COLONNADES
THE LITERARY AND ART JOURNAL
OF ELON UNIVERSITY

The Unlikelihood of Blooming

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When we’re young, we often complain about wanting to get older. We want to wear make-up. We want to go to the movies with just our friends. We want to make our own rules. “When will it be my turn?” It seems unfathomable that we will ever get there. That is the unlikelihood of blooming.

The myriad of voices you will encounter here also strive to take the next steps in life. You can find them taking late-night drives in Houston or walking the streets of Florence alone. They confide in psychic hotlines and volunteer in Jamaica to run away from their stateside problems. Each narrator tries and sometimes fails to keep up with the speed of the world. In those failures, there may be heartbreak, but there’s also brilliance and beauty, which makes these voices so compelling.

The artwork itself has a need to be seen. There are pieces that seek to be understood, that want to venture beyond the page. They explore color and medium, capturing the essence of each artist and begging for us to give them a chance. We are in awe of how the artists have captured existence, what it means to be alive and constantly shifting.

We feel so fortunate that we can present you such moving works in issue 66 of Colonnades. There is an honesty and fearlessness that we admire throughout the issue. Thank you to our staff for their dedication, our contributors for their talents, and our advisors, Tita and Drew, for always finding the little things we missed. And to you, our readers, thank you for picking up issue 66, and we hope you enjoy “The Unlikelihood of Blooming.”

CASEY BROWN & AUTUMN SPRIGGS
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LITTLE GREEN WOMEN
ORPHANAGE
MAN IN A BOTTLE
MARYLAND BLUE CRAB

OUR SPRING IS SWEET, NOT FLEETING
CHAINED & RUSTED
YERUSHALAYIM
DROWNED IN TEARS

FALLEN IN THOUGHT
DECLINED
COSTA RICAN IDENTITIES
THE ASHTADIKPALAS

SOMES BAR LIVING
GRANADA
UNTITLED
THE LOOP
At the sink
she slices a peach,
thumbing the knife
through slippery flesh,
its skin ribboning
around her fingers.

The peach fuzz
is slick in her hands
like a newborn’s head,
amniotic and warm.

She cries,
and to her lips
she presses the pit—
wrinkled and sweet,
a cranial fossil.

When she woke
to her bed blooming red,
she was horrified,
relieved.

No longer will she
line up possibilities
like tomatoes
across the windowsill,
their tight skins ripening
in the moonlight.
There are no meteors.
I am sitting at the edge of the ocean
with the world staring back
and all there is for miles is space.
From here, I can hear the moon
in the push and pull of the tides
and I wonder if meteors make sounds too—
if I could hear them from my space in the sand—
if that’s how you can tell when they’re coming.

The beach is empty, silent
save for the waves: a hollow
scallop shell. If you press your ear to the lip
you can hear the sea. I dig trails
in the sand with my hands, carve rivers
like I am reimagining the world.
The ground glows and crackles
in the currents I have left.
I think I have hallucinated it, so desperate
for stars that I have hidden them
in the sand like old bones, like gold,
but I try again and set the beach alight:
a fevered phosphorescent blue.

Between disturbances, the sand fades
back to gray and settles
as if I have never been there at all.
When I go home I will learn the science,
the chemistry. I will learn about the microscopic
phytoplankton who are built to flare from the inside out,
about how they radiate when moved,
about what it means to be luminescent.
But here, at the edge of the world,
all I can understand is magic.
The Milky Way lives in the Earth
and my fingers are full of fire. I feel
in love with the world, in love with joy
and dark and dirt.

I feel like I am a universe.

I run backwards down the coastline,
watch my footprints burn bright and vivid
like rocket trails, like meteors.
UNTITLED
TASSY HENDERSON | CHARCOAL
One of my earliest memories is from age four or five: I’m sitting under the side table next to the floral couch of the living room eating Reese’s cups in the middle of the night with Bailey, my eleven-year-old yellow lab, lying next to me. Red and green and gold wrappers are scattered around my crossed legs, my fingers smudged with melted chocolate and crumbling peanut butter. I delicately unwrap a cup, stick it out for Bailey, and then laughing, pull it away as she tries to eat it from me. I shake my head at her, saying no, no, no as I plop it onto my tongue.

I have always had a sweet tooth, or so my mother tells me. I grew up with more baby fat than average, my cheeks protruding from my face, making my eyes look small and squished. I had no shame strutting around the beach in a bikini, my belly round and my legs flabby.

I don’t remember when it all changed. I don’t remember when my mother stopped buying the sugary cereal I loved, and I don’t remember when she decided a sandwich, apple, and water was the appropriate lunch for me in grade school. I don’t remember which year she started hiding my Halloween bag after I collected all my goodies and I don’t remember when she made the rule that I had to ask her for a snack after school. She never took things to an extreme. There was no calorie-counting, though she suggested it. There were no mandatory weekly weigh-ins or forced diets, just cut-backs and minor control of what I ingested. She let me eat the buttery popcorn, but only in snack sizes, and she would bake me delicious treats full of chocolate and fatty goodness, but only from time to time.

I do remember in seventh grade when my bones burned in the middle of the night as they grew and stretched, and my fat shifted and spread. By eighth grade, I was slim and tall, a sight to behold for the first time.

“You know, Delaney,” my mom said to me as I sat on my bed about to go to sleep, “you’ve lost all of your baby fat. Now, you really need to focus on keeping it off.” Her hand hovered over the light switch. We had just discussed the new high school I would be going to next year. We talked about fresh starts and new impressions, and what sports and clubs I wanted to join.

“Because nobody wants to be friends with the fat girl,” she said, before leaving me in the dark.
I hated the way dressing rooms were lit, fluorescent and harsh like the light a dentist shines into your mouth. I hated the mirrors and the scraping sound the metal latch made as I locked my mother out. She always begged to come inside the little cubicle, so she could sit on the bench instead of leaning against the wall. I staunchly refused. Even after she promised to keep her eyes closed, even after she told me she had seen me naked all of my life, even after she laughed, yelling that she birthed me. She waited outside until I tried on something I liked that fit me. She huffed when I didn’t come out after every single thing we picked up, even if I knew it didn’t fit. She wanted proof.

The eighth-grade thin didn’t last long; my slow metabolism quickly corrected this mistake. My body was clearly supposed to be round and squishy, not smooth and small. I was fat again. Therefore, the dressing room had become a circle of hell for me. None of the clothes I wanted to wear fit my body the way I wanted them to. My body was too big, too bulky, too much for these skirts and tank tops. I stared and stared in the mirror as shirts didn’t fit over my wide shoulders, as jackets stretched and suffocated me, as dresses never zippered all the way up. I sat on that bench my mother so desperately wanted and cried. I sobbed silently, my mouth stretched wide and open, not allowing myself to make a noise, not allowing for anyone to hear the fat girl crying over the skirt she had ripped. I emerged, eyes puffy and glazed. My mother asked if I wanted a bigger size. I always said no.

I blamed my fat for my failures. Sometimes it was valid, other times not. No boys liked me because I was too big for them. I wasn’t skin and muscle, I wasn’t flat—I took up space. I wouldn’t get the lead roles in theater because I was too large for the costumes. I wasn’t a believable romantic interest. The musical director laughed in my face when I told him I wanted one of the lead roles my senior year: “We have to hold you upside down at one point!” I got to play the grandma. I blamed my weight, but it may have been my subpar tap-dancing.

I developed a role, much like the roles I would get in those theater productions: the jester. My humor was my identity. My mother’s words were stamped in my mind: people weren’t going to like me for my looks, that was for
sure, so I might as well give them something to like. And if people were going to be laughing at me, it was going to be because I made the joke. I was outrageous in classes, on the lacrosse field, at parties. Loud and boisterous and full of candor, I made friends through sarcasm, through dancing in hallways and making goofy faces in class.

In my AP Government class, I would sit in the back and take a large strand of hair right above my ear and string it across my face, right above my lip and under my nose, tucking the end behind my other ear. I would sit with my pseudo-mustache, waiting for Mr. Demers to call on me, so I could speak in a deep British accent and make a wrong comment about the judicial process. My classmates would cackle and I even got Mr. Demers to laugh sometimes before he would scold me.

In Chorus, when it was particularly dull, I would create interpretive dances to the Latin hymn “Ubi Caritas” or the classic “Mary, Did You Know?” which caused the tenors next to me to chuckle, disrupting the entire song. Ms. Dunn hated me for that and for more reasons, and she would sneer and threaten me with detention but never follow through. All the younger students would thank me later for my entertainment. I resisted replying, “Just doing my job.”

I was severely depressed for the last two years of high school. I was losing my faith in God at Catholic school, gaining more weight as I was surrounded by girls developing curves and long legs, and sullen for no reason other than an imbalance of chemicals in my brain. No one knew; my exterior was not only saggy and unappealing, but also armored and unrevealing. I couldn’t be the deadly combination of the sad, fat girl. I was convinced that my friends only kept me around, so I could deliver the punch line, entertain them, keep them laughing.

So, I did.

I had this one recurring dream. I woke up naked on a surgeon’s table, a cold scalpel in my hand. I would slice myself open horizontally, creating three or four slits on my stomach, and two slits down the sides of my thighs. I would reach in, pulling out fat like stuffing, like a clown pulling a string of handkerchiefs out of his sleeve. I would pull until I was flat and thin and glistening. Then I would sew myself up, smiling, the stitching black and thick like Frankenstein’s. I would run my hands down the raised skin on my belly. They were like guitar strings, I told myself after I awoke. I would later mimic the lines with a razor.
College was going to be different. I wanted it to be what high school wasn’t for me: a do-over. I wanted to be that triple threat: smart, funny and skinny. I highlighted my hair and joined Weight Watchers, much to my mother’s delight. After I got tired of earning arbitrary points so I could spend them on food as if calories were currency, I decided that eating one meal a day would suffice. And maybe a handful of almonds or sunflower seeds if my stomach was making too much noise.

I convinced myself that the headaches empowered me. I felt strong as my knees wobbled after the second flight of stairs. I felt skinny, even if my weight didn’t change. I would make it a week before binging on ramen noodles, full-sized bags of popcorn, and microwaved cookies from the coffee shop right by my dorm.

One Tuesday night, after eating no more than six almonds, when my depression cuffed me by the ankles and took me hostage, I took a walk around the entire campus. I stopped for a while at the bell tower by the football field, lying with my back pressed against the concrete. I had this image of a man jumping out from behind the bushes, dressed all in black, pinning me down, stabbing me in the back over and over again like that scene from Zodiac. I replayed it in my head every few minutes, the initial fear turning into slight resignation. I wasn’t afraid of death and I wasn’t afraid of the pain. I was afraid of the loss of control. I had thought about suicide many times, beginning all the way in sixth grade, and even wrote letters to my loved ones, only to burn them in the dark hours of the morning on my back porch. I think I liked the idea of suicide, because it would be my doing, my choice and my will. I would have control. Headlights illuminated the road as a car started driving towards me. Spooked and cold, I took off at a sprint back towards my dorm.

My roommates found me by the volleyball courts outside of our building, aimlessly pacing in circles. They took my arms, softly peppering me with questions. I didn’t say anything except, “Thank you,” as they tucked me into bed. We never talked about it again.

Boyfriends were uncharted territory. There were guys,
sure, but I was far too self-conscious for relationships to ever be healthy or successful.

“You’re intimidating,” boys would tell me, echoing what my friends said when I opened up about my insecurities. Intimidating was just a nice word for too much, too big, I thought.

But really, I was venomous to most boys. I was convinced I was sexually unappealing and resigned to indifference toward them. I felt—and still do—this intense pressure to convince any boy who started talking to me that I was not pursuing them romantically or sexually. I knew the stereotype people would box me into: desperate, fat girl on the hunt for someone to love her.

I was confused as to how to genuinely make friends with boys. I wanted to wear a “Not Interested In You” sign at parties or in class.

But I was interested in some boys. Whenever I was flirting with a guy or starting a relationship, my walls were impermeable. I was constantly waiting for them to make me the butt of a cruel joke, like some prank in a ‘90s movie where a friend dared him to talk to me, to date me, to love me. So, I let guys treat me however they wanted. Mostly I was treated like a video game that could be paused and saved, so when he wanted to start back up again, I was there. I was accepting of this new role, of being used. I was trying to find empowerment in that.

There was the Italian assistant professor of Physics at a nearby university who preferred me with my shirt on while he fucked me. Then, there was Zack, a friend of a friend of a friend from Greensboro, who talked about how he preferred his girls bigger, girls who didn’t pressure him into exercising. He wouldn’t sleep with me, though, because he thought his number of sexual partners was already too high—a whopping seven—and didn’t deem me worthy.

One night, after Zack refused my spread legs, in my desperate need for affirmation, I messaged a random guy
online whose only aim was to hook up. I drove a half-hour to his place, and crept down into his basement, where we finished a bottle of wine in twenty minutes. I felt warm and free, and soon we were taking off each other’s clothes. He pulled my shirt off and as I started to peel off my leggings, he stopped and looked at me. His face visibly dropped as the glow from the TV lit up my stretch marks, my rolls of flesh hanging from my stomach. He closed his eyes and pushed my mouth down, not saying a single word. I struggled to breathe after he came in my mouth. I watched him roll over onto his side, pretending to fall asleep. I stared at him for a minute, wondering if he was serious, if he was even going to speak to me. I collected my shirt and my shoes, mumbled a goodbye and refrained from asking for money. If he was going to treat me like a whore, I wanted to at least earn my keep.

I stopped at a gas station by his house, bought a pack of Camel menthols and smoked half the pack on the drive home, my tears dripping onto my lips between drags. I could still taste the semen through the smoke; I could smell it as I heaved for air through my nostrils. To this day, when I’m feeling particularly sad, sometimes cigarettes start to taste like cum.

I stopped harming my body with diets and razors full-time my junior year of college. I became engrossed in the feminist community where we talked about not only political and economic inequalities between genders, but social inequalities as well, discussing things like body and sex positivity. We talked about how girls are shamed for taking up space, shamed for being loud, shamed for being anything other than feminine and small.

I knew most of this the entire time I was at college, but I had internalized it. I was preaching things I wasn’t practicing. Of course, I didn’t just wake up and start loving my body, but I did stop punishing it. Slowly but surely, I was getting stronger, getting healthier. And I don’t mean in my body, but in my mind. I don’t remember the switch. I don’t remember the day I woke up and decided to throw out the razors hidden under my sink, and I don’t remember the first time I looked at my body without flinching. I just remember no longer feeling apologetic for the way my thighs tend to shake the floors I walk on. I turned those depressed, self-loathing feelings into
rage and hope at the same time, challenging the people around me to be more accepting, less judgmental. I was speaking up for those who couldn’t, women who were forced to keep their mouths wired shut, keep their rib cages hollow and empty. I spoke up, I screamed and I yelled. I decided that I was not built for containment, in the same way I was not built for small sizes in dressing rooms. I was built to be fat and I was built to be boisterous. I was built to be powerful.

“Imagine how many billion-dollar industries would shut down if women everywhere woke up and decided to love themselves today.” I posted this on my social media wall, my goal to wake up every day and love one thing about my body and to maybe destroy capitalism in the process. Kidding. Kind of.

I’ve gained a better sense of who I am, underneath all of the angst and hatred I clung to so tightly for so many years. The summer before I embarked on my last year of college, I was even brave enough to venture out into the dating world again. I was pretty content being alone, until I met Cam. Twenty-four, hairy and big like me, fat like a bear, Cam says he fell in love with me the second he saw me. My wide thighs wrapped in tights, my bulging stomach hidden under a black dress. He said he wanted me then and there.

Cam and I talk about our bodies and how they give us strength. When we’re in bed, he grabs hold of my belly fat and shakes it, watching the skin ripple and wave. His hands glide down the inside of my thighs, ridden with cellulite, and he smiles, sighs, whispers, “You are perfect.”

I laugh and tell him that I don’t believe in the idea of perfection, that it doesn’t exist. He says, as his fingers creep back up my torso, “You’re perfect for me.” And I roll my eyes, giggling at the cliché and the cheesiness of it all, but my cheeks still blush. I stand naked in front of my mirror and remember the time he spent stroking my bulging thighs, the way he loved how it all funneled thick towards my hips. I take an extra second to tell my thighs that I love them, even if I don’t fully mean it yet.

I do not rely on anyone to tell me how to feel about my body anymore. But having someone love my body more than I ever have is refreshing. Whoever said that you can’t love someone until you love yourself is full of shit. I have never met anyone who loves themselves wholly. We are all works
in progress, trying our hardest to feel at home in the bodies we are given. When I start subconsciously scratching at my stretch marks on my hips and stomach, the ones that look like lightning bolts, Cam is there to take my hand away and kiss each fingertip and I remember the electricity I have burning under my skin.

When I was home over the summer, I told my mom how much her words affected me, how those words she said to me in eighth grade made me doubt my relationships, made me hate my body. She has no recollection of saying it, but doesn’t doubt that she did.

“Your father and I have never worried about you as much as we worried about Colleen and Michael,” she said, referring to my older siblings. “We knew you would be fine. The only thing that worried us was your weight, your health. We tried to help you.”

I have no other choice but to assume the best intentions because I cannot believe that anyone would wish this onto their daughter. It was all out of love, my mother promised, and I believe her. ✿
Reaching for the Sun
SOPHIA SPACH | 35MM FILM PHOTOGRAPHY
Pura Vida

SOPHIA SPACH | DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY
I remember sitting in my mother’s lap a week before she left us and watching my little brother Kenny lift rocks and throw them into the creek behind our house. In church that morning, we sung a hymn about being lifted high by the Lord, and I liked to imagine God scooping people up in his hands and casting them far, the same way Kenny threw the rocks. A hidden sparrow sang out again and again. The Brysons across the street yelled at each other from their front porch. My mother touched the fresh cast on my arm and said “My poor, baby Nan,” but she looked way out past me into a spot of sky blurring with heat. She’d sobbed when I fell off my bike and broke my arm. She kept calling me her poor, baby girl. She said that she’d given me her brittle bones. She left for good with a man whose truck had collected mud around its rim like a dirty hem. I think back to this today because Laurence and Robert have been talking all morning about a church sermon while polishing old medals for a museum display. The sermon’s about one of those bible stories I used to love—the kind where Jesus peeled suffering off of people like it was nothing more than a summer shirt stuck to their skin with sweat.

Kenny started his first job this morning at the baseball stadium’s concession stand. For weeks after Mom left, he’d crawl into my bed at night and sleep beside me. He was only four then, and I had just turned eight. He had small, sharp arms that reminded me of a bird. When he got older, Ken could understand me even though I stumbled over my words in front of other people. Sometimes he spoke for me. I could tell when the Bryson boys across the street were upsetting him by trying to peel up a dead squirrel from the road or hitting each other in the ribs. It’s been a few years since Ken started wearing his hair long over his eyes and getting in trouble at school for mouthing off to teachers. He’s left Dad and me alone in the house and shut himself up in his room. Most recently, he was suspended for vandalizing lockers at his high school. His neatly manicured guidance counselor thought up the concession job. She said it would be good for him, that it would teach him responsibility.

I hear a car pull into the parking lot over the buzz of the office copy machine. We haven’t had a single visitor to the
Greenwood Confederate History Museum all week, save the mini-van that used our parking lot to turn around yesterday. The museum is a small house filled with clothing of the dead and defunct weapons. I’m the youngest thing here, dead or alive, and I’m almost completely unneeded. The museum’s run by The Sons of the Confederacy and operated by two of them, Laurence and Robert, but Dad owns it and created my job for me. I graduated with an associate degree in Arts Education from Greenwood Tech, which hasn’t been enough to find a job. It was a transfer-track degree, but I realized that I didn’t really want to teach and the idea of moving to a new school to study for two more years and then figure out how to pay for it all stressed me out. I never finished filling out the transfer application. I’ve wanted to move away and find a new city ever since I learned about foreign paintings in school, but I haven’t figured out how to leave. Most of my friends from high school left me two years ago to go to the state school I couldn’t afford, and most of my friends from Tech found jobs.

I’M THE YOUNGEST THING HERE, DEAD OR ALIVE, AND I’M ALMOST COMPLETELY UNNEEDED.

The copy machine beeps and I pull out The Confederate States of America: What Might Have Been and flip to the next page Dad needs. This week, he’s given me a list of books and pages on an index card for his research, which he claims will one day produce an article that will make people want to visit the museum. I mentioned moving away to Dad once, and he looked at me with his droopy, basset-hound wrinkles and patted my shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Little Nan,” he said. He always calls me Little Nan since my mother and I share a name. “We’ll find something for you to do down at the museum.”

Laurence goes into one of his coughing fits. For the first few weeks of work I couldn’t tell him and Robert apart since they are both bulbous, old men with receding hairlines, but Robert wears sneakers with his dress pants and Laurence always forgets to shut the lights off when he leaves, so I have to
drive back and shut them off to save money. That museum duty may be the only one that wouldn’t get done if I weren’t stuck here.

The digitized door chime is broken, so whenever someone opens the door, it makes a slow, pained sound like an animal being stepped on. Rhett Bryson walks in with his hands tucked into his pockets and looks around at the soldier faces lining the walls.

“Can I help you?” Laurence says from the office.

“Yeah,” Rhett replies, but his eyes rest on me. “How’s it going, Nan?”

I cross my arms and look at the ground. I don’t like looking straight at him. He’s the same age as I am and works at a restaurant around the corner. The restaurant logo marks the left pocket of his sweat-stained polo.

“I’m, I’m,” I start, but I fall into my nervous, stumbling way of speaking. “Um,” I say, “Why are you—” I pause and feel him looking at me. “What are you doing here?”

Rhett and his brother, Joey, made fun of the way I spoke when we were kids. Once when we were in elementary school, Rhett mock-stumbled over his words until I cried because I’d run away when he tried to kiss me.

He pulls his hands out of his pockets and crosses them, his mouth just barely curled into a smile. He always looks like he knows some funny, dark secret that I don’t. He looks me up and down.

“Jesus, Nan, quit acting like that. Your genius father locked himself out of the house again. Says you’ve got a key.”

I hate the way he talks about my father, but I say nothing. When Mom left in that man’s truck, it was in broad daylight outside. When we were still kids, Ken did something to piss Rhett off and Rhett said, “At least my momma never left my dad.” Rhett still has a small white scar across his left eyebrow from when Ken unscrewed the front wheel of his bike to get him back. Rhett tried to pop a wheelie and flew clean over the handlebars when the wheel fell out. The blood on his face made Kenny turn white. Mr. Bryson came outside and told Rhett to quit his crying while he cleaned him up.

“I’m just being a good neighbor to y’all,” Rhett says, still smiling. “I hear Kenny’s got a new job. It’ll take a miracle for him to keep that, won’t it?”

The blouse I’m wearing begins to make my shoulders
feel naked. He’s right, of course. I’ve been expecting Kenny to lose the job today. I’d give him a week, maybe two, before he shows up late or gives his boss trouble. But I don’t want anyone else talking about him that way. I want Rhett to leave us alone.

I tell Laurence and Robert I’ll be gone for a few minutes. Rhett could have just as easily called me and had me drive over to the house, but he insists on giving me a ride, which makes me uneasy. The AC in his car doesn’t work, so the air around us holds still. When we get to our street, Dad stands in the driveway in an old t-shirt, barefoot. He smiles and waves an envelope at me as I walk over. Rhett follows behind. I pull my key out of my wallet and unlock the door as Dad speaks.

“The tickets came,” he says. He seems unfazed by the fact that I had to come let him into our house. Instead, his wrinkled face perks up a little as he shows me two tickets for a baseball game at Kenny’s stadium this weekend. Our team, The Greenwood Bears, is playing a slightly worse amateur team, making the turnout a little bigger than usual. I silently pray that Ken’s job will last that long for Dad’s sake.

My legs stick to the seat of Rhett’s car on the ride back. When we get to the museum, he sits there and looks at me, like he’s waiting for something. When I mumble out a thank you, he reaches forward and grazes the tips of his fingers across my cheek, soft like the after-touch of a spider web. I shrink back from him and look down.

“Bye, Nan,” he says, but I don’t look back up until I’m through the door. Inside, I can still feel sweat fingering its way down the back of my thighs as the marching song loops back to its beginning.

I turn the radio off while driving to pick Kenny up and listen to the silence. I like the feeling of driving. I like the motion of it, the possibility that I could just keep going and find myself somewhere new. I’d really like to work at an art museum in a city. One of my friends from high school, April, has an apartment down in Columbia and sometimes when she calls and tells me about her life, I imagine what it might be like to move down there. I have enough money saved up to pay rent for a little while before getting a job. I’d like to work in a big museum, or maybe in a little independent studio. I’d buy myself new sketchbooks and draw city skylines. I’d move so
far away from Kenny’s rebellion and Dad’s museum that I’d become a whole new person. I’d wear nice dresses and make small talk with baristas at the coffee shop on my way to work each morning. Ever since graduation, I’ve started putting a few things in the duffle bag in my room, like my mom’s old watch and a card Kenny made for me back when he still drew balloons with red crayon. The packing isn’t real, though, because I know I couldn’t go unless I had a clear plan or some voice telling me to go, like if the Old Testament voice of God bellowed down to me like it did for Moses. Every time I really think of leaving, I think of my brittle bones and my mother running off before my arm had even healed. I think of my made-up job at the museum and my inability to speak clearly. I remind myself that I’ll always stay.

The baseball stadium sits small and hunched up on a hill all on its own with “Home of the Bears” painted across its entrance in steel blue. Most everyone has cleared out when I pull up because it only hosted a kid’s league tournament today and it’s closing time. Two skinny kids throw a ball back and
forth beside the road. Kenny leans against the stadium wall, waiting for me.

I think of good questions to ask Ken about work while he walks over, but when he opens the door and sits down, I forget them.

“So,” I say. “So, how were your, the um, I mean—”

Ken looks up and waits for me to finish. I used to be able to speak to him without feeling nervous and tripping over each thing I said, almost like a normal person. Now that I can’t read his face, I get as tongue-tied with him as I do with anyone else. I don’t understand it.

“How, how was it?” I say.

“Thrilling.”

Even though Ken’s four years younger, he’s only shorter than I am when he slouches back into the passenger seat. He flips his hair to the side to move it out of his eyes.

“Some bitch yelled at me for giving her the wrong type of soda.” I tap the steering wheel and look out the window. I keep thinking of Rhett grazing my face with his fingers, and I try to brush off the spider web feeling. I keep remembering his smug grin when he said Kenny wouldn’t keep the job. I want to say something encouraging to Ken to let him know that I care. I watch tree leaves quivering against each other in their branches.

“Oh,” I say, and he stops talking and turns the radio on.

I work through my dream museum job again as we drive. When we pull into our street, the Bryson brothers are standing in the middle of their yard beside their cyprus tree. The tree is unnaturally big and sits smack in the center of their yard, blocking most of their house. I don’t know how it wound up there, like if it was an accident or something. I do know that the Brysons love that tree. When we were all kids, the two of them carved their names into its side with pocketknives. If we played tag, they would run to it and declare it base. They’d sit under it sometimes when their parents were yelling inside. Now, they just stand beside it, watching us pull up to our driveway.

“Hey,” Rhett calls over as we get out. Joey, younger by two years, always stands a little behind him. His hands have this way of looking heavy. Kenny gives them one of those teen boy reverse-nod greetings, jutting his chin out in their direction. He shifts his weight from side to side, which I know means he’s
nervous, but he maintains his tough expression. When we walk inside, Ken glances back at them over his shoulder. I try and see anxiety or fear on his face when he turns back around, but I still can’t see anything.

During dinner, I make an obvious show of peeling burnt flecks off my chicken because I’m still annoyed that Dad didn’t apologize for making me come back to the house this afternoon. I hate that my made-up job lends itself to being inconvenienced. Kenny tells him work was fine and almost inhales his food. Dad tells us that he thinks his article is really taking off and I nod. Kenny doesn’t react. When Dad tells him that he got the game tickets in the mail today, Kenny shrugs. He pulls a lighter out of his pocket while Dad continues to talk about the game and starts flicking it on and off.

Dad sighs but Ken remains fixated on the lighter. “Kenny, could you please not do that, okay?” He always sounds like he’s whining when he yells at Ken. “Could you please not?”

Ken flicks it on one last time before putting it back in his pocket. Dad stares at him for a moment, and then pushes some of the charred bits of chicken around on his own plate before clearing his throat to speak again.

Kenny keeps his job for the first week. On the day of the game, I ride down to the stadium with Dad. He tucks his shirt in and buys a Greenwood Bears baseball cap even though I tell him it looks ridiculous. He laughs when he sees himself in the mirror and I can’t help but laugh with him.

We decide to wait to visit Kenny until later since he’s probably busy before the game. We find our seats and Dad watches the men in blue shirts prepare the field. After a few minutes, I tell him that I’m going to get something to drink and he nods and asks me to grab some popcorn. I spot Kenny after I climb the steps and scan the different stands. He looks surprisingly grown-up in his striped shirt behind the cash register, and I feel a flicker of pride for him. He hands a red snow cone to a girl in a black tank top at the front of the line. She laughs at something he says.

“Bye, Kenny,” she shouts as she turns to walk back toward the seats. He waves.
“Hey,” I say when I walk over to him. “Do you, um—” I pause. “Do you, like, know her?”

He stops laughing to himself when he looks up at me. A small smile lingers on his face. The game will start soon, and the line has died down. He pulls out a rag and starts wiping something on the counter.

“Yeah,” he says. “Went to a party with her last year. Wasn’t into me, though. Wound up with some other guy and—” He stops and puts the rag back below the counter. “It’s whatever,” he says. “You wouldn’t care.”

A kid wearing a foam finger needs extra ketchup packets. I tear at a napkin in one of the metal dispensers and feel his last comment settle in my gut. When he spoke just now, I could see his face start to open up a little. He waves to a group of high school kids walking past us. I realize that I don’t know the girl in the black tank top or any members of the group. I’m so removed from his life that I’m not even sure who his friends are. I try and tell myself that he must know that I care about him and that he’s just being a little jerk. Kenny hands the packets to the kid, checks his phone, and then loads a few more soft pretzels into their orange-glowing box. I think of the laughing girl and the way he still shifts his weight nervously around Rhett and Joey. These moments make me worry that the rift between us is capable of repair, and I’m just failing to understand how to fix it. I worry that I could do something to make him talk to me again. But I remind myself that he’s moody and tough now. He doesn’t really care what I think about him. I remind myself that I can hardly speak to him, let alone try and figure him out. I tell myself that I don’t control his problems.

I buy the popcorn for Dad and a Pepsi for myself. Kenny’s jaw tenses as he looks over my shoulder, and I turn to see the Bryson brothers headed in our direction, carrying paper soda cups. Joey stands a little taller than usual and walks shoulder-to-shoulder with Rhett, which he only does when they’ve been drinking. Rhett winks at me.

“Hey, there, Nan,” he says. He takes a few steps forward until he stands close enough for me to smell the beer on his breath. When I step away from him, I bump up against the trashcan behind me. I glance over at Kenny, but he just stands there behind the counter, his jaw tight and his arms tensed. Rhett takes a step closer and grabs the side of my stomach with
his sweaty hand. Ken looks away from me.

“Come here,” Rhett says, reaching his other hand up to touch my neck. Beside me, the pretzels keep turning and glowing red. I push his hand off my waist and turn away from him.


“God, shut up,” I whisper.

“What’s that, Nan?” Rhett shouts, a little louder now. “I don’t understand.”

His words slide into me. I turn to face him, popcorn and soda in either hand. I haven’t decided what I’m going to say as I turn, but I can feel words bubbling up inside me. I’m pissed at Kenny for leaving me to face them alone. I’m pissed at Dad’s naive hope for the museum and for me. I’m pissed that I’m stuck in a place with idiots like Joey and Rhett. I’m going to say something terrible; I can feel it. I’m going to tell him. I’m going to shut him up for good.

When I turn, I catch both their eyes, both of their secretive smiles, their amused drunkenness. Something flutters in my gut, but I’ve already begun speaking.

“I said shut, shut, shut—” I close my eyes and take in a slow, shaky breath. Sweat runs down the inside of my shirt. My hands shake a little. I can’t get it out.

When I open my eyes, they’re still there. Joey furrows his brow and Rhett raises his eyebrows in a mock attempt to understand. All around us people have stopped to look. My neck and ears burn. I want to cry, but instead I turn and concentrate on walking down the steps to our seats. Ken never looks up at me. The two of them start laughing again when I descend the first few stairs.

Dad still wears the starched blue hat when I reach our seats. I sit beside him and look at the game without really watching it. Heat prickles up and down my neck. I have a death grip on the popcorn and soda. I put them down. I want to melt into the plastic seat. Dad takes the popcorn, says “Thanks, Little Nan,” and then comments on the game. I nod and replay the scene in my head. Now, more than ever, I wish I had a reason to leave. I wish I had somewhere else to go. I wish I could know that everything would be okay if I just got the hell out of that stadium and Greenwood. I can’t decide if I’m more upset with Kenny or more upset that I couldn’t stand up for myself. The
game continues. We are winning. Everyone stands and cheers at each home run.

Kenny finds us at the end of the seventh inning, still in his blue apron.

“Hey there, kid,” Dad says, eating his popcorn. “What’s up?”

Ken doesn’t respond. He hands me my wallet without making eye contact.

“You left this on the counter.”

I take it from him, still only feeling like I am half in the world. Kenny looks around the stadium and pulls at one of the corners of his apron.

“We were just thinking of stopping by to say hey,” Dad says.

Ken shrugs. “Yeah, whatever.”

Dad looks down at his popcorn, takes his hat off, and runs his fingers along the rim. His face drops. I could kill Kenny for being such an idiot. After he leaves, my father only half-watches the game. When he stands at the next home run, he drops the popcorn on the ground, spilling it everywhere. I still feel like my insides are shaking. I feel too hot, almost faint. I tell him I have to go to the bathroom.

I must stand in the bathroom for five minutes, replaying the scene in front of the stand, feeling the heat of Rhett’s hand through my shirt, their stupid smiles, strangers’ eyes. Mostly, though, I hear myself stumbling over that one word. Dirt clings to the spaces in between the white tiles on the wall and water pools up in spots on the stall floor. Something rises in my chest. Now that I am alone, I start crying. I splash water on my face and fix my hair in the mirror.

When I get back to the seats, Dad’s on his hands and knees on the dirty concrete between the rows, picking the popcorn off the ground. I watch him pick the pieces up one by one, the new hat beside him, and it hurts me. I don’t want to see him stooped over alone, picking up pieces. I don’t want to be left here like him. I want to get a real job and I want Kenny
to shut his smart mouth. But he won’t, and when I realize this, something in me snaps in two. It’s like the booming voice of God. It’s like a sign. I tell Dad I’m going for a drive and he can ride back with Kenny. The air outside the stadium rests heavy with humidity as I walk to the car and drive toward our house. I know it now. I’m going to leave for good.

I speed past the museum. The earth stays damp from all the afternoon thunderstorms, and when I run through the front yard, the ground sinks beneath my weight. I pull my duffel bag out from under my bed and finish packing. I decide that I’ll stay in a hotel and call April from the road. I’m doing it, though. I’m leaving now.

I call April, but she doesn’t answer. After half an hour, I stop at a gas station because I need to use the ATM and I realize I’m starving. When I walk in, I avoid eye contact with the cashier and speak the minimum amount, so I don’t embarrass myself. I catch my reflection in the shop window, and I can see how unchanged I look. I stand with my shoulders folded in a little and my arms crossed. I look down at my graying shoelaces. I don’t start to panic until my phone buzzes and I look down at the message reading: *Ken and I home now, where r u?* I don’t know the name of the town I’m in. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing. I’m in a gas station in the middle of nowhere, stuck being myself. I don’t know why I thought this would work or why I thought I could go, especially without telling Dad or Ken. I think of Dad putting dinner on the stove and Ken locked up in his room watching TV. I can’t get away from them even when I’m gone.

April calls back but I let the phone ring. I text Dad—*errands, be there soon*—and start driving back. After I merge onto the highway, I pick up the mini-mart bag of trail mix I no longer need, throw it at the duffel bag in the back, and start crying. I wonder what it would take for me to run like my mother did. I wonder if I could go if I just cared a little less or if I had a big man in a truck come steal me straight from my front porch. I wish I felt free to run. Instead, I continue back, and once I see the museum again I know that I’ve almost returned.

Before I reach our street, I can see smoke rising into the sky from where we live, but I don’t know what’s happening.
until I get to the four-way stop and see that the Brysons’ damn tree is on fire.

I can’t believe it. The tree is up in flames. Fire trucks block the Brysons’ driveway and the four of them stand next to their car, watching it. Dad stands on the front lawn watching too. The older couple who live next door to the Brysons stand out on their porch. The tree touches nothing else, so it just burns there on its own. I walk over to Dad and watch in silence too until the firemen put it out and leave it there, scorched and dripping with water.

Dad turns and looks at me. My face must still be splotchy and red from crying.

“Where were you?”

I look out past his head at one of the flashing red lights. Lying makes me anxious, so I know I’m going to mix up my words if I say a lot.

“Gas station,” I half-lie. He watches me for another second then walks inside. I walk in behind him and go into the kitchen. Through the screen door, I can see Kenny sitting on the porch steps in the backyard. I realize now that he’s been home this whole time but hasn’t come out to watch the fire like everyone else. I walk outside and down the steps until I’m standing in front of him. Dad walks out after me and stands on the porch behind him. Ken sits with his feet resting on one of the wood steps, flicking his lighter on and off, on and off. He doesn’t look up.

“You,” I say. “You—” I’m not tripping over my words. I actually can’t think of anything to say.

“Oh God,” Dad puts his hand on top of his head. “Oh God, Kenny.”

Even as we realize what he did, he doesn’t look up. “Shitheads,” he says. “They should’ve left you alone.”

Across the street, the old couple still stands on their porch talking. Dad keeps saying, “Oh God.” I want to kneel there next to Kenny and cry. I want to say that I hate them, too, but for God’s sake, you can’t just go lighting things on fire, Ken. What the hell were you thinking?

Instead, I kick him in the shin. He winces.

“They’ll, the Brysons, what did you, what will they—” I’m so upset that I really can’t say the right thing. “What if they—”

“No one saw.”
“Idiot,” I spit out.
“I am.”
I kick him again. He doesn’t move. I imagine our sweet elderly neighbors sending him to jail somewhere far away. I imagine losing him for good. I have to walk around our backyard a few times to calm myself down. After a few laps, the firefighters leave and our neighbors’ voices disappear. A few hours later, I bring my duffel bag back in from my car, empty it, and return everything to its old place.

Kenny shows up late for a shift and loses his job at the stadium. He watches TV in his room. I barely see him. Dad throws his hat away before it’s even broken in.
I keep working at the Confederate museum. For weeks we go on this way. My father cooks the same meals. Often, he burns them. I remain terrified that someone knows what Kenny did. Laurence and Robert still bicker. The marching song holds its steady beat beside the weapons left behind by the dead. A few visitors come and go.

Joey and Rhett stand in their front yard sometimes when I drive home, and I avoid speaking to them. I can see them from my bedroom window out there beside their ruined tree just as dusk curls in around our houses. Once, Rhett rested his hand on his brother’s shoulder for the slightest moment, so quick that I barely saw it. Seeing them a little broken makes something feel cracked open inside me. This feeling gets worse whenever I pass Kenny staring open-mouthed at the television in his room.

One day, when I pull into my driveway, they call over to me from their yard. I keep walking.
“Where’s Kenny been?” Rhett says. I stop. Something about his voice makes me feel like they know what he did. I pause for a moment to gather my words.
“Why?” My skin burns and I think back to the baseball stadium. I can’t look at them.
“I don’t know. Just haven’t seen him around.”
I shrug and continue to walk inside. Ken stands right by the window, watching them through the blinds.
“What’d they say to you?” He keeps staring out the window at them. I jingle my keys and adjust the strap on my
“Why do you care?” I’m angry enough to snap back at him without hesitating. He doesn’t respond. I’ve already started walking upstairs when Laurence calls.

It’s been a good week-and-a-half—a new record—since Laurence has called and needed me to go back to the museum to shut off the lights or check something. Tonight, he calls from his granddaughter’s birthday dinner, says that he can’t remember if he shut the lights off or not, and asks if I can go back.

It’s beginning to grow dark outside. Ken keeps standing by the window. He looks out at the Brysons’ yard even though they aren’t there anymore. I walk back to the door.

“Where are you going?” He looks at me now.

“I’m,” I start, “Um, the museum.”

He looks back out at the empty yard.

“I’ll come.”

He digs at the floor with the toe of his shoe.

“No,” I say, but he follows behind me when I walk outside. He stands beside the car and looks around as I get in.

“Ken,” I say, but before I can do anything else, he opens the passenger door and sits down.

I tell him I don’t want him to come, but he just sits there staring at his hands until I turn the car on and pull out of the driveway. A small patch of sky ahead burns a soft yellow and red. Ken looks out the window the entire ride, like he is searching for something. When we get to the museum, he steps out of the car with me.


“I’ll come in.”

I honest to God can’t figure out what’s up with him.

“Scared?” I say. He looks at me.

“Scared of the dark?”

I glare at him. He says nothing. I turn and walk inside. The lights are off, but when I get to the back room I realize that Laurence left the TV on. The marching song plays softly. I stand in front of the screen, so that it casts its gray glow over me. I’ve never actually watched the video before. My own face reflects back from the screen. The video shows different shots of soldiers marching forward with lyrics to the song stretched
along the bottom. I wonder what kind of actors they find for films like this. I watch it loop through a second time. I wonder about each deadpan face, each gray scale uniform.

Someone shouts outside. When I hear it, I don’t recognize him at first. I imagine some old man yelling at a dog, the Brysons yelling on their front porch. I think of my mother crying about her weak bones making me easy for breaking. I think of the red dot of a truck disappearing, leaving only its dirt on the ground. I do not recognize my own brother’s shout right away. But, when I do, it is his voice that pulls me free from watching my gray face reflecting back at me beside the others. I shut the TV off and listen. When I don’t hear him again, I go outside.

When I make it outside, I begin running. I realize why he was shouting for me. I realize why he followed me outside into the dark, how he was trying to protect me. I see him lying there in the parking lot and the two of them running away through the trees into the fading light. I figure out what they’ve done and I start running to him and I see blood on his face and on the asphalt. He starts crying and I see his eye swollen shut and his nose bleeding and his face red and my own hands shaking over him.

For a moment, I think of what comes next. I think of his blood dripping from his face to the wood floor as I help him onto the couch in our living room. Dad will nearly cry when he sees how badly Ken’s been beaten up. I realize that I can’t change Kenny back into the kid he used to be, that I can’t fix him into some brave, responsible boy or shake Dad free from his lost causes. I realize that I won’t ever run away from his sobbing, swollen face. I imagine the Bryson brothers sprinting through the woods like shadows and always finding us when we aren’t ready. I imagine myself never becoming that eloquent city-museum employee, and I want, so badly, to be able to push away the fear in my own voice and pull the bruises off of Kenny’s face. Instead, I take his arm. I am here now, reaching out for him. I am pulling at him, trying to lift my little brother, trying to tell him to get up, that he is okay. I am lifting him up and trying to steady him and make it so he can walk. We are taking a step, his arm draped over my shoulder. Blood runs down from his nose. We are walking forward, and I am holding onto him. I try to carry his weight. I tell him that we are going to make it home. ✮
The formal demonstration and unification of mixed perspectives is a challenge I like to meet through painting. The panel series, *Track Triptych*, presents viewers with multiple views and snapshot-like instances within a singular frame. The varied representations of my cross-country teammates’ track flats are consequently overlapping and ingrained within one another. The puzzle-like orientation alludes to the theme of teamwork, or smaller parts working together for the larger whole. The distinct panels also function together as a singular work of art. This similarly speaks to the subject of cross-country, a team sport that is often mistaken for being individual. The composition complements the subject matter because it elicits a sense of motion and movement, the essence of a runner’s task. I chose to apply paint with a palette knife and use active brushstrokes to discourage such static representation.

**Featured Artist**

**Kaitlin Stober**

The formal demonstration and unification of mixed perspectives is a challenge I like to meet through painting. The panel series, *Track Triptych*, presents viewers with multiple views and snapshot-like instances within a singular frame. The varied representations of my cross-country teammates’ track flats are consequently overlapping and ingrained within one another. The puzzle-like orientation alludes to the theme of teamwork, or smaller parts working together for the larger whole. The distinct panels also function together as a singular work of art. This similarly speaks to the subject of cross-country, a team sport that is often mistaken for being individual. The composition complements the subject matter because it elicits a sense of motion and movement, the essence of a runner’s task. I chose to apply paint with a palette knife and use active brushstrokes to discourage such static representation.

**Track Triptych**

**Kaitlin Stober | Oil and Track Tread**
The painting *Feet* is an instance of blithe experimentation with hue and tone. I was inspired by contemporary artist David Agenjo to substitute natural hue for a larger variety of colors when depicting parts of the human body. By elevating the role of color, I aimed to make the work of art about the material of paint just as much as it is about the subject. I relied on the tone and vibrancy of colors to pull parts forward and push others back. I responded to Agenjo’s series of hand paintings by focusing on my feet. I purposefully set this composition in the painting studios, and included a painted apron, to raise the question of whether color is being used to represent human flesh or paint on top of skin. I enjoyed arranging it in such a way that multiple possibilities are set forth.
Paint
Kaitlin Stober | Oil and Mixed Media
Textile Collages
Kaitlin Stober | Mixed textiles and materials on canvas
If there is a God, you should hope She’s crying in her studio apartment down the street from Heaven’s only coffee shop. What happened to the second-world countries after the communist bloc party? America’s favorite sitcom is a misogynistic piece of dreck. Be grateful there’s a studio audience to tell you when you should be laughing.

The best myth they taught you is that you swallow eight spiders every year. You imagine the first was an explorer, the following seven a search party. You still dream of teeth falling out. No one asks to be your emergency contact.

One side puts the emphasis on THINK, the other on TANK. Yikes. Keep a suitcase in the trunk of your car, so you can start over at a moment’s notice. You can pick out a new name and a new life, but a new conscience costs extra.

You can almost remember what childhood tasted like, dried blood with a hint of strawberry. You can read a book on cosmonauts or die whenever you’d prefer to pencil it in. Just sign your name on the dotted line beside St. Peter’s John Hancock. Don’t let anyone see you scanning the fine print. Bring a handkerchief to wipe Her tears.
Exposure

Lydia Willig | Digital Photography
I stand with him in the kitchen while he sorts silverware. When I tell him I’m tired, breath escapes his mouth like a fist slammed into a mirror, spider-webbing an unwanted reflection.

Across the parking lot, I see a bird nudge another off the telephone wire and I wish we were them, but we are a small white teacup, an egg dropped on the floor—cracked, fragile, almost hopeful.

Do you still want me around?

Sometimes he holds me like glass and I am frozen, as if the twitch of a finger could fracture the moment. He is laughing eyes and cautious hands, trailing his fingernails underneath the back of my shirt.

He is the words in my ear, stinging like a paper cut, and the immortal blue gas station rose he bought me for our anniversary. When we sit in the same room, we miss each other.
That evening in late summer, I sat at a circular hickory table hewn from a tree that used to rain its five-fingered leaves and hard-shelled nuts onto the front porch of the country restaurant before lightning struck the proud old hardwood in half, if the little bronze plaque bolted to the center of the table was to be believed. I could barely read the tiny letters since they were upside down from my vantage point and the light from the mason jar candles and brick fireplace was flickery and low, but I remember all the same.

That evening in late summer, I dropped my fork with a soft thump on the faded floral rug that hugged the softwood floor, and as I bent down, I heard you speaking with a British accent.

That evening in late summer, I flipped my head upside down and even in the dim lighting saw a flash of cherry red-and-custard yellow-striped socks between the hem of your gray slacks and your sharp Oxford dress shoes, and I felt embarrassed that I hadn’t bothered to wear a lip color to dinner.

That evening in late summer, I straightened up in my seat and listened behind me for the British accent. Instead, I heard unfamiliar voices and the chink of silverware on porcelain plates and the occasional bubble of a laugh floating above the low buzz of conversation, barely quieter than my table’s empty chatter of almost-close friends together for the last time before heading off to concrete and metal and glass.

That evening in late summer, I finally heard you again, ordering salmon and pronouncing the L. The familiar pink-bellied fish sounded new and exciting when the forgotten sound flipped its tail, tumbling across your tongue and the back of your teeth. The soft clink of mostly-melted ice cubes tickled the air between your table and mine as you took a sip of your sweet tea, and I
know it was sweet tea, because you told the man sitting beside you that it was like nothing you’d ever tasted before, and I thought you would hate it, but then you said that you liked it and

That evening in late summer, I came to dinner knowing that the hickory tree wasn’t the only one stuck in the same place forever, that I was a part of this place like the table, worn by seasons of sun and ice, but unable to escape. The faces around the table could uproot and disperse and tell stories of this restaurant to faraway friends and laugh, but I would always be stuck in this red-clay country and before tonight, I had always wanted to take a spade to my feet and dig myself out, but

That evening in late summer, my home started to seem a little less like the place it always had been and a little more like an adventure in its own right.

That evening in late summer, I wanted nothing more than to turn around in my seat and offer to cook you anything you wanted to try, anything at all, offering my grandmother’s cornbread if you didn’t have any ideas. I wanted to share my home of hickory and pecan with you if you would take it.

That evening in late summer, I watched as you left the country restaurant. I never caught a glimpse of your face, but I memorized the way you talked and walked and the pattern of your navy blue raincoat and your wavy black hair. And I wanted to share my everyday adventure with you, but you left before I could.

That evening in late summer, I never caught your eye, because I was shy and eating with friends and barefaced, but if I could do it over again, I would have turned my back to the lipsticked faces around my hickory table and asked you if you’d ever eaten steaming hot buttermilk cornbread from a cast-iron skillet. ✯
Kelsey tells me that she’s always had faith in math and measurement, found comfort in the science of what will hold together in flight—in the structure of metal bodies and the certainty of rising. In school, we learned to hope for the ascent of souls and to call the dead departed—to imagine them all lifted up by a careful hand. I try to cradle the phone to my shoulder, standing on the porch and watching lights blink overhead as she speaks. She says her job has made her unable to sit inside a plane without spotting each sign of repair, then talks about scatterplots and probabilities, stress and breaking points. I think of the way planes continue to crash, disappear,

of how I fear the thought of splintering less than this feeling of suspension—than the way I so often find myself between spaces, unable to stop wondering if I’m just patching over some split part of myself whenever I imagine souls scaling the sky, or something more than planes moving over the sprawl of streetlights beyond my yard.

I think of the difficulty of trusting whatever it is that keeps pushing us along, how it’s even harder than figuring out what leaves me standing here in the cool night after she’s hung up, feeling as though a space keeps opening in my gut, as though I keep speeding forward, being kicked up into air.
Redefined
Kate Levenberg | Mixed Media Sculpture
**UNTITLED**

TASSY HENDERSON | PENCIL, OIL PAINT, COLLAGE
If You Say “I Love You” in a Plague Year
Casey Brown | Short Story

It is a plague year. Or at least it’s shaping up to be one. Reports of quarantines and hospital patients with unexplainable symptoms are sprinkled throughout the nightly newscasts. You’ve lived through five plague years, so this shouldn’t come as a surprise. You almost come to expect it.

You keep a surgical facemask in the top drawer of your desk, with cough drops and sticky notes and half-used pens, to make it feel more commonplace. You slyly tucked it in that drawer when you moved into this hollow shoebox of a dorm room, the one you share with no one, since limitations on public spaces were enforced to prevent mass outbreak. Colleges could keep their dorms to maintain the authenticity of a college experience, but only one student to a room with no hall-style bathrooms. Just a tiny cubicle with a toilet and a shower and a sink nudged between every two rooms, so in the case that one resident is infected, only two might be affected, rather than fifty. Flawed logic, you think, but you’ve never been one to complain about precaution.

Open the drawer and stare at the mask. Wonder if it’s too early to be wearing one in public. The girl who lives next door, with whom you share a bathroom, stands at the sink, adjusting her pearls in the mirror. She smiles when she gets their placement just right. Something about the smile seems so carefree it perturbs you. Take another peek into your drawer. Leave the mask for now. Subtlety is best for the time being.

Sit in the back corner of the lecture hall, the drafty one that smells vaguely like stale popcorn. People avoid it like the plague. It seems ironic to you that people still use that expression. Or maybe, it just became more relevant. Drape the newspaper over your desktop. It flares out the way the bed sheets would when your mother and father made their bed together on Sunday afternoons. That was before he died. Now, you have to help your mother make her bed or the sheet will wobble in the air and ruffle unevenly in the middle of the mattress. But don’t think about that. Take a bite of the grapefruit you grabbed from the breakfast window. You read somewhere that grapefruits are good for your immune system. Wipe the dribble from your chin before it drips onto the paper and makes the print bleed.

Scan the front page until you see the first headline about the
plague. The story tentatively calls the new plague, “Strain George,” as if giving them human names makes them any easier to control. The human race is in control of very little nowadays. Pollution has left a permanent hazy beige color in the sky and affected the genetic codes of the plants and the wildlife and even the bacteria. Many of the trees curve grotesquely under their own weight and grow patches of thick, crimson phlegm. Dogs and cats are no longer permitted as pets—scientists have said that animals were susceptible to the earliest cases of the plague—and now they stumble through the streets with foam bubbling off the edges of their jowls. Don’t think about the look on your brother’s face the day your mother drove Toby away to “the farm,” or about the two-hundred-dollar check and the letter from the government you found under the oven mitts, thanking your mother for her cooperation. Then there’s the human race, combating the mysterious strains of the plague. Not even the top scientists can pinpoint its origin.

The lecture hall door creaks open as students start to shuffle in. They laugh. One girl mentions a party in the apartment complex just north of the quad. You heard some girls on your hall talking about the same party. They went as a group. You weren’t invited. As the girl and her friends sit a couple rows down from you, they rattle off the names of boys who danced with them or offered them shots. Andy. Mark. Jordan. Russ. But they don’t mention George. You wonder why you’re the only one concerned about George.

The edges of your paper flutter as someone wiggles into the seat next to yours. You start to feel like air is rolling over itself in your chest. You already know who it is sitting down next to you.

“Good morning,” he says cheerfully.

Nod, so he knows you heard him, but continue to scan the headlines. You need to know the status of the plague more than you need to evaluate his eye color. The professor slaps a saggy leather briefcase onto the table at the front, which means it’s time for class. You feel the boy’s arm lightly brush your knee as he pulls a pen from the front pocket of his backpack.

You know a couple of things about the boy. He seems like he’d be the guy his friends would call by his last name. Rolled-out-of-bed hair. An affinity for grey t-shirts. His backpack always slung from one shoulder. All the tops of his
pens are chewed. So are his nails. The corners of his notebook are splotched with coffee ring stains, which he doodles over during class. You’ve noticed these things as he has sat next to you for the last six classes. The first time, he didn’t say anything, only smiled. The next time, he asked you which book you chose for your final paper. With each concise answer you gave him, you shuttered at the tone of your voice. You sounded so cold. But you weren’t trying to be. You were just confused. You continue to be confused every time he takes the seat next to yours.

After the lecture, collect your items hurriedly and stuff them in your backpack. You want to get out the door before the others. But as you approach the door, you realize the boy is already there, holding the door wide open for you.

“Have a nice day,” he says.

Without even thinking, you smile back before you hurry out the door.

Before you go to your mother’s house for Saturday night dinner, add extra clothes to your laundry bucket. A pair of jeans you only wore once. Some odd, unpaired socks. It will make her feel more useful, seeing a bucket filled to the brim. You hear it in her tone as she chatters from the laundry room about her newest project.

Ask: “A koi pond?”
Ask: “Where in the yard were you thinking of putting it?”

Don’t ask: “How long will it take for the fish to die?” She smiles as she brushes excess lint from her hands. She props a catalog up on the toaster as she stirs the tomato sauce. “I want to add a little color to the yard. Can you imagine how those orange fish will look out there? It’s so dull since…”

She looks out the window at the dilapidated swing-set, half collapsed into the brush at the edge of the property line. Offer something about school as she grows eerily quiet. Tell the story about the cute boy in your class who opened the door for you. Don’t be offended when she continues to stare off through the window at the rusted swing, hanging by one chain, oscillating in the breeze. It was your brother Joey’s favorite swing. Wonder what she thinks about when she stares out there
at it. The first time Joey fainted? The heaviness of his coughs as you all waited in the bleak hospital waiting room? Or maybe she relives it all, from the official announcement of Strain Ernest to the moment Joey was taken away in the middle of the night. As you ramble, it will feel like you are simply stringing along words, hoping they make even a remote bit of sense. But it doesn’t matter. As long as you don’t say what you’re thinking. As long as you keep talking. You know she feels guiltier when she recomposes herself and realizes the room is silent.

The sauce bubbles riotously. Steer your mother to the small kitchen table. Pull out the pale blue bowls and serve two helpings of meatballs and spaghetti. As she starts to absently poke her meatballs, bring up the koi pond again. Exhaust her with questions about what shape will she choose for the pond, how many fish she will get, and whether she wants to include a water feature. This will get her through dinner. As she wipes down the table afterward, put the dishes in the dishwasher and dump your laundry back into your bucket.

It’s okay to leave then, because she’s settled on the couch, staring intently at the TV. Kiss her on the forehead. Glance one more time at her before you leave; make sure you’re
leaving the mess the way you found it.

Try to focus on the lecture. It’s about *The Virgin Suicides*. You love *The Virgin Suicides* and its groupthink narrator. Forget that the boy, Billy, keeps nudging you with his elbow as you take notes. You can see the smirk on his face. He thinks this is funny, distracting you. Try to pout, make him think you’re mad. Hide that you think it’s a little funny, too.

You did something different this morning. You usually avoid leaving your room before you have to, but today, you went to the breakfast window, the ones your classmates hover around after each lecture, and bought a hot chocolate. You looked around for a little bench to sit on to enjoy your drink. But after your first sip of hot chocolate, you realized you bought the worst cup of hot chocolate, so bad it makes your nose wrinkle. As you turned to throw it in the trash, there he was, standing behind you, smiling widely.

“Good morning, Jules,” he said. When you tried to return the greeting, you realized you didn’t know his name. “Billy,” he offered. “Billy Hayes.”

You repeated his name. “Billy. Of course.” You felt like an idiot. You wanted to walk away then, but Billy made no move to let you by.

“I’ve never seen you here,” he said.

“I decided to mix it up this morning, see what I was missing,” you said. You shook your cup slightly. “Which apparently was horrible, overpriced hot chocolate.”

He laughed, which caught you off guard. You didn’t think you were funny. He then asked you about your weekend and surprisingly, you found yourself telling him about the koi pond, which again made him laugh. He said all he did was go to a party and it was dull, though it didn’t sound it to you. As you talked on and on, you took turns playfully warning people against the hot chocolate. When it was finally time for class, he opened the door for you, and you both took your seats in the stale popcorn corner, and ever since, your heartbeat hasn’t slowed.

Billy nudges you again. Your professor starts to make a point about whether or not the plural narrator can be considered a Greek chorus, but Billy drops his pen, making a
lot of noise as he tries to pull it back to him with his foot. Feel a
giggle rise in your throat, but cough to hide it. He winks as he
tucks the pen behind his ear.

You’re cognizant of his body next to yours as you collect
your things. His skin has a peach tone you never noticed before.
He smells like a plug-in air freshener. When you finish packing
your bag and straighten up, he’s still standing there, waiting
expectantly.

“Jules,” he says plainly. Open your mouth to say
something, but he cuts you off. “Can we get dinner together?
Maybe Friday?” Feel your cheeks heat up. He seems to read
your nervousness as reluctance, because he says, “I just want
to eat some food with you. No plans for marriage.” He laughs
weakly at his attempt at humor.

You exhale, look down at the books you hug tighter into
your chest. “Okay,” you say.

A grin spreads across his face. You said the right thing.
The satisfaction in that one simple success gives you a chill.
Give him your phone number and pray you don’t trip on the
lip of the doorframe on the way out.

Pelt him with Snow Caps as you walk down the street.
Laugh because it’s funny the way he does a little dance,
tiptoeing cartoonishly as he dodges the caps.

“Hey! That’s a waste of perfectly good Caps,” he calls.

Stuff a handful of Caps into your mouth and hum
mockingly as you chew them. Then throw another Cap at him.
He ducks. It misses his head by mere inches. He shakes his
head in mock disbelief.

“Jules Hartley,” he says, in a voice that sounds like
someone giving a eulogy. “Once such a quiet girl, a sweet girl,
now a bully with a vendetta against classmates and a disrespect
for Snow Caps.”

You roll your eyes, but can’t suppress your laugh.
Tonight has been fun, a lot more than you expected. It is your
fifth date. You and Billy got dinner from the Marv’s Diner take-
out window, the place you went for your first date, sitting at
what was quickly becoming your bench next to the old movie
house. You were sweating profusely, the fabric of your shirt
clinging to your back and underarms. You kept wiping your
palms on your napkin enough times that finally, Billy grabbed
your wrists and asked you what was wrong.

You pulled your hands away and said, “Just that.”
His brow wrinkled in confusion. You took a deep breath and
you finally explained. It was your fifth date. The date you had
decided, after the first one, that if you had reached this point,
you would have to lay out the rules. He laughed at that.

“The rules?” he asked incredulously, a smirk playing on
his face. “Jules’ Rules for Boys and Romance.”

You pouted until he listened to you again. Then, you
pulled a crinkled piece of legal pad paper from your bag and
read. Number 1: No sex. You felt your cheeks flush, so you
avoided looking up. Number 2: No sleeping over. Number
3: No kissing. Number 4: No holding hands without gloves.
Number 5: Faces must stay at least a foot apart. You looked up
from your list and found him an inch from your face, a smile
playing on his lips.

“Could I interest you in a fry?” he asked as seriously as
he could. You rolled your eyes but you happily accepted a fry.
When you tried to bring the list up again, he raised one hand
and said, “I respect your rules.” Then, he squinted his eyes
mischievously and said, “but rules were made to be broken.”
He winked. You were thankful you were already sitting down.

After you finished eating, he surprised you by leading
you into the movie house. Apparently, some recent graduate
had reopened it over the summer. Not many movie theaters
existed anymore, because owners found it too tedious to close
and reopen with each new strain. This movie house only played
movies on Saturday and generally, they were kids’ movies, so it
could attract greater audiences. That night’s feature was about
talking fish, but you didn’t pay attention much. Once it started,
a group of boys behind you started to throw M&M’s at you.
Billy, with a mischievous grin on his face, threw some popcorn
back. It was an all-out war until a mother told an usher and you
were asked to leave. Billy received a round of applause from
the boys as he marched out the door.

As you pass a former laundromat, Billy points to a sign
that says “No Jaywalking” before sprinting across the street
at that exact spot. Stare at him in disbelief, but when he calls
to you, you squeal and follow him. When you get to the other
side, he wraps his arm around your waist.

“See?” he says. “Rules. Made to be broken.”
Wiggle out of his grasp but smile. You turn to argue with him when you see the large, gray building behind him, looming over the sidewalk. The old Carson Factory. It used to make cream-filled cakes, until it went out of business when you were five. It still smells vaguely of vanilla, which makes you shiver because now it’s a plague camp.

Billy lurches forward as you stay in your place, and looks to the building.

“The camp,” he says. “I forgot that was on this route.” He notices the discomfort on your face. “I’m really sorry. If I knew we were coming by this way, I would have…”

Raise a hand to hush him. He tucks his hands in his pockets. “Did you ever know anyone who went to a camp?” he asks.

Take a moment, survey the thick, high walls of concrete they built around the factory to separate the healthy from the sick. You hear no noise from the other side. Maybe they don’t even use this as a camp anymore. Moved on to more high-tech places. Billy looks at you expectantly. “I knew a few,” you offer.

“Me too,” he says. “Some classmates. A teammate or two. But no one really close.” Knowing him as you do now, this revelation doesn’t surprise you. He isn’t someone who carries the heaviness of true tragedy. He kicks at a rock by his shoe. It clacks as it bounces against the pavement. “Creepy either way. When they disappear, you know? There one day, gone the next.”

Nod in solemn agreement, but don’t add anything more. You both stand in silence, facing each other for another minute or two. Bump him with your shoulder to get him walking again. He starts to talk about the movie, how much fun he’s had tonight, but your mind is still on the plague camp. After the first couple strains came through and wiped people out, the government started setting up restrictive zones where plague victims would be away from society. The idea was that if all the plague victims were in one place, it would prevent them from infecting otherwise healthy people. People never necessarily
went to the plague camp nearest to them. You learned that when Joey was taken from the hospital late at night, after your mother had sent you home to get some rest. You stood outside the Carson Factory for days, hoping to hear Joey’s voice calling for you, for your mother, but it never did. For all you knew, he wasn’t even at that camp. You waited. You held onto the government’s promise that if someone got better, he or she could come back from the camp. But those promises were empty. Joey never came home. It’s been three years.

Billy looks at you expectantly. Raise an eyebrow. “I asked you if you had fun, too,” he says.
Smile and say, “Yeah. I had a lot of fun.”
He grabs your hand. He’s broken rule number 4. But let it slide for now. Lean into him as the pale yellow light of the street lights make a solid path to follow back to campus.

**WIND**

*KATE LEVENBERG | MIXED MEDIA SCULPTURE*
Tell yourself to stop shaking. It won’t work, but you hope it might. You’re standing in your driveway with Billy. You’re about to have dinner with your mother. You’ve been to the house every day this week, sweeping, scrubbing, rearranging furniture, checking in on your mother’s sanity. She seemed in high spirits every time you stopped by, which surprised you. You have been the only person, besides the occasional repairman, to step into the house since Joey left. The guys from the hardware store came by this week and dug up the yard for the koi pond. Now, there’s a huge plastic tub in the middle of the backyard.

Billy smiles at you reassuringly. You feel a little tremor in his fingers as they brush yours. But you don’t hold his hand. You can’t even imagine what your mom would do if she saw you holding his hand. Instead, nudge him with your shoulder and lead him inside. Your mother stands in the kitchen doorway, dressed in a pressed pair of slacks and a nice button-up shirt. She looks nice. She is giddy when Billy walks in,
reaching to shake his hand but then remembering herself. She
ushers you into the kitchen, where she has a bowl of peanuts
for you to share. After the hello’s and how-are-you’s, the room
grows quiet. Don’t panic. You prepared for this.
Just as you start to tell your mother a little bit more about the
Suburban Literature class you and Billy share, he says, “Mrs.
Hartley, Jules tells me you’re building a koi pond.”

Your mom lights up. She asks if he’d like to see it.
He says yes and they go into the yard. Watch them from
the kitchen window. Your mom uses her hands expressively, no
doubt explaining the environmental benefits of a koi pond.
From what you can see, he is rapt with attention. Place your
hand on your chest, as if that will stop your heart from racing.
Make sure you wink at him when he walks back in. Your father
used to wink at you, really slyly behind your mother’s back
whenever he teased her. It was a way to include you in the
game. That’s how you feel now with Billy, that secret sense of
belonging to something that is just yours. You like that feeling.

After dinner, your mom hums along to the radio as
she scrubs the dishes. When her back is turned, take Billy by
the hand and lead him to the far living room, “the fancy living
room” as Joey used to called it, the one reserved for three
occasions: the annual family photo, presents on Christmas, and
Easter morning. It sits empty all year now, except when you
dust and vacuum it in springtime.

Lead him up to the mantle and pause. He pulls the
center photo off the shelf and cradles it in his hands. It’s the one
of the whole family, Joey and your dad, too. You are nine in the
photo, a huge gap where your two front teeth should be. He
notices your teeth. He laughs. Tell him how you used to be a hit
at all the pool parties, gathering the chlorinated water in your
mouth and shooting it out every which way.

“You mean like this?” he asks. He kicks one leg behind
him. He has one arm above his head, hand open as if reaching
for something off in the distance. The other is placed gracefully
above his heart.

“Except the gap,” you giggle. “You don’t have the gap.”
He collapses his limbs with a smile. Take the picture
in your hands and trace the frame with your thumb. Tell him
this is the last photo you have of your father. Tell him your
father went quickly, that one day it was like a cold, then like
a flu, then he was gone. Search for something in Billy’s face,
something that is enough to compel you to tell him the rest. Focus on his eyes, warm and crinkled with attention.

Tell him: “My mom told me once she thought he was one of the earliest plague victims. The way strain Andrea moved so quickly, my mom thought—well—”

You remember that night, your mom balled up on the bathroom floor, hugging the plush bathmat to her chest. It took you two hours to get her back into bed. But don’t tell him that. He squeezes your hand and wipes away the tear threatening to fall from the corner of your eye. Lean your head on his shoulder. He doesn’t ask about Joey and you’re glad. Joey is a story for another time. For now, grasp his hand tightly and listen to your mom’s humming echo down the hall.

Open your mouth wide and let him toss popcorn pieces into it. You’re both in sweatpants, sitting in your dark dorm room with only a strand of Christmas lights to cast shadows on the wall. A movie plays on your laptop, but neither of you are paying attention. Billy mocks you, trying to mess with your focus, but don’t let him. With each piece you catch, chew it up with a smirk.

His hands start to creep toward you. He leans in to kiss you. Dodge it. His kiss lands on your upper cheekbone. He knows the rules, the rules you’ve changed again and again since meeting him. You won’t want to kiss him, not now that this is an official plague year. You caved once, on the way home from Marv’s. Billy had stopped at the jaywalking sign and when you expected him to dart across the street, he grabbed your wrist. You were about to remind him about the rules, when he tugged you enough to unbalance you. That’s when he kissed you. It was over before you could even recognize it happening, but the feeling of his lips, soft against yours, hovered there as he winked and ran across the street. Since the headlines include more and more mention of Strain George, you refuse to cave again. But once this strain’s damage is done, maybe the rules could be altered. You said as much to him. He didn’t really fight you on that. He kisses the top of your forehead and excuses himself to the bathroom. Practice your popcorn-catching skills, catching them one after another with finesse. Say something about going pro.
There is a crashing sound from the bathroom. Call his name and then call it again. Panic fills you when he doesn’t respond. Rush into the bathroom to find him on the floor, unconscious. A lump develops on his forehead. Did he hit the toilet as he fell? It doesn’t matter. His nose starts to run red. Don’t think about how fainting spells and bloody noses are the first signs of Strain George. Call an ambulance.

Rummage through your bag before you go in. Snow Caps. The book for your final paper. Spare change. Tuck your mask in a side pocket where he can’t see it. Take a deep breath. Walk through the doorway.

He sits up tall in his bed, eating a cup of yogurt. He’s happy to see you. He beckons you to come over and hug him but you take a seat in the chair in the corner of the room.

Ask: “How are you?”
Ask: “How’s your head?”
Don’t ask: “Is it the plague?”

He tells you about waking up in the hospital, that everything was too bright and he didn’t know why you weren’t there. He’ll tell you about a nurse, Murphy, who comes in on quiet hours and shoots crumpled up balls of paper into wastebaskets with him. He smiles the whole time he tells you, but the bags under his eyes tell you he’s tired. Stressed.

Your phone starts to vibrate. Excuse yourself and walk outside, by the bathroom, where it’s polite to have hushed conversations.

“Honey.” Your mother sounds panicked.
“Hi, Mom. How—”
“Billy? Is he— Have they said—”
“Not sure yet. Doctors are still running tests. They say it’s something about his symptoms that make them unsure.” The words get choked up in your throat. Try to hide it with a cough. There is a heavy pause. You hear your mom sniffling on the other side of the phone. “Mom, I went to the clinic this morning. I took the test.”

The plague test. Developed during Strain Diana, scientists realized that once they isolated the strain and understood its biology, they could run a test to see the ways the plague could affect each individual person. Plagues work in
weird ways. You could have a classmate, a sibling, a boyfriend
be infected and yet you’d never even catch anything at all.
It’s biology, the doctors have said time and again. The test
could tell you how vulnerable your DNA was to this strain
and more importantly, the likelihood that you would die from
contraction. It is an expensive procedure, but you pawned some
jewelry your mother never wears right after Billy was admitted.
You didn’t want to take any chances.

“Oh, you did? Well—I wasn’t calling to—I just wanted to—"

“Mom, stop,” you say.

That sounds harsh. You can practically hear the fear
bubbling in your mother’s voice. You know she’s scared. You
know she’s terrified. You remember the way her voice quivered
that first night you called from the hospital. You’re surprised
she even has it together enough to call you now. No doubt her
nights are sleepless, thinking about what he could have brought
into the house, what he could have given to her daughter, if he
could have affected her.

Soften your tone and say: “When I hear back from the
clinic, I’ll let you know.”

Say: “I got to get back.”

Hang up the phone. Look through the window into
his room. He taps his fingers on his blanket, looking towards
the doorway expectantly. Don’t tell him you got the strain test.
Though he’d never say it, it is a betrayal. You’ve condemned
him before his tests came back.

You’re startled when a gurney squeaks furiously past
you. The patient is a young woman with bright orange hair and
skin the shade of newspaper. She moans and clutches a place
above her hip with stiff fingers. Feel relieved that you haven’t
felt sick yet, despite newscasts saying George is fast-acting. Feel
sick that you’re relieved. You hear Billy call your name. Take a
deep breath with your knuckles pressed into your thighs. Put
on a happy face and re-enter his room.

Don’t tell him you love him now. Not on this bench with
the ripped cushions in the middle of this white-washed hallway
next to the hospital cafeteria with the fluorescent lights that
flicker every third minute. He counts the number of bare butts
he sees peeking out of the hospital robes of patients who shuffle or wheel by. He’s crestfallen—the doctors have had no news about his results, just taken more and more samples to test. He absentmindedly toggles his hospital band around and around his wrist as he counts. The smell of the polished linoleum makes him feel nauseous in the afternoon, but today’s mystery chili may be making it worse. He makes eyes at the trash can across from you when he’s not counting.

Telling him you love him now would be a consolation prize. You could be dying, but I love you. It would be selfish and sadistic. Don’t add one more thing he needs to worry about at night as he listens to the traffic on the nearby highway, counting the ways, one after another, his hospital stay has hurt others. Don’t tell him you love him now. Don’t let your confession unravel him further.

Instead, hide in the bathroom after visiting hours end, and sneak back into his room after the hallways grow dark. Sit at his bedside and examine the way the bluish light from the street lamp outside coats his skin. Listen to the machines breathe all around him, deep and even with a slight robotic wheeze. Follow the trails of the wires as they twist around his body like maypole ribbons. There is no detection of disease in the way his chest falls with each exhale.

In this moment, think about telling him you love him. How the corner of his lips may twitch with excitement. The way his coarse hands would feel against yours. How his voice, low and gravely, would sound saying, “I love you, too.” Though, if you’re being honest, he would say it first. He’s never been afraid to say what he’s thinking, but he’s also too impatient to keep something like that inside for very long.

Imagine it away from this hospital room, back in your room, sitting with your legs hanging over the edge of your bed or on your bench by the movie house. You would probably let him kiss you, let it last a little longer than that first kiss had.

This image is enough, needs to be enough. Take one last look at him, so still within the heavy gasps of the machines

DON’T TELL HIM YOU LOVE HIM NOW. DON’T LET YOUR CONFESSION UNRAVEL HIM FURTHER.
that the scene looks almost eerie now. Don’t kiss him before you leave—you don’t want him to wake and have to spend a sleepless night worrying. Click the door shut quietly before you sneak out of the hospital.

Two large men dressed in sharp, grey suits have been standing stiffly by the nurse’s desk for the last half hour. There’s a round emblem stitched on their jackets, but you can’t see it clearly from where you are sitting. The one with the dark blonde buzzcut makes conversation with a tan-skinned nurse through pursed lips. The other, bald with a thick neck, checks his watch every couple of minutes while helping himself to mints.

You watch the men as you pretend to read your book for your final paper. By now, you can tell the difference between a regular and a temporary patient, but of all the people that fluttered in and fluttered out throughout the days, none of them look like these two men. The men are composed, at ease. No one with someone in the hospital feels at ease. Especially not during a plague year.

You are drumming your fingers against the back cover of your book, still stealing glances at the men, when you get the call. Billy’s mother is two seats over from you, head flopped on her palm in a vain attempt to sleep. You like his mother. She’s quiet and un-territorial and she always brings lemon bars to eat while you wait. The room hums with overworked light bulbs and the hiss of pained coughs. Wear your mask today. As the phone shrills, unhook the mask from one ear and let it slip away from the corner of your mouth.

“Jules, honey.” It’s your neighbor, Gladys, the one who has nothing else to do but wait for something, anything to change in the neighborhood.

“Hi, Gladys, what’s—”

“You are getting your house fumigated?”

“Excuse—“

“Fumigated? Or maybe your carpets cleaned, though it smells too strong for carpets…” Gladys wheezes into the phone. “I only ask because there’s some smell coming from your house and I don’t want it stinking up my azaleas.”

“Wait, smell? What smell?” You notice a couple of
people turn to you as you speak. You mouth ‘sorry’ and hurry through the automatic sliding doors. Plug a finger in your ear to hear her better.

“Yes, honey. Like it’s super clean. It could be chlorine. I saw some workmen come over earlier this week. Are you getting a pool?”

“Gladys, is my mom okay? Is the house okay?”

“I think your ma’s fine,” she says. “She’s been scurrying around the yard. I keep hearing doors slamming.” You hear a male voice say something to her. She scoffs, but says to you, “Jerry says you should probably come home, but honey, I think everything’s fine. It’s just my azaleas.”

Hurry her off the phone and rush back inside. Stuff your books in your bag and search for your car keys. Snap your mask back on. Put your hand on Billy’s mother’s shoulder. She stirs slightly, wiping absently at a speck of drool on her chin. Ask her to tell Billy you’ll be right back. She nods, but her head bobs with sleep. Think about leaving a note for him on the waxy page of a catalog advertisement, but then Murphy walks behind the nurse’s desk. Walk up to him and slap your hands on the desk to get his attention.

Say: “There’s a family emergency.”
Say: “I’ll be back in an hour. Tops.”
Don’t say: “It might be more than that.”

Murphy assures you that Billy is asleep, but he will let you know as soon as he wakes up. As you turn to leave, you get a better look at the emblem on the men’s jackets. It’s a gold circle with a deep red heart in the middle and the blip of a heart monitor stretched across it in white. You know that symbol from somewhere, though you can’t put your finger on it.

Rush to your car. Quickly rub a glob of hand sanitizer into your palms before you climb into your car and drive away. On your way home, you pass through campus, then turn right. You pass the Carson Factory, still gloomy and menacing, even with the hazy golden light of a sky just shy of sunset shining against it. The light at the corner of the factory turns red and you can feel the factory looming over your car. You peek at it again, and you’re suddenly struck with panic. Gold circle. Dark red heart. White blip. The symbol of the government-sanctioned Department of Outbreak Containment. The Plague Patrol. These are the agents who become involved when someone’s symptoms are suspicious, the people who sweep
in to collect confirmed cases. The men who took Joey. It strikes you that they could be there for anyone. There were so many families; any one of them could have a daughter or an uncle or even a grandparent to be collected. But you have a knot in your stomach. Your body barely believes your own words.

Before you have time to make a decision, the light turns green again and someone behinds you beeps. You step on the gas and keep driving.

Make a promise to yourself right there in the car. You will go in, you will check on your mother, and you will leave at the first moment you can. Twenty minutes maximum. Thirty if your mother starts to cry. On the way back to the hospital, you can use that service road behind the strip mall, the one only meant for delivery trucks, because it will shave minutes off your driving time and help you avoid two lights. Rush into the lobby, politely but firmly demand to see Billy, and do not take no for an answer. This is your game plan. You feel your heart leap in your chest when you think of the men in the suits back at the hospital. Stick to the plan and you will be back in plenty of time.

Before you take the keys out of the ignition, survey the scene. The front door is wide open, bouncing on its hinges just slightly. So are two windows on the first floor and only one on the second. Joey’s room. The carpet from inside the front door hangs out like a dog’s tongue in summer. A few objects are splayed throughout the front yard and the driveway— a tube sock, a baseball, a yellow legal pad, a leather-bound book—like one of those houses with young kids who don’t pick up after themselves. But there are no young kids here. Just your mother. Then the smell leaks in through the air vents. It stings your nose as it fills the car. It smells vaguely familiar—shoe polish? Detergent?

Clutch the sides of your seat and take one big breath. Try to imagine what you might find inside. Maybe the smell makes it look worse than it is. Maybe your mom accidentally spilled a bottle of cleaner. But then again, that didn’t explain the objects on the ground. Maybe she was getting the house fumigated for some reason. But you have a feeling you’re just being optimistic.
As you walk into the kitchen, the smell hits you. Your head spins and you tuck your nose into your shirtsleeve. You take a step and feel your foot slide. The floor is slick. Look down and see suds gather around the edges of your shoes. Press on the arm of the couch and find it damp. Bring your fingertips to your nose; they reek of bleach. All the knickknacks on the shelves in the kitchen have been removed. The cabinets are all open. Peer out the kitchen window. The koi pond has been pulled onto the porch.

Walk outside to examine it closer. It reflects the muted rose-colored light from the setting sun. The smell of bleach grows stronger as you approach. Bobbing in the pool is a baseball glove, the rotted swing from the swing set, picture frames, the light blue printed plates you ate off the day Billy came for dinner. Pick up one of the photo frames and see that it is the one from the mantle from your ninth Christmas. Shake some of the bleach off it, and lay it gently off to the side.

As you walk back in the house, realize the scrubbing gets louder when you walk toward the hall. In the family room, your mother stands at the mantle, rubbing the wood with a sopping toilet brush. Her cheeks are flushed and her arm twitches as she presses down harder. Every couple of seconds, she bends over, stirs the bucket with her brush and returns to furious scrubbing. Walk over to her and place a hand on her shoulder. She shudders violently, but doesn’t turn to face you.

Say: “Mom?”
Say: “What are you doing?”
Say, louder: “Mom.”
She says nothing, just lifts onto her tiptoes for more leverage. A white smudge widens on the mantle where she’s stripped off the finish. Grab her forearms and pull her away from the mantle. Her arms fall limp at her side.

“It needs to go away,” she whispers. “It can’t be in here.”

Say: “Mom, why?”
Say: “This stuff has been sitting in the house for a while.”

Don’t say: “If it was going to affect you, it would have done it by now.” No, say it. She needs to hear it.

But she isn’t listening. You reach for her hand but she pulls away. She grabs the last remaining frame and runs towards the kitchen. When you round the corner from the
hallway, your mom stands by the sink, dousing the frame in bleach. Grab her around the waist and pull her away from the counter. She yells “No!” like a petulant child as she throws the frame, dripping with bleach, toward the window. It clinks against the glass and falls into the sink. She chokes on a sob and her knees buckle. You fall to the ground with her, the weight of your chest falling on her shoulder. She shakes as she spits words out her mouth, speaking to the world rather than to you directly.

“Get it all out of my house,” she cries. The back of her head batters your cheekbone as her body rocks back and forth. Lean into her and tighten your grasp on her. “Just get it out of my house. It can’t be here. I can’t have it here.” She’s losing momentum fast. She stops rocking and instead cries into your chest.

“He sat at the table,” she moans softly, her voice breaking. “He sat on the couch. He used the dishes. I can’t have it here. I can’t! I can’t!”

She goes on like this for an hour. You can tell when your mother sobs about Billy, blaming him for any traces of George left among the silverware or cracks in the bathroom walls, but sometimes, she gets confused about who she’s talking about. She will whisper something about all the newspapers left behind in the garage or cry softly about almost tripping on baseballs being left at the landing of the front staircase. In those quiet moments, you speak softly in her ear, hoping it might calm her down permanently. When words become nothing more than incoherent mutters half-washed away by tears, hum one of the tunes that she used to sing to you.

When she finally grows silent, barely able to keep her head off your chest, you feel comfortable coaxing her off the ground. With one of her arms slung over your shoulder, lead her to her room. The air is stale in there and smells of bleach, but of something else, too: your father’s favorite cologne. With your free hand, grab a handful of her sheets and pull them down just enough that she can slide into bed and you can cover her. She curls into the fetal position. Before you leave, you try to open a window, but it’s stuck from years of neglect. Kiss your mother on the forehead before you tiptoe outside and close the door quietly behind you.

Night has almost fully fallen and you can’t see anything except for the last band of sunlight over the treetops. Turn the
porch light on. Wrap yourself in an old quilt left untouched by your mother’s fury and sit on the bench out front.

Make another plan. You have to call the fire department, ask them how to dispose of all the bleach, if you need to throw the entire couch away. If they ask you whether or not they should stop by, tell them that you’re fine. Leave the pictures and other salvageable items drying on the steps of the porch. Hopefully, the sunlight will dry them out. But the smell? Maybe ask the fire department about that, too. Call all the neighbors, especially Gladys, and tell them you’re sorry for the noise and the stench. Explain that your mother spilled some cleaner on the floor and panicked. That might be plausible enough.

Check the time on your phone. There’s nothing from Billy or Mrs. Hayes. You think maybe no news is good news, but a pit is still settled in your stomach. Distract yourself. Make a plan for the next time you see him. You’ll hold his hand as you tell him about the next crazy thing your mother has done. You’ll go to Marv’s before and get him chili cheese fries. Plan for an upcoming trip to the movie house, and explain that you will let him partake in a candy war and that when the usher comes to kick you out, you’ll block him with outstretched arms so Billy can run the other way, evading capture and staging an epic finale in his war. Then, when you walk home, kiss him, not by the jaywalking sign, but in the street, right in the middle. How’s that for breaking rules? Yes. That would be the plan.

The wind picks up and a fresh wave of bleach hits you. Pull the quilt closer around you. You’re not ready to go in yet, to go to sleep, to have tomorrow come, so you look at your phone again. Maybe one phone call to the hospital wouldn’t hurt. With each ring, you whisper “Please be there” into the phone. You can feel an “I love you” hanging on your lips, but it’s still not the right time. Instead, listen to the hollow ring in your ear, silently pleading for his voice to interrupt it, as the last ember of the sunset burns out. ✪
Limitless
KATE LEVENBERG | MIXED MEDIA SCULPTURE
Give me a Saturday night my baby by my side
Sweet Home Alabama and a six pack of lights
An old dirt road and I'll be just fine
Give me a Sunday morning that's full of grace
A simple life and I'll be okay, yeah I'll be okay
Here in small town USA

"Hey, brother.
There's an endless road to rediscover.

"So let your heart, sweet heart
Be your compass when you're lost"
Every day I pray I thank God I got her
She's the moon in my shine, the whiskey in my water.

Bonnie and Clyde
Go it as bumpy down as yeah
looking for the law while I push my luck
She's ridin' shotgun like it ain't no thing
turn the radio up so the girl can sing right
pull into the party like "y'all wassup"
I think I dove in but never got out. Instead, I drifted for a while under a mirrored sky, distracting myself with dragonfly colors and rushes that spoke in a language both foreign and sweet. Swimming was the best part—a movement so sleek and thin I could almost disappear.

That was before. Now, when I least expect it, the people with wings drag me out. They tell me I’m safe, but the flying feels like falling. The dream shatters. I look down and everything is small, quiet, and I don’t know how to tell where up begins and where deep loses its meaning.

When they set me back on the ground, the water is too thin. I reach around me but I don’t remember where it might have gone. I try to rub the river dregs into my skin to wash off the surface stains with rivulets of muddy blue, but my handfuls are full and thick with collapsing earth.

Slowly, I stand on legs that shudder. I’ve forgotten how to walk, and the parrots on land point and laugh when they realize I’ve forgotten how to breathe, too. It’s just that the air feels heavier here. It’s too dry, and I don’t know how to force it down after months of growing gills.

I try to tell them: I am used to liquid that pools on my tongue and whets my appetite for bigger things. That is the taste I love. But they don’t understand, and I weep when I see all the green, a feather-bright color they hawk at me. I miss my muted world, my vast, wet, sunken world.
How can I forget it? How can I forget the place of light that breaks and bends against the surface like an infinity of stars? It never stood still, and I didn’t either. I learned how to sing in the softness of water gone bright. How can I stop hearing the waves that once spilled around me?

I’m not sure I can. I try to as I sit in my tiny puddle but my skin runs cold and I turn shallow with the water. I am surrounded by things I’m supposed to be used to—air and sun and wind that bundles me dry—but I still feel like I’m drowning, the only thing plummeting in a sea of wings.
I like to sweat out my guilt like my dad used to sweat out his hangovers. In this humidity, digging rainwater trenches feels a hell of a lot like Purgatory. Even up here in the mountains, the humidity hardly ever drops below 35 percent, especially with the Jamaican rainy season approaching. Iraq was all dry heat, the kind that sizzles your spit right when it touches the sand. But this, this is some dense-ass, malaise-inducing Santeria heat. Thick in the air, it wrings you out like a raisin. All that pressure precipitating in the atmosphere, these clouds looming overhead. It’s some ominous shit, and it gets me sweating real quick. With each heave of the pickaxe into the ditch, a drop will collect in the bags under my eyes or the small of my back or the crease behind my knee-cap, and after a while it starts to feel like that work accounts for one sin or another. Not that perspiration is equivalent to exoneration, but it’s a start.

Not that that’s the whole truth of why I signed on for a year of service at Bethel Orphanage in Jamaica. But it is why I’m still here, a month after my year of service ended and my visa expired.

D-Jam and I wait for the volunteers to go to sleep before we sneak out with the paint scrapers. We agree on the schoolhouse: it’s far enough from the dorms that we won’t wake anyone up, and it hasn’t been painted in six weeks—the longest of any building on the orphanage grounds. Starting on the backside, we shave the peeling yellow paint off with the rusted scrapers. We use them often. This is our Sunday night ritual: preparing a building for the new group of volunteers to paint this week.

When I finally hit the rack around one, I’m slick with sweat and can feel it dampening the cot’s ratty fabric. I flip my wrist over and check my watch—I wear it on the underside of my wrist, the way Dad taught me. There are a lot of things Dad taught me, mostly by example. At least he was consistent.
Those mornings after Mom made him sleep on the couch, or later when he would go for a drive in the pick-up after giving me or Brian a shiner, he would trudge down to the basement, clad in this beat-to-shit bright scarlet Nebraska Cornhusker Starter jacket and a ratty old Dale Earnhardt, Sr. visor. Always that sweatshirt. Always that visor. Always reeking of whiskey. I still don’t know why he wore a visor for working out in the basement; he got a little salty whenever I asked him. He would crank out a thousand sit-ups, five hundred push-ups, and a six pack to start the day, and give Mom some time to forget about whatever shit he had pulled the night before. Then he’d cash his VA pension check, roll through Mayette’s for booze, and pick up where he left off last night.

I #$####

Monday mornings like this, when the cicadas wake me up and I’m lying in my cot staring up at the dead ceiling fan, poking my finger through holes in the mosquito net and thinking. That’s when I look forward to the hard labor. It takes my mind off things. In Iraq, they were real good about always having something for us to do: more acting, less thinking. Until I got back, that is. Then, I was jacking off all day, because who wants to hire a high-school-dropout, dishonorably-discharged Marine with the marketable skills comparable to a telegraph in the digital age?

I had only been home for two months when I signed on for the year of service. Dad wouldn’t even talk to me when he found out about the discharge. He and Brian were the reasons I enlisted, too. I mean, how could I not enlist—three generations of Marines in the family, and then we get the call that Brian’s KIA. Then the funeral, and the folded flag, and Dad not taking his eyes off me at dinner. I signed up within the week.

And, honestly, if it weren’t for how everything went at the end of my deployment, I probably would’ve enlisted for another tour. I hated it over there worse than anything, but I could only take so much of the bullshit that got shoved down my throat once I got back stateside. Mom pinned my picture up to the “Wall of Heroes” at my town’s Walmart. Girls ignored me at the bar, because I don’t remember how to talk to civvies, let alone girls. Employers told me they “support the troops” or some other bullshit before saying my history was inexcusable—
when they didn’t even see the After Action Report. Fuck all that.

I needed to get back into the rhythm of taking shit step by step, and Bethel Orphanage provided that for me. No shortage of shit to do here. The structure of routine gives me a reason to get up, and reasons to get up are a rarity when a cold bucket shower and rice breakfast are the only things waiting outside of bed for me at five in the morning.

I swing my legs out from the netting and walk into the bathroom. The moldy tiles feel cool on my feet. My head swivels to the corner behind the door. Clear. Then my eyes sweep the rest of the room. Clear. Some habits you can’t quit.

I step into the shower stall and spread soap on my body, then scrub it through my hair. Cracked and woven with wrinkles, the skin on my face feels like old leather against the coarse bar of soap. Upending the bucket slowly, I try and rinse off all the soap. The water from the bucket is frigid and it’s empty before everything’s washed away. That happens most days. The dirt doesn’t wash away easy. And water is precious.

When I walk downstairs to the kitchen, Matilda, the Irish nurse, is preparing breakfast for the orphans—a pallid oatmealy paste. I grab the coffee pot off the counter and pour a cup. She doesn’t turn her head. She knows about the paint scraping, lets me and D-Jam sleep in on Mondays. The children play with her long red hair, splaying it over their heads as if it were their own. Her nose is tiny, a pockmark on her slender face. She’s the other reason why I’m still here.

When I first met her ago a month ago, she was standing at the stove cooking breakfast for the kids, just like she is now. I asked her to throw another shrimp on the barbie. She was confused, didn’t know where to start: Australia and Ireland are on opposite sides of the equator, and Crocodile Dundee is not the craic in Dublin these days. She thought that was mostly hilarious, though. Told me to call her “Waltzing Matilda.” I didn’t know what she meant by that, still don’t. Either way, she looked more confused when I told her that I liked her three
days ago. She ran her hand through her hair, stressed, like she had to operate on a sucking chest wound. I didn’t know what I was doing. I guess that was some high school shit. I can be a little rash sometimes. We haven’t spoken since.

The mountains and the jungle thicket canopy the orphanage, tinting the sparse shade all bright and verdant. From the chapel, the orphanage grounds stretch downhill about two hundred yards to the front gate. It’s a long but narrow arrangement, like a football field built on the slope of a mountain. A gravel road winds through the middle of the grounds and up to the chapel where it ends in a cul-de-sac. Four dorms sit on either side of the road—left for the boys, right for the girls—and the final building before the chapel has the kitchen and cafeteria downstairs, the infirmary upstairs. D-Jam and I sleep in the infirmary, Matilda in the cafeteria.

“D-Jam,” I say, walking upstairs to join him on the porch outside the infirmary. “What’s good, Kemosabe?”

D-Jam’s the on-site director of the orphanage. He’s good shit—knows my visa’s up, but he takes all the help he can get. Besides, the last thing the Jamaican government wants to do is deport an American. That said, their infrastructure is about as organized as a brawl in a biker bar; even if they cared about expired visas, they don’t care enough to act on it. Jamaica time is the only time here.

“Another day, another dig, eh?” He sighs, sunk down into the faded patio furniture, watching the sun rise above the jagged mountain face shading the orphanage. D-Jam pats me on the shoulder and daps me up: a clasp of the right hands, then snap the thumbs against each other. We take quick swigs of the piping hot coffee. Beads of sweat condense on my upper lip.

“Heard that, brother,” I say before nursing my coffee again. D-Jam doesn’t talk much, and neither do I. I think that’s why he likes me. He smiles so little it seems like his face is cast in plaster—always neutral. Ear buds pulled up over his collar from under his t-shirt, he always has at least one in, talks on his phone through them. I think that’s how he got the nickname, though he never plays music out of them. Says he doesn’t like music.
We try to avoid the volunteers outside of labor situations. That’s why Mondays suck: we’ve got to teach the newest group of white people how to save the world by re-painting the same building the last group painted. Every Sunday morning, last week’s group packs into the orphanage’s dilapidated shuttle bus, tired and teary-eyed, and off they go, back stateside where they can post profile pictures of themselves posing with a bevy of adorable Jamaican kids and act like they made a difference or some other TED Conference bullshit. Sunday evenings, the upcoming week’s group pours out of the orphanage’s bus and gets acclimated to sleeping with mosquito nets as blankets.

“What do you think the body count will be for today?” I say. Invariably, two or three hard-ass guys in the group ask to work in the trenches with us. We like to size them up and bet how many injuries they’ll sustain that day. There are usually a lot of accidents. D-Jam just shrugs.
By nine, we have the new group of volunteers lined up along the road and waving to the orphans peeking through the slanted window shades in their dorms. All scrawny white kids in tank tops, there are ten of them, including their male chaperone—clad in spandex shirt and shorts—who assures us that they’re “ready to rock.”

I bring the three guys over to the tool shed and introduce myself. “David,” I say, nodding my head. Rattling open the shed door, I muster a weak “Glad you came” to each of them as I hand them their axes. I didn’t have to lie too often in Iraq; the translators did that for us. Their hands look soft—no calluses—and they take practice swings with the pickaxes like they’re fucking shot puts. We bring them out to the trench, along the far left side of the orphanage grounds. It extends...
from the chapel all the way down to the gated entrance, and it’s about halfway done. The further down we get, the moister the earth is. Moist means mud. Mud means heavy. Heavy means hard work. They’re usually not good with hard work.

We set up in a line, alternating which side of the trench we stand on. Sharp on both ends, the pickaxes work, though they’re a bit unwieldy. We till the earth enough to shovel through the trench afterward, clearing out the loosened clumps of dirt and rock. The axes are about ten to fifteen pounds, which is heavier than you think when you’re heaving it up and over your head, then deep down into the mud, all morning and afternoon without a semblance of shade. Even the wind is sparse. Even in the mountains.

Exhausted and whiny, they take a break after every swing, hunching over the wooden hilt of the pickaxe to breathe heavy and bitch. That’s when I tell them to take lunch break, and tell D-Jam that I’m going farther down the trench—to the untouched part—to get a start on the wetter ground. It’s gonna be a bitch, but at least I feel moderately useful.

I march down and begin work on this portion of the trench. The ground is fucking sopping. After a while, my back gets sore from yanking the axe out of the muck. I start to bend over and pull out the submerged end of the pickaxe from ground level, shooting a sideways glance down the trench to get a view of today’s progress. D-Jam’s nowhere in sight.

I feel a pin prick in my right wrist and look down.

Fuck me. A fuckin’ Little Boy—or at least that’s what D-Jam calls them—a black snake, fang deep, hanging from the artery in my wrist. No more than a foot long and slim as my pinky finger, D-Jam warned me about these fuckers.

They’re not imposing or anything, but their venom is no joke. The first time he showed me one, he had it trapped under the heel of a garden hoe. He cut its head off with his machete and flung the body into the woods with the blade of the hoe. When I asked him what would happen if someone got bit, he just stared into the distance, stoic as usual, weighing the question. Then he ran his pointer finger along his throat quickly, casually, and walked away.

The Marines preach the importance of remaining calm, and I figure that keeping my heart rate down will help slow the flow of the venom to my heart. That said, there’s still a fucking snake dangling from my wrist like—fuck—like how a fucking
snake would dangle from a wrist. I don’t know. But I know to react.

That’s what I was trained to do and that’s what I do. I yank that fucker off and kick a stone on top of its torso. Taking a step back, I raise the pickaxe over my head, bring it down, and chop its head off. Axe buried deep in the dirt, through the snake’s body, it’s then that I look down at my wrist—my hands still clamped tight around the base of the axe handle. I haven’t seen this much blood in a while—not since Iraq, not since the roadblock. It must have latched onto my wrist real good. The floodgates are open. Untying my bandana, my vision starts to blur a bit. I wrap the bandana around my wrist and fashion a tourniquet out of it, then make a beeline for the infirmary.

My arm is throbbing now; I can feel my pulse all the way up in my armpit. I run behind the buildings so the kids and volunteers can’t see me, blood drenching my t-shirt sleeves as I hold my arm upright to stall the bleeding. Sweat-soaked and sapped of energy, I slide up the stairs to the infirmary, bracing myself against the wall as I go. Matilda is treating a volunteer for a headache, but she shoos him away as soon as she catches sight of me.


“You shouldn’t be around either,” she says, laying me down on a bed and running for D-Jam. I close my eyes and open them and Matilda is sucking on my wrist, the wound. She spits out the blood and venom into an empty can of Chef Boyardee. It sounds like dip spit pooling in a spittoon.

“Beef Ravioli. I see sanitation is a priority,” I say.

She doesn’t look up. Standing over my head, D-Jam starts talking with Matilda about blood transfusions or something. She just nods as she continues sucking the wound, then spitting into the can. I keep nodding in and out. The last thing I hear is them talking about transportation options.

Here’s how it goes: U.S. government’s still trying to install puppet leaders in the city—he definitely can’t be in the Ba’ath party, if he’s Sunni the Shias hate us, and if he’s Shia the Sunnis hate us. It’s a lose-lose-lose situation. But they finally find their golden boy, Al Habib or some shit.

Rules of engagement are already a clusterfuck, and then we start stationing roadblocks throughout Baghdad. CO says fire tracer
rounds over the top of the vehicle as a warning. Turns out most
civvies don’t know what to do once live rounds whiz past their
windows. They panic, drive forward. We flick our safeties off,
null the threat. Except it’s not a threat, it’s a family of four
with a trunk overflowing with baggage. They were fleeing the
city.

The ones where everyone lined up on the roadblock
opens fire, those aren’t the ones that stick with you. That way
it’s not just on you. Not as much as the next one, at least.

New ROE: CO says fire smokes as a warning, then
tracer rounds over the top of the vehicle as a second warning,
then light those fuckers up once they hit the fifty-meter mark.
Roger that. Fifty meters can’t come soon enough, PFC Drescher
says. He’s the fucking new guy, straight outta high school,
replaced Specialist Knudsen who got fragged in Fallujah. We’ve
only got thirteen days left in our deployment.

Rifle perched atop the hood of the Humvee, I glance
down at the thermometer on my watch. It reads 106. I blink
slowly, the bags beneath my eyes sagging on my gaunt cheeks;
it’s coming up on three days since I’ve slept for longer than
an hour. My eyelids feel heavy. Grabbing the tin of Grizzly off
the dash, I weigh the contents in my hand and snap my index
finger against its side to pack what’s left of the dip in a tight
wad. With my left thumb and forefinger, I pull my right lower
eyelid open and wedge a pinch between it and my eyeball, then
do the same for my other eye. It burns like hell but gives you a
jolt. A lot of the other guys pound energy drinks, but that shit
causes chest-clenching bouts of heartburn. To be sure, the dip
gave me Prilosec-grade chest pain, too, but it wasn’t nearly as
bad. That’s the case most of the time here: your options consist
of two shitty things, and ideally, you get to choose the one that
hurts less.

But anyway, I blink a few times to clear my field of
vision and get back to scanning my sectors. Next car is a white
Lincoln sedan, ‘90s make and model, but still nice. The heat’s
distorting the air close to the broken asphalt—like a mirage, it’s
obfuscating the tires, their motion. Lance Corporal Pace fires
smokes out of his 40mm at a hundred meters. Not fast so much
as persistent, the car swerves but keeps coming.

Seventy-five meters comes and we let loose with the
tracers—still not sure why we fired tracer rounds in broad
daylight, but a corporal’s not allowed to ask those questions.
The Lincoln speeds up, or at least that’s what it looks like from my view, and I gently place my finger on the trigger, leveling my sights on the driver seat. No one’s saying anything. Or everyone’s talking and I just can’t remember right.

What I do remember is this: the sedan passes the bullet-riddled Iraqi cigarette billboard, marked with white paint in the corner to denote the distance of fifty meters. I feel the adrenaline in my fingers, my eyelids; I’m frosty—but not on edge, exactly. The car keeps coming.

It’s not like in the Westerns, when Clint Eastwood squints an eye and plants one in the chest of Lee Van Cleef from a football field out. Both eyes peeled, I focus on the sights: the pointed reticule, one circle within another circle. The rifle’s steel stock feels snug and cold against my right cheekbone. The car keeps coming.

I fire.

Only, no one else along the line fires.

Three bursts, twelve 5.56 rounds: good effect on target. The windshield’s cracked to shit and all I can see is the blood splattered across it from the inside. The car coasts to a stop against a wall along the right side of the road about twenty meters short of the perimeter. It’s deathly quiet save the sedan’s side-view mirror grinding and sparking against the clay wall.

CO approves my request to inspect the scene up close. Pace and Mendoza come with. Rifles shouldered, we stalk up to the Lincoln. I creak open the driver side door and Pace cranes his head and rifle inside. Ducking his head out immediately, he bumps his Kevlar helmet against the car doorframe and walks away. Doesn’t say a peep.

We don’t ID the man in the driver seat as Al Habib’s brother until later. I lean in, see a woman sitting shotgun—his wife—tattered to a pulp. Once I peer through the gaps in the driver’s headrest and see the pink and purple car seat, I back off, too. There’s blood smearing the back windshield. Her blood. She was four.

Al Habib doesn’t take Americans killing his brother and his family too well. He pulls out of the election, starts spouting anti-American shit to any Iraqi that’ll listen. A lot of them listen.

Back at the roadblock, Drescher’s grinning ear-to-ear. He tries to give me a fist bump. I give him a crack to the jaw. Hard. That’ll go on the After Action Report, too. Normally, paperwork in the military takes a while to go through, but
they expedite that process quicker than Bush fast-tracked the “Mission Accomplished” banner a year before.

Less than a month later and I’m no longer a Marine. No benefits. No job recommendations. No honor. No feature spot in the commercials with the saber-wielding Marine in his blues fighting a dragon.

When I wake up, Matilda’s leaning on the doorframe. “We found the Little Boy’s body, spread its blood on the bite to stop the bleeding and clean the wound out. Snake blood coagulates. Bought us time to get the antivenom,” Matilda says. “D-Jam wanted to fly you home, said the orphanage couldn’t afford a dead American on our hands.” It’s dark, and the cicadas are starting up again.

I sit up, look at her. “Thanks for doing that—the sucking thing.”

“Don’t get any ideas,” she says. It’s quiet for a pause and the cicadas are deafening. “You need to rest. You’ve lost a lot of blood.”

“I’ll give you a day. I’m not gonna coop up in here and rub elbows with the clown crusaders,” I say, tilting my head toward the volunteers’ dorm.

**LESS THAN A MONTH LATER AND I’M NO LONGER A MARINE. NO BENEFITS. NO JOB RECOMMENDATIONS. NO HONOR.**

“The volunteers?” she says. “Who do you think donated blood for you? There aren’t many B-positive blood types in these parts.” She stares at me. I look away, out the window. “What have you got against them, Dave?”

“I don’t know,” I sigh, scratching the back of my neck. “They just seem like tourists, is all, with this fetish to see the Third World—but it’s not like we need a fresh coat of paint on the buildings every week. We need a well and a chicken coop and a finished trench. They just don’t do anything, you know?”

“They’re just kids, Dave. They seem a bit young for
fetishes. Other than the spandex chaperone, at least. Besides, they make the children laugh. I think that’s worth something."

Her words kind of hang there for a moment. “Can we talk sometime?” I say. She raises an eyebrow and crosses her arms; I know she’s waiting for an explanation. I gulp. What I don’t know is what to say—explanations were never a strong suit. I keep it simple: “Lunch?”

She raises her eyebrow even higher, somehow. “Fine,” she says. “But it’s going to be with the kids.”

Normally D-Jam and I take lunch in the trenches, chewing down leftover jerk chicken in silence. I tend to avoid the orphans like the volunteers—with a wide berth, almost like an IED. Since my deployment, I can get a little jumpy around kids.

Matilda tells me most of the orphans are mentally or developmentally disabled—she told me that term too: Dad had a different name for it. Their maladies run the gamut from severe cases of cerebral palsy to Down syndrome and autism. The treatment options for them here are just shy of FUBAR; we can’t afford wheelchairs for a lot of the kids in need of them.

The Sisters of the Blessed Assurance attend to the children all day and night. Mostly older women from Ghana and the Dominican, they work their side of the street at Bethel Orphanage and D-Jam and I work ours. It’s probably happenstance that our side of the street involves all the heavy lifting and theirs the far-off looks and navel-gazing. But they treat the kids with care and seem mostly nice and sincere. They’re always smiling to themselves, content changing shitty diapers all day. Theirs is a happiness that comes from someplace else.

I sweat pretty often, but I’m swimming in it now, waiting for Matilda to come down from the infirmary. This is the closest I’ve come to a bona fide date since high school. Between Matilda and the thought of being around the orphans, I’m at DEFCON 2 in my armpits right now.

It’s strangely quiet here in the cafeteria this afternoon.
The volunteers left this morning—three days early—after the whole snake fiasco. They came to see me in my cot before D-Jam herded them into the bus. I asked why they were leaving, if it was something I said. Matilda got a kick out of that. Helped break a little bit of the tension around here, too, I think.

I hear Matilda before I see her—her barefoot feet slapping down the stairs. She pauses at the bottom, looks lovelier than ever in this blue blouse that matches her eyes and is probably the last clean article of clothing she’s got. I’m in my good-luck shirt: the Snow Patrol t-shirt Brian gave me before he shipped off to basic. It’s an Irish band, I know; I’m hoping to impress.

“Now, I know you’re fuckin’ with me,” she says, glowering at it. “Of all the bands, you pick the one from Belfast?” I stare back, dumbfounded. “I’m from Dublin, you asshat. My Da’s IRA.”

I think about making a break for it and joining D-Jam back in the trenches before this date is too far gone.

“I’m just messing with you,” she says, pushing me by the shoulders out the doorway. “C’mon, let’s go. Mid-day prayer is soon.”

We start down the path toward the chapel. A soft drizzle starts, spotting the sand and gravel in the walkway. Rainy season’s finally inbound. It’s been a long time coming.

From outside we can hear the sisters and children singing a hymn. It sounds something like Babel—the sisters’ practiced choir mixing with the kind of melodic groans of the children.

We walk into the chapel and I stall under the archway entrance at the sight of all the children lining the walls of the chapel in their wheelchairs and walkers and crutches. The sweat comes back with a vengeance, clams up my palms. A shiver runs down my spine. Matilda grabs my hand, lurches me into the cool chapel. She brings us to a seat between two boys supine in the corner—twins, identical, both stricken with cerebral palsy but without wheelchairs.

“Roman, Roshawn,” she says, “meet Dave.” They both smile, flashing white teeth and big dimples. I smile back, nervous and goofy. The shakes are coming on. I used to get them all the time when I first arrived at Bethel, one week sober and DTing in the worst way.
Scrunched up against the chapel wall, we sit back and Matilda holds out a lyric sheet between us. It’s loud and everyone is singing, or trying to, and the kids start clapping, too. The din echoes under the chapel’s dome. Socks cover the hands of some of the children who are prone to putting their hands in their mouths, and still they thud their hands softly against each other, trying to clap along. Bad as the music sounds, it’s charming and light, so I do it. I sing and clap to the shitty ‘70s church songs. Holding back a smile is a lost cause.

I flinch when a big bald head nudges into my side; Roman nestles into my lap—kind of rolling and contorting—but he stays there, lying on my thigh. I turn to Matilda.

“It’s okay. Roman’s just writhing a little. He’s fine,” she says into my ear, shouting over the chorus. Outside, the rain picks up; it’s lapping up in puddles and rattling the sheet metal roof.

The song finally comes to a close. “Our Father,” the sisters and Matilda recite, finishing up the mid-day prayer. They all raise their arms and hold the hands of the people beside them. Matilda follows suit, grabbing my hand from my lap and lifting it in prayer. I freeze up when Roman holds up his left hand to mine. Slowly, I take it. My hands shake and Matilda grasps my right hand tighter as we mumble through the prayer.

Roman’s hand feels cool, clean in my sweaty palm. Meeting his eyes, I smile weakly. My throat is tight, constricted like a bottleneck. Unclasping hands, the sisters say “Amen.” Roman lets go of my hand. Matilda lifts her head up from prayer and looks over at me. Her eyes are kind and sad.

It’s strange the stuff that sticks with you: the way Mom stuffed wet tissues down her sweater sleeves during Bri’s funeral; the Rorschach blot of blood splattered against the white Lincoln’s back windshield; the words to a prayer you tried to forget since Baghdad.

I think of D-Jam eating shitty jerk in the soggy trench alone. I think of Dad slouched in his ratty pleather recliner with a tall boy of Coors in hand, watching the nightly mortality report. Matilda leans her head on my right shoulder, takes my wounded wrist in her hand and clutches my bandaged forearm tight to her chest. There are all kinds of cripples. The sisters shuffle the orphans off to lunch. Some strands of Matilda’s red hair catch on my chapped lips as I smile against the back of her
head. I am here. ✿

for Ray
Our Spring Is Sweet, Not Fleeting
HANNAH FERNANDES-MARTIN | OILS ON CANVAS
Chained (left) & Rusted (above)

VIRGINIA KLUITERS | DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY
But things grow stagnant these days in my America, 
where I drive roads so thick with dependency.

I’d be better off walking through the land of milk and honey, 
of my ancestors, of my own misguided homesickness.

There, the languages flow like bitter wine through the streets, 
and no one understands all of my secrets.

There, even dead things float, and I think I could be holy, 
though I am as ugly as the angels.

I want to bleed on the temple walls. 
I want to press my lips against them until the imprint 
of the stones and the parables are a part of my bone structure. 
I want to forget everything I don’t feel, go where even my sadness 
will be the color of sand, someplace where life is valuable 
and fleeting and we march in the streets until the prisoners come home.

Yes, I say; I will go by the name of my soul. 
I will stand on the mountains, try new wine every week.

I will taste the elements. I will throw my loneliness into the mikveh. 
I will fear no more land mines. I will lay my body down 
to the mercy of the Jerusalem street 
and I will cry only laila, laila, laila tov.
DROWNED IN TEARS
RACHEL HAYES | DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY
KarmaCell is a phone service that I use when shit gets really terrible. I just call the 800 number and talk for as long as I want to one of the KarmaCell psychics. They hire a few professionals—real smart people who are known to have the Sight—and I can talk to whoever I like when I call, as long as I pay. It’s totally legit, no bullshit—these are 100% genuine psychics. All I gotta do is give them my credit card number, and then they lay out my life in a way that makes sense, that feels possible.

I always talk to the same guy. KarmaCell calls him “The Great Interpreter,” but after about five phone calls, I got him to tell me his real name. It’s Baldwin, he told me, because his father was a concert pianist. Way sophisticated. Elegant. Like what you’d expect a psychic to be named. He’s said the last couple times we’ve talked that I’m about to enter a new career, and that I’m going to find love soon, and that I don’t really have to worry about Chad, my ex-boyfriend, breaking the terms of his restraining order, but if he does, I should call 911. I’m pretty excited about that new career thing, because my online psychology degree hasn’t really panned out the way the website promised.

Lately I’ve been calling a couple times a week. It’s not a huge deal, mostly because my roommate Shay is almost never home anymore. She’s always at her boyfriend’s apartment in Akron. When she was around, she used to give me shit for how much I spent on manicures and psychics and card readings and smoothies at the mall, but I figure as long as I’m paying my share of the rent mostly on time I’m fine. Plus, not much makes me feel better than having some stranger hold my hand. It’s basically like paying for therapy or Xanax but way cheaper, so whatever. I consider it a sound financial decision.

The thing is, though, that I’m way broke. I work two jobs—well, one real job, and one sort of on-the-side thing—just to stay basically functional. During the day, I work at Sears, fitting forty-five-year-old women into boxy pleat-front pants
and folding never-ending piles of fruit-print sweaters. On occasional Fridays and weekends, I babysit for friends of my parents, the Caldwells, who live a town over. They live in a bona fide mansion—three floors and a pool—and pay me pretty well. Their seven-year-old twins, Zoe and Margot, both have nicer cell phones than I do and they make fun of my highlights. Still, the $12-an-hour is more than I make at my actual job, so it’s worth it. But it would be better to work somewhere else, somewhere that doesn’t make me feel dead and poor when I leave.

Tonight, I’m sitting on the leather couch in the Caldwells’ living room. I put the twins to bed half an hour ago, which means they’re probably asleep enough for me to watch television and make a phone call. I find reality TV reruns, something where women with pearl necklaces drink champagne straight out of the bottle. It’s nice to be reminded that rich people are just as fucked up as me. For about twenty minutes, I watch housewives take their dogs to therapy and fight with their husbands before I start to realize that I’m falling asleep. To stay awake, I pull out my phone and call Baldwin. As always, I give my credit card number before I hear the familiar chime that tells me I’ve been connected.

“What can the Great Interpreter divine for you today?” Baldwin’s voice is sleepy, thick. I wonder if I’ve caught him in the middle of something.

“Hi, Baldwin.”

He coughs on the other end of the line. “Angie! What do you need this fine evening?”

“Just wondering what you had for me.”

“Any particular area you’re interested in?” he asks.

“No. Thought I’d see if the spirit had moved you at all since Tuesday.”

“Let me see.” He hems and haws, and I click my new nails together while I wait. They’re long and plastic this time. Purple. “Aha. I think I’m getting something.”

“What?”

“It’s about your romantic horizon.”

“What about it?”

Baldwin doesn’t get to tell me, or maybe he does and I miss it, but I’m interrupted when Margot walks into the living room in her nightdress with her blanket thrown over her shoulder.
“Who are you talking to?” she says.
“Nobody,” I say.
“You’re holding your phone.”
“I’m talking to your mom and telling her you’re still up and walking around at ten o’clock.”
Margot shakes her head. “No, you were talking about spirits.”
“What are you doing awake?”
“I wanted a glass of water. Who are you talking to? Is it your boyfriend?”
“It’s my psychic,” I say. “I call him sometimes.”
Margot sits next to me on the couch and scrunches up her blanket in her lap. “Dad says that psychics are scam artists.”
“Scam artists?”
“They aren’t real. He says so. Mom does, too.”
I give her the benefit of the doubt since most people don’t believe in the Sight, even if they are still young enough to believe in little kinds of magic. Kid magic. “They’ve always helped me out when I needed it.”
“How do they help you?”
How do you explain this to a seven-year-old? How do you tell a tiny person how much life is going to suck? I think of telling Margot about how my mom won’t talk to me since I decided not to go to real college, and about how sometimes hanging out with Margot and Zoe on weekends puts food in my fridge for the rest of the week. I think of telling her about how my roommate has basically moved out but her goddamn magazine subscriptions keep coming to the apartment. Piles of _Cosmo_ and _Glamour_ everywhere. And I think of telling her about my shitty boyfriends and Chad and how sometimes the people who are supposed to love you stalk you all the way to Cincinnati where your grandparents live and you have to call the cops on them.
I say, “I know a lot of people don’t think psychics are real, like your mom and dad, but I’ve always believed in the Sight. I’m pretty sure my aunt actually has it. I bet you believe in stuff that other people don’t think is real.”
“Santa isn’t real either. Mom and Dad told us that, too. Or the Tooth Fairy. They said that we’re too old to believe in Santa, but we’re still going to get presents and stuff, so it’s okay.”
“Go get your water, Margot.”
She walks almost tiptoe into the kitchen, so quiet that she sounds like she’s disappeared. Margot uses a step stool to reach the glasses in the cabinet, and when she fills her glass at the fridge, she holds it with both hands. Once she’s said goodnight and left for her room, I pick up the phone and hear a familiar alert: Five more dollars for eight more minutes.

I snag six extra hours at work the following week. I’m starting to set money aside, a little bit at a time, because JoJo at work told me what happens when credit card bills don’t get paid. She said her ex-girlfriend’s debt got sold off to some third-party collector, and that the collector came and found her at the bar where she was working, ordered twenty whiskey sours, and stole her purse. I think she’s full of shit, but I’m not gonna risk it.

One of my responsibilities at work is making sure that
stuff doesn’t get left in fitting rooms. Usually, it’s just product—polyester suit jackets, strangely proportioned cocktail dresses, jean shorts with too many buttons on the front—but sometimes people leave other stuff. Their cell phones. Bubblegum wrappers. I found a used diaper one time.

I do a routine check through the fitting room near Women’s Business Casual and Maternity. A quick glance down the row shows me there are two pairs of feet under stall number three. I hear whispers. Squeaks of hands against a mirror. Someone stumbles and there’s a thump, like a fist or a knee hitting the door. Laughter. I don’t move, just stand and listen for a second, hoping I misheard. It takes another thirty seconds of clunking and the scratchy sound of denim-on-denim to tell that I really didn’t.

We’re actually trained in how to deal with this—there was some old video, probably made in the early ‘90s—but I can’t remember a single step of protocol. I don’t know what to do, or how to do it, or if I should do something at all. I reach towards the door to knock before I change my mind, take a step back. I bite off the edge of my new thumbnail. Maybe I could shout at them. But that might freak them out. I’m not really good at shouting. Plus I heard this crazy story on TV one time about this chick having sex with her husband and her house got robbed in the middle of it and her heart rate was so fast that she died or went into a coma or something. I don’t want to kill anybody.

I step out of the fitting room and lean against the wall between the Spanx and a thermostat. I figure that maybe I can tell people that the fitting room is out of order if they come by and want to try on elastic-waist slacks. One time, like ten years ago, me and my eighth-grade boyfriend Jake—the one with the beautiful hands—made out in the photo booth at the state fair, and my cousin Lauren stood on the outside and kept watch for us. I still think about it every time I see a Ferris wheel. So, I’m just paying it forward, or whatever.

The couple steps out of the fitting room. The girl wraps a scrunchie around her hair and fixes the edges of her lipstick with her thumb. Her boyfriend looks red but satisfied, and as he walks behind her, he slips a hand under the hem of the girl’s cropped jean jacket. I turn my back to them and rearrange stuff on the clearance rack, embarrassed. I wonder if they even knew I was there.
“Are you sure they were fuckin’?” JoJo asks when I tell her the story later. “Damn, yo. I mean, I’d be lying if I said I never did that shit before, but it’s probably different to be standing on the other side of the door. You doing okay?”

I nod and help JoJo hang lingerie properly back on the racks. Bra straps never go back on those weird little hangers right, and some days I wish we could just dump all this stuff in a pile. It’s hard to care enough to make it right.

“It’s just—why would you do that?” I say. I’m still red in the face from before. I know because Sears has like five mirrors in every department. They’re unavoidable.

“I don’t know, man,” she says. “Sometimes you just can’t help it.”

“That’s gross.”

“Ain’t you ever loved somebody? Come on. Me and my girl did it in a gas station bathroom one time. It was awesome, but it smelled like bleach and hot dogs.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“I mean, whatever. You gonna pass me that hanger, or what?”

I hand it to her and she slides the straps of a satin nightgown over the edges. My stomach hurts, but I’m not sure if it’s from earlier or from the bleach-and-hot-dog story. Could be both.

“I’m taking my break,” I decide, and I pull my ID lanyard over my head and shove it in my pocket. “I’m getting a pretzel.”

JoJo’s face completely twists up. She looks super happy, but also kind of evil? I can’t place it.

“Yo, girl, you get that pretzel.”

“Stop being weird. I like pretzels.”

“Aw, come on, you know that pretzel guy wants some Angie-style strange.”

I throw a hanger at her, and she pretends like I shot her. “Go away.”

I fish a five-dollar bill out of the depths of my purse to pay. I order the same thing I always do—a giant buttered soft
pretzel with cheese and a large lemonade. I actually don’t even have to ask for it anymore, because the guy at the counter who works lunch hours has my order memorized. Whenever I come over with JoJo, she elbows me in the ribs until I think I’m gonna get a bruise and whispers, “Girl, get it,” in my ear over and over. I don’t come with JoJo to get pretzels anymore.

Pretzel Guy stares at me when I hand him my five, and it freaks me out a little bit. He’s looking at me super-close, and he’s not bad-looking or anything, you know, he’s normal, but it’s like he has laser eyes, and I feel self-conscious about it.

“What?” I ask.

“Sorry,” he says. “You just—sorry. Just trying to figure out how much change to give you.”

“It says on the register. It’s a dollar thirty-five. Same as always.”

“Yeah, just thought I’d brush up on my second-grade math.” He scratches the back of his neck with a free hand. It would be cute if he wasn’t so weird.

“Cool,” I say, and I take my pretzel and my lemonade and go. I glance back as I’m walking back to work, and he’s hitting his head on the side of the nacho cheese machine.

“So, what are you wearing?” I ask, halfway through my next call to Baldwin. Maybe I’m pushing it. He laughs.

“Those on this astral plane don’t concern themselves with such mortal matters,” he says. “Also, they monitor my phone calls.”

I wonder what the real answer might be. I wonder if he’s neat, if he wears socks that match his sweaters, if he owns a Rolex. Maybe he’s like a hippie, a spiritual guy, the ones with dreads who reek of weed and incense. I think he’d make his phone calls barefoot. I wonder if he would tell me if the company didn’t go through his call records.

“Is there something else I can help you with?” he asks.

“I’m just waiting for something to happen,” I say. “I don’t know. I call a lot, and you always tell me that something is just around the corner, and it just—well, there’s nothing.”

“Be patient,” he says. “The world works in mysterious ways. You’re going to be fine.”

“Make me feel better,” I say. “Tell me anything. You
“Angie.”
“Just talk to me.”
“You know you’re paying for this,” he says. “There are other people waiting who want real predictions. People with dead husbands and stuff.”
“Better, not worse,” I say.
“Ange,” he sighs. “Okay, I mean, if I was giving you advice on anything, I’d be worried about your credit card.”
“Better,” I repeat. “It doesn’t even have to be a reading, if you don’t want. You could tell me about your day.”
“I like when you call,” he says. “But you make me nervous.”
I lie back in my bed, the phone pressed to my ear. “You like when I call?”
“I don’t know, I mean, you seem cool. You seem sad.”
“Hey.”
“No, I know,” he says. “Better stuff. Look, it sounds like you’re working pretty hard. I think you’ll find a way out of this. Maybe go talk to a financial advisor or something.”
“I caught two people having sex in a fitting room yesterday at work.”
There’s a long pause on the other end of the line. “Better than catching five people having sex. You know, at the same time. At work.”
“Does that mean something?” I ask. “Is it a sign?”
There’s an alert on the line to add more money to stay on the phone, and I push the pound key to continue my call.
“So?”
“I don’t know,” Baldwin says. “How do you feel about it?”
“I’m not sure I’ve ever been in love,” I say.
“Whoa,” he says.
“Yeah.”
I can hear him breathing over the phone. “I can’t fix that for you,” he says, finally.
“I wish you could,” I say back.

Zoe and Margot spend their Saturday evening sitting in my lap, painting my face. Their aunt came to visit them and
gave them a starter makeup kit this week, and since they got way into it, their mom gave them all kinds of expired lipstick and eye shadow colors that haven’t been cool for thirty years. They won’t let me look into a mirror. Margot keeps stabbing me in the eye with the applicator.

“You are going to be so pretty,” Margot says. “Can I do your hair? I have a big round brush. You’re supposed to dry your hair with it, but I think I can just use it normal.”

“I’m doing her hair,” Zoe says from behind me. She’s got a pigtail’s worth of hair in her fist and she’s pulling, but I assume she’s just trying to braid it or something. I pretty much know that it’s just gonna be a tangled mess by the time they’re done.

Margot frowns and takes a giant tube of hot pink lipstick. “Pout your lips like this,” she directs, making a face, and I copy her. “Beautiful. Beautiful.”

She smears the lipstick around my mouth and misses at least once, which puts a giant pink stripe on my chin. I let her get away with it. I did this as a kid with my mom, and then we both stood in her closet and found all of the jackets that had shoulder pads. Being a grown-up is exciting until you don’t have any other choice.

Margot gets up to grab me a tissue and a mirror, and Zoe is humming Disney songs to herself while she works on my hairdo. I’ve always liked when people play with my hair. I realize, with gross kid hands all over my face and Zoe’s tiny knees pressed up against my back, that it’s been a while since I’ve had any human contact. I miss having people touch me; I miss hugs and friends holding my hand and kisses on the top of my head. I am grateful for the kids and their makeup fingers.

Margot hands me the mirror so I can check out my face. I have like five layers of blue eye shadow on. My lipstick looks like Margot and Zoe’s Barbie Dream Car. Margot put circular blush on me, like a doll or a nightmare clown. I have mascara on both my eyelashes—good job, Margot—and on my forehead. Luckily, this is easily fixable. I keep makeup wipes in my purse for emergencies like this.

“I did your hair awesome,” Zoe says. “Look at it.”

I shift the mirror a little to the left and I see it. Zoe’s hairdo. I’m missing a huge chunk of hair. I don’t know how I missed her doing this. I reach back and the back of my hair is cut at a severe, sloppy diagonal. I shriek and Zoe jumps back
behind me, some of my missing hair trapped in her hand.

“What the hell? What the fuck did you do to my head?”

“Those are swear-jar words,” Margot says quietly. The girls are standing together in the corner of the living room.

I can’t stop shrieking. I know it’s bad. I’ll never get asked to babysit again. I can’t stop. “Do you know what you did to me? Oh my God! What the fuck? Do you know how much this costs to fix? What is wrong with you?”

“I thought it was cool,” Zoe says, crying. “Like famous hair!”

“You know better than that. You know you don’t do that. You’re a big girl.”

“I wanted you to be pretty!”

“Where’s my hair, Zoe?”

She points to a pile on the floor behind the couch. There it is. A good four inches.

“Clean that up. I’m calling your mom.”

There’s a fresh round of screaming and crying, this time from me and the kids, and I know in my heart that the mascara has got to be coming off. I start dialing the twins’ mother and feel for my hair with my free hand. So much of it’s gone. On the right hand side, all the hair is still there. The girls are sweeping the pieces into a plastic bag with their hands.

As Zoe and Margot’s mother picks up the phone, I catch my reflection in Margot’s hand-sized kid mirror. The mascara has made big black watery stripes through the rest of the clown-face makeup. I am a disaster.

First thing the next morning, I go to a salon to get my hair fixed. I go somewhere good, because I need somebody with skill to fix this first-grade mess. It’s one of those nice places that plays satellite radio with no commercials instead of the actual radio. I don’t recognize the shampoo bottles because the brands are way fancy.

They do some kind of weird voodoo magic and somehow give me a cute haircut, a short bob that I never thought would have worked. While I’m at it, I get them to update my highlights, so that I don’t have to do them out of a box for a while.

I flip through a magazine while they run my card,
comparing my new hair to the red carpet photos. I feel fashionable, almost. Pretty. The hairdresser holds up my card and gives it back to me.

“It says declined,” she says.

“That’s not possible,” I say, but it’s totally possible. I know it, and she knows it. I can tell by the way she sighs at me. She runs the card again. “Declined. You got another one?”

I hand her my other card. It’s approved, by some kind of crazy miracle.

As soon as I get in the door to my apartment, I call Baldwin. “I need a good prediction,” I say. “I am falling apart.”

“Okay, slow down,” he says. “What’s going on?”

I tell him the story of the haircut and about my credit card and about the judgy hairdresser. I tell him that I didn’t get fired from babysitting, but I’m worried that I scared the kids. I tell him that I don’t have any friends besides Shay, who is never home, and JoJo, who is too weird to be my only friend. I tell him that I don’t know anyone who will touch me. “I’m going to be alone forever,” I say. “Alone with my debt in this shithole apartment.” I’m crying by the end, choking on my own tears, lying on the floor in the middle of my kitchen.

“That’s not true, babe,” he says. “You’re going to be fine.”

“You say that all the time but it doesn’t happen.”

“Predictions take a while.”

“What are you predicting now?”

“I predict that you’re going to be fine. There’s probably somebody who’s in love with you right now and you don’t even know it. Seriously.”

“You say that to me every time,” I say, exhausted.

“Look, Angie,” he says. “Things get better with work. I can’t just say it and make it happen. This psychic stuff is a two-way thing. I have faith in you. Just, you know, talk to people. And stop buying stuff with your credit card. I told you that last time.”

“And you were right, as always.”

“I would never lead you wrong,” he says. “Or the spirit wouldn’t, whatever.” I can hear him laugh over the line.

“You know everything about me,” I say. “I wish I had
the Sight. Maybe I’d know something about you, too.”
“Yeah, I’m pretty mysterious.”
“Can I ask you a question?”
“Shoot,” he says.
I take a deep breath. “Are you the person who’s in love
with me? You know, secretly?”
There is a long pause. I picture him on the other end of
the line trying to put a sentence together, trying to figure out
how to tell me, how he’s been thinking about it for weeks. I
think about all our phone calls, about all the times he’s told me
someone has been in love with me all along.
Instead, he says, “What?”
“Like, are you...the person...who’s in love with me?”
“Yeah, no. I got it the first time. What? No.”
“What do you mean, no? You flirt with me all the time,
and you’re always telling me I have a secret admirer, and—”
“I do that with everybody,” he says. “It’s part of my
job.”
“You’re a real psychic, though.”

I TELL HIM THAT I DON’T KNOW ANYONE WHO WILL TOUCH ME.

He laughs. “Oh, sweetheart. I do this to make a couple
extra bucks in the evenings after work, so I can go to Vegas this
summer. All you gotta do is ‘make a prediction’ for KarmaCell,
and they put you on payroll. I get real into it, though. I like
to help people. Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t totally lying to
you—I think you’re great, actually, and if you can get through
some of this stuff, you’ll be fine. You just have to stop doing
dumb shit. You know. You’re a sweet girl, and you’re not
actually dumb. You’re funny. I like talking to you. But maybe
get a therapist.”
“What do you do during the day?”
“I’m a market research analyst. I figure out how to get
people to buy, like, different weights of printer paper.”
I’m confused. I feel like dying. “Is your name even
Baldwin?”
“Uh—no.” He groans. “Sorry. I made that up to seem
more legit. It’s Greg. I just—”
I hang up my phone before he can finish apologizing. I can’t hear his voice anymore. My phone feels diseased. I throw it on the floor. I get up, walk a lap around the kitchen, lean my head into the cabinet door. I am an idiot. I am a wreck.

I catch Shay’s giant pile of *Cosmos* out of the corner of my eye. I grab the stack and go to throw them away—just to get rid of something, anything—and the top one is just mocking me. There’s some rich, happy, plastic bitch on the cover. Cover stories: *Be a Better You! Get Sexy! 50 Ways to Seduce a Man!*

In a movie, they might light it on fire, or shoot a hole through the front. I can’t do it. I drop them on the floor and run to vomit in the kitchen sink. I wash it down, sort of, and collapse on the floor next to my phone. I slide my phone open and closed again and again. The clicking noise calms me down a little. Open. Closed. Open. I think I might have a switch off in my brain, or there’s a part missing or something. I feel broken all the time.

###

Pretzel Guy comes to Sears the Tuesday after that. He’s a little sweaty and needs to shave.

“Pretzel Guy,” I say. I am not very good at greetings, or people.

“Mike, actually, but hey,” he says to me. “I don’t know if I got this right.” He holds up three ties. One’s beige, and has a sailboat print. Another is solid, almost ketchup red. One has vertical green and brown stripes. They’re all bad. “I got jury duty,” he says. “Not sure what to wear.”

I shake my head and put the ties down, and pick up a navy one from behind the counter that somebody returned this afternoon. It’s better—still not great, but better. “This one’s good. It’d suit you, I think.”

“Ha, ’suit,’” he says. “You know, ’cause it’s a tie, and when you wear a suit... Anyway.” He clears his throat and pays with cash. When I hand him his receipt, he writes his number on it and slides it back across the counter. “You could call me sometime. Or not, you know, you don’t have to. I just. I think you’re cute? And I have for a while? I just finally got it together to say it. I had to practice a lot in the mirror. Your hair was different before. Oh God. Sorry, wow. I am— I am embarrassing myself.” Mike picks up his bag with one hand
and does that thing where he scratches the back of his neck with the other, and then he’s gone, leaving at a half-jog through the sliding mall doors.

There’s a short line that’s started behind where Mike was awkwardly stalling, so I shove his receipt in my pants pocket and help the next customer. Baldwin’s prediction was real. He might still be an actual psychic after all. People with the Sight usually like to keep it a secret.

Me and Baldwin—Greg—could have made it work if it had been like this. If I had helped him pick a jury-duty tie. If I had stood behind him in line at the grocery store, watching him buy beef jerky and orange juice. If Baldwin had worked in the mall, and not on the phone. I’m thinking about this, trying different scenarios over in my head, when JoJo joins me at the counter.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,” she says, and she’s bumping her hip against mine. “The thirst is so real!”

“I don’t even know what that means,” I say back. It’s probably a sex thing. I don’t really want to hear it.

“He is so into you. Shit is crazy. Did he just come over and, like, ask for your hand or some shit? I bet he brought you a rock.”

“There were no rocks. He just gave me his number.”

“His number? Oh, baby!” JoJo goes into this old school Gone-With-the-Wind-type fainting fit. Some teenage girl walking by watches and laughs. “You need to jump every single one of his scrawny-ass bones. For real.”

I’m not even sure how to tell her I’m heartbroken. Even if she knew everything, even if she had the whole story, she’d still probably give me the same advice. I just shake my head at her instead, because it’s all I can manage right now.

She puts a hand on my shoulder. I think she can tell something’s not right. Maybe she can see it in my face. JoJo’s pretty good at that. “Hey,” she says. “I don’t even know your deal. But I know that you’re sad a lot. Maybe do something that makes you not sad. Like, try it. You know? Have fun. One time. If it sucks, you can go back to being sad. Whatever. Do your thing.”

I lean my cheek against the top of her head, her pile of braids scratching my face.

“Thanks,” I say. I mean it.

She squirms. “Yo, man, whatever, you don’t have to get
all weird about it.”

After I get off work, I sit in my car in the parking lot for twenty minutes, holding Mike’s receipt in my hands. I debate calling him. I think about calling Greg instead. I don’t even know what Greg looks like. I don’t know how tall he is. I don’t know if he would run in the mall, I don’t know if he eats pretzels. I don’t know how he smells. I know what his voice sounds like when he’s tired. But that’s not enough.

Mike has messy, quick handwriting. He writes his name in all capitals. His eyes are brown. His pants are a little too short. These are all things that I know, things that are true. Mike is a real person.

I lean my forehead against the steering wheel and listen to the radio cycle through advertisements. McDonald’s. Nightclubs. Day care. Attorneys. Engagement rings. I haven’t made a phone call in a week, since my last one to Baldwin. The thought of talking to anyone over the phone makes me feel sick and desperate. I don’t want to be that girl again, hanging on to men who aren’t real.

I crumple the receipt with Mike’s number on it into a ball, throw it in with the other backseat crap, and shift the car into drive. Tomorrow I will be back at the mall. I know where Mike is. I can stand at the counter and he will have my order before I ask for it, and when he hands me my change I will let our fingers touch, and maybe I will not be so scared of a good thing. ✹
The Ashtadikpalas
HANNAH FERNANDES-MARTIN | CRAYON, INDIA INK AND COLORED PENCIL
Granada
Sarah Luther | Acrylics on Canvas
Let’s drive.
Let’s take the loop around Houston,
going round and round
a curve so gentle
it feels like straight lines.
The kind, you laugh, we’ll never do.
So, we’ll stick to smoke, and you’ll let me
brush your fingers with mine
when we pass the papers
over the gearshift.

We’ll pass
blue-lit houses hazed
by the smoke drifting from our mouths,
and barrios cramped with the bright taste
of foreign language on our tongues.
Let’s pass the parks,
Reliant Stadium, the Astrodome hunched
in slump-backed defeat,
and make up lives for the people
slick with Gulf Coast heat.

And I’ll wish for once
that it wasn’t just you and me
but a hundred more people
stuffed in the cab of your truck.
Then I could straddle the transmission, pretend
each movement you make is an excuse
to touch my skin,
and not just a matter of moving forward.
You lead me toward blackening smoke, so I can see the cane fires before the air grows too thick to smell the sweetness of dying cane: your favorite part of winter. We sit across the narrow road together, and you lean closer, your shoulder touching mine as you point toward those burning roots and tell me to mind the thick base thinning, to watch how the fire eats at the excess and leaves only what’s necessary, see how killing the plant brings about the best of it, those useable parts.

We watch it die so quickly that I can barely remember what it looked like before fire caught, that I can’t go back to just two days ago when you drove us home on your old ATV from camping by the dry riverbed, and I held you at the waist as we passed through these fields, green on both sides, before and after us, as if the cane stretched across the kilometers with promise of no nearing end.

You take a piece of cane from the ash bed and hold it up to my bottom lip, telling me to lick it, assuring me it still has a sweetness of flavor, that the fire only burned the casing, not its core.
I take the cane from you, biting its crumbling shell and pulling it into my mouth. As it hits my tongue, my nose wrinkles and my senses are blinded by the taste of char that melts slowly before the sugar finally leaks out and settles.

As we walk the road back home again, I feel that sweetness linger on my tongue, your fingers lock in mine. I think of the fires that burn and the fires that burn out. You squeeze my hand and I look up at you, hoping we’ll come back to see the cane fires next year.
It’s drizzling when I step outside the double doors of my apartment onto Via Tosinghi in Florence. Senegalese street vendors roam through the crowds, picking out unprotected ones like me, shoving umbrellas under my nose and chirping, “Five euro, five euro.” I shrink further into my windbreaker, hands clammy in my pockets, feeling a little relieved that the rain disguises the few nervous tears that I’ve failed to blink away. For a brief moment, out there on the streets of Florence, I have to laugh at myself; I’m getting a tattoo, not losing a limb. And, despite my sudden unease, it would be rude to cancel last minute.

I take a left, a right, and walk through Piazza Repubblica, bordered on either side by upscale restaurants where chic city-dwellers and middle-aged tourists sip overpriced cocktails in the indoor-outdoor dining area. Then, I pass the carousel on the left. It’s shoved off-center towards the back of the square, like the one attraction abandoned from some long-passed traveling carnival. All semester my friends and I said we’d ride it eventually, even if it was silly, the kind of fun meant for little children. Some of my friends did, when their families came to visit and they could take time off of school to do the touristy things that were too touristy even for us. But my family could never work out a trip, which is a nice euphemism for us not having any money.

It felt like I was in limbo between two different universes, coming home from a weeklong trip to Greece and seeing an email about my tuition payment being overdue. Or listening to my parents tell me that we couldn’t afford our house anymore while I cavorted around one of the most expensive cities in Italy. My parents made every effort to downplay hardship, but the selfishness nagged at me nonetheless. And now here I am, with my last fifty euro in my pocket, doing the only thing that my parents had ever said they would kick me out of the house for. But it seems appropriate to commemorate the surreal experience with an equally surreal act.

I stride past the mothers waving to their slowly rotating children, walking with insincere confidence. If nothing else, I
should have woken up one of the four friends I came abroad with, who’d all assured me for days they would come along. “I would hate to get my first tattoo alone,” they kept telling me—until midafternoon naps and hangovers made them forget their promises. I’d long ago abandoned any idea of loyalty between what I’d realized were fair-weather friends and me, but it still hurt a little.

I walk underneath the Arcone, which signifies where the center of Roman-era Florence used to be, and turn past a nightclub, inconspicuous in the daylight, with its stone façade and grand, arched windows. This is my favorite thing about Florence: the way the city’s history blends together, the way each building has a story—like my apartment building, previously owned by the Medici family—the way I feel like a part of something past and present, the way I feel like a part of something at all.

I’m pleased with myself for being familiar enough with the streets that I don’t have to check the map on my phone. Granted, I spent thirty minutes before leaving my apartment memorizing the short route to Porta Rossa 14 on Google Maps, but I count it as a win because I look a little less like a lost American.

**I’D LONG AGO ABANDONED ANY IDEA OF LOYALTY BETWEEN WHAT I’D REALIZED WERE FAIR-WEATHER FRIENDS AND ME.**

As I scan the street corners for signs, *il giglio*—the symbol of Florence—jumps out at me from the sides of taxi cabs, buildings, and shop windows. I’m used to seeing it every day, and it makes me feel like my stomach is filled with champagne bubbles: giddy and hopeful. About halfway into the semester, I decided, on little more than a whim, that I should get a tattoo, but it took me another month to figure out exactly what I wanted. Then one day, as I was walking through the city with my roommates, I saw the familiar *fleur de lis* symbol on a restaurant sign, and I immediately told them, “That’s what I’m going to get.” A few days later I was setting up an appointment with the one tattoo artist I’d talked to—
purportedly “the cheapest and best” in all of Florence—and I agreed to come in on the first of May, exactly a week before my flight back home.

It wasn’t until the night before that I started to research. I discovered that I’d really put no thought into permanently inking my body; the information available on the artist’s Facebook page, aside from a few pictures of drawings and tattoos I assumed he’d done, was unsettlingly sparse. I had almost no idea about the risks that came along with tattoos; the dream world of Florence seemed risk-free to me, and I hadn’t considered that seedy people taking advantage of silly American girls who all want the same souvenir tattoo design were probably not few and far between. Not to mention the fact that I was prone to major bouts of general anxiety and hypochondria, and I’d happened upon a cautionary article about a girl who’d been poisoned by toxic tattoo ink. For the majority of the time I’d been in Italy, I’d been preoccupied enough by the novelty of living next to Medieval churches and taking international excursions to keep my anxiety at bay, but it had now returned in full force. Even though I knew it was unrealistic to believe that the tattoo would kill me, it seemed as though the risks had been staring me in the face the whole time, and I had only just begun to notice them.

As I made my way to the guy’s apartment that afternoon, I knew three things for certain: I should absolutely make sure he uses a clean needle; I would get my tattoo on my ribcage, largely considered one of the top three most painful places on the body for tattooing; and I was doing it alone.

I reach the street I’m looking for, a narrow, residential-looking block that looks out of place so close to the center of the city, and walk the length of it and back before I find number fourteen. I ring the buzzer labeled Genovali. After a moment, the double doors unlock with the customary loud buzz and clunk, and I push the heavy handle inward. I don’t realize until I’m facing an empty stairwell that I was really expecting to be met at the front door. But I ascend the steps alone, nervous tremors making it difficult for me to walk without wobbling. I have no idea where his apartment is, and when I finally reach a landing with a door standing ajar, I pause for a moment, wondering
if I’ve found the right place, or if I should just turn around and walk back down the stairs and send him a message that I couldn’t go through with it. But then a figure appears in the doorway.

“Katharine?” he says. I don’t recognize him at all, because the pictures he’s posted online don’t do him justice. For one, his teeth are perfect. He’s also younger, and blonder, than I pictured him: less tortured artist, more sports-car enthusiast and part-time model. I am suddenly very aware that I’m not wearing a bra.

“I’m Giuliano. Come on in.” He waves me inside. Right off the bat, he’s much friendlier than most Florentines I’ve met. I follow him into a nondescript apartment, through a white-tiled kitchen and past a bedroom with music and voices coming from inside, a bicycle stored in the hallway, posters on the wall, and into a back room. Sparsely furnished with a futon, two desks and a black table pushed back into corners, I wonder if this is his bedroom. Charcoal and pencil drawings are taped to rundown plaster walls; wooden artist’s models and stone bust replicas rest in front of stacks of paper on the desk.

Giuliano gestures to the futon, and I sit while he takes a seat on a stool and wheels closer to me. “How are you today?” he asks, his accent a mixture of Italian and something else.

“I’m really, really nervous,” I blurt, and laugh awkwardly. Because this is ridiculous: me, here, in a foreign country, with a stupidly handsome and questionably legitimate tattoo artist, getting a permanent mark of a city I’ve lived in for a mere three months. I feel silly and scared and defensive, prematurely judging him, certain that he’s judging me.

But he laughs, and tells me not to worry. “It will be quick and easy,” he says, and he picks up the stencil from the desk to show me. It looks unthreatening, at least: a simple outline, four or so inches tall, like I’d specified over Facebook.

“I’m afraid it’s going to hurt, like, bad,” I confess.

“This is your first tattoo?” he asks, and I nod. “Ah, you’ll be fine. It won’t be bad at all.”

I make a sound, like pffffhh, an exhalation of air meant to signify that I’m reassured, though I think his reassurances, which he continues with while I nod along, are empty—a simple attempt to keep a customer. I can’t really fault him for that.

“Not many people come alone for their first tattoo. You
could have brought friends, you know."

“Ha,” I say. “Well, I didn’t want to bother them.”

Giuliano has me play music on his computer, whatever I like, he says, and I play Blink-182 for no reason I can think of. Stirring up rebellious preteen angst, probably. Then he brings me in front of a mirror and I roll up my flannel shirt—amidst my stuttered explanations that I’m not wearing a bra on purpose, because I found in my last-minute research that the elastic warps the skin—and awkwardly try to secure the fabric just under my armpit so as to position the stencil and simultaneously not expose myself.

He moves the translucent paper up and down on my ribcage, asking me, “Maybe a little this way? Maybe a little bit further up?” and I try to make it seem like yes, that does look better and not exactly the same, until we find a spot that we agree is perfect. And then the preparation is over and I am lying on my side on the thick black table and my hands are shaking from anxiety and adrenaline and Giuliano is firing up the tattoo gun and the buzz sounds just like I expected it would but different at the same time and every muscle in my body is tensing up, afraid to move, waiting for that first prick and the rib-vibrating, unbearable pain that is sure to follow, and then maybe Giuliano tells me he’s starting and maybe he doesn’t, but I don’t hear either way, because my ears are ringing and then the needle breaks my skin, and I clench my fists and squeeze my eyes shut and inhale sharply.

It doesn’t hurt as bad as I thought it would, as I lie there more still than I’ve ever been. It hurts, but in a bearable way, in a way that’s visceral and satisfying. After a couple minutes, probably due to all of the adrenaline, the smooth buzzing actually feels pleasant. It occurs to me that it’s been a while since I really felt something. I’m without mind-numbing pain to distract me, so I stare up at the drawings on the wall, thinking in expletives and expressions of disbelief, punctuated by short answers to small-talkey questions from Giuliano. I say something about my friends and think that I’m glad I came here alone. Digging my fingernails into my palms is an okay substitute for not having a hand to hold, and that seems preferable to having someone else intrude on this memory, distort it with their own perceptions, their presence. I am greedy and relishing that this experience is mine and mine alone.
“Wow,” Giuliano says. “You are not twitching at all.”

After no longer than thirty minutes, he finishes smoothing out the final lines, and tells me to get up and look in the mirror.

“Holy shit,” I say, because that’s really the only thing you can say when looking at your first tattoo for the first time. I have crippling second thoughts, about what my parents and sisters will say, about whether my friends will like it, about whether I like it. But it’s already there, so I tell Giuliano that I love it. And I think I believe it.

Giuliano covers the raw skin with plastic and gives me instructions for proper care. “I thought you were going to flinch all the time, and mess my lines up,” he says. “I thought you would ruin my business for sure. But you barely moved at all.”

I laugh weakly, feeling dazed.

Giuliano ushers me back through the apartment to the front door. “Tattoos are stories,” he tells me, as we stand facing each other on either side of the doorway. “You come in with a story, and you come out with another story. The most important thing is that, after you get a tattoo, you feel like a different person. After every tattoo, you must feel like a different person.”

I nod, in acknowledgement more than agreement, still reeling too much to consider my personal growth in the last thirty minutes. But I guess that alone answers it for me: I’ve made one of the most permanent decisions I think a person can make, after deliberating for only a month. And maybe I’m not a different person walking out of Porta Rossa 14, but I’m not the same person as the one who came to Florence three months ago, and maybe that’s the same thing.

I was only ever just a visitor to Florence, skimming the cream off the top, the best parts, the most beautiful parts, the parts that let me live suspended in a dream-state, a months-long experience filled with two-euro wine and Renaissance art, high ceilings and huge windows that let in the smell of warm Nutella even when closed, of carousels and street chalk drawings and feeling, for the first time in my life, not afraid of everything.
Exactly a week later, my skin still embossed with black ink, I sit in the passenger seat of the car that used to be mine while my parents tell me they’ve sold all of the other cars, along with our house. I come home to boxes and garage sales, and I watch as our possessions disappear into the backseats of other peoples’ cars. We spend the summer packing up the things we’ll keep, shuffling around homes offered up by neighbors and family friends; I drive nearly two hours north each weekend to stay with friends of my own, one of whom becomes my boyfriend and then my ex. These weekends become bright spots to break up the monotony of my well-paying and horribly dull job at an insurance agency and my family’s comfortable quasi-homelessness. We finally move into a small rental, and a couple of weeks later, I leave for my senior year of college.

I’m hoping for a comfortable return to the same uniformly brick campus and formulaic English classes after the past several months of uncertainty. The friends I made in Italy and the promises we made—of *la famiglia per sempre*—are not kept, despite how adamant we were that they would be. It’s almost painful to sit around a dimly-lit kitchen table reminiscing about the coffee shop we went to every day, the waiters there who knew our names, all the little tiny things.

When my relationship ends only a few weeks after it became long distance, I attribute the emptiness I feel to the breakup and disenchantment at being back in Burlington, North Carolina. But after months of not being able to concentrate, or be around my friends, or shower regularly, or get out of bed at all, I discover that this is not normal, but rather a combination of slowly building symptoms of depression that have likely been lurking for a while. I’m in denial at first, refusing to accept that in a matter of months, I could go from feeling like the luckiest person in the world to barely a person at all. Even on good days, that charmed and ephemeral life in Florence seems more like a vivid dream that’s fading at the edges. I still have the tattoo, though—a reminder I didn’t know I would need about what is and what isn’t a permanent thing.✨
Margaret Bryant is a junior English major with concentrations in Creative Writing and Professional Writing and Rhetoric. She is a big fan of words and has a soft spot for cat puns and subtle sarcasm. She is grateful to have Rachel Shippee as her co-pilot on this editorial adventure and appreciates the time, energy, and sanity that the staff has dedicated to this publication.

Casey Brown is a senior Creative Writing major from Franklin, MA with a fierce laugh and passion for women in comedy. She strives to live every day like Mindy Kaling, is fearfully preparing for her post-grad move to Los Angeles, and shamefully admits she had to sing her ABCs to put this contributors page together.

Frankie Campisano is an aspiring humorist who may or may not actually be three children in a trench coat.

Emily Cinquemani is a senior Literature and Creative Writing double major from South Carolina who almost always has a good day when it rains. When she’s not writing, she spends her time getting lost while driving and reading anything by Fred Chappell or Melanie Rae Thon. In the face of her upcoming graduation, she finds herself both excited and slightly terrified. But above all, she is very grateful for her past four years at Elon.

Dannie Cooper is a recent graduate (woo-hoo!) and English major from Maryland. She likes big dogs, cake batter ice cream and writing about her travel-related endeavors.

Kevin Coyne is a junior studying creative writing and literature. He’s admittedly confused as to why/how he was printed in anything beyond a mug shot. Skeptical of pants as well as mayonnaise and single-ply toilet paper, he’s relieved
to have a tangible thing, let alone a prestigious publication like this, to cling to during bouts of (self-)doubt. More than anything, he’s tired of this here tryst with writing in the third-person.

Brianna Duff is a senior, a writer, and a physics enthusiast. She is currently working on a novel that is about running too fast, skirting black holes, not disappearing, and falling in love. Since she is also expected to graduate and somehow leave this place, she would like to thank Drew Perry for always accepting the science in the pages and for knowing exactly what it takes to make something turn to light.

Hannah Fernandes-Martin is majoring in all things art and hopes to do all things art with her life. You know, casual things like revolutionize the way art museums function, destroy the Vasarian cannon, make art that changes the world—that kind of thing. In her free time, she enjoys ballroom dancing and thinking about dogs.

Claire Fyvolent is currently residing on a mysterious planet called post-grad life. She has a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing and plans to enjoy all the beauty the universe has to offer.

Alli Ginsburg feels far too passionately about most everything.

Olivia Guerrieri is a junior Political Science major with a minor in Women’s and Gender Studies. She loves feminist rants and cuddling with her cats.

Rachel Hayes is a first-year Art major with a specialty in photography from Greensboro, NC. She loves taking unique and thought-provoking portraits, can be seen holding a Starbucks coffee every morning, and thoroughly misses her cats from home.
**Tassy Henderson** is a senior double major in Art and Arts Administration and is a native of Durham, NC. She is influenced by her own thinking and her ideas concerning culture and identity. “*I’m not scared of lions and tigers and bears but I’m scared of...*” - Jasmine Sullivan, “Lions, Tigers & Bears”

**SJ Knowlton** is a junior Creative Writing major who has been told she’s “pretty funny for a girl.” She also enjoys reading Wikiplots of scary movies instead of watching them.

**Virginia Kluiters** is a junior Creative Writing major and a lover of poetry and photography. She’s also obsessed with (dark) chocolate and owes all of her successes to coffee, which gives her the ability to function every day.

**Kate Levenberg** is a sophomore Public Health major with a Biology minor. She is inspired by nature and likes to sculpt in her free time.

**Rachel Charlene Lewis** was born (and eventually raised) in Maryland. She writes almost exclusively about women who are/want to be/used to be in love and has recently traded in an obsession with semicolons for an obsession with parentheses.

**Katharine Lindsay** sometimes makes her mouth numb, so it feels like someone else is telling her she’s pretty.

**Sarah Luther** is a first-year from Bristol, TN majoring in Art and Strategic Communications. She enjoys painting, reading, watching movies, traveling, and drinking as much tea as possible.

**Delaney McHugo** is a senior double major in Creative Writing and Cinema who hopes to write screenplays giving voice to women and other marginalized groups. You can find her with a Dunkin Donuts cup in hand on the hunt for a strong wifi connection and a new shade of lipstick.
Christopher McKenzie is a senior who enjoys painting when he can. He worked on his piece for a week over the summer and realized he made something that he found special to him.

Sarah Paterson is a senior Professional Writing and Rhetoric major. She is currently designing a blueprint for a rocketship treehouse.

Lianna Pevar is a sophomore Human Service Studies major who hopes to never stop seeing each day as a new adventure. She survives on hot chocolate, grilled cheese, and warm weather.

Rosie Ruzzi is a sophomore majoring in English with Teacher Licensure with an Art minor. Other than canvases and paper, she has painted screens, cabinet fronts, and bowling pins, among other things. She draws much inspiration from being surrounded by nature in all its glory at Deep Creek Lake in Maryland.

Rachel Shippee is a senior double-dipping in Creative Writing and International Studies with a side of Spanish. She loves caramel apples, talented spoken word artists, and the Oxford comma. Shout-out to her lovely fiction co-pilot Mags, whom she trusts immensely, except if she actually attempted to fly a plane.

Julia Sorensen is a Psychology major with minors in Communications and Creative Writing. She can often be found on the swinging benches beside the lake, daydreaming with an open book in her lap.

Sophia Spach is a senior from Davidson, NC. Her major is Human Service Studies and she is double minoring in Art and Religious Studies. Her passions include photography, singing in the gospel choir, playing in the snow and traveling. She hopes to live in England one day and own a red telephone box.
Autumn Spriggs is a senior with a double major in Psychology and Creative Writing. She has a knack for finding obscure music and truly appreciates napping with her window open on rainy days. She will forever be impressed with the talent contained in this journal and is thankful for the entire staff and the contributors.

Kaitlin Stober likes pandas, peace, and painting. She enjoys ice cream for breakfast and reading Colonnades Literary and Art Journal.

Ben Stringfellow is a senior Cinema student from Annapolis, Maryland. He is pursuing a career in film editing.

Sarah Wasko is a senior Art and Strategic Communications major from Marietta, GA. She’s a critical art student who’s never quite satisfied with her own work, but that comes with the territory. Sarah loves brussels sprouts, miniature schnauzers, and equality. She owes everything to her spirit guides, Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer.

Lydia Willig is a first-year Art major with a passion for photography. A lover of cats and nature, she hopes to continue her growth as a photographer and reminds everyone to stay golden.

Anna von Wodtke graduated in December with a major in Psychology and minors in Creative Writing and Political Science. She writes shamelessly about her feelings because no one has ever had the decency to stop her.
Nonfiction Contest 2014
Judged by Ryan Van Meter

First Place: Casey Allen
Honorable Mentions: William Stirn, Kelsey Camacho

Poetry Contest 2014
Judged by Paisley Rekdal

First Place: Alli Ginsburg
Second Place: Phillip Danieley
Third Place: Emily Cinquemani
Honorable Mention: Liana Mills

Fiction Contest 2014
Judged by Holly Goddard Jones

First Place: Sarah Paterson
Second Place: Kevin Coyne
Colonnades welcomes all submissions of fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction, as well as visual and audio-visual art. Submissions must be free of grammatical and mechanical errors. Pieces are chosen for publication through a blind reading and ranking process by staff members, taking into account the space available in the magazine.

All pieces should be submitted electronically: literary submissions to colonnades@elon.edu and art submissions to colonnades.art@gmail.com. In the subject of the email, include your last name and the title of the piece (ex. lastname_title). In the body of the email, include only your name, Datatel number, the title of your piece, and genre. Save your submission as the title of your piece and attach it to the email as a Word document (do not paste submissions into the body of the email). You may include multiple submissions in one email.

Each piece of artwork must be saved at 300 dpi resolution, in TIFF format.

The deadline for literary submissions is January 10, 2016, and the deadline for all art submissions is January 24, 2016.
Robbyn Harper
MidAtlantic Printers Limited
Elon University Media Board
Ryan Van Meter
Paisley Rekdal
Holly Goddard Jones
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Nico & The Toad
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Our contributors
Our readers
COLONNADES
THE LITERARY AND ART JOURNAL
OF ELON UNIVERSITY

The Unlikelihood of Blooming
EDITORS-IN-CHIEF
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AUTUMN SPRIGGS

FICTION
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POETRY
CLAIRE FYOLOLENT

NONFICTION
RACHEL LEWIS

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JULIA SORENSEN
CALEB STACK
ALEXIS WILLIAMS

ADVISORS
DREW PERRY
TITA RAMIREZ
When we’re young, we often complain about wanting to get older. We want to wear make-up. We want to go to the movies with just our friends. We want to make our own rules. “When will it be my turn?” It seems unfathomable that we will ever get there. That is the unlikelihood of blooming.

The myriad of voices you will encounter here also strive to take the next steps in life. You can find them taking late-night drives in Houston or walking the streets of Florence alone. They confide in psychic hotlines and volunteer in Jamaica to run away from their stateside problems. Each narrator tries and sometimes fails to keep up with the speed of the world. In those failures, there may be heartbreak, but there’s also brilliance and beauty, which makes these voices so compelling.

The artwork itself has a need to be seen. There are pieces that seek to be understood, that want to venture beyond the page. They explore color and medium, capturing the essence of each artist and begging for us to give them a chance. We are in awe of how the artists have captured existence, what it means to be alive and constantly shifting.

We feel so fortunate that we can present you such moving works in issue 66 of Colonnades. There is an honesty and fearlessness that we admire throughout the issue. Thank you to our staff for their dedication, our contributors for their talents, and our advisors, Tita and Drew, for always finding the little things we missed. And to you, our readers, thank you for picking up issue 66, and we hope you enjoy “The Unlikelihood of Blooming.”

CASEY BROWN & AUTUMN SPRIGGS
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LITTLE GREEN WOMEN
ORPHANAGE
MAN IN A BOTTLE
MARYLAND BLUE CRAB

OUR SPRING IS SWEET, NOT FLEETING
CHAINED & RUSTED
YERUSHALAYIM
DROWNED IN TEARS

FALLEN IN THOUGHT
DECLINED
COSTA RICAN IDENTITIES
THE ASHTADIKPALAS

SOMES BAR LIVING
GRANADA
UNTITLED
THE LOOP
At the sink
she slices a peach,
thumbing the knife
through slippery flesh,
its skin ribboning
around her fingers.

The peach fuzz
is slick in her hands
like a newborn’s head,
amniotic and warm.

She cries,
and to her lips
she presses the pit—
wrinkled and sweet,
a cranial fossil.

When she woke
to her bed blooming red,
she was horrified,
relieved.

No longer will she
line up possibilities
like tomatoes
across the windowsill,
their tight skins ripening
in the moonlight.
There are no meteors.
I am sitting at the edge of the ocean
with the world staring back
and all there is for miles is space.
From here, I can hear the moon
in the push and pull of the tides
and I wonder if meteors make sounds too—
if I could hear them from my space in the sand—
if that’s how you can tell when they’re coming.

The beach is empty, silent
save for the waves: a hollow
scallop shell. If you press your ear to the lip
you can hear the sea. I dig trails
in the sand with my hands, carve rivers
like I am reimagining the world.
The ground glows and crackles
in the currents I have left.
I think I have hallucinated it, so desperate
for stars that I have hidden them
in the sand like old bones, like gold,
but I try again and set the beach alight:
a fevered phosphorescent blue.

Between disturbances, the sand fades
back to gray and settles
as if I have never been there at all.
When I go home I will learn the science,
the chemistry. I will learn about the microscopic
phytoplankton who are built to flare from the inside out,
about how they radiate when moved,
about what it means to be luminescent.
But here, at the edge of the world,
all I can understand is magic.
The Milky Way lives in the Earth
and my fingers are full of fire. I feel
in love with the world, in love with joy
and dark and dirt.

I feel like I am a universe.

I run backwards down the coastline,
watch my footprints burn bright and vivid
like rocket trails, like meteors.
One of my earliest memories is from age four or five: I’m sitting under the side table next to the floral couch of the living room eating Reese’s cups in the middle of the night with Bailey, my eleven-year-old yellow lab, lying next to me. Red and green and gold wrappers are scattered around my crossed legs, my fingers smudged with melted chocolate and crumbling peanut butter. I delicately unwrap a cup, stick it out for Bailey, and then laughing, pull it away as she tries to eat it from me. I shake my head at her, saying no, no, no as I plop it onto my tongue.

I have always had a sweet tooth, or so my mother tells me. I grew up with more baby fat than average, my cheeks protruding from my face, making my eyes look small and squished. I had no shame strutting around the beach in a bikini, my belly round and my legs flabby.

I don’t remember when it all changed. I don’t remember when my mother stopped buying the sugary cereal I loved, and I don’t remember when she decided a sandwich, apple, and water was the appropriate lunch for me in grade school. I don’t remember which year she started hiding my Halloween bag after I collected all my goodies and I don’t remember when she made the rule that I had to ask her for a snack after school. She never took things to an extreme. There was no calorie-counting, though she suggested it. There were no mandatory weekly weigh-ins or forced diets, just cut-backs and minor control of what I ingested. She let me eat the buttery popcorn, but only in snack sizes, and she would bake me delicious treats full of chocolate and fatty goodness, but only from time to time.

I do remember in seventh grade when my bones burned in the middle of the night as they grew and stretched, and my fat shifted and spread. By eighth grade, I was slim and tall, a sight to behold for the first time.

“You know, Delaney,” my mom said to me as I sat on my bed about to go to sleep, “you’ve lost all of your baby fat. Now, you really need to focus on keeping it off.” Her hand hovered over the light switch. We had just discussed the new high school I would be going to next year. We talked about fresh starts and new impressions, and what sports and clubs I
wanted to join.

“Because nobody wants to be friends with the fat girl,” she said, before leaving me in the dark.

I hated the way dressing rooms were lit, fluorescent and harsh like the light a dentist shines into your mouth. I hated the mirrors and the scraping sound the metal latch made as I locked my mother out. She always begged to come inside the little cubicle, so she could sit on the bench instead of leaning against the wall. I staunchly refused. Even after she promised to keep her eyes closed, even after she told me she had seen me naked all of my life, even after she laughed, yelling that she birthed me. She waited outside until I tried on something I liked that fit me. She huffed when I didn’t come out after every single thing we picked up, even if I knew it didn’t fit. She wanted proof.

The eighth-grade thin didn’t last long; my slow metabolism quickly corrected this mistake. My body was clearly supposed to be round and squishy, not smooth and small. I was fat again. Therefore, the dressing room had become a circle of hell for me. None of the clothes I wanted to wear fit my body the way I wanted them to. My body was too big, too bulky, too much for these skirts and tank tops. I stared and stared in the mirror as shirts didn’t fit over my wide shoulders, as jackets stretched and suffocated me, as dresses never zipperered all the way up. I sat on that bench my mother so desperately wanted and cried. I sobbed silently, my mouth stretched wide and open, not allowing myself to make a noise, not allowing for anyone to hear the fat girl crying over the skirt she had ripped. I emerged, eyes puffy and glazed. My mother asked if I wanted a bigger size. I always said no.

I blamed my fat for my failures. Sometimes it was valid, other times not. No boys liked me because I was too big for them. I wasn’t skin and muscle, I wasn’t flat—I took up space. I wouldn’t get the lead roles in theater because I was too large for the costumes. I wasn’t a believable romantic interest. The musical director laughed in my face when I told him I wanted one of the lead roles my senior year: “We have to hold you
upside down at one point!” I got to play the grandma. I blamed my weight, but it may have been my subpar tap-dancing.

I developed a role, much like the roles I would get in those theater productions: the jester. My humor was my identity. My mother’s words were stamped in my mind: people weren’t going to like me for my looks, that was for sure, so I might as well give them something to like. And if people were going to be laughing at me, it was going to be because I made the joke. I was outrageous in classes, on the lacrosse field, at parties. Loud and boisterous and full of candor, I made friends through sarcasm, through dancing in hallways and making goofy faces in class.

In my AP Government class, I would sit in the back and take a large strand of hair right above my ear and string it across my face, right above my lip and under my nose, tucking the end behind my other ear. I would sit with my pseudo-mustache, waiting for Mr. Demers to call on me, so I could speak in a deep British accent and make a wrong comment about the judicial process. My classmates would cackle and I even got Mr. Demers to laugh sometimes before he would scold me.

In Chorus, when it was particularly dull, I would create interpretive dances to the Latin hymn “Ubi Caritas” or the classic “Mary, Did You Know?” which caused the tenors next to me to chuckle, disrupting the entire song. Ms. Dunn hated me for that and for more reasons, and she would sneer and threaten me with detention but never follow through. All the younger students would thank me later for my entertainment. I resisted replying, “Just doing my job.”

I was severely depressed for the last two years of high school. I was losing my faith in God at Catholic school, gaining more weight as I was surrounded by girls developing curves and long legs, and sullen for no reason other than an imbalance of chemicals in my brain. No one knew; my exterior was not only saggy and unappealing, but also armored and unrevealing. I couldn’t be the deadly combination of the sad, fat girl. I was convinced that my friends only kept me around, so I could deliver the punch line, entertain them, keep them laughing.

So, I did.
I had this one recurring dream. I woke up naked on a surgeon’s table, a cold scalpel in my hand. I would slice myself open horizontally, creating three or four slits on my stomach, and two slits down the sides of my thighs. I would reach in, pulling out fat like stuffing, like a clown pulling a string of handkerchiefs out of his sleeve. I would pull until I was flat and thin and glistening. Then I would sew myself up, smiling, the stitching black and thick like Frankenstein’s. I would run my hands down the raised skin on my belly. They were like guitar strings, I told myself after I awoke. I would later mimic the lines with a razor.

College was going to be different. I wanted it to be what high school wasn’t for me: a do-over. I wanted to be that triple threat: smart, funny and skinny. I highlighted my hair and joined Weight Watchers, much to my mother’s delight. After I got tired of earning arbitrary points so I could spend them on food as if calories were currency, I decided that eating one meal a day would suffice. And maybe a handful of almonds or sunflower seeds if my stomach was making too much noise.

I convinced myself that the headaches empowered me. I felt strong as my knees wobbled after the second flight of stairs. I felt skinny, even if my weight didn’t change. I would make it a week before binging on ramen noodles, full-sized bags of popcorn, and microwaved cookies from the coffee shop right by my dorm.

One Tuesday night, after eating no more than six almonds, when my depression cuffed me by the ankles and took me hostage, I took a walk around the entire campus. I stopped for a while at the bell tower by the football field, lying with my back pressed against the concrete. I had this image of a man jumping out from behind the bushes, dressed all in black, pinning me down, stabbing me in the back over and over again like that scene from Zodiac. I replayed it in my head every few minutes, the initial fear turning into slight resignation. I wasn’t afraid of death and I wasn’t afraid of the pain. I was afraid of the loss of control. I had thought about suicide many times, beginning all the way in sixth grade, and even wrote letters
to my loved ones, only to burn them in the dark hours of the morning on my back porch. I think I liked the idea of suicide, because it would be my doing, my choice and my will. I would have control. Headlights illuminated the road as a car started driving towards me. Spooked and cold, I took off at a sprint back towards my dorm.

My roommates found me by the volleyball courts outside of our building, aimlessly pacing in circles. They took my arms, softly peppering me with questions. I didn’t say anything except, “Thank you,” as they tucked me into bed. We never talked about it again.

Boyfriends were uncharted territory. There were guys, sure, but I was far too self-conscious for relationships to ever be healthy or successful.

“You’re intimidating,” boys would tell me, echoing what my friends said when I opened up about my insecurities. Intimidating was just a nice word for too much, too big, I thought.

But really, I was venomous to most boys. I was convinced I was sexually unappealing and resigned to indifference toward them. I felt—and still do—this intense pressure to convince any boy who started talking to me that I was not pursuing them romantically or sexually. I knew the stereotype people would box me into: desperate, fat girl on the hunt for someone to love her.

I was confused as to how to genuinely make friends with boys. I wanted to wear a “Not Interested In You” sign at parties or in class.

But I was interested in some boys. Whenever I was flirting with a guy or starting a relationship, my walls were impermeable. I was constantly waiting for them to make me the butt of a cruel joke, like some prank in a ’90s movie where a friend dared him to talk to me, to date me, to love me. So, I let guys treat me however they wanted. Mostly I was treated like a video game that could be paused and saved, so when he wanted to start back up again, I was there. I was accepting of this new role, of being used. I was trying to find empowerment in that.

There was the Italian assistant professor of Physics at a nearby university who preferred me with my shirt on while
he fucked me. Then, there was Zack, a friend of a friend of a friend from Greensboro, who talked about how he preferred his girls bigger, girls who didn’t pressure him into exercising. He wouldn’t sleep with me, though, because he thought his number of sexual partners was already too high—a whopping seven—and didn’t deem me worthy.

\{ INTIMIDATING WAS JUST A NICE WORD FOR TOO MUCH, TOO BIG, I THOUGHT. \}

One night, after Zack refused my spread legs, in my desperate need for affirmation, I messaged a random guy online whose only aim was to hook up. I drove a half-hour to his place, and crept down into his basement, where we finished a bottle of wine in twenty minutes. I felt warm and free, and soon we were taking off each other’s clothes. He pulled my shirt off and as I started to peel off my leggings, he stopped and looked at me. His face visibly dropped as the glow from the TV lit up my stretch marks, my rolls of flesh hanging from my stomach. He closed his eyes and pushed my mouth down, not saying a single word. I struggled to breathe after he came in my mouth. I watched him roll over onto his side, pretending to fall asleep. I stared at him for a minute, wondering if he was serious, if he was even going to speak to me. I collected my shirt and my shoes, mumbled a goodbye and refrained from asking for money. If he was going to treat me like a whore, I wanted to at least earn my keep.

I stopped at a gas station by his house, bought a pack of Camel menthols and smoked half the pack on the drive home, my tears dripping onto my lips between drags. I could still taste the semen through the smoke; I could smell it as I heaved for air through my nostrils. To this day, when I’m feeling particularly sad, sometimes cigarettes start to taste like cum.

I stopped harming my body with diets and razors full-time my junior year of college. I became engrossed in the feminist community where we talked about not only political and economic inequalities between genders, but social inequalities as well, discussing things like body and sex
positivity. We talked about how girls are shamed for taking up space, shamed for being loud, shamed for being anything other than feminine and small.

I knew most of this the entire time I was at college, but I had internalized it. I was preaching things I wasn’t practicing. Of course, I didn’t just wake up and start loving my body, but I did stop punishing it. Slowly but surely, I was getting stronger, getting healthier. And I don’t mean in my body, but in my mind. I don’t remember the switch. I don’t remember the day I woke up and decided to throw out the razors hidden under my sink, and I don’t remember the first time I looked at my body without flinching. I just remember no longer feeling apologetic for the way my thighs tend to shake the floors I walk on. I turned those depressed, self-loathing feelings into rage and hope at the same time, challenging the people around me to be more accepting, less judgmental. I was speaking up for those who couldn’t, women who were forced to keep their mouths wired shut, keep their rib cages hollow and empty. I spoke up, I screamed and I yelled. I decided that I was not built for containment, in the same way I was not built for small sizes in dressing rooms. I was built to be fat and I was built to be boisterous. I was built to be powerful.

“Imagine how many billion-dollar industries would shut down if women everywhere woke up and decided to love themselves today.” I posted this on my social media wall, my goal to wake up every day and love one thing about my body and to maybe destroy capitalism in the process. Kidding. Kind of.

I’ve gained a better sense of who I am, underneath all of the angst and hatred I clung to so tightly for so many years. The summer before I embarked on my last year of college, I was even brave enough to venture out into the dating world again. I was pretty content being alone, until I met Cam. Twenty-four, hairy and big like me, fat like a bear, Cam says he fell in love with me the second he saw me. My wide thighs wrapped in tights, my bulging stomach hidden under a black dress. He said he wanted me then and there.

Cam and I talk about our bodies and how they give us strength. When we’re in bed, he grabs hold of my belly fat and shakes it, watching the skin ripple and wave. His hands glide down the inside of my thighs, ridden with cellulite, and he smiles, sighs, whispers, “You are perfect.”
I laugh and tell him that I don’t believe in the idea of perfection, that it doesn’t exist. He says, as his fingers creep back up my torso, “You’re perfect for me.” And I roll my eyes, giggling at the cliché and the cheesiness of it all, but my cheeks still blush. I stand naked in front of my mirror and remember the time he spent stroking my bulging thighs, the way he loved how it all funneled thick towards my hips. I take an extra second to tell my thighs that I love them, even if I don’t fully mean it yet.

I do not rely on anyone to tell me how to feel about my body anymore. But having someone love my body more than I ever have is refreshing. Whoever said that you can’t love someone until you love yourself is full of shit. I have never met anyone who loves themselves wholly. We are all works in progress, trying our hardest to feel at home in the bodies we are given. When I start subconsciously scratching at my stretch marks on my hips and stomach, the ones that look like lightning bolts, Cam is there to take my hand away and kiss each fingertip and I remember the electricity I have burning under my skin.

When I was home over the summer, I told my mom how much her words affected me, how those words she said to me in eighth grade made me doubt my relationships, made me hate my body. She has no recollection of saying it, but doesn’t doubt that she did.

“Your father and I have never worried about you as much as we worried about Colleen and Michael,” she said, referring to my older siblings. “We knew you would be fine. The only thing that worried us was your weight, your health. We tried to help you.”

I have no other choice but to assume the best intentions because I cannot believe that anyone would wish this onto their daughter. It was all out of love, my mother promised, and I believe her. ✿
Reaching for the Sun
SOPHIA SPACH | 35MM FILM PHOTOGRAPHY
I remember sitting in my mother’s lap a week before she left us and watching my little brother Kenny lift rocks and throw them into the creek behind our house. In church that morning, we sung a hymn about being lifted high by the Lord, and I liked to imagine God scooping people up in his hands and casting them far, the same way Kenny threw the rocks. A hidden sparrow sang out again and again. The Brysons across the street yelled at each other from their front porch. My mother touched the fresh cast on my arm and said “My poor, baby Nan,” but she looked way out past me into a spot of sky blurring with heat. She’d sobbed when I fell off my bike and broke my arm. She kept calling me her poor, baby girl. She said that she’d given me her brittle bones. She left for good with a man whose truck had collected mud around its rim like a dirty hem. I think back to this today because Laurence and Robert have been talking all morning about a church sermon while polishing old medals for a museum display. The sermon’s about one of those bible stories I used to love—the kind where Jesus peeled suffering off of people like it was nothing more than a summer shirt stuck to their skin with sweat.

Kenny started his first job this morning at the baseball stadium’s concession stand. For weeks after Mom left, he’d crawl into my bed at night and sleep beside me. He was only four then, and I had just turned eight. He had small, sharp arms that reminded me of a bird. When he got older, Ken could understand me even though I stumbled over my words in front of other people. Sometimes he spoke for me. I could tell when the Bryson boys across the street were upsetting him by trying to peel up a dead squirrel from the road or hitting each other in the ribs. It’s been a few years since Ken started wearing his hair long over his eyes and getting in trouble at school for mouthing off to teachers. He’s left Dad and me alone in the house and shut himself up in his room. Most recently, he was suspended for vandalizing lockers at his high school. His neatly manicured guidance counselor thought up the concession job. She said it would be good for him, that it would teach him responsibility.

I hear a car pull into the parking lot over the buzz of the office copy machine. We haven’t had a single visitor to the
Greenwood Confederate History Museum all week, save the mini-van that used our parking lot to turn around yesterday. The museum is a small house filled with clothing of the dead and defunct weapons. I’m the youngest thing here, dead or alive, and I’m almost completely unneeded. The museum’s run by The Sons of the Confederacy and operated by two of them, Laurence and Robert, but Dad owns it and created my job for me. I graduated with an associate degree in Arts Education from Greenwood Tech, which hasn’t been enough to find a job. It was a transfer-track degree, but I realized that I didn’t really want to teach and the idea of moving to a new school to study for two more years and then figure out how to pay for it all stressed me out. I never finished filling out the transfer application. I’ve wanted to move away and find a new city ever since I learned about foreign paintings in school, but I haven’t figured out how to leave. Most of my friends from high school left me two years ago to go to the state school I couldn’t afford, and most of my friends from Tech found jobs.

I’M THE YOUNGEST THING HERE, DEAD OR ALIVE, AND I’M ALMOST COMPLETELY UNNEEDED.

The copy machine beeps and I pull out The Confederate States of America: What Might Have Been and flip to the next page Dad needs. This week, he’s given me a list of books and pages on an index card for his research, which he claims will one day produce an article that will make people want to visit the museum. I mentioned moving away to Dad once, and he looked at me with his droopy, basset-hound wrinkles and patted my shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Little Nan,” he said. He always calls me Little Nan since my mother and I share a name. “We’ll find something for you to do down at the museum.”

Laurence goes into one of his coughing fits. For the first few weeks of work I couldn’t tell him and Robert apart since they are both bulbous, old men with receding hairlines, but Robert wears sneakers with his dress pants and Laurence always forgets to shut the lights off when he leaves, so I have to
drive back and shut them off to save money. That museum duty may be the only one that wouldn’t get done if I weren’t stuck here.

The digitized door chime is broken, so whenever someone opens the door, it makes a slow, pained sound like an animal being stepped on. Rhett Bryson walks in with his hands tucked into his pockets and looks around at the soldier faces lining the walls.

“Can I help you?” Laurence says from the office.

“Yeah,” Rhett replies, but his eyes rest on me. “How’s it going, Nan?”

I cross my arms and look at the ground. I don’t like looking straight at him. He’s the same age as I am and works at a restaurant around the corner. The restaurant logo marks the left pocket of his sweat-stained polo.

“I’m, I’m,” I start, but I fall into my nervous, stumbling way of speaking. “Um,” I say, “Why are you—” I pause and feel him looking at me. “What are you doing here?”

Rhett and his brother, Joey, made fun of the way I spoke when we were kids. Once when we were in elementary school, Rhett mock-stumble over his words until I cried because I’d run away when he tried to kiss me.

He pulls his hands out of his pockets and crosses them, his mouth just barely curled into a smile. He always looks like he knows some funny, dark secret that I don’t. He looks me up and down.

“Jesus, Nan, quit acting like that. Your genius father locked himself out of the house again. Says you’ve got a key.”

I hate the way he talks about my father, but I say nothing. When Mom left in that man’s truck, it was in broad daylight outside. When we were still kids, Ken did something to piss Rhett off and Rhett said, “At least my momma never left my dad.” Rhett still has a small white scar across his left eyebrow from when Ken unscrewed the front wheel of his bike to get him back. Rhett tried to pop a wheelie and flew clean over the handlebars when the wheel fell out. The blood on his face made Kenny turn white. Mr. Bryson came outside and told Rhett to quit his crying while he cleaned him up.

“I’m just being a good neighbor to y’all,” Rhett says, still smiling. “I hear Kenny’s got a new job. It’ll take a miracle for him to keep that, won’t it?”

The blouse I’m wearing begins to make my shoulders
feel naked. He’s right, of course. I’ve been expecting Kenny to lose the job today. I’d give him a week, maybe two, before he shows up late or gives his boss trouble. But I don’t want anyone else talking about him that way. I want Rhett to leave us alone.

I tell Laurence and Robert I’ll be gone for a few minutes. Rhett could have just as easily called me and had me drive over to the house, but he insists on giving me a ride, which makes me uneasy. The AC in his car doesn’t work, so the air around us holds still. When we get to our street, Dad stands in the driveway in an old t-shirt, barefoot. He smiles and waves an envelope at me as I walk over. Rhett follows behind. I pull my key out of my wallet and unlock the door as Dad speaks.

“The tickets came,” he says. He seems unfazed by the fact that I had to come let him into our house. Instead, his wrinkled face perks up a little as he shows me two tickets for a baseball game at Kenny’s stadium this weekend. Our team, The Greenwood Bears, is playing a slightly worse amateur team, making the turnout a little bigger than usual. I silently pray that Ken’s job will last that long for Dad’s sake.

My legs stick to the seat of Rhett’s car on the ride back. When we get to the museum, he sits there and looks at me, like he’s waiting for something. When I mumble out a thank you, he reaches forward and grazes the tips of his fingers across my cheek, soft like the after-touch of a spider web. I shrink back from him and look down.

“Bye, Nan,” he says, but I don’t look back up until I’m through the door. Inside, I can still feel sweat fingering its way down the back of my thighs as the marching song loops back to its beginning.

I turn the radio off while driving to pick Kenny up and listen to the silence. I like the feeling of driving. I like the motion of it, the possibility that I could just keep going and find myself somewhere new. I’d really like to work at an art museum in a city. One of my friends from high school, April, has an apartment down in Columbia and sometimes when she calls and tells me about her life, I imagine what it might be like to move down there. I have enough money saved up to pay rent for a little while before getting a job. I’d like to work in a big museum, or maybe in a little independent studio. I’d buy myself new sketchbooks and draw city skylines. I’d move so
far away from Kenny’s rebellion and Dad’s museum that I’d become a whole new person. I’d wear nice dresses and make small talk with baristas at the coffee shop on my way to work each morning. Ever since graduation, I’ve started putting a few things in the duffle bag in my room, like my mom’s old watch and a card Kenny made for me back when he still drew balloons with red crayon. The packing isn’t real, though, because I know I couldn’t go unless I had a clear plan or some voice telling me to go, like if the Old Testament voice of God bellowed down to me like it did for Moses. Every time I really think of leaving, I think of my brittle bones and my mother running off before my arm had even healed. I think of my made-up job at the museum and my inability to speak clearly. I remind myself that I’ll always stay.

The baseball stadium sits small and hunched up on a hill all on its own with “Home of the Bears” painted across its entrance in steel blue. Most everyone has cleared out when I pull up because it only hosted a kid’s league tournament today and it’s closing time. Two skinny kids throw a ball back and
forth beside the road. Kenny leans against the stadium wall, waiting for me.

I think of good questions to ask Ken about work while he walks over, but when he opens the door and sits down, I forget them.

“So,” I say. “So, how were your, the um, I mean—”

Ken looks up and waits for me to finish. I used to be able to speak to him without feeling nervous and tripping over each thing I said, almost like a normal person. Now that I can’t read his face, I get as tongue-tied with him as I do with anyone else. I don’t understand it.

“How, how was it?” I say.

“Thrilling.”

Even though Ken’s four years younger, he’s only shorter than I am when he slouches back into the passenger seat. He flips his hair to the side to move it out of his eyes.

“Some bitch yelled at me for giving her the wrong type of soda.” I tap the steering wheel and look out the window. I keep thinking of Rhett grazing my face with his fingers, and I try to brush off the spider web feeling. I keep remembering his smug grin when he said Kenny wouldn’t keep the job. I want to say something encouraging to Ken to let him know that I care. I watch tree leaves quivering against each other in their branches.

“Oh,” I say, and he stops talking and turns the radio on.

I work through my dream museum job again as we drive. When we pull into our street, the Bryson brothers are standing in the middle of their yard beside their cyprus tree. The tree is unnaturally big and sits smack in the center of their yard, blocking most of their house. I don’t know how it wound up there, like if it was an accident or something. I do know that the Brysons love that tree. When we were all kids, the two of them carved their names into its side with pocketknives. If we played tag, they would run to it and declare it base. They’d sit under it sometimes when their parents were yelling inside. Now, they just stand beside it, watching us pull up to our driveway.

“Hey,” Rhett calls over as we get out. Joey, younger by two years, always stands a little behind him. His hands have this way of looking heavy. Kenny gives them one of those teen boy reverse-nod greetings, jutting his chin out in their direction. He shifts his weight from side to side, which I know means he’s
nervous, but he maintains his tough expression. When we walk inside, Ken glances back at them over his shoulder. I try and see anxiety or fear on his face when he turns back around, but I still can’t see anything.

During dinner, I make an obvious show of peeling burnt flecks off my chicken because I’m still annoyed that Dad didn’t apologize for making me come back to the house this afternoon. I hate that my made-up job lends itself to being inconvenienced. Kenny tells him work was fine and almost inhales his food. Dad tells us that he thinks his article is really taking off and I nod. Kenny doesn’t react. When Dad tells him that he got the game tickets in the mail today, Kenny shrugs. He pulls a lighter out of his pocket while Dad continues to talk about the game and starts flicking it on and off.

Dad sighs but Ken remains fixated on the lighter. “Kenny, could you please not do that, okay?” He always sounds like he’s whining when he yells at Ken. “Could you please not?”

Ken flicks it on one last time before putting it back in his pocket. Dad stares at him for a moment, and then pushes some of the charred bits of chicken around on his own plate before clearing his throat to speak again.

Kenny keeps his job for the first week. On the day of the game, I ride down to the stadium with Dad. He tucks his shirt in and buys a Greenwood Bears baseball cap even though I tell him it looks ridiculous. He laughs when he sees himself in the mirror and I can’t help but laugh with him.

We decide to wait to visit Kenny until later since he’s probably busy before the game. We find our seats and Dad watches the men in blue shirts prepare the field. After a few minutes, I tell him that I’m going to get something to drink and he nods and asks me to grab some popcorn. I spot Kenny after I climb the steps and scan the different stands. He looks surprisingly grown-up in his striped shirt behind the cash register, and I feel a flicker of pride for him. He hands a red snow cone to a girl in a black tank top at the front of the line. She laughs at something he says.

“Bye, Kenny,” she shouts as she turns to walk back toward the seats. He waves.
“Hey,” I say when I walk over to him. “Do you, um—” I pause. “Do you, like, know her?”

He stops laughing to himself when he looks up at me. A small smile lingers on his face. The game will start soon, and the line has died down. He pulls out a rag and starts wiping something on the counter.

“Yeah,” he says. “Went to a party with her last year. Wasn’t into me, though. Wound up with some other guy and—” He stops and puts the rag back below the counter. “It’s whatever,” he says. “You wouldn’t care.”

A kid wearing a foam finger needs extra ketchup packets. I tear at a napkin in one of the metal dispensers and feel his last comment settle in my gut. When he spoke just now, I could see his face start to open up a little. He waves to a group of high school kids walking past us. I realize that I don’t know the girl in the black tank top or any members of the group. I’m so removed from his life that I’m not even sure who his friends are. I try and tell myself that he must know that I care about him and that he’s just being a little jerk. Kenny hands the packets to the kid, checks his phone, and then loads a few more soft pretzels into their orange-glowing box. I think of the laughing girl and the way he still shifts his weight nervously around Rhett and Joey. These moments make me worry that the rift between us is capable of repair, and I’m just failing to understand how to fix it. I worry that I could do something to make him talk to me again. But I remind myself that he’s moody and tough now. He doesn’t really care what I think about him. I remind myself that I can hardly speak to him, let alone try and figure him out. I tell myself that I don’t control his problems.

I buy the popcorn for Dad and a Pepsi for myself. Kenny’s jaw tenses as he looks over my shoulder, and I turn to see the Bryson brothers headed in our direction, carrying paper soda cups. Joey stands a little taller than usual and walks shoulder-to-shoulder with Rhett, which he only does when they’ve been drinking. Rhett winks at me.

“Hey, there, Nan,” he says. He takes a few steps forward until he stands close enough for me to smell the beer on his breath. When I step away from him, I bump up against the trashcan behind me. I glance over at Kenny, but he just stands there behind the counter, his jaw tight and his arms tensed. Rhett takes a step closer and grabs the side of my stomach with
his sweaty hand. Ken looks away from me.

“Come here,” Rhett says, reaching his other hand up to touch my neck. Beside me, the pretzels keep turning and glowing red. I push his hand off my waist and turn away from him.


“God, shut up,” I whisper.

“What’s that, Nan?” Rhett shouts, a little louder now. “I don’t understand.”

His words slide into me. I turn to face him, popcorn and soda in either hand. I haven’t decided what I’m going to say as I turn, but I can feel words bubbling up inside me. I’m pissed at Kenny for leaving me to face them alone. I’m pissed at Dad’s naive hope for the museum and for me. I’m pissed that I’m stuck in a place with idiots like Joey and Rhett. I’m going to say something terrible; I can feel it. I’m going to tell him. I’m going to shut him up for good.

When I turn, I catch both their eyes, both of their secretive smiles, their amused drunkenness. Something flutters in my gut, but I’ve already begun speaking.

“I said shut, shut, shut—” I close my eyes and take in a slow, shaky breath. Sweat runs down the inside of my shirt. My hands shake a little. I can’t get it out.

When I open my eyes, they’re still there. Joey furrows his brow and Rhett raises his eyebrows in a mock attempt to understand. All around us people have stopped to look. My neck and ears burn. I want to cry, but instead I turn and concentrate on walking down the steps to our seats. Ken never looks up at me. The two of them start laughing again when I descend the first few stairs.

Dad still wears the starched blue hat when I reach our seats. I sit beside him and look at the game without really watching it. Heat prickles up and down my neck. I have a death grip on the popcorn and soda. I put them down. I want to melt into the plastic seat. Dad takes the popcorn, says “Thanks, Little Nan,” and then comments on the game. I nod and replay the scene in my head. Now, more than ever, I wish I had a reason to leave. I wish I had somewhere else to go. I wish I could know that everything would be okay if I just got the hell out of that stadium and Greenwood. I can’t decide if I’m more upset with Kenny or more upset that I couldn’t stand up for myself. The
game continues. We are winning. Everyone stands and cheers at each home run.

Kenny finds us at the end of the seventh inning, still in his blue apron.

“Hey there, kid,” Dad says, eating his popcorn. “What’s up?”

Ken doesn’t respond. He hands me my wallet without making eye contact.

“You left this on the counter.”

I take it from him, still only feeling like I am half in the world. Kenny looks around the stadium and pulls at one of the corners of his apron.

“We were just thinking of stopping by to say hey,” Dad says.

Ken shrugs. “Yeah, whatever.”

Dad looks down at his popcorn, takes his hat off, and runs his fingers along the rim. His face drops. I could kill Kenny for being such an idiot. After he leaves, my father only half-watches the game. When he stands at the next home run, he drops the popcorn on the ground, spilling it everywhere. I still feel like my insides are shaking. I feel too hot, almost faint. I tell him I have to go to the bathroom.

I must stand in the bathroom for five minutes, replaying the scene in front of the stand, feeling the heat of Rhett’s hand through my shirt, their stupid smiles, strangers’ eyes. Mostly, though, I hear myself stumbling over that one word. Dirt clings to the spaces in between the white tiles on the wall and water pools up in spots on the stall floor. Something rises in my chest. Now that I am alone, I start crying. I splash water on my face and fix my hair in the mirror.

When I get back to the seats, Dad’s on his hands and knees on the dirty concrete between the rows, picking the popcorn off the ground. I watch him pick the pieces up one by one, the new hat beside him, and it hurts me. I don’t want to see him stooped over alone, picking up pieces. I don’t want to be left here like him. I want to get a real job and I want Kenny
to shut his smart mouth. But he won’t, and when I realize this, something in me snaps in two. It’s like the booming voice of God. It’s like a sign. I tell Dad I’m going for a drive and he can ride back with Kenny. The air outside the stadium rests heavy with humidity as I walk to the car and drive toward our house. I know it now. I’m going to leave for good.

I speed past the museum. The earth stays damp from all the afternoon thunderstorms, and when I run through the front yard, the ground sinks beneath my weight. I pull my duffel bag out from under my bed and finish packing. I decide that I’ll stay in a hotel and call April from the road. I’m doing it, though. I’m leaving now.

I call April, but she doesn’t answer. After half an hour, I stop at a gas station because I need to use the ATM and I realize I’m starving. When I walk in, I avoid eye contact with the cashier and speak the minimum amount, so I don’t embarrass myself. I catch my reflection in the shop window, and I can see how unchanged I look. I stand with my shoulders folded in a little and my arms crossed. I look down at my graying shoelaces. I don’t start to panic until my phone buzzes and I look down at the message reading: Ken and I home now, where r u? I don’t know the name of the town I’m in. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing. I’m in a gas station in the middle of nowhere, stuck being myself. I don’t know why I thought this would work or why I thought I could go, especially without telling Dad or Ken. I think of Dad putting dinner on the stove and Ken locked up in his room watching TV. I can’t get away from them even when I’m gone.

April calls back but I let the phone ring. I text Dad—errands, be there soon—and start driving back. After I merge onto the highway, I pick up the mini-mart bag of trail mix I no longer need, throw it at the duffel bag in the back, and start crying. I wonder what it would take for me to run like my mother did. I wonder if I could go if I just cared a little less or if I had a big man in a truck come steal me straight from my front porch. I wish I felt free to run. Instead, I continue back, and once I see the museum again I know that I’ve almost returned.

Before I reach our street, I can see smoke rising into the sky from where we live, but I don’t know what’s happening
until I get to the four-way stop and see that the Brysons’ damn tree is on fire.

I can’t believe it. The tree is up in flames. Fire trucks block the Brysons’ driveway and the four of them stand next to their car, watching it. Dad stands on the front lawn watching too. The older couple who live next door to the Brysons stand out on their porch. The tree touches nothing else, so it just burns there on its own. I walk over to Dad and watch in silence too until the firemen put it out and leave it there, scorched and dripping with water.

Dad turns and looks at me. My face must still be splotchy and red from crying.

“Where were you?”

I look out past his head at one of the flashing red lights. Lying makes me anxious, so I know I’m going to mix up my words if I say a lot.

“Gas station,” I half-lie. He watches me for another second then walks inside. I walk in behind him and go into the kitchen. Through the screen door, I can see Kenny sitting on the porch steps in the backyard. I realize now that he’s been home this whole time but hasn’t come out to watch the fire like everyone else. I walk outside and down the steps until I’m standing in front of him. Dad walks out after me and stands on the porch behind him. Ken sits with his feet resting on one of the wood steps, flicking his lighter on and off, on and off. He doesn’t look up.

“You,” I say. “You—” I’m not tripping over my words. I actually can’t think of anything to say.

“Oh God,” Dad puts his hand on top of his head. “Oh God, Kenny.”

Even as we realize what he did, he doesn’t look up.

“Shitheads,” he says. “They should’ve left you alone.”

Across the street, the old couple still stands on their porch talking. Dad keeps saying, “Oh God.” I want to kneel there next to Kenny and cry. I want to say that I hate them, too, but for God’s sake, you can’t just go lighting things on fire, Ken. What the hell were you thinking?

Instead, I kick him in the shin. He winces.

“They’ll, the Brysons, what did you, what will they—” I’m so upset that I really can’t say the right thing. “What if they—”

“No one saw.”
“Idiot,” I spit out.
“I am.”

I kick him again. He doesn’t move. I imagine our sweet elderly neighbors sending him to jail somewhere far away. I imagine losing him for good. I have to walk around our backyard a few times to calm myself down. After a few laps, the firefighters leave and our neighbors’ voices disappear. A few hours later, I bring my duffel bag back in from my car, empty it, and return everything to its old place.

Kenny shows up late for a shift and loses his job at the stadium. He watches TV in his room. I barely see him. Dad throws his hat away before it’s even broken in.

I keep working at the Confederate museum. For weeks we go on this way. My father cooks the same meals. Often, he burns them. I remain terrified that someone knows what Kenny did. Laurence and Robert still bicker. The marching song holds its steady beat beside the weapons left behind by the dead. A few visitors come and go.

Joey and Rhett stand in their front yard sometimes when I drive home, and I avoid speaking to them. I can see them from my bedroom window out there beside their ruined tree just as dusk curls in around our houses. Once, Rhett rested his hand on his brother’s shoulder for the slightest moment, so quick that I barely saw it. Seeing them a little broken makes something feel cracked open inside me. This feeling gets worse whenever I pass Kenny staring open-mouthed at the television in his room.

One day, when I pull into my driveway, they call over to me from their yard. I keep walking.

“What’s Kenny been?” Rhett says. I stop. Something about his voice makes me feel like they know what he did. I pause for a moment to gather my words.

“Why?” My skin burns and I think back to the baseball stadium. I can’t look at them.

“I don’t know. Just haven’t seen him around.”

I shrug and continue to walk inside. Ken stands right by the window, watching them through the blinds.

“What’d they say to you?” He keeps staring out the window at them. I jingle my keys and adjust the strap on my
“Why do you care?” I’m angry enough to snap back at him without hesitating. He doesn’t respond. I’ve already started walking upstairs when Laurence calls.

It’s been a good week-and-a-half—a new record—since Laurence has called and needed me to go back to the museum to shut off the lights or check something. Tonight, he calls from his granddaughter’s birthday dinner, says that he can’t remember if he shut the lights off or not, and asks if I can go back.

It’s beginning to grow dark outside. Ken keeps standing by the window. He looks out at the Brysons’ yard even though they aren’t there anymore. I walk back to the door.

“Where are you going?” He looks at me now.

“I’m,” I start, “Um, the museum.”

He looks back out at the empty yard.

“I’ll come.”

He digs at the floor with the toe of his shoe.

“No,” I say, but he follows behind me when I walk outside. He stands beside the car and looks around as I get in.

“Ken,” I say, but before I can do anything else, he opens the passenger door and sits down.

I tell him I don’t want him to come, but he just sits there staring at his hands until I turn the car on and pull out of the driveway. A small patch of sky ahead burns a soft yellow and red. Ken looks out the window the entire ride, like he is searching for something. When we get to the museum, he steps out of the car with me.


“I’ll come in.”

I honest to God can’t figure out what’s up with him.

“Scared?” I say. He looks at me.

“Scared of the dark?”

I glare at him. He says nothing. I turn and walk inside. The lights are off, but when I get to the back room I realize that Laurence left the TV on. The marching song plays softly. I stand in front of the screen, so that it casts its gray glow over me. I’ve never actually watched the video before. My own face reflects back from the screen. The video shows different shots of soldiers marching forward with lyrics to the song stretched
along the bottom. I wonder what kind of actors they find for films like this. I watch it loop through a second time. I wonder about each deadpan face, each gray scale uniform.

Someone shouts outside. When I hear it, I don’t recognize him at first. I imagine some old man yelling at a dog, the Brysons yelling on their front porch. I think of my mother crying about her weak bones making me easy for breaking. I think of the red dot of a truck disappearing, leaving only its dirt on the ground. I do not recognize my own brother’s shout right away. But, when I do, it is his voice that pulls me free from watching my gray face reflecting back at me beside the others. I shut the TV off and listen. When I don’t hear him again, I go outside.

When I make it outside, I begin running. I realize why he was shouting for me. I realize why he followed me outside into the dark, how he was trying to protect me. I see him lying there in the parking lot and the two of them running away through the trees into the fading light. I figure out what they’ve done and I start running to him and I see blood on his face and on the asphalt. He starts crying and I see his eye swollen shut and his nose bleeding and his face red and my own hands shaking over him.

For a moment, I think of what comes next. I think of his blood dripping from his face to the wood floor as I help him onto the couch in our living room. Dad will nearly cry when he sees how badly Ken’s been beaten up. I realize that I can’t change Kenny back into the kid he used to be, that I can’t fix him into some brave, responsible boy or shake Dad free from his lost causes. I realize that I won’t ever run away from his sobbing, swollen face. I imagine the Bryson brothers sprinting through the woods like shadows and always finding us when we aren’t ready. I imagine myself never becoming that eloquent city-museum employee, and I want, so badly, to be able to push away the fear in my own voice and pull the bruises off of Kenny’s face. Instead, I take his arm. I am here now, reaching out for him. I am pulling at him, trying to lift my little brother, trying to tell him to get up, that he is okay. I am lifting him up and trying to steady him and make it so he can walk. We are taking a step, his arm draped over my shoulder. Blood runs down from his nose. We are walking forward, and I am holding onto him. I try to carry his weight. I tell him that we are going to make it home. ✯
The formal demonstration and unification of mixed perspectives is a challenge I like to meet through painting. The panel series, Track Triptych, presents viewers with multiple views and snapshot-like instances within a singular frame. The varied representations of my cross-country teammates’ track flats are consequently overlapping and ingrained within one another. The puzzle-like orientation alludes to the theme of teamwork, or smaller parts working together for the larger whole. The distinct panels also function together as a singular work of art. This similarly speaks to the subject of cross-country, a team sport that is often mistaken for being individual. The composition complements the subject matter because it elicits a sense of motion and movement, the essence of a runner’s task. I chose to apply paint with a palette knife and use active brushstrokes to discourage such static representation.
The painting *Feet* is an instance of blithe experimentation with hue and tone. I was inspired by contemporary artist David Agenjo to substitute natural hue for a larger variety of colors when depicting parts of the human body. By elevating the role of color, I aimed to make the work of art about the material of paint just as much as it is about the subject. I relied on the tone and vibrancy of colors to pull parts forward and push others back. I responded to Agenjo’s series of hand paintings by focusing on my feet. I purposefully set this composition in the painting studios, and included a painted apron, to raise the question of whether color is being used to represent human flesh or paint on top of skin. I enjoyed arranging it in such a way that multiple possibilities are set forth.
Textile Collages
Kaitlin Stober | Mixed Textiles and Materials on Canvas
If there is a God, you should hope She’s crying in her studio apartment down the street from Heaven’s only coffee shop.
What happened to the second-world countries after the communist bloc party?
America’s favorite sitcom is a misogynistic piece of dreck.
Be grateful there’s a studio audience to tell you when you should be laughing.

The best myth they taught you is that you swallow eight spiders every year. You imagine the first was an explorer, the following seven a search party. You still dream of teeth falling out. No one asks to be your emergency contact.

One side puts the emphasis on THINK, the other on TANK. Yikes.
Keep a suitcase in the trunk of your car, so you can start over at a moment’s notice.
You can pick out a new name and a new life, but a new conscience costs extra.

You can almost remember what childhood tasted like, dried blood with a hint of strawberry. You can read a book on cosmonauts or die whenever you’d prefer to pencil it in. Just sign your name on the dotted line beside St. Peter’s John Hancock. Don’t let anyone see you scanning the fine print. Bring a handkerchief to wipe Her tears.
The Mrs.

BEN STRINGFELLOW | DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY
I stand with him in the kitchen while he sorts silverware. When I tell him I’m tired, breath escapes his mouth like a fist slammed into a mirror, spider-webbing an unwanted reflection.

Across the parking lot, I see a bird nudge another off the telephone wire and I wish we were them, but we are a small white teacup, an egg dropped on the floor—cracked, fragile, almost hopeful.

Do you still want me around?

Sometimes he holds me like glass and I am frozen, as if the twitch of a finger could fracture the moment. He is laughing eyes and cautious hands, trailing his fingernails underneath the back of my shirt.

He is the words in my ear, stinging like a paper cut, and the immortal blue gas station rose he bought me for our anniversary. When we sit in the same room, we miss each other.
That evening in late summer, I sat at a circular hickory table hewn from a tree that used to rain its five-fingered leaves and hard-shelled nuts onto the front porch of the country restaurant before lightning struck the proud old hardwood in half, if the little bronze plaque bolted to the center of the table was to be believed. I could barely read the tiny letters since they were upside down from my vantage point and the light from the mason jar candles and brick fireplace was flickery and low, but I remember all the same.

That evening in late summer, I dropped my fork with a soft thump on the faded floral rug that hugged the softwood floor, and as I bent down, I heard you speaking with a British accent.

That evening in late summer, I flipped my head upside down and even in the dim lighting saw a flash of cherry red-and-custard yellow-striped socks between the hem of your gray slacks and your sharp Oxford dress shoes, and I felt embarrassed that I hadn’t bothered to wear a lip color to dinner.

That evening in late summer, I straightened up in my seat and listened behind me for the British accent. Instead, I heard unfamiliar voices and the chink of silverware on porcelain plates and the occasional bubble of a laugh floating above the low buzz of conversation, barely quieter than my table’s empty chatter of almost-close friends together for the last time before heading off to concrete and metal and glass.

That evening in late summer, I finally heard you again, ordering salmon and pronouncing the L. The familiar pink-bellied fish sounded new and exciting when the forgotten sound flipped its tail, tumbling across your tongue and the back of your teeth. The soft clink of mostly-melted ice cubes tickled the air between your
table and mine as you took a sip of your sweet tea, and I know it was sweet tea, because you told the man sitting beside you that it was like nothing you’d ever tasted before, and I thought you would hate it, but then you said that you liked it and

That evening in late summer, I came to dinner knowing that the hickory tree wasn’t the only one stuck in the same place forever, that I was a part of this place like the table, worn by seasons of sun and ice, but unable to escape. The faces around the table could uproot and disperse and tell stories of this restaurant to faraway friends and laugh, but I would always be stuck in this red-clay country and before tonight, I had always wanted to take a spade to my feet and dig myself out, but

That evening in late summer, my home started to seem a little less like the place it always had been and a little more like an adventure in its own right.

That evening in late summer, I wanted nothing more than to turn around in my seat and offer to cook you anything you wanted to try, anything at all, offering my grandmother’s cornbread if you didn’t have any ideas. I wanted to share my home of hickory and pecan with you if you would take it.

That evening in late summer, I watched as you left the country restaurant. I never caught a glimpse of your face, but I memorized the way you talked and walked and the pattern of your navy blue raincoat and your wavy black hair. And I wanted to share my everyday adventure with you, but you left before I could.

That evening in late summer, I never caught your eye, because I was shy and eating with friends and barefaced, but if I could do it over again, I would have turned my back to the lipsticked faces around my hickory table and asked you if you’d ever eaten steaming hot buttermilk cornbread from a cast-iron skillet.
Kelsey tells me that she’s always had faith in math and measurement, found comfort in the science of what will hold together in flight—in the structure of metal bodies and the certainty of rising. In school, we learned to hope for the ascent of souls and to call the dead departed—to imagine them all lifted up by a careful hand. I try to cradle the phone to my shoulder, standing on the porch and watching lights blink overhead as she speaks. She says her job has made her unable to sit inside a plane without spotting each sign of repair, then talks about scatterplots and probabilities, stress and breaking points. I think of the way planes continue to crash, disappear,

of how I fear the thought of splintering less than this feeling of suspension—than the way I so often find myself between spaces, unable to stop wondering if I’m just patching over some split part of myself whenever I imagine souls scaling the sky, or something more than planes moving over the sprawl of streetlights beyond my yard.

I think of the difficulty of trusting whatever it is that keeps pushing us along, how it’s even harder than figuring out what leaves me standing here in the cool night after she’s hung up, feeling as though a space keeps opening in my gut, as though I keep speeding forward, being kicked up into air.
Redefined
KATE LEVENBERG | MIXED MEDIA SCULPTURE
UNTITLED

TASSY HENDERSON | PENCIL, OIL PAINT, COLLAGE
It is a plague year. Or at least it’s shaping up to be one. Reports of quarantines and hospital patients with unexplainable symptoms are sprinkled throughout the nightly newscasts. You’ve lived through five plague years, so this shouldn’t come as a surprise. You almost come to expect it.

You keep a surgical facemask in the top drawer of your desk, with cough drops and sticky notes and half-used pens, to make it feel more commonplace. You slyly tucked it in that drawer when you moved into this hollow shoebox of a dorm room, the one you share with no one, since limitations on public spaces were enforced to prevent mass outbreak. Colleges could keep their dorms to maintain the authenticity of a college experience, but only one student to a room with no hall-style bathrooms. Just a tiny cubicle with a toilet and a shower and a sink nudged between every two rooms, so in the case that one resident is infected, only two might be affected, rather than fifty. Flawed logic, you think, but you’ve never been one to complain about precaution.

Open the drawer and stare at the mask. Wonder if it’s too early to be wearing one in public. The girl who lives next door, with whom you share a bathroom, stands at the sink, adjusting her pearls in the mirror. She smiles when she gets their placement just right. Something about the smile seems so carefree it perturbs you. Take another peek into your drawer. Leave the mask for now. Subtlety is best for the time being.

III

Sit in the back corner of the lecture hall, the drafty one that smells vaguely like stale popcorn. People avoid it like the plague. It seems ironic to you that people still use that expression. Or maybe, it just became more relevant. Drape the newspaper over your desktop. It flares out the way the bed sheets would when your mother and father made their bed together on Sunday afternoons. That was before he died. Now, you have to help your mother make her bed or the
sheet will wobble in the air and ruffle unevenly in the middle of the mattress. But don’t think about that. Take a bite of the grapefruit you grabbed from the breakfast window. You read somewhere that grapefruits are good for your immune system. Wipe the dribble from your chin before it drips onto the paper and makes the print bleed.

Scan the front page until you see the first headline about the plague. The story tentatively calls the new plague, “Strain George,” as if giving them human names makes them any easier to control. The human race is in control of very little nowadays. Pollution has left a permanent hazy beige color in the sky and affected the genetic codes of the plants and the wildlife and even the bacteria. Many of the trees curve grotesquely under their own weight and grow patches of thick, crimson phlegm. Dogs and cats are no longer permitted as pets—scientists have said that animals were susceptible to the earliest cases of the plague—and now they stumble through the streets with foam bubbling off the edges of their jowls. Don’t think about the look on your brother’s face the day your mother drove Toby away to “the farm,” or about the two-hundred-dollar check and the letter from the government you found under the oven mitts, thanking your mother for her cooperation. Then there’s the human race, combating the mysterious strains of the plague. Not even the top scientists can pinpoint its origin.

The lecture hall door creaks open as students start to shuffle in. They laugh. One girl mentions a party in the apartment complex just north of the quad. You heard some girls on your hall talking about the same party. They went as a group. You weren’t invited. As the girl and her friends sit a couple rows down from you, they rattle off the names of boys who danced with them or offered them shots. Andy. Mark. Jordan. Russ. But they don’t mention George. You wonder why you’re the only one concerned about George.

The edges of your paper flutter as someone wiggles into the seat next to yours. You start to feel like air is rolling over itself in your chest. You already know who it is sitting down next to you.

“Good morning,” he says cheerfully.

Nod, so he knows you heard him, but continue to scan the headlines. You need to know the status of the plague more than you need to evaluate his eye color. The professor slaps a
saggy leather briefcase onto the table at the front, which means it’s time for class. You feel the boy’s arm lightly brush your knee as he pulls a pen from the front pocket of his backpack.

You know a couple of things about the boy. He seems like he’d be the guy his friends would call by his last name. Rolled-out-of-bed hair. An affinity for grey t-shirts. His backpack always slung from one shoulder. All the tops of his pens are chewed. So are his nails. The corners of his notebook are splotched with coffee ring stains, which he doodles over during class. You’ve noticed these things as he has sat next to you for the last six classes. The first time, he didn’t say anything, only smiled. The next time, he asked you which book you chose for your final paper. With each concise answer you gave him, you shuttered at the tone of your voice. You sounded so cold. But you weren’t trying to be. You were just confused. You continue to be confused every time he takes the seat next to yours.

After the lecture, collect your items hurriedly and stuff them in your backpack. You want to get out the door before the others. But as you approach the door, you realize the boy is already there, holding the door wide open for you.

“Have a nice day,” he says.

Without even thinking, you smile back before you hurry out the door.

III

Before you go to your mother’s house for Saturday night dinner, add extra clothes to your laundry bucket. A pair of jeans you only wore once. Some odd, unpaired socks. It will make her feel more useful, seeing a bucket filled to the brim. You hear it in her tone as she chatters from the laundry room about her newest project.

Ask: “A koi pond?”

Ask: “Where in the yard were you thinking of putting it?”

Don’t ask: “How long will it take for the fish to die?” She smiles as she brushes excess lint from her hands. She props a catalog up on the toaster as she stirs the tomato sauce. “I want to add a little color to the yard. Can you imagine how those orange fish will look out there? It’s so dull since…”

She looks out the window at the dilapidated swing-
set, half collapsed into the brush at the edge of the property line. Offer something about school as she grows eerily quiet. Tell the story about the cute boy in your class who opened the door for you. Don’t be offended when she continues to stare off through the window at the rusted swing, hanging by one chain, oscillating in the breeze. It was your brother Joey’s favorite swing. Wonder what she thinks about when she stares out there at it. The first time Joey fainted? The heaviness of his coughs as you all waited in the bleak hospital waiting room? Or maybe she relives it all, from the official announcement of Strain Ernest to the moment Joey was taken away in the middle of the night. As you ramble, it will feel like you are simply stringing along words, hoping they make even a remote bit of sense. But it doesn’t matter. As long as you don’t say what you’re thinking. As long as you keep talking. You know she feels guiltier when she recomposes herself and realizes the room is silent.

The sauce bubbles riotously. Steer your mother to the small kitchen table. Pull out the pale blue bowls and serve two helpings of meatballs and spaghetti. As she starts to absentely poke her meatballs, bring up the koi pond again. Exhaust her with questions about what shape will she choose for the pond,
how many fish she will get, and whether she wants to include a water feature. This will get her through dinner. As she wipes down the table afterward, put the dishes in the dishwasher and dump your laundry back into your bucket.

It’s okay to leave then, because she’s settled on the couch, staring intently at the TV. Kiss her on the forehead. Glance one more time at her before you leave; make sure you’re leaving the mess the way you found it.

Try to focus on the lecture. It’s about *The Virgin Suicides*. You love *The Virgin Suicides* and its groupthink narrator. Forget that the boy, Billy, keeps nudging you with his elbow as you take notes. You can see the smirk on his face. He thinks this is funny, distracting you. Try to pout, make him think you’re mad. Hide that you think it’s a little funny, too.

You did something different this morning. You usually avoid leaving your room before you have to, but today, you went to the breakfast window, the ones your classmates hover around after each lecture, and bought a hot chocolate. You looked around for a little bench to sit on to enjoy your drink. But after your first sip of hot chocolate, you realized you bought the worst cup of hot chocolate, so bad it makes your nose wrinkle. As you turned to throw it in the trash, there he was, standing behind you, smiling widely.

“Good morning, Jules,” he said. When you tried to return the greeting, you realized you didn’t know his name. “Billy,” he offered. “Billy Hayes.”

You repeated his name. “Billy. Of course.” You felt like an idiot. You wanted to walk away then, but Billy made no move to let you by.

“I’ve never seen you here,” he said.

“I decided to mix it up this morning, see what I was missing,” you said. You shook your cup slightly. “Which apparently was horrible, overpriced hot chocolate.”

He laughed, which caught you off guard. You didn’t think you were funny. He then asked you about your weekend and surprisingly, you found yourself telling him about the koi pond, which again made him laugh. He said all he did was go to a party and it was dull, though it didn’t sound it to you. As you talked on and on, you took turns playfully warning people
against the hot chocolate. When it was finally time for class, he opened the door for you, and you both took your seats in the stale popcorn corner, and ever since, your heartbeat hasn’t slowed.

Billy nudges you again. Your professor starts to make a point about whether or not the plural narrator can be considered a Greek chorus, but Billy drops his pen, making a lot of noise as he tries to pull it back to him with his foot. Feel a giggle rise in your throat, but cough to hide it. He winks as he tucks the pen behind his ear.

You’re cognizant of his body next to yours as you collect your things. His skin has a peach tone you never noticed before. He smells like a plug-in air freshener. When you finish packing your bag and straighten up, he’s still standing there, waiting expectantly.

“Jules,” he says plainly. Open your mouth to say something, but he cuts you off. “Can we get dinner together? Maybe Friday?” Feel your cheeks heat up. He seems to read your nervousness as reluctance, because he says, “I just want to eat some food with you. No plans for marriage.” He laughs weakly at his attempt at humor.

You exhale, look down at the books you hug tighter into your chest. “Okay,” you say.

A grin spreads across his face. You said the right thing. The satisfaction in that one simple success gives you a chill. Give him your phone number and pray you don’t trip on the lip of the doorframe on the way out.

IIIII

Pelt him with Snow Caps as you walk down the street. Laugh because it’s funny the way he does a little dance, tiptoeing cartoonishly as he dodges the caps.

“Hey! That’s a waste of perfectly good Caps,” he calls.

Stuff a handful of Caps into your mouth and hum mockingly as you chew them. Then throw another Cap at him. He ducks. It misses his head by mere inches. He shakes his head in mock disbelief.

“Jules Hartley,” he says, in a voice that sounds like someone giving a eulogy. “Once such a quiet girl, a sweet girl, now a bully with a vendetta against classmates and a disrespect for Snow Caps.”
You roll your eyes, but can’t suppress your laugh. Tonight has been fun, a lot more than you expected. It is your fifth date. You and Billy got dinner from the Marv’s Diner take-out window, the place you went for your first date, sitting at what was quickly becoming your bench next to the old movie house. You were sweating profusely, the fabric of your shirt clinging to your back and underarms. You kept wiping your palms on your napkin enough times that finally, Billy grabbed your wrists and asked you what was wrong.

You pulled your hands away and said, “Just that.” His brow wrinkled in confusion. You took a deep breath and you finally explained. It was your fifth date. The date you had decided, after the first one, that if you had reached this point, you would have to lay out the rules. He laughed at that.

“The rules?” he asked incredulously, a smirk playing on his face. “Jules’ Rules for Boys and Romance.”

You pouted until he listened to you again. Then, you pulled a crinkled piece of legal pad paper from your bag and read. Number 1: No sex. You felt your cheeks flush, so you avoided looking up. Number 2: No sleeping over. Number 3: No kissing. Number 4: No holding hands without gloves. Number 5: Faces must stay at least a foot apart. You looked up from your list and found him an inch from your face, a smile playing on his lips.

“Could I interest you in a fry?” he asked as seriously as he could. You rolled your eyes but you happily accepted a fry. When you tried to bring the list up again, he raised one hand and said, “I respect your rules.” Then, he squinted his eyes mischievously and said, “but rules were made to be broken.” He winked. You were thankful you were already sitting down.

After you finished eating, he surprised you by leading you into the movie house. Apparently, some recent graduate had reopened it over the summer. Not many movie theaters existed anymore, because owners found it too tedious to close and reopen with each new strain. This movie house only played movies on Saturday and generally, they were kids’ movies, so it could attract greater audiences. That night’s feature was about talking fish, but you didn’t pay attention much. Once it started, a group of boys behind you started to throw M&M’s at you. Billy, with a mischievous grin on his face, threw some popcorn back. It was an all-out war until a mother told an usher and you were asked to leave. Billy received a round of applause from
the boys as he marched out the door.

As you pass a former laundromat, Billy points to a sign that says “No Jaywalking” before sprinting across the street at that exact spot. Stare at him in disbelief, but when he calls to you, you squeal and follow him. When you get to the other side, he wraps his arm around your waist.

“See?” he says. “Rules. Made to be broken.”

Wiggle out of his grasp but smile. You turn to argue with him when you see the large, gray building behind him, looming over the sidewalk. The old Carson Factory. It used to make cream-filled cakes, until it went out of business when you were five. It still smells vaguely of vanilla, which makes you shiver because now it’s a plague camp.

Billy lurches forward as you stay in your place, and looks to the building.

“The camp,” he says. “I forgot that was on this route.” He notices the discomfort on your face. “I’m really sorry. If I knew we were coming by this way, I would have…”

Raise a hand to hush him. He tucks his hands in his pockets. “Did you ever know anyone who went to a camp?” he asks.

A GRIN SPREADS ACROSS HIS FACE.

YOU SAID THE RIGHT THING.

Take a moment, survey the thick, high walls of concrete they built around the factory to separate the healthy from the sick. You hear no noise from the other side. Maybe they don’t even use this as a camp anymore. Moved on to more high-tech places. Billy looks at you expectantly. “I knew a few;” you offer.

“Me too,” he says. “Some classmates. A teammate or two. But no one really close.” Knowing him as you do now, this revelation doesn’t surprise you. He isn’t someone who carries the heaviness of true tragedy. He kicks at a rock by his shoe. It clacks as it bounces against the pavement. “Creepy either way. When they disappear, you know? There one day, gone the next.”

Nod in solemn agreement, but don’t add anything more. You both stand in silence, facing each other for another minute or two. Bump him with your shoulder to get him walking
again. He starts to talk about the movie, how much fun he’s had tonight, but your mind is still on the plague camp. After the first couple strains came through and wiped people out, the government started setting up restrictive zones where plague victims would be away from society. The idea was that if all the plague victims were in one place, it would prevent them from infecting otherwise healthy people. People never necessarily went to the plague camp nearest to them. You learned that when Joey was taken from the hospital late at night, after your mother had sent you home to get some rest. You stood outside the Carson Factory for days, hoping to hear Joey’s voice calling for you, for your mother, but it never did. For all you knew, he wasn’t even at that camp. You waited. You held onto the government’s promise that if someone got better, he or she could come back from the camp. But those promises were empty. Joey never came home. It’s been three years.

Billy looks at you expectantly. Raise an eyebrow. “I asked you if you had fun, too,” he says.
Smile and say, “Yeah. I had a lot of fun.”
He grabs your hand. He’s broken rule number 4. But let it slide for now. Lean into him as the pale yellow light of the street lights make a solid path to follow back to campus.

Tell yourself to stop shaking. It won’t work, but you hope it might. You’re standing in your driveway with Billy. You’re about to have dinner with your mother. You’ve been to the house every day this week, sweeping, scrubbing, rearranging furniture, checking in on your mother’s sanity. She seemed in high spirits every time you stopped by, which surprised you. You have been the only person, besides the occasional repairman, to step into the house since Joey left. The guys from the hardware store came by this week and dug up the yard for the koi pond. Now, there’s a huge plastic tub in the middle of the backyard.
Billy smiles at you reassuringly. You feel a little tremor in his fingers as they brush yours. But you don’t hold his hand. You can’t even imagine what your mom would do if she saw you holding his hand. Instead, nudge him with your shoulder and lead him inside. Your mother stands in the kitchen doorway, dressed in a pressed pair of slacks and a nice button-up shirt. She looks nice. She is giddy when Billy walks in, reaching to shake his hand but then remembering herself. She ushers you into the kitchen, where she has a bowl of peanuts for you to share. After the hello’s and how-are-you’s, the room grows quiet. Don’t panic. You prepared for this.

Just as you start to tell your mother a little bit more about the Suburban Literature class you and Billy share, he says, “Mrs. Hartley, Jules tells me you’re building a koi pond.”

Your mom lights up. She asks if he’d like to see it. He says yes and they go into the yard. Watch them from the kitchen window. Your mom uses her hands expressively, no doubt explaining the environmental benefits of a koi pond. From what you can see, he is rapt with attention. Place your hand on your chest, as if that will stop your heart from racing. Make sure you wink at him when he walks back in. Your father used to wink at you, really slyly behind your mother’s back whenever he teased her. It was a way to include you in the game. That’s how you feel now with Billy, that secret sense of belonging to something that is just yours. You like that feeling.

After dinner, your mom hums along to the radio as she scrubs the dishes. When her back is turned, take Billy by the hand and lead him to the far living room, “the fancy living room” as Joey used to called it, the one reserved for three occasions: the annual family photo, presents on Christmas, and Easter morning. It sits empty all year now, except when you dust and vacuum it in springtime.

Lead him up to the mantle and pause. He pulls the center photo off the shelf and cradles it in his hands. It’s the one of the whole family, Joey and your dad, too. You are nine in the photo, a huge gap where your two front teeth should be. He notices your teeth. He laughs. Tell him how you used to be a hit at all the pool parties, gathering the chlorinated water in your mouth and shooting it out every which way.

“You mean like this?” he asks. He kicks one leg behind him. He has one arm above his head, hand open as if reaching for something off in the distance. The other is placed gracefully
above his heart.

“Except the gap,” you giggle. “You don’t have the gap.”

He collapses his limbs with a smile. Take the picture in your hands and trace the frame with your thumb. Tell him this is the last photo you have of your father. Tell him your father went quickly, that one day it was like a cold, then like a flu, then he was gone. Search for something in Billy’s face, something that is enough to compel you to tell him the rest. Focus on his eyes, warm and crinkled with attention.

Tell him: “My mom told me once she thought he was one of the earliest plague victims. The way strain Andrea moved so quickly, my mom thought—well—”

You remember that night, your mom balled up on the bathroom floor, hugging the plush bathmat to her chest. It took you two hours to get her back into bed. But don’t tell him that. He squeezes your hand and wipes away the tear threatening to fall from the corner of your eye. Lean your head on his shoulder. He doesn’t ask about Joey and you’re glad. Joey is a story for another time. For now, grasp his hand tightly and listen to your mom’s humming echo down the hall.

III

Open your mouth wide and let him toss popcorn pieces into it. You’re both in sweatpants, sitting in your dark dorm room with only a strand of Christmas lights to cast shadows on the wall. A movie plays on your laptop, but neither of you are paying attention. Billy mocks you, trying to mess with your focus, but don’t let him. With each piece you catch, chew it up with a smirk.

His hands start to creep toward you. He leans in to kiss you. Dodge it. His kiss lands on your upper cheekbone. He knows the rules, the rules you’ve changed again and again since meeting him. You won’t want to kiss him, not now that this is an official plague year. You caved once, on the way home from Marv’s. Billy had stopped at the jaywalking sign and when you expected him to dart across the street, he grabbed your wrist. You were about to remind him about the rules, when he tugged you enough to unbalance you. That’s when he kissed you. It was over before you could even recognize it happening, but the feeling of his lips, soft against yours, hovered there as he winked and ran across the street. Since the
headlines include more and more mention of Strain George, you refuse to cave again. But once this strain’s damage is done, maybe the rules could be altered. You said as much to him. He didn’t really fight you on that. He kisses the top of your forehead and excuses himself to the bathroom. Practice your popcorn-catching skills, catching them one after another with finesse. Say something about going pro.

There is a crashing sound from the bathroom. Call his name and then call it again. Panic fills you when he doesn’t respond. Rush into the bathroom to find him on the floor, unconscious. A lump develops on his forehead. Did he hit the toilet as he fell? It doesn’t matter. His nose starts to run red.

Don’t think about how fainting spells and bloody noses are the first signs of Strain George. Call an ambulance.

Rummage through your bag before you go in. Snow Caps. The book for your final paper. Spare change. Tuck your mask in a side pocket where he can’t see it. Take a deep breath. Walk through the doorway.

He sits up tall in his bed, eating a cup of yogurt. He’s happy to see you. He beckons you to come over and hug him but you take a seat in the chair in the corner of the room.

Ask: “How are you?”
Ask: “How’s your head?”
Don’t ask: “Is it the plague?”

He tells you about waking up in the hospital, that everything was too bright and he didn’t know why you weren’t there. He’ll tell you about a nurse, Murphy, who comes in on quiet hours and shoots crumpled up balls of paper into wastebaskets with him. He smiles the whole time he tells you, but the bags under his eyes tell you he’s tired. Stressed.

Your phone starts to vibrate. Excuse yourself and walk outside, by the bathroom, where it’s polite to have hushed conversations.

“Honey.” Your mother sounds panicked.
“Hi, Mom. How—”
“Billy? Is he— Have they said—”
“Not sure yet. Doctors are still running tests. They say it’s something about his symptoms that make them unsure.”

The words get choked up in your throat. Try to hide it with a
cough. There is a heavy pause. You hear your mom sniffling on the other side of the phone. “Mom, I went to the clinic this morning. I took the test.”

The plague test. Developed during Strain Diana, scientists realized that once they isolated the strain and understood its biology, they could run a test to see the ways the plague could affect each individual person. Plagues work in weird ways. You could have a classmate, a sibling, a boyfriend be infected and yet you’d never even catch anything at all. It’s biology, the doctors have said time and again. The test could tell you how vulnerable your DNA was to this strain and more importantly, the likelihood that you would die from contraction. It is an expensive procedure, but you pawned some jewelry your mother never wears right after Billy was admitted. You didn’t want to take any chances.

“Oh, you did? Well—I wasn’t calling to—I just wanted to—”

“Mom, stop,” you say.

That sounds harsh. You can practically hear the fear bubbling in your mother’s voice. You know she’s scared. You know she’s terrified. You remember the way her voice quivered that first night you called from the hospital. You’re surprised she even has it together enough to call you now. No doubt her nights are sleepless, thinking about what he could have brought into the house, what he could have given to her daughter, if he could have affected her.

Soften your tone and say: “When I hear back from the clinic, I’ll let you know.”

Say: “I got to get back.”

Hang up the phone. Look through the window into his room. He taps his fingers on his blanket, looking towards the doorway expectantly. Don’t tell him you got the strain test. Though he’d never say it, it is a betrayal. You’ve condemned him before his tests came back.

You’re startled when a gurney squeaks furiously past you. The patient is a young woman with bright orange hair and skin the shade of newspaper. She moans and clutches a place above her hip with stiff fingers. Feel relieved that you haven’t felt sick yet, despite newscasts saying George is fast-acting. Feel sick that you’re relieved. You hear Billy call your name. Take a deep breath with your knuckles pressed into your thighs. Put on a happy face and re-enter his room.
Don’t tell him you love him now. Not on this bench with the ripped cushions in the middle of this white-washed hallway next to the hospital cafeteria with the fluorescent lights that flicker every third minute. He counts the number of bare butts he sees peeking out of the hospital robes of patients who shuffle or wheel by. He’s crestfallen—the doctors have had no news about his results, just taken more and more samples to test. He absentmindedly toggles his hospital band around and around his wrist as he counts. The smell of the polished linoleum makes him feel nauseous in the afternoon, but today’s mystery chili may be making it worse. He makes eyes at the trash can across from you when he’s not counting.

Telling him you love him now would be a consolation prize. You could be dying, but I love you. It would be selfish and sadistic. Don’t add one more thing he needs to worry about at night as he listens to the traffic on the nearby highway, counting the ways, one after another, his hospital stay has hurt others. Don’t tell him you love him now. Don’t let your confession unravel him further.

Instead, hide in the bathroom after visiting hours end, and sneak back into his room after the hallways grow dark. Sit at his bedside and examine the way the bluish light from the street lamp outside coats his skin. Listen to the machines breathe all around him, deep and even with a slight robotic wheeze. Follow the trails of the wires as they twist around his body like maypole ribbons. There is no detection of disease in the way his chest falls with each exhale.

Don’t tell him you love him now. Don’t let your confession unravel him further.

In this moment, think about telling him you love him. How the corner of his lips may twitch with excitement. The way his coarse hands would feel against yours. How his voice, low and gravely, would sound saying, “I love you, too.” Though, if you’re being honest, he would say it first. He’s never been afraid to say what he’s thinking, but he’s also too
impatient to keep something like that inside for very long.

Imagine it away from this hospital room, back in your room, sitting with your legs hanging over the edge of your bed or on your bench by the movie house. You would probably let him kiss you, let it last a little longer than that first kiss had.

This image is enough, needs to be enough. Take one last look at him, so still within the heavy gasps of the machines that the scene looks almost eerie now. Don’t kiss him before you leave—you don’t want him to wake and have to spend a sleepless night worrying. Click the door shut quietly before you sneak out of the hospital.

III

Two large men dressed in sharp, grey suits have been standing stiffly by the nurse’s desk for the last half hour. There’s a round emblem stitched on their jackets, but you can’t see it clearly from where you are sitting. The one with the dark blonde buzzcut makes conversation with a tan-skinned nurse through pursed lips. The other, bald with a thick neck, checks his watch every couple of minutes while helping himself to mints.

You watch the men as you pretend to read your book for your final paper. By now, you can tell the difference between a regular and a temporary patient, but of all the people that fluttered in and fluttered out throughout the days, none of them look like these two men. The men are composed, at ease. No one with someone in the hospital feels at ease. Especially not during a plague year.

You are drumming your fingers against the back cover of your book, still stealing glances at the men, when you get the call. Billy’s mother is two seats over from you, head flopped on her palm in a vain attempt to sleep. You like his mother. She’s quiet and un-territorial and she always brings lemon bars to eat while you wait. The room hums with overworked light bulbs and the hiss of pained coughs. Wear your mask today. As the phone shrills, unhook the mask from one ear and let it slip away from the corner of your mouth.

“Jules, honey.” It’s your neighbor, Gladys, the one who has nothing else to do but wait for something, anything to change in the neighborhood.

“Hi, Gladys, what’s—”
“You are getting your house fumigated?”

“Excuse—”

“Fumigated? Or maybe your carpets cleaned, though it smells too strong for carpets…” Gladys wheezes into the phone. “I only ask because there’s some smell coming from your house and I don’t want it stinking up my azaleas.”

“Wait, smell? What smell?” You notice a couple of people turn to you as you speak. You mouth ‘sorry’ and hurry through the automatic sliding doors. Plug a finger in your ear to hear her better.

“Yes, honey. Like it’s super clean. It could be chlorine. I saw some workmen come over earlier this week. Are you getting a pool?”

“Gladys, is my mom okay? Is the house okay?”

“I think your ma’s fine,” she says. “She’s been scurrying around the yard. I keep hearing doors slamming.” You hear a male voice say something to her. She scoffs, but says to you, “Jerry says you should probably come home, but honey, I think everything’s fine. It’s just my azaleas.”

Hurry her off the phone and rush back inside. Stuff your books in your bag and search for your car keys. Snap your mask back on. Put your hand on Billy’s mother’s shoulder. She stirs slightly, wiping absently at a speck of drool on her chin. Ask her to tell Billy you’ll be right back. She nods, but her head bobs with sleep. Think about leaving a note for him on the waxy page of a catalog advertisement, but then Murphy walks behind the nurse’s desk. Walk up to him and slap your hands on the desk to get his attention.

Say: “There’s a family emergency.”
Say: “I’ll be back in an hour. Tops.”
Don’t say: “It might be more than that.”

Murphy assures you that Billy is asleep, but he will let you know as soon as he wakes up. As you turn to leave, you get a better look at the emblem on the men’s jackets. It’s a gold circle with a deep red heart in the middle and the blip of a heart monitor stretched across it in white. You know that symbol from somewhere, though you can’t put your finger on it.

Rush to your car. Quickly rub a glob of hand sanitizer into your palms before you climb into your car and drive away. On your way home, you pass through campus, then turn right. You pass the Carson Factory, still gloomy and menacing, even with the hazy golden light of a sky just shy of sunset shining.
against it. The light at the corner of the factory turns red and you can feel the factory looming over your car. You peek at it again, and you’re suddenly struck with panic. Gold circle. Dark red heart. White blip. The symbol of the government-sanctioned Department of Outbreak Containment. The Plague Patrol. These are the agents who become involved when someone’s symptoms are suspicious, the people who sweep in to collect confirmed cases. The men who took Joey. It strikes you that they could be there for anyone. There were so many families; any one of them could have a daughter or an uncle or even a grandparent to be collected. But you have a knot in your stomach. Your body barely believes your own words.

Before you have time to make a decision, the light turns green again and someone behinds you beeps. You step on the gas and keep driving.

III

Make a promise to yourself right there in the car. You will go in, you will check on your mother, and you will leave at the first moment you can. Twenty minutes maximum. Thirty if your mother starts to cry. On the way back to the hospital, you can use that service road behind the strip mall, the one only meant for delivery trucks, because it will shave minutes off your driving time and help you avoid two lights. Rush into the lobby, politely but firmly demand to see Billy, and do not take no for an answer. This is your game plan. You feel your heart leap in your chest when you think of the men in the suits back at the hospital. Stick to the plan and you will be back in plenty of time.

Before you take the keys out of the ignition, survey the scene. The front door is wide open, bouncing on its hinges just slightly. So are two windows on the first floor and only one on the second. Joey’s room. The carpet from inside the front door hangs out like a dog’s tongue in summer. A few objects are splayed throughout the front yard and the driveway—a tube sock, a baseball, a yellow legal pad, a leather-bound book—like one of those houses with young kids who don’t pick up after themselves. But there are no young kids here. Just your mother. Then the smell leaks in through the air vents. It stings your nose as it fills the car. It smells vaguely familiar—shoe polish? Detergent?
Clutch the sides of your seat and take one big breath. Try to imagine what you might find inside. Maybe the smell makes it look worse than it is. Maybe your mom accidentally spilled a bottle of cleaner. But then again, that didn’t explain the objects on the ground. Maybe she was getting the house fumigated for some reason. But you have a feeling you’re just being optimistic.

As you walk into the kitchen, the smell hits you. Your head spins and you tuck your nose into your shirtsleeve. You take a step and feel your foot slide. The floor is slick. Look down and see suds gather around the edges of your shoes. Press on the arm of the couch and find it damp. Bring your fingertips to your nose; they reek of bleach. All the knickknacks on the shelves in the kitchen have been removed. The cabinets are all open. Peer out the kitchen window. The koi pond has been pulled onto the porch.

Walk outside to examine the it closer. It reflects the muted rose-colored light from the setting sun. The smell of bleach grows stronger as you approach. Bobbing in the pool is a baseball glove, the rotted swing from the swing set, picture frames, the light blue printed plates you ate off the day Billy came for dinner. Pick up one of the photo frames and see that it is the one from the mantle from your ninth Christmas. Shake some of the bleach off it, and lay it gently off to the side.

As you walk back in the house, realize the scrubbing gets louder when you walk toward the hall. In the family room, your mother stands at the mantle, rubbing the wood with a sopping toilet brush. Her cheeks are flushed and her arm twitches as she presses down harder. Every couple of seconds, she bends over, stirs the bucket with her brush and returns to furious scrubbing. Walk over to her and place a hand on her shoulder. She shudders violently, but doesn’t turn to face you.

Say: “Mom?”
Say: “What are you doing?”
Say, louder: “Mom.”
She says nothing, just lifts onto her tiptoes for more leverage. A white smudge widens on the mantle where she’s stripped off the finish. Grab her forearms and pull her away from the mantle. Her arms fall limp at her side.

“It needs to go away,” she whispers. “It can’t be in here.”

Say: “Mom, why?”
Say: “This stuff has been sitting in the house for a while.”

Don’t say: “If it was going to affect you, it would have done it by now.” No, say it. She needs to hear it.

But she isn’t listening. You reach for her hand but she pulls away. She grabs the last remaining frame and runs towards the kitchen. When you round the corner from the hallway, your mom stands by the sink, dousing the frame in bleach. Grab her around the waist and pull her away from the counter. She yells “No!” like a petulant child as she throws the frame, dripping with bleach, toward the window. It clinks against the glass and falls into the sink. She chokes on a sob and her knees buckle. You fall to the ground with her, the weight of your chest falling on her shoulder. She shakes as she spits words out her mouth, speaking to the world rather than to you directly.

“Get it all out of my house,” she cries. The back of her head batters your cheekbone as her body rocks back and forth. Lean into her and tighten your grasp on her. “Just get it out of my house. It can’t be here. I can’t have it here.” She’s losing momentum fast. She stops rocking and instead cries into your chest.

“He sat at the table,” she moans softly, her voice breaking. “He sat on the couch. He used the dishes. I can’t have it here. I can’t! I can’t!”

She goes on like this for an hour. You can tell when your mother sobs about Billy, blaming him for any traces of George left among the silverware or cracks in the bathroom walls, but sometimes, she gets confused about who she’s talking about. She will whisper something about all the newspapers left behind in the garage or cry softly about almost tripping on baseballs being left at the landing of the front staircase. In those quiet moments, you speak softly in her ear, hoping it might calm her down permanently. When words become nothing more than incoherent mutters half-washed away by tears, hum one of the tunes that she used to sing to you.

When she finally grows silent, barely able to keep her head off your chest, you feel comfortable coaxing her off the ground. With one of her arms slung over your shoulder, lead her to her room. The air is stale in there and smells of bleach, but of something else, too: your father’s favorite cologne. With your free hand, grab a handful of her sheets and pull them
down just enough that she can slide into bed and you can cover her. She curls into the fetal position. Before you leave, you try to open a window, but it’s stuck from years of neglect. Kiss your mother on the forehead before you tiptoe outside and close the door quietly behind you.

Night has almost fully fallen and you can’t see anything except for the last band of sunlight over the treetops. Turn the porch light on. Wrap yourself in an old quilt left untouched by your mother’s fury and sit on the bench out front.

Make another plan. You have to call the fire department, ask them how to dispose of all the bleach, if you need to throw the entire couch away. If they ask you whether or not they should stop by, tell them that you’re fine. Leave the pictures and other salvageable items drying on the steps of the porch. Hopefully, the sunlight will dry them out. But the smell? Maybe ask the fire department about that, too. Call all the neighbors, especially Gladys, and tell them you’re sorry for the noise and the stench. Explain that your mother spilled some cleaner on the floor and panicked. That might be plausible enough.

Check the time on your phone. There’s nothing from Billy or Mrs. Hayes. You think maybe no news is good news, but a pit is still settled in your stomach. Distract yourself. Make a plan for the next time you see him. You’ll hold his hand as you tell him about the next crazy thing your mother has done. You’ll go to Marv’s before and get him chili cheese fries. Plan for an upcoming trip to the movie house, and explain that you will let him partake in a candy war and that when the usher comes to kick you out, you’ll block him with outstretched arms so Billy can run the other way, evading capture and staging an epic finale in his war. Then, when you walk home, kiss him, not by the jaywalking sign, but in the street, right in the middle. How’s that for breaking rules? Yes. That would be the plan.

The wind picks up and a fresh wave of bleach hits you. Pull the quilt closer around you. You’re not ready to go in yet, to go to sleep, to have tomorrow come, so you look at your phone again. Maybe one phone call to the hospital wouldn’t hurt. With each ring, you whisper “Please be there” into the phone. You can feel an “I love you” hanging on your lips, but it’s still not the right time. Instead, listen to the hollow ring in your ear, silently pleading for his voice to interrupt it, as the last ember of the sunset burns out. ✽
Limitless
Kate Levenberg | Mixed Media Sculpture
"Hey, brother.  
There's an endless road to rediscover.

Give me a Saturday night, my baby by my side
Sweet Home Alabama and a six pack of lights
an old dirt road and I'll be just fine

give me a Sunday morning, that's full of grace
a simple life and I'll be okay, yeah I'll be okay
here in small town USA

“So let your heart, sweet heart
be your compass when you’re lost”
Every day I pray I thank God I got her
She's the moon in my shine, the whiskey in my water.

Every day I pray I thank God I got her
She's the moon in my shine, the whiskey in my water.

Somebody told me, like Bonnie and Clyde
They gone as tumbling down falls yeah. man
Looking for the law while I push my luck.
She's ridin' shotgun like it ain't nothing.
Turn the radio up so the girl can sing right.
Pulled into the party like "y'all wassup".
I think I dove in but never got out. Instead, I drifted for a while under a mirrored sky, distracting myself with dragonfly colors and rushes that spoke in a language both foreign and sweet. Swimming was the best part—a movement so sleek and thin I could almost disappear.

That was before. Now, when I least expect it, the people with wings drag me out. They tell me I’m safe, but the flying feels like falling. The dream shatters. I look down and everything is small, quiet, and I don’t know how to tell where up begins and where deep loses its meaning.

When they set me back on the ground, the water is too thin. I reach around me but I don’t remember where it might have gone. I try to rub the river dregs into my skin to wash off the surface stains with rivulets of muddy blue, but my handfuls are full and thick with collapsing earth.

Slowly, I stand on legs that shudder. I’ve forgotten how to walk, and the parrots on land point and laugh when they realize I’ve forgotten how to breathe, too. It’s just that the air feels heavier here. It’s too dry, and I don’t know how to force it down after months of growing gills.

I try to tell them: I am used to liquid that pools on my tongue and whets my appetite for bigger things. That is the taste I love. But they don’t understand, and I weep when I see all the green, a feather-bright color they hawk at me. I miss my muted world, my vast, wet, sunken world.
How can I forget it? How can I forget the place of light that breaks and bends against the surface like an infinity of stars? It never stood still, and I didn’t either. I learned how to sing in the softness of water gone bright. How can I stop hearing the waves that once spilled around me?

I’m not sure I can. I try to as I sit in my tiny puddle but my skin runs cold and I turn shallow with the water. I am surrounded by things I’m supposed to be used to—air and sun and wind that bundles me dry—but I still feel like I’m drowning, the only thing plummeting in a sea of wings.
I like to sweat out my guilt like my dad used to sweat out his hangovers. In this humidity, digging rainwater trenches feels a hell of a lot like Purgatory. Even up here in the mountains, the humidity hardly ever drops below 35 percent, especially with the Jamaican rainy season approaching. Iraq was all dry heat, the kind that sizzles your spit right when it touches the sand. But this, this is some dense-ass, malaise-inducing Santeria heat. Thick in the air, it wrings you out like a raisin. All that pressure precipitating in the atmosphere, these clouds looming overhead. It’s some ominous shit, and it gets me sweating real quick. With each heave of the pickaxe into the ditch, a drop will collect in the bags under my eyes or the small of my back or the crease behind my knee-cap, and after a while it starts to feel like that work accounts for one sin or another. Not that perspiration is equivalent to exoneration, but it’s a start.

Not that that’s the whole truth of why I signed on for a year of service at Bethel Orphanage in Jamaica. But it is why I’m still here, a month after my year of service ended and my visa expired.

D-Jam and I wait for the volunteers to go to sleep before we sneak out with the paint scrapers. We agree on the schoolhouse: it’s far enough from the dorms that we won’t wake anyone up, and it hasn’t been painted in six weeks—the longest of any building on the orphanage grounds. Starting on the backside, we shave the peeling yellow paint off with the rusted scrapers. We use them often. This is our Sunday night ritual: preparing a building for the new group of volunteers to paint this week.

When I finally hit the rack around one, I’m slick with sweat and can feel it dampening the cot’s ratty fabric. I flip my wrist over and check my watch—I wear it on the underside of my wrist, the way Dad taught me. There are a lot of things Dad taught me, mostly by example. At least he was consistent.
Those mornings after Mom made him sleep on the couch, or later when he would go for a drive in the pick-up after giving me or Brian a shiner, he would trudge down to the basement, clad in this beat-to-shit bright scarlet Nebraska Cornhusker Starter jacket and a ratty old Dale Earnhardt, Sr. visor. Always that sweatshirt. Always that visor. Always reeking of whiskey. I still don’t know why he wore a visor for working out in the basement; he got a little salty whenever I asked him. He would crank out a thousand sit-ups, five hundred push-ups, and a six pack to start the day, and give Mom some time to forget about whatever shit he had pulled the night before. Then he’d cash his VA pension check, roll through Mayette’s for booze, and pick up where he left off last night.

Monday mornings like this, when the cicadas wake me up and I’m lying in my cot staring up at the dead ceiling fan, poking my finger through holes in the mosquito net and thinking. That’s when I look forward to the hard labor. It takes my mind off things. In Iraq, they were real good about always having something for us to do: more acting, less thinking. Until I got back, that is. Then, I was jackin’ off all day, because who wants to hire a high-school-dropout, dishonorably-discharged Marine with the marketable skills comparable to a telegraph in the digital age?

I had only been home for two months when I signed on for the year of service. Dad wouldn’t even talk to me when he found out about the discharge. He and Brian were the reasons I enlisted, too. I mean, how could I not enlist—three generations of Marines in the family, and then we get the call that Brian’s KIA. Then the funeral, and the folded flag, and Dad not taking his eyes off me at dinner. I signed up within the week.

And, honestly, if it weren’t for how everything went at the end of my deployment, I probably would’ve enlisted for another tour. I hated it over there worse than anything, but I could only take so much of the bullshit that got shoved down my throat once I got back stateside. Mom pinned my picture up to the “Wall of Heroes” at my town’s Walmart. Girls ignored me at the bar, because I don’t remember how to talk to civvies, let alone girls. Employers told me they “support the troops” or some other bullshit before saying my history was inexcusable—
when they didn’t even see the After Action Report. Fuck all that.

I needed to get back into the rhythm of taking shit step by step, and Bethel Orphanage provided that for me. No shortage of shit to do here. The structure of routine gives me a reason to get up, and reasons to get up are a rarity when a cold bucket shower and rice breakfast are the only things waiting outside of bed for me at five in the morning.

I swing my legs out from the netting and walk into the bathroom. The moldy tiles feel cool on my feet. My head swivels to the corner behind the door. Clear. Then my eyes sweep the rest of the room. Clear. Some habits you can’t quit.

I step into the shower stall and spread soap on my body, then scrub it through my hair. Cracked and woven with wrinkles, the skin on my face feels like old leather against the coarse bar of soap. Upending the bucket slowly, I try and rinse off all the soap. The water from the bucket is frigid and it’s empty before everything’s washed away. That happens most days. The dirt doesn’t wash away easy. And water is precious.

When I walk downstairs to the kitchen, Matilda, the Irish nurse, is preparing breakfast for the orphans—a pallid oatmealy paste. I grab the coffee pot off the counter and pour a cup. She doesn’t turn her head. She knows about the paint scraping, lets me and D-Jam sleep in on Mondays. The children play with her long red hair, splaying it over their heads as if it were their own. Her nose is tiny, a pockmark on her slender face. She’s the other reason why I’m still here.

When I first met her ago a month ago, she was standing at the stove cooking breakfast for the kids, just like she is now. I asked her to throw another shrimp on the barbie. She was confused, didn’t know where to start: Australia and Ireland are on opposite sides of the equator, and Crocodile Dundee is not the craic in Dublin these days. She thought that was mostly hilarious, though. Told me to call her “Waltzing Matilda.” I didn’t know what she meant by that, still don’t. Either way, she looked more confused when I told her that I liked her three
days ago. She ran her hand through her hair, stressed, like she had to operate on a sucking chest wound. I didn’t know what I was doing. I guess that was some high school shit. I can be a little rash sometimes. We haven’t spoken since.

The mountains and the jungle thicket canopy the orphanage, tinting the sparse shade all bright and verdant. From the chapel, the orphanage grounds stretch downhill about two hundred yards to the front gate. It’s a long but narrow arrangement, like a football field built on the slope of a mountain. A gravel road winds through the middle of the grounds and up to the chapel where it ends in a cul-de-sac. Four dorms sit on either side of the road—left for the boys, right for the girls—and the final building before the chapel has the kitchen and cafeteria downstairs, the infirmary upstairs. D-Jam and I sleep in the infirmary, Matilda in the cafeteria.

“D-Jam,” I say, walking upstairs to join him on the porch outside the infirmary. “What’s good, Kemosabe?”

D-Jam’s the on-site director of the orphanage. He’s good shit—knows my visa’s up, but he takes all the help he can get. Besides, the last thing the Jamaican government wants to do is deport an American. That said, their infrastructure is about as organized as a brawl in a biker bar; even if they cared about expired visas, they don’t care enough to act on it. Jamaica time is the only time here.

“Another day, another dig, eh?” He sighs, sunk down into the faded patio furniture, watching the sun rise above the jagged mountain face shading the orphanage. D-Jam pats me on the shoulder and daps me up: a clasp of the right hands, then snap the thumbs against each other. We take quick swigs of the piping hot coffee. Beads of sweat condense on my upper lip.

“Heard that, brother,” I say before nursing my coffee again. D-Jam doesn’t talk much, and neither do I. I think that’s why he likes me. He smiles so little it seems like his face is cast in plaster—always neutral. Ear buds pulled up over his collar from under his t-shirt, he always has at least one in, talks on his phone through them. I think that’s how he got the nickname, though he never plays music out of them. Says he doesn’t like music.
We try to avoid the volunteers outside of labor situations. That’s why Mondays suck: we’ve got to teach the newest group of white people how to save the world by re-painting the same building the last group painted. Every Sunday morning, last week’s group packs into the orphanage’s dilapidated shuttle bus, tired and teary-eyed, and off they go, back stateside where they can post profile pictures of themselves posing with a bevy of adorable Jamaican kids and act like they made a difference or some other TED Conference bullshit. Sunday evenings, the upcoming week’s group pours out of the orphanage’s bus and gets acclimated to sleeping with mosquito nets as blankets.

“What do you think the body count will be for today?” I say. Invariably, two or three hard-ass guys in the group ask to work in the trenches with us. We like to size them up and bet how many injuries they’ll sustain that day. There are usually a lot of accidents. D-Jam just shrugs.
By nine, we have the new group of volunteers lined up along the road and waving to the orphans peeking through the slanted window shades in their dorms. All scrawny white kids in tank tops, there are ten of them, including their male chaperone—clad in spandex shirt and shorts—who assures us that they’re “ready to rock.”

I bring the three guys over to the tool shed and introduce myself. “David,” I say, nodding my head. Rattling open the shed door, I muster a weak “Glad you came” to each of them as I hand them their axes. I didn’t have to lie too often in Iraq; the translators did that for us. Their hands look soft—no calluses—and they take practice swings with the pickaxes like they’re fucking shot puts. We bring them out to the trench, along the far left side of the orphanage grounds. It extends

Maryland Blue Crab
ROSIE RUZZI | ACRYLIC PAINT, SAND, OLD BAY SEASONING

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from the chapel all the way down to the gated entrance, and it’s about halfway done. The further down we get, the moister the earth is. Moist means mud. Mud means heavy. Heavy means hard work. They’re usually not good with hard work.

We set up in a line, alternating which side of the trench we stand on. Sharp on both ends, the pickaxes work, though they’re a bit unwieldy. We till the earth enough to shovel through the trench afterward, clearing out the loosened clumps of dirt and rock. The axes are about ten to fifteen pounds, which is heavier than you think when you’re heaving it up and over your head, then deep down into the mud, all morning and afternoon without a semblance of shade. Even the wind is sparse. Even in the mountains.

Exhausted and whiny, they take a break after every swing, hunching over the wooden hilt of the pickaxe to breathe heavy and bitch. That’s when I tell them to take lunch break, and tell D-Jam that I’m going farther down the trench—to the untouched part—to get a start on the wetter ground. It’s gonna be a bitch, but at least I feel moderately useful.

I march down and begin work on this portion of the trench. The ground is fucking sopping. After a while, my back gets sore from yanking the axe out of the muck. I start to bend over and pull out the submerged end of the pickaxe from ground level, shooting a sideways glance down the trench to get a view of today’s progress. D-Jam’s nowhere in sight.

I feel a pin prick in my right wrist and look down.

Fuck me. A fuckin’ Little Boy—or at least that’s what D-Jam calls them—a black snake, fang deep, hanging from the artery in my wrist. No more than a foot long and slim as my pinky finger, D-Jam warned me about these fuckers.

They’re not imposing or anything, but their venom is no joke. The first time he showed me one, he had it trapped under the heel of a garden hoe. He cut its head off with his machete and flung the body into the woods with the blade of the hoe. When I asked him what would happen if someone got bit, he just stared into the distance, stoic as usual, weighing the question. Then he ran his pointer finger along his throat quickly, casually, and walked away.

The Marines preach the importance of remaining calm, and I figure that keeping my heart rate down will help slow the flow of the venom to my heart. That said, there’s still a fucking snake dangling from my wrist like—fuck—like how a fucking
snake would dangle from a wrist. I don’t know.
But I know to react.
That’s what I was trained to do and that’s what I do. I yank
that fucker off and kick a stone on top of its torso. Taking a step
back, I raise the pickaxe over my head, bring it down, and chop its
head off. Axe buried deep in the dirt, through the snake’s body, it’s
then that I look down at my wrist—my hands still clamped tight
around the base of the axe handle. I haven’t seen this much blood in
a while—not since Iraq, not since the roadblock. It must have latched
onto my wrist real good. The floodgates are open. Untying my
bandana, my vision starts to blur a bit. I wrap the bandana around
my wrist and fashion a tourniquet out of it, then make a beeline for
the infirmary.

My arm is throbbing now; I can feel my pulse all the way up
in my armpit. I run behind the buildings so the kids and volunteers
can’t see me, blood drenching my t-shirt sleeves as I hold my arm
upright to stall the bleeding. Sweat-soaked and sapped of energy, I
slide up the stairs to the infirmary, bracing myself against the wall
as I go. Matilda is treating a volunteer for a headache, but she shoos
him away as soon as she catches sight of me.


“You shouldn’t be around either,” she says, laying me down
on a bed and running for D-Jam. I close my eyes and open them and
Matilda is sucking on my wrist, the wound. She spits out the blood
and venom into an empty can of Chef Boyardee. It sounds like dip
spit pooling in a spittoon.

“Beef Ravioli. I see sanitation is a priority,” I say.

She doesn’t look up. Standing over my head, D-Jam starts
talking with Matilda about blood transfusions or something. She just
nods as she continues sucking the wound, then spitting into the can.
I keep nodding in and out. The last thing I hear is them talking about
transportation options.

Here’s how it goes: U.S. government’s still trying to install
puppet leaders in the city—he definitely can’t be in the Ba’ath party,
if he’s Sunni the Shias hate us, and if he’s Shia the Sunnis hate us. It’s
a lose-lose-lose situation. But they finally find their golden boy, Al
Habib or some shit.

Rules of engagement are already a clusterfuck, and then we
start stationing roadblocks throughout Baghdad. CO says fire tracer
rounds over the top of the vehicle as a warning. Turns out most
civvies don’t know what to do once live rounds whiz past their
windows. They panic, drive forward. We flick our safeties off,
neutralize the threat. Except it’s not a threat, it’s a family of four
with a trunk overflowing with baggage. They were fleeing the
city.

The ones where everyone lined up on the roadblock
opens fire, those aren’t the ones that stick with you. That way
it’s not just on you. Not as much as the next one, at least.

New ROE: CO says fire smokes as a warning, then
tracer rounds over the top of the vehicle as a second warning,
then light those fuckers up once they hit the fifty-meter mark.
Roger that. Fifty meters can’t come soon enough, PFC Drescher
says. He’s the fucking new guy, straight outta high school,
replaced Specialist Knudsen who got fragged in Fallujah. We’ve
only got thirteen days left in our deployment.

Rifle perched atop the hood of the Humvee, I glance
down at the thermometer on my watch. It reads 106. I blink
slowly, the bags beneath my eyes sagging on my gaunt cheeks;
it’s coming up on three days since I’ve slept for longer than
an hour. My eyelids feel heavy. Grabbing the tin of Grizzly off
the dash, I weigh the contents in my hand and snap my index
finger against its side to pack what’s left of the dip in a tight
wad. With my left thumb and forefinger, I pull my right lower
eyelid open and wedge a pinch between it and my eyeball, then
do the same for my other eye. It burns like hell but gives you a
jolt. A lot of the other guys pound energy drinks, but that shit
causes chest-clenching bouts of heartburn. To be sure, the dip
gave me Prilosec-grade chest pain, too, but it wasn’t nearly as
bad. That’s the case most of the time here: your options consist
of two shitty things, and ideally, you get to choose the one that
hurts less.

But anyway, I blink a few times to clear my field of
vision and get back to scanning my sectors. Next car is a white
Lincoln sedan, ‘90s make and model, but still nice. The heat’s
distorting the air close to the broken asphalt—like a mirage, it’s
obfuscating the tires, their motion. Lance Corporal Pace fires
smokes out of his 40mm at a hundred meters. Not fast so much
as persistent, the car swerves but keeps coming.

Seventy-five meters comes and we let loose with the
tracers—still not sure why we fired tracer rounds in broad
daylight, but a corporal’s not allowed to ask those questions.
The Lincoln speeds up, or at least that’s what it looks like from my view, and I gently place my finger on the trigger, leveling my sights on the driver seat. No one’s saying anything. Or everyone’s talking and I just can’t remember right.

What I do remember is this: the sedan passes the bullet-riddled Iraqi cigarette billboard, marked with white paint in the corner to denote the distance of fifty meters. I feel the adrenaline in my fingers, my eyelids; I’m frosty—but not on edge, exactly. The car keeps coming.

It’s not like in the Westerns, when Clint Eastwood squints an eye and plants one in the chest of Lee Van Cleef from a football field out. Both eyes peeled, I focus on the sights: the pointed reticule, one circle within another circle. The rifle’s steel stock feels snug and cold against my right cheekbone. The car keeps coming.

I fire.

Only, no one else along the line fires.

Three bursts, twelve 5.56 rounds: good effect on target. The windshield’s cracked to shit and all I can see is the blood splattered across it from the inside. The car coasts to a stop against a wall along the right side of the road about twenty meters short of the perimeter. It’s deathly quiet save the sedan’s side-view mirror grinding and sparking against the clay wall.

CO approves my request to inspect the scene up close. Pace and Mendoza come with. Rifles shouldered, we stalk up to the Lincoln. I creak open the driver side door and Pace cranes his head and rifle inside. Ducking his head out immediately, he bumps his Kevlar helmet against the car doorframe and walks away. Doesn’t say a peep.

We don’t ID the man in the driver seat as Al Habib’s brother until later. I lean in, see a woman sitting shotgun—his wife—tattered to a pulp. Once I peer through the gaps in the driver’s headrest and see the pink and purple car seat, I back off, too. There’s blood smearing the back windshield. Her blood. She was four.

Al Habib doesn’t take Americans killing his brother and his family too well. He pulls out of the election, starts spouting anti-American shit to any Iraqi that’ll listen. A lot of them listen.

Back at the roadblock, Drescher’s grinning ear-to-ear. He tries to give me a fist bump. I give him a crack to the jaw. Hard. That’ll go on the After Action Report, too. Normally, paperwork in the military takes a while to go through, but
they expedite that process quicker than Bush fast-tracked the “Mission Accomplished” banner a year before.

Less than a month later and I’m no longer a Marine. No benefits. No job recommendations. No honor. No feature spot in the commercials with the saber-wielding Marine in his blues fighting a dragon.

When I wake up, Matilda’s leaning on the doorframe. “We found the Little Boy’s body, spread its blood on the bite to stop the bleeding and clean the wound out. Snake blood coagulates. Bought us time to get the antivenom,” Matilda says. “D-Jam wanted to fly you home, said the orphanage couldn’t afford a dead American on our hands.” It’s dark, and the cicadas are starting up again.

I sit up, look at her. “Thanks for doing that—the sucking thing.”

“Don’t get any ideas,” she says. It’s quiet for a pause and the cicadas are deafening. “You need to rest. You’ve lost a lot of blood.”

“I’ll give you a day. I’m not gonna coop up in here and rub elbows with the clown crusaders,” I say, tilting my head toward the volunteers’ dorm.

LESS THAN A MONTH LATER AND I’M NO LONGER A MARINE. NO BENEFITS. NO JOB RECOMMENDATIONS. NO HONOR.

“The volunteers?” she says. “Who do you think donated blood for you? There aren’t many B-positive blood types in these parts.” She stares at me. I look away, out the window. “What have you got against them, Dave?”

“I don’t know,” I sigh, scratching the back of my neck. “They just seem like tourists, is all, with this fetish to see the Third World—but it’s not like we need a fresh coat of paint on the buildings every week. We need a well and a chicken coop and a finished trench. They just don’t do anything, you know?”

“They’re just kids, Dave. They seem a bit young for
fetishes. Other than the spandex chaperone, at least. Besides, they make the children laugh. I think that’s worth something.”

Her words kind of hang there for a moment. “Can we talk sometime?” I say. She raises an eyebrow and crosses her arms; I know she’s waiting for an explanation. I gulp. What I don’t know is what to say—explanations were never a strong suit. I keep it simple: “Lunch?”

She raises her eyebrow even higher, somehow. “Fine,” she says. “But it’s going to be with the kids.”

Normally D-Jam and I take lunch in the trenches, chewing down leftover jerk chicken in silence. I tend to avoid the orphans like the volunteers—with a wide berth, almost like an IED. Since my deployment, I can get a little jumpy around kids.

Matilda tells me most of the orphans are mentally or developmentally disabled—she told me that term too: Dad had a different name for it. Their maladies run the gamut from severe cases of cerebral palsy to Down syndrome and autism. The treatment options for them here are just shy of FUBAR; we can’t afford wheelchairs for a lot of the kids in need of them.

The Sisters of the Blessed Assurance attend to the children all day and night. Mostly older women from Ghana and the Dominican, they work their side of the street at Bethel Orphanage and D-Jam and I work ours. It’s probably happenstance that our side of the street involves all the heavy lifting and theirs the far-off looks and navel-gazing. But they treat the kids with care and seem mostly nice and sincere. They’re always smiling to themselves, content changing shitty diapers all day. Theirs is a happiness that comes from someplace else.

I sweat pretty often, but I’m swimming in it now, waiting for Matilda to come down from the infirmary. This is the closest I’ve come to a bona fide date since high school. Between Matilda and the thought of being around the orphans, I’m at DEFCON 2 in my armpits right now.

It’s strangely quiet here in the cafeteria this afternoon.
The volunteers left this morning—three days early—after the whole snake fiasco. They came to see me in my cot before D-Jam herded them into the bus. I asked why they were leaving, if it was something I said. Matilda got a kick out of that. Helped break a little bit of the tension around here, too, I think.

I hear Matilda before I see her—her barefoot feet slapping down the stairs. She pauses at the bottom, looks lovelier than ever in this blue blouse that matches her eyes and is probably the last clean article of clothing she’s got. I’m in my good-luck shirt: the Snow Patrol t-shirt Brian gave me before he shipped off to basic. It’s an Irish band, I know; I’m hoping to impress.

“No, I know you’re fuckin’ with me,” she says, glowering at it. “Of all the bands, you pick the one from Belfast?” I stare back, dumbfounded. “I’m from Dublin, you asshat. My Da’s IRA.”

I think about making a break for it and joining D-Jam back in the trenches before this date is too far gone.

“I’m just messing with you,” she says, pushing me by the shoulders out the doorway. “C’mon, let’s go. Mid-day prayer is soon.”

We start down the path toward the chapel. A soft drizzle starts, spotting the sand and gravel in the walkway. Rainy season’s finally inbound. It’s been a long time coming.

From outside we can hear the sisters and children singing a hymn. It sounds something like Babel—the sisters’ practiced choir mixing with the kind of melodic groans of the children.

We walk into the chapel and I stall under the archway entrance at the sight of all the children lining the walls of the chapel in their wheelchairs and walkers and crutches. The sweat comes back with a vengeance, clams up my palms. A shiver runs down my spine. Matilda grabs my hand, lurches me into the cool chapel. She brings us to a seat between two boys supine in the corner—twins, identical, both stricken with cerebral palsy but without wheelchairs.

“Roman, Roshawn,” she says, “meet Dave.” They both smile, flashing white teeth and big dimples. I smile back, nervous and goofy. The shakes are coming on. I used to get them all the time when I first arrived at Bethel, one week sober and DTing in the worst way.
Scrunched up against the chapel wall, we sit back and Matilda holds out a lyric sheet between us. It’s loud and everyone is singing, or trying to, and the kids start clapping, too. The din echoes under the chapel’s dome. Socks cover the hands of some of the children who are prone to putting their hands in their mouths, and still they thud their hands softly against each other, trying to clap along. Bad as the music sounds, it’s charming and light, so I do it. I sing and clap to the shitty ’70s church songs. Holding back a smile is a lost cause.

I flinch when a big bald head nudges into my side; Roman nestles into my lap—kind of rolling and contorting—but he stays there, lying on my thigh. I turn to Matilda.

“It’s okay. Roman’s just writhing a little. He’s fine,” she says into my ear, shouting over the chorus. Outside, the rain picks up; it’s lapping up in puddles and rattling the sheet metal roof.

The song finally comes to a close. “Our Father,” the sisters and Matilda recite, finishing up the mid-day prayer. They all raise their arms and hold the hands of the people beside them. Matilda follows suit, grabbing my hand from my lap and lifting it in prayer. I freeze up when Roman holds up his left hand to mine. Slowly, I take it. My hands shake and Matilda grasps my right hand tighter as we mumble through the prayer.

Roman’s hand feels cool, clean in my sweaty palm. Meeting his eyes, I smile weakly. My throat is tight, constricted like a bottleneck. Unclasping hands, the sisters say “Amen.” Roman lets go of my hand. Matilda lifts her head up from prayer and looks over at me. Her eyes are kind and sad.

It’s strange the stuff that sticks with you: the way Mom stuffed wet tissues down her sweater sleeves during Bri’s funeral; the Rorschach blot of blood splattered against the white Lincoln’s back windshield; the words to a prayer you tried to forget since Baghdad.

I think of D-Jam eating shitty jerk in the soggy trench alone. I think of Dad slouched in his ratty pleather recliner with a tall boy of Coors in hand, watching the nightly mortality report. Matilda leans her head on my right shoulder, takes my wounded wrist in her hand and clutches my bandaged forearm tight to her chest. There are all kinds of cripples. The sisters shuffle the orphans off to lunch. Some strands of Matilda’s red hair catch on my chapped lips as I smile against the back of her
head. I am here. 🌺

for Ray
Our Spring Is Sweet, Not Fleeting
Hannah Fernandes-Martin | Oils on Canvas
Chained (left) & Rusted (above)

VIRGINIA KLUITERS | DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY
But things grow stagnant these days in my America, 
where I drive roads so thick with dependency.

I’d be better off walking through the land of milk and honey, 
of my ancestors, of my own misguided homesickness.

There, the languages flow like bitter wine through the streets, 
and no one understands all of my secrets.

There, even dead things float, and I think I could be holy, 
though I am as ugly as the angels.

I want to bleed on the temple walls. 
I want to press my lips against them until the imprint

of the stones and the parables are a part of my bone structure. 
I want to forget everything I don’t feel, go where even my sadness

will be the color of sand, someplace where life is valuable 
and fleeting and we march in the streets until the prisoners come home.

Yes, I say; I will go by the name of my soul. 
I will stand on the mountains, try new wine every week.

I will taste the elements. I will throw my loneliness into the mikveh. 
I will fear no more land mines. I will lay my body down

to the mercy of the Jerusalem street 
and I will cry only laila, laila, laila tov.
KarmaCell is a phone service that I use when shit gets really terrible. I just call the 800 number and talk for as long as I want to one of the KarmaCell psychics. They hire a few professionals—real smart people who are known to have the Sight—and I can talk to whoever I like when I call, as long as I pay. It’s totally legit, no bullshit—these are 100% genuine psychics. All I gotta do is give them my credit card number, and then they lay out my life in a way that makes sense, that feels possible.

I always talk to the same guy. KarmaCell calls him “The Great Interpreter,” but after about five phone calls, I got him to tell me his real name. It’s Baldwin, he told me, because his father was a concert pianist. Way sophisticated. Elegant. Like what you’d expect a psychic to be named. He’s said the last couple times we’ve talked that I’m about to enter a new career, and that I’m going to find love soon, and that I don’t really have to worry about Chad, my ex-boyfriend, breaking the terms of his restraining order, but if he does, I should call 911. I’m pretty excited about that new career thing, because my online psychology degree hasn’t really panned out the way the website promised.

Lately I’ve been calling a couple times a week. It’s not a huge deal, mostly because my roommate Shay is almost never home anymore. She’s always at her boyfriend’s apartment in Akron. When she was around, she used to give me shit for how much I spent on manicures and psychics and card readings and smoothies at the mall, but I figure as long as I’m paying my share of the rent mostly on time I’m fine. Plus, not much makes me feel better than having some stranger hold my hand. It’s basically like paying for therapy or Xanax but way cheaper, so whatever. I consider it a sound financial decision.

The thing is, though, that I’m way broke. I work two jobs—well, one real job, and one sort of on-the-side thing—just to stay basically functional. During the day, I work at Sears, fitting forty-five-year-old women into boxy pleat-front pants
and folding never-ending piles of fruit-print sweaters. On occasional Fridays and weekends, I babysit for friends of my parents, the Caldwells, who live a town over. They live in a bona fide mansion—three floors and a pool—and pay me pretty well. Their seven-year-old twins, Zoe and Margot, both have nicer cell phones than I do and they make fun of my highlights. Still, the $12-an-hour is more than I make at my actual job, so it’s worth it. But it would be better to work somewhere else, somewhere that doesn’t make me feel dead and poor when I leave.

Tonight, I’m sitting on the leather couch in the Caldwells’ living room. I put the twins to bed half an hour ago, which means they’re probably asleep enough for me to watch television and make a phone call. I find reality TV reruns, something where women with pearl necklaces drink champagne straight out of the bottle. It’s nice to be reminded that rich people are just as fucked up as me. For about twenty minutes, I watch housewives take their dogs to therapy and fight with their husbands before I start to realize that I’m falling asleep. To stay awake, I pull out my phone and call Baldwin. As always, I give my credit card number before I hear the familiar chime that tells me I’ve been connected.

“What can the Great Interpreter divine for you today?” Baldwin’s voice is sleepy, thick. I wonder if I’ve caught him in the middle of something.

“Hi, Baldwin.”

He coughs on the other end of the line. “Angie! What do you need this fine evening?”

“Just wondering what you had for me.”

“Any particular area you’re interested in?” he asks.

“No. Thought I’d see if the spirit had moved you at all since Tuesday.”

“Let me see.” He hems and haws, and I click my new nails together while I wait. They’re long and plastic this time. Purple. “Aha. I think I’m getting something.”

“What?”

“It’s about your romantic horizon.”

“What about it?”

Baldwin doesn’t get to tell me, or maybe he does and I miss it, but I’m interrupted when Margot walks into the living room in her nightdress with her blanket thrown over her shoulder.
“Who are you talking to?” she says.
“Nobody,” I say.
“You’re holding your phone.”
“I’m talking to your mom and telling her you’re still up and walking around at ten o’clock.”
Margot shakes her head. “No, you were talking about spirits.”
“What are you doing awake?”
“I wanted a glass of water. Who are you talking to? Is it your boyfriend?”
“It’s my psychic,” I say. “I call him sometimes.”
Margot sits next to me on the couch and scrunches up her blanket in her lap. “Dad says that psychics are scam artists.”
“Scam artists?”
“They aren’t real. He says so. Mom does, too.”
I give her the benefit of the doubt since most people don’t believe in the Sight, even if they are still young enough to believe in little kinds of magic. Kid magic. “They’ve always helped me out when I needed it.”
“How do they help you?”

How do you explain this to a seven-year-old? How do you tell a tiny person how much life is going to suck? I think of telling Margot about how my mom won’t talk to me since I decided not to go to real college, and about how sometimes hanging out with Margot and Zoe on weekends puts food in my fridge for the rest of the week. I think of telling her about how my roommate has basically moved out but her goddamn magazine subscriptions keep coming to the apartment. Piles of Cosmo and Glamour everywhere. And I think of telling her about my shitty boyfriends and Chad and how sometimes the people who are supposed to love you stalk you all the way to Cincinnati where your grandparents live and you have to call the cops on them.

I say, “I know a lot of people don’t think psychics are real, like your mom and dad, but I’ve always believed in the Sight. I’m pretty sure my aunt actually has it. I bet you believe in stuff that other people don’t think is real.”

“Santa isn’t real either. Mom and Dad told us that, too. Or the Tooth Fairy. They said that we’re too old to believe in Santa, but we’re still going to get presents and stuff, so it’s okay.”
“Go get your water, Margot.”

She walks almost tiptoe into the kitchen, so quiet that she sounds like she’s disappeared. Margot uses a step stool to reach the glasses in the cabinet, and when she fills her glass at the fridge, she holds it with both hands. Once she’s said goodnight and left for her room, I pick up the phone and hear a familiar alert: Five more dollars for eight more minutes.

I snag six extra hours at work the following week. I’m starting to set money aside, a little bit at a time, because JoJo at work told me what happens when credit card bills don’t get paid. She said her ex-girlfriend’s debt got sold off to some third-party collector, and that the collector came and found her at the bar where she was working, ordered twenty whiskey sours, and stole her purse. I think she’s full of shit, but I’m not gonna risk it.

One of my responsibilities at work is making sure that
stuff doesn’t get left in fitting rooms. Usually, it’s just product—polyester suit jackets, strangely proportioned cocktail dresses, jean shorts with too many buttons on the front—but sometimes people leave other stuff. Their cell phones. Bubblegum wrappers. I found a used diaper one time.

I do a routine check through the fitting room near Women’s Business Casual and Maternity. A quick glance down the row shows me there are two pairs of feet under stall number three. I hear whispers. Squeaks of hands against a mirror. Someone stumbles and there’s a thump, like a fist or a knee hitting the door. Laughter. I don’t move, just stand and listen for a second, hoping I misheard. It takes another thirty seconds of clunking and the scratchy sound of denim-on-denim to tell that I really didn’t.

We’re actually trained in how to deal with this—there was some old video, probably made in the early ’90s—but I can’t remember a single step of protocol. I don’t know what to do, or how to do it, or if I should do something at all. I reach towards the door to knock before I change my mind, take a step back. I bite off the edge of my new thumbnail. Maybe I could shout at them. But that might freak them out. I’m not really good at shouting. Plus I heard this crazy story on TV one time about this chick having sex with her husband and her house got robbed in the middle of it and her heart rate was so fast that she died or went into a coma or something. I don’t want to kill anybody.

I step out of the fitting room and lean against the wall between the Spanx and a thermostat. I figure that maybe I can tell people that the fitting room is out of order if they come by and want to try on elastic-waist slacks. One time, like ten years ago, me and my eighth-grade boyfriend Jake—the one with the beautiful hands—made out in the photo booth at the state fair, and my cousin Lauren stood on the outside and kept watch for us. I still think about it every time I see a Ferris wheel. So, I’m just paying it forward, or whatever.

The couple steps out of the fitting room. The girl wraps a scrunchie around her hair and fixes the edges of her lipstick with her thumb. Her boyfriend looks red but satisfied, and as he walks behind her, he slips a hand under the hem of the girl’s cropped jean jacket. I turn my back to them and rearrange stuff on the clearance rack, embarrassed. I wonder if they even knew I was there.
“Are you sure they were fuckin’?” JoJo asks when I tell her the story later. “Damn, yo. I mean, I’d be lying if I said I never did that shit before, but it’s probably different to be standing on the other side of the door. You doing okay?”

I nod and help JoJo hang lingerie properly back on the racks. Bra straps never go back on those weird little hangers right, and some days I wish we could just dump all this stuff in a pile. It’s hard to care enough to make it right.

“It’s just—why would you do that?” I say. I’m still red in the face from before. I know because Sears has like five mirrors in every department. They’re unavoidable.

“I don’t know, man,” she says. “Sometimes you just can’t help it.”

“That’s gross.”

“Ain’t you ever loved somebody? Come on. Me and my girl did it in a gas station bathroom one time. It was awesome, but it smelled like bleach and hot dogs.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“I mean, whatever. You gonna pass me that hanger, or what?”

I hand it to her and she slides the straps of a satin nightgown over the edges. My stomach hurts, but I’m not sure if it’s from earlier or from the bleach-and-hot-dog story. Could be both.

“I’m taking my break,” I decide, and I pull my ID lanyard over my head and shove it in my pocket. “I’m getting a pretzel.”

JoJo’s face completely twists up. She looks super happy, but also kind of evil? I can’t place it.

“Yo, girl, you get that pretzel.”

“Stop being weird. I like pretzels.”

“Aw, come on, you know that pretzel guy wants some Angie-style strange.”

I throw a hanger at her, and she pretends like I shot her. “Go away.”

I fish a five-dollar bill out of the depths of my purse to pay. I order the same thing I always do—a giant buttered soft
pretzel with cheese and a large lemonade. I actually don’t even have to ask for it anymore, because the guy at the counter who works lunch hours has my order memorized. Whenever I come over with JoJo, she elbows me in the ribs until I think I’m gonna get a bruise and whispers, “Girl, get it,” in my ear over and over. I don’t come with JoJo to get pretzels anymore.

Pretzel Guy stares at me when I hand him my five, and it freaks me out a little bit. He’s looking at me super-close, and he’s not bad-looking or anything, you know, he’s normal, but it’s like he has laser eyes, and I feel self-conscious about it.

“What?” I ask.

“Sorry,” he says. “You just—sorry. Just trying to figure out how much change to give you.”

“It says on the register. It’s a dollar thirty-five. Same as always.”

“Yeah, just thought I’d brush up on my second-grade math.” He scratches the back of his neck with a free hand. It would be cute if he wasn’t so weird.

“Cool,” I say, and I take my pretzel and my lemonade and go. I glance back as I’m walking back to work, and he’s hitting his head on the side of the nacho cheese machine.

“So, what are you wearing?” I ask, halfway through my next call to Baldwin. Maybe I’m pushing it. He laughs.

“Those on this astral plane don’t concern themselves with such mortal matters,” he says. “Also, they monitor my phone calls.”

I wonder what the real answer might be. I wonder if he’s neat, if he wears socks that match his sweaters, if he owns a Rolex. Maybe he’s like a hippie, a spiritual guy, the ones with dreads who reek of weed and incense. I think he’d make his phone calls barefoot. I wonder if he would tell me if the company didn’t go through his call records.

“Is there something else I can help you with?” he asks.

“I’m just waiting for something to happen,” I say. “I don’t know. I call a lot, and you always tell me that something is just around the corner, and it just—well, there’s nothing.”

“Be patient,” he says. “The world works in mysterious ways. You’re going to be fine.”

“Make me feel better,” I say. “Tell me anything. You
“Angie.”

“Just talk to me.”

“You know you’re paying for this,” he says. “There are other people waiting who want real predictions. People with dead husbands and stuff.”

“Better, not worse,” I say.

“Ange,” he sighs. “Okay, I mean, if I was giving you advice on anything, I’d be worried about your credit card.”

“Better,” I repeat. “It doesn’t even have to be a reading, if you don’t want. You could tell me about your day.”

“I like when you call,” he says. “But you make me nervous.”

I lie back in my bed, the phone pressed to my ear. “You like when I call?”

“I don’t know, I mean, you seem cool. You seem sad.”

“Hey.”

“No, I know,” he says. “Better stuff. Look, it sounds like you’re working pretty hard. I think you’ll find a way out of this. Maybe go talk to a financial advisor or something.”

“I caught two people having sex in a fitting room yesterday at work.”

There’s a long pause on the other end of the line. “Better than catching five people having sex. You know, at the same time. At work.”

“Does that mean something?” I ask. “Is it a sign?” There’s an alert on the line to add more money to stay on the phone, and I push the pound key to continue my call.

“No?”

“I don’t know,” Baldwin says. “How do you feel about it?”

“I’m not sure I’ve ever been in love,” I say.

“Whoa,” he says.

“Yeah.”

I can hear him breathing over the phone. “I can’t fix that for you,” he says, finally.

“I wish you could,” I say back.

Zoe and Margot spend their Saturday evening sitting in my lap, painting my face. Their aunt came to visit them and
gave them a starter makeup kit this week, and since they got way into it, their mom gave them all kinds of expired lipstick and eye shadow colors that haven’t been cool for thirty years. They won’t let me look into a mirror. Margot keeps stabbing me in the eye with the applicator.

“You are going to be so pretty,” Margot says. “Can I do your hair? I have a big round brush. You’re supposed to dry your hair with it, but I think I can just use it normal.”

“I’m doing her hair,” Zoe says from behind me. She’s got a pigtail’s worth of hair in her fist and she’s pulling, but I assume she’s just trying to braid it or something. I pretty much know that it’s just gonna be a tangled mess by the time they’re done.

Margot frowns and takes a giant tube of hot pink lipstick. “Pout your lips like this,” she directs, making a face, and I copy her. “Beautiful. Beautiful.”

She smears the lipstick around my mouth and misses at least once, which puts a giant pink stripe on my chin. I let her get away with it. I did this as a kid with my mom, and then we both stood in her closet and found all of the jackets that had shoulder pads. Being a grown-up is exciting until you don’t have any other choice.

Margot gets up to grab me a tissue and a mirror, and Zoe is humming Disney songs to herself while she works on my hairdo. I’ve always liked when people play with my hair. I realize, with gross kid hands all over my face and Zoe’s tiny knees pressed up against my back, that it’s been a while since I’ve had any human contact. I miss having people touch me; I miss hugs and friends holding my hand and kisses on the top of my head. I am grateful for the kids and their makeup fingers.

Margot hands me the mirror so I can check out my face. I have like five layers of blue eye shadow on. My lipstick looks like Margot and Zoe’s Barbie Dream Car. Margot put circular blush on me, like a doll or a nightmare clown. I have mascara on both my eyelashes—good job, Margot—and on my forehead. Luckily, this is easily fixable. I keep makeup wipes in my purse for emergencies like this.

“I did your hair awesome,” Zoe says. “Look at it.”

I shift the mirror a little to the left and I see it. Zoe’s hairdo. I’m missing a huge chunk of hair. I don’t know how I missed her doing this. I reach back and the back of my hair is cut at a severe, sloppy diagonal. I shriek and Zoe jumps back
behind me, some of my missing hair trapped in her hand.
   “What the hell? What the fuck did you do to my head?”
   “Those are swear-jar words,” Margot says quietly. The girls are standing together in the corner of the living room.
   I can’t stop shrieking. I know it’s bad. I’ll never get asked to babysit again. I can’t stop. “Do you know what you did to me? Oh my God! What the fuck? Do you know how much this costs to fix? What is wrong with you?”
   “I thought it was cool,” Zoe says, crying. “Like famous hair!”

   “You know better than that. You know you don’t do that. You’re a big girl.”
   “I wanted you to be pretty!”
   “Where’s my hair, Zoe?”
   She points to a pile on the floor behind the couch. There it is. A good four inches.
   “Clean that up. I’m calling your mom.”
   There’s a fresh round of screaming and crying, this time from me and the kids, and I know in my heart that the mascara has got to be coming off. I start dialing the twins’ mother and feel for my hair with my free hand. So much of it’s gone. On the right hand side, all the hair is still there. The girls are sweeping the pieces into a plastic bag with their hands.
   As Zoe and Margot’s mother picks up the phone, I catch my reflection in Margot’s hand-sized kid mirror. The mascara has made big black watery stripes through the rest of the clown-face makeup. I am a disaster.

First thing the next morning, I go to a salon to get my hair fixed. I go somewhere good, because I need somebody with skill to fix this first-grade mess. It’s one of those nice places that plays satellite radio with no commercials instead of the actual radio. I don’t recognize the shampoo bottles because the brands are way fancy.

   They do some kind of weird voodoo magic and somehow give me a cute haircut, a short bob that I never thought would have worked. While I’m at it, I get them to update my highlights, so that I don’t have to do them out of a box for a while.

   I flip through a magazine while they run my card,
comparing my new hair to the red carpet photos. I feel fashionable, almost. Pretty. The hairdresser holds up my card and gives it back to me.

“It says declined,” she says.

“That’s not possible,” I say, but it’s totally possible. I know it, and she knows it. I can tell by the way she sighs at me.

She runs the card again. “Declined. You got another one?”

I hand her my other card. It’s approved, by some kind of crazy miracle.

As soon as I get in the door to my apartment, I call Baldwin. “I need a good prediction,” I say. “I am falling apart.”

“Okay, slow down,” he says. “What’s going on?”

I tell him the story of the haircut and about my credit card and about the judgy hairdresser. I tell him that I didn’t get fired from babysitting, but I’m worried that I scared the kids. I tell him that I don’t have any friends besides Shay, who is never home, and JoJo, who is too weird to be my only friend. I tell him that I don’t know anyone who will touch me. “I’m going to be alone forever,” I say. “Alone with my debt in this shithole apartment.” I’m crying by the end, choking on my own tears, lying on the floor in the middle of my kitchen.

“That’s not true, babe,” he says. “You’re going to be fine.”

“You say that all the time but it doesn’t happen.”

“Predictions take a while.”

“What are you predicting now?”

“I predict that you’re going to be fine. There’s probably somebody who’s in love with you right now and you don’t even know it. Seriously.”

“You say that to me every time,” I say, exhausted.

“Look, Angie,” he says. “Things get better with work. I can’t just say it and make it happen. This psychic stuff is a two-way thing. I have faith in you. Just, you know, talk to people. And stop buying stuff with your credit card. I told you that last time.”

“And you were right, as always.”

“I would never lead you wrong,” he says. “Or the spirit wouldn’t, whatever.” I can hear him laugh over the line.

“You know everything about me,” I say. “I wish I had
the Sight. Maybe I’d know something about you, too.”
  “Yeah, I’m pretty mysterious.”
  “Can I ask you a question?”
  “Shoot,” he says.
  I take a deep breath. “Are you the person who’s in love with me? You know, secretly?”
  There is a long pause. I picture him on the other end of the line trying to put a sentence together, trying to figure out how to tell me, how he’s been thinking about it for weeks. I think about all our phone calls, about all the times he’s told me someone has been in love with me all along.
  Instead, he says, “What?”
  “Like, are you… the person… who’s in love with me?”
  “Yeah, no. I got it the first time. What? No.”
  “What do you mean, no? You flirt with me all the time, and you’re always telling me I have a secret admirer, and—”
  “I do that with everybody,” he says. “It’s part of my job.”
  “You’re a real psychic, though.”

I TELL HIM THAT I DON’T KNOW ANYONE WHO WILL TOUCH ME.

He laughs. “Oh, sweetheart. I do this to make a couple extra bucks in the evenings after work, so I can go to Vegas this summer. All you gotta do is ‘make a prediction’ for KarmaCell, and they put you on payroll. I get real into it, though. I like to help people. Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t totally lying to you—I think you’re great, actually, and if you can get through some of this stuff, you’ll be fine. You just have to stop doing dumb shit. You know. You’re a sweet girl, and you’re not actually dumb. You’re funny. I like talking to you. But maybe get a therapist.”
  “What do you do during the day?”
  “I’m a market research analyst. I figure out how to get people to buy, like, different weights of printer paper.”
  I’m confused. I feel like dying. “Is your name even Baldwin?”
  “Uh—no.” He groans. “Sorry. I made that up to seem more legit. It’s Greg. I just—”
I hang up my phone before he can finish apologizing. I can’t hear his voice anymore. My phone feels diseased. I throw it on the floor. I get up, walk a lap around the kitchen, lean my head into the cabinet door. I am an idiot. I am a wreck.

I catch Shay’s giant pile of *Cosmos* out of the corner of my eye. I grab the stack and go to throw them away—just to get rid of something, anything—and the top one is just mocking me. There’s some rich, happy, plastic bitch on the cover. Cover stories: *Be a Better You! Get Sexy! 50 Ways to Seduce a Man!*

In a movie, they might light it on fire, or shoot a hole through the front. I can’t do it. I drop them on the floor and run to vomit in the kitchen sink. I wash it down, sort of, and collapse on the floor next to my phone. I slide my phone open and closed again and again. The clicking noise calms me down a little. Open. Closed. Open. I think I might have a switch off in my brain, or there’s a part missing or something. I feel broken all the time.

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Pretzel Guy comes to Sears the Tuesday after that. He’s a little sweaty and needs to shave.

“Pretzel Guy,” I say. I am not very good at greetings, or people.

“Mike, actually, but hey,” he says to me. “I don’t know if I got this right.” He holds up three ties. One’s beige, and has a sailboat print. Another is solid, almost ketchup red. One has vertical green and brown stripes. They’re all bad. “I got jury duty,” he says. “Not sure what to wear.”

I shake my head and put the ties down, and pick up a navy one from behind the counter that somebody returned this afternoon. It’s better—still not great, but better. “This one’s good. It’d suit you, I think.”

“Ha, ‘suit,’” he says. “You know, ‘cause it’s a tie, and when you wear a suit... Anyway.” He clears his throat and pays with cash. When I hand him his receipt, he writes his number on it and slides it back across the counter. “You could call me sometime. Or not, you know, you don’t have to. I just... I think you’re cute? And I have for a while? I just finally got it together to say it. I had to practice a lot in the mirror. Your hair was different before. Oh God. Sorry, wow. I am— I am embarrassing myself.” Mike picks up his bag with one hand.
and does that thing where he scratches the back of his neck with the other, and then he’s gone, leaving at a half-jog through the sliding mall doors.

There’s a short line that’s started behind where Mike was awkwardly stalling, so I shove his receipt in my pants pocket and help the next customer. Baldwin’s prediction was real. He might still be an actual psychic after all. People with the Sight usually like to keep it a secret.

Me and Baldwin—Greg—could have made it work if it had been like this. If I had helped him pick a jury-duty tie. If I had stood behind him in line at the grocery store, watching him buy beef jerky and orange juice. If Baldwin had worked in the mall, and not on the phone. I’m thinking about this, trying different scenarios over in my head, when JoJo joins me at the counter.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,” she says, and she’s bumping her hip against mine. “The thirst is so real!”

“I don’t even know what that means,” I say back. It’s probably a sex thing. I don’t really want to hear it.

“He is so into you. Shit is crazy. Did he just come over and, like, ask for your hand or some shit? I bet he brought you a rock.”

“There were no rocks. He just gave me his number.”

“His number? Oh, baby!” JoJo goes into this old school Gone-With-the-Wind-type fainting fit. Some teenage girl walking by watches and laughs. “You need to jump every single one of his scrawny-ass bones. For real.”

I’m not even sure how to tell her I’m heartbroken. Even if she knew everything, even if she had the whole story, she’d still probably give me the same advice. I just shake my head at her instead, because it’s all I can manage right now.

She puts a hand on my shoulder. I think she can tell something’s not right. Maybe she can see it in my face. JoJo’s pretty good at that. “Hey,” she says. “I don’t even know your deal. But I know that you’re sad a lot. Maybe do something that makes you not sad. Like, try it. You know? Have fun. One time. If it sucks, you can go back to being sad. Whatever. Do your thing.”

I lean my cheek against the top of her head, her pile of braids scratching my face.

“Thanks,” I say. I mean it.

She squirms. “Yo, man, whatever, you don’t have to get
After I get off work, I sit in my car in the parking lot for twenty minutes, holding Mike’s receipt in my hands. I debate calling him. I think about calling Greg instead. I don’t even know what Greg looks like. I don’t know how tall he is. I don’t know if he would run in the mall, I don’t know if he eats pretzels. I don’t know how he smells. I know what his voice sounds like when he’s tired. But that’s not enough.

Mike has messy, quick handwriting. He writes his name in all capitals. His eyes are brown. His pants are a little too short. These are all things that I know, things that are true. Mike is a real person.

I lean my forehead against the steering wheel and listen to the radio cycle through advertisements. McDonald’s. Nightclubs. Day care. Attorneys. Engagement rings. I haven’t made a phone call in a week, since my last one to Baldwin. The thought of talking to anyone over the phone makes me feel sick and desperate. I don’t want to be that girl again, hanging on to men who aren’t real.

I crumple the receipt with Mike’s number on it into a ball, throw it in with the other backseat crap, and shift the car into drive. Tomorrow I will be back at the mall. I know where Mike is. I can stand at the counter and he will have my order before I ask for it, and when he hands me my change I will let our fingers touch, and maybe I will not be so scared of a good thing.
The Ashtadikpalas
Hannah Fernandes-Martin | Crayon, India Ink and Colored Pencil
Granada
Sarah Luther | Acrylics on Canvas
Let’s drive.
Let’s take the loop around Houston,
go round and round
a curve so gentle
it feels like straight lines.
The kind, you laugh, we’ll never do.
So, we’ll stick to smoke, and you’ll let me
brush your fingers with mine
when we pass the papers
over the gearshift.

We’ll pass
blue-lit houses hazed
by the smoke drifting from our mouths,
and barrios cramped with the bright taste
of foreign language on our tongues.
Let’s pass the parks,
Reliant Stadium, the Astrodome hunched
in slump-backed defeat,
and make up lives for the people
slick with Gulf Coast heat.

And I’ll wish for once
that it wasn’t just you and me
but a hundred more people
stuffed in the cab of your truck.
Then I could straddle the transmission, pretend
each movement you make is an excuse
to touch my skin,
and not just a matter of moving forward.
You lead me toward blackening smoke,  
so I can see the cane fires  
before the air grows too thick to smell  
the sweetness of dying cane:  
your favorite part of winter.  
We sit across the narrow road  
together, and you lean closer,  
your shoulder touching mine  
as you point toward those burning roots  
and tell me to mind the thick base thinning,  
to watch how the fire eats at the excess  
and leaves only what’s necessary,  
see how killing the plant brings about  
the best of it, those useable parts.

We watch it die so quickly  
that I can barely remember  
what it looked like before fire caught,  
that I can’t go back to just two days ago  
when you drove us home on your old ATV  
from camping by the dry riverbed,  
and I held you at the waist  
as we passed through these fields,  
green on both sides, before  
and after us, as if the cane stretched  
across the kilometers with promise  
of no nearing end.

You take a piece  
of cane from the ash bed  
and hold it up to my bottom lip,  
telling me to lick it, assuring me  
it still has a sweetness of flavor,  
that the fire only burned the casing,  
not its core.
I take the cane from you, biting its crumbling shell and pulling it into my mouth. As it hits my tongue, my nose wrinkles and my senses are blinded by the taste of char that melts slowly before the sugar finally leaks out and settles.

As we walk the road back home again, I feel that sweetness linger on my tongue, your fingers lock in mine. I think of the fires that burn and the fires that burn out. You squeeze my hand and I look up at you, hoping we’ll come back to see the cane fires next year.
It’s drizzling when I step outside the double doors of my apartment onto Via Tosinghi in Florence. Senegalese street vendors roam through the crowds, picking out unprotected ones like me, shoving umbrellas under my nose and chirping, “Five euro, five euro.” I shrink further into my windbreaker, hands clammy in my pockets, feeling a little relieved that the rain disguises the few nervous tears that I’ve failed to blink away. For a brief moment, out there on the streets of Florence, I have to laugh at myself; I’m getting a tattoo, not losing a limb. And, despite my sudden unease, it would be rude to cancel last minute.

I take a left, a right, and walk through Piazza Repubblica, bordered on either side by upscale restaurants where chic city-dwellers and middle-aged tourists sip overpriced cocktails in the indoor-outdoor dining area. Then, I pass the carousel on the left. It’s shoved off-center towards the back of the square, like the one attraction abandoned from some long-passed traveling carnival. All semester my friends and I said we’d ride it eventually, even if it was silly, the kind of fun meant for little children. Some of my friends did, when their families came to visit and they could take time off of school to do the touristy things that were too touristy even for us. But my family could never work out a trip, which is a nice euphemism for us not having any money.

It felt like I was in limbo between two different universes, coming home from a weeklong trip to Greece and seeing an email about my tuition payment being overdue. Or listening to my parents tell me that we couldn’t afford our house anymore while I cavorted around one of the most expensive cities in Italy. My parents made every effort to downplay hardship, but the selfishness nagged at me nonetheless. And now here I am, with my last fifty euro in my pocket, doing the only thing that my parents had ever said they would kick me out of the house for. But it seems appropriate to commemorate the surreal experience with an equally surreal act.

I stride past the mothers waving to their slowly rotating children, walking with insincere confidence. If nothing else, I
should have woken up one of the four friends I came abroad with, who’d all assured me for days they would come along. “I would hate to get my first tattoo alone,” they kept telling me—until midafternoon naps and hangovers made them forget their promises. I’d long ago abandoned any idea of loyalty between what I’d realized were fair-weather friends and me, but it still hurt a little.

I walk underneath the Arcone, which signifies where the center of Roman-era Florence used to be, and turn past a nightclub, inconspicuous in the daylight, with its stone façade and grand, arched windows. This is my favorite thing about Florence: the way the city’s history blends together, the way each building has a story—like my apartment building, previously owned by the Medici family—the way I feel like a part of something past and present, the way I feel like a part of something at all.

I’m pleased with myself for being familiar enough with the streets that I don’t have to check the map on my phone. Granted, I spent thirty minutes before leaving my apartment memorizing the short route to Porta Rossa 14 on Google Maps, but I count it as a win because I look a little less like a lost American.

**I’D LONG AGO ABANDONED ANY IDEA OF LOYALTY BETWEEN WHAT I’D REALIZED WERE FAIR-WEATHER FRIENDS AND ME.**

As I scan the street corners for signs, *il giglio*—the symbol of Florence—jumps out at me from the sides of taxi cabs, buildings, and shop windows. I’m used to seeing it every day, and it makes me feel like my stomach is filled with champagne bubbles: giddy and hopeful. About halfway into the semester, I decided, on little more than a whim, that I should get a tattoo, but it took me another month to figure out exactly what I wanted. Then one day, as I was walking through the city with my roommates, I saw the familiar *fleur de lis* symbol on a restaurant sign, and I immediately told them, “That’s what I’m going to get.” A few days later I was setting up an appointment with the one tattoo artist I’d talked to—
purportedly “the cheapest and best” in all of Florence—and I agreed to come in on the first of May, exactly a week before my flight back home.

It wasn’t until the night before that I started to research. I discovered that I’d really put no thought into permanently inking my body; the information available on the artist’s Facebook page, aside from a few pictures of drawings and tattoos I assumed he’d done, was unsettlingly sparse. I had almost no idea about the risks that came along with tattoos; the dream world of Florence seemed risk-free to me, and I hadn’t considered that seedy people taking advantage of silly American girls who all want the same souvenir tattoo design were probably not few and far between. Not to mention the fact that I was prone to major bouts of general anxiety and hypochondria, and I’d happened upon a cautionary article about a girl who’d been poisoned by toxic tattoo ink. For the majority of the time I’d been in Italy, I’d been preoccupied enough by the novelty of living next to Medieval churches and taking international excursions to keep my anxiety at bay, but it had now returned in full force. Even though I knew it was unrealistic to believe that the tattoo would kill me, it seemed as though the risks had been staring me in the face the whole time, and I had only just begun to notice them.

As I made my way to the guy’s apartment that afternoon, I knew three things for certain: I should absolutely make sure he uses a clean needle; I would get my tattoo on my ribcage, largely considered one of the top three most painful places on the body for tattooing; and I was doing it alone.

I reach the street I’m looking for, a narrow, residential-looking block that looks out of place so close to the center of the city, and walk the length of it and back before I find number fourteen. I ring the buzzer labeled Genovali. After a moment, the double doors unlock with the customary loud buzz and clunk, and I push the heavy handle inward. I don’t realize until I’m facing an empty stairwell that I was really expecting to be met at the front door. But I ascend the steps alone, nervous tremors making it difficult for me to walk without wobbling. I have no idea where his apartment is, and when I finally reach a landing with a door standing ajar, I pause for a moment, wondering
if I’ve found the right place, or if I should just turn around and walk back down the stairs and send him a message that I couldn’t go through with it. But then a figure appears in the doorway.

“Katharine?” he says. I don’t recognize him at all, because the pictures he’s posted online don’t do him justice. For one, his teeth are perfect. He’s also younger, and blonder, than I pictured him: less tortured artist, more sports-car enthusiast and part-time model. I am suddenly very aware that I’m not wearing a bra.

“I’m Giuliano. Come on in.” He waves me inside. Right off the bat, he’s much friendlier than most Florentines I’ve met. I follow him into a nondescript apartment, through a white-tiled kitchen and past a bedroom with music and voices coming from inside, a bicycle stored in the hallway, posters on the wall, and into a back room. Sparsely furnished with a futon, two desks and a black table pushed back into corners, I wonder if this is his bedroom. Charcoal and pencil drawings are taped to rundown plaster walls; wooden artist’s models and stone bust replicas rest in front of stacks of paper on the desktops.

Giuliano gestures to the futon, and I sit while he takes a seat on a stool and wheels closer to me. “How are you today?” he asks, his accent a mixture of Italian and something else.

“I’m really, really nervous,” I blurt, and laugh awkwardly. Because this is ridiculous: me, here, in a foreign country, with a stupidly handsome and questionably legitimate tattoo artist, getting a permanent mark of a city I’ve lived in for a mere three months. I feel silly and scared and defensive, prematurely judging him, certain that he’s judging me.

But he laughs, and tells me not to worry. “It will be quick and easy,” he says, and he picks up the stencil from the desk to show me. It looks unthreatening, at least: a simple outline, four or so inches tall, like I’d specified over Facebook.

“I’m afraid it’s going to hurt, like, bad,” I confess.

“This is your first tattoo?” he asks, and I nod. “Ah, you’ll be fine. It won’t be bad at all.”

I make a sound, like pffffhh, an exhalation of air meant to signify that I’m reassured, though I think his reassurances, which he continues with while I nod along, are empty—a simple attempt to keep a customer. I can’t really fault him for that.

“Not many people come alone for their first tattoo. You
could have brought friends, you know.”

“Ha,” I say. “Well, I didn’t want to bother them.”

Giuliano has me play music on his computer, whatever I like, he says, and I play Blink-182 for no reason I can think of. Stirring up rebellious preteen angst, probably. Then he brings me in front of a mirror and I roll up my flannel shirt—amidst my stuttered explanations that I’m not wearing a bra on purpose, because I found in my last-minute research that the elastic warps the skin—and awkwardly try to secure the fabric just under my armpit so as to position the stencil and simultaneously not expose myself.

He moves the translucent paper up and down on my ribcage, asking me, “Maybe a little this way? Maybe a little bit further up?” and I try to make it seem like yes, that does look better and not exactly the same, until we find a spot that we agree is perfect. And then the preparation is over and I am lying on my side on the thick black table and my hands are shaking from anxiety and adrenaline and Giuliano is firing up the tattoo gun and the buzz sounds just like I expected it would but different at the same time and every muscle in my body is tensing up, afraid to move, waiting for that first prick and the rib-vibrating, unbearable pain that is sure to follow, and then maybe Giuliano tells me he’s starting and maybe he doesn’t, but I don’t hear either way, because my ears are ringing and then the needle breaks my skin, and I clench my fists and squeeze my eyes shut and inhale sharply.

It doesn’t hurt as bad as I thought it would, as I lie there more still than I’ve ever been. It hurts, but in a bearable way, in a way that’s visceral and satisfying. After a couple minutes, probably due to all of the adrenaline, the smooth buzzing actually feels pleasant. It occurs to me that it’s been a while since I really felt something. I’m without mind-numbing pain to distract me, so I stare up at the drawings on the wall, thinking in expletives and expressions of disbelief, punctuated by short answers to small-talkey questions from Giuliano. I say something about my friends and think that I’m glad I came here alone. Digging my fingernails into my palms is an okay substitute for not having a hand to hold, and that seems preferable to having someone else intrude on this memory, distort it with their own perceptions, their presence. I am greedy and relishing that this experience is mine and mine alone.
“Wow,” Giuliano says. “You are not twitching at all.”

After no longer than thirty minutes, he finishes smoothing out the final lines, and tells me to get up and look in the mirror.

“Holy shit,” I say, because that’s really the only thing you can say when looking at your first tattoo for the first time. I have crippling second thoughts, about what my parents and sisters will say, about whether my friends will like it, about whether I like it. But it’s already there, so I tell Giuliano that I love it. And I think I believe it.

Giuliano covers the raw skin with plastic and gives me instructions for proper care. “I thought you were going to flinch all the time, and mess my lines up,” he says. “I thought you would ruin my business for sure. But you barely moved at all.”

I laugh weakly, feeling dazed.

Giuliano ushers me back through the apartment to the front door. “Tattoos are stories,” he tells me, as we stand facing each other on either side of the doorway. “You come in with a story, and you come out with another story. The most important thing is that, after you get a tattoo, you feel like a different person. After every tattoo, you must feel like a different person.”

I nod, in acknowledgement more than agreement, still reeling too much to consider my personal growth in the last thirty minutes. But I guess that alone answers it for me: I’ve made one of the most permanent decisions I think a person can make, after deliberating for only a month. And maybe I’m not a different person walking out of Porta Rossa 14, but I’m not the same person as the one who came to Florence three months ago, and maybe that’s the same thing.

I was only ever just a visitor to Florence, skimming the cream off the top, the best parts, the most beautiful parts, the parts that let me live suspended in a dream-state, a months-long experience filled with two-euro wine and Renaissance art, high ceilings and huge windows that let in the smell of warm Nutella even when closed, of carousels and street chalk drawings and feeling, for the first time in my life, not afraid of everything.
Exactly a week later, my skin still embossed with black ink, I sit in the passenger seat of the car that used to be mine while my parents tell me they’ve sold all of the other cars, along with our house. I come home to boxes and garage sales, and I watch as our possessions disappear into the backseats of other peoples’ cars. We spend the summer packing up the things we’ll keep, shuffling around homes offered up by neighbors and family friends; I drive nearly two hours north each weekend to stay with friends of my own, one of whom becomes my boyfriend and then my ex. These weekends become bright spots to break up the monotony of my well-paying and horribly dull job at an insurance agency and my family’s comfortable quasi-homelessness. We finally move into a small rental, and a couple of weeks later, I leave for my senior year of college.

I’m hoping for a comfortable return to the same uniformly brick campus and formulaic English classes after the past several months of uncertainty. The friends I made in Italy and the promises we made—of la famiglia per sempre—are not kept, despite how adamant we were that they would be. It’s almost painful to sit around a dimly-lit kitchen table reminiscing about the coffee shop we went to every day, the waiters there who knew our names, all the little tiny things.

When my relationship ends only a few weeks after it became long distance, I attribute the emptiness I feel to the breakup and disenchantment at being back in Burlington, North Carolina. But after months of not being able to concentrate, or be around my friends, or shower regularly, or get out of bed at all, I discover that this is not normal, but rather a combination of slowly building symptoms of depression that have likely been lurking for a while. I’m in denial at first, refusing to accept that in a matter of months, I could go from feeling like the luckiest person in the world to barely a person at all. Even on good days, that charmed and ephemeral life in Florence seems more like a vivid dream that’s fading at the edges. I still have the tattoo, though—a reminder I didn’t know I would need about what is and what isn’t a permanent thing. 🌟
MARGARET BRYANT is a junior English major with concentrations in Creative Writing and Professional Writing and Rhetoric. She is a big fan of words and has a soft spot for cat puns and subtle sarcasm. She is grateful to have Rachel Shippee as her co-pilot on this editorial adventure and appreciates the time, energy, and sanity that the staff has dedicated to this publication.

CASEY BROWN is a senior Creative Writing major from Franklin, MA with a fierce laugh and passion for women in comedy. She strives to live every day like Mindy Kaling, is fearfully preparing for her post-grad move to Los Angeles, and shamefully admits she had to sing her ABCs to put this contributors page together.

FRANKIE CAMPISANO is an aspiring humorist who may or may not actually be three children in a trench coat.

EMILY CINQUEMANI is a senior Literature and Creative Writing double major from South Carolina who almost always has a good day when it rains. When she’s not writing, she spends her time getting lost while driving and reading anything by Fred Chappell or Melanie Rae Thon. In the face of her upcoming graduation, she finds herself both excited and slightly terrified. But above all, she is very grateful for her past four years at Elon.

DANNIE COOPER is a recent graduate (woo-hoo!) and English major from Maryland. She likes big dogs, cake batter ice cream and writing about her travel-related endeavors.

KEVIN COYNE is a junior studying creative writing and literature. He’s admittedly confused as to why/how he was printed in anything beyond a mug shot. Skeptical of pants as well as mayonnaise and single-ply toilet paper, he’s relieved
to have a tangible thing, let alone a prestigious publication like this, to cling to during bouts of (self-)doubt. More than anything, he’s tired of this here tryst with writing in the third-person.

**Brianna Duff** is a senior, a writer, and a physics enthusiast. She is currently working on a novel that is about running too fast, skirting black holes, not disappearing, and falling in love. Since she is also expected to graduate and somehow leave this place, she would like to thank Drew Perry for always accepting the science in the pages and for knowing exactly what it takes to make something turn to light.

**Hannah Fernandes-Martin** is majoring in all things art and hopes to do all things art with her life. You know, casual things like revolutionize the way art museums function, destroy the Vasarian cannon, make art that changes the world—that kind of thing. In her free time, she enjoys ballroom dancing and thinking about dogs.

**Claire Fyvolent** is currently residing on a mysterious planet called post-grad life. She has a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing and plans to enjoy all the beauty the universe has to offer.

**Alli Ginsburg** feels far too passionately about most everything.

**Olivia Guerrieri** is a junior Political Science major with a minor in Women’s and Gender Studies. She loves feminist rants and cuddling with her cats.

**Rachel Hayes** is a first-year Art major with a specialty in photography from Greensboro, NC. She loves taking unique and thought-provoking portraits, can be seen holding a Starbucks coffee every morning, and thoroughly misses her cats from home.
Tassy Henderson is a senior double major in Art and Arts Administration and is a native of Durham, NC. She is influenced by her own thinking and her ideas concerning culture and identity. “I’m not scared of lions and tigers and bears but I’m scared of...” - Jasmine Sullivan, “Lions, Tigers & Bears”

SJ Knowlton is a junior Creative Writing major who has been told she’s “pretty funny for a girl.” She also enjoys reading Wikiplots of scary movies instead of watching them.

Virginia Kluiters is a junior Creative Writing major and a lover of poetry and photography. She’s also obsessed with (dark) chocolate and owes all of her successes to coffee, which gives her the ability to function every day.

Kate Levenberg is a sophomore Public Health major with a Biology minor. She is inspired by nature and likes to sculpt in her free time.

Rachel Charlene Lewis was born (and eventually raised) in Maryland. She writes almost exclusively about women who are/want to be/used to be in love and has recently traded in an obsession with semicolons for an obsession with parentheses.

Katharine Lindsay sometimes makes her mouth numb, so it feels like someone else is telling her she’s pretty.

Sarah Luther is a first-year from Bristol, TN majoring in Art and Strategic Communications. She enjoys painting, reading, watching movies, traveling, and drinking as much tea as possible.

Delaney McHugo is a senior double major in Creative Writing and Cinema who hopes to write screenplays giving voice to women and other marginalized groups. You can find her with a Dunkin Donuts cup in hand on the hunt for a strong wifi connection and a new shade of lipstick.
Christopher McKenzie is a senior who enjoys painting when he can. He worked on his piece for a week over the summer and realized he made something that he found special to him.

Sarah Paterson is a senior Professional Writing and Rhetoric major. She is currently designing a blueprint for a rocketship treehouse.

Lianna Pevar is a sophomore Human Service Studies major who hopes to never stop seeing each day as a new adventure. She survives on hot chocolate, grilled cheese, and warm weather.

Rosie Ruzzi is a sophomore majoring in English with Teacher Licensure with an Art minor. Other than canvases and paper, she has painted screens, cabinet fronts, and bowling pins, among other things. She draws much inspiration from being surrounded by nature in all its glory at Deep Creek Lake in Maryland.

Rachel Shippee is a senior double-dipping in Creative Writing and International Studies with a side of Spanish. She loves caramel apples, talented spoken word artists, and the Oxford comma. Shout-out to her lovely fiction co-pilot Mags, whom she trusts immensely, except if she actually attempted to fly a plane.

Julia Sorensen is a Psychology major with minors in Communications and Creative Writing. She can often be found on the swinging benches beside the lake, daydreaming with an open book in her lap.

Sophia Spach is a senior from Davidson, NC. Her major is Human Service Studies and she is double minoring in Art and Religious Studies. Her passions include photography, singing in the gospel choir, playing in the snow and traveling. She hopes to live in England one day and own a red telephone box.
Autumn Spriggs is a senior with a double major in Psychology and Creative Writing. She has a knack for finding obscure music and truly appreciates napping with her window open on rainy days. She will forever be impressed with the talent contained in this journal and is thankful for the entire staff and the contributors.

Kaitlin Stober likes pandas, peace, and painting. She enjoys ice cream for breakfast and reading *Colonnades Literary and Art Journal*.

Ben Stringfellow is a senior Cinema student from Annapolis, Maryland. He is pursuing a career in film editing.

Sarah Wasko is a senior Art and Strategic Communications major from Marietta, GA. She’s a critical art student who’s never quite satisfied with her own work, but that comes with the territory. Sarah loves brussels sprouts, miniature schnauzers, and equality. She owes everything to her spirit guides, Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer.

Lydia Willig is a first-year Art major with a passion for photography. A lover of cats and nature, she hopes to continue her growth as a photographer and reminds everyone to stay golden.

Anna von Wodtke graduated in December with a major in Psychology and minors in Creative Writing and Political Science. She writes shamelessly about her feelings because no one has ever had the decency to stop her.
Nonfiction Contest 2014
Judged by Ryan Van Meter

First Place: Casey Allen
Honorable Mentions: William Stirn, Kelsey Camacho

Poetry Contest 2014
Judged by Paisley Rekdal

First Place: Alli Ginsburg
Second Place: Phillip Danieley
Third Place: Emily Cinquemani
Honorable Mention: Liana Mills

Fiction Contest 2014
Judged by Holly Goddard Jones

First Place: Sarah Paterson
Second Place: Kevin Coyne
Colonnades welcomes all submissions of fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction, as well as visual and audio-visual art. Submissions must be free of grammatical and mechanical errors. Pieces are chosen for publication through a blind reading and ranking process by staff members, taking into account the space available in the magazine.

All pieces should be submitted electronically: literary submissions to colonnades@elon.edu and art submissions to colonnades.art@gmail.com. In the subject of the email, include your last name and the title of the piece (ex. lastname_title). In the body of the email, include only your name, Datatel number, the title of your piece, and genre. Save your submission as the title of your piece and attach it to the email as a Word document (do not paste submissions into the body of the email). You may include multiple submissions in one email.

Each piece of artwork must be saved at 300 dpi resolution, in TIFF format.

The deadline for literary submissions is January 10, 2016, and the deadline for all art submissions is January 24, 2016.
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