



NTR 2022

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Cover art created by Paige Sanders: "Persephone&Hades."

A Note From the Editor

Dear Reader,

What a pack of years it has been.

Thank you for making it this far. Thank *you* for reaching us.

Thank you to *Raina Joines* for her immense assistance and endless patience as I tried to get my own footing this school year. Thank you to *Diane Culpin*, the *Department of English*, *Student Service Fee Committee at Student Affairs* and *UNT Printing and Distribution Solutions* for helping us establish ourselves and connect with more people on campus this year. Thank you to *Brandon Knight*, *Ariana Thompson*, *Kathryn Bistodeau*, *Emmi Tinajero*, *Mercedes Muratalla*, and everyone else who helped run the North Texas Review this year, for being the reason we are even holding this book in our hands right now.

We made it, everyone. I'm so proud of all of us.

Now please enjoy the fruits of our labors. Let us celebrate what we have accomplished.

Ashra Londa
They/She
Editor in Chief | 2022

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The City I Know, Angus Sullivan

Andèla Divina
B.T. Kilgore

There he stood, hunched over his bathroom sink—somewhat of a demon—washing his hands ferociously; skin red from the scrubbing and scratching. Cobalt blue was a poor color choice to make, especially on a day like this. He relented, staring down at his blue fingers. He dried his frigid hands and blew on them, rubbing them together as if to start a fire in his palms. He gave an aggressive press to his hair, tucking it behind his ears. The dark circles under his eyes mocked him. He stumbled through his studio. He made it out the door.

He could never afford a taxi, especially from Brooklyn. He was forever bound to the pigeons and pavement. Walking steadily to the subway, he kept his hands buried deep in his coat. The threat of frostbite was familiar and all too anticipated. His hands were his livelihood, he could not have them bitten by frost. Alas, his stress dissolved as he watched the city fly by, holding on to the rail above him. The setting sun doused the passengers' weary faces with a sort of honey they ignored. They were far too tired (and poor) to relish the sun.

But the painter relished regardless, eating as much of the sun's honey as he could—until his stomach no longer growled. He waited and soon rejoiced as he made it to Manhattan. It was mostly dark by the time he approached the Lincoln Center; the sun having sweetly bid him adieu into the night.

The Metropolitan Opera House, what a kingdom gate. Heaven had never felt so real to him. He circled the plaza fountain a few times, staring up at the

columns of water, wondering how they weren't freezing into spears. They surged like horses into the air, creating a mountainous sound, much like a cascade. Although it was painfully cold, it was not enough to push him inside. This was what he called New York Severity; when a sight was too severe for you to look away from or go on from unchanged. It holds you by the throat, demanding you look. As he staggered into the lobby, the chandeliers had their turn. His eyes rose up, following the velvet-lined staircases. His head fell back while his gaze became perpendicular to the chandeliers above. The hushed voices of the opera-goers filled the lobby as bubbles fill champagne, gently floating up into the vaulted space, to collect and commune at the height of the chandeliers. This is when nerves set in. Like a nausea never felt, he clutched his stomach. His shoulder blades touched and he brought his head back down, to set his eyes on the ground and find his balance. He spotted a luxurious sofa-like chair. He sat in it. The dresses and jewels walked past him, nearly waltzing. The suits and heavy trench coats marched, with their clean hands—clean of Cobalt; clean of want. This reminded him to hide his hands. He was in a thrifted sportcoat and trousers that were unmatching shades of brown, with scuffed shoes and frayed laces. He feared they would find out of this imposter, this beggar-man unfit. He retrieved his ticket from his coat pocket and stared down at it in awe.

Orchestra; Row R; Seat 110
Price: \$0.00 (complimentary)

He would not have to climb any of those velvet-lined staircases that constructed the lobby; his seat for the evening was on the floor of the house, in the premium section just near the orchestra pit. Depending on the soprano, premium seats like this could sell for upwards of \$500 each. He gulped and put his ticket back in his pocket. Just then, a wealthy man in a sleek black coat sat down next to him—quickly. He had a small boy with him, in an outfit that could pay the full tuition of a needy art student. The boy put his shiny shoe up on his father’s knee who began to tie up the laces with haste. The boy held the program for the opera in his small, curious hands, looking at the pictures with a furrowed brow.

“So...” he began in a high, raspy voice, “this play is about a bunch of talking fish?”

“No, Simon. Firstly, this is an opera, not a play. You know the difference.” His father had an English accent. “Operas are all-singing, plays are just speaking, and musicals are?...”

“Musicals are both.”

“Very good. Secondly, it’s about *Rusalka*, see the title, *Rusalka*. This is a Czech opera about a water nymph princess, daughter to Vodník, the King Water Gnome. The story is just like *The Little Mermaid*, and you loved *The Little Mermaid*.”

“Indeed I did,” he said,

“But what is a nymph?”

“It’s a mythological being found near lakes, rivers, and ponds...”

“A talking fish,” he decided with a single nod. “But here at the opera, it’s a *singing* fish.”

“Sure.” The father pulled the laces into a neat bow. “Now, come along, we have to meet your mother inside.”

The painter felt comforted in knowing he wasn’t the only one unfamiliar with the plot of *Rusalka*, although little Simon could not have been older than seven. Alas, the painter collected himself, took a deep breath, and stood up to walk into the house. At some point, he knew he had to own it, he had to hold his shoulders back, keep his chin up, and believe he belonged there, regardless of his oversized coat and blue fingers. The usher inspected his ticket and led him through the rows. He found his seat, dwarfed by the stage in front of him; the enormous wall of gold that was the Metropolitan Opera curtain.

The overture felt like a bath; a dark, womb-like bath that he never wanted to leave. A bath that one could completely stretch themselves out in. No walls, no having to curl your legs beneath you—just warmth and plenty of space to relax, to be intoxicated in; to float in. The rose-scented suds pillowed, while the orchestra seduced. He never closed his eyes, but it restored him as the deepest slumber would. The stage was the dream he dreamt, while the soprano was the muse. There she stood, *Rusalka*, in her dark colors, clutched to a tree, while an enormous moon slowly passed along the backdrop. She lived in her meadow near the lake, with her water nymph companions. They splashed and played in the pools of silver moonbeam puddles. She sang an aria of longing, a prayer to the moon, *Mesicku na nebi hlubokém*. The painter watched her neck and her

arms, from the distance of Row R, and he reminisced, smiling upon the memory. *Andèla*, raptured in beauty. *Andèla*, with the spirit of wine within. *Andèla*, his muse for only but mere hours.

It was a week ago that she sat for him. Although it wasn’t any less winter than it was now, the memory of painting her felt like the height of spring. She came all the way to his studio in Brooklyn, wearing a decadent bear fur—from her native Russia—on her fair, winter-clad skin. She sat perfectly still, staring at him darkly. Her hair was black and her eyes were grey.

“Scuse me,” she began to say after the first hour, in a savory accent. He looked up from his canvas and listened, enamored. “D’you know opera?”

“Opera?” he didn’t know what she meant. “Like the Met? Yeah, I’ve heard of it. I’ve never been, but I’ve seen pictures... beautiful place.”

“Yes...” she said, thinking; sorting through her broken English. “At Met, soprano sing over full orchestra all de way to back house. Dou know how far da is? From stage to back row...”

“How far?”

“One city block.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No.”

“That’s incredible!”

“No mic.”

“There are no microphones in opera? You mean to tell me they don’t hide it under a wig?”

“Never!” she laughed; her diamond earrings rattled.

“If use mic, no opera.”

“And they sing over a full orchestra, you said?”

“Yes...” She repositioned herself and looked back at him, they were both silent thereafter. What an odd thing to say, yet it somehow made sense. She seemed like the opera-goer type. He received a bright red envelope in the mail the next day with a note that read:

Mr. Charles Landon,

World-class soprano, Andèla Vasilieva, whom with you presumably spent yesterday afternoon, has personally invited you to her performance as the title role in Dvořák’s “Rusalka” on Saturday, February 24, at the Metropolitan Opera House. The ticket is enclosed, and she wishes to see you backstage after her performance.

Good Day.

-Patrick Babann (on behalf of Andèla Vasilieva)

It was something like a Cinderella story—an invitation to some fantastical ball he was no more prepared for than the mice themselves. Captivated by this *Andèla* creature, no other painting he worked on improved. Why did she, a world-class soprano, drop everything she had to do to have her portrait painted... by him? How did she even know who he was? Had she seen one of his ads on the street? She came so humbly, too. Perhaps she wanted to escape the pressure. As he leaned against the wall with the red envelope in hand, dazed, he imagined the rehearsal where she had been absent. The conductor waiting for her to enter, giving her cue multiple times, and her never taking the stage. For she, *Andèla Vasilieva*, was in a

dingy Brooklyn studio having her portrait painted by Charles Landon, a world-famous nothing.

Upon the final touchups, he had her portrait sent to the Manhattan address she gave him but was never sure if she got it or not. He assumed she was far too busy to let him know. The whole week floated on and Saturday came. He had to attend the opera now, not out of wish, but out of Romantic obligation. It was a duty now, to meet her backstage; to bless the back of her hand with a kiss and bring not a bouquet, for an Artist's gift was made without money.

The applause that filled the opera house was comparable to a jet engine. The flowers rained down on her and she bowed like some mighty heroine, having slain every ear in the house with her vocal chords alone. No mic. The artist sprung to his feet and howled the greatest *brava!*, along with every other man under *Andèla's* spell. Eventually, the golden wall reinstated its position. The lights came up. The audience was abuzz. The bath was drained. They slowly diffused into the lobby. The artist spotted the man from earlier, carrying a sleeping Simon whose head slouched on his shoulder. The boy preferred Broadway's *The Little Mermaid*.

The artist followed his heart to the backstage corridor. He entered without hesitation. No one was there to stop him. He ventured, without restraint, into the catacombs of the Metropolitan Opera House. He passed by villages of props and costumes, dormant in their dust. A population was equally as active behind

the curtain as they were in the lobby. Dancers, directors, builders, all manner of people working to maintain the ancient spirit of opera. He found her door, or rather it found him. *Andèla Vasilieva* read the golden nameplate. He could hear a party within, the door was ajar. He pushed on it.

"It's Boy!" she cried, running to him with extended arms. The others in the room followed her pink robe with their eyes as she tackled the artist with a hug. Her face was dark with makeup and her voice was thoroughly worked, but not near exhaustion; in its most enlightened state; having reached nirvana. She brought him in and put a glass in his hand. With a pale pink lipstick mark on his cheek, he smiled, nodding at the entourage of foreign opera gods who spoke anything but English. The King Water Gnome stood there, with dark eyeliner and a greenish beard. As well as the sea witch, *Jezebaba*, looking sinister with her milky eyes, disguised by color contacts. The nymphs sighed and spoke in whispery Russian upon the rose-laden sofa; a mound of blooms collected on one end. And there, crest upon the mound, the artist saw his painting. Enthroned, like a shrine, *Andèla's* face stared back at him yet again. In this blushed light, the painting glowed. His heart stopped.

"He painted it!" she said to her crew, pointing at the canvas. They burst into accented praises, clapping and sighing at the work. "You paint all my friends! I pay you," she said, holding him by the shoulders, laughing operatically. How was it that *he* was the one receiving praise?

"You all were absolutely incredible!" he said, failing to communicate such things he felt, especially in his American English. They all laughed and bowed lightly, thinking he was something cute. She even had nicknamed him *Boy*, apparently. "Thank you so much for having me come tonight, *Miss Vasilieva*."

"*Miss Vasilieva?*" She was disgusted, "No, no. *Andèla! Andèla Divina!*"

"She likes to be called *Andèla Divina* after a show," the witch explained, who seemed to be an American—a legend in her own right, to a degree the artist would never know. He nodded.

"In that case." He took her hand, "*Andèla Divina*, you know not of your powers." There was nothing that was going to stop him at this point. He raised her hand up to his lips and kissed it daringly. "Brava... and thank you." She gasped like a child, hugging his neck tightly.

He could not sleep. So much money had floated around him that evening—more money than he could comprehend; a millionaire here, a millionaire there. He was so close, yet so incredibly far. As he laid in his bed, the NYPD sirens rang out through the city, much less preferred to the brasses of the orchestra. He gazed at his ceiling, smiling dumbly. He was paralyzed, a boy again, just a freezing body warmed by the memory of her laugh alone. How was he supposed to carry on? How was he to rise and live the life he presently lived? Perhaps the roach which crawled across the floor would remind him in the morning, but, while the

moonlit snow still reigned, he only wished to dream of *Andèla Divina*.

Stolen Africans- Not Machine

JMC

Stolen Africans
Barred from ancestral realms
Became the Black Americans of today
Only to struggle in the country their mothers built
Without the mother, one must become the parent of change
Then, if nurtured with power and pride, will the child Freedom be born
However, the creation of one Freedom bringer cannot unchain a people
It takes Culture, Action, Progression, and the strongest Will
Writers, Protestors, Businessmen, Policy Makers
They take the burden of the mortal parents
For the Black American is Human
Not Machine



Barcode Prison Cell, B.T. Kilgore

You'll Always Drown
by Ethan Wood

The sound of running water wakes the man up. He doesn't remember getting in the bathtub. He doesn't remember anything before the sound of running water. Pooling at his feet, the lukewarm water starts to work its way up to the man's calves. He stands, steps out of the tub, and takes a moment to look around this room he's found himself in. Aside from the rather large bathtub, the room has a shower and a countertop with two sinks, above which there's nothing but empty wall space. On the wall opposite the countertop stands a door, slightly ajar. The man takes a look back at the bathtub, the water still rising, and, more out of instinct than concern, turns the knobs on either side of the faucet; the water doesn't stop running. At this, the man gives the room one more once-over then pushes the door open.

Tracking wet footprints on the hardwood floor, the man enters a large bedroom decorated with a few paintings of landscapes the man didn't know and two sets of closed curtains, shrouding the large windows behind them. In the center lay a king size bed, nightstands on either side. The one on the right holds only a lamp, while sitting on the left-side nightstand is a paperback novel, the front cover curving upwards, a pair of round glasses, and a picture frame.

The man picks up the frame and looks at the couple frozen in time. One of them has a thick, auburn-colored beard. Dark curls poke out from beneath his beanie, and a soft smile lightens his face. The man can't make out the face of the other person in the photo because their

head is nuzzled into the shoulder of their burly counterpart. They're standing, bundled up in warm clothes and holding each other, a beautiful, snowy vista behind them. The photo nudges something inside the man. He becomes aware of the slight warmth radiating in his chest, but he doesn't know what to think of it and replaces the picture frame on the nightstand. Walking past the dresser that sits across from the end of the bed, the man notices a few more pictures of the couple, but even in the other pictures the only face visible is that of the bearded man. The other's face is always turned away from the camera. Also on the dresser are pictures of two cats, one orange, the other a calico, mostly white. The warm feeling in the man's chest grows a little more, and a small, slight smile appears on the man's face.

The bedroom opens out into the center of a small, branching hallway. On one end lay the guest bedroom and bathroom. On the other end is the door to the study, but it's the living room directly across from the bedroom door that catches the man's eye. Or rather, the piano that stands against the wall. It's an antique, upright piano that's clearly been well taken care of despite its age. Walking towards the instrument, the warmth in the man's chest hums, and yet, the closer he gets, a slight feeling of apprehension bites at the edges of the warmth. Understanding neither feeling but trusting the former, the man slides onto the piano bench with a familiar ease. He sits there for moment and notices how the piano seems to be pulling at him, begging to be touched, to

be allowed to sing again. Without thinking, his hands rest gently the keys. A slight tremble ripples from the tips of his fingers and down into his arms. Taking a deep breath, he uses the middle finger on his right hand and presses a key. The note rings out, full, clear, and warm. Then the man plays.

He plays the music that lived inside him for years. It ebbs and flows with each delicate note. Crescendos, decrescendos. Rises, falls. All with a rubato that can't be followed but feels so right. There's not a thought in the man's head. His mind and body are one with the piano now, linked in a perfect harmony that can't be—

A wrong note breaks the trance. The man stops playing, looks at the black and white keys, and tries the musical phrase again. He gets back into the flow of the piece until, again, a wrong note. The same one as before. The man takes a moment to breathe, resets his hands, and tries again. This time his fingers fail to cross over when they need to before even getting to the wrong note. The pleasant warmth in his chest starts to climb in temperature. He tries again. Wrong. And again. Another new mistake. The more he tries, the messier it gets, and the warmth, now a wildfire, is too much for his body to handle. With one final mistake, he slams his fists down onto the keys and stands from the bench with a huff. Still fuming, it takes him a moment to notice the water covering his ankles and the heavy fog that presses against the windows in the living room. The entire floor is now covered in a few inches of water. The man walks, water sloshing at his feet, back into the

bathroom where he woke up and sees water pouring not only from the bathtub, but from the two sinks as well, adding to the growing flood. He again tries to turn the water off, but it's of no use. No matter what he does, the water doesn't stop. Both the fire and the warmth that occupied his chest are now completely gone, leaving only simmering embers that threatened to die at any moment.

Coming out into the hallway again, the man hears scratching, accompanied with light meows, coming from behind the door to the study. The embers in the man's chest flare a bit, bringing back a note of the nice warmth. He opens the door and finds the two cats from the photos sitting at the door, water up to their necks, seemingly unphased. They look up at him and meow simultaneously. Despite the peculiarity, the man kneels down and pets each of them, purrs growing louder in volume. The cats turn and dart up a three-tier cat tree nestled in the corner of the study. They lay their wet bodies down at the top, and, curled into one another, close their eyes.

The man walks further into the study. There are filled floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on each side, and at the back of the room, facing a large window, sits a wooden desk with an open laptop staring back at the man. Something inside him tells him he wants to avoid the laptop for right now, so instead he peruses the bookshelves scanning over the many titles and various authors, nothing really speaking to him until his eyes land on one book—well, multiple copies of one book: *You'll Always Drown* by Isaac Taylor. The book

has its own shelves dedicated to it. One shelf with copies of the book in various translations and the other shelf adorned with many “Book of the Year” and finalist plaques and trophies sitting on it. He picks up a copy of the book and rifles through, a feeling of resentment growing inside him. He turns to the back cover of the book and is surprised to see a man from the couple, the one whose face was always hidden. The man stares at the small portrait, noticing the dark blonde hair, the gray eyes, and the wide smile beaming up at him. This picture, the person in it, irks the man. Feelings of familiarity and total disconnect swirl around inside him. What he doesn't notice rising is the pure resentment as he reads the blurb written under the portrait:

“Isaac Taylor lives in Seattle, WA with his husband and two cats. You'll Always Drown, national bestseller and winner of many finalist and Book of the Year awards, is his first novel.”

The man drops the book in the water, which now rests at his thighs. Then he throws every book and trophy across the study. They collide with the bookshelves, walls, and window then sink into the water. The cats watch from their perch, still unbothered. It's in the midst of his anger that he hears a ding from the laptop sitting at the desk. Breathing hard, coming down from the sudden fit of rage, the man trudges through the water and towards the laptop. It's a mess of open documents full of half-baked stories and emails from an agent demanding a new manuscript. The man's eyes grab on multiple phrases:

“...dying for something new...”
“...How was the retreat? Any pages I can send...”
“...been SEVEN YEARS...”
“...publisher has decided to drop you...”

The man slams the laptop shut, leaving it fully submerged in the water that was now above the desk. Inside him, the fire dies out. No warmth remains, only cool ash, and now Isaac remembers. He remembers the pain. Feels it now. The pain of pressure. The pain of success, how temporary it is. It's an ongoing cycle, or at least, it was.

Sitting at the desk, water up to his chin, Isaac lets the pain well up inside him, seeping from a wound he doesn't know how to close, or if he wants to close it. He doesn't know what to do with the pain, so he lets the water rise around him, letting his tears contribute to the flood. He won't subject himself to any more pain.

Just as the water starts to cover his ears, he hears the front door open. He wouldn't have gotten up if it weren't for the voice, one so familiar, that ripples through the water, calling his name.

The water is rising fast. Only Isaac's head is above the water when he stands and makes his way, practically swimming now, out of the study. He notices the cats still laying in their tree, unbothered. When he reaches the hallway, he can just barely keep his nose above the water as he presses his head against the ceiling. Over the thin layer of air that is left, he hears the voice call out to him again. Taking one last breath,

the man pushes off the ceiling and ducks down into the water. Reaching the threshold of the living room Isaac sees him. His husband, Darren. The warmth comes alive in his chest, brighter than ever before. Darren is smiling at him, standing by the front door, waiting for Isaac to join him.

Isaac's lungs ache. He kicks and swims as hard as he can, getting closer and closer to the man he had known true love with. The one who was always there to comfort him at his weakest, who knew him before the novel, before it swallowed him. The person the man thought he didn't deserve. Isaac wishes he could've kept Darren away from the wells of pain, but they had started to pour over. He wanted to keep Darren away from it, thought he'd be better off. He won't let himself make the same mistake again.

Isaac uses the last of his oxygen to surge forward. He is so close to grazing Darren's skin with his fingertips. Even that smallest contact is enough to fight for. Looking at his husband. His husband looking back at him.

"You left me," Darren says and walks out the front door, disappearing into the fog. *I know. I'm sorry*, Isaac thinks as he closes his eyes.

A moment later, the man wakes to the sound of running water.

Apostate

Charity Morrison

they didn't fall away.

not like that. not
in the dusty thirst of gasping heat,
consumed by the predacious,
asphyxiated in the catatonic stupor
of burning drought.

not until the rain ran cold, drenching full boughs
in black precipitation,
silently chilling lifeblood stagnant in each vein.
turbulent air swirling, and they drift,
gently tattered.
now they lie
askew, dying in color.

above, an azure firmament,
refracted by the distant winter sun,
gleams cold in the stillness.

I Write for Capitalist Stomachs

JMC

People mistake my writing for a passion,
instead of a hobby I've turned into my life.

Our world is too crowded for odd shapes,
either you stick to your box,
or get thrown out with the misshapen fruits,
regardless of your sweetness.

They'll press you for every drop of blood, sweat,
tears, happiness, sanity.
Or pulp if we're still with the fruit metaphor.

The rest of us get put on display,
as if our success wasn't the luck of our surroundings.

A degree is nothing more than an "ORGANIC"
sticker, it speaks little of your taste,
just how expensive you are.
I would know, I have one.

We're bought by those who can afford us,
and rot if we're taking too long to be sold
We spend thousands for this sticker,
waiting for the day we get eaten,
by Bezos, Zuck, Musk, or Gates.

I Write For Capitalist Stomachs,
in hopes they eat my words,
and not bite my hand in the process.
They'd make me feed them without fingers
anyway. It's no wonder I have no passion,
for something that'll only keep me alive for
so long.



Bliss, Ainsley Smith

*The Story Behind
Our Smile*
Nneoma Imo

It takes more muscles to frown than to smile. I wonder if the simplicity of it is what makes it the perfect mask for a lie. I knew a man who flashed bright smiles. I always envied him as I wanted to smile just like he did. His smile was like no other, filled with glee like he walked on clouds. His demeanor revealed no holes. Even on the brightest of days no shadows appeared, he looked as though only angels knocked at his door. I had caught his stare quite a few times, but they never lasted too long. It seemed almost as if he was hiding, what or from who? But here in this moment as the rain cascaded down our faces I wondered where has the boy of my envy gone?

Only but minutes ago, I was running: red eyes and a tear-stained face, but here I stood unable to move within a chaos that wasn't even mine, and it all began with a face I once envied for a smile. He stood in front of me, his lips cracked as the blood trickled to the edge of his mouth, his collar tinted. Slightly, his eyes had turned my way, but that was enough to glimpse the red lines that stretched across his eyes and the dark circles that shadowed under it. I felt the wind, caressed in a scent I knew too well, perspiration, pass me under the shadow of his gaze. I turned around to ascertain if this sad, tear-stained, bruised boy was the same image I gawked at with envy. Was this that same boy?

It was cloudy that day, as if the world had anticipated the mood. The skies were as grey as the countenance of the boy who just slid past me. I turned around, still in question, and to my

surprise there he stood, his back to my front and his raven black hair dangling under the weight of the rain. I stood there aware of the rain that fell on me, unaware of the time that drew closer to me, but completely drawn in by the story that unfolded. A part of me wanted to run up to him, hold his hand, and listen to his struggles. But a sick and twisted part of me found joy in knowing someone's pain was deeper than my own. And so there I stood, watching him as he picked up his feet and ran. Only for a mere second did I reflect on my current struggles, only for a mere second was I set on running back home, and only for a mere second did the idea of confrontation lubricate my mind, but in that mere second, I met eye-to-eye a woman.

She seemed lost, her portrait, a canvas. She lit a cigarette, but it seemed her thoughts prevailed as she didn't smoke it but rather watched the ashes fall and the smoke rise. Her face was bruised, but she didn't show it. Her lips were dry, if not for the red succulent that flowed beside it. Her eyes looked as though she had given up on tears a long time ago and so she let the sky and the bud she held do it for her. I watched her deep in thought as she stared down at the cigarette. Her eyes seemed to reflect a wish, a guilty desire, for the cigarette to somehow light up and take her along with her tormentor down to the gates of hell, where she could, with little hesitation, push them into the infernos. Her thoughts seemed to be so potent in nature as she failed to notice a man slip from the back.

This man, I could tell like the others,

held a pain in his heart, one that hid behind a bad drinking habit, and seemed to have found its outlet in her canvas. He swayed back and forth stumbling with each step. I watched him as he suddenly turned his head to meet my gaze. He looked me in the eye for 5 seconds before his shoulders, like his will, dropped. His eyes met the ground and from the sides of his face, I could see his lip part. And though I couldn't hear what was said, his demeanor, which held some form of remorse, as late as it may have been, spoke. Dragging his feet but still glued to the ground, as though in question, he pulled out from behind what I had failed to notice before, as a shot rang out on that cold and rainy day.

There I stood, as my feet remained glued to the ground but feeling slight signs of someone's approach, I turned and was met by the boy which I envied. His head turned towards me but didn't stay too long, as if to ascertain some stance he still held above me. He turned to his father who lay lifeless, his blood swirling with the water below, and whispered a sentence. I couldn't tell if he cried or if he let the rain do it for him, as his cheeks were stained with moisture but none of it seemed to reflect his image. I turned to the woman to gauge any emotion but was met with a shadow marked with uncertainty. Was she to mourn or celebrate?

Behind me the sound of murmuring began to grow alongside the sound of sirens that drew near. Quickly, the whispers turned to talk, getting louder with each second the body met decay, as their eyes gazed at the spectacle before them.

Heads turning back and forth, lips protruding as though they knew it all, as I heard one speak of how she had seen it all coming. But there I stood within a chaos that was not even mine, between 2 puzzles and a lifeless body. There I stood, pondering: why had I ever envied his smile, why couldn't I see the mirror that faced me this whole time? But slowly a thought sounding louder than before came: "I should keep running."

But wait there's another half.

My mother always tells me little quotes of which she heard her mother say and one I could for certain remember was as quoted, "there are 3 significant shades, the shade you want to be, the shade others want you to be, and a hidden shade." At the end she always reasserted the 3 can without each other be but never should they mix. But as I watched her, my mother's warnings came bursting to life, which is why I always found her strange. It appears months of existing between life and death had done nothing but ascertain her irregular beliefs. I watched her smile, but there was a problem, the problem of a smile. That smile, to so many seemed as though it was filled with sincerity but to me it lacked authenticity, but one, and even that was hard to find. Her eyes looked as though they hid no lie, but her lips told a different story. And even though she laughed mindfully I wondered whether her heart was there fully.

She drew in crowds and was easy to engage with, a conversation starter who looked introverted but was quite the

opposite.

She drew in crowds and was easy to engage with, a conversation starter who looked introverted but was quite the opposite. I was completely drawn in by her demeanor as in a weird way she seemed to resemble me. I can't tell if she's good at lying or just unaware of it, 'cause for a moment even I was fooled to the point where I questioned who was being fooled and who was doing the fooling. I would watch her walk around as though the whole world were behind her, and suddenly our eyes would meet as though for the first time in hundreds. Which shade, I'd wonder, was she putting on today as she peered into my soul and I hers too. And in a moment's notice to avoid the other digging too deep, we'd shake it off. Then with a smile, a bit too fake and I think she knows it, she'd continue as though we'd never met, soul for soul, and yet she doesn't know me. But I know her 'cause I know me.

How she completely fooled the world, and herself, I could tell was no easy task, as she made many believe she was this, and others see her as that, and saw herself as it. All who gazed at her either wanted her or sought to be her, they failed to see the smile she gave when disaster would strike and then her name would be nowhere to be found. Surrounded by company, a smile on my face, I could feel her stare as it burned down my back. I could feel her questions radiating, but unlike her my demons walked about clear, at least in my eyes, which is why she would quickly avert her eyes, her questions diminished.

Again, I found myself completely entranced, but not by her beauty which many would say it is. This time when she caught me glaring, hands on my cheeks, resting in a fixed posture, eyes in question, and lips ajar, she failed to smile as her eyes in a second left mine and landed on those who adorned her and lifted her high. But for a mere second, I swear I saw a golden brown dipped in a hint of reality. And at this sight I couldn't help but smile, maybe she's on to me or rather herself. She was a little gift I watched from time to time, she made me sigh and she made me laugh but she also made me realize how sad it is to not know oneself.

But it's funny as how I had watched her and now, she saw me, my already shattered life breaking into thinner pieces. I wonder which shade is watching. "At least I still know myself more than she does, right?"



The World, Ainsley Smith

The Day Scars Turn Into Roses

Katie Norris

Maybe the dead are lucky,
Smarter than us in the sense—
As we close our eyes in remorse,
their spirit transcends, souls flushed open
wide—

like windows, the hurricane pushes through.
Glass shattering everywhere, leaving ribbons
of crimson on our flesh
The foundation in our home chipping at
your walls,
cracked but finally stopped and resonated.

The decrescendo of your heart still resides,
in that old house.
Phantoms of past storms strike through,
while they are a remembrance—

for an angry sheltered teen— a selfish but
scared child,
We had to stare Death in the eyes, eyes that
reflected You.
He took pieces of you each year, your
warmth, your hair
till there was nothing left but a monster.

Grief is in the shape of the paintbrush,
swirling shades of cerulean oceans,
cascading into the deepest gorges of mauve.
You always looked beautiful in purple.

It's funny how mortality steals the precious
memories,
the Sundays when you were in a good mood.
The sleepy
mornings when gentle fingers would caress
my spine.
We Remember You.

Years after the storms,
I walked those stages expecting you to be
there.
I hope you're looking down, a witness
to the scars you've left, blossoming into roses
on my skin.

I never told you how much I loved you.

Untitled (Joan), Paige Sanders



The House Across the Street
Neeve Robinson

The moonlight washed heavily over Leigh's face, turning his eyes already riddled with cataracts, a cloudier milk color ready to curdle. He fingered the curtains soiled with cigarette smoke and moth holes, opening them slightly wider to glance at the house across the street. From the exterior, it appeared to be like any other house; the bricks crumbling red with age, an orange glow emitting from the glazed windows, and paint peeling from the front door like sunburnt skin. Yet Leigh was certain that the inhabitant of this house was anything but normal. He'd been building his case for many weeks and had concluded that the woman who lived across the street was in fact an extraterrestrial. A creature who every night after leaving biscuits out for the stray cat, would go upstairs and explode out of her skin. Leigh was adamant that the creature would fling her human disguise like a meat sack to the corner of the room, as green tentacles dripping a gelatinous gunge ruptured from her back.

Tonight, the moon's light glinted off her skin in a way that reminded Leigh of the pearly iridescence of reptilian scales. Clotted mud and strings of sticky weed were plastered to her faded dungarees, as she tenderly replanted a patch of azaleas in her front garden. One of her hands rested in a soiled cast decorated with sloppy handwriting saying, 'Get Well Soon Grandma'. She wiped the clamminess from her forehead and smeared a streak of soil across it in the process.

The woman noticed the stream of light meandering from Leigh's open curtain and waved jollily in his direction.

Leigh quickly pulled the curtains tightly together and held his breath until he could see shapes swimming within the grey fabric. He knew the moon had given away his position. It was too bright tonight and had been staring directly at him, communicating with his alien neighbor that she was being watched. The moon was her accomplice, a mottled shadowland of craters and volcanoes coughing with chalky dust. Her homeland. When he was younger, Leigh suspected that the moon was suspended on a cord that could swing like the pendulum of a clock, now he believed that it was hooked to a silvery fishing line that something would reel up and down every 24 hours, likely creatures from a further out planet.

It had been several months since he'd last witnessed anything peculiar across the street, but Leigh was accustomed to spotting these sorts of enemies, he'd been doing it since his own father had been taken from him when he was a child. Leigh had been only six years old when his father had been taken. Abducted. His mother had refused to fill out a police report after saying it would be useless, Space wasn't covered by the local town's jurisdiction. His mother had told him that his father had been walking home slightly drunk from the local bar, using the cornfields to guide him, when a bright light trapped him in a gluey bubble and levitated him up into a metallic saucer. The only thing that remained was the swaying of corn husks in the sugary night air. She'd even thrown all his clothes out in towering cardboard boxes in the front

garden, Leigh assumed because it had been too painful to look at them.

Leigh had told everybody at school the next day that his father had been abducted by aliens, but he was only met with cruel taunting and disbelief. This hadn't deterred him from exposing the truth. Even now, his body was tangled within an intricate spider's web of string that crisscrossed over his bedroom. Lines stretched from one wall to the other, linking pictures and maps, connecting small notes written in messy scrawl to diagrams and symbols. Question marks written in thick marker on post-it notes peppered the walls like a scattering of freckles across cheeks. A stack of files detailing every reported alien abduction within the last 60 years lay sprawled across the bed, pages dangling off the quilt. He knew that knowledge was power, and his wielding of it frightened the extraterrestrials, which is why they'd sent an infiltrator to live across the street from him. Within this proximity, his alien neighbor could successfully eliminate him, not that Leigh had ever given her the chance. She'd tried on multiple occasions to kill or sedate him with the intentions of slicing his body open and twirling his insides around like spaghetti on a fork, just like they'd done to his father.

Only a couple of days ago, Leigh had discovered a tin of home-baked butter shortbread outside his door. A small card was attached to the lid saying 'Enjoy your day' with her initials printed like a symbol of the occult underneath. Leigh had refused to open the door when she'd knocked, instructing her to throw the

biscuits into a black hole where they could be enjoyed by her mutant friends. When Leigh had eventually opened the door, his neighbor was nowhere to be seen, just a muted red tin gleaming suspiciously in the fading sunset. Leigh had wrapped his hands in a tartan kitchen towel before opening the tin. He was fearful of the lunar dust she'd surely wiped onto the lid, that would transform his fingers into a landscape of pearly blisters glowing like small stars beneath the skin.

He vigorously kicked the tin over, making the shortbread scatter across his front porch, where it still remains. An oily mess smeared across the stone from heavy rainfall and buzzing with ants carrying crumbs back to their nests. Leigh dreaded to think what the effect would be on the ants. They'd probably bloat until they were blowing like tumbleweeds across his garden, but that problem would have to wait. He had plenty of needles ready to deflate them with if necessary. Now he had to deal with whoever was knocking at his door.

The knocks were loud and purposeful, bruising the areas they rebounded off as they traveled deep into the house. He refused to turn the light on as he trundled into the kitchen and saw the fuzzy silhouette of somebody standing through the door's glass pane. He tiptoed over to the kitchen cabinet beneath the sink and pulled out a small hammer, wiping his clammy hands over his shirt heavy with wrinkles like a scrunched-up nose.

So, this is how it will end. My moment has finally arrived. Leigh stowed the hammer under the elastic band of his

trousers and strode towards the door. The figure knocked impatiently before Leigh could open it.

"Dad?"

Leigh quickly reached for the hammer in his trouser band and threw it into the overcrowded kitchen bin where it landed with a squelch amongst courgette shavings and carrot mulch. The lines around his eyes wrinkled deeply and he couldn't help his feet doing a small celebratory dance, momentarily forgetting that he'd sprained his ankle only yesterday.

"Hang on Dylan, just one minute," Leigh replied. His fingers thick with arthritis struggled to retract the multiple chain locks that adorned the door. He reached up to the fridge and rubbed his fingers along its top, causing slabs of dust to fall heavily on him. Eventually, his fingers clawed around the handle of a spindly key. "Come inside," Leigh said once he'd managed to fit the key in the lock.

His hands searched desperately for the cotton sleeve of Dylan's camisole, pulling him in for a tight embrace. He suspected that the aliens would target Dylan next, wanting to extract the same treasure that they'd carved out of his father. There was something valuable lurking in their lineage, which is why they'd picked his father in the first place, and why Dylan needed to be protected at all costs. Leigh gently pulled Dylan further into the house, but he refused to step over the front porch.

"What is this doing here?" Dylan moaned, pointing towards the oily spoils of the shortbread that had been flattened

by a size 9 shoe.

"Nothing for you to worry about." Leigh tugged on Dylan's shirt harder as his eyes scanned the garden, expecting to see the luminous visage of his neighbor glaring back.

"But Dad, I really do worry about you," Dylan sighed, finally succumbing to his father's wishes, and stepping into the kitchen.

Leigh exhaled the breath he'd been storing and slammed the door harshly, causing clumps of dust to shake off the hinges and settle to the floor. Dylan coughed sorely as the dust congested in his inflamed throat.

"I didn't think you'd be here until next Thursday when we scheduled. Missing your old man, are you?" Leigh asked, trundling towards the kettle and rusted teabag canister. He pulled out a couple of musty bags with a coiled hair attached to them.

Dylan hovered by the front door, one hand drumming on the counter, the other one lingering on the door handle. "Everything's fine. There was just—just something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh er, sounds serious, just give me a minute to sit down, these legs aren't what they use to be, especially when in the proximity of an alien."

Dylan looked awkwardly around the kitchen. "You can't keep on calling Mrs. Lavine an alien, we've been over this so many times. It's just rude."

Leigh frowned, the naivety of his son when it came to the alien neighbor never failed to surprise him. Dylan was usually a fantastic judge of character, and

Leigh trusted his son's judgment blindly, which was why he couldn't understand why Dylan chose to ignore the malicious disposition stewing beneath her skin. Why couldn't Dylan see the face of the enemy as he did?

"Dylan, I know what I'm doing. Have some trust in your father."

Dylan scraped his fingers firmly through his hair until it looked like he was going to rub his scalp off. "You need to leave her alone. She's already called the police twice on you. They said if it happens again you'll get taken in. I can't be dealing with this; I'm so stressed with work and—"

"Dylan, you don't need to worry about it. I've got everything under control. Such a shame though how a once-mighty service has fallen into cahoots with extraterrestrials, I suspect some sort of mind manipulation or probing, that must—"

"Dad, look I came here because you need to have a look through these." Dylan leaned down to rummage in the plastic bag on the floor and pulled out some flimsy booklets in garishly bright colors. Dylan offered them to his father.

Leigh recognized the booklets' wrinkled corners, like somebody had struggled to decide which ones were worth marking. The top booklet had an image of a young couple with disturbingly stretched smiles waving farewell to an elderly woman being wheeled into a building.

"I've told you no—"

"Dad, please just have another look through them, you don't need to decide

anything today."

"I've told you before, I am not being pushed into some crusty nursing home. I would much rather die in my own bed."

Leigh couldn't stand the prospect of being surrounded by people who couldn't string two sentences together, their memories leaking out of their orifices and coiling into long lines that his grandchildren could use as skipping lines and the staff would be even worse. They'd be incapable of giving him everything he could already give himself.

"It would make me a sitting duck for the aliens."

Leigh knew that the aliens would sneak into the home, likely posing as inept staff members. His body would be discovered in the bathtub with strange symbols inked around the room, and his skin peppered with small incisions from where their needles and probes had entered him. If he died in this place, then he'd never be able to prove to Dylan and the rest of the world that aliens were living amongst them.

"Dad, we really think it'll be the best thing for you," Dylan reasoned.

Leigh's fingers thick with arthritis clawed the undersides of his chair as tightly as the muscles would allow him. The moon winking at him through the open curtains seemed to be shaking like a chest seized with laughter.

"I know this is difficult but we've been talking about this for a while now, and something needs to change. Please just have another think about it," Dylan glanced down at his watch, "Ah shit I

need to get home, it's mine and Justine's anniversary dinner and I need to get the lamb cooking before she gets back from work."

Leigh nodded rigidly, his eyes refusing to connect with Dylan's worried ones. Dylan unpeeled his father's cramped hands from underneath the seat and encased them in his hands like a weathered oyster pearl protected by the shiny shell. He gently kissed them.

"We'll sort something out Dad, I promise." Dylan started to meander back towards the front door, placing the carrier bag with the rest of the brochures on the countertop.

"Hey, wait a second," Leigh hollered. He tumbled off his chair and stretched behind the bread bin, pulling out a yellow envelope thick with food stains and muddy fingerprints. He rifled through the contents and pulled out a £20 note, extending his arm to Dylan.

"Here, treat yourself to something."

"You are aware I'm not ten anymore?"

"Humor an old man."

Dylan hesitantly prized the money out of his father's clawed hand and gently pulled him into a close embrace. "I love you Dad."

Leigh smiled peacefully. "I love you too, son. I know you're just looking out for me."

Leigh didn't want to release his son, but he could only watch as Dylan walked out of the door and into a world where he couldn't protect him from being sucked up into a UFO and taken away forever. A world that wasn't coated in lunar dust where the silence vibrates off every ridge and crater, and the stars gleam like shiny teeth within the mouth of the universe. But one where you only knew you'd

delved too deep into the jaws of a monster when you were being swallowed whole down its gullet and into the perpetual abyss.

The quiet click of the latch bolt settling back into its metal cavern pushed Leigh towards the front door. He bolted the multiple chain locks that adorned the wood as fast as his arthritic fingers would allow. Leigh rested his head against the clammy coldness of the glass pane and sighed deeply, his breath turning to a pearly condensation as it settled on the glass.

A soft murmuring from the other side of the door brought Leigh out of his mangled thoughts. He dropped his ear closer to the keyhole.

"Hi Dylan, it's nice to see you again," a gentle voice that Leigh didn't recognize said.

It had a soothing quality to it that offered him the same comfort that sipping on hot tea when his throat was inflamed with mucus did. Leigh rested his hand on the door handle, with the temptation to unlock the chains brewing intensely.

"Well, if you need anything, just let me know."

"Thank you, Dylan, that's very sweet of you to offer."

"It's no problem, it must be difficult not having your kids nearby."

"It can be challenging at times. After Howard died, they both wanted to come back from Australia, but I said no. They have families out there now, that's where their lives are."

"I understand, but if you ever do need something, you have my number."

"I have your number saved as a priority contact Dylan."

"I almost wish it wasn't," Dylan chuckled uncomfortably.

"Is your dad in? I just wanted to ask for my shortbread tin back."

Beads of sweat erupted along Leigh's forehead that coated him with a sickly sheen. He pushed his ear closer to the keyhole until the cartilage tip started to peek through.

"I'll have a look for it when I come back next week, I don't think he'd remember where he stowed it," Dylan explained.

"Of course, there's no rush. I've just made some banana chip cookies and wanted to bring some more over for him, hopefully, he enjoyed the shortbread."

"Well, he didn't offer me one, so I'd take that as a good sign."

"I'm glad. I don't want things to be awkward between us."

Silence. Leigh glanced down at some of the shortbread crumbs peppered over the mat and mashed them deep into the fibers with his foot.

Dylan spluttered over his words. "Things have been difficult... since mum passed away, he's gotten a lot worse."

"I understand, I know how difficult it is. I just want him to know that there is somebody who understands what he's going through."

"Yes, I am so grateful for you being so understanding and not calling the police last time."

"He's going through a lot, as far as I'm concerned, the police never need be involved again."

"I really do appreciate it, Mrs. Lavine."

Leigh's fingers wrapped around the door handle until they turned a ghoulish white. A sickness churned in his stomach and started bubbling up his throat. Leigh knew he had to rescue his son from the alien's grip, but his presence would only aggravate it more. For Leigh to make his presence known would only put Dylan in a more perilous position. Maybe the best thing Leigh could do for his son was to keep the door shut?

"It's no bother Dylan, and please call me Gwen. Would you pass my best wishes onto your dad when you see him next?"

"Of course, I'll be sure to do that, Gwen."

"Have a good evening, Dylan."

"You too."

Leigh heard the delicate crunch of shoes as the alien retreated to her lair. Dylan remained by the front door for a few seconds, taking some deep breaths before setting off down the gravel pathway. Leigh kept his ear close to the keyhole until he could only hear the wind whistling through in breathy tones. Leigh's brain was swirling chaotically like the red spot ravaging Jupiter's surface. A tornado of indiscernibility was wrecking inside Leigh's brain that made all his thoughts and memories blend into a mass of color and blurriness. Leigh had told his son about the dangers associated with aliens, so why would Dylan purposefully put himself in harm's way?

Leigh stopped breathing. What if Dylan had already been infected?

Leigh wondered if that was why Dylan was so adamant about placing him in the nursing home? Was his own son in cahoots with the enemy? No. It can't be. Their family's DNA was strong. It would take more than an alien to corrupt his lineage. Leigh had looked into his son's eyes only minutes before and seen the love budding there. They didn't reflect the craterous landscape of her shadowland yet.

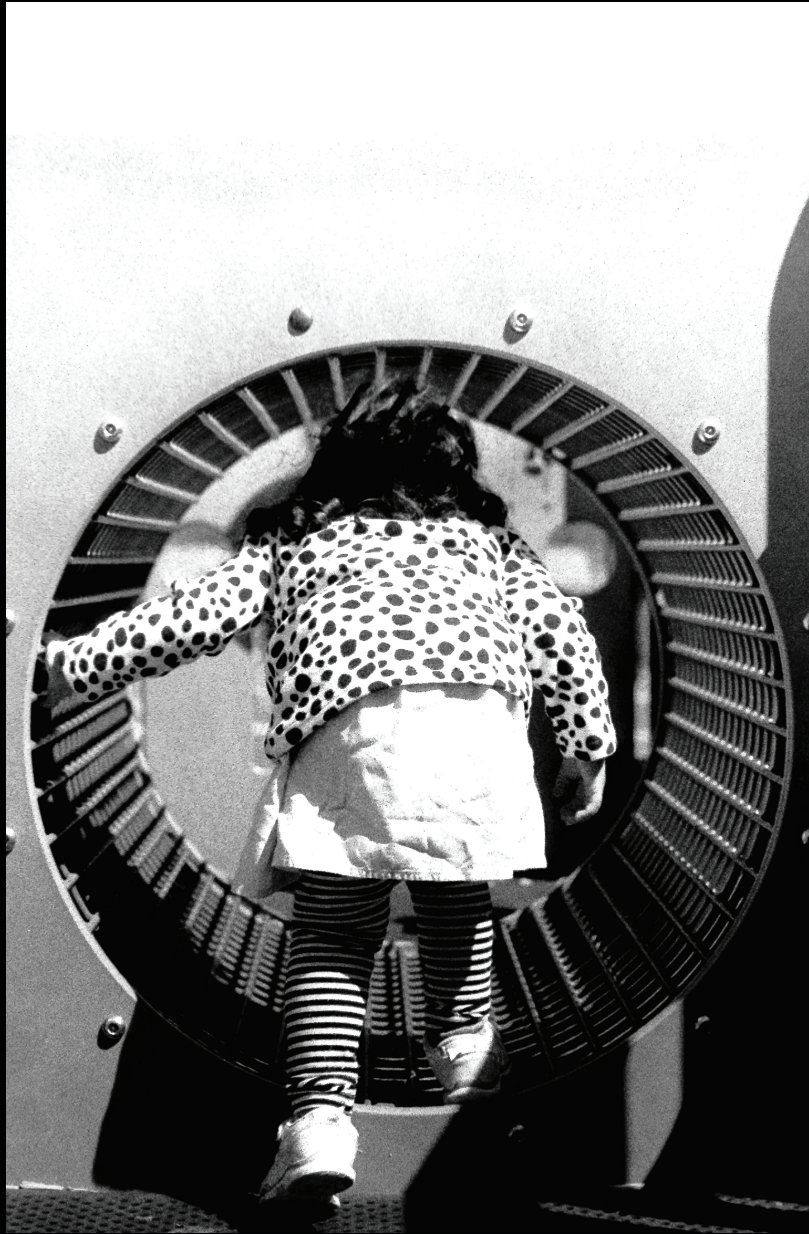
Leigh slowly straightened his back and placed his hand against the wall as he regained his balance. He was angry at his mind for even contemplating that Dylan had been corrupted, his son loved him irrevocably and no extraterrestrial presence could alter that. But Leigh could still not comprehend Dylan's comfort at being in the alien's presence. She was a threat to his existence, and yet he conversed with her like he would a friend. How could he hold a conversation with her and not feel the urge to run? *Because Dylan doesn't view her as a threat.*

Waves of nausea erupted from the depths of Leigh's stomach that made him want to splutter up all the organs in his body. A queasy thought untangled itself from the mass squirming within his mind and crept to the front of his consciousness. *What if Dylan doesn't view her as a threat because she isn't one?* What if his neighbor was not the extraterrestrial he had long suspected? Leigh could not think of another justification for why Dylan would have formed such a friendship with her, especially after Leigh had relayed all his research and findings to Dylan. If she wasn't an alien, then who was the real threat?

Leigh glanced at his reflection in the door's glass pane and saw the distortion of his face gaze back. His head was shaped like a lightbulb radiating a luminous glow, with his bulbous eyes swimming with nebulae and constellations. Leigh turned his head away from the door and shut his eyes tightly until psychedelic patterns swam behind the lids. He waited a few minutes before reopening them, his eyes watering from the dust settling in their moisture.

"There was something I meant to do," he whispered to himself.

He looked around the kitchen and noticed the damp tea bag on the counter with the attached strand of hair beginning to frizz. He shuffled over to the counter and placed the teabag in a stained mug, pouring cold water from the kettle over it. He stumbled back up the stairs, splashing globs of tea onto the carpet, and retreated into the warm embrace of his room where he could continue to monitor the alien across the street in peace.



2021 A Playground Odyssey, Steven Perez

Organic Sedimentary

Will Brooks

I couldn't help it. I looked.
She slithered gracefully across
the surface, smooth like the silk that stuck
to her curves and
I stopped. And whispered,
"Exquisite and magnificent and statuesque."
She was listening. She stared into
my lusty soul with blood eyes
and hissed.
Now, I feel the stone forming within
my feet, rising up through my
ankles, up to my shins, and up
to my knees, and I want to retreat
but I am too petrified to run. My arms,
fall to my side, heavy and solid. I fail
at desperate and futile attempts to lift
them. I shake with a tempestuous futility and
desperation as I try to free myself. Crimson
is the last thing I see as my eyes solidify into
rocks as the world turns black. I try

to scream but I got marbles in my
mouth and nothing comes out
but carbonate. I can't hear myself
anyway. Gravel clogs my ears and
rattles in my head like a baby toy. I was
a delicate infant once. I longed to be
caressed and kissed and held to the breast
of the soft Feminine Power, but
now my skin hardens into igneous granite.
And damn it,
I am petrified
I am the stone
exquisite
magnificent
statuesque
Because I looked.
I couldn't help it.



Overgrown, Paige Sanders

song / remains

Charity Morrison

by the waters of babylon
we sat down and wept
we woke in a land unrecognizable

led by promise of still waters,
now tabled amongst torrid elements,
an arid burial ground of flushed soul swept
by wind and flood and holy fire.

there our captors demanded songs of joy
blithesome as they disregard
the sway of spirit between sea and stern.
the sirens sing of love unbounded but
those waters depths of sunken boulders
can only crush in the end, limb and loam.
be still, be still, be still and know

that to voice those melodies of glorious
facade
is to drink the poison floating just beneath
the surface.
swallowed into groaning lungs,
we listen to the chorus, warped and waning,
wanting, it is the song of home, and i want
to sing.

i will not be lost by the music.

how can we sing the songs of god
in a foreign land?
how can we sing
when our mouths are filled with sand,
a thousand shards of malty rock,
the bread turned into stone?

i weep when i remember you.

how can we sing
when our homeland has been overtaken
with burning words, with sainted officers

wielding rescue in tokens, surrounded by
strange
fire and promise of cleansing?
either our hands are clean and bound
chained in sterile irons of silent decantation,
or else free to remove mountains,
shaking dust,
soil on our fingers and constellations
gleaming on the brow. i am repeating
in sobs and psalm and perspiration.

how can we sing?
how can we not sing?

my tongue clings to the roof of my mouth,
but i did not forget you. my highest joy of
hope unseen and house unharmed and
ravaged wounds that heal.
the splintered wood, the flesh and drink,
the sustenance of an exile's peregrination.
i consider you.
i consider the heavens,
and what is man? you are mindful
of our anthem cries, a beating heart of
pulsing
harmony. it is well, it is well, it is well

with our ebrious laughter and guttural joy
echoed in skin and bone and sweated
touch,
the glistening worship of divinity present,
the embrace of freedom unencumbered
by vacant eaves of falsified serenity
which threatens the clangorous voices of
that
endless captor, condemnation.

it is not peace.

but if i forget you, o jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill,
forget
the convulsive sorrow of dispossession
companied by homeward calls
the longing for sugared fruit and yeasted
dough,
salt broth, held hands, rising warmth of
crackling flame
the safety of being known
of lettered names i love —
unsure yet unhaltingly there
the pooled waves and cresting song
and parts torn asunder.

i weep when i remember you.

by the waters of babylon we sat down
and planted gardens
intransigent and trailing in virescent
leaves.
sown in tears, their redolent
blossoms smell of blood
and body.



Ascension, Angus Sullivan

Bonds Emilio Cecenas

“Damn, that’s a nice house,” he whispered under his breath.

She pulled into a large driveway, the three-story house connected to it looming over him as he peered through the window. As he clambered out, the smell of a freshly mowed lawn crept into his nose, dew reflecting orange stars as the sun began to sink into the horizon.

“Are you ready?” she asked, linking her arms around his as they walked up the steps of the porch towards the door tucked within.

“Yeah,” he assured, turning to her to give a quick smile. As he stared at the door, burgundy with a gold trimmed peephole, he heard a quick rustle and felt a peck on his cheek. His head darted to the side to find her trying to act normal, a smile fighting her attempt to suppress it as she reached for the door and led him in.

A chandelier above cast a warm yellow light on the base of a set of spiraling mahogany stairs and down a hallway that emitted laughter and more warm light. As they walked down the hallway, he watched a progression of life that hung on the walls. Newborns, birthdays, ceremonies, first bike rides, family vacations, family portraits, graduations. The laughter and overlapping voices grew louder as they reached the source: a dining room, encircled with more lives on the walls, furniture, and a table drowning in plates and surrounded by smiles that were large and infectious.

There was an uproar, louder than the limit that he thought the noise had already reached, at the sight of them. Chairs scraped, and the warmth grew as

there was a chain of hugging and larger smiles and question after question after question.

“Nice to meet you!”

“How did you meet Amy?”

“What do you do for a living? Wow! Do you like it?”

“What do you like to do for fun?”

“What kind of movies do you like? What about music? Do you play any instruments?”

“Amy told us all about you! You two should come over more!”

He began to sweat.

Always laughter. And smiles. Liquid would leak out of the corner of their mouths as they paused their laughter and smiles to take a drink. Playful chastising as they laughed with food in their mouth, the mushy clumps of chewed food fully visible in their mouths.

He sat with observant eyes, watching these things as he quietly ate his food. Watching Amy meld into part of the whole, joining in the laughter and the smiling.

He was on the sidewalk, standing in a dim almost-darkness between the edges of two streetlights giving off a cold white light, a plate covered in aluminum foil in his hands. As he stared at the street, a glaze over his eyes, a familiar squeal, soft at first, began to register in his ears, growing louder as a car turned onto the street. Its brakes screeched slightly as the car, with its peeled paint, dents, and scratches, came to a stop in front of him, the soft drip of leaking oil hitting the street and the faltering engine a comforting duet to his ears. He smiled at the figure obscured

by the night and tinted windows that sat in the driver’s seat as he opened the passenger door and tossed the plate in the back.

“Sup Daniel,” the driver said.

“Sup.”

“How’d it go?”

“Man, they were weird as hell.”

They chuckled, the driver offering him a blunt as they began to drive off.

“Seriously, man,” Daniel said. “It was so loud in there. They had to be on something man. I never saw anyone act like that when they weren’t on something. And they kept asking all these questions. Like, I get it, they’re her family, but still...”

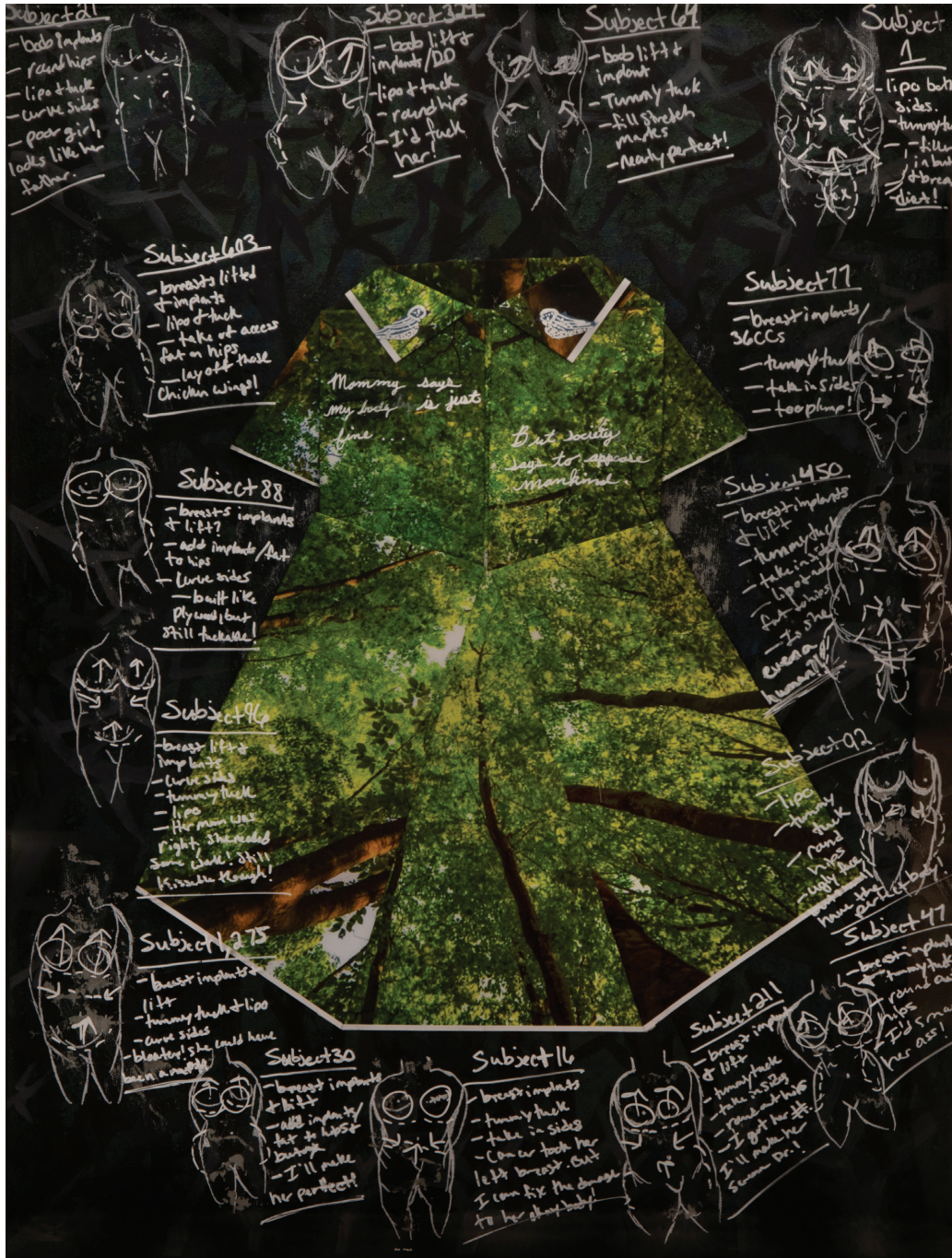
The driver chuckled again, turning up the music on the radio as they turned onto a main street.

But something began to ache in Daniel’s chest at the thought of them as he sat back, listened to the music, and put the blunt up to his lips. A tingling ache that spread to his fingertips and his toes. The ache grew; not painful, just overwhelming.

“Their laughs were annoying,” he said, exhaling smoke and forcing the ache away.

A Phoenix's Cycle and Melody: The Soundtrack

Alexandria Furlow



Cycles, Alexandria Furlow

Unwell, Matchbox Twenty. Hospital, Counting Crows. The Doctor, The Doobie Brothers. Down With the Sickness, Disturbed. Depression, Black Flag. Bipolar, Dilemn. Meds, Placebo feat. Alison Mosshart. Bad Medicine, Bon Jovi. I Want a New Drug, Huey Lewis and The News. The Drugs Don't Work, The Verve. Girl, You Have No Faith in Medicine, The White Stripes. My Friend the Doctor, Leslie Bricusse. Someone Like Me, Atomic Kitten. Relating To a Psychopath, Macy Gray. Overwhelmed, The Serpent. Where is My Mind, Pixies. Help, The Beatles. Losing My Balance, J. Cole. Manic, Plumb. I'm Gonna Show You Crazy, Bebe Rexha. Monster, Skillet. How It Feels to Be Lost, Sleeping With Sirens. I'm So Tired, The Beatles. Suicidal Thoughts, The Notorious B.I.G. The Cure, Lady Gaga. Time To Say Goodbye, Andrea Bocelli and Sarah Brightman. Stop (Think Again), Bee Gees. Don't Panic, Coldplay. It Won't Be Like This for Long, Darius Rucker. Life Is Worth Living, Justin Bieber. You Are Loved, Josh Groban. Don't Give Up, Peter Gabriel. It's Your Life, Francesca Battistelli. It's Not Over, Secondhand Serenade. Get Up Stand Up, Bob Marley. Rise, Katy Perry. Warrior, Demi Lovato. Survivor, Destiny's Child. The Real Me, The Who. The Phoenix, Fall Out Boy. Defying Gravity, Wicked the Musical.

Ocimum Basilicum Will Brooks

The perfect world started with a seed purchased from an online vendor in Michigan. I dropped it into a cell of a 6 X 12 vacuum tray that I had previously filled with a starting mix of compost, coco coir, and perlite. More seeds were sown in the rest of the tray. I watered them with squirts from a repurposed perineal bottle that my wife, Nicole, had received after she gave birth to our first daughter, Jane. The gentle drops did not wash away the seed from the top of the soil. Instead, they embedded themselves into the dirt as I covered the entire tray with a transparent plastic lid to seal in the humidity. Gently, like a father placing their infant into a bassinet, I lay the tray onto the steel shelf in my home office, just inches beneath a dormant 5,000 kelvin LED shop light that would one day become the sun.

In July 2015, nearly a month before her due date, Nicole and I had attended a routine doctor's check-up. The sonographer's warm baritone voice wavered as he printed off a still image. He whispered to his assistant to deliver it to Dr. Hill, Nicole's obstetrician. As the door slammed behind the assistant, the sonographer smiled with measured assurance.

"No worries, folks," he nodded. "Just need to confirm something."

I nodded. I smiled. I believed him.

Nicole reached for my hand and squeezed. All her anxiety oozed out of her clammy, pale palms. "Will," she whispered. "This isn't good."

I nodded. I smiled. I kissed the back of her sweaty hands.

Dr. Hill joined the sonographer and

pulled a stool up next to Nicole. She sat and told us that Jane had flipped in the womb and ruptured her amniotic sac. "She's quite the kicker!" she joked. In a previous appointment, Jane, from within the womb, had kicked Dr. Hill's stethoscope out of her hand. We had joked about it ever since.

"Is Jane ok?" Nicole asked.

"What do we do now?"

Dr. Hill removed her glasses and ran her fingers through her black braids. "The baby's heart is still beating." She nodded to the sonographer, who promptly applied the transducer to Nicole's belly.

Little muffled drumbeats filled the room with the sweetest music I'll ever hear.

I closed my eyes and thanked God, whom I only acknowledge when I'm scared.

"But," Dr. Hill continued. She placed a hand on Nicole's shoulder. "We are going to deliver today."

Jane was sliced out of Nicole's belly on July 14, 2015, at 1:17 PM. Dr. Hill gasped just as she lifted Jane from the bloody mess. The tiny piece of my heart looked like a pair of wrinkled khakis stained pink. A flat Filipino nose sat on her face. As nurses carried her away to a washing station, her little cries echoed throughout the delivery room.

"Oh," Nicole murmured from beneath her drug haze. "I wanted to do a delayed umbilical cord clamp."

"There's been a problem." Dr. Hill explained. "Jane took a big breath just as I pulled her out, and she inhaled a lot of fluid. We have to take her to the NICU

right now."

That's how she ended up in neonatal intensive care hooked up to various heart monitors beneath heat lamps. Four pounds of love screamed inside of a glass box for a week as we had spent our first nights as parents a hall over, unable to hear her little cries.

The basil seed sat there, safe and warm in its tiny world behind plastic. At the same time, Winter Storm Uri ravaged Texas with temperatures too cold for it to germinate. Death lingered outside. But inside, alive and well, the seed went through imbibition as the embryo absorbed the water through its membrane. The primary root grew downward from the seedling and anchored it into the soil. Outside, snow fell onto empty garden beds as the cotyledon, the embryonic leaves, reached out to the artificial sun that I had flipped on between the intermittent power outages.

Jane had felt the grass blades beneath her feet as she grew up amongst the trees of the piney woods. The sun perpetually hung above us. Even in the rain, we felt its glow. I was grateful to the four elements for how they enriched her life. The earth nourished her. The water cleansed her. The fire warmed her. The air filled her lungs with life. Nicole was there too, smiling, despite the cancer cells multiplying within her body.

Our second daughter, Margot, was there as well. While Jane was born in the summer, Margot was born amongst the dead leaves of autumn's oak. Orange, red, and brown fell onto her infant form as the grass yellowed and the birds flew south.

Fall is still a beautiful season, though it is only there for a fleeting moment.

The drives to Houston for Nicole's appointments at M.D. Anderson, the best cancer center in the country, were spent in quiet, reflective thought through east Texas. Our time with the specialists filled us with calm hope. But hope withered like the leaves from the oak upon our return home. Nicole's smile disappeared as she confronted her discomfort in the inevitability of death.

I began carrying blue rosary beads with me, and I'd run them through my fingers to ground myself. The ritual kept me from falling to the ground like tree branches in a frigid gale. "Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women," I'd chant.

Nicole became too weak to keep up with the kids. After each surgery, she was told she could not pick up or hold the children until she recovered. She needed me nearby when thoughts of the end came like a blight. The panic crept into her head as the seriousness of the condition tortured her. She recovered not only from surgery but also from delivering Margot into this world. We saw the end approaching. Winter had come, and we were incapable of warming ourselves. But we had agreed to try to fake it for the children anyway.

Once Winter Storm Uri passed and the power grid stabilized, the white LEDs shone down onto the seedling for 16 hours a day without ever dimming, while the sun outside hid its face behind a blanket of gray clouds. The grass remained yellow, and the branches of deciduous oak

trees remained bare. Inside its warm enclosure, the seedling developed its first mature set of leaves, flat and pointed and emerald. It was Genovese basil. More Genovese grew in the cells within its column. The column to its right contained Queen Siam basil, and the column to its left had tulsi. Hyssop and chamomile grew in the rest of the cells without desperation as they did not compete against each other for precious nutrients. Predatory herbivores could not feast on its flesh, nor could disease torture them until they withered into nothing. The baby plants were safe and fed in their world. I saw to that.

The breast milk had rushed past Wonder Woman. It cascaded down the marble coffee table onto Jane's knees before crashing down her pant leg to pool beneath her shoes. Strangers slowed their pace to watch the chaos unfold as I rummaged through a diaper bag to find a towel or muslin blanket to wipe up the mess. The strangers' stride quickened as they disappeared into the café as the screams of a toddler and a newborn became too grating. They had their own problems.

For days, I'd noticed how everybody in M.D. Anderson clutched their sorrow to keep it from spilling. They focused on their own recoveries or on the lives of loved ones getting surgery several floors above. I understood. Nicole was having surgery for her cervical cancer, so I bore no ill will towards them. They didn't have the strength to help my children and me.

It was my fault anyway. I'd tried to do too much again. With one hand, I

unscrewed the top of the milk container. At the same time, with the other, I fished through Jane's backpack for her Wonder Woman doll's golden lasso. Meanwhile, Margot wailed like a banshee into my face as she squirmed inside the BabyBjörn carrier.

Her blue eyes judged me as I failed to satisfy her hunger. Her white face grew a deeper shade of red with each scream as she projected a fury that seemed to say, "Well, idiot? Where is my food! Dummy!" Under this assault of insults, I had knocked over the container.

Jane shot up. Her brown nostrils flared as she scowled at me, aside from the hazel eyes that shot lasers through my brown irises, a reflection of my own face.

"Daddy! My shoes are wet!" Jane yelled.

"I know. I'm sorry." I answered.

"Your fault! You did it!"

"I know. I'm so sorry."

Margot screamed. I prayed though I didn't think anybody had been able to hear me.

The basil outgrew its cell just as winter retreated behind the horizon. At the same time, spring winds pushed the gray clouds aside to reveal the golden sun. And the basil toddler felt the real rain for the first time an hour after I transplanted it into a pot that sat upon the railing of our townhouse in Denton. It thrived and grew taller as the days grew longer, and the weather felt more like its ancestral Mediterranean home. And it grew taller still as I pinched off the tops to encourage bushier growth. My hands smelled of pesto as I flicked off the grasshoppers who

had stopped by to dine on the now-adolescent basil.

The year continued until one day, the children and I jumped out of the front door of our home and felt the crisp autumn air. Fall arrived a month earlier, but the weather was not cold enough to kill the basil. It swayed in a breeze within its clay pot as its stem reached out in the teal light of dawn. The basil was in no hurry to leave, just like my children.

Now six years old, Jane closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and shouted, "It smells so good!"

Margot, now three years old, copied her older sister. "Smells good!"

The basil dangled over their heads and absorbed their praise.

Nicole watched us from our bedroom window as the kids climbed into our Camry, and we drove away to school.



Two Flowers, Steven Perez

Clave Rhythms Phillip Guillen II

The moon smiles in an obsidian grin.

While at my back, the fireplace emits its light, I wake from sleep to cold air. The chimney tugs the smoke and makes it rise and fly, and grow to block the cold moon. The fall from dream I tumble through is harsh and bleak, but still the pain is soft, kind. A movement flits across my gaze and disappears. I swear a grin did laugh, mock.

My eyes go up. My bony raw shadows, in jerking, cutting insanity caress flaws...they want, in dance, to destroy.

Their silhouette fingers, in sync, all rattle and point. I rise with painless grace and walk a steady stride, the steps a waltz with no beat. And now I walk the hallway through the dark, to reach the door that's locked shut. The shadows push it open.

Canvases sit on the shelf and on the floor. Aged and young and pristine alike are still. Upon the floor, scattered and numerous papers await ink, razor blades in the disturb of obsidian light. Those silhouette fingers, again, all rattle and point.

The darkened corner stares without a smile, but oh, it's just her. Just her. Just eyes. Two eyes. Three eyes. Or four. No, four cheekbones. No, four hands. Either way, it's only her who can't smile. Or maybe it's...

Creaks in the floor and a hush...I am back.

Holding the crowd in her eye, her comet feet are clicking on air when her smile at a boy in blue without the idea of the beat in his intelligent head that smile takes breath to make space for memory. Takes the breath he needs to say, "I am an

out-of-the-rhythm and an out-of-step abysmal dancer it's true but I know I can unlearn myself entire for you if you still have a wanting to inhale the night and ask me to dance again. Please come back."

And then he paints an abstract four eyes, three eyes, two eyes, to make her face immortal art. He never knew it wouldn't matter. Not in the way of her face or of a memory. Not in the way of her feet in an immortal beat. That storm strong clave.

Click-click-click-TAH-TAH.

The walls a coal-darkness, the shadows in them dance blaze, the room and the house.

Those silhouette fingers, for me, all send off a breeze.

And I abide and look to where and what it leads, my eyes a slow and smooth wave.

The breeze dissolves in calming hush. My feet propel in broken rushing strides of fate. I land in front of it, there. The largest painted scene, the work in progress, testimony to my skill. I stare without the awe I had.

Creaks in the floor and a hush... I am back.

People with money and time in the embrace of light, colors of violet and red in the arresting robes that the vendors are claiming a monarch of especial beauty used, tables of food and the clinking of the silverware, waiters who run and exchange all of the beans and rice and chicken and corn and the brisket and dessert that's fresh, people all talking in groupings of adult discussion to a

background of kids and their screaming in excited joy, and backing the screaming, a baby with a drum and stick hitting beats without downing a down beat makes a soliloquy kind of rhythm that plows out of the drum.

All in the market I painted on that vibrant day, they turn in a twist of a common and insightful head. Turn to the empty stretch of canvas. The space I left for me, the artist. Empty space, oblivion. Circled by clave that cannot be contained in hush.

Plack-plack-plack-PAH-PAH!

The fire can't start, it is cold; the shadows descend beyond the night's light. They sink, they fade, laugh...then jump and full force pull-claw-fight moonlight... nothing results. The moon still grins.

I turn and face the center piece that stands apart, and all the room is still, cold.

A blank canvas. The smooth fabric. Rough feeling. No color. Hoping. Weeping. Wait. No. It shows me my face.

The shadows dance gleeful, and weeping, songs in the air.

"Come here, rest," says voice.

"No," say the tears in my eyes for a desired life.

And I walk.

Leaving my body on the bricks by the fireplace, my paintings in the room, the shadows dancing, I walk. Never an artist again, but now a ghost who cries. The night is so cold under an obsidian sky, and, grinning, the moon whispers in clave rhythms. *Tick-tick-tick-HAH-HAH!*

Comfortable

EJ Hess

I cover myself when I stand naked in front of him. He thinks it's cute and that it's just because I'm self-conscious. Like I'm a strong woman when clothed and a helpless young girl when not. He tools around what I must be thinking and that, even though we just had sex, I must still think that my clothesless frame is too pure for his perverse eyes. In the darkness of the bedroom, he believes that he sees everything in my pale starkness, but the moonlight casts false shadows through the heavy drapes.

I keep waiting for the day when I'll be comfortable—enough. I'm comfortable now in our relationship, I'm comfortable with the man in front of me, but I'm not comfortable enough to drop the crossed arms and balled fists from my chest and show him everything. I keep my words choked in my throat and tell him that I'm fine. I give him no reason to think otherwise.

But *he* was allowed to see all of it. All of me. *He* knew that I covered my chest with my arms, not as an act of self-consciousness, but as an act of self-preservation. Not just a shield, but a fighting stance with a battle cry hidden behind my teeth ready to say, "I will let you in, but I will not let you *in*."

I dropped my arms for *him*. My armor fell to the floor and was lost amongst

our strewn-out clothes.

I let *him* see me in not just the moonlight with the drapes open wide, but the lamplight, too. *Turn it on, I want to see your face.* Illumination and a smile. *Hey, sweetheart.*

In the far too bright bathroom lights after a shower with my hair slicked back and long streaks of mascara trailing down my reddened cheeks. *Come here, let me wipe off your eyes.*

In the sunrise after a night devoid of sleep. *Are you okay? You can tell me if you aren't.*

In the dim lamplight, in the steam of the shower, and on the bed in the light of the sun with every thought that I kept protected spewing out of my cracked open chest. *I love it when you're comfortable with me.*

Comfortable. Not just standing naked, but standing free and illuminated for all parts to be seen and heard with no armor between us. Comfortable with *him*, I will only be comfortable with *him*.

archaeology

Meghan Pangonas

in the midst of the silence,
she reached deep inside herself
and found a rock, rough around the edges
revealing a past she thought was buried
yet the pits and grooves of the artifact
show where hands placed too much
force on hips, waist, thighs, neck
indents that tell a story she buried inside her tomb
once preserved away from the outside world,
now her body becomes an excavation site,
uncovering a time she wants to forget.
grasping the jagged piece of remembrance,
it leaves a chalky residue on her skin
she craves to put it back where she found it.
she wishes she could swallow it whole.



A Study in Rust, B.T. Kilgore

Hell is Cold

B.T. Kilgore

I don't think it's hot down there;
Melting pain, blanket flame
—lasting all eternity; forever and all reign
Some Satan-centered sadist sun...
Endless anguish; demonic gold;

A Biblical acclaim be told.
But I contend...
—that Hell is cold.
Seizure-sighted, souls are sold;
—down a river oil-black.
Banks too muddy to bank upon,
—Pleasure now a hunted fawn.
A grayish type of gorge; communal separation
insurmountable remorse; penance; reparation!
Flowing—sinking
into the
Feeling... of being far too late.

Weary eyes of the lost
—sockets stuffed with snow.
Looking up; His blood's accost,
—His weeping beauty; their Victor Foe,

Christ.
Crystalized in Crucifixion.

In a glacial coffin, He reposes, a reflection and reminder.
Are they aware of the life they lived?
Are their memories locked in the Ices of Hell?

Numb to thought—a forgetting spell...
Just then, a sound brings forth a fear,
—jolly torment drawing near...
O Lake of “fire”, a second death!
Hades children, hold your breath—
Sailor demons wade the blood.
A crimson river; scarlet flood.
Creeping gazes, slick black lungs,
Scratching fingers, shriveled tongues.
The only life in Hell below...
In slushèd blood, a boat they row.
A boat of skin, gray and loose,
Ropes of hair, a tangled noose.
Blackest pitch of midnight sky
Down in hell, their sails fly high.
Screeching: “Nev’kah Mater Thala Kai!”

What if Hell is Blue? With streams of white and black?
Perhaps it be more Beautiful? Further tempting To the soul?
Does fire exist apart from life? Isn't burning all too human
of a repulsion?
If frigidity in Hell is the spine of speculation, be frigid in
your thoughts,
And forget the lies of flame they told,
—for I believe that Hell is cold.



Sitting on a Star, Harvey Simpson

*How We Play Make
Believe*
MJ Cartin

You were five years old when Mom sat you down in front of a TV for the first time. She plugged in the 28 inch box and she pushed in her favorite cassette tape. The Little Mermaid.

You immediately attached yourself to the girl with the gadgets and gizmos aplenty—

and you wondered before you were old enough to wonder what it would be like to live in a world where you could stay all day in the sun.

A world where a girl didn't have to hide her feelings from a father drowning in an ocean he ruled.

Dad used to take you to see empty houses. You don't know how he would find these houses most of the time. You moved so much that if you ever tried to chart the course of your life on a map, the ink from your lines would weep across the entire DFW Metroplex. 9,000 square miles of land dotted with red, inky tears. Dad would pick you up every other weekend, strap you into the passenger seat of his Nissan Armada (you didn't even weigh enough for the airbag sensor to light up on the dash), and he'd take you to visit the unfinished houses that weren't on the market yet. He'd drive for hours sometimes if it meant finding the thing he was looking for (you used to think that Dad just liked to surround himself with empty things). He'd turn onto streets with no names, and suddenly, empty streets would sprout into neighborhoods of wall studs and insulation rolls that looked like Grandma's area rugs. Dad's favorite thing about houses under

construction was their "new house" smell. He'd throw open brand new doors and stand in the foyer for

ten

long

empty

seconds

before he'd take a deep breath.

Was that why he loved to move so much?

Was his life nothing more than chasing a smell that would disappear three months later?

You didn't learn to swim until you were nine years old. Your family used to spend early mornings on Lake Lewisville, where the motor blades of your uncle's pontoon boat were the only thing that stirred the dirty surface of the water below. It was so murky that a person at the bottom of the lake could look towards the surface and only see the shadows casted from the green algae above. Just about everyone in your family had learned how to swim in the heat of the moment; the moment where your limbs are thrashing to maintain your weight above the surface of the water. It was either learn how to float on the surface or sink under the weight. You remember asking yourself how cruel your father had to be to just throw you into the deep end and hope you learned how to float.

You twisted in the algae with no way to keep the water from entering your lungs.

You twisted and turned

and gasped

for air

but the water only swallowed you whole.

It wasn't about cruelty. It was about survival. If you never learned how to swim, then you would never learn what it meant to drown.

Dad was barely an adult himself, and it showed in his face the most. He had these lines that framed the outside of his cheeks. Like a moat, his dimples kept the curve of his smirk at bay. You knew he was a man who smiled too much; who laughed so hard that crow's feet were quick to seize the corners of his eyes. You still know the exact dimensions that your father was when you were younger.

Two "9-year-olds stacked on top of each other" tall

and ¼ of the weight limit on your trampoline.

But he was just small enough to squeeze into the closet under your grandparents' stairwell, where you and your imaginary kingdom would present His Lordship invisible tea and Mardi Gras beads. You liked to play pretend (you probably liked it a little too much). You could be a princess of the sea or a knight in a castle and the only thing you'd have to worry about was whether your father could literally fit into your make-believe life too.

The first TV you remember watching with your dad was at your grandparents' house. He had a box TV with his original XBOX on the floor of your grandparents' guest room because he couldn't afford any other furniture at the time. Pillows and blankets were piled on the floor with your Dad squished

somewhere in between. Your grandmother called you downstairs, just to drop a plate full of cookies (the ones with the little green Christmas trees engraved into them) into your hands. "Make sure your dad eats some too!"

Your return to the bedroom was foreshadowed by your Dad's underhand curses about his controller. The motorcycle sequences in *Tomb Raider: Legends* always caused him trouble. He could never keep the analog sticks steady enough to pull off the thirty second maneuver (*this was before you knew that Dad's shaky hands were a symptom of his cravings*).

"Can I try, dad?"

Dad gave you a strange look. You shouldn't have been surprised that Dad was already drowning that day. His face had grown permanently slack with a grief you couldn't quite understand. But that didn't stop him from handing the controller over to you instead. "Knock yourself out, kiddo."

That was all you needed to know. You may not have known grief like the one that simmered in your dad's chest, but you knew the pain of losing a video game. Dextrous maneuvers were no match for your little fingers—kept steady by your tenacious will to win. The level was conquered with a brilliant shout from both of you at once. You both celebrated by gorging on the cookies that were left behind on the floor.

Dad's many doctors said it best.

It was the sugar highs that kept his hepatic failure away.

After Dad separated from your mother when you were two, he never stayed in one place for more than three years. He was constantly on the move. He had to be, or else the world he was searching for would slip between his fingers. And he couldn't keep them steady enough to close into a fist.

One of your formative memories was your dad teaching you to pack your life into twenty or so confined spaces. Cardboard boxes, faded lug tubs, and garbage bags. There was no "move-out" day quite like the ones with your father. Except for one. You didn't know what was in the cardboard box until you opened it to look for your lost stuffed animals. It was everything he planned on never touching again, including the half empty bottle of Titos and the thousands of pictures of his glory days (his beach volleyball days, the days before he had to start paying off his student loans). If he was always moving then he never had to open it and see what was inside.

You stepped into a barren kitchen where a thin layer of sawdust had covered just about every surface you could reach as a little girl. "You could fit the entire state in here!" your dad exclaimed, slapping the shoulder of the uppity realtor. These new builds felt tailor-made to a 9 year old and her drunk of a father. Granite (almost porcelain) countertops still had little pieces of styrofoam covering the corners, just in case wandering fingers or stumbling bodies drew too close to the unsanded edges. There were no door handles anywhere in the house. There was no

chance of locking yourself in a room by accident, or hiding in one of the closets long enough for the realtor to forget you're there at all and then the house really becomes yours. There was no furniture or glass or even carpet, because the one thing that children and drunks have in common is that they are prone to violently vomiting (and concrete was easiest to clean). There was only a dirty can of paint sitting by itself on the floor, having long been dried and used up. "We're only interested in looking around today. You should know what your options look like when buying your dream home."

He loved to act as if he could afford a million-dollar mansion. That was the thing he was best at. Not beach volleyball, or even drinking. It was playing pretend. His make-believe life wasn't living inside his parents' guest room, or thousands of dollars in debt, or divorced, or living with a houseless child by the time he was 25. No, his make-believe life ruled the world he created, like a king who was looking for his next great castle.

It was comforting to play pretend with your dad, even if it was only for thirty minutes on every other weekend. The house was yours for thirty minutes every other weekend. It was like coming home from school one day, only to learn that you were the long lost heir to a throne in some distant, far away land.

After all—if there is one thing 9 year old girls are good at—then it's playing pretend.

For thirty minutes, you were a father and daughter looking for your third

house, because two houses wasn't quite enough for His Lordship.

For thirty minutes, you both were gulping for air on the surface of the water—

preparing for the moment when the front door would release another wave, and you would both be thrown under once more.

Runs in the Family

Meghan Pangonas

a melancholic father from decades ago
whom i never met but in moments like these,
alone in this one-bedroom apartment
surrounded by a solitude, an emptiness
i can't contain inside my chest.
is this how he felt when they laid him down
and placed those electrodes upon his temples?
an ongoing current of misery pulsing in our blood
that has trickled down my family tree.
these things are so common in my family
that my grandmother shared it over the
morning paper and a blueberry muffin,
as if rain was to be in the forecast.



Objectified., Abi Furr

Torn., Abi Furr



Inherited War Shannon Alexander

“You didn’t inherit any of what’s wrong with him, did you?” my uncle had asked my brother and I the last time we’d seen him at my cousin’s wedding. We’d been talking about my father and how messed up he is. How he constantly checks the door until it’s broken and then checks it some more. How he constantly swears we’re angry with him when all we do is speak normally. How if we forget to lock the door just once, he holds onto it for years, until we’re holding onto it too and will make quadruple sure that we locked it, almost as many times as he does. He never lets go of anything and always makes sure we don’t either. Or maybe that’s just me, I think, as I choose not to say that part out loud.

We both shake our heads no as if we’re nothing like him and are completely immune from such annoying problems. Because that’s all they are, aren’t they? Just irritating to the people around them. Something to be scoffed at. Something that ruins marriages and makes your family discuss how messed up you are at get-togethers. Honestly, my brother is immune from those problems. He’s nothing like my father, carrying an easy, calming energy around him that’s always been the tranquilizer of our family. It’s also rewarded him with many circles of people that find him easy to talk to.

In high school, a guy I had a crush on once said that I was hard to talk to.

As I try to shake my head no as carelessly and easily as I can, willing myself to be exactly like my brother, I try to ignore the nagging in my mind. The

nagging is coming is coming from both sides, willing me to be exactly like my father, but also willing me to push that nagging deep down. If only I could.

My uncle always talks about how he freaked my dad out when they were younger by moving his perfectly organized pencils. He was really young then. Just like I was when I used to be close with my dad. My first memories from that time are of him jumping in fright if anyone made one unexpected move. My mom got annoyed by it and still does. So do I. What annoys me the most though is how much I understand it.

“Oh, I have OCD,” people always say with a laugh when mentioning anything about organization. Do they? I always wonder. Does it take them hours to go to bed every night because they must check everything in the house before they do? Do they have to get up and check it again because they’re haunted by thoughts of a fire happening even though there’s probably less than a 1% chance of that happening? Do they have to check the door 10 times just to be able to relax for a few minutes? As I write this, I’m not sure if I’m asking those questions for my father or for myself.

Checking. Counting. Demanding absolute reassurance. Those are always on the lists I see whenever I feel brave enough to look up the symptoms of OCD. As I read them, I’m reminded of memories that are always stuck at the back of my mind. Memories of my father counting out loud how many times he checks his pockets. Memories of myself doing the same thing every night when

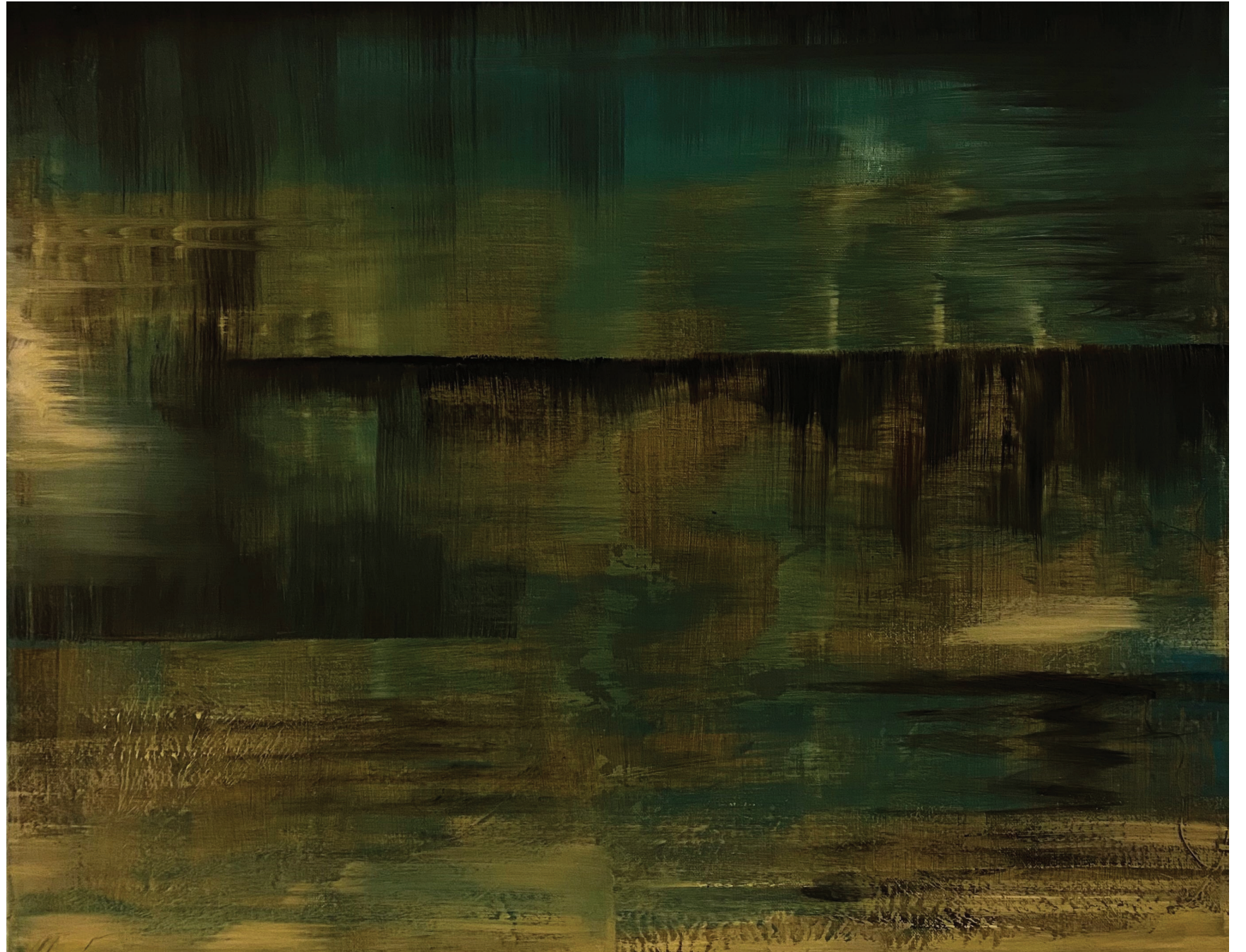
making sure my alarm is set. Memories of trying so hard to fight it. The only time I ever have it in me to win that fight is when I think about my future children. Them fighting the same war and then talking about how messed up I am as they wish they weren’t secretly messed up, too. I always wonder, though.

Did my dad ever try to fight it?

Something I always pretend not to know about OCD is that criticizing the person for it only makes it worse. I hate myself for knowing that. My family doesn’t seem to know that and I’m not sure they’d care if they did. I can’t blame them either. I could never when I see the depressed, far away look in my mom’s eyes when she talks about her marriage to my dad. I never want to be in a marriage like that. I never want to be the cause of a marriage like that.

Sometimes I wonder if it’s my fault the way I am. My father would probably agree. *You’re just like your brother*, he always says when we argue. *Or you’re just like your mother*, when I finally snap after hours of him criticizing everything I do. *No*, I want say. *I’m just like you. That’s why I’m so angry. That’s why I’m trying to do everything that I know you hate. So that I’ll never be like you.* That’s true, but somehow, I don’t think it’s working. I think anyone can see that.

Lake of Emeralds, B.T. Kilgore



Nothing Much Happens Now

EJ Hess

There is a special kind of sadness that comes along with the memory of you. It stirs in my chest, the place where Rumi says nothing much happens now. A sweet, nostalgic sadness that makes me long for simpler days. Days when love was x's and o's, not of chess matches—you know that I'm no good at chess.

Do you remember the day you tried to teach me? And I kept forgetting the name of the rook and how many spaces the knights could move? (One square in any direction and then one square away diagonally.) I said that I let you win and then gave you a kiss as your prize. If I would have known that day would be the last time we would be playing that game, I would have agreed to reset the board and lose another game and give you another kiss.

Maybe nostalgic is the incorrect word to use—I often forget the right vocabulary when thinking of you. Words tie my tongue like the knots in my hair after we're together in bed and I have to take a moment to regroup. I catch a breath at each beat of your heart until it slows down to its normal rhythm and I fall to sleep. *Naïve* might be what I'm looking for here. I was *naïve* when I was with you. I was *naïve* when I let you into my bed and into me and into my life. The spot you left has grown cold and echoes the moans that once escaped my lips.

Your ears aren't here to catch them anymore, so they settle next to the dust bunnies under the bed.

I wish I could go back to the time when I didn't know that I didn't know anything. It was easier back then to live in

that sweet naivety. At least I had you. Our minds didn't think too deeply, but our skin still felt everything. Every touch, every pull, everything that made me want to be touched by you again and again. I miss the way you would wrap your legs through my legs as if you could only ever drift to sleep bound to me because you knew that I could keep you from falling.

I loved the way you touched me. I search for it, still, in the arms of men who are different from you—not worse, not better, just different. They're good men, but they're not you.

You were the rush of cool air that hit me every early spring. I could speak into you and you would reply with the same consistent, refreshing new year music of rustling branches and singing birds.

I'm picturing it now: a sunny morning glow with the frosty wind dancing around me. I'm picturing you. I'm picturing us. You're the wind and I am the budding trees. You rip through, gentle enough not to hurt me, but I still feel it all. I still feel you all over and in all the places that no one else is allowed to go. I have not found that type of breeze since you left and my buds have not bloomed the same—not worse, not better, just different.

I'm not naive anymore. Maybe it would be easier if I was. My buds could at least still be blooming with the same kind of beauty that you left them with.

Now, nothing much happens.



Afloat, Angus Sullivan

Contributors

Cover Artist: Paige Sanders is a Communication Design major and artist (who particularly favors printmaking). She usually enjoys integrating her mediums to create works that toe the line between art's asking the question and design's answer.

Will Brooks is a senior creative writing student who likes to work in many genres. Will is also a parent to two young children and a spouse to a graduate student.

Magdalen Wasielewski (or Mj Cartin) is a senior attending the University of North Texas. Born and raised in the DFW area, her essays often focus on the intimacy of addiction and grief from the perspective of children.

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Meghan Pangonas is a Senior at the University of North Texas majoring in Creative Writing with minors in Music and Women & Gender Studies. She hopes to continue publishing works of poetry and fiction to make herself and others feel a little less alone.

Harvey Simpson is a sophomore linguistics major who enjoys photography in their spare time. Her favorite subjects are bugs, flowers, and bugs on flowers.

Ainsley Smith is originally from Lindale, Texas and has studied art for 8 years under the instruction of artist Maureen Killaby. Now she studies studio art at the University of North Texas and strives every day to broaden her artistic horizons.

B. T. Kalgore is a 3rd-year English Creative Writing major with a minor in French. Other than writing and painting, his greatest passion in life is Korean cooking.

Ej Hess. Mother and human embodiment of the color yellow. Read more work at EJHess.com.

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Abi Furr is a second-year student at UNT pursuing a degree in Interdisciplinary Arts and Design: Design Management. Through the use of photoshop and sculpture, they explore the abstract concepts of life, death, the soul, mental health, and unspoken truth, looking between the lines of our society to where such concepts align and interact.

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