Dear Reader,

Perhaps now, more than any other time in our recent memories, we turn toward creative works that can be useful to us: works that help us navigate the diverse roles we play as family, friends, lovers, and citizens. We, as readers and editors, often find the most meaning in works that communicate something previously unexplainable and that make us feel less alone as human beings.

Although this work cultivates a sense of belonging upon reading, much of a creator’s time is spent in solitude, in the background, composing what will become the pieces of art, poetry, or prose in this publication. We want to thank our fellow writers and artists for their generous contributions—without them, the Trinity Review could not be a place where we come together to listen and reflect.

We would also like to acknowledge the generous contributions of the English Department and Creative Writing Faculty who have spent time and money to encourage students and their literary pursuits. Specifically, the guidance and support of Claudia Stokes, Jenny Browne, and Andrew Porter have been invaluable.

We, the co-editors, may head the Trinity Review, but the creation of the publication you hold and the events that the Review held throughout the year would not have been possible without our incredibly dedicated staff. We especially want to thank our Design Editor, Grant Peterson, without whom this publication would not have gone to print. Our Events and Managing staff, Bailee Mouton and Robin Bissett, orchestrated many of the events the Review held this year, and Carl Teegerstrom, Design Editor, worked tirelessly on advertisements and flyers.

The Trinity Review, more than anything else, represents the effort of a community of diverse individuals. It is through this community’s effort and their contributions that we are able to give you this Review. We hope that you find the work in this publication to be useful, reinvigorating, and challenging.

Warm regards,
Kelly Carroll & Emily Peter
Co-Editors of the Trinity Review
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Contributors | Our Team
Cracks Between

AMANDA GERLACH
One day we'll have all of our memories
Inscribed on rusty USBs
So that our grandchildren can wear them on chains of silver and gold
And remember we weren't always so old...
We didn't wear tech around our neck,
But instead had our favorite selfies in the center of lockets
Or on a phone background in our pockets.
Maybe they’ll be stored in clouds or outer space
Since our earth by then may have no place,
Maybe virtual reality will bring back long-extinct species
We have even no recollection of on our USBs.
The kids will remember weekends at grandma’s condominium
Where from balconies we shouted messages with 280 characters maximum
For those who cared (or not) to hear our white noise,
All just because we had a voice.
And we'll wear our Instagram bios like archived pages
As tattoos on our pruned ankles and ribs, cages
Remembering the sweet sting of youth,
The bliss of thinking we knew about truth...
We'll age invariably, as it’s our fate,
To follow our path until its expiration date,
To be taken from the universe in puffs of smoke
Or arthritis and blindness our screens may provoke.
So I’m left to wonder, as we type and type on our phones:
Who will be left to caption our tomb stones?

On some nights the pasture
and the prairie fire, redblooming,
are still, standing straight,
unbowed beneath the biggest
moon, that downglows to the
grasshusks, each of them
unmolested by black cow,
nor tomato bug, and the way
all of it is: together.
The world is getting loose,
and thundering, runaway
toward diminishing green.

From beyond some veil,
the space beneath the human
and between the blue day
and the bluer night, a tremor
shaking in the red dirt and dust
as from a woodechoing guitar
rings out through the pasture,
and Papa Willow rises up
from the dead, lifts his head
from its pillow of goose down
To trace out his walkpath
slowly across the plains where
he once rode the tallhorse, straight
in the saddle, straight across
the pasture, and he passes out
aches, or a sprain, or a hurt
like a mothering bird, and it burns,
and he yearns for the days of

The cleaned cattle chute
and the weaned calves, bucking,
and the stiff breeze, blowing,
and the rattle of snakes from somewhere
further west and the greenglass
bottles he’d shoot from their
perch up on some fencepost, or
log, out by the back porch, down
into the greengrass and
the tin barn, filled up with hay bales
And the way the barn’d sing,
when struck by some hail and
the family of owls hid out in
that barn, and the farmcats to
chase them and snapping sheets
on the clothesline, patterned in
daisies, or paisley,
hovering in air.

Like a phantom limb burns,
Papa Willow turns down
the oldroad and
he sees the tallferns
all a-choking and
girdling close the big
pond where the fish
used to live.
I think what I wonder is what is your mother tongue? What words have you forgotten? Who taught you to answer a question from a friend like it’s an interview? Who taught you to guard your whispers even when you’re naked and warm and fingers entwined?

Or, where is the child in you? The thing that David Foster Wallace says is in us all insatiably wanting, I agree the child is all of us, wanting, but it isn’t insatiable it just wants to be held, like any child. Where is that in you, the vulnerable thing that cries when it needs something it cannot get, that is not self-conscious?

Do you hold yourself? Have you met the fifteen year old you used to be? Is he okay? Is he still telling you lies about the world? Is he still terrified, like all teenagers were?

How many times in the last week have you sat down and noticed if anywhere in your body hurt or stretched or taken a minute to rub your forehead? How many times have you played the same song on repeat?

Why do you save old letters? Why don’t you wear the socks from your ex? Why do you save old letters? How many times in the last week have you sat down and noticed if anywhere in your body hurt or

I think what I want to know is what are the secrets you’re keeping from yourself? And is there something in you that responds when you hear someone else crying in the stall next to you in a bathroom? Have you ever carried chapstick in your backpack because your best friend might need it? Or even have you gotten yourself water every time you were thirsty, have you had enough sleep?

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Alone, on her own, Madeline wonders what it is to be human. What differentiates her tan, trembling hands from those of a marionette alone on the back shelf of Sears, she saw last Friday while walking around with her friend, Evelyn. Home wanted for a loving new friend, the advertisement read. She could tell the doll wasn’t human by its glossy beetle eyes. Some people would consider Madeline to be inhuman if she let them. Madeline wonders what it means to be considered inhuman. Who considers whom. Who considers whom what. Present participle party.

Madeline eats a mandarin orange slice by slice and tries not to tremble as she peels back the rind from the quavering fruit. Orange viscera congeals on her fingers, and she washes it off in the sink, trying not to eye her reflection in the sink’s mirror. Bushy brown hair, a white chenille nightgown. A look Kate Bush, 70s experimental pop icon and certified woodland spirit. would love, Madeline wants to be Kate Bush. Madeline wants to do many things with Kate Bush while also perhaps being Kate Bush.

Sometimes Madeline has dreams about underwater hotels, midnight trysts with beautiful sea nymphs with eyes the color of copper pennies and skin as sleek as moonbeams. In her dreams, she struggles to touch them, like she’s a character in a video game with a faulty mouse. Their bodies never line up, their mouths never meet. Faulty mouths, guileless fingers. Her dreams have inordinately elaborate logistics, the kind an architecture major would simultaneously love and be baffled by. A psychology major would laugh knowingly, but then quickly become confused. Becoming more and more confused, he would head off to the library to retrieve a stack of books on memory and dream retrieval. When he returned, Madeline would be gone.

Following one of these dreams, Madeline often falls asleep on the guest room floor, her limbs sticky and quavering like a mandarin orange. She feels like she could take off her skin like an overcoat with buttons, and be someone else. Where did you go, Madeline? her skin would shout. Madeline feels very bad and hides in the back of the garage, sitting on a makeshift throne of blue-purple car tires. The car tires are mottled like snakes. This could be the cover of a very bad vaporwave album, Madeline thinks.

Madeline wonders who it is that things happen to, and why it is that nothing ever happens to her. When she thinks these thoughts, it is like an invisible sports trainer is holding a hypothetical ice pack to an incorporeal bruise. But the incorporeal bruise encompasses all of her, leaves her fleeting, her. When she thinks these thoughts, it is like an invisible sports trainer is holding a hypothetical ice pack to an incorporeal bruise. But the incorporeal bruise encompasses all of her, leaves her fleeting.

Kate Bush. A look Kate Bush, 70s experimental pop icon and certified woodland spirit, would love. Madeline wants to do many things with Kate Bush while also perhaps being Kate Bush.

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Consequently, the rabbit remained nameless. Madeline let the rabbit live in her room, telling her parents that she’d won it in a school raffle. The rabbit and Madeline watched Gilmore Girls together. The rabbit drank coffee out of a straw. Afterwards, they watched The Good Place: Madeline thought that Chidi and Eleanor made a good couple, but the rabbit shipped Eleanor and Tahani. Madeline had to admit that the rabbit was valid. The rabbit learned beginner’s German on Duolingo. Impressive work, rabbit!

The rabbit learned advanced German on Duolingo. Come on now. Who are you trying to impress? You spend all of your time bettering yourself because you are afraid what will happen if you look inside yourself like a cold borscht soup.

The rabbit felt shaky and went to the hallway bathroom mirror slowly and took off its skin. Inside was a flurry of songbirds, tiny and blue and chittering, babbling insanely, swirling, chattering, humming. The songbirds parted away to reveal Him. His face all orange. His skulking form of black steel. The mirror broke in ten thousand pieces.

Oh, rabbit. What have you done?

Alone, on her own, at a party. A girl with short brown and blue hair, chewing on a vanilla wafer. Her freckles reminded Madeline of constellations. Scorpio, Aquarius, the one NASA keeps calling fake but we all remember. Silly, frenetic NASA.

Madeline wonders if she is a fake and a fraud and pretending to be a person. What if she is a stuffed teddy bear in a garage somewhere, dreaming of being real? Or a boy in New Hampshire, and the blue haired girl is another boy named Antonio in a remedial astronomy class? The boy in New Hampshire and Antonio are in love. They make out furiously in the midst of Neil DeGrasse Tyson monologues. The peer tutor is either at his wits’ end or a taxidermy sociology experiment. Neil DeGrasse Tyson is proud of them but too pretentious to just say it. Madeline is so fucking jealous.

Sometimes, Antonio burps and he sounds like a cow. The boy from New Hampshire doesn’t know this, but he would think it was cute if he knew about it. Cows know this, and they are filled with jealousy. Sometimes, cows assemble in secret and form a militia, wielding small, cow-sized pitchforks that slot into a void in their hooves. Sometimes, a small but noble minority of cows (who are also very well-read) pray for Antonio. They pray to the Laughing Cow, that all-knowing trickster goddess.

There is a cow that is in love with the trickster goddess. She looks up into the sky at night (as round as a Laughing Cow trademarked cheese) and blushes.

Some cows pray to Tru Moo, an opposing god of stability and the hearth. Every 700 moon cycles, proponents of each faith duel against each other in interpretive dance battles. Farmers are very alarmed and think that their cattle are having seizures. They are indeed having seizures—seizures of everything that they once believed was real. Truth flows into them like milk from an udder. Antonio does not think of any of this, but sometimes he feels grateful for being lactose intolerant, without knowing why.

Sometimes, the taxidermied sociological experiment falls on the floor and they wish that someone would help them up. They look at the ceiling in those taut hours between end-of-class and 8:00 AM in the morning and they feel the skeins of time rolling away from them like a yarn ball.

The blue haired girl (Elaine) and Madeline start spending more time together on weekends, drinking green milkshakes that Madeline makes by herself with dandelions that she grows in a special pewter vase. The rabbit comes along, although it prefers coffee. Elaine likes The Good Place because of her crush on Ted Danson. Madeline and the rabbit agree that Elaine is not valid, but over time they concede that she is somewhat valid. Ted Danson looks like a velociraptor, in a vaguely paternal way.

Elaine has strong hands that remind Madeline of tortoises. Her family is poor, so she works two jobs—ergo, the strong hands. Elaine loves baseball and the opera La Boheme. Madeline loves Elaine in the way you might love a tortoise or the opera La Boheme. But more than those things, or less than those things? Madeline feels like a rabbit when she thinks of Elaine.

The rabbit feels like Elon Musk after an exhausting week of networking and a class called “The Business Major’s Guide to Mixing Daiquiris” (stirred, not shaken).

Sometimes, Elaine and Madeline lie on the veranda of Madeline’s house and discuss the future. They curl up together, and then apart, and feel very small. The rabbit doesn’t know what it feels. It doesn’t want to feel anything, but it wants to feel everything.

One day, Madeline wakes up and the rabbit is gone.

ROBIN BISSETT

Yellow House

Barrera  Bissett
I forget that there is a place where people look like me
Round faces, tanned skin, with jet black hair
Black eyes that look like yesterday’s black beans
Con salsa en arroz y gandules
with long nails painted hooker red by my tía

The sky is always blue, there is fire in our souls and in the mountains.
I forget that home is a place I love,
where mariachi’s retire to Boyle Heights to raise their grandchildren
and I walk along the beach with my little sister
who hates her gorgeous body
as much as I hate mine

But she is so beautiful,
hersoul is like that of the dolphins we can hear from the port
and the boy I like, with his wavy blonde hair,
reminds me of that sand that used to get stuck in my sneakers as I walked to school

Cuando veo esos ojos,
oye la canción de la calle
donde hay magia en la aire
and I see people who look just like me
and I remember

That if I love them, as much as I do,
Then others must love me too.
Warm skin, warm breath,
I feel your letters sent by
Lips and tongues on chest.
Can you feel me,
As legs weave like vines beneath roughspun blankets?

Run your hands across my back,
Feel my pounding heart, though
My flesh feels soft, it’s made of a
Dense granite, a marble statue of
A petrified oak.

Panting, tasting,
I want to feel you.
I want to know if you, too, are made of stone,
Or if you’re made of grass,
Soft and slight.

Please be stone with me,
There’s still time for
Sediments to invade your pores
And turn your bending leaves to rock,
Your flowers to gems.

Somewhere, a statue stands
Weathered but tall,
Beside the rotting carcass of a
Rose bush.
They were, as a collective, almost definitely fucked.

Thanks to the grace of their ancestors, a whole generation was now inheriting a clusterfuck of problems deemed too large or too complex to properly manage. The can had been kicked down the increasingly shrinking line and pointing fingers meant nothing because most of the blame belonged to the old and dead. Sasha longed for it to be over like an addict, obsessively and to the point of self-destruction. And yet, she knew nothing could save her from the long, creeping shadow but herself, and everyone else like her—abandoned by circumstance and ambivalence.

She spent most days scrounging in abandoned buildings and the junkpiles at the edge of town, tagging long useless stop signs and helping the slow crush of destruction along. Kit went with her, along with her little brother Thomas. Kit, very much a product of his environment, tended toward less scavenging and more destruction. The nail-studded baseball bat slung over his shoulder, justified as protection, served as his catharsis against the surroundings that made him. Thomas was young and slight, perfect for slipping into hard to reach cracks of buildings or defunct machines that had otherwise been rendered clean by any and all other scavengers. In her mind, Sasha brought him along for this reason and this reason alone, but she also could not stand the sight of him home alone with their mother, picking at the fallow garden or uselessly cleaning out the ever present dirt that seemed to sink even into the cracks of their skin and stay there.

“We picked this place last week,” Kit mentioned, gesturing to the dramatic hole in a sheet of drywall bearing the fingerprints of his bat.

“You said that about the old factory,” whined Thomas, very much against the idea of walking any farther; Sasha knew that much from experience. “We gotta start someplace.”

“I’m telling you, we already started at this place. There ain’t no more starting left for us.” Kit swung his bat into one of the support pillars of the old office building.

The building had once held productive, if potentially redundant, jobs for relatively average people and, once upon a time, that was how the world had spun. Now, a shell stood in place of the breathing organism, picked clean long before Sasha learned to talk of such things. Nothing remained but the skeleton, the charcoal sketches of what might have been here, filled in by stories and imagination more than anything in evidence. The support pillars were the only part still working as intended, which meant Kit intended to help them along on their path to inevitability.

“Tommy, see if you can climb up into the ceiling tiles. There might be some wiring left,” Sasha said, not quite willing to admit defeat even when she recognized it staring her in the face. “We gotta start someplace.”

He never really came around to their house anymore and Sasha could hardly blame him. Certainly, he understood her though, just as well as she understood him, and that should have worried her. But nothing indicated to her that they wouldn’t start up again if prodded.

.Void was a concept they all understood past the point of fear. She knew he didn’t really care what he did with it because it wasn’t something he could destroy. And Kit, she knew, only destroyed what he understood. He still had family around because he couldn’t be bothered to get to know them and they felt the same towards him. In that way, balance maintained itself because Kit never overstepped his bounds and his family never bothered him.

He understood her though, just as well as she understood him, and that should have worried her. It meant she would eventually be picked apart as thoroughly as the old office building if she let him.

She wouldn’t let him.

“Do you think Mom would let me keep a dog if I found one?” Thomas was saying, scuffing his boots against the yellow-grey floor, coated in dust.

“If you found one,” Sasha replied. “What makes you think a dog would hang around someplace he couldn’t be fed?”

Thomas shrugged, one of the few expressions he was truly good at. “He could guard the house and Mom wouldn’t have to worry so much.”

Sasha sighed. Thomas still believed he had any semblance of effect on the emotions of their mother. He was young and trusting and Sasha had kept him out of the house enough that he forgot many of the reasons why they were out in the first place. Life meant endless adventure for him, searching for treasure to bring back to an adoring mother. A regular lost boy.

Sasha, though thoroughly lost in most respects, did not consign herself to something that had...
already let her down. She couldn’t afford it and neither could Thomas, although he didn’t know it. Their father had jumped ship for a reason and that reason was the endless delusions of their mother. Sick as she might have been, Sasha ran out of sympathy for her long ago.

“You’d have to guard him from the neighbors,” Kit said, a poison smile crossing his face. “It’s been a long time since anyone’s had fresh meat.” Almost immediately, Thomas attacked him, defending the honor of his imaginary dog. They struggled for a bit, Kit down to one hand while the other held the bat against his shoulders and Thomas thoroughly outmatched in size and strength. Ultimately, Thomas shoved Kit back and settled for deadly glares.

Sasha shook her head. “You two keep doing that and we’re never gonna find nothing.”

Kit sneered. “We’re never gonna find nothing anyway. I’m telling you, there ain’t nothing left for us.” He paused and seemed to consider something distant. “You know, I’ve got a cousin who’s leaving for one of those big eco-cities, them utopia-types. The more I look around, the more I think for us.” He paused and seemed to consider something distant. “You know, I’ve got a cousin who’s leaving for one of those big eco-cities, them utopia-types. The more I look around, the more I think for us.” He paused and seemed to consider something distant. “You know, I’ve got a cousin who’s leaving for one of those big eco-cities, them utopia-types. The more I look around, the more I think for us.” He paused and seemed to consider something distant. “You know, I’ve got a cousin who’s leaving for one of those big eco-cities, them utopia-types. The more I look around, the more I think for us.” He paused and seemed to consider something distant. “You know, I’ve got a cousin who’s leaving for one of those big eco-cities, them utopia-types. The more I look around, the more I think for us.”

Then Kit did look around, brown eyes flashing, considering his surroundings as something other than destruction fodder. Sasha knew, because she felt the same, that he was thinking how everything around them meant to slowly destroy them. The only difference between them was that Kit meant to destroy everything before it had the chance. Sasha would run if she thought she could make it.

“You think they got dogs in them eco-cities?” Thomas asked, already forgiving of Kit’s reference to dog meat.

“No,” Kit’s smile now had an edge of authenticity. When pressed, Thomas became just as much his brother as Sasha’s. “They got everything in the eco-cities. Beef everyday and showers with clean water. Nothing bad ever happens there.”

“Tell him that,” Sasha rolled her eyes, “You ain’t never been there.”

“Yeah,” Kit admitted. “But I’ve read those brochures same as you. They’ve got civilization there.”

He drew out the word as if it were a foreign thing he needed to pronounce correctly, and really that wasn’t far from the truth. “One day we’re all gonna live there and it’ll be better than here.”

“One day if it doesn’t help us today, Kit.” Sasha grumbled, reluctantly, because damn if she hadn’t dreamed of something better than here. “We need to earn enough to eat this week. Keep looking.”

“Fine, fine.”

Sasha knew nothing was fine.

Yesterday night, after finishing their search, he’d offered the whole lot to Sasha and Thomas—they got everything in the eco-cities. Beef everyday and showers with clean water. Nothing bad ever happens there.

The next morning, Kit started awake and momentarily forgot where he was. He changed living spaces so often that nothing felt familiar anymore, everything changed and nothing got better. Yesterday night, after finishing their search, he’d offered the whole lot to Sasha and Thomas—they needed it more than he did—in exchange for sleeping quarters in their shed for the night. He thought Sasha might protest, being more inclined to fairness than most people, but she didn’t and Kit didn’t want her to anyway.

The small shed reeked like rodent, musty and cloying, yet he had found none. Mostly, the glorified hutch housed spareparts Sasha hadn’t found a buyer for or thought might be useful in some unknown future. It really was pathetically empty, even with Kit’s height included. Kit thought the emptiness had more to do with the building’s lack of proper purpose, which only served to annoy him because now he could relate on a personal level with a shed.

He grumbled senselessly to himself and stumbled out of the shed and into the morning. He squinted up through the dust towards the sky, but mostly all he could see was the sickly yellow tint of dust reflecting sun. Any rain would be a mixed blessing, since in this landscape it tended more towards flooding than anything productive.

Sasha stood outside, hanging laundry on a wire and looking faded as an ancient photograph, dust roughing up her edges.

“Don’t worry. She’s keeping inside,” she said, not slowing the pace of her work or even sparing Kit a glance. “She won’t see you.”

She meant, of course, Sasha and Thomas’s mother, a vestigial limb in their lives that Kit guessed was more harm than comfort. But what did he know? Most things were vestigial in his life.

“Can I help?” Kit asked, gesturing towards her work.

She hummed by way of answer, so he stumbled over to her basket and picked up one of Thomas’s thin shirts.

“She says she’s sick again. Says the medicine is killing her.”

Kit sneered ruefully as he pinned the shirt’s shoulder to the wire. “Killing you and Thomas, more like.”

Sasha nodded, but her bothered expression didn’t change. Her face often defaulted to this expression—part stubbornness, part disappointment, and all fury. It made her eyes turn into dull charcoal where they might have held glowing light.

“I don’t know how to tell her that we can’t afford it, no one can. She doesn’t even know that Dr. Garrett left almost six months ago.”

“You didn’t tell her?”

“She wouldn’t believe me. You know she thinks I lie about everything, exaggerating how bad it is. There’s no point in telling her anything anymore.”

Now Sasha paused in her rhythm. She seemed sunk with exhaustion, drowning in it.

“We could leave.” Kit suggested, trying not to look at her, trying to continue working and not notice her pause. She wouldn’t want him to notice.

“Kit,” she spat. He lifted his hands in surrender. “I know, I know. You don’t want to hear it. The eco-cities are a hoax. I’m not saying go there, I’m saying go anywhere. Anywhere else.”

Sasha stared at him and he could feel the weight of it on his neck, like the burning sun pounding down on a dustless day.

“Why don’t you go? Why haven’t you left already if you like the idea so much.” She snarled, but without much venom, which mostly spoke to her bone-deep exhaustion.

Kit swallowed. She wouldn’t like the truth, but she would recognize a lie. He tried to play it off as a soft, quiet thing, not the blaring song inside him.

“Ash, come on, Sashabelle, you know I couldn’t leave you.” He smiled something fake, but quickly gave up.

She grimaced and shot him a glare. “You know I hate it when you call me that.”

“That’s why I do it.”

“Okay, then, Kitty.” He winced. “Tell me the truth. What’s keeping you here?”

“You.”

She sneered and aggressively didn’t look at him. “Be serious.”

“You asked for the truth.”

She rounded on him, her eyes set with angry fire. “I’m not enough for something like that.”

Kit twitched when he meant to shrug. “You don’t have to be.”

“What does that mean?”

He exhaled, loudly, heart pinned down and exhausted. “Shit, Sasha, what do you think? It means I won’t leave because I want to be around. I like seeing you everyday. I like tussling with your kid brother. I like listening to you complain about your mother. I won’t leave because there can’t be anything better that I’m missing out on.”

Now he’d done it. He’d ripped his ugly heart out of his chest and threw it in the dust at her feet. He could see it bleeding on her shoes.

She stayed quiet for a long time, looking at him, measuring something inside him. Then she nodded like she’d decided something, hummed again, and kept his gaze.
“I like seeing you everyday too. I get nervous when you sleep other places because who knows if you’ll come back. But, Kit,” she paused and he thought somehow the world was about to crack in half, “I won’t leave because I’m a coward.”

“That’s okay.”

“It’s not. It means I’m killing my brother. He deserves better.” “We all do, Sasha.”

And then, the world really did crack in half because Sasha’s mother stepped out of the house. Kit thought she was screaming, but Sasha had told him before that her mother was incapable of talking any quieter.

“What the blazing hell is that boy doing on my property!” She screeched, spit flying in the air, dressed in something that might have been a grubby nightgown, but also might have been a tablecloth.

Sasha didn’t even flinch.

Neither did Kit, but that was because his feet were frozen to the ground, like in the worst sorts of nightmares.

“He’s helping with the laundry,” she said, her voice cool and even as the ground after a rainstorm.

“Like hell he is! Get out before I call the cops!”

Sasha rolled her eyes. “There aren’t cops around anymore, Mama.”

Her daughter’s comment only aggravated her, so Kit wasn’t surprised when Sasha’s mother picked up an empty flower pot and lobbed it at him. It struck the side of the house instead.

“Damn you! Damn you to hell!” she screamed as Sasha pulled Kit away by the arm. He couldn’t tell who exactly she was cursing.

“Thomas! We’re going! Come on!” Sasha raised her voice enough to make Kit’s ears ring trying to compete with her mother.

Thomas, always alert, bolted out of the house like he’d been waiting for the signal and jogged after Kit and Sasha as they headed back towards town.

“Did you get that thing to hold a charge?” he asked as they distanced themselves from the house.

“Yup.” Sasha produced the box they had found from the folds of her clothes. “We’ll get a better signal from the mountain.”

The mountain was not an actual mountain, but a hill where townsfolk left useless things, which tended to pile up. It became a mountain when it became the tallest structure on the horizon. To get there, they had to trek through much of the wasted town. Rusted and broken buildings held nothing more than squatters and the last of the real stores had closed before Kit hit puberty. Having nothing else in the way of possessions, Kit sometimes used his imagination to fill in the gaps left behind.

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Even in his head, the town didn’t look like much. One main street bordered by tiny, local shops and feeding into small clusters of houses. In its heyday, this place begged to be abandoned.

Somehow, bad things never changed.

When they reached the mountain, Sasha led the way through the rusted junk and other tetanus hazards to its highest point. They had marked it one summer with a large spray-painted X back when they could spare the time to find out such a thing, back when other people cared if they were eating.

“X marks the spot,” Thomas gleefully shouted, pounding the car hood where the mark lived.

“Alright, Captain. Move aside. Let’s see if we can get a signal.” Sasha replaced Thomas on the car.

Kit imagined she looked like a captain while standing there, guiding them towards better treasure.

She had a way of moving and speaking that was much more solid than he ever could. He envied and envied and admired it in equal parts and he hoped she wouldn’t mind if he thought of her that way.

“Alright, come on, darling.” Sasha whispered to the box as its lights flickered weakly.

She held it above her head and tilted it this way and that. She pushed buttons and stared at the box’s displays, none of it meaning anything to Kit.

“Aha!” Sasha cried suddenly, making him jump.

The box had started to beep. Steadily, it sounded off over and over like an alien heartbeat.

`eeepbeepbeep`

`eeepbeepbeep`

`eeepbeepbeep`

“Is it supposed to be doing that?” Thomas asked, pointing warily at the box.

“Yes! It found a signal!” Sasha bounced on the tips of her toes so steadily her body hummed.

Then they all heard static crackling inside long unheard speakers.

“You said the speakers were broken!” Thomas barked, accusatory, but still split with excitement.

“I said I thought they were broken!” Sasha’s voice rang clear in the air and Kit knew why.

“Something, finally, worked.”

Sasha messed with the box’s buttons some more and the static became clear. A soft voice, like a shout heard miles away, leaked through the unbroken speakers.

Attention all sectors. Prepare for cleansing evacuation effective immediately. Please go to your assigned lodgings for processing.

Thomas pouted, sticking his bottom lip out in the only way children know how.

“That is it?” he demanded.

“We must have picked up an emergency signal from one of the cities,” Sasha mused, clearly undone by the message.

Or at least, Kit assumed she was undone because he felt that way too.

“What kind of emergency?” Thomas asked, leaping up to join Sasha on top of the car.

Sasha shook her head, still fiddling with the buttons on the communicator and humming. More sound crackled out of the speakers.

Rising mutation levels put us all at risk. Please comply with cleansing officers’ directions. A whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Something clicked in Kit’s head as the message continued to repeat. A few drunken rumors circulated by his freight car driving uncles suddenly made terrible sense.

“It’s a culling,” he mumbled, his voice soft and trembling.

“A what?” Thomas echoed.

“Culling. Kit repeated, hauling himself onto the car and snatching the communicator from Sasha.

“Someone’s killing people in the cities because they don’t like them.”

The morning’s light seemed strained suddenly, breaking and shattering against metal bits and hard rocks of the landscape. Kit dreamed he could see the people screaming, dying on the horizon where the heat became a shimmer.

Sasha’s face contorted darkly and Kit watched as she reached for her brother. “How do you know?” Her voice wavered like the horizon in Kit’s head.

“My uncles make supply runs to the cities and back. They were talking a week ago about people getting rounded up and shipped off.” Kit let his voice drop into a snarl. “They seemed to think there was something funny about it.”

Thomas glanced at his sister, then back to Kit, his bright eyes wide. “Why would they do that?” he asked, a quiet terror growing in his words.

Kit looked at Sasha, who stared at him evenly, waiting to see what he would say. He didn’t know how to answer Thomas. He didn’t want to hurt Sasha by hurting her brother.

“I don’t know, kid,” Kit’s words slumped against the rust and discarded waste of the mountain. He handed the communicator back to Sasha. She held it cautiously, like it might set off a bomb.

“I don’t know.”

They left the mountain soon after, having found no joy in their discovery, and continued the eternal search for whatever was left.

At midday, when the sun shot bullets and did not miss, they stopped to gather water. Or rather, Kit helped Sasha cut and gather cactus and Thomas went searching for lizards. If he were anything like Kit, he would be hunting for a meal, but Thomas, blessed with his guardian sister, hunted for...
closer to his chest. Black eyes stared up at them with disinterest. Desert sand. Kit thought it looked funny for a dog, with disproportionately large, pointed ears. Its

"You weren't at that age."

"Yeah, well, I knew I was an orphan. He hasn't put it together yet. If this is about leaving, knock it off. You heard that transmission."

Kit sighed and kicked the cactus, which made Sasha stop and cross her arms. "So what? We don't have to go there. Don't you want to leave your mom?"

"I never said that."

"You didn't have to."

"Damn it, Kit!" she shouted, throwing her knife down so hard it stuck in the rough sand. They both glanced around to see Thomas bouncing through the desert well out of earshot. She shook her head, scowling at him, and he realized that she had aged when he wasn't looking. Or maybe not aged, but withered. She was defeated and dying. They all were, but she would come by it sooner.

"Where would we even go?" she mumbled to the dirt and the near-useless knife and the cactus spines. "How do we know it would be better?"

Kit's blood surged, roaring in his head, anger at what he couldn't control swirling through his veins. "My point," he said, taking her junk knife and setting his real one in her hand, "is that they live up here.

"You have a point here?" Sasha picked up her knife and returned to shearing off cactus spines.

"I have cousins," he said finally. "Not kin cousins. Their mother saved my dad's life once."

"You have a point here!" Sasha nodded. She'd made a decision about something, although Kit couldn't tell what exactly. "Ask her then."

"That's far, isn't it?"

"It's not?" Kit and Thomas answered together, making Thomas smile even wider. The animal, apparently content to be curled up in Thomas's arms, was small and as tan as the desert sand. Kit thought it looked funny for a dog, with disproportionately large, pointed ears. Its black eyes stared up at them with disinterest.

"That's a desert fox. A baby by the look of it." Sasha drew near, but Thomas only held the animal closer to his chest. "She found me. I helped her catch a lizard. You have to let me keep her. Like you said, she's a baby. She needs me." Thomas was obsolete, which meant Sasha likely wouldn't stop him. The baby fox yawned.

"You didn't have to."

"I never said that."

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"Sasha sighed, shook her head, and turned to smirk at Kit. He shrugged.

"Okay."

"As soon as Thomas caught the shape of her approval, he bounced in place, shouting his excitement.

"But you're taking care of it, you hear me," Sasha continued. "Don't let Mom know about it, or it won't be up to me if you keep it."

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"Sasha left the house and locked her mother inside. If she would hit her daughter now, it wouldn't matter. Thomas had his bat. For some reason, the sight of Kit brandishing the bat at his side like a sword made her smile. Thomas was babbling about how

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Thomas snorted dismissively. "You worry too much, Sasha." Then, setting the fox onto his shoulders, he jogged off towards their house. "Mama's gonna love Lizard."

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"That's far, isn't it?"

"I should think so. I can ask her about it tonight."

"I have cousins," he said finally. "Not kin cousins. Their mother saved my dad's life once."

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"I have cousins," he said finally. "Not kin cousins. Their mother saved my dad's life once."

Sasha froze and stared at him, with eyes that glowed like glass bottles in the sunlight — broken veins. "How do we know it would be better?"

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She had convinced Thomas to hide the fox—Lizard—in the shed. He was in there with it now, feeding it bits of cactus and canned meat. The animal made things complicated, but it also made Thomas happy, so Sasha would live with it.

She questioned whether she could do the same with her mother any longer. It was Kit's fault, really. He kept filling her head with hope for something better. He meant well, she knew, but so did her father and he'd still let her down. She never did receive any of the letters or a cent of the money he'd promised she would send.

Tonight, her mother seemed worse. Sasha couldn't pinpoint why accurately enough to ease her nerves. She shouted at the old landline, whose wires had been chewed through before Thomas was born. She almost burned herself attempting to make dinner because, she claimed, someone was coming home soon. Sasha gave up guessing who she meant and turned off the gas when her mother wasn't looking. Things like that had happened before, Sasha had grown used to it for better or worse.

Then she started yelling at Sasha about eggs. There weren't any eggs in the refrigerator, she said. Sasha didn't think there had ever been any eggs in the refrigerator, if there had been, they wouldn't have lasted long. The refrigerator didn't work, it had never worked to her knowledge, and she had gutted it for parts a long time ago. Her mother yelled at her to go grocery store for eggs and when Sasha, unable to cater to her mother's delusions anymore, said no, her mother hit her.

It stung more than Sasha thought it would. Her mother was weak and deathly skinny, she struggled to walk about the house, but that didn't change the fact that she had just left a bruise on her daughter. More than that, Sasha's mother had never struck her. Never. Even the days when she did become violent, it was always towards objects or furniture or occasionally Kit, never her children.

Until tonight.

Sasha left the house and locked her mother inside. If she would hit her daughter now, it wouldn't be long before she hit Thomas. If one thing was certain in this shattered glass life of hers, Sasha would never let that happen.

Kit appeared out of the dark, with Thomas behind him. Sasha couldn't manage to be angry about Thomas leaving in the middle of night; she felt numb down to her bones. Thomas had his face screwed up like he did when he didn't want to cry. Kit had his bat. For some reason, the sight of Kit brandishing the bat at his side like a sword made her smile. Thomas was babbling about how
animals could sense danger, that Lizard had been barking so he went to find Kit. Sasha didn’t care.
Kit opened his mouth to say something, but Sasha beat him to it. Her words felt dead in her mouth and she knew he could hear it.
"We’re leaving. I don’t care where we go."

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**Rare Plants**

**ARIANA FLETCHER-BAI**

i feel the moon turning to ice in my eyes
the cold night, this time
we will not find ourselves on a rooftop downtown
at 3 am.
we will not find ourselves.
he will be handled like a rare plant.
he will be given exact measures. i will
handle myself like a rare plant too
care for myself in the dark i will
look for sunlight where i can get it.
i will starve for touch, starve.
i will consult a botanist. i will pay attention
to the signs of rot.
he will look at the time and think ‘this is
not enough, for any of us.’
he will grow.
i will stare at the clock until i get
bloodshot eyes again and a headache.
i will wonder if it is anger when it feels like a headache
an ache, an x where there wasn’t one before
or just dehydration?
he will not know where the x is or the end is
and maybe
he dreams about it like i do in horrible strange
slow motion horrible strange
nightmares of loss.
or maybe he sleeps like a rare plant
without dreams.

---

**Small (but Significant) Creature**

**NICK SMETZER**

Hold a creature in your hands,
Feel fearful fluttering breaths,
Sense small seething shivers.
How is it that two sets of eyes meet
To speak a language neither owner hears.
To live is to be strange to life;
To live is to be strange.
no sense of depth as i fall into the dirt — surface tension being the thing that breaks
the skin — of divers slipping off the ledge, their minds too quick for their arms,
twisting hips in a dance — as a bone crossing the water dissolves, i’m still in love —
the stream bends and wavers beneath us as we kick our feet, light shimmering
against the surface like thinly brushed watercolors whose edges burn brightly into
the water — and you’re here, talking about the way the earth feels against your
fingers — how the dirt builds up under your nails —
sometimes in fear of sounding dramatic, i remain silent, going dramatically and
profoundly and perhaps sexily unnoticed —
am i a girl or am i a beast whose small legs skid across the water at breathtaking
speeds — an opossum straying from the grass, blithely admiring the cool rumbling of
the gravel?

Gustav Klimt’s “The Kiss (Lovers)”, 1907, oil paint and gold leaf

i.
in it i found it pressed between
the tri-colored print of Bob Marley
and a laminated copy of the constitution.

This is not how Klimt wanted it,
too bright and too red,
hung up with thumbtacks
and duct tape
on cinderblocks and drywall.

But she put it there anyway,
And I can’t get away from it now
And I don’t know if I want to.

ii.
in it i miss knowing what i was afraid of.
Today I forgot
why this painting made me feel so scared.
Only yesterday, I looked at her and I knew.

We call each other lovers,
but only in parentheses.

We are dancing
between feverishness and fear,
Klimt on scratchy sheets
and lost sleep.

Our cramped bodies match the painting
here on this bed too small for sharing,
where she choose we be together anyway.

Opposite a wall decorated with dying hydrangeas,
Yellow clorox, and the Kiss,
we write our first draft
And name it love.

iii.
They would like us to think it was pleasure.
Eyes closed in ecstasy.
Toes curling from the touch of his lips on her cheek-
Flushed and breathless.
Flower

DINDA LEHRMANN

at some point you have to start believing it'll be ok / somewhere in the ruins, a snapping turtle crouches in the corner and fumbles towards the shore / jewels from the city in its mouth. at some point we take for granted that there was a star somewhere / is a star out there / that the bright slits in the sky aren’t cuts in a spray-painted styrofoam ball that we call the universe / that maybe the star believes it’ll be ok, in its course to the earth. and maybe that’s what counts. maybe, even if that’s all wrong and the star wipes out all forms of life, a snapping turtle will let us live in their nostril. sometimes it gets rainy in there, but after a few years / after a special Umbrella Reeducation Training / the new generation will forget about umbrellas, and just love dwelling in a snapping turtle’s sinus cavity. maybe that’s what love is about, even if we’re wrong about everything else.

I am not sure it is a kiss.
No matter the title.
She told him she did not want to be kissed, and he made her
and he made us watch it anyway.

I am not sure it is a kiss.
No matter her calling us lovers.
Maybe I remembered what I was afraid of.
Maybe I couldn’t get away from her, maybe
I didn’t know how to want to.
I did not dare tell her no,
I did not dare argue
When met with fists.

He held her as she was falling. Sometimes, holding onto something that wants to hurt you feels better than losing the last patch of ground you have left.

Look at her toes—
They are trying to not lose grip of the only thing keeping her from floating away.
Look at my eyes.
Shut and scared and— does anyone know how I ended up here?

In the end,
She grabbed me
and kissed me.
She grabbed me
and hurt me.
You cannot get enough.
It all just happened so fast. Not two months after even meeting, a mutual friend told me, “he likes you”, and I screamed. The next day he sat next to me on my couch and told my roommate, apropos of nothing, “By the way, I’m dating Erica now.” A few days later we first met for coffee. I hadn’t meant to date him yet. He was so young, practically a baby, had never even taken a college midterm yet. (I saw myself comparatively grizzled, in my third Trinity October.) I was both thrilled and terrified about what was happening. But I told myself it all came with the territory, that these were the gears inside the fairytale. I tried to drown my doubts, silence them by insisting that this was how it was supposed to be: that anything new would be a little uncomfortable, insecurities about the relationship were probably just thinly-veiled self-sabotage, and love is a verb.

We laid in my bed, my laptop resting on my left and his right knee, catching up on “The Good Place”, watching as Eleanor and Chidi finally proclaimed their love to each other. There was a new tension in the air. I felt an urge to turn time backward, to have never heard their words. Maybe love is a touchy subject for any new relationship but the sudden weight in the air unnerved me. I felt an urge to turn time backward, to have never heard their words. Maybe love is a touchy subject for any new relationship but the sudden weight in the air unnerved me.

I was willing to work, and grow, and make myself vulnerable for this thing more than I can tell. Weeks later, we would lay side by side again, him quiet and awkwardly still as tears gently slid down my cheeks. I didn’t have the words to explain how I was feeling that day, the day after the synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, or how anyone could help. So we both laid there, without much to say, each trying to manage the discomfort of my pain. My roommate sat on her bed three feet away and tried hard not to notice. Any strong emotions were touchy. But I accepted that, too, as a symptom of newness. I was willing to work, and grow, and make myself vulnerable for this thing I had, this just-out-of-reach love that we, too, would one day proclaim. I threw myself, freefalling, into the pre-scripted role of a girlfriend.

I don’t know why he changed his mind. I didn’t understand that December noon two and a half months later when he said “I’m unhappy” and it took too long in the one-sided conversation before I realized what I had been agreeing to by nodding as he talked. I blanked out as soon as I heard him say “I’m unhappy” and it took too long in the one-sided conversation before I realized what I had been agreeing to by nodding as he talked. I blanked out as soon as I heard him say “I’m unhappy” and I was how it was supposed to be: that anything new would be a little uncomfortable, insecurities about the relationship were probably just thinly-veiled self-sabotage, and love is a verb.

I feel the summer’s comradery with me as I drive. With every song, I am transported back to Pennsylvania, June 2018. The oom-pah of Gaston’s narcissistic, misogynistic solo “Me” starts and I am in the dressing room again, pinning a wig into a sweaty head of hair, listening to Jon sing through the monitor, “This equation, girl plus man/Doesn’t help just you/On occasion, women can/Have their uses too/MAINLY to extend the family tree/Pumpkin, extend with me!” Such spot-on casting; what a bastard. Once and a half through the Spotify album, I realize I miss hearing all the stuff that happens in between songs, the jokes and voices and lines copied word-for-word from the animated movie. I pull up the Google Drive mp4 of the production I had worked on the past summer and play it through my speakers instead. Whatever bond we cast and crew had had, tempered by the collective varied horrors of the production’s experience, comes back to life as I hear them sing.

I had fallen in love with many of the people of Beauty & the Beast; it was hard not to. Allie played the overshadowed feather duster and was a feminist powerhouse icon onstage. When “Jon Gaston” harassed several ensemble women at the opening night party, Allie went with them to talk to HR. She supported and affirmed me too, through the party the night before our closing performance: from my outfit, through crying with an empty wine bottle in hand, to the next morning when I had to survivor my first hangover during a matinee. One two-show Saturday she gave me $2 so I could get a snack from the vending machine for “lunch”. For weeks after, I had dreams of her giving me money as a good omen that everything would be ok.

Seth was a friend when I desperately needed one, a rare cast member who wasn’t a Muhlenberg student or alum. We were two of only a few without a social group in place upon our arrival to the campus for the summer and bonded through that if nothing else. We celebrated my birthday a few days late with plans of ice cream from the 24hr store. Though I felt 1 am talking so freely, the early stages of getting to know each other. And he was almost more than a coincidence, but never quite. The summer romance that got away. Our backstage flirting and kisses at parties turned out to be just a step along the journey of my self-confidence, not anything long-lasting or serious. But whatever gray space our relationship occupied for those few weeks, it was meaningful. He was the first person with whom I felt comfortable with the possibility of intimacy, and although our relationship never included intimacy, the new comfort I felt with something I otherwise knew as being so taboo was significant beyond words. As my comfort zone expanded, I grew with it, learning about love in-betweens.

Alan and Christine, Beast and stage manager, respectively, were a couple and were so professional and talented, and the loveliest people imaginable. I learned from them about the human capacity for goodness, a quality I needed around me as I got used to the rigor of being an intern and working on not only a (semi-)professional production but this one especially. (My first dance musical to crew, and a “spectacle” one at that!) They were so nice, above and beyond what was necessary and what I
had ever encountered. Christine learned my name the first day she met me and wished me a happy birthday the next day. Alan would squat down slightly every time I needed to clip a bow into his Beast hair during a very fast costume change so that he wouldn’t be over a foot taller than me and I would be able to reach. I spent June with a crush on both of them; it really is the little things.

By the time I pull into the Sonic in Columbus for dinner around 6pm, Act 1 has ended again. God, that Act 1 closer. The sound quality on the Google Drive file isn’t as good as the OBCR Spotify album by a long shot, but at the same time it is somehow more beautiful. More familiar, more personal. I had watched Alan sing that angsty Beast song in tech. He had been in costume, on stage, and every new way the designers fiddled with the lights seemed to make more beautiful what I was witnessing. That angsty Beast song... today I can see myself in it. “How I could have loved her/And made her love me too/If I can’t love her, then who?” I change the pronouns in my mind and channel my own frustration and fear and sadness through the music. How could I have loved him? “Long ago I should have seen/All the things I could have been.” Careless and unthinking I moved onward, the Beast and Belle made him love me once made in his heart, deep inside. I am afraid if I can hear anything other than the music and my own voice, the emotional void I have found myself in since I had the end of my relationship. I, too, see to be “helpless, unforgiven.” Nothing makes sense anymore in light of the previous day, everything totally subverted. I hated this song half the performance nights for being whiny and now here I am losing my voice to it. But it’s cathartic to imagine myself the tragic hero of my life story and to imagine my story the Beast’s.

I became the tragic heroine as well, singing along with Belle just as deeply impassioned. “Try to find/Something good in this tragic place/Just in case/I should stay here forever/Held in this empty space,” she sings from new captivity in the Beast’s castle. I feel this, deep inside. I am afraid if I can’t help but compare my own situation, placing some blame on myself for whatever part I had in the end of my relationship. I, too, seem to be “helpless, unforgiven.”

I showed up to work, and I got up to take a shower to at least wash my face. I stood in the shower circulating through the air vents. I arrive home, dry-eyed. How revealing my face would be of an emotion no one else was showing not nine hours later when I climbed back into bed I was refreshed both in my body and in my soul.

“I can’t/Solve my problems going back.” These lines quickly become an anchor. I can’t solve my problems by going back either: back in time, back to San Antonio, back to my new ex. And I can panic about the longevity of emotions, my fear and despair and loneliness, in safety, knowing that Belle got through it and chances are I will too.

"Wardrobe Intern" had been the official title of my summer job, and it was a terrible job I had signed on to do. And the pay didn't help at all. Later. I would calculate the stipend’s “hourly wage” equivalent to $2.50, barely more than the great gift of pocket change Allie had once lent me. Two dollars and fifty cents an hour to sit in darkness and wash sweaty leotards until 1 am nearly every day for three weeks. But I was in love. Muhlenberg Summer Music Theatre's "Wardrobe Intern" had been the official title of my summer job, and it was a terrible job I had signed on to do. And the pay didn't help at all. Later. I would calculate the stipend’s “hourly wage” equivalent to $2.50, barely more than the great gift of pocket change Allie had once lent me. But I was in love. Muhlenberg Summer Music Theatre’s "Beauty & the Beast" was a grieving process. I knew the summer’s production schedule for whatever part I had had in the end of my relationship. I, too, seem to be “helpless, unforgiven.”

"For in my dark despair / I've slowly understood / My perfect world out there / Had disappeared for good / But in its place I feel / A truer life begin / And it's so good and real / It must come from within / And I-- I never thought I'd leave behind / My childhood dreams but I don't mind / I'm where and who I want to be / No change of heart / A change in me"
Photos of sunflowers in pots, perfect purple sofas,
Each identical to the next. Lemon lingers in the air,
The soft murmur of the radio not much louder than the whispers of white coats.
A young woman lays in an unfamiliar bed, softly clutching a grey bunny.
A blanket weakly drapes around her,
Her bandaged arm, her bruised face — a mosaic.
A monitor marks each and every unsteady breath,
I know you call her doll but I never treated my dolls like this.
Does the morning sky look different in your eyes?
Can you tell the colors apart or do they blend
Until you can’t see what color you started with?
Do the trees welcome you to their home or do
They stare at your hands?
Do the stars shine or do they simply
Scream for you to stop?
A lamp knocked over, its light missing,
A trash bin, refusing to stomach its remains,
The apartment is tired.
Four rings from a phone are heard, but ignored.
A young man lays in a familiar bed. Another four rings.
She’s gone.
I’ve heard it all before. Love, Hope, Anger.
Each a different name for how your hand touched her face.
I know you call her doll but I never treated my dolls like this.
Dwelling
NICK SMETZER

Dwelling in a dark cave
Drinking cold coffee
Watching lights flicker,
He turns his head and sees the discarded watering can
He had used to feed flowers that have long-since perished.
No, now the only things that grow
Are his coffee cold,
And the mold on the dirt beds
Where he had once trimmed leaves
And picked ripe fruits.
And he grows colder
For missing their company

Crease
AMANDA GERLACH

I can barely feel the rain
so light that it only moves the hair out of my face
I hear it, so I know it is there.
My eyes are closed as I lie in the mud
my right hand is broken
I can feel it throbbing
but no pain.
Why?
I just wanted to prove I could be like him
climbing the balcony to surprise her
to let her in.
My breaths come in gasps
I feel the rain now.

Distortion
KATE NUELLE

By the Time You Read This the 1980’s Will Have Passed
DALTON FLOOD

I can barely feel the rain
so light that it only moves the hair out of my face
I hear it, so I know it is there.
My eyes are closed as I lie in the mud
my right hand is broken
I can feel it throbbing
but no pain.
Why?
I just wanted to prove I could be like him
climbing the balcony to surprise her
to let her in.
My breaths come in gasps
I feel the rain now.
**HOLES**

Kenny had holes. He had holes in his ears and he had holes in his jeans and he had holes in his head. He had holes and sometimes they were small and sometimes they were big. Sometimes they were so big that they sucked everything into them, sometimes until there was nothing left. We all knew about the holes. We all hated the holes. And I'm sure he did too. But his holes were our holes. His presence was small when his holes were big. And this created holes in us. This created holes in a mother estranged from her son. This created holes in a woman disconnected from the love of her life. This created holes in a family with a peculiar love for a man on a stupid god-forsaken motorcycle with tattoo sleeves on which he wore his heart. But these holes were okay, because, like his, they could get smaller. They could get smaller as he came back, as he called in the middle of dinner to ask about golf, as he rolled into town for a graduation, as he responded to a text on Father's Day. But now, now his holes are bigger, they're bigger than ever before and we can't make them small again. Now I have holes. I have holes where my Kenny should be. And you have holes where your Kenny should be. And nothing can ever fill those holes. But maybe we can help each other make them smaller. Make them smaller than the ones Kenny sometimes had, that all of us sometimes have. Because holes in the soles means a world well travelled. Because holes in the souls means a world well known. He had holes but he was far from holy. And that's okay, because so are we.

**the last planet, minus pluto, which no longer counts**

This is supposed to be a poem about Neptune, who has fourteen moons and a great dark spot, who is blue and invisible to the naked eye.

Pluto, who we decided wouldn't count, we kept him in the underworld. He was never, really, a planet, I suppose, but he may have held the things which life comes from and he may have held me too.

Pluto and Neptune will never meet, one is the sea and one is hell, too far and not fast enough, never fast enough.

**Shout Out to the Lighting Crew**

Star-crossed stars, their two bodies could never collide.

I am supposed to be writing about Neptune, and Neptune is supposed to be staying away from Pluto, but bodies keep colliding and I keep remembering the way the impact feels.
For the Tears in Heaven
A Play in One Scene by COLLIN MCGRATH

Cast of Characters

Tristan Lambert: Young man, age 17. Generally withdrawn and shy, but very passionate about things he cares about. Extremely studious and introspective, more interested in the natural world and imagination than actual people. Deeply sensitive and feeling, but outside generally wears a neutral expression.

Abbie Lambert: Duncan’s older sister, age 19. Seems overbearing at demanding at times, knowing she’s always right (even when she’s wrong). This stems in part from having to take an active role as the older sibling protecting Tristan from their dad’s yelling outbursts. Extroverted and generally friendly when she’s gotten her morning coffee.

Scene

A suburb house, holding a family of three.

Time

The Present. Evening. Around 7:30 pm.

Act 1, Scene 1

Setting:

We open in TRISTAN’S room, fairly wide with brown-wood paneled floor, a white door with a yellow handle, and a desk littered with miscellaneous papers and various knickknacks, most noticeably a cicada’s brown molt and a few loose guitar picks shaped like stars. There is also a bed with blue sheets that someone else chose for TRISTAN and a tempurpedic mattress. There are two bookshelves in his room; one with superhero comic books (mostly Superman and Green Lantern, as well as a few Captain America) and the other with his favorite novels (i.e. The Ranger’s Apprentice) and some schoolbooks, displaying a few of his Bionicle toys he built as a child, most of which are his own original creations. The wall has Star Wars posters; The Empire Strikes Back and Revenge of the Sith. By his desk, there is a stool, a music stand, a guitar case lying flat across the ground, and a guitar stand that is currently empty.

At Rise:

TRISTAN sits on the stool with his music stand in front of him, his acoustic steel-stringed guitar resting on his knee. He is trying to play Eric Clapton’s “Tears in Heaven” but is too angered by something to play properly. He takes a deep breath, starts over, and sings some of the song.

(As he’s singing, his voice cracks.)

For the Tears in Heaven

TRISTAN
Damn. As if this song wasn’t hard enough. Trusting my muscle memory’s hard, now I can’t trust my own voice to work.

(He clears his throat.)

I bet you never had to deal with this crap. You probably just saw this and played it without a problem.

(He resumes playing, singing with less volume now. As he does so, ABBIE enters and marches straight to his door. She pauses when she hears him playing and singing that familiar song. TRISTIAN sees her, and stops playing. He turns back to his music, trying to ignore her.)

ABBIE
Come on, grumpy. Mom wants us to do the dishes.

(ABBIE doesn’t move. TRISTAN doesn’t move. ABBIE walks over and closes her hands over the frets. He looks up and glares.)

TRISTAN
It’s kinda hard to play with your fingers covering the frets.

ABBIE

(TRISTAN appears as though he’s going to give in for a moment.)

TRISTAN
In a minute.

ABBIE
Do you want to count how many times I’ve done the dishes this past week? Because I guarantee you it’s a lot more than you have.

TRISTAN
Look, I’ll help you in a bit. Just leave me alone so I can practice.

ABBIE
I did leave you alone, remember? For a whole hour after you stomped away from dinner like a pig with no manners.

(TRISTAN grabs her hand still closed over his guitar fret. She doesn’t flinch or back down. Pause. He lets go of her hand.)

TRISTAN
I came back here to blow off some steam. Could you just give me some time?

(She takes her hand off the frets.)

ABBIE
Uh, I can’t exactly relax if you’re sitting right there.

TRISTAN
Uh, You’ve played guitar in front of people before.
TRISTAN

I haven't mastered this song yet. Plus it's personal.

ABBIE

I know. And before you say you're gonna get mom and tell her to make me leave, she's lying down and doesn't want to be bothered. She didn't care for your tantrum at dinner.

TRISTAN

Will you please get out of my room?

ABBIE

Eenope.

(ABBIE walks over to his shelf and picks up one of his Bionicles. She starts toying with it, putting it in awkward positions i.e. splits, hands on hips, etc.)

ABBIE

(Using a mocking Kermit the frog voice.)
Oh, I'm just a red boy from a red family.

TRISTAN

Will you cut that out?

ABBIE

(Still using the voice.)
But, comrade Tristan, I must dance! I must look fabulous!

TRISTAN

I can't finish up if you keep screwing around with my stuff.

(ABBIE folds her arms.)

ABBIE

You play it pretty good. Almost as good as him. (TRISTAN pauses. He begins the hammer down once again.)

ABBIE

But you sing better.

TRISTAN

I don't know about that.

ABBIE

Well, you do.

TRISTAN

When my voice doesn't crack.

ABBIE

But you sound so cute when it cracks.

TRISTAN

Stop it.

ABBIE

Like a puppy sneezing!
ABBIE

Didn’t he fall asleep every other time?

TRISTAN

I’m only any good at the guitar because he sat down and taught me. He cared about us.

ABBIE

Did he? I couldn’t tell with all his drinking.

(Interrupting her.)

TRISTAN

Pause.

He was clinically depressed.

ABBIE

That’s no excuse to drink until his stomach exploded. It’s no excuse to be piece of crap to his own family.

TRISTAN

He wasn’t always like that!

ABBIE

He was horrible.

TRISTAN

SHUT UP! Just shut the hell up! You don’t know anything!

ABBIE

Now, you’re starting to act like him. You gonna yell at mom next too? Or maybe you should yell at yourself.

(Pause. They both realize they’ve gone too far.)

I’m sorry.

(She makes to leave and is at the door when she hears TRISTAN talk.)

TRISTAN

Remember at Splash Mountain, how he always made faces at the camera on the big drop?

ABBIE

Yeah, that was always funny. Look, I’m not saying I didn’t love him but sometimes he could be so difficult.

TRISTAN

Whenever I think of him, I think of how he played this song.

(He takes out his guitar and plays the intro to it.)

I can’t get that memory to mesh with this “horrible person” you call him. So, I don’t get why you’d call him something like that when it can’t be right.

ABBIE

I’m sure he had like, those moments, and I’m glad you remember them, but I just like don’t have any positive memories of him. I felt like when he was in one of his moods I always had to protect you from him.

ABBIE

(Interrupting by dropping the book to the floor.)

Well, I haven’t forgotten when he made you work on your throwing arm so much you started to cry.

TRISTAN

Don’t throw my books on the floor, Abbie.

ABBIE

(Interrupting by speaking over him.)

As I recall, that’s the reason you quit sports, Tristan.

TRISTAN

Come on, you know I’ve never really liked sports. I always liked reading. Dad respected that.

ABBIE

If he respected you reading, then why the hell did he set one of your Bionicle books ON FIRE?

TRISTAN

Okay, first off. I kind of earned that.

ABBIE

Nobody “earns” their book being set on fire!

TRISTAN

I was reading at the dinner table.

ABBIE

Sane people don’t put books on fire when they don’t want someone reading at dinner! They tell them “please put away your book.”

TRISTAN

Second, he only put it to the candle for three, maybe five seconds tops before blowing it out. And it wasn’t even that bad, just a little charred on the edges.

ABBIE

(Sarcasm.)

Oh, I see. That makes it okay then.

TRISTAN

It was his way of making a joke.

ABBIE

Setting a book on fire is not a joke. That’s something Nazis did.

TRISTAN

Hey! He wasn’t a Nazi! How can you even compare him to one?!

ABBIE

Fine, he wasn’t a Nazi, but he had like zero patience.

TRISTAN

No patience?

(Points to the Revenge of the Sith poster.)

He watched Revenge of the Sith with me twenty nights in a row. And that’s not even an exaggeration! I counted.
TRISTAN

Protect me?

ABBBIE

Remember when he yelled at you as a kid, for being too slow getting ready for school? I started waking you up extra early so he wouldn’t have reason to get mad at you.

(They are silent for a moment.)

TRISTAN

Remember that song he always sang about that detergent?

(ABBIE smiles and starts to sing.)

Comet. It makes your teeth turn green.

(TRISTAN sings the next verse.)

Comet. It tastes like gasoline.

(ABBIE)

Comet. It will make you vomit.

ABBIE & TRISTAN

So buy comet, and vomit, today!

(They both smile and chuckle at the memory. The tension in the room seems to dissipate just a bit.)

TRISTAN

I’m sorry I yelled at you earlier.

ABBIE

Yeah, I’m sorry too. Look, just finish up your song. I’ll do the dishes on my own.

TRISTAN

No, I’ll be there in a second.

(ABBIE hugs him.)

ABBIE

Bestest little brother ever.

(She leaves, leaving TRISTAN alone in his room. She stands outside the door and listens to him finish up the last verse.)

TRISTAN

I guess I know this better than I thought I did. Just channeling you makes it easier.

(He manages to play the outro flawlessly. There is a moment of peace and a smile crosses his face. Then ABBIE hops in and loudly screams, startling him.)

ABBIE

YOU SOUND SO GOOD!
Cento Poetry Spotlight

Goodbye
TIANA SANCHEZ

The troubled sky reveals how ruined the lovely
Listen for a piercing shriek. When the doctor lifted you to the light
Into the nothingness of scorn and noise, before the agitations of the day
You have laughed with me at
At the angels who wait for us to pause
They could not forget you

of newness
FAITH BRODDRICK

I’ve never touched a Goddess
But I know one
Her, Who is blessed among us
her hands
my fingers
her face

I smile
priest, help me
Pray bitterly with me

Cento (n)
A poem composed of other poems — a patchwork poem.

At our spotlight event held in November, students were invited to cut up provided poems and reassemble the pieces into their own original work. Two poems were selected from the many works crafted that evening to be featured in this edition of the Review.
While she stays rock still and stone silent.
When he is finished, it is like a satisfying workout.
He pants, looks at the bruised bloody thing,
He takes a picture.
When he leaves, she lets it all out,
Sobbing and shaking.

She lies against the wall in the grey grey room.
A man comes in.
He walks up to her.
Feels the scars, red remnants of yesterday. She twitches.
He traces his finger along the edges.
Then rubs his hand softly along her back.
Then starts to scratch her back. She does not cry.
He scratches harder. She shakes.
Kicks him backwards in the jaw. He stumbles back.
He grabs the bucket of paper mache.
He undoes her wrists.
She goes to kick him again.
He pins her down.
A scuffle, a movement of bodies.
He pins her wrists down and straddles her.
Smacks her in the face. Kisses her.
She kisses him back. Melts into his touch.
They make love, and at the moment of climax,
She reaches into his back pocket grabs his knife and slits his throat.
Looks at his body.
Covers his face in the paper mache.
Then runs up the stairs.

She walks into the grocery store.
She wears a big fluffy nightgown.
She examines all the foodstuffs with big glassy eyes.
She walks slowly, in a daze.
Then makes her way to the flower section.
She opens the door and breathes in the cold air-
Makes puffs with her breath.
She stands in silence.
She waits until the customers leave.
The last employee leaves.
She examines the cold hard night.
Then, sits down with her back facing the wall.
Raises her arms stiffly, as if something were there to hold them, puts them against the wall.
Relaxes.
Breathes in the air and fumes of all the flowers.
Uncertainty lingers in the brain
controlling the puppet to not act,
not do.
refrain.

Motionless but wishing to pull through:
Hoping a spark will appear
so that she can break free
from not knowing her next move.

They say to her,
“it’s easy, cut your strings,
control your life and you’ll be free.”
But will she?
How can she get there,
and who says that she’ll survive?

She is paranoid about the unknown
but only because she doesn’t know herself
this keeps her trapped in her own thoughts
and her dreams filed away on dusty shelves

stillness born from the fear of what action may bring
stillness that does not lead to an escape from the strings

instead, the mind is lost
it goes insane
in the end,
uncertainty becomes the brain.

to talk at length of wordless songs —
to become one with nature —
—as gravel crackles underfoot, as sweater makes an apron —
— one person occupies a seat designed for half a dozen
the spindly leaves make up the ground: await decomposition
beg to be crunched without a sound— withholding the satisfaction —
—they find you nonetheless it seems —
Juan pointed to the ground where a grasshopper writhed, spasming with post-mortem muscle reactions, as fire ants swarmed across its lush green wings, drowning the twitching insect beneath a current of rusty crimson.

"Solenopsis invicta," Joey said, taking a brief moment to record the finding in his journal. "Not the ant we’re looking for."

"Maybe we could take some photos anyway?"

"Dr. Richard's seen fire ants already. Hell, everybody's seen fire ants. They're the most researched ants on the whole damned planet. If we wanted to study fire ants in the field, we could've just gone into my parents' backyard."

"Dude!"

"Am I being too harsh again?"

"Do you really have to ask?"

Joey sighed. "I was trying to make one of those jokes. All I’m saying is fire ants don’t just live in Peru."

"Look, I’m not saying we do a whole report on them. I’ll just take a few quick photos and we can keep going, okay?" Juan asked.

"Suit yourself."

As Juan took out his camera, Joey observed the fire ants tugging at the grasshopper's barbed hind legs. He didn't bother bending over to get a closer look. He'd seen this behavior plenty of times. His fingers tapped across his bicep, while Juan adjusted the camera.

"When I was twelve, I caught a fire ant queen and managed to raise a colony," is what Joey would have said. He would've had a smile on his face as he recounted how quickly a single queen produced thousands of workers. He would've especially remembered how much peace he found in watching them run about, more efficiently than humans. Even now, at twenty-six years old, he remembered what life was like before he raised that fire ant colony.

He was seven years old when it started; the loneliness, the being treated differently. Kids usually didn’t talk to him because he never talked himself. Low murmurs, nods, and headshakes were his primary modes of communication. He never joined the other boys when they played football, even when they invited him, even when the teacher asked if he wanted to play. Some kids assumed he was mute and called him Link, because they knew he liked Legend of Zelda. That was the only thing they knew about him, the only thing they needed to know. Everything else about him was just weird to the other seven year olds. He didn't put his books or his Gameboy down. When kids would ask what he was reading or if they could see what he was playing, he would just show them the cover of the book or the game screen, and then turn away. He covered his ears when the other kids squealed as they raced around the playground. A wailing police or fire siren could send him into a whimper. Whenever teachers would lead the class in the happy birthday song, he just sat silently and clasped his hands, as if he was praying for an end to the noise. Most children learned to avoid him.

It was a big surprise when two kids, Drew and Tom, approached him on the playground and said things to him. Where other kids gave up on getting a word out of Joey after a mere day, those two kept on him for weeks. Their persistence paid off and soon they got him talking. Playing their games. At first, they became friends over Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker, one of the few videogames Joey would discuss with any visible enthusiasm. Then, they became friends because no one else had stuck to Joey this long. Most others would've given up by now, but those two never stopped
leading Joey along a sort of leash, bringing him into their circle, into their games.

He was grateful to finally have people to be with, even if Drew and Tom said a lot of peculiar things that he didn’t know friends said to each other. These peculiar things were mostly nicknames they gave him, like “nerd” which was snickered in whispers whenever he answered the teacher’s question, and “wimp” when he tried to explain why he didn’t want to play tag with them that day. They also played games with strange rules: tag but Joey’s not allowed to run, or Pokémon battle; but Joey has to use his weakest Pokémon. Other times, they would invite him to eat lunch with them and then exclude him from their conversations. Sometimes, they would sneak up behind him as he sat on a bench and let a high-pitched scream to freak him out. They made Joey feel bad, but he never had friends before. If the hurt was a part of the friendship, he’d take it.

This continued for a few more years, and they were the only friends he had until he met her. It was after a rainstorm that lasted two days. While he was cleaning his parents’ swimming pool, he saw dozens of black winged ants floating lifelessly on the surface of the water between luscious pink crepe myrtle blossoms. The sun overhead cast a shadow on one of the insects in the pool, betraying the movements of her red body. She squirmed against the lapping currents, her petal-thin wings were soaked shut against her black abdomen, but her beauty eyes were trained on a clump of purple crepe myrtle flowers floating only inches away even though reaching the buoyant refuge was impossible. Joey fished her out and held her in his palm. As she dried her antennae, he studied the fine white hairs along her oval rear. She seemed content to rest in the crevices of his hand, using her wiry legs to tug and pull at her wings. When she broke off her wings, he didn’t know it was because she was a queen. He thought she was injured. And for some reason he couldn’t explain, he wanted to take care of her.

Juan was already finished with the photograph, scratching his bearded chin, and Joey didn’t see any point in lingering. All things had to end. He took a moment to flip through his journal before he and Juan put themselves back on their path. The pair walked without talking, surrounded by the forest’s chorus mingled with crunching leaves and twigs beneath their feet. They stopped twice for a snack break, and four more times to look at interesting insects, and once for a red-bellied crested quetzal that quickly flew off the deciduous canopy before Juan could take a picture.

Hours into their hike, it became all too clear this wouldn’t be one of their lucky days. This path was a no show for Dinoponera, the giant Amazonian ant. Still, it gave them a better picture of where their ant resided overall. It also gave Juan a chance to photograph the wildlife. At the very least, they could cross this area off their maps for future investigations. The two left, turning back the way they came and heading out of the reserve to their motel room.

Joey didn’t bother showering off his sweat; he just plopped himself down on a chair and took deep breaths as he brought the rim of his baseball cap over his eyes. He would fall asleep at any moment.

However, he was brought to his senses when he heard Juan fumbling with some crinkling paper, no doubt the New York Times, saying how someone somewhere did something foolish or was caught redheaded in some sort of crime or some other nonsense. One thing he had learned a long time ago was to never read the papers. People fought each other over everything; civil rights, resources, some sense of being wronged, and they fought everywhere, whether it was in the courts, in Congress, on the streets, or in some foreign country, they just kept at it. It never ended.

“Hey,” Juan’s nearby voice interrupted his thoughts. “I was just wondering if you want to see the next picture in my digital camera.”

Juan scrolled to the next picture a zoom-in of a Eucharitidae wasp and Joey’s impulse simmered down into a distant fantasy. Juan’s eyes focused on him, expecting some sort of feedback. Joey once again felt that uncomfortable obligation to say something.

“Good eye with the wasp,” he said. “I didn’t see it.”

“Thanks,” Juan replied. “I was wondering if you thought this wasp was parasitic to our ant species, Dinoponera.”

Joey stared at the wasp for a moment, and shrugged. “Not sure. Kinda reminds me of that bug boss in Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker. The one you fight with the grapple hook.”

“Oh yeah! That game was my childhood.” Juan’s lips stretched into a small grin. “Did you play the HD remake?”

“Not sure I’m willing to buy a Wii-U just for that.”

“Pretty sure it’s on the Switch too.”

“Yeah, buying another console sounds like a blast.”

Juan chuckled, and Joey surrendered a smile.

“Well,” said Juan, “I think it’s just fun for me because it’s like reliving my childhood.”

“Maybe that’s why I’ve never gone back to play it again,” was the reply burning on the tip of Joey’s tongue. He had a sudden, uncomfortable sensation that he left himself exposed. “Anyways, it’s a good photo.”

If Juan was disappointed by Joey ending the conversation he didn’t show it. Then again, two months had passed since Dr. Richards assigned them together for field research. Maybe by now, Juan had learned not to show his annoyance at Joey’s reluctance to speak or frustration when Joey made attempts to make small talk ended up slightly too boastful. Joey cycles through a few more photographs before standing up straight and stretching.

“I’m going to shower and get some dinner,” said Juan. “You coming?”

“Not hungry.”

Juan shrugged and picked up a spare change of clothes before heading to the shower. Soon, the static of water droplets on skin, dampened by the thin wall, echoed from the bathroom.

Joey brought the rim of his hat back down over his head and tried to drift off to sleep. How old was he when he first came to the ant’s jar one morning to find the little white ricey pellets? He thought it was ant poop, until the day there were a dozen ants in the jar. A quick Google search revealed these pellets were pupae, ant eggs. It was then he realized the ant he’d been keeping the last five months that he named Link after his favorite mute green-skirted hero was in fact a girl, and was on her way to producing a colony. This left him with two glaring problems: giving the queen a new, gender appropriate name and finding a home for her growing family. Although the renaming issue irritated Joey at first, it had a simple fix: renaming Link as Zelda. Unfortunately, the second
problem wouldn't be solved so easily. Once again, he turned to Google for advice. That was how he discovered ant keeping was a thing and that there were ant homes called "ant farms" specifically designed for this kind of situation, such as Uncle Milton's Ant Farm. But then, a third problem arose: these farms cost a little more money than he had in his piggy bank.

He could've asked his parents for the money, and they would have been happy to oblige, but that just didn't feel right to him. The hero Link didn't ask his parents for help rescuing Princess Zelda. He just donned his Peter Pan garbs, found the master sword, and did it himself. Sure, Joey's Zelda wasn't a magical princess, but for all intents and purposes, he was her Link. At least, that's what he kept telling himself as he worked all those odd neighborhood jobs for the next month.

By the time he got the money, his ant queen had already given birth to a small army of workers. The seething splotch of dark red had filled out the jar's bottom. Ants scrambled across the glass, lost in their endless quest for something beyond his comprehension. Following the instructions from the Internet (written with the credibility of whoever was the last person to log into Wikipedia), he drilled a hole in the lid and wound a tube through it, stuffing the end of the tube with cotton to seal up the exit. When he was ready, he connected a second tube straight into the Uncle Milton Ant Farm and then connected that tube to the jar. One ant ventured out and circled the new lands, working together to form a small labyrinth. Then, the workers moved their brood into the tunnels and ushered out their queen, urging her into the tunnels below ground. Joey watched, mesmerized by the sight. He could've watched them all night. But of course, that had to end. He had school tomorrow, and Tom and Drew were anxious to see him.

Joey found himself unable to fall asleep for a second on that chair. Juan came out, dressed in a blue collared shirt and blue jeans, his black hair still damp. Without looking at Joey, he grabbed his wallet and headed towards the door.

"Hey," said Joey, rising out of his chair. "I changed my mind."

"About what?"

"I'm hungry. Just give me a couple of minute to shower and I'll join you."

Joey picked up a fresh set of clothes and made his way to the shower.

"Just so you know," Juan said. "I was gonna go to a McDonalds or something.

"There a McDonalds in Peru?"

"There's a McDonalds everywhere."

As Juan predicted, they found a McDonalds within a matter of minutes. Before long, they were sitting across from each other eating hamburgers and fries.

"I gotta admit," Juan said between bites. "After all the local cuisine, it's kinda relaxing to just sit back with a below average burger."

"You say that now, but wait till we get heart attacks in forty years."

Juan nodded, giving a soft chuckle, before they both went quiet as they dipped their french fries in ketchup. Joey held the fry slathered in dark red for a moment.

"Did I ever tell you that I had a colony of fire ants as a kid?"

Joey knew it was unusual for him to initiate the conversation, much less a conversation. He looked away and shoved the fry in his mouth, uncomfortable with this prolonged silence, wondering if he did something to offend Juan.

"This is the first time I'm hearing about it," Juan replied, taking a casual sip of his drink. "Well, I did."

"How'd you get them?"

Encouraged, Joey told him the whole story from meeting the queen to his first Uncle Milton Ant Farm. Juan for the most part listened with an appreciative smile, even though Joey's gaze drifted to the nearby window, to the line of customers, the table, his burger, only occasionally meeting Juan's gaze as he recalled the following years with the fire ants.

"They kept growing and growing, so I kept giving them more living space, but they always needed more. They also stung me a lot when I worked around them." His arm involuntarily twitched as he looked at his hands, recalling the burning pain from each bite.

"Kinda sounds like an abusive relationship."

"I guess. But they gave me so much, I could spend hours just watching them work. They were practically family, and it hurt so much when I lost them."

A ripple of bitterness spread across Juan's expression. It caused Joey to pause, wondering once again if he said something wrong.

"I don't know if I told you," Juan said, "but my grandparents got deported last year."

"Joey's mouth opened a bit, surprised by this new nugget of information. "I'm sorry. Why'd they deport them?"

"They came to North America illegally fifty years ago."

"That's it?" Juan nodded.

"Joey couldn't help frowning. "Still don't understand why they wouldn't give them a break."

"Me neither. They never caused trouble for anyone. They just minded their business and did whatever work they could. They were community leaders, making sure everyone had everything they needed to get by. I swear, you've never seen a couple of people as nice as them. Not that they cared why they came or all the good they did. When time came, they just grabbed them and sent them back to a country they didn't know anymore. My parents and I sent them letters everyday, hoping we'd get them back. But I guess the stress of it all was too much for them."

"Juan's shoulders sagged, his eyelids half-closed over red eyes. Looking at him, Joey got the impression of a young man whose mental fatigue overshadowed his pain."

"I'm sorry," said Joey. "Some people are just the worst."

"Yeah. It's not always easy to remember, but I'm pretty sure there's more good people in the world than bad."

"Wish I could agree with you."

"Why wouldn't you?"

"My dad's a civil rights lawyer. If there were more good people than bad out there, he'd be out of a job." He paused, lost in a private thought.

This time, Juan didn't have a response. They sat in silence for a while, the sounds of the McDonalds customers and staff becoming background noise in an increasingly small world. They ate their burgers, now cold, dipped their over-salted french fries in ketchup and mashed the salty pulp in their mouths, letting the cold condiment slide down their throats. When they finished their meal, they threw their napkins and fry cups into the trash and departed without a word.

It was getting dark outside their motel room, the day had only just begun the first ebb into night. Joey went back to rereading his journal entries, leaving Juan to sit on his bed and scroll through the day's photographs. There seemed to be an unspoken agreement to remain consigned to silence, but that agreement felt hefty on Juan and even began to take its toll on Joey. Although Joey didn't see the point of talking anymore, he had a suspicion he wouldn't be allowed to remain silent much longer.

"Joey?"

"Yeah?"

"You were talking about your fire ants at McDonalds. What happened to them?"

"Does it matter?"

"It does to me."

Keeping his gaze focused on the dark world outside the window, Joey recounted his childhood as a pariah, telling Juan about Tom and Drew and the games they played, and how they bullied him. He stopped and glanced and Juan for any reaction, but he only listened with an attentive, inexpressive face. Joey looked back out the window, finding the trial of talking facilitated by the
lack of eye contact.

“They bullied me all my life and I never realized it. I think I was starting to get that they weren’t really my friends when I started watching ants.”

Joey smirked, as an old memory returned. “You know, I actually traded Pokémon with Drew whenever Tom wasn’t around, and he always gave me some pretty cool ones. Maybe that got me to keep dealing with him.

‘Anyways, a priest came to school one week for the blessings of the animals. I felt like I really owed it to my ants to get them that blessing, especially since they helped me through my depression and kept me from really hurting myself. But, there was no way I could get the whole colony there cause at this point they were connected to almost five different ant farms. So I just brought one of the ant farms that I was sure had Zelda. I figured if she got the blessing so would her kids. The priest was pretty surprised at first, no one ever asked him to bless ants, but he went through with it. A lot of kids and teachers came over to take a look at my ants, take pictures, that kind of stuff. Lots of these people hadn’t talked to me since Pre-K. When I went home, I realized the ants would be going through nuptial flights soon. Normally, I kept their farms shut so they couldn’t fly out, but I remembered how much everyone at school liked them. I brought the ant farm with the most alates to a park by school, put it on the ground, and opened the lid so they could fly away. The park was mostly empty at this point. Until, Tom and Drew came. They must’ve been in a bad mood because I’d never seen them so angry before.

I told them what I was doing. Tom grabbed the farm, turned it upside down, and started shaking it. I yelled at him to stop, try to take it back, but he was too fast for me and just keeps at it, dumping out ants, pupae, and alates. Tom and Drew tossed it to each other to keep me from getting it back. Some of the ants must’ve slipped onto Drew’s hand and stung him because he dropped it. I just grabbed that ant farm and got the hell out of there. I was so relieved it was over. But then in a few weeks, the colony began to shrink. There were no more pupae or new workers. That’s when I realized I’d lost Zelda. I searched the park for weeks, but I never found her. It’s not like I could’ve, but I was so desperate that I was willing to try. Soon, the colony died out.”

There was silence. Joey felt sharp stabs of pain in his throat as old pain returned with a vengeance.

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“I’m sorry.”

“I’ve got no one to blame but myself. Showing my ants to the people at school was a mistake. It showed them my weakness, how they could hurt me, and I paid the price. I was trying to let my ants make more queen ants for other people to raise, and look what that got me.”

“Stop.” Juan’s forceful voice shocked him. For once, Joey turned around and looked back at the young man, finding a fiercely solemn face. “You showed them your ants and they loved them. Maybe those two assholes took them from you, but from what you’ve told me everyone else enjoyed watching them. That’s got to count for something, right?”

Joey stared at Juan’s unshaking glance, recognizing all at once empathy, pain, and ultimately hope. For the first time, he began thinking about Tom and Drew as actual people who felt just as much pain as he did. If he was going through his own shit, what kind of problems did they have to deal with? Drew lived with his stepmother, a woman who married his father only for him to die and leave her his son. Did she just give him videogames to keep him out of her hair because she worked too much to actually spend time with him? He didn’t know. Joey could imagine Tom jealously of his ant farm because he couldn’t afford a pet of his own, and here comes along a boy who just picks up an ant and gets his own. His sister probably didn’t have much time for him, and his parents ... Joey wasn’t even sure what happened to them.

“Joey?”

He realized he’d been standing there, lost in thought for some time.

“Sorry. I was just thinking.” His dry tears ebbed away. Even though he still felt pain, it felt slightly more bearable than before. “Well, this has been fun and all, but I want to get off this emotional roller coaster.”

“Fair enough. We should probably be getting to sleep anyways. We’re going back in tomorrow.”

He nodded, turning out the lights and crawling underneath the covers, and soon Juan followed suit.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. It was nice talking to you, Juan.”

Somehow, through the dark room, he could see Juan roll over his head to look at him and smile. Before he closed his eyes and surrendered to the ambiance of the night crickets, he met Juan’s gaze and smiled back.
I’m gay
and you’re gay
so let’s get gay together
and suck each other’s dicks until
we pass on from this world
From being so gay that our bodies
swell outward for miles
in every direction and at the edges
disperse and grow mistlike, so
that where we have overlapped the sun
shines through us like stained glass.

And then,
when we have expanded to reach
the end of the world
we will roll over it like
a wave of honey
and drip
and drip
ourselves
into thin air
A deep freeze came like a thief in the night
and bound the trees and ground in frost and ice
driving away the warmth and green and sun
veiling what was left in white, wintry mist
hiding the horizon and thus the world
was without form

and in the midst of this
winter the bare trees bloomed with spikes of ice
and the dark earth was sown with seeds of snow
growing cold crops, a harvest of hoarfrost,
and by strange alchemy the wind tossed lake
was transmuted into still crystal
white like the sky above.

I walk across
a bridge spanning the frozen, glass-like lake,
seemingly made of diamond recently
surfaced after spending millennia
beneath the earth.

Curiosity drove
me to test the strength of the pristine ice
so I throw a stone to see if it breaks
through or slides and bounces across the smooth
surface. The lone stone flies and strikes the ice.

Sound. A note. Something between a deep twang
and a spritely chirp. The stone bounces across.
And a song unlike any known birdsong
echoes throughout the fog in eerie tones.
There is a pause
as those around the lake
take in the new, inhuman tune full of
disbelief and reverence, awestruck by
the archaic, hyperborean hymn.
Then suddenly
another stone is cast.
Then, before its song can end, more follow.
Each stone bounces across the frozen lake
as if plucking the strings of a strange harp.
Audience has become the orchestra,
making cold yet jovial notes, something
between the eerie harmonies of a
stark, Siberian symphony and the
arctic arias of a boreal
chorus and the cold calls of ghostly loons.

Those eerie tones continue to echo
through the air, growing fainter and fainter
until there is no difference between
these ethereal tones and undisturbed
silence.

From this frozen lake, from this night,
from this cold, this undesigned instrument,
this lyre no human hand has shaped or tuned,
emerged from the ever turning cycles
and the cool indifference of nature
and has been discovered by the careless
curiosity of humans.

This lake
is the stringless lyre of an old, weary
Apollo who no longer bathes under
the summer sun but hides within winter’s
distant depths and gazes out with glacier eyes
hidden deep within his hoary white hair
and cracking skin.

With his final effort
the Old Man who abandoned the pale sun
wills a lyre of winter to come into
existence. But he is too tired to play.
Thus he leaves it to those who forgot him
so they can continue to play without
the Muse whose great voice has become as thin
as the voice of Echo.

With this device,
with this coincidence of cool nature,
weary Apollo and the waning Muse
can be content to fade, realizing
that they are something between natural
phenomena and human creation,
that the arts never belonged to them
alone and will not fade with their passing.
They are content knowing that the arts were
always something blurry and liminal,
something old, between design and nature,
something between divine inspiration
and human creation that will go on
without gods or humans. This winter lyre
is a testament this truth, known to
those who throw and those who listen
from afar. For even within the depths
of such an inhospitable season
where there is silence
there is still music.
When you first found out that I
laid with another girl
after I told you I was with friends
(please forgive me for breaking your heart)
you laughed in my face— a hollow,
broken sound as bitter as the
cooling mug of coffee before you,
catching in the base of your throat,
and dying on the tip of your tongue.

You demand to know why (not to understand,
you make that clear enough),
but what can I say?
Why is a set of strobe lights flashing against
concrete walls, a cacophony of colors,
why is candlelight catching in topaz eyes,
barely-there breaths brushing over warm skin.
Why is not the question;
why is the answer.
(you are a man of answers and yet this is one you cannot accept)

You drink to cope.
Wine as the red as the
blood rushing through your veins
(your blood, my blood;
we cannot fight what we share)
slipping, spilling, staining
the white tablecloth below.
Together, we watch the damage grow.
(I wonder, am I just a stain to you, too?)
We hop into the blue Fiat, shut the doors, throw down the top, and fire up the engine.

“Here, put these on,” Taylor says, handing me a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses that match theirs. I put them on. “It’s 65 miles to Charleston, we got a full tank of gas, half a pack of Juicy Fruit, it’s sunset, and we’re wearing sunglasses.”

Over the time I’ve spent with Taylor, I knew exactly what to say.

“Hit it.”

We make a selection on the touchscreen. Music plays. The screen shows a rusty, futuristic racer. Their hands grip the steering wheel firmly and their face is cool and confident as they whip the winding hillside roads, deftly working the gas, brakes, and paddle shifters like a professional Nitro, Taylor puts the blinker on.

As we sing along with our music selections of rock, folk, and even some country. Once we get to the West Virginia line. My mind started wandering and the trees became an autumnal blur.

The past four days were a cloudy, wonderful mess of an epic road trip. I recommended we just take an airplane, but Taylor insisted on driving. So we set out from our apartment down in Texas on Friday then slowly made our way across the South. We went on a riverboat tour in Shreveport and watched bands play in Memphis and Nashville. We stopped for lunch and dinner in Texarkana and Little Rock and visited the Chevrolet Corvette museum in Bowling Green. (I thought I’d never be able to get Taylor out of there with all the classic cars on display. It was adorable to watch.) We left after brunch today, Monday, from Louisville and were on the last leg of our trip. With our pit stop at the Flying J behind us, our sights were firmly set on Charleston.

Taylor’s voice snaps me out of my mind. “You all good over there?”

“Yeah. Just can’t believe how long it’s been.”

“You know it’s only been two hours, right?”

I chuckle at their signature sarcasm. “I know. I meant the whole trip. Hell, even this whole year. It’s been a wild ride.”

“Almost heaven, West Virginia…”

We pull out of the Flying J truck stop and begin racing down the highway. I look outside and see the forests and hills fly by through the open passenger window. It’s almost 4 o’clock and the sun is just beginning to go down, filtering the world under the brisk blue sky through soft tangerine light. Taylor and I sing along in perfect harmony as we quickly approach the West Virginia state line.

Although we had met back in spring, it feels like only last week. And now I was on an epic road trip to celebrate Thanksgiving with Taylor’s family in Charleston? Everything seemed too good to be true.

We zip past Huntington, Milton, and Hurricane along I-94, our straight shot to Charleston, we shoot forward. We both holler and laugh in excitement.

“Hey, check this out.”

“Gotcha.”

I look out at the view, at their face, and the picture on my phone. “Isn’t it beautiful?” Taylor asks, turning to face me.

“You sit down beside Taylor. They speak to me, still looking longingly at the forests. Out in the distance, I can see a small city.

“I really missed this place. Regardless of everything that happened with my family, this place is still my home. I want to come back. Maybe even see them again.”

I scrunch my brows at them. “But why? I thought you weren’t wanted around there anymore.”

They let out a heavy sigh. “You’re right. I don’t know why, but something just feels different. I feel like I can make things right this time.”

“But you never did anything wrong to begin with! Your family was wrong when they threw you out of the house.”

“No. My dad didn’t throw me out. He’s the one who said I should come back to begin with.”

Taylor gives a long pause. “He’s the one who wanted to see me again. And I want to see him, too.”

They take a deep breath and put a determined expression on their face. “If I can fix things with the rest of my family as well, even better. And if not, then so be it.”

Taylor quickly gets up and starts marching towards the car, trampling fallen leaves beneath their feet with an audible crumple.

“I stand up and turn around, calling after them: “Hey, where’re you going?”

Before I know it, I see them whip out their phone and hear a camera click. A smug grin is plastered on Taylor’s face.

“Gotchya.”

After about another hour or so of driving along Route 119, we make a right turn onto a narrow two-lane road that curves and weaves through trees, houses, and apartment buildings. The further we progress, the closer we get to the riverbank, and the ritzier the houses get. Taylor has stopped singing. They’re visibly anxious.

Taylor slows down the car and we pull into the large circular gravel driveway of a giant Georgian house along Bougemont Road. The well-manicured lawn was peppered with fallen leaves from the surrounding shrubbery and trees. We come to a stop in front of the house’s entrance, with a three-car garage straight ahead of us. They take a deep breath, shut off the car, and open the door.

I hear the reluctant crunch of their combat boots against the dirt. I get out of the car and follow my partner to the front door.
After a long pause, Taylor reaches for the door handle and slowly turns it. The door greets us with a soft creak and they gradually push it open. They gingerly step inside, but their footsteps echo throughout the entrance nonetheless. The door opens fully and we step inside. The ensuing slam reverberates throughout the hall.

“TAYLOR ASHLEY SHELBY,” booms a voice from above. We look up the stairs and see a tall, bearded man wearing blue jeans, swept back salt-and-pepper hair, and a henley sweater. I turn to look at Taylor, who is absolutely beaming now that they know what’s going on.

“So you finally decided to show back up!”

The man begins to descend the stairs with loud, stomping boots, only to stop when he sees me. “Taylor looks at me and I nod. “Sounds good to us,” says Taylor. However, their eyes suddenly grow wide. “Wait, where’s…”

“Riley’s still deployed, unfortunately. He says he misses you, though; sends his regards from Nellis AFB,” He pauses, taking a deep breath. “As for your mother, she’s still out on her business trip.”

Taylor looks at me and I nod. “Wanna go grab our stuff?”

Taylor downs another gulp of apple juice. “I was thinking of showing Andrew around town, if we’re all enjoy it so much.”

Taylor flounces out of the bathroom, piecing together an outfit from the dresser. They pull on a pair of black jeans, a binding bra, and a simple gray sweater. I look back to the mirror and work some cleanser suds off my face and see something in the mirror. Taylor materializes behind me, their arms wrapping around my bare torso. I watch through the reflection as those lovely blue eyes look at me from over my shoulder. Their black hair smells like rosemary shampoo.

“Looking good there, handsome,” sings Taylor.

I lovingly grumble at them, rolling my eyes. “Go get dressed; I need to brush my hair.”

Taylor Baylors out of the bathroom, piecing together an outfit from the dresser. They pull on a pair of black jeans, a binding bra, and a simple gray sweater. I look back to the mirror and work some pomade into my light brown hair, giving it a sleek, side-swept wave and a scent of lemon meringue pie. With my morning ritual complete, I walk over to the dresser and curate my own outfit, selecting a new pair of boxer briefs, gray patterned socks, dark indigo jeans, and a black Ducati Scrambler shirt Taylor had given me for my birthday. It’s around 10:15.

We make our way downstairs into the breakfast nook by the kitchen. Robert gives a welcoming bellow.

“Just in time! I was worried you two wouldn’t make it for breakfast.” He places a few plates on the table, each comprising a few perfectly-cooked bacon slices, homemade hashbrows, and sunny-side-up eggs. Taylor procures glasses of apple juice for us.

“Morning, Dad,” chirps Taylor. A few bites into the meal, Taylor speaks with a voice muffled by eggs and hashbrows. “I can’t believe I almost forgot how much I loved your breakfast.”

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I chime in, “I agree. I can’t remember the last time I had a homemade meal this good.”

Robert lets out the warm laugh I’d just started growing used to. “Well, I’m flattered to know you all enjoy it so much.”

We all take some time to eat before he speaks up again.

“So, any fun plans for today?”

Taylor downs another gulp of apple juice. “I was thinking of showing Andrew around town, finding cool things to do and such.”

“Well, with all the Christmas craze in town I don’t think that’s such a good idea. Even in your tiny blue thing, parking is going to be a complete mess.” Robert pauses and focuses on my shirt. “Unless…”

He glances at me. “I hear you’re quite the motorcycle ace.” Looking back at Taylor, he says. “Your brother’s old Desert Sled is in the garage. He said he’d be happy to let you use it while he’s away, but since you can barely balance on one foot…” Taylor gives him a snide glare as he turns back to face me. “…”I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if you borrowed it. You can park just about anywhere on that bike. It probably needs some new fluids and such, but everything’s there in the garage. There’s a set of spare helmets, too.” He gives me an assured nod and a matching smile.

“We thank Robert for the meal and the borrowed motorcycle and put up our plates. We run upstairs to grab our jackets and head to the garage to get to work. Vintage tin posters and countless tools decorate the space, along with a mini fridge and a gunmetal gray Jeep Gladiator Rubicon.

The Ducati Scrambler Desert Sled is a sleek, classic black machine with gold wire rims and knobby off-road tires giving it a tall, athletic stance off the ground. A visible film of dust obscures the red, orange, and yellow stripes on the fuel tank and front forks. Taylor and I wipe off the dust, walk the bike over to the workshop area of the garage, and get to work. While old oil and coolant drain out of their respective tanks, I refill the tires to their proper pressure level. Taylor pulls a jerry can from the wall, hops in their car, and heads to the Exxon station just down the road to get gas for the groggy bike. I refill the bike’s vital fluids and fill up the fuel tank once Taylor returns. With the bike back in running order, we grab rags and waterless car wash to polish the dirty paint. By early afternoon, the Desert Sled looks factory fresh with an extra showroom shine. I turn the key and the engine roars to life. We put on our helmets, hop aboard, and set out on our way to the city.

Taylor navigates me through the winding roads of the surrounding neighborhood and gets me...
back on Route 119. Although it was strange to feel the wind buffeting my face again, the open-face helmets turned out to be a slight blessing as Taylor was easily able to bark directions at me. After cruising up the highway for a short distance, they direct me to take an exit onto I-64. We cross over the Kanawha River Bridge as we enter the city, taking in the rusty blue steel arching over us and the rippling water down below.

Though small, the town is still bustling with life and urban development. Small skyscrapers sprout from the streets alongside old brick and mortar buildings. Parked cars, vivid trees, and vintage green streetlights sit along the cobblestone curbs. I can even watch as early Christmas shoppers dart from store to store along the sidewalk. After exploring the town and checking out a few shops, we cruise down Kanawha Boulevard past the capitol building before stopping for dinner at a small pizzeria on Capitol Street. We go inside and sit at a dark wooden table near the window as a waitress takes our order. Taylor drapes their black leather jacket over the back of their seat and places their helmet on the empty chair next to them. I follow suit with my armored denim jacket and my own helmet.

I look outside at the slowly setting sun. “It’s beautiful out here,” I said. “I feel like I’ve been everywhere, but I’ve never seen a place like this before.”

Taylor smiles. “It’s lovely, isn’t it?”

“Definitely.”

The waitress arrives with our drinks. I take a sip of my cream soda. “Your dad seems like a really cool guy.”

“Yeah. I’m really glad I have someone like him around. He and my big brother have always been super supportive.”

“You think he likes me?”

Taylor nearly spits out their drink. “Of course he does. I’ve kept him posted on literally almost everything that guy was saying. He’s getting thrown out, but I also have to ask you not to do that again.” Taylor nods, but continues looking down at the bar table. “I know it was basically self-defense.”

The waitress returns, sliding a mozzarella caprese pizza and two plates onto our table. Taylor turns to the counter and grabs us each a slice and we dig in.

A short while later, we circle back around to Capitol Street again and find a bar with a chalkboard sitting in their window. It reads: “Autumn in Charleston”

I enter the bar and find that it is nearly empty. Neon signs, black and white photos, and tin posters adorn the walls, as do full-size posters of a local beer. Off in the back corner, the 76th Street Band serves up a great, faithful rendition of Elvis Presley’s “Heartbreak Hotel” with their singing, guitar, bass, piano, and drums. Around us, people chat, drink, and revel. Neon signs, black and white photos, and tin posters adorn the walls. A handsome bartender dressed in a black T shirt, matching jeans, and a neat blond pompadour stands behind the counter. I ask him for a mint julep, and within minutes I have a glass of the drink set in front of me. Taylor and I sit together, enjoying our drinks, the music, the atmosphere, and each other.

The band strikes up a jazzy, familiar tune. The singer speaks into the microphone, inviting people to get up and dance to the music. Taylor finishes the rest of their beer, then grabs my arm.

“Hey, didn’t you mention you knew how to swing dance once?”

“Yeah, I was my best to stammer out a response. “Taylor, I — it’s been — I haven’t been swing dancing since Fl—”

“Well, it’s about time you remembered how.”

They drag me out into the bar’s open floor in front of the band and we start dancing. After a few measures of tripping over both myself and Taylor, I remember what I’m doing. Before I know it, we’re swinging, spinning, and twirling each other around the floor with ease. The singer cheers for us, then continues the song.

“This...just have one more moondance with you, my love?”

For all their clumsiness, Taylor is an exceptionally talented dancer. They can anticipate almost any move I throw at them and execute it wonderfully. I can’t even remember the last time I had this much fun at any point in my life.

The song ends and the bar’s patrons applaud both the band’s playing and our dancing. We head back to our seats as the band starts their next song. A man further down the bar grumbles something to his friend that catches Taylor’s attention. Taylor rolls their eyes, swings, and takes a deep breath before setting their jacket on the back of their barstool. I watch from my seat as they slink over to the man, who gets up off his stool. The two increasingly angrily exchange words. Taylor begins walking away, but then rapidly turns around and swings their arm at his face with a powerful punch, knocking him to the ground and silencing the music along with half the bar. As his friend helps him up, Taylor sits back at the bar with his arms folded, ordering a stronger drink.

The bartender comes back with Taylor’s drink and admonishes them. “Just so you know, I heard everything that guy was saying. He’s getting thrown out, but I also have to ask you not to do that again.”

Taylor nods, but continues looking down at the bar table. “I know it was basically self-defense and we don’t tolerate any of that crap here, but we can’t have fights breaking out either, okay?” He walks away, off to tend to another customer.

Taylor sips their drink, still looking glum.

“Taylor, what happened?” I ask, concerned.

They down half their drink. “He called us a couple of queers when we were walking back to our seats. So I went over to give him a piece of my mind. Then he said I was a filthy dyke, but I didn’t care.” They brush their wavy black hair back with their hand. “Even when he threatened me to make me leave here. But when he tried to drag you into things…”

Taylor wraps my arm around their waist. “You know, maybe it would be better if we got out of here, too.” I wave the bartender over to close our tab, handing him 30 dollars in cash to cover the cost, tip, and more. Taylor puts their jacket back on and we grab our helmets. We head out the door and back onto the moonlit cobblestone sidewalks. The bike is just up the street.
I giggle to myself as we walk. “You know, I’m curious to know where you learned to throw a punch like that.”

Taylor gives a soft smile. “My roommate back in college did some boxing. You could say she taught me a few things.”

“Well, remind me never to piss you off.”

Taylor laughs and gives me a kiss as we hop back on the motorcycle.

I giggle to myself as we walk. “You know, I’m curious to know where you learned to throw a punch like that.”

Taylor gives a soft smile. “My roommate back in college did some boxing. You could say she taught me a few things.”

“Well, remind me never to piss you off.”

Taylor laughs and gives me a kiss as we hop back on the motorcycle.

Passiflora incarnata

KELLY CARROLL

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KELLY CARROLL
What are your words for?
I don’t care if your actions are louder.
Words are what truly hurt.
For even in the silence that follows,
they are still being said.

Hate
The first blow isn’t what started my pain.
You could beat me for eternity,
But you didn’t have to scream.
Don’t scream
Your loud hate is what kills me.

Weapons Of Choice (Trigger warning)
Stupid-
  Whelps over arms
Freak-
  Aluminum bat to the knees
Dike-
  Fist to the gut
Bitch-
  Pushed from behind, knees meet the gravel
Worthless-
  Fingers twist in hair and yank upwards
Cunt-
  A quick throw to the ground
Switch Bitch-
  Sneaker soles atop my head, pavement at my cheek
Slut-
  Knife against my breast
Faggot-
  The promise of more to come

“How are you feeling today, Mrs. Robinson?”
“Everything’s fine, I’m just here for my check up,” she said grudgingly. Something was off about her today. She never once looked me in the eyes during the exam. It might have just been to avoid the awkward doctor-patient eye contact, but I could tell there was something else on her mind, something that was forcing her to remain closed off and completely introverted. This wasn’t like her at all.

I remember Sarah every time she came in, even though I only saw her twice a year. I remembered her because she always made me feel better. She would ask me about my day, and tell me about hers, and somehow she never stopped smiling. She was curious and a beacon in my life. But today was different.

“You vitals all look good, blood pressure is normal, but let me check your heartbeat.” I put on my stethoscope and moved the metal towards her chest. I sensed her heartbeat before I even touched her skin. I felt her heart not just beating, but beating towards me, beckoning me, awaiting my arrival. And I was drawn in, just as it was pulling me. Then, amidst my trance, my stethoscope touched her, and everything changed.

I saw walls of red, a red ceiling, and the red river flowing in every direction. I never thought standing inside someone’s heart could be so relaxing. It felt natural, and I felt safe. Sarah had a good heart; I knew that already, but I didn’t know that you could see its goodness from inside as well. I saw a man, an unhappy one, who appeared to be punching the heart’s walls. Apparently, he was trying to damage this sweet red room that I stumbled in. And it was working; the area he was punching look bruised. I walked closer to try to stop him, and then I recognized him. It was Sarah’s husband, whom I had seen a couple times at the doctor’s office. And when I saw him, I figured it out. I was watching Sarah’s husband slowly break her heart. He never seemed right for her, but I always thought I was wrong because it was just me that wanted to be right for her instead. Now I could see that he really was not a good husband.

I ran over to try to stop his punching the wall, but when I pushed him aside, my hands went right through him. I was transparent. I yelled, but he did not stop. There was nothing I could do. There was no way I could save her.

And then, just as abruptly as it had happened before, I was back in the examination room, my stethoscope sensing her heartbeats just like any other patient. I wanted to shout to her, confess to her what I had seen, tell her to leave him, tell her that he’s going to break her, tell her that I could make her happy, tell her that she needs me... But I couldn’t. It wouldn’t do anything. Just like in the heart, my efforts would be pointless. I am just her doctor, a bystander to her love life. I looked up one last time, only to see her glancing at her knees, unexpressive and disconnected.

“Heart beat is just fine, Sarah.”
Walking up to the house had been strange; perhaps even suspicious. The building was a two-story monument to the cotton-picking genocide of days supposedly gone past, and the way the sunset had framed it did not bode well. Sure, it was pretty, but dawn and dusk are Doorways and Johnny had good reason to be wary of those. Plus, the owner had decided that no she wouldn’t have anything as prosaic as cows—it was llamas or bust for this gal. So, a vast curtain of hooved flesh, with fluffy heads perched ludicrously upon necks and bodies recently sheared nude, passed judgment on him while he walked up to the gates.

“By ‘ell I hope this ain’t the Fair Folk again,” Johnny muttered as he shouldered past another llama. But when the beautiful white oak doors opened, he gave the lady on the other side his most courteous, lopsided grin and tipped his dark cowboy hat, “G’d evenin’ ma’am, heard you’d like to hear me play.”

The woman, Georgia Marthis, gave a short laugh that came from a life of chain smoking, “Well you certainly do live up to your reputation for good manners.”

“Why thank you.”

“Now, let’s see if you can fiddle as well as I’ve been told. Come on in Mr. Tagesanbruch.” Somewhere behind her at ankle level a deranged, asthmatic yip sounded. As Johnny stepped over the threshold, he was inspected by what was quite possibly the world’s ugliest dog. It was some sort of Chihuahua, half bred with a Mistake. The horrid thing trembled constantly from undying yet impotent rage. Between its bulging eyes and Georgia’s scarred voice, his nervousness melted away.

Once seated in plush, embroidered chairs Georgia bid him to play. As Johnny undid the clasps of his carrying case and gently brought the fiddle to his chin, Georgia’s eyes widened. The whole thing was white as bone except for the deep blue of inlaid sapphire and the cold grace of just enough gold leaf.

Then Johnny played. He chose an upbeat tune lost to almost all the world. It was considered too lowbrow and popish when recording was first invented, and then too dead when that sort of thing was considered worth remembering. Most think of songs that move to tears, but this moved to laughter. Light and careless, it spoke of a thousand childhood carnivals full of wonder, even while parents grumbled about scam artists. It spoke, really, of a world that isn’t: impossibly gentle and vibrant, and it asked those listening not to mourn for the fact it wasn’t real. Johnny took care to honor that wish and wound it down slow to end, so that the return didn’t jar. Still, Georgia found it far shorter than she wished.

A moment passed and joy lingered like a fog. “Well I’ll be damned, you’re the real deal.” Georgia breathed, and then added jokingly, “Though I hafta admit, I did expect the famous Golden Fiddle to have a bit more gold!”

Johnny gave a chuckle, “Yeah, I think folks just figured ‘Golden’ was a lot catchier than, ‘The extinct-critter-ivory fiddle with huge hunks a sapphire and tiny little bit a gold painted on.’ T’be honest, the first time I heard them singin’ that blasted thing I damn near had a heart attack. Thought Old Scratch was gonna come marchin’ back to snap me in two for makin’ fun!”

“I take it you weren’t consulted in its making then?” the sarcasm in her voice and smile were warm and without much bite.

He gave a snort. “Nope. Not that I ain’t flattered by it. Kinda blew it out of proportion, but at the same time it doesn’t do the tale justice.” he went a little introspective then, “I’m not sure anything could really do him justice.”

“I’d sure like to hear you try.”
Johnny smiled, and stared out into the middle distance with the dramatic flair of a small-town story teller, "I s'pose... well I guess I must have been about 25 at the time...

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I've been playing fiddle for as long as I can remember. Gran-Anne, the local midwife, used to joke that I came out of the womb clutching rosin. I'd just come home for summer after wandering at me like I'd absolutely lost it. He took my hand, shook it with perfect grace and told me this in a voice like ink, barin' their teeth. He accepted it with a casual sort of reverence, "Much obliged Ms. Marthis."

"Before you go, I've got one last question: Tagesanbruch, it's an odd name, German I believe, never to sell this. There's a tornado of emotion whirled through me then, confusion and relief chief among them with paraonias ripping at their heels. Satan then continued, 'Johnny, you're the world's greatest fiddle player, and I'm the best at violin.' He placed both promised fiddle and the bow in my hands but before he let go, he gave me a warning, his voice gone grave, 'I advise you never to sell this. There's not a one on Earth that could give you half of what this is really worth.'

A bolt of lightning crackled through the air, destroying a willow tree. The neighboring town's church was torn apart, its steeple flying through the sky and landing a mile away. I think all that had really been holding me up till then was sheer terror, and the moment he was out of sight I collapsed right there in the dirt, crying and laughing and yellin' that I'd won! By the Lord there were tears and whoops and shouts of joy all around. I don't think we stopped celebrating the whole rest of the time, and somewhere in there is when The Devil Went Down to Georgia first got sung.

There was a pause between Johnny and Georgia then, broken only by the dog as it twitched and muttered through its dreams. Then she spoke, "Wow, that... You're right the song really does undersell it."

Johnny sat a little straighter and smiled wide, 'Yer too kind ma'am.' He glanced up at the clock, and saw that it was well past midnight. "Sadly, I can't stay much longer, and please, don't ask why." She returned shortly with a tome bound in vellum, layer after layer of it, to the point that one might mistake it for just a roll of fabric. He accepted it with a casual sort of reverence, "Much obliged Ms. Marthis."

"Before you go, I've got one last question: Tagesanbruch, it's an odd name, German I believe,'

'"My mother fell to sobbing for the fate of her incurably stupid son, and she clutched my little sis who was really starting to panic at this point. I think poor, dear Christian Smith was yelling at me to run. Roger Blakey, who'd seen the death of war and the blood of birth in his time as town docor, fainted. But I was only vaguely aware of them. I watched Lucifer's face twist into a manic grin and nothing else mattered. The world was on fire, and the only thing left to do was play 'til it all turned to ash."

'I took the first round. I couldn't honestly tell you what I played, only that it was powerfully sorrowful and harsh. I did it flawlessly, every note sang clear and perfect. I felt top of the world, there was no way he could go any higher than that."

'But then Satan pulled his bow across this fiddle's strings and out pored the most achingly beautiful, pure, crystalline tones. His music was romance wrapped in velvet, and it seemed that all my talent made was shrieks and hisses in comparison. By about the end of the twelfth song I was certain I was leaving this town tied to the back of Satan's horse."

'Halfway through what must have been the 20th song I played that day, (I actually remember this one it was "Chicken in the breadpan a picking out dough") I glanced up and caught my competitor's eyes. He had this look, gentle and sweet, full of honey, like he just wanted to hear me play for the rest of time. Startled me so bad I forgot what the Hell I was playing so I just improvised random shit for a while and then stopped cold. He raised his hand to show that it was done, and I wished myself not to cry, least not before my mom, but then he said, "I concede."

'Truth be told I just nodded dumb, and damn near dropped the thing when the Devil let go. I think all that had really been holding me up till then was sheer terror, and the moment he was out of sight I collapsed right there in the dirt, crying and laughing and yellin' that I'd won! By the Lord there were tears and whoops and shouts of joy all around. I don't think we stopped celebrating the whole rest of the time, and somewhere in there is when The Devil Went Down to Georgia first got sung."

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"Oh, now I'm desperately curious, but a man has a right to his dignity. Go wait by the door, and I'll get yer book."

'Before you go, I've got one last question: Tagesanbruch, it's an odd name, German I believe,
and you don’t strike me as the type. How’d you come by it?”

Johnny showed her the back of his left hand where pale, intricate, and obviously deliberate scars circled his ring finger and traced a pattern to the rest of his hand, “When I married the Dawn, I took his name.” He flashed a sly smile at her and headed down to wade through the llamas.

Johnny, Satan, and Various Georgias

Macha Races the King’s Horses

CARL TEEGERSTROM

I crumple,
Honey,
beneath the bobcat
poster above her full bed. She calls him Bill.
I call her leche.
dulce de, mi Emilia.

mi dulce Emilia
begins with the crumple
of puffy cheetos y un vaso de leche -
warm, with a teaspoon of honey
and the wavy bill
of her bucket hat over her eyes as she dreams of bobcats.

I do not dream of bobcats.
I dream of Emilia.
Run up the phone bill
the next morning to tell her, through the crumple
on the other line that I dream she can swim through honey
because her bones are made of leche.

And she is white, como la leche,
ever since Bill the bobcat
severed the sun from her face, from the walls of her honey
colored bedroom on the second floor that says “Emilia”
over the doorway on a crumpled
piece of construction paper across from Bill.

While downstairs, the bills
go unpaid, and the leche
goes sour, and the HEB bags in the bottom drawer crumple,
unused and unaware that the bobcat
upstairs is eating mi Emilia,
feasting on her honey.

So please, Honey,
please. We don’t have time to wait for the bill.
The adventures of Emilia
will end, and end soon. Even if I call her leche,
even if I stop the bobcat,
even if I keep her from crumpling.

Go ask for Emilia. Do not get distracted by the honey
dripping down the sides of the crumpled poster, or by the bill
of her hat over her bones made of leche. They will say she is dreaming of bobcats.

Mi Emilia

HANNAH BRALEY
Eulogy For Ireland

ME

Shrouded in green white and orange
I wake up
Tossing up electric blankets
in my single bed nook
Morning shook
Consumed by a fiery torrent
as I consume rock hard porridge
That ever familiar sight of orange
crescendoing like new sunrise
to sever our commonwealth ties
Becoming the light to eradicate industrial darkness
just north of our heads
At least that’s what our leaders said

We fight for the people
Sprouting from hairs of the motherland
The old country
The place that the old fellows reminisce about
at the back street
hole in the wall
sub par pubs
We binge on
endless Guinness by the pint
The black lager gives us might
The Irish are strong
That’s why there’s no Guinness light
That dove-wing white
The calcimined center stripe
Signifying the peace after war
yet covering up our war on peace
Youths’ minds struggling between right and wrong
until we remember the oath we must keep
Upon pain of death our boots strike down
Molotov fire scorches the ground
And for every redcoat we make redder
we get another pint
It tastes like brainwashed victory
Bitter
like the overdone roots of my royalty
Flushed
That green
Lush
Soft beauty brushed on rolling hills

Chilled
Never above 70
70 nails carefully placed
in our fake army bombs
We say a prayer of psalms
and wire up the lord’s work in the calm
We take pride in the storm that follows
Drunk off our victory after a few swallows
Our minds exploded along with that bomb
And the headlines brought realization back
We are weighed down by the guilt of our pact
Four killed in terror attack
Shrapnel riddled dreams
Severed in broken heart-strings
as harp-strings play funeral dirges
Dirt covered corpses
buried under supernatural forces
We
The rebel stereotype
Question our right
to live
After causing our people so much strife
in our misguided fight
We pray for deliverance from our tortured life

In The Name of the Father
Bless green grass fields
Bless lush rolling hills
Bless those who perish in Emerald Isles
Funeral shrouded
in green white and orange
Veronica Arraiz Rada is a freshman at Trinity University planning to major in Neuroscience. She is from Venezuela and she is very thankful for the opportunity to showcase her work. She also indulges in songwriting and hopes to use writing as a way to make her voice heard.

Noelle Barrera is a sophomore who is majoring in English and either Anthropology or Sociology (ask her again next semester, honestly). Noelle enjoys listening to the Carrie & Lowell album by Sufjan Stevens on repeat when she writes. And definitely not crying (okay, well maybe a little).

Quinn Bender is a junior Art major with a concentration in Photography. She grew up in South Dakota and bought her first camera when she was 10.

Robin Bissett is a junior English major and Creative Writing minor. She works for the Writing Center, the Trinity Review, and helped put together the premiere issue of High Noon.

Hannah Braley is a Senior Religious Study Major graduating this spring. She has had a lifelong interest in writing, but her passion was re-sparked while studying abroad in Auckland, New Zealand in the spring semester of 2018. She was fortunate enough to study under the poet laureate of New Zealand, Selina Tusitala Marsh, and is grateful for the chance to share some of the work she developed over there with the Trinity Community.

Faith Broddrick is a junior majoring in music composition because having the means to financially support herself after college is overrated. When she is not struggling to write music or sleeping in the practice rooms, she enjoys playing a certain popular table-top RPG with her friends on the weekends and cooing over the many cats on campus.

Kelly Carroll is a senior Biology major with a minor in Creative Writing and Environmental Studies. They write and take cool photos in their free time, what little of it they can get, and they are one of the co-editors of the Trinity Review.

Cat Cura is a junior English Major and Creative Writing Minor. Aside from writing, she loves photography, the supernatural, television shows about forging historical weapons, and girls. When she isn’t juggling two novels-in-progress, you can find her cuddling the campus cats, browsing the Food Network website for dishes to cook for her future wife, or laughing with her ridiculously adorable friends.

James Everett Davis is an It’s-Complicated year psychology major. Ze describes zirself as an Ultra-Queer Satanist dedicated to the destruction of power for the good of all people, including those who aren't human. Zir hobbies include writing (both fiction and not), creating and improving zir new language, and reading Tarot.

Ariana Fletcher-Bai is a junior HCOM major and Creative Writing minor. She works in the writing center and interns at TUpress and her whole life revolves around words. She wouldn’t have it any other way.
Dalton Flood is a senior philosophy major. He is a member of the Iota Chi Rho fraternity and a computer science enthusiast. He is committed to a job with Capgemini in Chicago after his impending graduation.

Jessica García-Tejeda is a first-year student, double majoring in Computer Science and Business Administration. She is a Colorado native, born and raised in Denver, has three dogs, three siblings, and knows three languages.

Amanda Gerlach is a junior studying Communication and Sport Management. She grew up in Houston, Texas and got her first camera at age seven.

Collin McGrath is a senior English major. His work has previously appeared in the McNay Art Museum’s exhibit “Telling Tales: Contemporary Narrative Photography”.

Calliope Izquierdo (or Callie, for short) is a sophomore English major from Laredo, Texas. She was named after a cat who was named after the instrument (which one would assume was named after the muse). In her free time, she listens to music and lies in bed.

Madeline Kennedy is a senior political science major with an interest in translating experiences, emotions, spaces, and apprehensions across contexts. Whether this is teaching two-year-olds how to ask for what they want, teaching herself how to ask for what she wants, or writing, her focus is on building empathy and understanding in dissimilar people.

Declan Kiely is a Junior Environmental Studies Major. All of his poems are simply edited mind vomit, if one could irrationally covet vomit.

Sneh Lalani is a senior Psychology major here at Trinity. She enjoys creating new studies at the Children’s Research Lab and is also co-captain of Trinity’s own Bollywood Dance Team, Top Naach!

Dinda Lehmann is an art major following the MAT path at Trinity. She often experiments with different techniques and mixed media within her artwork. You can find more of her work on Instagram @stars_shine_for_you.

Alyssa Machajewski is a Sophomore Anthropology Major. When she’s not in class, she writes, she reads, she watches too many movies. She writes stories anywhere she can set a laptop, short ones when she’s stuck and long ones when she’s not.

Collin McGrath is a senior, born in Houston, with an English Major and a Creative Writing Minor. Since the spring of 2016 during his free time, he has written and published 17 stories online, totaling over 400,000 words, and was a guest speaker on Texas Public Radio’s podcast. He intends to pursue an MFA in Young Adult and Children’s Literature.

Kate Nuelle is a sophomore studio art and art history major who works as a student assistant for the Visual Resources Center and as a photographer for the Mirage Yearbook. Kate is the president of the Trinity Art Collective and a mentee in the 1869 Scholars Program. Over the summer, she was an intern with Blue Star Contemporary through the Arts Letters and Enterprises program.

Grant Peterson is a sophomore from Boulder, Colorado, working towards a comp-sci major and a minor in studio art. He sometimes writes poetry and short prose for fun (usually from imagination, rather than lived experiences), and in the last couple of years he has also gotten into digital photography. The only problem is, photography is a much more expensive hobby than writing!

Tiana Sanchez is a junior English major. Tiana doesn’t normally experiment with pre-existing poetic styles or forms, but this was a fun way to branch out. Finding new meaning in these lines was extremely inspirational and enlightening.

Erica Schoenberg is a junior Theater/English major from Houston (ish). She wishes “Renaissance man” was still a valid profession and wants to be that when she grows up and just do a bunch of, like, art and stuff all the time. This is her first time being published and thinks it’s super cool that y’all want to read her essay which is not only true & personal, but also about Beauty & the Beast.

Nick Smetzer is a junior Philosophy and Communication double major. He is thrilled to check “get something published somewhere” off of his list of life goals, and hopes that he can make a habit of writing.

Jocelyn Suárez is a junior biology major from El Segundo, California. This is Jocelyn’s first published poem and she hopes that there may be more in the future. When creating, Jocelyn is always accompanied by a friend, some arizona lemon tea, and memories of home. Gracias mamá y papá.

Carl Teegerstrom is a Senior English and Ancient Mediterranean Studies double major. He loves drawing, writing poetry and traveling. When he was in high school he taught himself basic linguistics to try to create his own language.

Kirsten Timco is a junior English major who will start applying to MFA Playwriting Programs in the fall. Kirsten then plans on getting her Ph.D. in Dramatic Literature to continue onto a career in writing and teaching. She loves her cat Baby, who she insists is a crucial part of her writing process.

Anna WaIlack is a junior at Trinity. She is majoring in Psychology, but her soul is in the Theater department. She learned how to write plays from the wonderful Dr. Rachel Joseph.

Maria Zaharatos is a freshman planning to major English and minor in Spanish. She is an aspiring poet and writer from Houston, TX, though her parents from France and Greece. In addition to academics and creative writing, Maria has a love for West Coast Swing, a partner dance, which she competes in regionally.
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