

PERIPHERY



Art and Literary Journal

ed.

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— DRAKE UNIVERSITY 2024 —



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Edition 61

ABOUT

Periphery Art and Literary Journal is an annual, student produced publication at Drake University. Funding for *Periphery* is provided by the Board of Student Communications. Contents and opinions in this journal do not reflect those of Drake University.


For more information and contact: www.peripheryjournal.com

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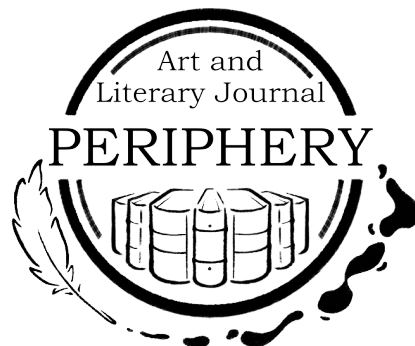
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SUBMISSION PROCESS

Submission to *Periphery* is free and open to undergraduate students from around the globe. *Periphery* accepts stories, photographs, poems, songs, essays, paintings, videos, interviews, digital art, sculptures, graphic narratives, spoken word, comics, and other creative works, including works from genres that have yet to be recognized. All submissions are sent through a blind review process by the Editors-In-Chief, Art Directors, and Editorial Staff. *Periphery* reserves the right to edit any and all submissions, but does not claim the rights to any published work.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

In 2022, *Periphery*, alongside many of Drake University's other publications, faced the most serious threat to its operation in years. In late 2022, budget cuts rocked the University—and every community organization that calls Drake home. That's why this year, I'm grateful to the Board of Student Communications, the Student Senate, and the larger overseeing committees for their tireless work, and for re-committing themselves to the importance of student publications.

I'm even more so proud of everyone involved with the creation and maintenance of *Periphery*. I'm proud of the staff for their clarity of purpose, of the amazing writers and artists who submitted this year, and of anyone who has found joy and inspiration in our events or our journal. You are a shining example of why journals like *Periphery* must be maintained.

The work in these pages comes from you. They come from your community, your colleagues, and your friends. They are worth celebrating. As long as Drake University remains, *Periphery* intends to do exactly that.

It was my honor to serve alongside Atlas Desmond as Editors-In-Chief.

To many more years of *Periphery*!

Aanika Pfister
EIC of *Periphery* (Fall 2023)

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

When I first started at *Periphery*, we were a team of ten. Each year since then, our numbers have dwindled, until last year we were down to five. Graduation left *Periphery* with a staff of three: myself, Aanika Pfister, and Avery Hjelm.

This year was very much make-it-or-break-it for *Periphery*. Aanika and I were both new to the position of EIC and trying to learn the ropes, while simultaneously, all around us organizations were having their funding cut. There was a very real fear of *Periphery* disappearing altogether.

But now, at the end of the 2023-24 academic year, I can proudly say that *Periphery* has regained its strength and is here to stay. This year, we managed to keep our funding and grow to a team of eight incredible editors and designers. Next year, I can rest easy knowing that *Periphery* is in the competent hands of our new EIC, Avery Hjelm, our art director, Emma Masso, and our more than capable editors.

As this year comes to a close, the question remains: why does *Periphery* matter? It's a small, relatively-unknown journal—why fight for it?

Periphery matters because writers, artists, and creatives of all kind matter. Especially at the undergraduate level, when creatives are facing a brand new world of discouragement and rejection, it is absolutely vital for there to be places for creatives to have their work featured and their voices heard. *Periphery* matters because there is nothing quite so powerful as being heard.

Thank you to everyone who submitted; regardless of whether your piece was included in this issue or not, I assure you, your voice was heard.

Thank you, also, to my wonderful team of editors, and to my co-EIC Aanika.

Sincerely,

Atlas Desmond
EIC of *Periphery* (Fall 2023 - Spring 2024)

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⌘ LITERATURE ⌘

"EMPTY WORDS ARE EVIL." -HOMER, THE ODYSSEY

YOU KNOW THE WAY TO CALIFORNIA

Maggie Gillaspie

Buried under the stump
Of the old orange tree
Lie the bones of your forethought and freedom
They will serve as direction to
The river
You do not need them
You know the way
Past the thorns of the lemon bush
The tooth rot
Four cups of sugar for every lemon
Twelve cavities and a golden crown
You know the way
Beside the house up the hill
That your mother ran every morning
Determined to lose weight
On her sabbatical from your father
Her study being your body as well as hers
Her seven years of labor long passed
Her year of leave spent nurturing you
You know the way
Through your grandmother's kitchen
To the stone patio
Chopin blaring on a crank radio
Quiet conversations with Virgil
Without the threat of violence
NPR talks don't bore you
Your grandfather likes them
You latch onto his characteristics
Bent on making them facets of yourself
Hope to leech some of his greatness

Steal some power for yourself
You know the way
Long dresses and purposeful incompetence
You crave being taken under the wing
T-shirts over tankinis
Tying beads to bracelets
Bare Feet and crabgrass
Dry wind and dry faces
That should be wet
Your grandmother, the wraith, whispers
As you embark
On your walk back home
If you ever need to escape Phlegethon
'You know the way to California'

FAMILY SOUP

Kolby Friedrichsen

I spend most nights closed in the furthest room at home,
to avoid kids the mother grew as her own, but nights
like these, I like to believe they all forget where I came from.
I press my toes carefully across the once sand colored carpet

Now holding the fur of our last two family dogs
and the stains of a jealous cat, competing
against the “accidents” of a pre-potty-trained
little boy. Leaving my footprints behind
like a treasure hunt back to my bedroom door.

I am enveloped in pumpkin candles that mix aromas
of a meal to warm my cold achy bones. In the last year
those achy bones cling tight to my skin, framing craters
that hold home at the base of my neck, supported by a collar
bone, or a Tumblr.com girl, or a heroin chic
Courtney Love didn't do it girl, and the need to grieve
where I came from, pushing these girls down my throat
So forcefully, the mother soup never passes through my lips
anymore.

I still watch her though—the mother. In the kitchen
of warm-toned light. Swirling, potatoes, carrot, garlic stock;
warmth. I watch her soaking the wooden spoon with new flavors
Every circle she swirls in the pot. Placing new meaning on home,
Potato, carrot, garlic stock. Is this love? I watch Her
sway side-to-side gifting me the motion of unsung lullabies;

Comfort, nurture, warm love. Are you my mom? With caution
she holds a steam coated potato, pressed by the tips of her
fingers, offering to my hollow body—Today I am home.

GRIEF

Maggie Gillaspie

Grief is a funny thing for a small being such as me
I find grief in bookstores and in
The stems of cucumbers
I weep for the raccoon on the road
The mouse in the trap
My childhood dog in the yard
He always bathed in sun face upturned
Laid forever to rest underneath the grass
Ambiguous grief
I find it waving at me as the car pulls out
Find it in my mother's smile lines
I find grief prematurely
When I laugh with my sisters
Look into the eyes of lovers
I find grief too late
The dog's old blanket on my bed
An old letter in my childhood desk
A sharpened pencil
A tattoo on the ribs
I take grief in and hug her
Clean grass off graves
Here in wet faces and red eyes
The sweetest price of love
Here is my proof that I can do it
I can love and I can hurt for love
I wouldn't give it up for anything
I thank God for ignoring my pleas for the pain to stop
Grief is my moles that mirror my mothers
Shaped in triangles
Scattered about my body
To mourn is to sing songs
To mourn is to remember

To be human, to feel, to fight
Grief is a funny thing
It is cold at night and warm in the morning
A laugh in the mirror at
A puffy face
God help the dry eyes in the audience

THE SKELETON

Grace Flammang



A skeleton woke up from beneath the ground.
After shaking and digging he broke through the dirt mound

He pulled himself up and sat on the grass.
The skeleton looked around and then out loud, he asked,
“Is anyone out there, or is it just me?”
“Am I alone, there’s no spirit nor soul I can see.”

Without a brain in his skull, there were no memories he had.
“Do I have a mother?” he thought, “Maybe a dad?”
The Skeleton stood and took a step back.
He bumped into something,
his own epitaph.

“RIP” read the tombstone
“Beloved son and brother.
Date of death: unknown.”

“My family,” he thought, “Where could they be?
What do they look like? Do they look like me?”

“I must find them at once! We shouldn’t be apart.

With their son missing,
They'll be ailed with broken hearts.
I'll head into to town and look for them there
We'll be reunited and hence, cured from despair."

The skeleton departed from his home in the ground
and trekked down the path that led into town.

Upon his arrival to Main Street,
Stranger after stranger, he tried to greet.

"A dead man, how gross!"
"He's decomposed! Unclean!"
"He was eaten by worms and dares to be seen!"

One man stopped, glared and grimaced.
He looked the skeleton up and down, finally resting on his boney
visage.

"Do I know you? How could I say?
You don't look human, but like a Halloween display.
Now, I don't mean to be crass, I don't mean to debase, but
You'd be more recognizable with flesh on your face."

The skeleton stood still and took this to heart.
"I know what to do," he thought, "I know where I'll start!
With my body just bones and the rest decayed,
any features I had have melted away!"

So he zipped the man down
and wore him like a suit.
He crept in his skin and walked in his boots.

How comfortable it is, another man's skin.
You'd be surprised, I'd say, how easily you can crawl in!

Through the night he stalked, his anticipation undeterred.
But a few moments later, something surprising occurred.

A women, quite short, ran up to HIM.
Held him tightly,
with a beaming, toothy grin.

"Oh, my son!" She cried, "You gave me quite the scare!
Where have you been? I've been stuck in despair!"

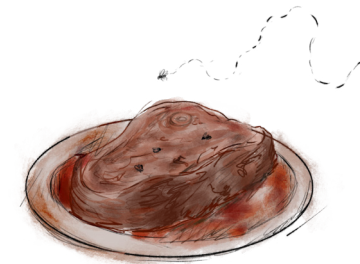
Overflowing with joy he hugged her so fast.
"Mother, is it truly you? Have we reunited at last?"
She didn't respond, instead she just smiled,
slapped his back, "Don't mock me, my silly child."

"You look no more than some skin on bones.
Your ribs stick out like the teeth on a comb.
You must come home and eat, I'll cook up some beef.
We'll fill up so you'll put on some meat."

He held her arm and followed her with no delay.
Just now noticing she resembled the man he fileted.

Our skeleton now sits at a table, a filling meal in his ribs.
Resting content at the bottom, like a babe in a crib.
Well, so it seems he has a home for today, but now let me ask a
question:

What will happen once borrowed flesh starts to decay?



TW: suicide

EMAILS OVER RESEARCH

Olivia Corey

The door opened slightly, letting out the bit of daylight that was from the hallway windows. All morning, she sat in her lifeless office with just a few pictures of her family scattered among the many shelves of books. She sighed after answering the fiftieth email she had responded to. Her eyes strained from the countless hours of focusing on what was on her screen.

A knock on the door was quickly followed by footsteps and mumbling. A girl stood in the corner of her eye; she wore a very shaky smile like she was trying to force it.

"Can I help you?"

The girl leaned into her personal bubble, her face inches from hers; she bent over as if she were bowing. She made direct eye contact. From here, body tremors were radiating from her whole body.

"Hi, Dr. Kassel; sorry to bother you, but do you remember me from last semester?"

Dr. Kassel slowly shook her head until the girl continued to blurt out words.

"I remember you." She closed her eyes and let out a shaky sigh. "But it's ok, you're very busy. I wanted to see if you had any updates about research?"

Dr. Kassel shook her head again and slowly closed her laptop. "I have a lab, but there isn't much to do right now—"

"Great, that's what I thought, but—"

"Please email me back and come during office hours if you want more information."

The girl backed away; her smile dissipated into a quivering thin line.

"Ok, thank you, Dr. Kassel." her face was still focused on Dr. Kassel's face. "I was coming from a different professor and thought I would stop by. I'm sorry for interrupting you." And with her last words, she dashed out of the office.

Dr. Kassel sat in her office, confused at what had just happened. No one ever came to her office hours. But Dr. Kassel shrugged it off and kept answering emails.

About a month passed, and her co-worker stepped into her office briefly.

"So, how's the lab?"

"It's fine."

"How is it fine?"

She concentrated on her emails again, clicking, opening, typing, and repeat. Her fingers flew right off the keyboard, glancing back at the screen, making sure everything she wrote conveyed everything she said.

Her mouth moved. "Just fine."

"Well, my research is going great."

"That's good."

He paused, his glance reading her reaction. "And I need more people."

She stopped, finally looking at him. He wore a cocky smile.

"And?"

"I just need more people to care for the rats, Kassel."

"Sure."

"I do!"

"Don't you have 30 people in your lab?"

"It's not enough."

"It's not *enough*?"

"Rats Kassel. The Rats need their young mommies and daddies."

She rolled her eyes back at the phrase "Mommies and daddies." A twinge of cringe hit her in the gut. Her fingers started to dance back onto her keyboard, distracting her from it.

He started tapping her monitor, his grimy fingers reaching her emails.

"Crine cut it out. I don't have anyone."

“Yes, you do.”

Her fingers left the keyboard one last time, her dark bags staring straight at Dr. Crine. “Is this how a professor in a Ph.D. in Psychology from *Yale* should be acting?”

There was a moment of heavy silence before Dr. Crine threw his hands in the air, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and stomped off. His cursing echoed through the halls. A satisfied smile appeared on her lips as she returned to her typing and reading. She had finished her last email when she moved on to her next. It was the girl.

It was a simple email. Stating that Dr. Kassel had a good week and asked about research.

Her eyes went to the date. It had been sent a few days after she barged into her office. But it had been about a month for Dr. Kassel to read it. Her fingers hesitated over the keyboard. The girl must know that she’s a very busy woman. She must know. She must understand.

Dr. Kassel wrote a simple reply to the message apologizing for the delay and to please see her during office hours.

The door to the dark office opened, letting in the morning light into the lifeless office. She put up her coat and put her bag on the floor. This time, she grabbed a textbook from her bookshelf. She flipped it open, starting off a lovely morning with a daily dose of *Anxiety and Other Related Disorders*.

As she finished the last paragraph, she noticed someone’s head peeping out of her door. It was the girl.

“Hi, Dr. Kassel. Did you want to see me?”

“No, I thought you wanted to see me.”

She paused, closing her eyes so tight that the wrinkles on her eyelids and shook her head as if her actions could suddenly restart their conversation.

“Sorry.” forcing a smile, “I’m just nervous.”

Dr. Kassel said nothing. The girl pulled off her old blue backpack and took off her own coat. After that, she hugged her coat

tightly as she sat.

“So?” Kassel asked. “Why are you here?”

“I wanted to see if you had any research opportunities right now. I was interested in your research on anxiety and depression.”

“Yes, my research.” She put her hands together on the table. “Well, we aren’t currently looking for anyone right now. I only have a grad student who is a TA in the biology department and another student finishing up the paperwork from last semester. I have a bunch of data, but I don’t know what to do with it right now. That is mostly how it works. I experiment, and then I have a bunch of data that sits around for years before it’s picked up and we see if anything happens to it.”

The girl’s shoulders rose to her ears. She rubbed her fingers together. “But what about the presentation you did last semester? I went to see it. Is that all done?”

“Yes. It’s all done. As I said, it’s all being turned into a research paper. Try to email me again if I have any openings.”

The girl’s nails started to dig into her cuticles. “Are there going to be any openings? It’s just that I need this research before I graduate.”

Dr. Kassel hummed, noticing the skin picking from the other side of the desk. “What are your plans after graduation anyway?”

During the first draw of blood, she kept picking over the blood. She rubbed the sticky blood into her fingers before she spoke. “I want to either work in Clinical work or become a family therapist.”

Dr. Kassel paused. “If clinical work, what would you like to study?”

“Working with depression and anxiety.”

There was a longer pause between them. The blood on her fingers started to run onto her hands.

“That’s interesting, then; what would you want to do research within family therapy?”

The girl took a deep breath, rubbing her damp, bloody fingertips on her worn-out jeans.

“I want to see how depression and anxiety affect the family.”

“That’s very similar to my research.” Dr. Kassel whispered, squinting her eyes. “Is that why you want to join my research?”

She nodded, her words spilling out of her mouth. “It’s just I’ve been emailing you and contacting you since last January, and you still had no openings for your lab.”

“You should try talking to other professors about research—”

“But I want this research!”

The girl stood out of the chair, her coat still in her grasp. Her jaw clamped down as she stared directly at Dr. Kassel. There was a hint of body odor when she stood; a sweat drip ran down her forehead. She wore a long-sleeved shirt, trying to pull down her sleeves. The girl whispered as if this was her last hope:

“Please.”

Dr. Kassel shook her head, leaning back into her chair, and shrugged.

“I’m sorry, but I just don’t have any openings right now. And this isn’t how a college student should ask her professor about opportunities. Think about being more professional.”

The girl’s shoulders lowered. Her eyes drooped to the ground; a gray film waved over her eyes. The desperation in her face was lost.

“OK, I’m sorry. I’ll try emailing you later in the semester.”

The girl walked away.

“Hey, Kassel.”

Dr. Kassel looked up at the door to see Dr. Crine. Unlike his bubbly, annoying, childish self, he stood straight up. His usual cheeky smile turned into a thin line, and his brows furrowed.

“What is it, Dr. Crine.” “

Did you hear about the news?”

“I swear if you are asking me again about research, I am going too—”

“We lost a student last night.”

Her attention was on Dr. Crine.

“Did you ever hear the name Haile Morton?”

Silence.

“She was a psychology student?”

She shook her head in response.

“My advisee?”

She stopped shaking her head, still silent.

“She wouldn’t shut up about your research to me, and how bad she wanted it?”

Dr. Kassel paused. She blinked a few times, her eyes shifting from one side of the room to another until her whole world connected.

“You pushed her to send those emails?”

“Look.” He moved into her office; he stood up, leaning on the chair the girl sat on just a few days ago. “I know I can be a real pain in your ass, but I was personally hoping for something. The girl was going through some stuff, and she didn’t have the funds—”

“Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

Dr. Crine looked down and broke eye contact with Dr. Kassel.

“Kassel.”

“What?”

“The faculty thought you knew about her.”

“Get out.”

“What?”

“I told you to get out of my office. Now.”

Dr. Crine did what she said—and left with no more words to say. Moments, seconds, minutes, and hours passed. She missed lecturing in her first, second, and third classes. She missed taking her lunch break. She, herself, was lost. She put in her two weeks that same day.

ANHEDONIA

Aria Fisher

You have to make yourself look up at the trees every once in a while. You need to remember when they were larger. Megaflora in your childish eyes. The first time you learned about hippies, you stretched your Icarus limbs and nestled your cheek into the forgiving sappy trunk of that evergreen that you swore you'd make a home out of when things got bad. When you would get sap deep in the whorls of your fingerprints and the lifelines of your palms and somehow the foaming soap in its ugly plastic container couldn't wash it all the way out and you could smell it on your fingertips when you went to sleep that night. biting bark scraps as a primal beastly instinct despite a loose front tooth and skinning your knees while you fall because you vastly underestimated the distance between the safe cradle nook you and your friend found and the pine needle ground.

You must recall what it tasted like, when trees were gods. when your holy communion, the closest you ever got to church, was grinding pine needles between your teeth. the old testament clarity embedded when you almost gouged out your eye with a spare branch and dreamed about the grounded dirt-sap-earth smelltheevergreen breathe deep looking out past the grime while your waxed hardwood floors shook loose and spun under your feet, some odd sense of artificial doom coming from the artful carvings of your kitchen table and the straight-backed lumber chairs that hurt no matter how you tried to contort yourself to make them natural again. the adrenaline violence fear of falling, more honest in the forest than in a living room.

You need to look at the trees and feel the way you used to. shove some dirt in your mouth and connect again and yearn the way you did before it became true that yearning is for fools who hurt. The trees will hurt you and you can love them and pretend you understand the lifetime rings of kingdoms fallen and fires wrought. above and under the ground ancient electric

symbolsyntax humming through you—all flimsy lenses bundle of nerves you small human animal of urges you. Remember when you were moved magnetic and reach for it, ambitions of the sun. Remember when you wanted so badly. and look up and watch the leaves change. and walk over the rotting scraps on the ground. and pretend it is sublime.

FIKA

William Shell

“Coffee, anyone?”
sitting on barstools
couches and rugs
rain tip toeing outside
“milk and sugar?”
sipping from thrifted mugs
on criss crossed legs
three years ago.

The rain falls as
the bitter coffee brews
staring through red eyes
at neutral beige walls
dragging back on sore knees
to board meetings
while sipping
from white
company
mugs.

ANOTHER LOST HOLIDAY

Stella Stocker

I wait where he can watch me.
Follow the fly's shaky scribble
to the fruit bowl, where it spits
up like a baby. I smell the sun-
warmed apples, red as Christmas.

Its seeds are sprouted from and
cosseted by cyanide. I'm a waiter—
I watch and anticipate. I know he
wants a mom, not a girlfriend. I
serve him roast turkey and brussel

sprouts that he won't touch. I
trash my childhood crafts, make
room for his, because mothers
were never children. Instead
they are reborn as angel tree-

toppers, primed with painted
smiles and wings that twitch
but don't fly. All of my clumsily
crafted snowmen sculptures
are strangling on friendship-

bracelet scarves. I can hear them
gasping in the kitchen trash can,
cheery faces pressed to scrapped

bird bones and the brussel sprouts
that I cooked and served for him,
the ones he would not touch.

AFTER OXYKODONE

Abbie Langmead

talking to you like this

is like speaking to a toddler
who knows nothing, but hates you.
they say that They Hate You.
you have no choice
but to reassure them they don't know
what hate is.

is like muttering to yourself
as you try to Remember
what you need before you leave.
wallet. keys. cell phone.

is like reading the same word
over and over again, until
it means Nothing. it's always
the simple words. like school.
or friend. or catalogue.

talking to you like this

is Apologizing, every time,
because i woke you up.

is listening Through
your delirious dreams
of me, Dying Young.

is waiting for You
to Fall Asleep on the line.

is calling my dad after,
to sure your cpap machine
is on tight.

SWEET SEASIDE

Emily Hedrick

"Jason, I'm not mad, just disappointed," the king said to his nephew, "As heir to the throne, I expect you to automatically understand how things work."

"That's impossible, Uncle." Prince Jason slouched and put one hand in the pocket of his jacket, where he kept his mother's wedding band.

"We're royals, we're born with the innate ability to fully take in situations and make our own decisions about what to do from birth. I simply can't fathom why you don't use these noble skills."

The prince crossed his arms. "You think I'm an imposter? That someone switched the real prince with me after I was born? I knew you didn't love me."

The king looked offended. "Jason, I'm hurt!"

"Whatever." The prince turned on his heel and walked briskly out of the room.

Jason was the only eligible heir to the throne. Almost every royal in this cold, seaside kingdom had died of some type of disease. The situation had become so dire that a separate hospital wing of the castle had been reserved just for royals to protect the staff. Only six people of the royal lineage remained. Jason, prince and heir, about to turn twenty years old. Jason's uncle Frederick, the younger royal brother, was king, and afflicted with frequent bouts of illness that had caused his health to deteriorate over the past decade, and most people were convinced that he wouldn't last another decade. He was barely able to get out of bed in the morning these days. Jason's father, Alexander, the elder brother, was unfit to rule due to brain damage. Jason's three princess cousins were all under the age of twelve, way too young to rule. That was it. Only them.

Their miserable and dying dynasty had been allegedly cursed generations ago by a vengeful wizard whom they refused to be a patron kingdom to because he was a silver-tongued criminal who failed to fool them with his antics. Nobody wanted to marry into the seaside kingdom's royal family anymore because they

feared the perpetual bad luck spreading to them.

The wizard's curse went like this:

*"As punishment for the royal family's scorn and for their spite,
My strongest spell, like a serpent, will sharply bite.
Fevers will burn like fire, but the flames of life will be snuffed out,
And as if this were not enough, these plagues will spread
throughout.*

*Until the stubborn cowardice of these arrogant kin,
Change their ways which spawn such poison within,
All who are wed upon the soil to the blood of the Seaside,
Will find that they are condemned to death's dark tide."*

The wizard had never been seen again since he'd cast the spell, but the following generations had suffered greatly without any hope that the curse could be broken. Jason knew from a young age that his days were numbered.

Jason didn't want to rule. He wanted to be an architect. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to marry someone and bring them bad luck. The monarchy could go right to whale shit in his opinion. He just didn't want to lose his remaining relatives, even though they didn't get along with each other.

Jason exited the castle and made his way down the rocky slope to his favorite secret cove where nobody could bother him. He was sulking, but he knew the fresh sea air would calm him down a little. Staring at the sand below him, he headed toward his favorite rock so he could sit and gaze sullenly at the waves on this gray, misty morning. Jason waded into the lapping water. He looked up from his feet, saw the rock, and nearly jumped out of his clothes.

A merman was sprawled out on the rock. His eyes were closed, his forehead was sweating profusely, and he was barely breathing. His emerald-green tail had scales missing and his shredded fins lilted weakly in the wind. His skin was covered in bruises and bleeding cuts that stained the rock he lay on. His long dark hair was a disheveled mess with pieces of seaweed stuck in it. Based on his human half's appearance, Jason guessed he was about his age.

Jason was absolutely baffled. He'd heard of merfolk in fairy tales but had never seen or heard of them truly existing. How did this one end up on these shores? And what had he been through?

Jason climbed up on the rock and gently poked the merman's arm. The merman's eyes slowly opened. Their eyes met. Fear flashed across the merman's face. He choked out something frantically in a foreign language and tried to get up, but he was too weak to move. He let out a moan of pain.

"It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you!" Jason tried to assure him, putting a gentle hand on the stranger's shoulder. The merman stopped struggling.

Jason pointed to the water. The merman shook his head violently. Jason pondered this. They couldn't communicate apart from body language. The merman clearly needed medical attention and, for some reason, didn't want to return to the ocean, his main life source.

"Well," Jason said to himself, "I can't leave him to die."

Jason pointed to the merman, then to himself, then to the castle. The merman seemed to understand. Jason carefully lifted him up into his arms and carried him toward the castle. The merman clung to him, shivering, terrified of the unknown but relieved to be away from the rock. Jason could feel the pounding of the merman's heart, just as loud and frightened as his own heartbeat.

"Uncle!" He yelled as he entered the castle with the merman in his arms, "I found an injured fish boy on the beach!"

An hour later, the royals congregated in the hospital wing of the castle. The merman was stretched out on a bed of seaweed in the biggest glass tank they could find on short notice, which was more like a glass coffin than anything else, minus the lid, of course. There was no room to swim. A doctor stitched up his torn fins. Jason stood by the tank with his arms crossed. He felt responsible for the merman's protection and didn't want anybody besides the doctors to touch him. The merman looked calmer after seeing that the humans posed no threat to him, but he clearly sensed the negative energy in the room.

King Frederick stood opposite Jason, nervously wringing his hands. His three daughters, huddled around him, gazed in wonder at the merman in the glass tank. Jason's dad, Prince Alexander, wrapped in thick furs, stared blankly at the floor. Since the near-fatal fever had boiled his brain, he mostly talked in one-word sentences, if at all. He suffered extreme memory loss, barely

recognized those around him, and always needed someone with him to guide him through his daily needs. He walked with a limp, suffered frequent nightmares, and was prone to seizures. He hadn't smiled since the frightful fever had broken.

King Frederick took a breath, trying to keep his voice steady. "You found him, Jason?"

"Yes, Uncle."

The king's eye twitched. "You can't communicate? You don't know where he's from?"

"No, Uncle."

"You haven't been secretly talking to merfolk for years? I mean, it's okay if you have, I'm just trying to understand the situation."

"No, Uncle, he's the only merperson I've ever seen in real life."

"You don't know what caused his lacerations?"

"Ask the doctor, Uncle."

"Dr. Pamela, what do you think caused his lacerations?"

Dr. Pamela looked up from her work, annoyed at the distraction, "Probably got caught up in that violent storm last night, got smashed against rocks or other sharp debris. Fins are quite delicate and sensitive. However, this slash here on the chest is clean and deep, likely a knife wound. Hard to be sure, though."

"That makes sense," Jason responded. "He made it clear that he didn't want to return to the water. Maybe he was trying to escape something else entirely."

Frederick sighed. "Jason, what do you expect me to do about this?"

"Help me. You know, help me to help him?"

"How do you expect me to help you to help him?"

"Get some excavations under way! We need a bigger pool so this poor merman can swim after he recovers. I'll design the interior and you can find people to dig the hole."

"We have enough problems without having to worry about a fish boy of unknown origins! Repairing damages from the storm in the homes farther down the coast! Trying to figure out how to break this curse! Planning your coronation as King of the Seaside!"

"Water," Jason's father mumbled softly.

Frederick sighed. "Yes, brother, I know that."

"Daddy, please don't send the fish boy away!" Luna, the youngest princess, begged.

"Exactly," Jason agreed, "We can't just force him back into the sea if he doesn't feel safe. Surely, we can spare just a little more kindness. All we do in our spare time is sit in silence waiting for the next disease-related death. Each funeral becomes less expensive because less people attend, and nobody associates with us because we're cursed. Well, except for trade, because the goods we sell aren't cursed, but anyway, the people just do their own thing and don't bother us at all. Our crime rate is non-existent because we pay everyone a living wage. They're also not cursed, so they're thriving as long as they have leadership. There's literally nothing happening in this kingdom these days. We can set aside time for one marooned merman. Girls, you agree, right? You want the fish boy to stay?"

"Yes, please, please, please!"

The king gritted his teeth. "Fine. We'll work together to get the pool put together. He can stay until he's fully healed, but then he must go home, like it or not. This is no place for a merman who has nothing to do with us. He's better off in the ocean away from complicated human matters in general. He's been through enough and we don't want to cause him any trouble with our issues."

"Fine," Jason scowled, "I know I'm not your ideal heir, Uncle, but I'm trying to help someone."

"Jason! Firstly, we can barely help ourselves, and secondly..."

"Good talk, thank you!" Jason turned to leave, but the merman splashed frantically in the tank.

"Whoa, easy!" Dr. Pamela exclaimed. The merman looked at Jason with a pleading expression.

Dr. Pamela frowned. "Prince Jason, it looks like he's only comfortable if you're in here with him. The rest of you, get out. Prince, stay. Doctor's orders."

"Yes, Dr. Pamela," said the king, "Brother, come, let's get you something to drink."

"Sad," Alexander murmured glumly.

The king guided his brother out. The girls followed, whispering to each other excitedly. Dr. Pamela sewed the last stitch. "I better do some research on merfolk to get a better idea of

of what he needs are and what kind of conditions he came from. Since most information is rooted in legend due to extremely limited contact between merfolk and humans, this might take a while. Keep him company, please."

She left, leaving Jason alone with the merman. They regarded each other.

"I wish I could understand you," Jason told him, "I bet you have some interesting things to say."

The merman spoke in his own language. His tone made it sound like he was reflecting on his situation and trying to reach out. Jason hoped so. He didn't really have any friends.

"I'd love to know your name," Jason remarked. He pointed to himself. "Jason."

"Jason?" the merman echoed. He said a word in his language, pointing at himself. His name, Jason guessed, but the word was formed in a way his mouth wasn't familiar with.

Jason tilted his head, confused. The merman understood. He scanned the room and pointed to a map on the wall. Jason walked to the map and gingerly touched it. The merman motioned for him to go outward, past the castle, past the beach, and finally, past the shallows. Jason did so and stopped. The merman nodded and repeated the word.

"Reef," said Jason, "We call this type of place a reef."

The merman nodded. "Reef," he repeated, pointing to himself again. His voice was low and sweet, conjuring the mental image of strong river reeds.

"So that's your name in my language. Cool." Jason gestured at the map again, in the same place. "Is that your home?"

Reef seemed to understand because he nodded again and made a face of discomfort.

Jason sat down beside him. "I'm sorry things aren't right in your home, Reef. It must've been terrible, what you endured, and to be washed up in a strange place with no one..."

Reef sighed and stared forlornly at his tail. He could barely sit up, so his head was propped up just above the waterline. He curled up his tail and rubbed his fins.

"I'm not happy in my life, either. It really is a shame that you had to wash up on shores this dismal. Things really aren't good over here."

Reef was looking at him again, listening intently. He seemed to notice Jason's sorrowful tone. He had a light in his eyes, intelligent and kind. It was nice to have a companion.

"My family is small. So much death. Mom died when I was little. Dad got so sick that it damaged his brain. He doesn't recognize me now. My cousins don't get to have fun and just be kids."

Reef said something sympathetic sounding. He tried to reach up with one of his arms, but he winced and stopped moving it. It was thickly bandaged and fractured, with an infected wound.

Jason continued. "My uncle is Dad's main caregiver. He's stressed because he's a full-time father, uncle, brother, caregiver, and king. He puts so much pressure on me because I'm the heir and I constantly disappoint him because I'm unmotivated. We don't see eye to eye on enough things to get along with each other."

Reef asked a question. He pointed to a painting on the wall. A family portrait showing Jason as a depressed teenager. Jason went over to it and pointed to his image. "Prince. I'm the prince of this land." He pointed to the map for good measure.

"Prince Jason," Reef responded.

Jason felt more comfortable discussing his problems. Reef was such a good listener. "We're all unhappy. Nobody likes us because we're bad luck. I know it's not my fault. I can't control it. I also don't know what to do about it. I feel bad, like I've let my family and kingdom down just for existing."

Reef spoke. His tone was quite validating. He slowly, deliberately blinked his eyes at Jason, his face just as sad, as if communicating empathy.

"Thank you for listening," Jason said to Reef, giving him a strained half smile. Reef copied the gesture and nodded, speaking in his merfolk language.

Dr. Pamela returned. "Prince, your cousins need you. I'll take care of him, don't worry."

Jason didn't want to stop talking to Reef, but he wasn't one to argue with a doctor. "Okay, Dr. Pamela, thank you. I'll come see you again soon, Reef, okay?" He patted Reef on the shoulder reassuringly, then waved to him. Reef looked disappointed but understood. He waved back, and Jason left the room.

Within a week, a pool had been filled in the courtyard. Now Reef was strong enough to swim around while the rest of his body healed. Jason carried him to the pool himself and dropped him in with a big splash. Reef seemed happier with more space. During the time leading up to that change of venue, Jason had spent as much time as possible talking with Reef, whose company he found comforting. They gradually began to learn more of one another's languages, speaking in small sentences to one another. It happened quickly as both were quite enthusiastic. Jason found himself feeling calmer and more upbeat around Reef.

Reef seemed happier around him too. He'd grown accustomed to his new surroundings and was more willing to let people besides Jason and Dr. Pamela come near him, starting with the three little princesses who absolutely adored him. They would come by the pool and swim with him, splashing and playing. They would play tag and Reef would always catch them, being the fastest and strongest swimmer, but they didn't mind. The castle just seemed to enter a mildly enjoyable routine where people would pass through the courtyard and happily greet Jason and the friendly merman.

One day during this time, something extra special happened. Dr. Pamela guided Alexander out to the courtyard for fresh air and had a servant bring a chair for him to sit on near Reef's pool. She then went off to check on her medical supply inventory.

Jason looked sadly at his dad, who started blankly off into space. "Dad?"

No response. Jason didn't expect one.

Reef studied the king's brother intently. "Talk to him," Reef said to Jason.

"He doesn't," Jason said.

"Again, talk to him," Reef encouraged him.

Jason tried again, taking his father's hand. "Dad, I have something to tell you. Reef is my friend. The first and best friend I've ever had. I just thought you'd like to know that."

"Friend?" Alexander asked, looking up at his son.

"Yes," Jason responded, gesturing at Reef, "He's a good friend."

Reef smiled, then did something surprising. He lifted his tail from the water and smacked it down, causing a huge splash. Water sprayed all over Jason and his dad, startling them both.

Jason laughed for the first time in years. The feeling, the raw sensation of it was thrilling and euphoric. He glanced at his dad's shocked face and smiled lovingly at him. Alexander started laughing too. He smiled for the first time in years. He seemed more awake, more alive, more joyful than Jason had ever seen him, even before the near-fatal fever had stolen his sanity. It was the most amazing feeling Jason had ever experienced, laughing hysterically with his new friend and his father.

After several minutes of this, something like clarity seemed to shine across his father's weary, lined face. His father started crying.

Reef looked mortified. "My fault?" He asked in an apologetic tone, pointing to his tail fins.

"No, no, you're fine, Reef!" Jason spoke quickly, kneeling beside his father, who looked him dead in the eye.

"S-s-son?" He stuttered, more tears rolling down his face, still heavily scarred from old lesions.

Jason gasped. "Yes, Dad, it's me, your son! It's Jason."

Alexander stretched out his arms, still crying. "Jason. Jason."

Jason threw his arms around his father and held him tightly.

"I missed you so much, Dad," he sobbed in his dad's furs.

After their hug, Alexander pointed at Reef. "Friend?"

"Yes, come meet him." Jason brought his father closer to the edge of the pool. Reef swam over and held his hand out to the frail man. He reciprocated. The two stayed like that for a moment, touching palms like that.

Reef smiled at Alexander and pointed at Jason. "I like him," he told Jason's dad.

Jason blushed. He liked Reef too. Quite a lot.

Reef pointed to Alexander with his other hand. "Kind man," he said, "Very kind man. He knows you, Jason. He loves you."

"Thank you, Reef," Jason wrapped one arm around his dad and held out his other palm to Reef. Reef touched his other palm to Jason's palm.

Jason smiled at his dad. "I love you, Dad."

His dad smiled back at him. "Happy," he answered.

After that heartwarming experience between the three, Jason insisted that his dad hang out with him and Reef whenever he could. It was the closest he'd felt to him since the illness had spiraled out of control. Soon, Jason was just spending more quality time with his dad in general. He no longer saw his dad's memory problems as a barrier between them. He took his dad on walks and even encouraged him to dip his feet into Reef's pool and wade around in the shallow portion of it. His father's physical health also seemed to improve. He was faster, more vital, more mobile. When King Frederick noticed his brother's improvement, he just had to know how this miracle had come about.

"Brother, what's gotten into you? Are you healing? After all this time?" He gazed in wonder at his brother, who took both his hands and squeezed them.

"Brother, I'm happy," he spoke softly.

The king was shocked. "Jason?" He called.

"Yes, Uncle?" Jason was in the pool swimming with Reef.

"Do you know what's going on with your father? I haven't seen him anywhere close to this since before his fever. I want to know what you're doing because it's working."

"It was Reef!" Jason answered enthusiastically, "He made Dad laugh."

The merman shook his head and put his arm around Jason. "Both of us!"

Frederick was spellbound. "And is Reef the reason why my daughters are so cheerful lately?"

"Well, yeah!" Jason answered.

"Jason, we need to talk!"

In the king's study, Frederick told Jason something he needed to focus on.

"As you know, young man, your twentieth birthday is coming up, and so is your coronation."

Jason scowled. "I know, Uncle, and you know exactly how I feel about that."

"I do, but I'm not going to be around forever. Us royals don't live that long, you know, and I really want you to focus and prepare yourself for taking care of this kingdom."

"You want Reef to go back into the ocean, don't you?" Jason said in an accusatory tone. "You think he's a distraction from my royal duties."

"I just want you to remember the serious stuff going on. The kingdom needs your full attention."

"I actually focus better when Reef's around, Uncle," Jason responded.

"Then why haven't you turned in any of the reports that I asked you to go through?"

"Because I already did them, sorted them, and sent them out all by myself."

"What? Without telling me?"

"I'm an adult, Uncle, I can be independent."

"If you're so confident, then why don't you want to be king?"

"I just don't, okay! I can't be king, Uncle!"

"Why can't you be king?"

"I'm going to help Dr. Pamela." Jason stormed out of the study.

The prince was riddled with intense anxiety and drowning in guilt. Too many things were weighing on his brain. The upcoming kingship, his father's health, his uncle's health, the fate of the kingdom if they ended up with no leaders to protect them... Jason's pace quickened until he was running through the halls toward the hospital wing. When he got there, Dr. Pamela was reading medical books.

"Dr. Pamela?"

The doctor looked up. "Yes?"

"Can I do anything to help you? I need to do something, anything!"

Dr. Pamela looked taken aback by his desperate tone. Usually, Jason was calm when he came to help her out.

"Oh! Um, you could go into that cabinet over there and count the rolls of bandages for me."

"I'm on it!"

As Jason's hands flew throughout the cabinet, counting roll after roll of bandages, trying to calm the negative voices in his head, he heard the running of six little feet.

"Cousin Jason?"

He turned to see his three cousins framed in the doorway. The oldest one, eleven-year-old Marie, was the one who had spoken.

"What is it, Marie?"

"We saw you running down the hall a minute ago. You looked upset. What happened?"

"Nothing!"

Marie put her hands on her hips. "Did you have a fight with Daddy?"

"We didn't fight, Marie, we had a grown-up discussion. When you become queen, which is probably going to happen sooner than you think, you'll understand what I mean."

Marie went pale. "Queen? No, you better stay alive, Jason! What are we going to do without you? What did you talk about with our Daddy? Are you sick?"

Her words tugged on Jason's heartstrings. His voice softened. "No, I'm not sick, Marie."

"He will be, though, if he marries Reef," commented the middle daughter, nine-year-old Eliza, "Is that what you talked about?"

Jason's heart skipped a beat. "No, we didn't talk about that, we talked about the coronation."

Eliza frowned. "Okay, but what happens after the coronation? You do know that you can't marry Reef, right? With the curse and all."

Marie gaped at Eliza. "Eliza! How could you say that to him?"

"It's true," Eliza insisted, "Jason, I hate to say this, but Reef's the best thing that's happened to us in a while and if you marry him, then you'll kill him, and you know it."

Jason dropped the bandages he'd been holding. He knew that Eliza was right, but, for some reason, he had hoped that maybe for once in his life...

The youngest princess, seven-year-old Luna, burst into tears and tugged on Marie's hand.

"No! No! I don't want the fish boy to die! No! Please!"

Dr. Pamela looked appalled. "Princess Eliza! You've made your sister cry!"

Eliza scowled. "Jason, listen to me! It's not just about Reef, it's about you too! You could get sick and die too, just like your

mama! And *our* mama! We don't want to lose the closest person we have to a brother! Please don't give the curse anymore chances to destroy our family. You *can't* get married, and if you do, you'll be putting us in danger, and that's selfish!"

Marie looked like she wanted to strangle Eliza. "Why are you doing this? It's not his fault that we're cursed! It's not Reef's fault that we're cursed! Refusing to marry doesn't even break the curse, it just delays it! What about our Mama, Eliza? Are saying she shouldn't have married Daddy just because she was unlucky? Are you saying they were wrong for falling in love? Do you hate our Daddy for loving our Mama?"

Eliza gasped, shocked at the accusation. "No, that's not what I meant at all!"

Marie, sobbing, grabbed the still wailing Luna and ran out of the room, crying for their father. Eliza ran after them, apologizing profusely.

Jason's heart was splitting apart in his chest. "We have thirty rolls of bandages, Dr. Pamela."

He ran from the hospital wing, crying, with Dr. Pamela yelling after him, "Prince Jason, wait! Do you need to talk?"

Jason ran right to the courtyard, where Reef was waiting for him. Reef looked horrified to see Jason so upset.

Jason jumped into the pool and frantically paddled toward Reef, tears rolling down his face and clouding his vision. He felt Reef grab his hand and pull him into a comforting embrace. Jason wrapped his arms around the merman and held him tight, afraid of what would happen if he let go but at the same time feeling like it was wrong for him to be there.

"Jason." Reef spoke softly, tenderly stroking Jason's hair. He wanted to know what was wrong with the kind prince and would do anything to see him smile again. Reef saw something special in Jason, and he wished he knew exactly how to express how Jason made him feel.

Jason sniffled and gently rubbed Reef's back, not sure who he was trying to comfort more, Reef or himself.

"It's all my fault!" He sobbed.

"No," Reef whispered into his ear, "Not your fault."

He pulled Jason even closer than before, as if hoping to keep him anchored to reality. Jason's heart sang whenever Reef showed

him such compassion, whenever he felt Reef's touch, or gazed into his eyes.

That didn't stop Eliza's words from pounding into his skull and filling him with fear, though.

Jason, eyes brimming with more tears, buried his face in Reef's shoulder. "Oh, Reef, I just don't want to lose you!"

King Frederick was at a loss. His daughters and brother had been generally happier lately, but he still couldn't see eye to eye with Jason. This upset him because he loved his nephew, had faith in him, and depended on him because his energy for ruling was diminishing. He just couldn't get through to him and didn't know why.

Then a thought occurred to him. Everyone in the castle had benefited from Reef living in the courtyard. His daughters were enjoying childhood now. His brother was healing, at least a little bit. And Jason seemed to benefit most of all. He was smiling, laughing, and more focused. He was talented at his royal duties. The only absence was motivation to be king or even approach the topic of doing so. If Reef helped Jason bond with his dad, then maybe he could help Frederick bond with Jason.

"If Reef helps me bond with Jason, he can stay forever," Frederick decided.

Later that evening, the king waited until everyone else was asleep. Then he went out to the courtyard and saw that Reef was still awake. He was lying on his stomach in the shallows of the pool, chin on his palm, holding himself up by his elbows and gazing dreamily at the stars.

"Jason," the merman murmured softly to himself, "Sweet, beautiful Jason."

"Reef?" Frederick called.

Reef snapped to attention. "Sir?"

"Reef, I need to talk to you about Jason."

Reef looked concerned. "Jason? Is he alright?"

"Yes, he's fine, but I'm not. Jason will be king, but he doesn't want to. When I mention the kingship, he gets upset, says something snarky, and leaves. Am I too tough on him?"

Reef was silent, comprehending that information. Reef was a quick learner, but still not fluent in the humans' language. Frederick hoped he got the gist of it, if not every word.

"Scared of being king." Reef declared.

"But why? He does so well."

Reef shook his head. "Worried about the kingdom, about sickness. Jason says this to me."

"About dying young, leaving the kingdom without an heir? Spreading disease all over the kingdom and beyond?"

Reef didn't understand every word of those questions, but he nodded anyway. "Scared of death. Scared he can't help."

"That he'll fail the kingdom?"

"Yes."

"That he'll fail me? That he's not good enough?"

"He is good enough. For me," Reef said insistently, "Worth dying for."

Frederick raised his eyebrows. Reef knew about the curse, then. Jason must've told him.

"But he doesn't think he's good enough?"

"No."

"Do you think I made him feel inadequate?" The king asked guiltily. "I never meant to do that. I'm just as scared as he is. We all need him. Really badly."

Reef nodded. "Yes, he saved me. And you are scared. You care about Jason."

"I really think he has potential as king. I believe in him more than anyone, apart from you."

Reef nodded. "Good king, good man, good Jason."

Frederick smiled. "Our good Jason."

Reef blushed under the moonlight. "Yes. Our good Jason."

"So how can I tell him that I believe in him? That we're in this together? That I'm just trying to help him? I want him to feel good enough. Confident."

Reef pointed up toward the tower where Jason's bedroom was. "Talk to him."

"He doesn't listen."

"Talk to him. He needs you."

"He needs you, too. Maybe you should talk to him instead."

Reef shook his head. He smiled at Frederick and gestured to the tower again.

Frederick sighed. "Thank you, Reef."

He turned to leave but paused. "Reef, why don't you want to go home?"

Reef looked uncomfortable. "Jason is home to me now."

"But what about the ocean?"

Reef pointed to the scar that Dr. Pamela had thought was a knife wound. "Family did this."

The King gasped. Who would hurt such a kind, compassionate soul like Reef? "Reef...I...I had no idea. Oh, I'm so sorry that happened to you!"

Reef nodded sadly. "They hate me. Find me. Scare me. Hurt me. Human family loves me."

It made sense to Frederick now. Reef was afraid of the ocean because it reminded him of his horror-filled home life. No wonder he wanted to stay here. Jason was the first one to ever show him any kind of love. Well, he had to stay now. This merman had changed the royal family forever and for the better. Everyone had more hope now because of his optimism and deep faith in them. Sending him back just wasn't right.

"You can stay, Reef. You're safe here. Please, stay here with Jason. I know you love Jason."

Reef sighed dreamily and nodded. "I do."

The king smiled in agreement. "He's a good one. I'll talk to him again."

Jason was in his room reading when his uncle knocked at the door.

"Jason? May I talk to you please? I wanted to apologize."

"Apologize?" Jason was surprised. He opened the door. "For what?"

"If I've sounded like I've been putting pressure on you, I'm sorry," Frederick explained. "I'm just as scared and uncertain about the future as you are, so I want you to be prepared for anything."

Jason blinked.

"You're the best chance we have at a brighter future, Jason. I believe in your skills, your talents, your potential, and I just want you to know that you are doing very well and you're the only one I can see saving the kingdom from collapsing one day."

“Really?” Jason exhaled. “Well, um, I just...I don’t know how to fix every problem. Not yet anyway, and I’m afraid of failing the kingdom somehow. Failing the family. I’ve been shutting you out because all I can hear is my anxiety about the kingship telling me I’m not worthy and avoiding the topic is my way of telling you before the coronation and before you can tell me after my half-baked plans fall through.” He paused and pondered his own words. “I’m sorry too, Uncle. I should’ve reached out about my exact inner struggles more. It would’ve made all our kingship lessons much less stressful.”

“It’s alright, my boy, no need to apologize!” The king put his arm around his nephew.

Jason smiled. “Back at you.” After a moment, he added. “How do you know I’ll be a good king?”

“You’re kind. You’re caring. You stand by your noble decisions.” Frederick answered. “I can tell by the way you rescued that equally kind merman from a hostile environment and how kind you’ve been to my daughters. They look up to you, Jason. They’ve told me themselves. You’ve helped Dr. Pamela, written those reports efficiently and taken initiative. And the way you’ve supported your father and worked so hard to get him well. It all touches my heart.”

“Reef did a lot of that, though.”

“He did, yes, and so did you. You had someone as kind and giving as you to do it all with. Reef is good for you, Jason. He brings out the best in you. The best that’s been there all along.”

Jason was utterly taken aback. Why hadn’t they opened up to each other like this years ago?

“And I know you want to be an architect, too.”

“I do, Uncle.”

“Being a king and an architect simultaneously is perfectly viable. You can design a stronger kingdom with better infrastructure and sanitation to curb disease. You can design underground and underwater passages that allow merfolk to come and go as they please. Reef can’t possibly live in that cramped pool forever.”

Jason hugged his uncle. “Thank you, Uncle! Wow, an amphibious waterfall sounds amazing.”

“We’re in this together, my boy. You, me, your dad, your cousins, Dr. Pamela, and Reef.”

“So he can stay?” Jason perked up, eyes aglow, realizing the meaning of his uncle’s statement about architecture. “As part of the family? Forever?”

“Of course! That’s what he wants, and I want that too. Everyone is happier with him around, especially you. And I know he loves you, Jason. You can see it in his eyes.”

Jason blushed.

“Do you love him, Jason?”

The moonlight shining through the window made Jason’s eyes sparkle. “I do.”

“That’s wonderful! Why don’t you go ahead and tell him?”

Jason looked conflicted. “But what about the curse? I don’t want him to die.”

Frederick spoke steadily. “I understand, my boy. I don’t know what this old curse will do, but I do know that my wife knew the risks, and so did your mother. They both knew the risks, but they married me and your father anyway because they didn’t see the curse as a reason to give up on true love. I believe Reef follows the same logic.”

Jason looked out the window at the stars, took a deep breath, and sighed. “Okay.” He stood up, shoulders straight with determination. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his mother’s wedding band. He looked at it, suddenly able to imagine himself using it for its intended purpose. He hugged his uncle again and exited his room.

Frederick walked to the window and gazed at the stars, feeling happier than he’d been in years. He felt at peace, complete, with genuine hope that things could get better someday.

As Jason made his way down the stairs, he passed Dr. Pamela.

She winked at him. “Are you going where I think you’re going, Prince Jason?”

Jason laughed. “Of course.”

Dr. Pamela looked pleased with herself. “I was just looking for you. I found a bunch of dusty old books full of speculative tales on merpeople, you know, because so little is known for sure about them, and they all seem to agree on one important thing.”

Jason tilted his head to one side. "And what is that?"

"That they bring good luck."

Jason gasped. "You mean...Reef could...could he?"

Dr. Pamela nodded. "It got me thinking about the exact wording of that wizard's spell:

*Until the stubborn cowardice of these arrogant kin,
Change their ways which spawn such poison within,
All who are wed upon the soil to the blood of the Seaside,
Will find that they are condemned to death's dark tide.*

It means making changes to how we live our lives and figuring out how to take care of each other more effectively. Plus, if you're marrying Reef, who is from the ocean, and you do that in the water instead of on the land of this seaside, then the curse should break as soon as you exchange vows."

Jason had never been so delightfully shocked in his life.

"Reef can break the curse?"

Dr. Pamela laughed good-naturedly. "I think the accurate statement is that you and Reef can break the curse together."

Jason, with butterflyfish in his stomach, walked down to the courtyard. Reef was still awake, swimming around.

"Reef?"

Reef looked delighted to see him. And a little flustered.

"Jason?"

"Reef, I want to tell you something."

Reef swam closer to the shallows, where Jason now sat. "Say it."

Jason took a deep breath. "Reef, I love you."

Reef inhaled sharply, his eyes wide with elation.

"And I love you, Jason."

Jason felt as if the sun was rising from the center of his heart. He held out his arms to Reef. Reef scooped him up, arms strong and warm. Jason took in a gulp of air and Reef dove to the bottom of the pool with him. There was just enough moon and starlight filtering through the water for them to see each other. Reef wrapped his flexible tail around Jason's legs. Jason and Reef wrapped their arms around each other and shared their first kiss.

Both felt at peace. Both were happy. Both felt complete. Both were right where they needed to be, and that was home, and home was where the other one was. And with newfound hope for a better future, they both knew it would be this way forever.

TW: gore

PEOPLE MEAT

Kolby Friedrichsen

I was born with a responsibility to make people love me—to change everything I am, for others around me.

I was promised safety if I could become uncanny, so I threw myself in rapid water, running deeper than the Manson family. Alone in the chaos
8 fish circle over,

kissing with their teeth, taking chunks of my body, I reach out my hand begging for them to take all of me in.

My body feels so much like a god, you'd think

I was green and covered in scales, with razorblades on my fingertips

instead of bitten nails. Heat-flash in my legs,

Goosebumps rise on my skin, on top of my bones rattling me with hope—

Oh god they love me, I just know!

The more fish rip pieces of me, the more my brain gets fuzzy, and I, the child born to make people love me,

am only bones leftover. With my body consumed there's nothing left for fish to steal, so with one flick of a fin,

I am cast back to shore, to see what the wolves have in store.

LIKE A ROACH, MY MOTHER

Penelope Alegria

shines red in the sun, lays flat on her stomach on bright summer days, though she only comes out in the open like this when she's sure no one else is around, when the neighbors are out of town and the kids across the street are at camp, and though she won't admit it, it's because she heeds the warning of the cucaracha, yes, the silly song she insists on taking seriously, the children's chant, the taunting tune that makes her skin crawl with paranoia, since what could happen to a dirty insect could happen to just about anyone, so no, she won't take her chances, though she's not sure whether American kids know the words, have translated them, perhaps, and grown into adults who hate small scurrying things, though this here is a cold, cold country, which means she hasn't seen any roaches, which means they must have all heard about back home, where the air is hot and heavy and sweet with the scent of trash tanning on the sidewalk, where roaches are only squashed by stupid tiny feet that don't understand that the cucaracha could be their mother, yes, she concluded, that's what must've happened, they all headed south in planes, trains, car trunks, thick with red-brown crawlers who cried and clamored in the dark until they got to their destination and found children who sang about them and women who left the side door wide open like her own mother who knew as all women do that girls grow into roaches and could survive even the apocalypse and still find their way back home.

YOU CALLED ME AN OLD SOUL

Gillian Ruppe

It was late, and my tiny hands gripped my kneecaps through the holes in my grass-stained jeans in desperation. Sleep tugged at my eyes, trying to serenade my young mind into drooling on the passenger side window. I needed to stay awake though. I didn't get to be alone with you often, and even less frequently did I get to sit in the front seat, it was a rare privilege.

The night streaked past the windows at breakneck speed, the mountain and trees and shadows trying to keep us. I was too assured by the haven of the minivan, the protective bubble that I thought was the headlights and blasting heater.

You called me an old soul that night.

I preened with the words, taking it as a compliment to my maturity. I was in such a hurry in that moment, in most of my memories, to get to adulthood. To be called an old soul, especially by you as you carried us from the dark of the cliffs with a practiced hand at the wheel, seemed like such a good thing.

My apartment is cold.

The thermostat is broken, stuck perpetually at 60 degrees. I didn't expect to need fuzzy socks in summer. I spend most of my time here curled up in the refuge of my cave, burrowed deep into my nest of blankets even as the sun bakes the pavement in the world outside.

My plastic bins packed full of first aid supplies and laundry detergent were supposed to cover every eventuality, but I wasn't prepared for this.

Who could've seen this coming?

It reminds me of you. Everything does now, but the cold night calls to mind the time we all spent crowded on the couches. You loved home improvement shows. You spent hours watching couples with perfect teeth and spray tans buy and sell homes like they were Skittles. You would comment on those you thought had good taste and the ones that you thought were tacky while the wind from outside howled through the gaps in the duct tape I helped mom line our windows with. Cooking shows, too. I never cared much for either, but I would always fall into your side as we watched iron chefs mince and flambee and plate and sautee as we ate our frozen tv dinners out of cardboard dishes. On the few days when I did not have the patience for these distant colorful worlds, you would make concessions, changing the channel until we found NCIS or Criminal Minds, the stuff that you knew would make me stay. Sometimes I still wouldn't stay. I suppose you understood that.

The kitchen can be warm, when I make it that way. Steam from my skillet fills the small space and turns my cheeks pink. This is my third attempt at this stir fry, the first two scraped into the trashcan with the lid shut tight. I hope that when he gets here he won't be able to smell the burning. I've gotten better at this whole cooking thing, believe it or not. A few months ago it would've taken me six attempts to get something even close to edible. It may be warm in here now, but it's also loud, the vent's fan whirring full blast to keep the fire alarm from going off. I think I turned on music earlier, but I can't tell if it is still playing. It is a miracle that I hear the doorbell at all. It's even more of a miracle that when I pull the pan off the heat the vegetables are perfectly caramelized.

You used to play the piano. You used to write music. Used to.

I'm not sure you ever saw me, although I suspect you knew I was there anyways, but when you used to play that old piano, caressed the strips of ivory until they sang I would huddle in the stairwell. My back was pressed to the wall, my knees pulled close

to my chest. I would stare at that popcorn ceiling that you hated and listen to you worship in the only way you knew how, a way that mom never really did. I'm not sure I ever really believed in God, even back then, but I still think I understood. That piano followed us from house to house, and in some places, I had to get creative with my hiding places. Even as my body elongated and I became more aware of the world, I was still worried that if you saw me listening you would stop. I don't know why I thought that. I wonder when the last time you played the piano was. I wonder if knowing would have changed how I listened. As I got older I spent more and more of my time on the other side of the windows, seduced by the call of having friends and joining the debate team and pretending that I cared about the football games. Maybe I wasn't even there the last time. I'm not sure I even noticed how long the piano bench sat empty until after.

I think you would like him, Dad. He makes me laugh, not in the way you did, not the same long hard belly laughs, but his reassuring smile and floppy hair makes it easy again. I'll take what I can get. To be honest, I'm not sure I can laugh like that anymore. But he tries. He holds the door for me and texts me in the morning and I know that's not a lot, but I'm sure you remember why the bare minimum matters to me. There's more than that, too. He doesn't read, but he bought me books for my birthday. I already owned one of them, and he was so embarrassed by his mistake, but he got it because he thought I would like it and well, I guess he was right. I do like it. I like him too. I want you to meet him Dad, I want to know if you like him because I do and that should be all that matters but you never liked anyone I dated. You were right, but that is why I wish you could meet this one. I think I finally got one right.

Mom cried for two straight weeks. We all sobbed and shook and hid from the world, but I think she spent more time with tears streaming down her cheeks in that time than she did sleeping. You two were never very physically affectionate, and if I had ever

once doubted how perfect you were for each other because of that those thoughts were quickly put to rest. You hated when we cried, panicked and floundered and just tried to get us to smile because you knew what to do with that. You would have hated to see how much she cried, but it was your fault. It was all your fault.

I don't want to be an old soul. I don't want to shiver and shake with the horror of time. I don't want to know what it means to mourn, to become the backbone of a family that is splintering. I wonder if you knew that night when you said those sorry words, what would happen. I wonder if you knew then that I would one day have to carry us on my back the way you did.

I wasn't an old soul then. I was just a kid.

I think I hate you for that, for cursing me to become someone patient and reliable, for cursing me to become like you without preparing me for the role.

But most of all I miss you.

I don't have a tv. I decided it was an unnecessary expense when I can't turn it on anymore without wanting to cry. But still, as I curl up on the couch beneath three thick blankets, and close my eyes tight, I can almost imagine that the sound of the city is the distant murmur of Fixer Upper or Master Chef, or maybe even the sound of a well-loved piano, smoothing out my hair as I drift off to sleep.

TW: discussion of sexual assault

BRACED FOR A BITE

Stella Stocker

The way that my mother carries herself with shoulders back,
teeth just barely tucked behind lips ready to snarl like a dog
kicked one too many times. We tip face-first into flutes

of Riesling. The microwave spins a popcorn bag and squeaks
like a baby bird before plunging from its nest into sky. We
talk softly over apple-white wine and playing cards as the

radiator buzzes like a cicada. She says the first time she was
assaulted was in college. The first time. The way the world
swishes through me slowly. My mom didn't believe a girl

could make it until my age without having been raped. A
matter of when. Not if. I'm twenty, bitter, and terrified. My
mother: a lifetime of snarling hound dogs with softer than

soft fur. The bark, the bite, then the begging. Men who fuck
you because they can. The way time collapses into this one
moment, solidifying us in amber. Her fear is blood borne.

Our apple-white teeth are bared.
Braced, we wait for the next bite.

SCARLET

Mallory Lo

Everyone dips it in seduction,
But I paint scarlet with panic,
Especially when she and I drink cranberry wine
That airs out like anxious
Anticipation,
And claws the only other red
Lining her bloodthirsty teeth,
Two women, one whose lips never met queer
But glow devilish sticky-glossed flames,
The dark cherry triad she pouts
Scares me to death—

Is it a purposeful
lip bleed, a streak of
raspberry infused
lipstick, or alcohol's
reddish poison
Pouring down
her chin?
Fickle thumb
Ready to wipe
But she'll catch my desire
Red-handed
As I forego irises
For a rose-bloomed mouth.

She is pungent blood rain
Storming sour in my mind
Growing chokeberries in my throat
With a lightning friendly touch,
Scarlet stains
In wait—

To be called her forbidden pomegranate,
 But if muted words submerge in scarlet,
 And leave a coat of unwanted affection,
 I'll choke out,
Joke just a joke
Just joke.

LOS PAPELES ARRIVE ON A TUESDAY

Penelope Alegria

my mama receives her name in an envelope with a US seal, official
 and everything, and she cries. she cries and cries and thanks
 the floor, who trembles in response, who shakes
 my books off the shelves because my mama has been named today.

down south—borders and borders down—they are better
 at reading tremors than i am. that is how my cousins
 and aunts and uncles and scorned grandmas know
 the news before i do. later, i am told that they hold hands
 for the first time in 26 years. they press their ears
 to the floor and that is how they learn to pronounce
 my mama's new name. *legal* is *legal* is the same in
 my language and yours. government-approved and irremovable.

good. my shoulders heave when i finally pick up
 my mama's call. i tell her to hold this news with both hands.
see? the paper doesn't tear no matter how our hands shake.
we cry and the ink doesn't smudge.

PRINTMAKING POEM

Jack Burns

“They Say All Art is Self Portrait”
 — Unknown

We are the intertwining of the human and the material.

Our start consists of fleeting thoughts.
 We shoot between your ears until you nail
 Us down and yank us into the light.
 The light, creamy void of the sketching paper.

We are a milky blue copper etch bathed in acid.
 We are a boundless eye of glass which glares through all trees.

A vibrant cemetery of concepts,
 Both premium and pitiful. The lucky lot are
 Etched into the metal. Meticulous.
 Surgical. Pull the spindly needle across
 And scratch us into the world.

We are viscous ink flooding through the trenches.
 We are the morbid heart that pumps to fill a bloody glass,
 The brittle fingers crunching beneath the ruthless gravity of time.

We watch you dip cardboard in the sticky
 Black blood, scraping our shiny skin. Wipe away the
 Goo and find your old friends hiding underneath.
 As if you're back at Lane Tech.
 Room 445, where you first learned to make prints,
 Polishing copper plates at lunchtime.

We are rainbow stains on a sharp paper crown.
 We are the unsolvable human spirit.

Lay us down beneath the clammy sheet.
Run us through the press. Brace yourself
While your ideas are squeezed, transferred
To the mulberry paper, giving us permanence.
Satisfying and scary.

We are the irreversible editions to your white T-shirt.
We are bony scissors with teeth, munching on corn.

The images you bring to life now
Are impulsive and provocative. Where
Is your statement? Where is your concentration?

We are greasy crayon streaks kissing stone.
We are a lunch tray full of critters and
A UFO frying in a pan, sunny side up.

You can't explain to them why
You see us. You just do.
Meanings materialize
When they're ready.

We are liquid tusche tinting and trickling from the brush to block.
We are a tongue clasping a plump uvula like a fleshy stress ball.
We are the eyelicker, a carnal amalgamation of ambiguous flesh.
We are the untitled.

We reveal the arcane thoughts that
You couldn't put your ink stained finger on
Until you saw us hanging on display.

OFF THE BONE

Ivani Atre

GOODNESS SAYS TO BECOME AS
EASY TO SWALLOW
AS POSSIBLE;
NEVER ASK, AND
IF YOU MUST, SING IT AS A BIRDSONG,

AS THE SILT AT THE BOTTOM OF THAT GREAT,
BIG, BLUE BANK,
TO TAKE IN THE SHARPEST BREATH.
GOODNESS SAYS THAT THIS IS NOT ABOUT
GIRLHOOD OR
A CHANT ABOUT CLEANLINESS.

ON PURPOSE, GOODNESS TELLS,
PROMISE TO DO THESE THINGS ON PURPOSE.
THIS IS ABOUT YOUR FEVER, YOUR
SORE-BONED PERSISTENCE.
ABOUT THE CREATURE OF ORDER, OF

CONVENIENCE—THE LOSING-WAR
ALLEGORY FOR
EARTHLY BELONGING,
BELONGING-IN-ARMS.
INCONSOLABLE, WITH OR WITHOUT A WITNESS.

GOODNESS SAYS "BECOME ME,"
SIGNALS TENDERNESS,
WEARS TWO DIFFERENT SILKS IN
COSMIC PERPETUITY.
THIS IS ABOUT THE THING THAT BITES

AND KISSES THE BLOOMS ON YOUR FINGERTIPS,

ON YOUR EYELIDS.

DO YOU TEACH TENDERNESS?

DO YOU BITE IT RIGHT OFF THE BONE?

EXTINGUISH

Laura Weber

At the art museum, I bought a candle with Kandinsky's "Squares with Concentric Circles" on it, two by four squares, vertical. In painting class, my professor said my portfolio held a theme of categorization and limits. "I can sense your anxiety throughout this, you consistently use compositions that compartmentalize objects. Oh, there's a clock: is time one of your stressors?" My friend in high school told me she can see my handwriting in my art work—what is it about art that reveals a touch of us we can't recognize ourselves?

I light candles when I do homework. The Kandinsky candle had two wicks, burning at once. Each day a square burned away wax dipped down edges up, fighting, but the flames turned towards each other. Desperate to cradle, desperate to share warmth. What is it about home that makes us assume love is evermore?

One of the wicks burned faster than the other and I knew that I was going to witness two versions of gone. When grandpa was in hospice, mom said that she couldn't bear to watch him dying. She watched him forget things like peoples' names and where he was and how to breathe and when it's a fast death it's shock but when it's a slow death it's agony because you never can know the precise moment when flame goes out. The first wick went black. I was gone making dinner and I came back to see how the wax had sobbed out beneath its metal stand, before it exhaled. I waited for the other wick to get close and even though caffeinated midnight tea sat at my left elbow—a stapled stack of paper with it—I watched it. Greens and blues, yellows and purples melted into a brown pool until all squares were gone. Only the wick.

It knelt down with an understanding that time is not an enemy but clear wax tears gushed out in pulses and I wondered if a candle could worry about dying, worry about forgetting, or worry about being forgotten. Maybe it sobbed gripping to the belief that the after life allows reconnection and I, with solace in my eyes, sat at the bedside and chewed on the inside of my cheeks. It was laying down with whispered breaths and I promised I'd stay with it. I'd give up my time for it. An hour passed and I wondered if I should blow it out. I went back to work, knowing I can only give up so much of myself before having to move on. I flickered my eyes back and forth periodically and it was in those few moments, I missed it extinguish.

WIVES AND WOLVES

Kathleen Menjivar

Tales often began with names, written down in a formal mind or settled notion. It was common knowledge to know the labelings of towns and their folk, and of dogs and their cities. It was the natural inclination of man that drove them to title the simplicities of everyday living in supple words that excited one's tongue. What was a man without his name? Could anything truly be of importance if it did not hold place within words?

Yet for the *groom*, for whom this tale resides, who still wandered amongst a house that smelt of supple wheat and chastising winds. He still, ever wondered about the narrative of such supposed understanding.

The elegance of his title was a facade, for the groom was as he was, a mere creature of strangest proportions. One that coiled the space he passed through with hideous abundance. By sight he was arching, and yet silent as the beasts of woods when they hunted. His body stretched towards the sun like a yearning branch, for the aspects of men could not be destroyed entirely, but the remnants of humble shoulders and limbs were all that remained of a gentle image. The groom bared the head of a wolf, gnarled with a maw gaping with fangs, and dark as the blackest soot. His hands kept claws sharp enough to rip the finest silks, and his eyes sought flesh and bone in the briefest darkness.

The groom *supposed* he had once been a man, though he was surely not one any longer.

He supposed the countryside that sheltered him had a name as well, but he had long since forgotten it. His name had already drifted with the rural winds, a revering title lost to the fogs of careless choices, and had left him with nothing. Nothing per say, beyond wife.

He called her such, if in the brief moments when they neared one another in comforted motion. Wife. Though it was not her name, and the groom did not know it. Nor did he have the

inclination to ask, for he'd attempted plenty before of course, but it never brought more than the curl of tentative lips and glossy eyes. He only recalled awakening, to see the veil of her dress one night, as well as the clutch of her hands. But the memories felt too recent to reminisce. She had dressed him in bigger tunic and sharper cloth, and had not fled at drawing presence wherever he followed her. He had not known why she allowed it, why he desired to follow her guidance into the warmth of a distant cabin with utter comfort.

The groom had only *known*. Peering into glistening eyes, and sweetened face. The groom had only known he loved her, and *my*-was there comfort in knowing.

And so they lived. Groom and bride, wife and wolf. The groom could taste the time of their abode crumble by miniscule minutes in the hidden sanctuary they had inhabited. For Wife did not tell him much, she only showed, and she had shown him a home, one built in ivory wood in the solace of the fields and the chatter of the birds. She treated him gently, and when her hands dared to dance atop his glistening claws, the groom ushered back, fearful to tear the delicate skin she wore. It occurred too often, fervently with how his feet chased the movements of her bare soles across wooden floors. Her presence felt too rightly placed, and the removal of it broke his passivity and wrenched him from whatever armchair he had settled in.

He didn't leave her be, he couldn't. There was wrongness in being separated, in daring to part from the warmth of their shared existence. But annoyance never surfaced in his oddly timed attachments, she was consistent in greeting him with a low chur of a voice that breathed into his soul. Wife never wore a wedding dress, the imagery of the flowing veil seemed to merely pass in his memory, for the paleness of the dress was not akin to what she wore then. Colorful patterns of red and yellow, greens that marked the furtive grass by the porch. It was all just as beautiful, but it did not tempt him enough to grasp at the fragile fingertips she offered.

She laughed at him for this. Softly, as if he were foolish for his worry.

When night came and silence draped itself atop the moors, *that* was when the groom saw her most pensive. It was a rare

occasion when she failed to drag him to bed, and he was timely-watching the gleam of the glass atop a clicking clock, and padding with immediacy to the bedchambers when night reached its peak. His feet resounded heavily when he walked, but the sight was always the same. Wife with thoughtful look, the drape of a nightdress upon her limbs, and open arms. It was a collision of ridiculous embraces, of a warmth that drew him to grasp the lean of her back to his chest, the blankets cupping his hands-it was the only time he knew they could not harm. She was quiet only then, breathing the fur of his shape, and saying nothing of the astoundingly clinging ritual.

Until one night, when the groom could not find her-and the loss of the daily embrace sent him to hurried concern.

He'd bounded through the household insistently that night. Nosing his way into doorways and chambers, huffing and whining when emptiness greeted him. He keened in anxiousness, clumsily tossed his maw to the air in some desperate attempt to find the glimpse of her golden presence. Yet it was only in his panicked findings that his eyes flashed in the breeze of an open window, and found the weight of her feet drenched in the height of the glory flowers. His pause had come stricken, but he dashed to the outdoors without hesitation, and her ears caught the hurry of his pace before he ever neared her.

"I just wished to see the stars," she told him-when his beastly hands hovered over her, and the ghost of a chastise filtered between fangs. "I miss the dances with the moon.. don't you?"

Dances. The notion of it had stilled the groom from herding her back into the air of the abode, *dances*. The stars were enveloping, dotted lights that hung themselves so daintily across the expanse of the dark sky. The groom's heart wrung at the sight, twisted so oddly that it pained him to drift over the notion of some hidden desire, his feet burned in an itching shame-but the furrow of his sight rested on only the woman before him. She gazed permissibly at him, but the groom spied the flare of a desire within

them, though it drowned in such a *wanting* that it seemed to shake her frame. It pained her, and the knowledge of it drawled a curdling sound from his grated tongue. He did not wish for it, this odd sensation that had emerged-his body shifted in a mere instinct, reached out to ease her, and drew back just as well in reminder of his cursed touch.

But above all, he sat still. Glinted paw extended to her whims, his shoulders bent in softened wait, his eyes crinkling at her features. He offered, his body and mind fired to the knowledge that *this* was right, though he little recalled why. She had mentioned dances, the groom recalled dances, had they not danced before? Her confusion laced her eyes as she watched, drifted to his extended palm with sifted breath, an air that dared to choke her, and took her time to move.

She took his palm. Claws and all, and danced.

They danced with the moon as their witness, with the stars glinting in match with their shapes and the curl of her lips in a whispering laugh. So that when it ended, and the delight of their actions faded in comforted silence, the groom watched the length of her fingers tap to her thighs as they walked in returning intention. The dance followed their rhythm in lingering pace, and the groom swore it did not leave him for days.

She spoke words to him.

No meager parting of her lips was worth missing, not with the kindness of each conversation drawing him to contentment-even if he could little answer in accuracy. His throat was horrendously garbled these days, scratchy as the mountain winds, his voice *howled* however with whatever he attempted to speak, and daring to attempt better chatter drew sounds too beastly to be repeated. It startled him, when he had first offered a mumble to her presence, but she spoke enough for the both of them-ringing throat unyielding to the a flaw of his speech.

She told him she loved him. Loved him more than the most gorgeous blooms of springs and the temptations of warm noons,

she cooed the words at him constantly-and though he did not answer, his teeth clacked heartily whenever she spoke it. His bones could little handle the excitement in his frame when she spoke of him, whatever word was worthy of joy if it came from her, she bathed them all in worthy brilliance. Every breath was never wasted on her tongue, and he only wished he could speak the softness of their meaning just as well. Yet the weight of her speech faltered with him, she could never fail to mutter another word in her whispers, and the word always paled her when she spoke it. She called him that word, often. The groom couldn't decipher it, he could not recall its significance in their patterns, she called him many things in truth. Darling was on a consistent occasion, precious on others, and there were plenty more that existed with their affections. But the word she spoke floated only briefly in his mind. He tried prying, staring inquisitively when she spoke it just as fondly as any other address, but the moment her realization clutched onto the matter of her speaking it-her cheeks thinned and she turned from him, so forcibly it seemed to make her ill.

So he did not ask, and only pondered.

It was truly nothing, words were nothing but sifted sounds, but that one had stuck to his ribs stubbornly. Perhaps it was because Wife had spoken it, and he did so care for her words. But it did not leave him easily, it appeared to him that the more he pondered, the louder the word grew, and he paced incoherently against lengthy halls, baring teeth at empty ghosts and that foolish sound that followed. On those occasions, he found peace by the mirror, a mere turn from the hall-with glass tall enough to meet his eyes, however dipped in darkness they were.

Beside it, he watched himself cautiously. The groom could spy it all upon him, with broad shoulders and sprawling ears, how he was a lashing sight of beast and man. To call himself a creature was wrong, but it was a worse injustice to stare longer at the reflection, it did not feel akin to right-not like the warmth of Wife or the dance with the stars. He seemed to wear a face, a false snout that creaked unnaturally.

In the reflection, there are hundreds of him-but what looks forth is a man, whose eyes are pained and whose hair is ash. It's

the face of a man he'll never meet, but when he comes closer, the image looks back, shaking and deforming into ripples until only the wolf stares on.

It only came to pass one day, that he could take it no longer.

Wife had appeared in a blur, drawn to the collapsing crash of his destruction, and wide-eyed in the face of the fitful madness he indulged himself in. The groom had spied his reflection once more, but had only met the sight of baleful teeth and lingering fur had suddenly suffocated him in their appearance, without reason, and without knowledge, he had *loathed* it. He'd hated the image of the beast with such visceral truth that his palms had lashed, and claws had torn through the glass like snow upon the wood. Both mirror and reflection had shattered to the sudden wrath, clinging to the floor and ringing a symphony of clashing catastrophes in their fall.

The effect had held him in horror, how could it not? But it was the tumbling mess of actions in itself that had bubbled a cry too long held within him, his hands had gripped the heaviness of his snout, and only felt the ripping of flesh in his desperate clutches. Blood dribbled from him, but the taste of it was nothing in this sardonic display, his body had turned to writhing like a child, his limbs thumping as if the pain of his own claws could truly kill him. It was all wrong, and his wailing screeches clipped into the air and howled to the sky, meeting the woods and branches, and stranding him on ruined floorboards. He could not stop, he simply could not, because it all felt wrong.

The madness lasted as long as Wife stood still, and she neared him too quickly for it to linger. Her knees crushed the glitter of glass before he could protest, but it was her touch that awakened him-the frantic clutch of her fingers to cradle his maw. A fierce hold, as if she feared he would dissolve if she released him, but it stilled him wholly, in heaving mess but in subdued reassurance. Her fingertips dug into his flesh, but the groom called to her, begging her nearing against the tears of her cheeks and the strength of her coddle. She held to him steadfast, and shifted her

vibrant lips to the word of his torturing.

She spoke it once, and suddenly the groom *knew*.
“Jeremias.”

Jeremias.

She spoke it again, and the groom raised a trembling palm to her cheek. He dared to touch the softness of her skin, and recalled its rosiness when she went to search for flowers, he recalled the flush of her nose whenever she sniffed a good tea. He recalled her essence and her love, and how he had forgotten. He had *forgotten*, it was clenching pain to hold and know, for how could he have *forgotten*? His darling of the woods, with glorious making and utter perfection, his shivering frame when their wedding had come-the curse of envious brothers and his own love.

He was sobbing, hideous tears rolling upon a face not his own-clutching her like a jewel and her holding him like a glass.

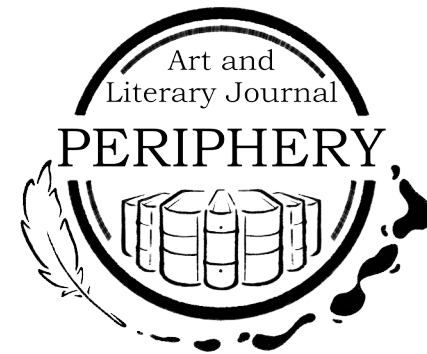
“Jeremias,” she cried, and how he nodded, how his name sounded so right.

The wolf said nothing, but the man did.

“Elina.” He said, remembering, gloriously so. “*Elina.*”

Tales often began with names, and he finally recalled each one.

In Finnish folklore, werewolves are born at weddings, which occurs when a jealous relative curses either the bride, her groom, or the accompanying party members. In belief, it is said that the curse can be broken if the wolf is recognized by a loved one in their monstrous state. I, on the other hand, wondered whether the opposite could be said-if the man inside the wolf had to remember first.



MY THOUGHT PROCESS ON DEATH

Osnaika Augustin

1. At a young age my parents told me about death. They told me how my middle name is after my dead Aunt, WildJane.
2. When I was younger I used to be the kid who told other kids that Santa wasn't real. I told them that if you thought about it, Santa would die as soon as he hit the bottom of the chimney, so they were stupid.
3. When I went back to Haiti I would see people lying dead on the side of the road. When I asked my dad about it he would just say "they're dead" and we would walk on. I was never able to tell the difference between a sleeping man or a dead man. I guess it was hard to tell at a young age.
4. The first family member to die was my mom's mother's sister who died in Florida. I never knew her; I just thought it was a free trip to Florida.
5. The second family member to die was my mom's cousin. I always called him my cousin but I never knew him. He died in prison.
6. Being from a poor country is hard. My dad was a pastor in Haiti as well. We would go to funeral services so my dad could bless the family. Haitians have this saying about death, "When you or someone dies you're dead. Death is death. If a dead person comes to you at night that is a demon." It sounds cooler in Creole.
7. When the 2010 earthquake happened in Haiti I had never seen so much suffering in my life. So many people dead.
 - a. (I went back recently. My mom always tells me that Haiti is cursed with death, every Haitian knows it. Although when I got back there, everyone had the biggest smile on their face. Maybe it's not all bad).
 - b. I don't talk about it much because it's a buzzkill.
8. In New York I lived in The Projects. I would hear gunshots all the

time. At the time, I'd only ever seen one person shot. Sometimes I wonder if my little sister remembers seeing it too.

9. When I moved to Iowa I lived in Cedar Rapids. I thought gun violence was just a New York thing but it's an everywhere thing. Especially in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.
 - a. On the second week of school a boy brought a gun and killed himself right in front of our class. No one talks about it.
10. I lived on the poor side of Cedar Rapids and went to the worst school in the district. (Sometimes I'm amazed I got into Drake). School shootings were a regular.
11. If you went downtown the shootings got even worse. I had a friend, Drew. Him, his brother, and his other friends all shot. The news never covers all the kids that died on First ave so I decided to write their names in my notes so one day I'll say their names in my book.
12. I cried when my favorite rapper Pop Smoke died
13. My great Grandma died at 98. She got to five generations. She lived a very happy life.
14. Another school shooting but instead one cop got shot.
15. My goddaughter in Haiti died. She was 5.
 - a. She was named after me. We had a plan for me to adopt her as soon as I finished college.
16. My Aunt kills herself.
17. My Uncle had a heart attack.
18. My Grandma on my dad's side died.
 - a. I don't like my dad side but she was a pleasant lady
19. My Aunt in Florida dies.
20. The privileges of having a big family is there's plenty of family. Even if one day you still have another cousin left. My older sister said that.
21. I forgot to mention. After someone dies you are supposed to have a party up until the funeral. Then you have an even bigger party after the funeral.
 - a. The members of the family also wore white. I have so many white dresses.
22. Most of my friends told me they have never been to a funeral.

Sometimes I wonder how? The funeral after party is the best part.

a. Does that sound harsh?

23. Shootings still happen in Cedar Rapids.

24. Sometimes I wonder what would I be like if I wasn't desensitized to death. I don't know. Maybe I would be shocked when I get news that I need to go to another funeral. Maybe I would feel more compassionate when my friends tell me they lost someone. I just think I wouldn't be as funny.

25. Either way like they say in Haiti, "Lè yo mouri yo mouri".

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PÓGINÍ GRÉINE

Mallory Lo

She didn't see little kisses of the sun in the saddles of her nose and cheekbones, she saw residues of dirt mocha grounds and rust gold flakes nobody wanted. 8-years-old, too much worry on playgrounds, shielding insecurities with mother's lifeless concealer or blank canvas hands to shut up mockery waiting to happen, still waiting. If only she heard the sun rays ambitions of whipping up her lost happiness with a serotonin recipe: Step one peck honeycombs, two smooch rich cocoa beans, three kiss her from chin to forehead, repeat step three so she knows she is loved, Unsuccessful. But a gentle schoolboy ponders cupped hands upon cheeks, seeing her beauty closed off like an unbloomed flower. He peels the fingers, so slowly trying not to cast nervous red blushing over freckles. A pursed smile compliments a whisper, I like your pretty little stars. He saw her little kisses of the sun, and she saw them too.

FORGOTTEN

Juheon Rhee

You have beaten my voice into me, and
Now you're dead. I learnt your death through
A parcel.

A photo of a tombstone, your name engraved.
A short note asking for donations for the family.
I despised you.

you broke my writing. you never liked how I
understood. so you hung my head above the
oak tree grappling my neck
forced me to become

the ants worming up
the branches droplets sinking into the bark.
Until the bullet-rain tore through my body
the sinewing clouds pulsed with eros while
lightning branched then rippled and faded.
pulled me back and asked me what I could see: your
eyes. brown and freckled with melanin
that metastasized onto your skin, textured
with acne scars, your aging, your wrinkles
your expressions. your face your—
I was startled by your humanness

and your life
and I am startled now, by your—
if you suffocated me
with your voice, it fills me whole now like
a skeleton, the cyanide ridden core of an apple
like a father.

TW: violence, drug use

MY ASS SCREAMS “DISRESPECT ME”

Anonymous

Manila to Majorca
Island hopping in between
Get a tattoo on my cheekbone
Bitch you know that I’m the queen
Popping black tar with the Beatles
Getting drunk, downtown Taipei
Someone else’s “once a lifetime”
Is my every fucking day

Got a pocket full of Bennys
Got a penthouse full of meth
The only things i fear in life
Are honesty and death
I’m a party in a woman
And a terror in the sheets
I killed a man on Tuesday
At the bank on 7th street

Bitches? I fuck ‘em
Willies? I suck ‘em
I drink your daddy’s liquor stash and then i just upchuck ‘em I won’t
let a boytoy hit unless he’s sterilized—vasectomy But everywhere i
go, you know, my ass screams “disrespect me”

You like cheese? I’ve got char-coochie
With a side of juicy peach
Maybe chocolate? Just fondue me
And we’ll drink sex on the beach
I think that man had children
See the background on his phone?

Hope someone else is in the picture
Or they’ll be left on their own

I like to fuck the prince of Sweden
For a hot spoonful of crack
Hope the cameras didn’t catch me
Cuz I’m never going back
I drink tequila like it’s water
I snort molly like it’s not
As a rule, I’m one and done
It’s just your mom is fucking hot

Bitches? I fuck ‘em
Willies? I suck ‘em
I drink your daddy’s liquor stash and then i just upchuck ‘em I won’t
let a boytoy hit unless he’s sterilized—vasectomy But everywhere i
go, you know, my ass screams “disrespect me”

Fire’s underneath my ass
That’s what i get for doing crime
But you can call me Jesus
Cuz my blood is mostly wine
Blood was splattered on the pavement
Knife was stuck between his ribs
Because my parents never loved me
Some folks shouldn’t try for kids

I think my bra was at a Jagger’s
Or my shirt. Or maybe shoes.
I watched my future change forever
I see it’s all over the news
I’ll burn my license in a bonfire
Dye my hair at Kum n Go
Call me Transcontinental Railroad
Manifest a fucking ho

Bitches? I fuck ‘em

Willies? I suck ‘em
 I drink your daddy’s liquor stash and then i just upchuck ‘em I won’t
 let a boytoy hit unless he’s sterilized—vasectomy But everywhere I
 go, you know, my ass screams “disrespect me”

Bitches? I got ‘em
 Banker? I shot ‘em
 When the cuties get suspicious, slide ‘em bills until I’ve bought
 ‘em I won’t let a boytoy hit unless he’s sterilized—vasectomy But
 everywhere i go, you know, my ass screams “disrespect me”

LETTING GO OF WORN OUT

Laura Weber

in reference to Mr. Perlman’s monologue from Call Me By Your
 Name

when I was seventeen, my boyfriend told me
 he only dates for home
 and family and
 rings.

we rip out so much of ourselves to be cured of things faster

we were each other’s first anything and
 he wouldn’t say he loved until his
 wedding day
 so when he asked
 “in years from now,
 could you see yourself in a gown” I said yes not
 because it was true, but because I needed someone to say
 they wanted me
 on purpose.

*that we go bankrupt by the age of thirty and have less to offer each time
 we start with someone new*

when we broke down, it felt like thirty
 and smudged signatures on
 divorce papers because
 I had already imagined
 how to make myself a wife. my bedsheets
 pulled crammed under
 cramped hands, I chest-down chest-up couldn’t breathe,
 heaved. I wasted so many days thinking
 about the moment I would finally

be happy.

but to make yourself feel nothing so as not to feel anything

feelings are the fog I live within. So
when it rains, the sky hiccups
through sobs the
thunderous wetness
pounds down
relentless,
I drown in the knowledge that to feel is a blessing
but not when
the flood comes.

what a waste.

time is not wasted in healing
but how
is one to know when they're ready
to crack
their ribcage open again after
how many times and
say "go ahead, take it."

*our hearts and our bodies are given to us only once and before you know
it, your heart is worn out*

and when I was seventeen, I thought
that love in a heart was a finite resource. like when
blood was drawn, drops
don't replenish; being worn meant never
being as full as you were.

*as for your body, there comes a point when no one looks at it, much less
wants to come near it. right now, there's sorrow, pain. don't kill it and
with it, the joy you've felt.*

as much as we heave and grieve
the loves that were not worth our hurting,
through glassy eyes, we hold our bodies
and gazes. I tell her I'm scared.
she says "me too."
we don't kill the joy we could feel
by opening ourselves up.
somehow, ~~we believe in~~ love
anyway.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR RUNNING HAPPY

Jack Burns

We run on science. Now you can, too.

Stiffer sidewalks will take you through the city. Through the
horseback trail or a Downtown loop. Endless pounding echoes
underground, bouncing up your
bones.

Wanna see how much those bones can take before they snap
as easy as a
toothpick?

We want to empower you. Stress, strain, and tension will
power their way through. Your body is only as safe as
your run.

That's why
we need you to **focus on** the hurt. **Your**

knees ache when it's

Cold out.
Cold sends a full shiver up your half tights. The blood of the
running pack keeps you
Warm.

The blood drips from your nose when the
air is dry. It stains your socks when your blisters burst. It's
summoned by the friction of your legs swiping one another, over
and over and over and over until it's over **& hips**

CRACKLE & CRUNCH & CREAK while your leg swings each way
in addition to the tired beads of sweat you've worked so hard to
earn falling at **your feet**.

To design shoes for the way your body naturally moves to the
SQUEAK of your brand new orthotics

SQUEAK on down the steps to the locker room.
Make them

SQUEAK until they go silent.

SQUEAK until they crack.

CRACK until they POP!

(It's a holistic approach—a system rather than just a technology.)

With the right shoes— “the coverings formerly worn by warriors to
protect **your whole body** in battle”

The world **must work smarter, not harder** to break you.

Your bones shift in your skin
over the course
of the season and
over the course
of the years. Your fans trample
over the course
while you race on it, itching to watch you sweat!
Of course it's gonna hurt!

This shift in paradigm departs from 40 years
of thinking
PAIN=BAD
and we neatly packaged that pain
into the shoes in this box.

Now get out there and run happy.

UNTIL NEXT TIME

Taylor Necko

8-18-1985

Dearest Anthony,

I finally found a notebook that perfectly fits into my purse, so I can now easily jot letters to you while I'm at work. Not much is new with me—just missing when we worked here together. Still pouring the coffee, sweeping the floors, and such. Speaking of the diner, check out this news clipping from Westwood Weekly from today:

Not only did we win and get this great review, but last night, the renovations were completed too. We have all new pink menus on the wall and leather bar stools at the counter. These stools don't squeak like the old ones! They're teal with little sparkles, and I think you would like them. Today's customers sure did. The usual flock came in after the 8am church service down the street. They nearly clean out our freezer every weekend, but I don't mind because the tips are great. Mr. Martin especially tips well.

All he ordered for lunch was an egg and coffee for \$2.50, but he tipped \$1.50. Mrs. Define, the hairstylist, tips decently, especially when I show interest in the silly gossip she shares. Mr. Williamson is a bit stingier, but it makes me smile when he folds the napkins into little swans. Today, he mentioned how his daughter flew out west to Arizona for college. That's even farther away than you.

Before I forget, I wanted to remind you to stock up on cleaning wipes and medicine before the weather cools down. An awful flu is already spreading around here. During work, I've tried to count how many cars come and go in the next-door pharmacy's parking lot, but I lose count every time. Anyways, my break is almost done, and I hope to drop this off at the post office before the

WESTWOOD'S OWN VOTED #1 DINER

It is no surprise to us at *Westwood Weekly News* that our own Early Bird Diner got voted as the best diner in the county for the third year in a row. Locals know it is as everyone's favorite brunch stop. You can find house-roasted coffee, farm-fresh eggs, signature burgers, salty French fries, and more. The owner and staff want to thank their valued customers and those who voted for Early Bird Diner in the contest. They encourage everyone in town to stop by for celebratory discounted egg platters, available until 9/1/85.

dinner rush.

P.S. I miss your smile.

Much love,
Mary Lynn

8-28-85

My love,

It sounds like your classes are off to a good start, and don't feel sorry that you didn't have time to call me last week. It saves both of us money, which we need if we decide to get married within the next few years. Anyways, even if we don't call, I'd love to hear more about your classes. Is it weird just starting college at 25, or have you been able to join study groups and make friends? You always have been a social butterfly, so I bet you've had few problems adjusting. Honestly, I can't believe it's already been almost a month since you left. The house is too quiet without you laughing at Cheers and cooking full meals in the middle of the night. Once all the humidity dies down, I can assure you, I'll be wearing your old jean jacket and scarf.

Something else that I wanted to tell you was that, on Wednesday, Ben Lewis, the owner of the hardware store who always asks for an absurd amount of cream cheese on his bagel, came to the diner alone. You know how he always comes in with his wife before dropping her off at work, but I didn't get the chance to ask where she was that morning. What was weird was that she wasn't with him for the remainder of the week either. On the third day, when I asked where she was, he told me she was sick. Likely the flu. I told you it was spreading, hopefully not at Mizzou. It must be very serious for her to be quarantined all week. I've been chatting with him extra since he doesn't have her to banter with. He asked about you, specifically if you "finally quit this job and went off to school after all these years." I told him about your mathematics major and how I'm excited for you to come visit me for Thanksgiving. He wishes you luck. Anyways, that's all I have to say right now, but I'll write you again soon!

With all my heart,
Mary Lynn

Hello Honey,

I'm sorry to hear you've had so many late nights already. At least you know better for scheduling classes next semester. I hope you've been able to relax during the downtime. If I were there, I would take lots of walks around campus or see the Gateway arch in St. Louis if it's close by. I wonder if Michigan connects to the Mississippi River. If so, I could send letters in the form of paper boats. I'm joking, but that would be fun, don't you think? You asked what I've been up to besides work, but that's how I've spent most of my time. At least it's satisfying to come home after being on my feet all day. The new lunch special—a burger, fries, and milkshake combo—seems to be a big hit, although cleaning the milkshake equipment isn't very fun. The ice cream drips everywhere. I don't think my apron has ever been this sticky before. A family came in and needed 6 different 7 different shakes right at lunchtime, so that put mine and Heather's speed to the test. I think she started right after you left. She graduated from Westwood High last spring, so I would have been a senior while she was a freshman. Heather's very smart but is taking a gap year before she continues with her schooling. Apparently, she's neighbors with the Lewis's and says Mrs. Lewis's car hasn't left the driveway in a couple weeks now. I mentioned that I wanted to drop off a care package for her, but Heather says that they don't usually answer their front door. Something about them not liking visitors. She told me, "If I can hear them arguing from my bedroom next door, imagine the poor ears of anyone that goes inside," and we shared a laugh about it. Anyway, maybe I'll change my mind, but I imagine Mrs. Lewis is getting awfully lonely while Mr. Lewis goes to work every afternoon.

Enough about the Lewis's—Kids have started coming to the diner right when school lets out. They're always very lively, which is nice, or irritating, depending on the day and the number of messes they leave behind on the tables (so excuse any ketchup stains on my letters). But any customer is a good customer because they keep me busy during the long days.

Until next time,
Mary Lynn

P.S. I miss you. I've been toughing it out. Someone needs to take care of the house and make sure no animals get through that broken window again (no, I will never let you live down the bird incident).

9-12-85

My Dear,

I'm glad to hear you've joined the math club. Is that how you met Christopher, Nicholas, and Vanessa? Maybe I should start saving my tips to plan a visit to Mizzou next semester so I can meet everyone. It's been a while since I've gotten together with friends for an evening. I've been cooking myself some of your favorite meals, like barbeque pulled pork. Have you been eating good? Any great restaurants near campus? Your kitchen looked nice. Thanks for sending those photos.

Even though you and Heather advised me not to, I put together a small care package for Mrs. Lewis. I found a polyester throw blanket on sale and a crossword book. She always did the games in the newspaper at the diner. You told me it would be pushy, but if I were in her shoes, I would appreciate someone reaching out to me. I was only intending to leave it on the porch with a note, to respect their distaste for visitors, but Mr. Lewis happened to be leaving at the same time that I arrived. He was surprised to see me, but he thanked me for the basket and insisted on getting our address to send me something. I must say that I'm excited to see what it will be! I wish you were here to open it too.

XOXO,
Mary Lynn

9-19-85

My Anthony,

Hi. I don't have much to write in this letter except that the weather is cooling down. Right now, I'm sitting in a booth by the window, facing the wide oak tree that teens carve their initials on. Its leaves are already fading to yellow. It made me think of the trip we took to Central Park last fall. Remember how the leaves were

beautiful and overflowing with color? They reminded me of those Pointillist paintings we saw at the art museum. Not being able to take a trip again this fall is making me think of other things we'll miss out on. Movies with hot chocolate, carving pumpkins, haunted houses...

A few weeks ago, my mom offered that I come stay with her and my dad while you're gone. I declined. They live too far away from work and home. But I did agree to stay with them over this weekend. We'll probably play board games and go to a farmer's market. It's been something for me to look forward to, which is hard to find these days when I only have an empty house to return to.

That's all,
Mary Lynn

9-23-85

Anthony,

I try to wait for your letters before I send out a second in a row, but this simply couldn't wait: Someone tried to break in while I was away! I wanted to call you but must have misplaced your apartment's phone number. Please write it down for me again ASAP. There were scratches around the door handle like someone was trying to bust it off to get inside. On the porch, our fiddle-leaf fig was knocked over. The police think that once it fell, the suspect left immediately to not leave tracks in the dirt. While they do their investigations, whatever that may be, I was asking people at work if there's been any recent break-ins. Mr. Martin said his cousin in town claims to have gotten his cat stolen, but Mr. Martin claimed, "no one would steal that straggly old thing." And when I Oops, I don't remember where I was going with that. A big group of young teens came in and were extra messy to clean up after. I'm home now and an orchid bouquet from Mr. Lewis and his wife was just delivered. They're very fragrant and are such a bold magenta shade. I wish you could smell them. This has been the one good thing that's happened since I came home Sunday evening. Speaking of which, now that I have time, I need to call my parents about the attempted break-in (and you should call me too. Don't

forget to give me your number!).

Hi love,

I'm still so happy that we got to call the other night! I was almost worried that you would be too busy to pick up my call. I wrote down your number and push-pinned it right above the phone so I won't lose it again. I'm taking the safety precautions you suggested. Although, it'll be a bit hard to avoid being outside at night due to my shifts and errands afterwards. My dad also advised that I get a dead-bolt lock installed and told me that the Lewis Hardware would be the best place to get one. It's sturdy and brass, so it even matches our doorknobs.

Today at the diner, I was finally taking care of the dust-coated frames on the wall when Mr. Lewis came in on his lunch break. I thanked him for the flowers and asked if his wife was doing any better, to which he said she's even worse than before. Poor Mrs. Lewis has pneumonia. However, after he paid and left, Mr. Williamson told me that it was strange for him to continue going out in public while his house is infected with illness. This prompted Mrs. Define to chime in, saying she had seen a perfectly healthy Mrs. Lewis at the hair salon the exact same day that Mr. Lewis claimed she started experiencing flu symptoms. She said something awful like, "I bet he's secretly happy she's sick so he doesn't have to hear her nagging all the time." Personally, I think they're both digging into something that isn't there. It's just unreliable hair salon gossip and people distracting themselves from their own lives by being nosy in the lives of others; You know how everyone around here likes to spin tales. Mr. Lewis already has a sick wife at home and he's the center of town gossip

Write me soon,
Mary Lynn
9-28-85

CRASHED CAR RIGHT OUTSIDE OF WESTWOOD
WESTWOOD (MI)—Jefferson County Fire Department rescue retrieved a green 1981 Chevrolet station wagon that was found crashed in a ditch on Sunny Slope SW.
The crash was discovered by Otis Williamson, a Westwood local who commutes out of town for work, at 9:47pm on September 30th. Upon arrival at the scene, the vehicle was severely dented, missing plates and side view mirrors. Members of the fire department were summoned to search for the driver but were unable to locate a victim. Sheriff's deputies infer that any passengers would have faced moderate injuries. Sheriff Brown requests that any information in terms

while he's out of the house. He must be exhausted.

Sincerely,
Mary Lynn

Anthony,

Look what the paperboy delivered at lunchtime:

The rest is just contact information and road regulation stuff, but you better believe this news article caused an uproar at the diner. Even the cooks left their stations to lean over the counter and listen to all the guesses and rumors. What made this article so fascinating is that several customers recognized the station wagon as belonging to Mrs. Lewis. Mr. Lewis happened to be there and was sweating through his shirt. Not even touching his bagel. He was babbling about how the newspaper has nothing interesting to write about these days. According to him, Mrs. Lewis left that day to see her sister a few towns over, despite him telling her not to due to her illness. He told all of us that the sister picked her up from the crash site. His answer did not stop conspiracies and questions. In fact, it only made everybody more interested. Everyone's talking a mile a minute, then downing whole cups of coffee so they can speak twice as much! All the talking gave me a headache, so right now I'm taking my break in my car to escape the noise.

Before I go, I thought for a long time that she was indeed sick. Why would that be something to lie about? I was given no reason to doubt that. Their occasional squabbles were nothing out of the ordinary—No couple is perfect. But considering the suspicions with her absence and now that her car was found in an obscure country ditch... I might be jumping to conclusions, but what if Mr. Lewis was trying to hide the car to make it look like she simply went out of town? No real crime is committed when a car leaves its own driveway, but things get quite a bit more suspicious when said car is found and Mrs. Lewis is nowhere around.

Concerned,
Mary Lynn

P.S. It saddens me that I haven't heard from you since our phone call. Would you prefer weekly phone calls instead of letters? I miss you, always.

10-12-85

Anthony,

Hello, how are you doing? I wish we could have talked for longer when I called the other night, but I understand that midterms won't study for themselves. It was great to hear you talk about math club. So there's an upcoming trip to Washington D.C.? That sounds exciting. But, I wanted to remind you that you're already only going to be home for three weeks for winter break. I know I'll get to see you at Thanksgiving, but that's only a few days. So much of your life has been happening away from mine. I just wanted to tell you that I wish I just needed to say I hope you are doing well. If you call me after my shift sometime soon, we can discuss the trip a bit more, ok?

Oh, the car crash? No official update, but I did see something weird at work yesterday. I was wiping the windows when I saw Mr. Lewis and Mr. Williamson talking in the parking lot after lunchtime. Mr. Lewis was trying to get inside his car, but Mr. Williamson was blocking the door. He kept pointing and poking Mr. Lewis's chest. I thought I heard Mr. Williamson say something about how his sister works at the pharmacy and never saw Mr. or Mrs. Lewis pick up antibiotics. Their squabble stopped when I came outside, pretending to sweep the sidewalk. After Mr. Lewis drove away, I tried to approach Mr. Williamson, still red in the face, but he blew me off and mumbled something like, "Leave the questioning for the men." That's when I recalled Mr. Williamson was the one who found Mrs. Lewis's crashed car. Of course, the other customers questioned Mr. Lewis too, but it was more in the sense that they wanted to know what was going on. I will admit that sometimes I fall for the curiosity that gossip has to offer. But Mr. Williamson? He seemed more interrogative about it.

Mr. Williamson came back to the diner today and did not leave behind a paper swan. All he gave me was a wide-eyed look and brief nod, the type of nod you give someone when you're both in the know. What does he think I know? Across the room, I think Mr. Lewis saw the one-sided communication because he gave me an odd look too: a sour one. He was gone without leaving a tip. I don't understand it. I keep him company, ask about his wife's health, bring over a care package... It almost makes me wish my

attention was more appreciated. My noodles are boiling now so I must go. We'll talk soon?

Sincerely,
Mary Lynn

10-21-85

Anthony,

Me again. I got the envelope you sent me with the D.C. trip itinerary and receipt. You must have forgotten to slide a letter into the envelope too because I didn't get one. Again, I would be more than happy to start calling more often if the letters aren't working for you. Long distance calls may be expensive, but it would be worth it to hear your sweet voice. You just need to let me know. Speaking of calls, I called the Lewis household today. I had the day off, so I was watching Cheers and eating scrambled eggs for lunch alone. With Mr. Lewis working at the hardware store and Mrs. Lewis sicker than ever, I figured she probably would appreciate some company. I found their number in the phonebook. Unfortunately, no answer—she must still be at her sister's house. I hope she is doing all right and being taken care of. I would try calling you tonight, but I'm tired and you're probably busy with your studies or friends. It's just past 11:00pm right now, anyway. I was lying on the couch but got uncomfortable with the way the orchids seemed to stare at me like little eyes, so I tossed them in the garbage and went upstairs.

You know, I was thinking that next year or even next semester we should get an apartment together near your school. My parents are the closest people to me right now, and since they're an hour and a half away, I wouldn't really be leaving anyone behind here. There are always other diners to work at. Plus, I miss when my own life was more fascinating than getting invested in the lives of those I wait on. We could find an apartment by those beautiful walking trails you told me about, and we could even go on hikes there with your new friends. I miss eating meals with you, even if it was quick during our lunch breaks, and falling asleep on the couch together late at night to The Tonight Show and your snores. I miss how you always used to beg for us to adopt a dog and surprise me with my favorite Cherry Soda when I was having a bad

day. Let me know what you think.

Sincerely,
Mary Lynn

10-25-85

To my dearest,

I am sorry. I really am. I am sorry for not writing sooner. For not calling. For not planning to visit sooner. I know you can't answer and I'm not even going to send this letter, but I don't know who else I can talk to about this right now. You always enjoyed the Westwood articles, so I thought you'd want to see yours:

By "forced entry," they really mean that someone busted the lock on our front door. They couldn't find any fingerprints because the criminal must have worn gloves. Darling, your neck was covered in awful bruises when they found you. But you want to know something been a great

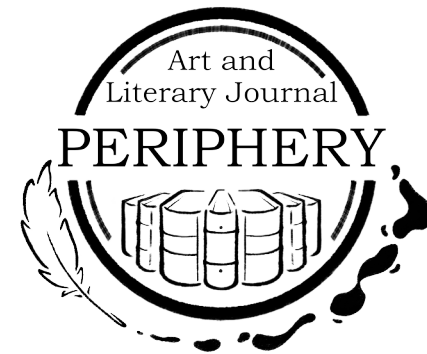
some kind of small knife tool on the carpet near the door. Some sort of blade with a square tip. If the investigators saw it, they probably thought it had something to do with repairing our broken window right beside the door. I am certain we never bought that tool. It looks like a lock pick... I'm going to bring it to the investigators. I promise that whoever did this to you will be found. No one can hide forever in a town as small as Westwood.

Mary Lynn, what I really need to say is that I should have made more time for you. Mizzou may have been a great opportunity for me to finally become a math teacher, but I didn't realize how the distance would affect us. How it would affect you. Or how my tuition money took away funds towards the engagement that I kept pushing off. I figured it could wait, but I shouldn't have expected you to always wait on me. There is so much I want to talk to you about, but I pushed it off too long and now it's too late. I am

LOCAL WOMAN FOUND DEAD
WESTWOOD (MI)—Jefferson County Police are investigating the death of a woman whose body was found Tuesday afternoon in her home, according to a news release. The victim was identified as local waitress, Mary Lynn Fanning (23).
The body was discovered on Tuesday, October 22nd by Heather Mitchell, friend and coworker to Fanning.
"Mary Lynn never misses her shifts, so I decided to check up on her during my break," said Mitchell. "As I was pulling in, my car headlights reflected off shards of glass in her yard. That was when I noticed the busted window and called the authorities pronto."
There were signs of forced entry, and the suspect is still at large.
Sheriff Brown asks that any information pertaining to Fanning's death be promptly passed on to his office.

so sorry. I'm finally home, but not for reasons I would have wanted to come home. I want to give you a tight hug while you're breathing, not touch your cold hand one last time before they close your casket. I must pack up a lifetime that we never got to experience and sell this house. I can't spend a night there when I know you won't come home at the end of the day. I'll return to college, but I don't know what I will do next.

If only there could be a next time,
Anthony



IDOLATRY

Mad Vuotto

I confess that I have searched for an idol to worship
That I have traced the static veins of marble statues
That I have looked upon the stainless face of Aphrodite
And found her wanting

I confess that I have lingered in empty chapels
That I have caressed the feathered wings of seraphs
That I have cast my gaze through fragmented glass
And felt nothing

I confess that I have ached in Latin, yearned in Greek
That I have cried in a language left to the dust of antiquity
That I have prayed in every tongue known and lost to man
And heard no reply

I confess that I have searched for an idol to worship
That I have sought in hollow churches and museum halls
That I have longed to hear the call of a worthy god
And You—oh, You put me on my knees

TO DRAW FORTH

Maggie Gillaspie

I waited outside
Regurgitating, choking, clawing at my throat
As it enunciated the death knell
Reciting vocabulary words
Stepping on my own foot
Phalanges
Toes or fingers the
Medical term
The season of your life your
Medical term

Demeter, I'll be there for your daughter
We hold our souls in cupped hands
Long since we dropped them in the
River in the back of
The old house
Before mold grew in your blood
We sent them down the river and
Grabbed hold of everything demented
That comes with being a daughter
Embraced the grief
Found ourselves once again on the shore of the creek
Cradled our souls; slammed hands into chests
She has always been free with me
She will never be free of me
Long since days spent in woods and mud and water
Writhing in dirt and cursing mothers
Swearing fealty to the spirits in the pine
Facetious as it was, we owe loyalty
Only to each other

Our religions are different our souls are one

We will get into whatever afterlife
 On account of the other
 I feel in my bones it will be hers
 She has always been right about
 Those things, matters of the soul
 On account of my pride or her humility
 Her strength my softness
 Her outburst my internalization
 There will never be a path
 A life a world a plane
 That we will not find each other
 Running and crying and screaming

Taking rotting wood to weeds
 Flowers to graves
 Sugar to the woman across the street
 We are matching pieces of the same soul
 We roil and burn with the same hate
 Whisper the same quiet adorations

LIPSTICK

Aria Fisher

I took a sip and saw that-
 sticky and hard to articulate-
 when I pressed my lips to the paper lid, I left a sign behind.
 Not of me, but rather of some collective entity
 woman
 femme
 alien.

Not of me
 not the words that left my throat
 shortly since impressing
 this smattering of shimmered hues,

but a beautifully lit mirror in a dressing room
 with bright bulbs to reflect me
 look, but not at me,
 see the gleam on my chemise, my cabaret tights
 and love me for a time
 in the mirage of night
 and I will love you for it

and I will look back down at my coffee cup and smile
 smug in how I seem to be
 in who I am and how you love me
 knowing that this subtle flaunting
 paint hides teeth, bone bare and wanting.

I sit with you and sinister
 like some child switched in cradle
 a changeling settles sweetly
 nestling under my ribcage
 after I take another sip
 and smudge the old mark
 and watch your eyes linger—first on it, then on my lips.

SEEDS AND CREEDS ARE DIFFERENT WORDS BY A LINGUISTIC HAIRLINE FRACTURE

Lucy Fleming

I am agnostic and I wake every day and stare god in the eye
as he eats my heart in an apathetic display of hedonism,
pomegranate viscera dripping from his jaw
He blocks the door to the bathroom some days
and I want to brush my teeth
but the chilling unfocus rends skin from my flesh at the idea of
touching him
It is in the likeness of a flash image of a deer caught in headlights
Tapetum lucidum, I think.
The way the deer is trapped in the photo in an uncanny, unholy
glow, knowing and
unknowing and alive and dead
Stasis.
The way the neck cranes uncannily to turn glowing eyes upon the
observer
It sees beyond the bounds of the photo, I think.
and the man in my bathroom door stands there and feels like a still
image,
A visage untethered from time.
Chained to a space in my hallway that just happens to be of
monumental
inconvenience.
Only he is not still.
He bites.
with sightless, blaming eyes and a staining jaw and a maw
ostensibly of a human if
only I could count the teeth.
It is my heart but he has been chewing for days and when he
disappears it does not
return and when he reappears it is always in his hand,
no more or less full.
and the staining to his chest is always fresh and dripping,

his flesh sometimes pockmarked with holes,
but the bits that fall to the floor are seeds, not gore.
pink and red and wet
I stepped on one to prove it was fake
it split beneath my toe, vindictive and sweet.
I brushed my teeth.
My tongue splits like the surface of a berry and I bleed iron, foul
and mechanic.
When my feet hit the floor in the night I swear for a moment
I can see the carpet beneath; pin-prick holes.
I want to dream of plant life growing but,
instead I wake and think of things that burrow and wriggle and
fester and rot.
I breathe and climb back to bed.
I shower and he smiles
and I am agnostic and god holds my heart half-eaten in his hand
with pomegranate
falling from his mouth,
Calcium and glucose and bitterness and—
vitriol, when it starts to pump blood, weakly.
Backwards.
the wrong chamber and ventricles
valves closing around fruit guts and misplaced viscera and
misplaced fear.
The pomegranate seed splits under my teeth and tastes like
vindication,
Rebellion.
pink blood drips recriminations onto the tiles and I dance around
the man in the
doorway who has returned to his loop,
Stasis.
I wash my face.
I slip past him.
I brush my teeth and wash my hair and it drips absolution onto the
not-blood stains
Like they were never there at all.

TELL ME IF YOU WANT MY LOVE

Emma Ketelsen

Tell me how to love you
when it is too early to use the word love.
Tell me how to show that I care—am curious—
About you, your happiness, your insecurities, your wonder, your
misery,
your all.

We've been two ships passing in the night
for months—
each on our own stormy waters it seems—
and yet
it is you I want to see wading through the dark towards me:
a life of your own I am just learning to recognize.

If I hold too tight,
If I ask too much too quickly
will you fight to leave?
That's if you enter my embrace to begin.

I love you like I love
the wild cats that called my house home before I did.
We had our own lives and one day we met and then
our
paths crossed more and more.

I know nothing about them except
the sunbathes they take outside my window.
I long to give them cuddles and a bed,
but when I step forward they stare and scurry.
I settle for leaving out food because they have a life
without me

and I can't leave them be.
I'll grow whiskers and a tail if it means you'll let me in.

Not me changing myself into something you want
but working to find common ground.
An island where we can dock our ships
together,
find solace from our churning seas
together.
Can we stand and stare and share an island
together?

Tell me if you want my love
is what I am saying when I read
your favorite poems.
Tell me if you want my love
is what I am saying when I text
not caring that you won't answer for weeks.
Tell me how to love you
is what I mean when I put
your poem on my wall and revere your baked goods.

I wish to earn your lilacs and chai and the effort that puts fog in
your glasses.
I wish to give you my most sincere words,
even when they fall from my lips in a string I don't know how to
untangle.
I wish to learn you favorite flower
and you learn mine.
And we each clutch and cherish them like
we don't know if they'll wither or grow.

If you add my favorite flower to
your garden
I hope that when it comes time to
cut it and tie it in satin
that you dry and press it into
your books
and you think of me as words wash over you.

Lay any sweetness
 you
 have for me down and I will
 gorge until I am sick on your
 sugarcane slime.
 The taste of your sweetness
 will forever linger in my mouth,
 behind my lips, and
 I will always have what you
 shared with me.
 How do I make you see your presence is gift enough to me?

But I am afraid that now is not the right time,
 or that there never will be a time.
 Because the dirt under my nails has been
 for me.
 My garden is choked with weeds I strain to
 rip out.
 I'm afraid that they will hitch a ride and
 poison the well if I let anyone
 get too close to me.
 That a mob of angry gardeners I thought I was confiding in
 will round the corner to cuss their withered fields.
 They won't care about the aches in my joints
 or the dirt up to my elbows and clinging to my knees.
 Tell me how to live a life with someone else
 because I have kept
 myself
 alone for as long as
 I can remember.

I hope it is not too bold—too frightening—of me to ask to grow
 our
 gardens together
 side by side.
 Full of flowers, peaches, lilacs, weeds, sugarcane, lavender
 and the seeds we collect along the way.

MONOLOGUE OF DESPAIR

Penelope Alegria

Don't you know I was raised to be forgiving?
 The trick is to look at your grief sideways,
 in between the eyebrows, never the pupils
 whose truth could turn you to salt and stone.
 You have to look at your gripe through a window,
 but the glass should be dirty, foggy. Huff hot air
 so it blurs, the outside blobs hard to make out
 and easy enough to dismiss when asked
 whether you remember what happened
 that night. It works sometimes. You think
 I don't know? Nothing really stops the pain
 from crystallizing, not even the steam of anger.
 You think I don't know that the wrong is there,
 still, an eclipse that blinds, a Greek myth
 that doesn't let me look back? It'll kill me. I know.
 I'll keep staring off into the distance until it does.

STILL WATER

Clare Pasley

They used to light up the night as the valley slept—the boys with their hatchet job engines and Timberland work boots. Lining up the cars and bikes they built from scratch, they revved the engines and laughed as if they hadn't done it every Friday night since they were fifteen. Those boys in town called out around the world as they went racing in the street. Their laughter echoed against the tin storm shutters pulled down over the liquor store and within the catacombs beneath the old bridges. They flew towards the Copper City town line, knowing nothing would ever feel as fast as this. Nothing so free.

I can still feel the cold, steel fence in front of the train station. The late June sun set behind a cover of fog, and the crickets hummed from the woods. The train came through once, maybe twice a year. The big hurricane from ten years before brought a flood so strong it wiped out the tracks and dug up coffins, sending them floating down the streets that had turned to rivers. The people downwind of the storm locked their doors and let the water flood their windows and drown them in their living rooms. The lush trees became hemlocks, and town officials marked the rising water levels against the beams of the Fall River Bridge with white paint that never dried.

Before the flood took out the tracks, people used to come to the valley from everywhere to find work. Trains from New Haven, Stamford, and sometimes even New York came through the station every day. The factories had constant, billowing clouds of smoke that grayed the air and gave the valley a bad reputation. But people say that if you got fired on a Friday night, you could find a shift somewhere else by Saturday morning. Now the factories are haunted, and kids throw rocks through the glass windows, knowing that, like those old buildings, we were meant to be born and buried here. But we had everything we needed, and the train had a whistle so loud you could hear it all the way over on Church Street.

We walked down Main Street in silence before the chaos of the race would erupt. Louis lit up a joint and handed it to me, and I took a drag deep into my chest.

"Sometimes I wish you never taught me how to smoke," I said.

"No, you don't."

"I do—it makes my dad furious."

He pulled the joint from my lips with two fingers. He stopped in the middle of the street, standing on the yellow line.

"Something's gonna kill you."

"I almost wish it wasn't by my own hand."

"Think about that feeling. The one that feels like a deep fog covering your mind. It's the silence in the corner of the party, and as you get higher and higher the figures blend. Any song that plays wraps around you. Any thought you have lasts only as long as you let it. This feeling is what people look for their whole lives. The feeling in your chest right now."

"Burning."

"Yes," he said.

"We aren't at a party," I argued as I leaned against the fence of Jimmy's tattoo parlor. He cut the power on the blue LED light and locked his doors at night. He never used to lock it but the month before someone had broken in for his needles, so he had to get tight.

"We could pretend." He threw the joint towards the river and reached for my hand. Rolling my eyes, I stood up and joined him in the middle of the road.

"What do you do at parties?" I asked.

"What everyone else is doing, I guess. We can be anything we want to be."

"Can I go to Yale?" I asked, hope flickering in my voice.

"Anywhere you want. I'm headed west."

"To play the bass?"

"A Fender Strat."

The red light above us flickered but never changed, reflecting in the water leaking from the sewers. He spun me around and staggered against the double yellow line. Pulling the flask from his shirt pocket, he downed whiskey and drifted farther away from me, the way he did almost every night. He was the perfect picture of rebellion. Nineteen and on fire, Louis was afraid of nothing but his own looming shadow. So many nights, his eyes dreamt of lights brighter than the ones on Main Street, and cars that drove faster than any of the beat-up ones he tried to fix. He began to sink in my arms.

He sighed, letting go of my hand. He took another swig. "Sometimes it feels like this street is the whole goddamn world."

We heard the mufflers from miles away as the boys pulled back in, and Louis lifted me on to the roof of his car to watch the headlights break open the darkness. When they returned, they drove slowly. Any scrapes got soaked in iodine and patched up roughly before they hit the bars to tell the stories.

That night we were silent on his roof, sometime after midnight, searching for stars. Louis studied his hands, permanently stained gray by oil from his dad's car shop. He worked there after school, and once school ended, he worked there in the mornings too. He used a skateboard to roll underneath the cars and change the oil or repair the brakes. His dad taught him how to fix everything on his 78' Cadillac. His dad worked quietly in the back; very rarely did he make a mistake. He remembered people by their cars, not their names, and could always tell who was coming without lifting his head from underneath the hood. Most nights he climbed the stairs to the kitchen as I sat with Louis, handing him tools I knew by function but never by name. Muffled voices from the TV upstairs echoed into the garage. The fridge door would creak, and then a bottle would open, over and over again. There is rarely a reason for it—that kind of unnamed ghost that causes blood to run cold. It was the kind that stayed underground, leaking slowly through the basement and out through the sewers

and eroding the foundation with tension strong enough to crack the mirror image of a father and son. Louis didn't have much use for love. He'd lived long enough without it.

"Do you ever feel like quitting the bakery and going somewhere really far away?" He asked me, breaking the quiet of the night.

"Sometimes, I guess. I don't know where I would go."

"I've been practicing," he said, sitting up to see my face. "I just need enough money for a plane ticket. Or gas to get me across the country. You could come too. You could be a real writer and live at the Chelsea Hotel with me."

I rubbed my eyes with my palms, sighing.

"I doubt it. I write like a virgin."

"Well, are you?" He asked, giving me a sideways glance.

"I'm not reckless enough."

I sat up so our knees touched, and he wrapped his hands around mine to warm them. His dark, Italian eyes stared into mine beneath lids that weakened as the rest of him followed. But his hands were still strong, the way they always were, even at the end of the night. He opened my hands in his, and there was nothing alive but the air between us. He rested his head on my shoulder, and I wondered what he dreamt of. He knew all my secrets because I didn't have any yet. I didn't know a single word of his.

"Do you ever think about not going?" I asked him.

"What, and end up like my dad?"

I eyed his empty flask. He didn't look at me. He rested his head against my knees to look back up at the sky. A dark navy blue, scattered with gray clouds.

"I wish we could see the stars," he breathed. "I bet they used to be beautiful. Before the factories and the trains and the chain smokers. I bet you could see them all the way from the pit of the valley."

After a while I felt his breathing slow against my chest. The early morning chill was beginning to set in as the birds awoke, and I helped him to his feet and through the window to his bedroom. My hand reached for his and I pulled him towards his

his head against a worn, yellowed pillow and covering his shivering body with a blanket. I started on the empty streets toward home, knowing he wouldn't remember any of it in the morning. Not the streetlights or dancing by the sewers, not even the sound of motorbikes racing past us. But I always did.

He picked me up from graduation and I threw my robes into the dumpster, running in my new yellow dress toward the car. He drove a gentle thirty and as the windows rolled down and the wind caught in my hair, it felt like we could've existed anywhere. For a moment his hand reached for mine and drifted just over the shifting gears. But then he pulled back, resting it on the wheel. He shut off the radio and there was only silence as the moon followed us towards the main stretch.

"Today we get to go anywhere you want. It's the first day of freedom for you, kid."

"Quit calling me kid. I'm seventeen."

We stopped by the side of the road to share a cigarette. He rested against the passenger seat door, blowing smoke up towards the sky. I felt the chill that comes after dusk against my bare legs and watched the warm glow of his cigarette, waiting patiently for it to burn out.

"I hope you know how proud I am of you," he stumbled through each phrase. "How much I've tried to love you, kid."

We sat on the train tracks as he hoped in vain for it to come around. He laughed as I got up to walk on the narrow cement curb, waving my arms to keep my balance.

"You know, I used to actually do my homework."

"It did take a great deal of corrupting to turn you into one of the burnouts." He laughed as I sat down beside him, resting my head on his shoulder as my smile died down. He took a drink and rested his beer on his leg. Then all of a sudden, he looked as tired as his father did at the end of his shift.

"You're too young." I looked up at him, and his eyes were

dead in the water as he stared at the tunnel wall. His wasted words turned cold. "You've always been too young. You don't know anything yet. You still think that all this could be something. Everything would have to change, but you know that nothing ever will."

"Why is it always down to us leaving?" I felt the familiar pull at my throat, wanting to wash every word down so as not to spit them out. "Would staying be so bad? I could stay at the bakery, you at the shop. We could get one of those houses with a window in the kitchen. Right on the highway, on the edge of town."

"How could you ever want to stay here?" He began to yell, tearing at the seams.

"It's my home."

"But it doesn't have to be."

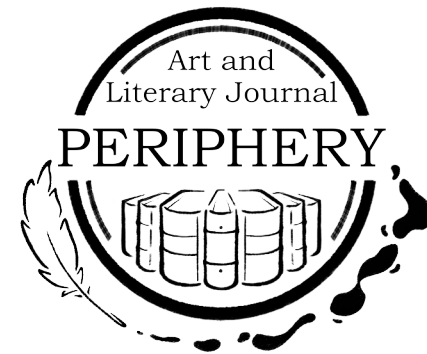
"If I stay here another minute, I'll become just like him. I'll wake up tomorrow and it'll be twenty years from now. I'll come home each night and crack open a beer before I even say hello to you. I won't love our kids; I won't love anything. Don't you see that?"

As quickly as it had come, summer's youth had let go of its last dying breath. And I could see it. I was a stranger by his own hand. He would find a train somewhere and never look back. So that someday, he could be more than just his father's son.

Sometimes I could see it. There was this house on the corner of Maple Street, between the grammar school and the graveyard. It was painted light blue with white shutters and dead grass. The one next to it burned down a few years before so the front yard seemed bigger than it actually was. Sometimes I thought about what it might have looked like on the inside. How my bare feet would feel against a winter morning's hard wood floor. Or how cold coffee being poured into the sink might sound. Brown bag lunches and zipped up backpacks, a kiss on the forehead goodbye. The end of a long day, or the final quiet when kids are asleep, and our parent's old cars are in the garage. Swaying to Tom Waits under the kitchen light, my head rested on his shoulder and his warmth so close to mine. Never wanting to run away. I wondered how it all might feel

inside my hands. That house with the light blue paint and white shutters was just up the road. But it might as well have burned down too.

In town, they would say “going west” when someone was dying. Dying and leaving the valley were sort of the same thing. We knew a few people who left for Massachusetts or New York, one for California. People never came back once they left. But most people never left once they were raised. It seemed as if we couldn’t wish for a better hell than the one we were already in. To him, I’d stay seventeen, coughing whenever I smoke. And he’d always be driving the car with the windows down. I was young enough to think it could all last forever. That the boys who race in the empty streets don’t grow up to be broken men. That the smoke never burns our lungs, and the streetlights never go out.



IN MEMORIAM...

Amanda Loesch

The night was ever cold on my fingertips
as they shuttered against the glass
I held it to my chest,
grasping at it for warmth
sipping slowly
reeling for the tingly feeling inside
as it slipped down my throat
traveling slowly
ever slowly
and then dissipating.

The same warmth I yearned for
as I climbed into bed
wrapping myself in the blanket
wiggling my toes
like I did when I was a little girl

securing the blanket to make sure
any monsters that were lingering had no chance
to reach out and grab me.

Those seemed like silly thoughts to me now
as I breathed in the slow breaths of slumber.
My chest rose and fell,
and I began to drift.

The air lingered over me.
Watching and waiting.
Until the right time to strike,
pushing down on my chest.
The blankets were my enemy now.
I struggled against them,

as a tear slipped down my face.
It whispered in my ear
Sshh

I drifted off again,
but not to sleep.
Body separating from mind.
It was foreign to me now.
My body writhed in pain,
but I could not feel it

My mind had slipped away,
down the stairs and out the door.
Leaving my body vulnerable to the attack.

Away from the home and into the woods.
As the evergreens folded in their branches
to scoop me up
and lead me away.

BEING A MOON SEXTINA

Stella Stocker

I needed to make a mark, so I let my star-print pj pants puddle to the floor and slithered under the sky-dark covers, my face a pockmarked moon hanging off the mattress. He had left a trail of tangerine peels like crumpled marigold petals, leading right into the bedroom. Yesterday in Macys, echoes of me in the mirrors were slipping into a too small citrus colored shirt. A low whisper,

shame, haunted me for the alfredo I ate earlier. In his ear I whisper about knowing yourself, how looking into a sky-saturated puddle is the clearest way to see yourself. But I know the truth: mirrors can only see themselves when looking into each other. So I face his cavernous kisses and eyes like bottomless pools and fall right in. When my mom said I was worth more, she imagined a trail

built from stars, a path twinkling ever upwards. As a moon, I trail over the ocean, wondering what I could hope for besides the whisper of waves at my feet. To be loved means much less than being right. Therapists tell me that I have low self-esteem. I say that a puddle is deeper than the love I have for my crooked smile and round face. Wishing on stars, I hope for contentment beyond that which mirrors

memories of meringue clouds in a blue-buttercream sky. Mirrors double all that they swallow: the white pills are a breadcrumb trail leading to him. Puppeted by pills, I stumble past the sandpaper face of my apartment, wading towards the park where we met. I whisper into the waiting ear of a slide that a moon can't reflect in a puddle. I'm nobody alone. Today he said I need him and I know he was right.

Marigolds wither where he held my wrist too tight. I'm okay, right?

I listen to his voice, warm as microwaved honey, and turn to mirrors for truth. On drowsy nights, I imagine my dad. Under the ink puddle sky, I count constellations like he and I used to do, tracing the trail of lights decorating the snow-globe sky. Only later did he whisper that Andromeda wasn't eaten by a monster—she drowned alone, face

to the stars. I watch talk show hosts with Colgate smiles when I can't face anything else. The pixelated stars shining from the TV know the right way to smile, to talk, to make friends. There's no apparent whisper of sadness and stagnation in their eyes, always cast down. Mirrors are honest. When the foggy bathroom mirror shows the indelible trail of bruises around my throat, an amber necklace, the truth is the puddle

I drown the whispers of my head in. I string up sheets outside, my face a moon framed in a glass-clear puddle. Home is far from here, right past the ocean—no mirrors there. And I'm alone following a starlit trail.

EL CAMINO'S DOUBLE HOMICIDE

Mallory Lo

Parked on Cherry Avenue, the lamppost begins to strobe
the tall oak shadow we're hidden in, time for him to drive her
home.

We take the long way, her fingers twined in my crescent hand,
his stroking my cindered buttons.

Their innocent touch feels like four decades ago
when I was cherished by a young man hugged in a signature
leather jacket,

matte obsidian like my body. How he called me his black beauty in
friendly introductions, a memorable kiss goodnight in the garage,

a drunken farewell rocketing from burnt asphalt
before a silent tree silenced us.

Now when I hold the blazing hearts of the boy and girl
jealousy smokes up boiling oil inside my used parts

deficient in sunlight, my outsides washed out by countless mystical
fog to aqua nights, he even calls me a moon-waxed El Camino.

They dream of drowning in memories of gray leatherette,
if it means sealing love in blissful paradise, or was that dream
mine?

Because if the sky's glowing eye shines on abandoned seats
where lovers meet nevermore, I'll throw up nuts and bolts.

So I plan on the next full moon for a hysterical tumble
across the crushing heavy road, wind piercing every inch of us.

The town will call it an accident,
their eyes rippling the flaming murderer.

SMEARED PERCEPTION

McKenna Ussery

Out-of-touch, unearthly,
grasping at straws of reality,
observed behind distant eyes.
An existence supposedly his own,
but the mind cannot construct images
blurred by shattered spectacles.

This smeared perception,
unreachable, unattainable,
behind pixels on a screen.
Glass reflects a stranger
who mimics his every motion.
The nagging familiarity
fades into harsh disconnect.

To escape perturbation, he lies
on plastic surfaces that fail
to accommodate numb appendages.
These hands are not his, he suspects,
wondering why or who now dictates.
An empty gaze, his focus swayed
to wondering what was real or fake.

AUTUMN

Madeline Cisneros

I'll change like the leaves change in Autumn
Going from green to red to brown
I'll change the way I wake up in the morning
Change the way I drive back home
So that someday I may not think of you
Anymore

I'll change like the air changes in Autumn
Going from bright warm rays to chills
I'll make sure to dress in layers
I'll do my best to prepare
Knowing that nothing can prevent the cold from
Creeping in

Autumn comes and goes
And before you know
Everything you thought you knew disappears
And autumn isn't fair
It's cruel and doesn't care
So I try not to dwell on past Summers
Because it only makes it harder
When the seasons change

I'll change like the days change in Autumn
I'll let the darkness creep in at only 4pm
'Cause how can I go about my day
When I know that you're not okay
So I'll change like the days change in Autumn

To Listen to the Audio Visit the Archives Section of
peripheryjournal.com

DORM ROOM RAINSTORM

Brynn Kelly

Curled up in twin sheets, crisp and unfamiliar.

Cement walls echo a distant hum.

Lamp light peeks through window slats.

Water droplets create a symphony of patter.

Students drift into sleep, listening to its lullabies.

The rumbling thunder like the heartbeat of a mother, shaking the
floors and rocking lofted cradles.

Nature knows the toll taken on children missing their mother's
warm embrace.

Maybe the rainstorm will rekindle mother's bedtime stories and we
all can get a good night's rest.



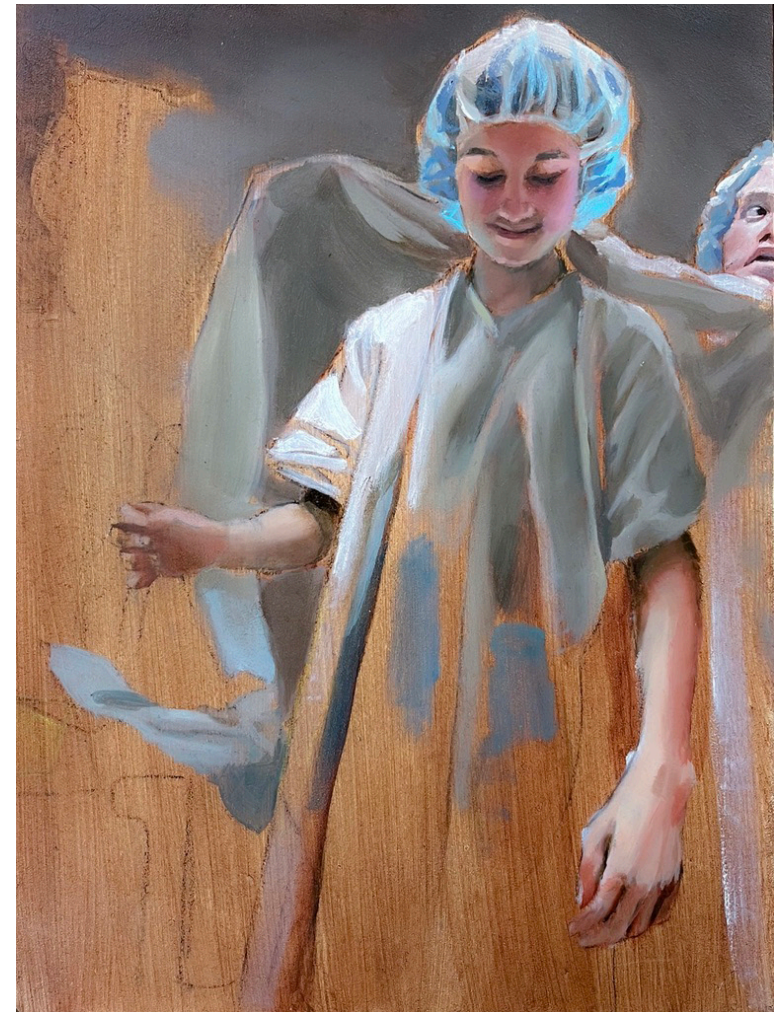
ART

"I ASK THIS ONE THING:
LET ME GO MAD IN MY OWN WAY." – SOPHOCLES, *ELEKTRA*



NOSTALGIA

Linksol Fleming



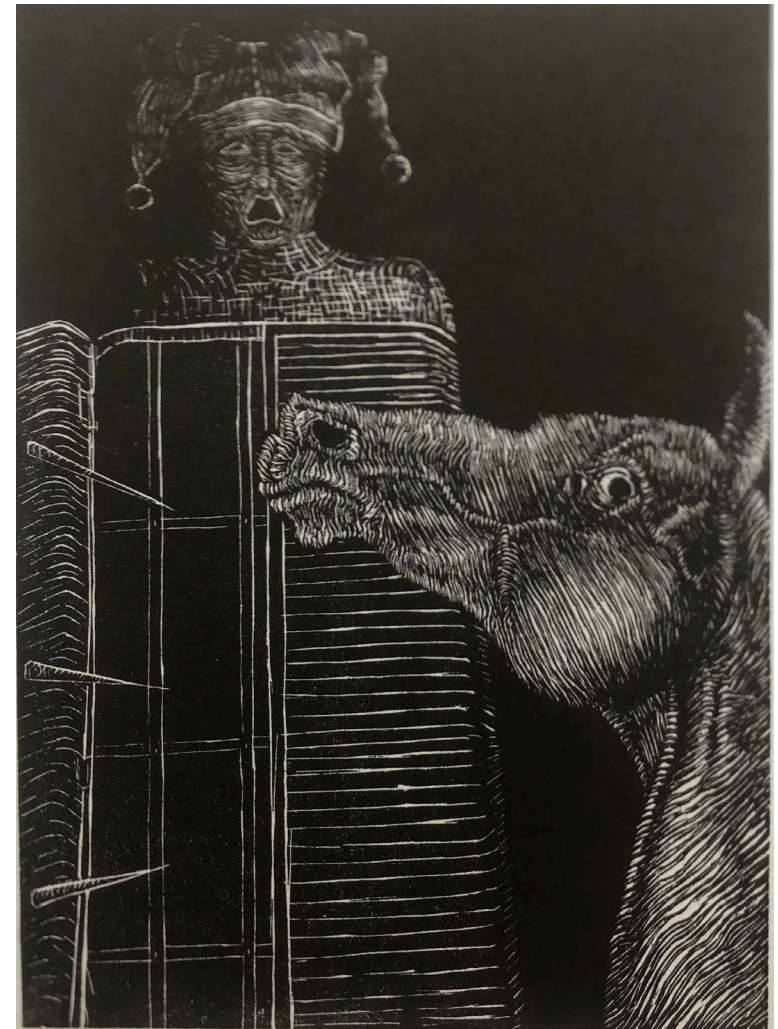
SURGERY

Linksol Fleming



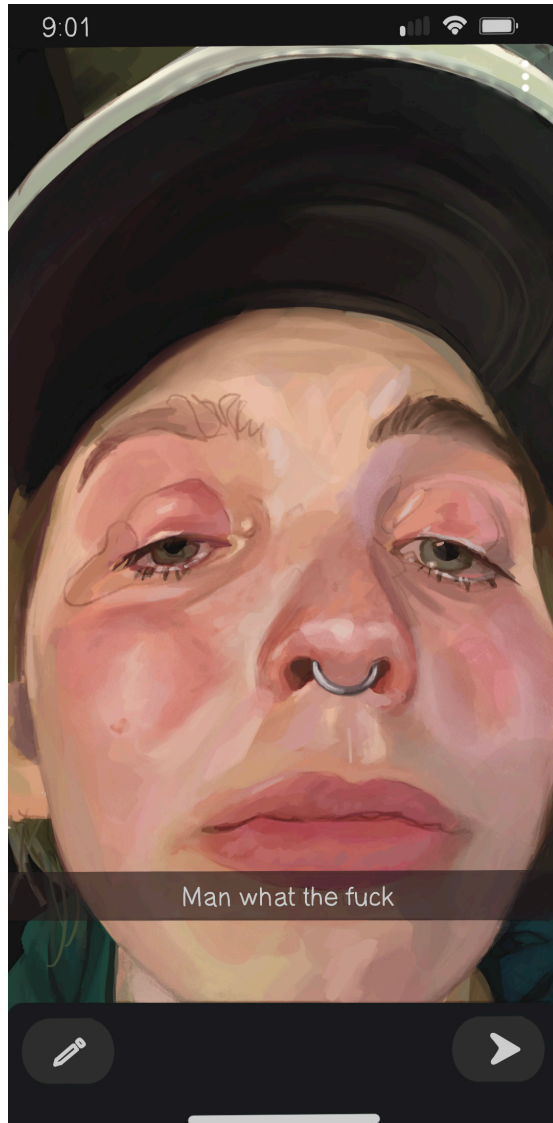
COUNT YOUR SHEEP

Kathleen Menjivar



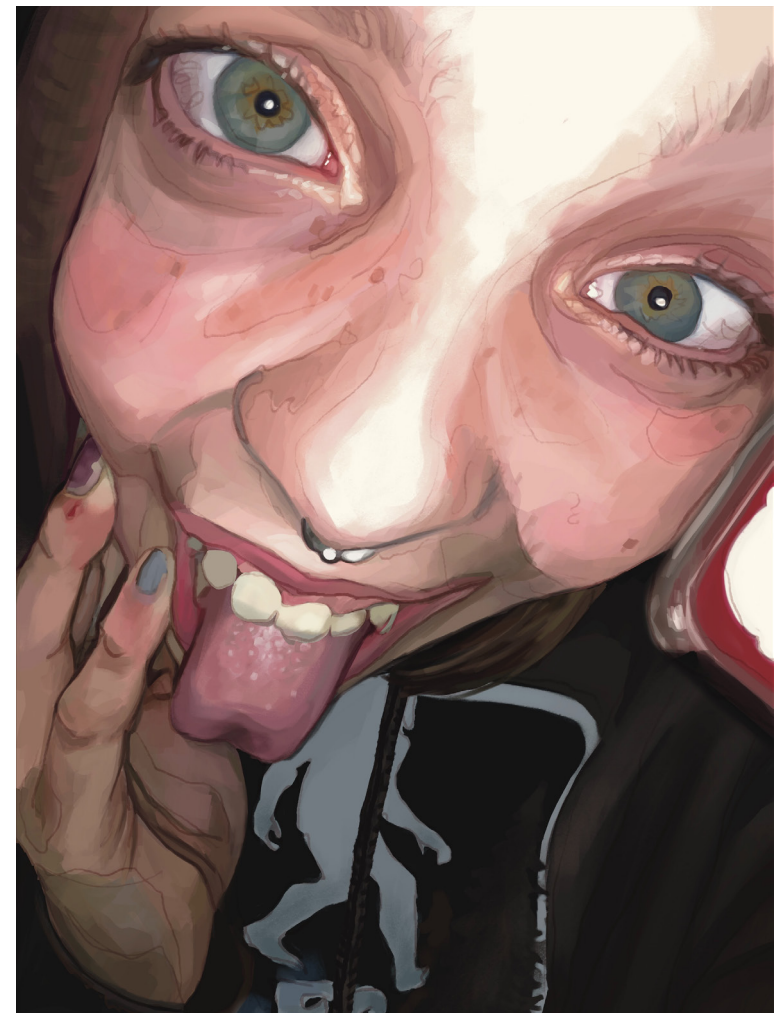
RESTLESS MAIDEN

Grace Flammang



ROUGH DAY?

Lucy Fleming



MAYBE THE REAL BIGFOOT WAS THE FRIENDS WE MADE ALONG THE WAY

Lucy Fleming



SANTIAGO

Donald Patten



PAIGE

Donald Patten



HOW I REMEMBER PUTTING FLOWERS IN YOUR HAIR

Lucy Fleming



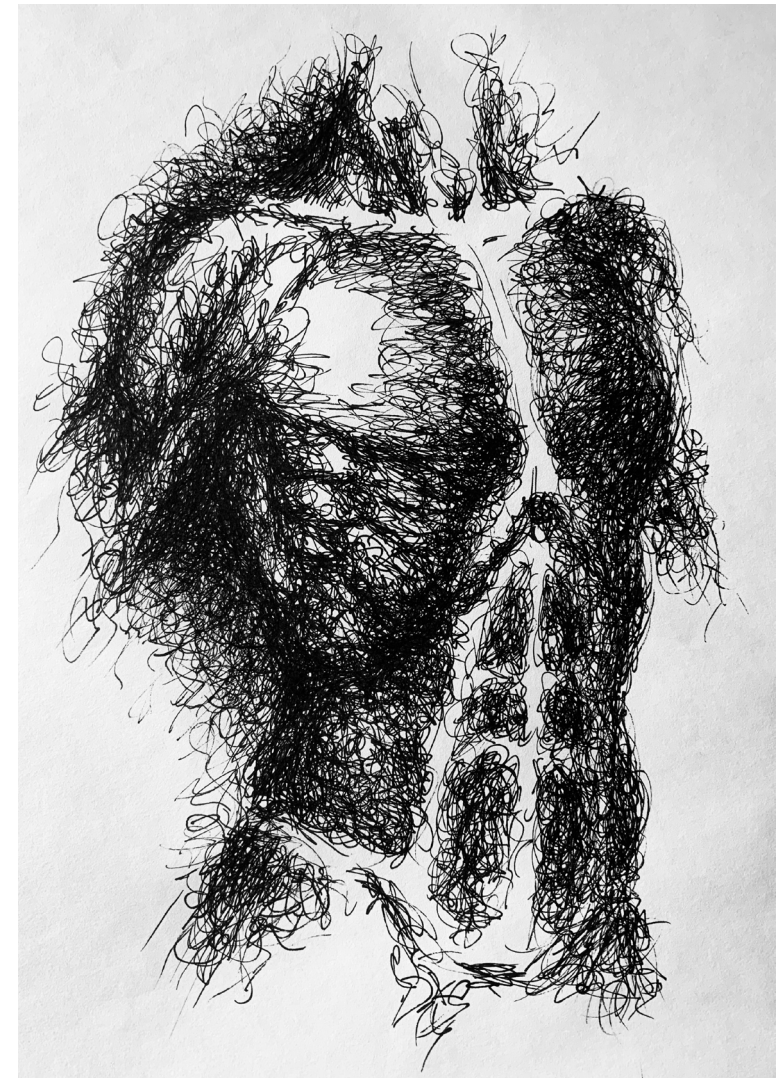
REMODELING

Lily McIntosh



THE HARPY

Linksol Fleming



ANTERIOR TORSO MUSCULATURE

Donald Patten



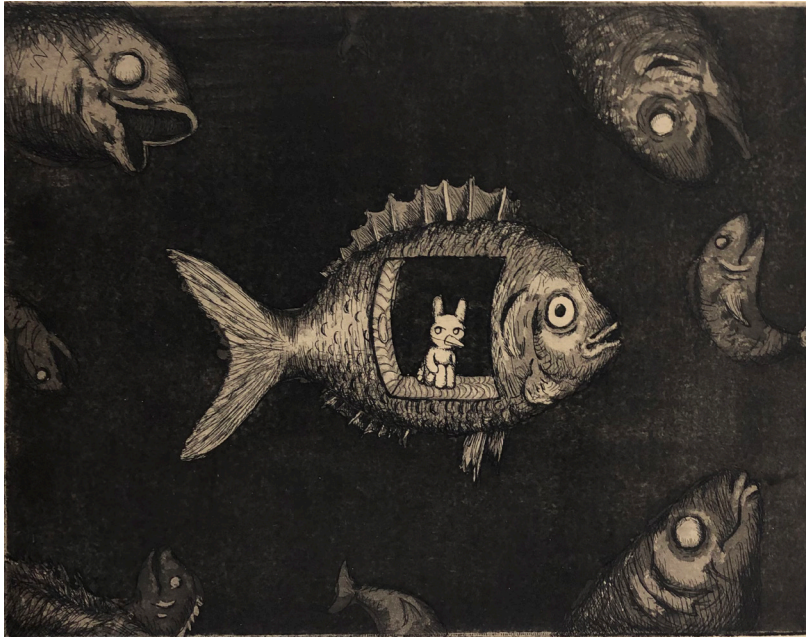
MUNKHTIME◀

Jack Burns



BEEF

Jack Burns



FISH

Grace Flammang



STILL, I AM SILENT

Sydney D'Andrea



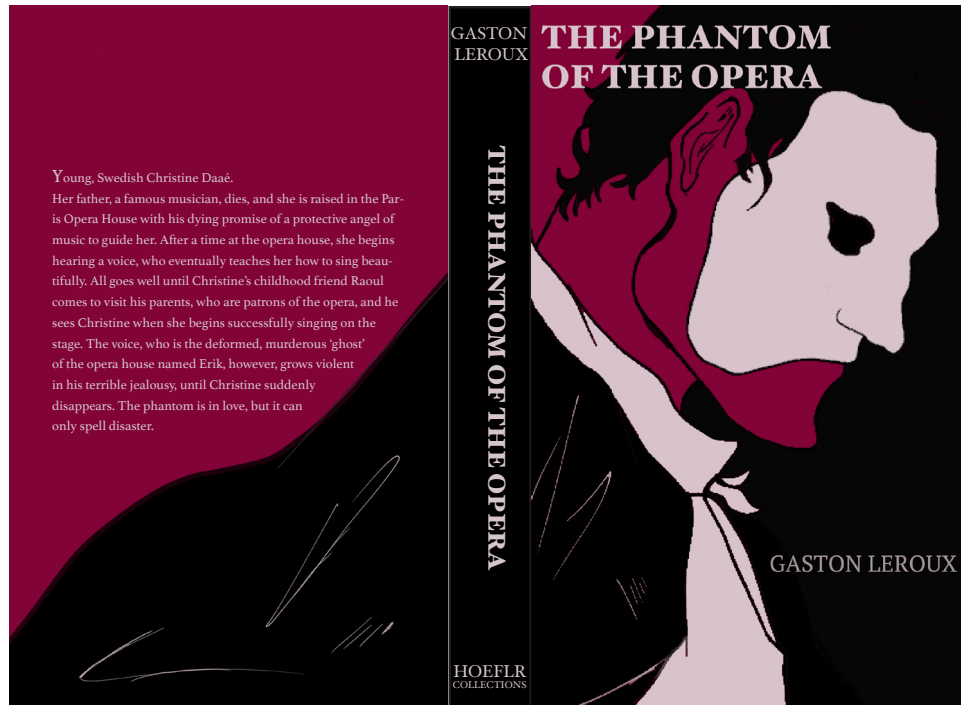
EAT AWAY AT ME

Lily McIntosh



HOW TEMPTING

Kathleen Menjivar



PHANTOM OF THE OPERA COVER SPREAD

Kathleen Menjivar



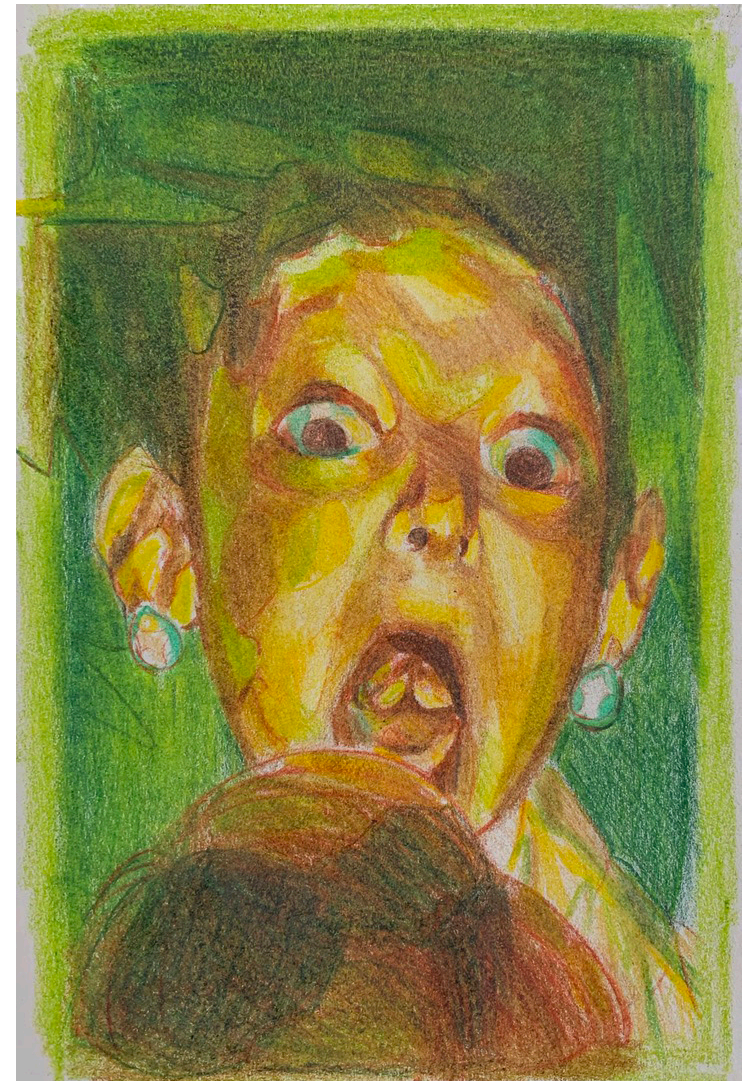
MODIFY

Lily McIntosh



MEAT MY FAMILY

Linksol Fleming



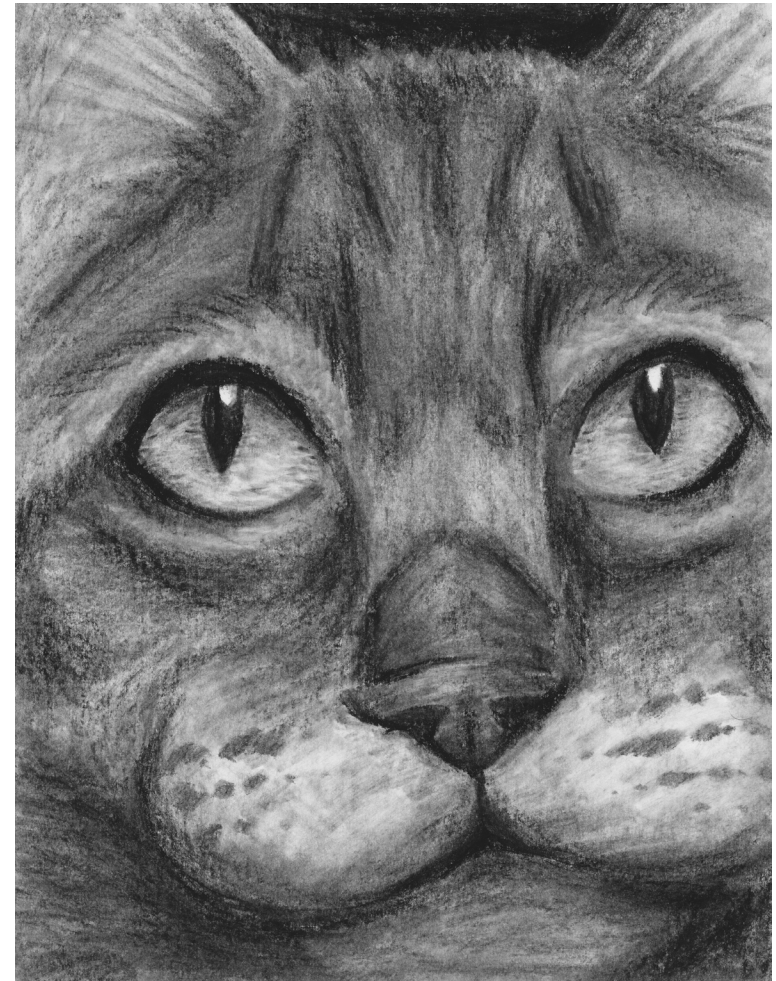
THE ROLLERCOASTER

Linksol Fleming



SHAME OF LIVING

Grace Flammang



POTRAIT OF A CAT

Jasmine Kasper



FRAGILITY

Jasmine Kasper



DRIFTING

Sydney D'Andrea



SHEPARD

Kathleen Menjivar



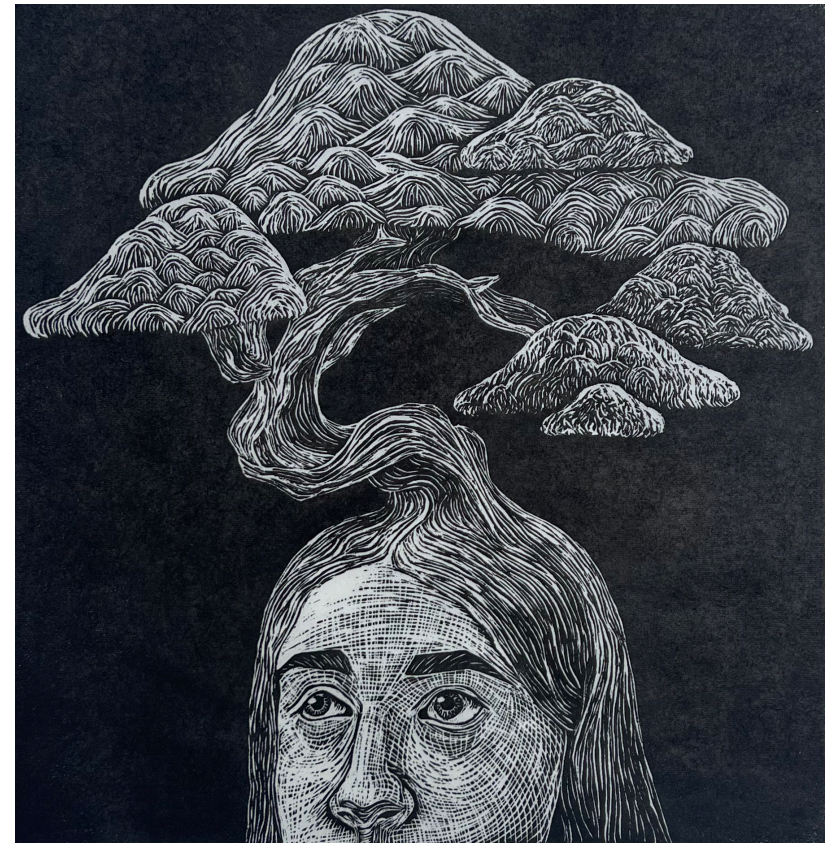
PERROS CALLEJEROS

Kathleen Menjivar



I'LL JUST KEEP GOING

Anna Miller



UNPRUNED

Sydney D'Andrea



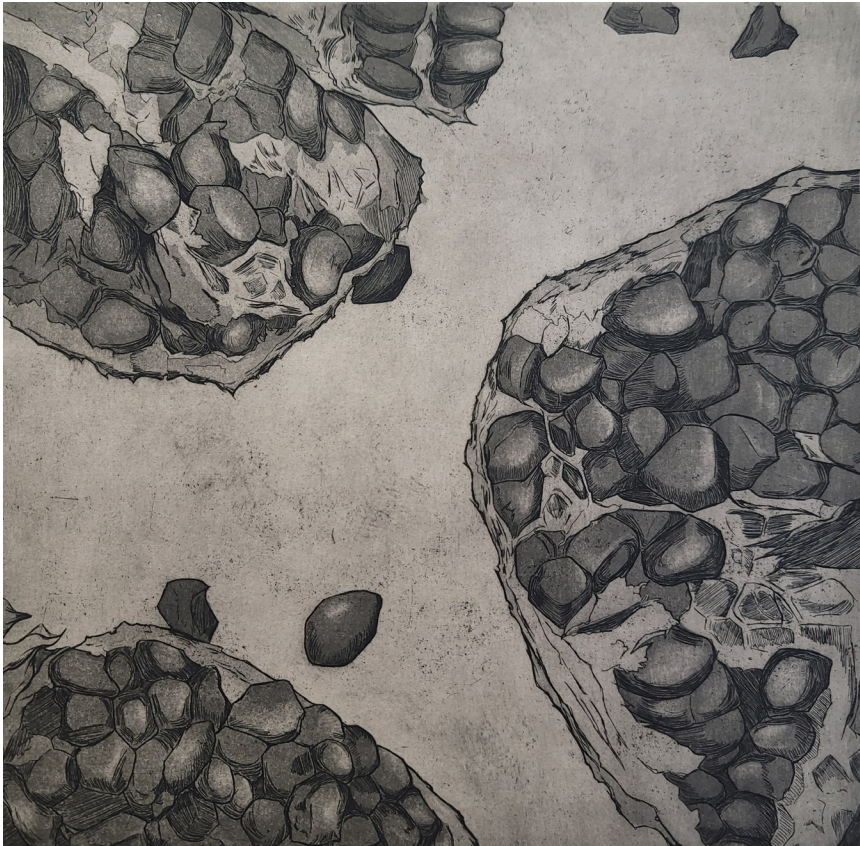
ALL YOU

Carolyn EJ Watson



KNIGHT RIDER

Lily McIntosh



TEAR ME APART

Lily McIntosh

