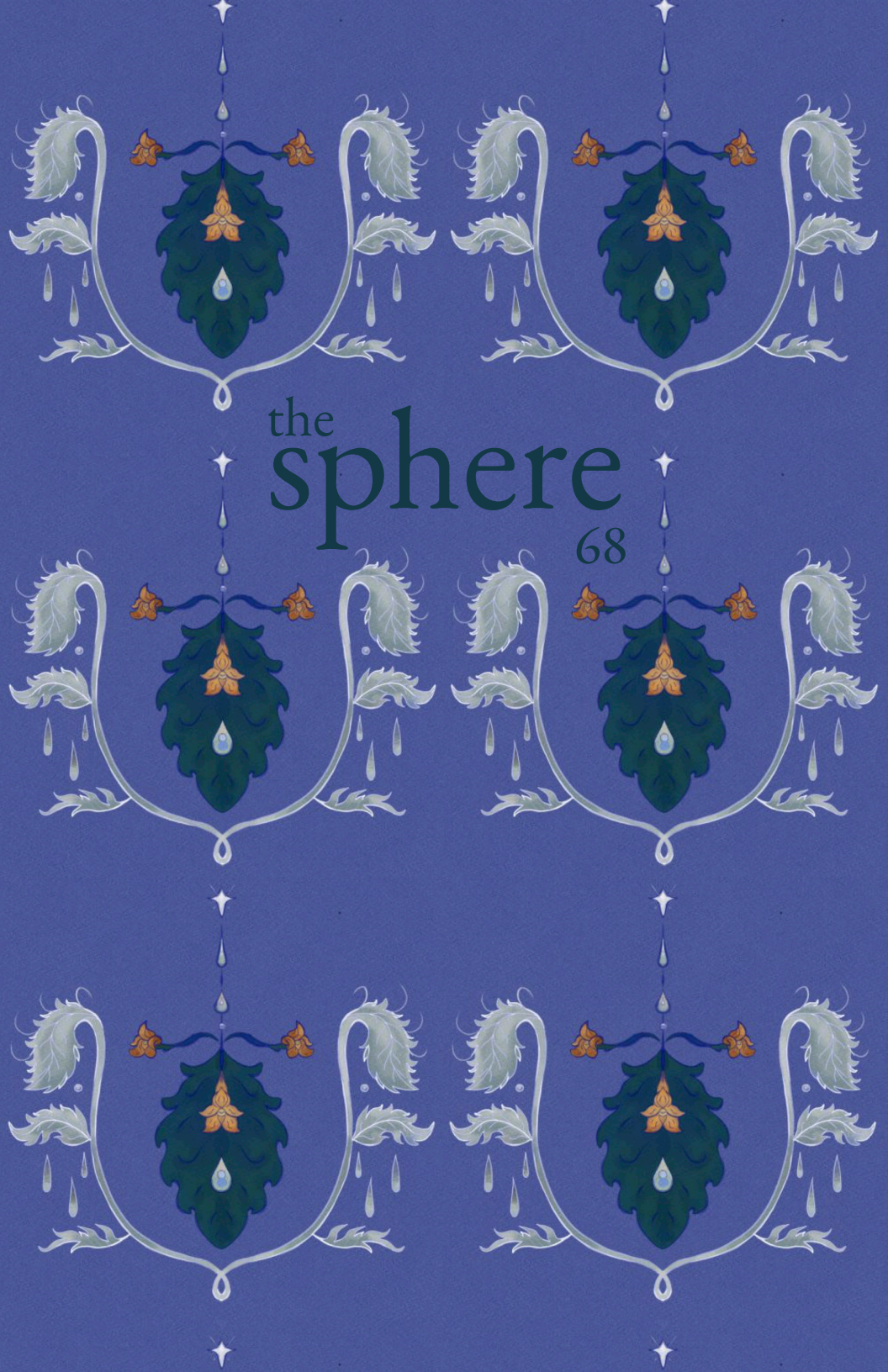


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Sixty Eight

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Surely the darkness will hide me

Halina Dreger

I'm thirteen and I'm in the living room with her for what feels like ages—the day passes to dusk, the coffee gives way to a dull headache. We are supposed to be doing an experiment, making fruit into batteries for our science class. Instead, we are sitting on the couch, a dog stretched out between us while I watch the TV as it is reflected in her pupils, a distortion of the cartoons playing out on the screen.

She reclines in stillness, but I can't help but wander: past the softness of her cheek, past the tuft of brown hair tucked behind her ear, past the couch and past the window, past her house. And soon I have wandered so far that I have become undone, that I have lost all semblance of myself and where I come from, and so finally I can rest and crawl into her sweater and kiss her like I've done it a thousand times before.

Before long I realize where my mind has gone, am quick to blame it on something distant, on something as constant as a heartbeat, as real as my own breath, but too far away to be me and too dull to mean anything. Right? Because I know I'd never want that.

You'd never want that.

My face is the kind of warm it gets when I tell a lie
but the room feels cold.

I feel feverish until we turn off the TV and go into the warm kitchen and the rest of the afternoon I am quiet as we attach wires to lemons and coins. And every time our fingers brush I wince from the white hot fire.

“What do you think?” She points to the tiny lightbulb, its glow finally sustained by the fruit and the copper. She looks at me, grins, and I'm about to say something stupid but before I know it the bulb bursts and tiny shards of glass pepper the table, rain down onto the floor. Then I remember the ice storm that happened last year, that brought highway traffic to a screeching halt and sealed up the door to my family's house.

For a few moments we just stare at the wires and the lemons and the pennies and the broken glass until her laughter cuts through the silence, and it's so contagious that soon I'm laughing too, eyes-squeezed-shut-head-thrown-back belly laughing that quickly

gives way to tears. So now I'm crying in her kitchen, full-body sobs racking against my ribs and squeezing my chest. But she hasn't even taken a break from laughing to see that the floor is glittering from all the glass and the tears, a hundred times brighter than the quietly glimmering light bulb, just moments ago unbroken and whole on the table.

Twinhood

Jonah Cashel

In class today, we began reading *Twelfth Night* and discussing the twins: Sebastian and Viola. Gender is but one of many topics, but I linger on the thought. Two beings cut from the same womb, opposite in sex yet visually identical. The thought of a double identity—born at once, of one, as one—riles something in me. Not the idea of real biological twins, but a dual embodiment, both ends of a spectrum captured in a single existence. When Viola thinks she has lost her brother, she veils herself in his clothes. Unable to cope with being a lone half, she muddles any distinction between the two. Am I jealous of them? Provoked? Why can't we all be two halves, three thirds, or more? Why can't I, alone, be all of it? The Duke calls them, "One face, one voice, one habit, but two persons." A natural perspective, he calls it. But Viola is two of each aspect in one—lucky she has her twin to help carry the weight. Is it selfish? Too much to ask that I wish for more than just one of me? Sebastian need not even know the role he plays. Viola was never forced to wear the dress, after all.

When I was too young and innocent to understand anything, my brother called me a fruitcake and laughed. I tried to get the joke, ask him what he meant, laugh along with him. None of that worked—he only laughed harder. Though I had never eaten fruitcake, it was my understanding that no one liked it. Not much later, I figured it out. He meant to call me a homosexual. This made far less sense, but from the vague connotation I picked up, it was a very bad thing to be. I was now not only hurt, but confused. I was unclear on the subject and unknowingly wounded.

This would certainly not be the last time I got called "fruit." When I did start to understand, I knew it was a false label. I felt no attraction to other boys my age. Some were friends, but even those boys were hurtful. I always preferred the so-called opposite sex. They were kind and had better humor. They didn't throw so many insults. I envied them.

Sure, Apollo was god of the sun—the big manly ball of fire in the sky. Fewer people know he was god of music too. Prophecy as well, a hopeless romantic for the ages. Sure, he tied the sun to his mighty chariot and hauled it across the sky each day. He also plucked away at the lyre all through the night. He sang lively songs and danced under the stars. He shared his silly invented rhymes with the passing mortals, and in doing so would call out their fate. He was promiscuous, lyrical, flamboyant. Total fruitcake!

Artemis, his twin goddess of the moon, a solemn watchful eye. She commanded the forest and guarded all the creatures within them. She was also goddess of the hunt, a silent but honorable killer. She was the spearhead of a battalion of hardened women—all of whom sacrificed romance from their lives in sacred service of the night. They were as noble as monks and as determined as battle-worn soldiers. Would you call them names too?

I wasn't the only one. In middle school I made friends that bore the same names as me. Other boys called fruit or fag or homo in the hallways and cafeteria. In rural Kentucky, it was not a hard club to join. For some of us, it was at least true. They thought some boys were cute even if they were mean. Sometimes they would call themselves out first before anyone else had the chance; "yeah, I am gay! So what?" I respected their self-knowledge. We were all forced to know ourselves. We had to figure it out quickly before anyone could decide for us. Even if I didn't know my identity yet, I knew I had to defend it. Learn to laugh it off, make it a mystery, keep them guessing. I thought, they can't make fun of you if they're too busy trying to figure out how. But they did regardless. For me, I suppose it was because of some vague 'girly' nature I had. Back then, I danced alone at school dances, I sang little songs to myself in the hallways, I wrote little poems and read them to my friends. I was just like the sun once was.

I, akin to the great manly ball of fire in the sky, was too girly for the boys at school. They could not comprehend Apollo's nature. They couldn't fathom a boy writing poetry. Boys went out on the hunt. Little did they know that was the moon's rite. The great glowing feminine spirit sitting in silence and watching the forest creatures through dusk light. Little did they know, they were practicing rituals of the goddess. I saw the appeal, but I did not want to hunt. In those days, my brother still tried to get me on board with what men did. When I finally agreed to go out with him at pre-dawn. I did not bring a gun. We did not shoot a thing. I sat in silence and watched him aim for hours. I thought the rise of the morning fog was beautiful. Maybe he did too, but we didn't talk about it.

Lately, the moon has been whispering to me. Smoking on our practically non-existent, concrete-slab of a back patio, I stand there with my back straight looking up. In her fullness, she gives me this forlorn look that I can't shake. She gently offers this silent back and forth only in my quietest moments. When the suffocation of being alone in my small basement apartment gets too much, she breathes cool air and soft white light into my body. She says, "It is okay to be so many things, my child." She brings a silver tear to my cheek. "Take it all with stoic elegance, like your mother."

In the sun, I am filled with youthful energy. My body absorbs the heat and pumps it into my legs, which sporadically pedal faster and then slow down. I slice through the warm air on my rusted bicycle and the wind sounds like fast, passionate music. I can't help but laugh aloud, though I am on the trail alone. Joy and hysteria need not be neatly defined in this mood. Times like these, the sun shouts down encouragement too. "Feel every ounce of that joy while you can, my child!" He knows it comes and goes but he smiles all the way regardless. "When I'm gone, keep dancing 'round the fire, like your father!" I can't help but beam back at him and let out a hearty shout of excitement.

I wish I could explain it to him, to the mean middle-school boys, to all the men in my life. I would tell them, "Can't you see it? How the Moon and the Sun radiate equally within me?" They might not understand at first—after all, the

standard measure of these things fails me. “Can you see the sun? See how it wants to burn beautifully, so seductively! See how he wants to serenade and swing his body!” And then, “Can you see the woman in me?” I would plead. “Can you see how she illuminates for others? How she yearns to protect and provide in ways the frivolous sun never could? Surely you have seen her soft, stoic face when we embrace.”

I would ask that they do not force a disguise on me. I would tell them that it is okay to be confused. That I do not operate in any preconceived manner, that I exist in two ways at once. That they’d just have to get used to it. I am of a twin nature. I am two celestial beings in one body.



Pittsburgh 001

Matthew Doron

Digital Photograph

4032 by 3024px

For my family and for art.

Ingredient: Ink

Acadia Hansen

I think that I was born with a pen in my hand and ink on my fingertips and a heart full of stories that I couldn't yet spell. Literature has always drawn me close, seemed to hold me instead of me holding it. Close to the page, close to the marks of ink that skip and scrabble across the emptiness. There's something comforting about the way that written language allows us to see something where there is nothing. I can look at a page and see oceans, dragons, a full world that I'll never be able to touch.

Is it the ink that holds me?

Many cultures have their own ancient history with ink, or some form of a similar substance. While the ingredients vary, the idea remains pretty much the same. You need something to dye it and something to make it stick. Ancient Egyptians used a carbon based ink, made by burning wood and combining it with water. In India, black ink was known as masi. They used ash, water, and a glue made from boiling animal bones.

The original ink that the Māori used for tattoos was made from burning white pine and collecting the soot, sometimes mixing it with kauri gum. This pigment was then tucked beneath the skin, like the pages of a book in its binding. A story.

In today's tattoo inks, carbon is often still a major ingredient. Again, you need a pigment and a binding agent. The rest of the ingredients are sometimes a mystery to the general public, a point of contention to some.

I wonder sometimes if the story lies in the ink.

I got my first tattoo when I was 17—three dragons on my wrist. People ask if it's a Game of Thrones tattoo and my answer is sometimes different. No, I hadn't read or watched anything related to George R. R. Martin at the time. Yes, the dragons are from a story. I don't know which story. All of them, I think. I got the tattoo with my sister; hers are on her ribs and they don't mean the same thing.

I got my second tattoo at 19. This one is on my upper arm and it didn't hurt; I remember mentioning that the lack of pain was disappointing and the person I told gave me that strange look, like they were not quite sure how to take that. The tattoo is a fragment from Sappho's work. I do remember her now, on this day, in this place.

My third tattoo came later that year. A desperation of sorts, a bat on my hand to cover up a scar that I didn't like. I'd heard that hand and finger tattoos hurt the most since there is very little flesh to protect the bone. It didn't hurt much at all—no more than what I'd already done to myself in the same place.

If I'm right and ink holds a story, then I've become one myself. Open me up and my blood will spill black and glossy across the page.

I'll Be Here

Savannah Rudy

There's a yellow house on Long Drive Lane, settled at the end of the cul-de-sac like the protector of the street. It's the only yellow house on the lane, and in the summer, the glow of the affectionate sun lights it up like a beacon. Sometimes the porch swing is occupied, a woman lounging with her legs tucked and a book in her lap. Often the yard is littered with sparkly bikes, training wheels, and abandoned rubber flip-flops. Childhood, summertime relics.

In October, glowing pumpkins illuminate the pathway leading up to the front door casting a tangerine glow over the facade, creating the backdrop for years of trick-or-treat snapshots on old cameras. A smiling line of girls dressed as witches, princesses, cowgirls, doctors. Moments, frozen in time.

On the other side of the yellow house the little wooden deck is timeworn, years of sunlight fading the cherry wood to light amber pink. A glass table, a dainty red umbrella. The slanted steps lead down to a sun-dappled yard, a big green hill. It's perfect for sledding in the winter, and at the bottom of the hill is a tree.

It's a red oak tree, its storybook branches stretching in a near-perfect circle. The reaching arms cast an idyllic patch of shade around the base of the broad trunk. Three wooden swings sway and twirl in the breeze, hanging from the longest branch by thick lines of manila rope. Three initials are carved into the base of the trunk, low down in the company of the wildflowers in the wispy grass. Carolina beauties. Gold-enrods, dewdrops. Spots of color.

Almost always, three girls lie in the grass under the tree. Spots of color in their own right.

Their heads arrange in a triangle, and their sandy brown hair nestles into the lush grass in an indistinguishable pool. Their bare feet plant and voices cast into the open air and swirl away with the breeze. They're six, eight, eleven. They talk about everything.

They deliberate on their favorite snacks, assess their mother's recent behavior, consider whose bed they'll all share later that night and what movie they'll watch. They talk about heartbreak and money, the world and its universe. Braiding hair and dragon fighting and homework. Secrets, dreams, fears. All beneath the oak tree.

Bare feet, the wide backyard, the oak tree behind the yellow house. A perfect snapshot, infinite and vibrant in their memory, calling them home.

*

Aden burst into the world at 10:01 P.M in complete silence. No kicking or screaming, just a little mouth, quietly agape, her little pink face startlingly quiet as she looked across the room, experiencing it from the fresh eyes of a person entering the world for the first time. Six pounds and four ounces. Her eyes opened as wide as the world that welcomed her, and she changed everything.

It was the night of May twenty-eighth, and Eleanor was twenty years old. She still felt—in most ways—like a child. She identified with the astonished infant resting

against her chest: emotional, and thoroughly unaware about the world around her. Especially in an endeavor as important as parenthood.

But here she was, a mother. That world felt foreign to Eleanor, especially when describing herself. Mother. Daughter. She looked down at Aden and tested it out. She whispered, “My daughter.”

Nothing could have prepared Eleanor for the pain of labor, or the kind of fear only reserved for new mothers, which made her stomach twist up inside itself like a tangled knot of silver necklaces. Even so, she felt her heart click into place, becoming whole where she hadn’t even known it was incomplete.

Her blonde hair slipped from the sweat-slicked ponytail at the base of her neck, falling in front of her flushed cheeks. Tears ran down them—tears of terror, of relief, and the purest heart-stopping joy.

Eleanor leaned down and kissed her daughter’s head. Everything was different now.

A decade and a half later, when Aden stepped into the kitchen of the yellow house and dropped her bags as the garage door rumbled closed behind her, a flurry of activity filled the kitchen.

She was the last to get home. Everyone else had been there for a while, but things weren’t complete until they were all together, the last puzzle piece in place.

As they migrated from the kitchen to the living room, Aden’s mother and sisters moved in harmony to remain circled around her, expertly volleying comments, questions, answers, and jokes back and forth like an Olympic tennis match.

“Oh my God, did you hear what Mom said to the painter yesterday? It’s so embarrassing.”

“Oh, Vallie, stop, I’m so embarrassed still.”

“Wait, why was the painter here?”

“Oh, um, because I want my room to be blue instead.”

“Aww, cute.”

“Remember when Summer tried to paint a mural in the basement without asking when she was twelve?”

They piled together on the linen sofa, El in the middle and her daughters on either side. She kicked her legs back and forth like a giddy child, and Aden leaned to rest her head on her mother’s shoulder. It was a moment of perfect completeness, the kind of contentment that was rare for any of them these days. After a few moments, they didn’t have to speak. Easing, at home, back into themselves.

*

Finally, here they all were, back together; back to their natural state, their default setting.

Their hearts swelled joyfully in approval as if to validate, *Yes, here!* Here’s where we’re meant to be.

Eleanor was always the last to fall asleep. Especially now—sitting in the giddy afterglow of the first night of summer—the knowledge that all of the bedrooms were occupied kept her wide awake.

She sat upright in her king-sized bed, ambivalent to the empty powder blue sheets next to her. Forever ago, that side of the bed would have been filled by the girls, either tear-streaked faces seeking comfort or late-night giggles as they crawled into bed with her. In the years that followed, she was all too aware that it was a space meant for a life partner, unfulfilled. The stretches of time between when her daughters climbed into her bed grew longer, and Eleanor formed a begrudging acceptance for the empty sheets.

Since then, though she was well aware it was a space typically inhabited by a life partner, she'd formed a discontented passivity for the empty sheets next to her.

Of course, it was only alone at night like this when Eleanor found herself ruminating in thoughts like these. The rest of the time, especially now—when the summer sun would rise soon on all of her girls at home—was saturated with emphatic, heart-stopping joy.

Joy also filled her head with a bouncing excitement and hindered her ability to sleep. Eleanor rose from her bed, dressed in a pair of well-loved navy sweatpants and a T-shirt from the girls' high school, the cotton soft and pilled from years of wear. Barefoot, she padded down the stairs and across the slightly uneven wood through the kitchen, where little clues of her daughters' presence had already been sprinkled about: a watch plugged in on the counter, a leather purse hanging on the back of a chair at the kitchen table; a canvas school backpack leaning against the wall in the corner.

Eleanor loved it, the way the girls effortlessly slipped back into normalcy in her house as if they'd never left. Their unabashed use of the space, the untidiness. It restored the sense that this was their home, not just Eleanor's. Other people lived here, too.

The cream wooden cabinet by the kitchen sink opened with a familiar creak and Eleanor pushed herself up on her toes to reach inside. All of her daughters were taller than her now. She reached for a mug, settling on the slightly misshapen one that Aden made her for mother's years ago, in the elementary school art classroom. She'd painted it blue, dotted with little white and yellow daisies, and on the bottom her little ten-year-old handwriting was permanently etched: *Love always, Aden.*

As her chamomile tea steeped, Eleanor walked around the counter to the other side of the kitchen, towards the round wooden table at which most of their meals were eaten. Past the table, through the small space between the sage curtains, she could see the dark figure of the oak tree.

Stepping closer to the door, Eleanor narrowed her hazel eyes, the thin lines around them slightly deepening as she strained to see in the dark. She realized she was, in fact, not the last one awake.

The backyard was quiet in the way of a summer night. The familiar soft breeze danced a soft twirl around the wind chimes, which sang their affectionate, sweet-tempered song in response.

The familiar, friendly hum of the other creatures awake in the night filled the air, and the three sisters had come together under the oak tree.

They sat in a circle, legs crossed and eyes wide and earnestly soaking up every moment of each other. They passed white wine back and forth, still in that space of incredulous delight that they were there, they were real, and here they'd stay.

Their heads grew comfortably fuzzy, and they came to be lying on their backs beneath the tree, watching the dark leaves sway. A companionable silence settled over them.

"What bugs make summer sounds?" asked Vallie, her head on the grass, nestled in the space above Aden's shoulder.

"Cicadas?" Summer suggested.

With gentle conviction Aden responded, "Katydid." The other two accepted this as truth, from their older sister.

"I love being at home," Aden sighed wistfully, inexplicably feeling tears prick her eyes. She blinked them away, though she was no stranger to effusive emotions, characterizations of oversentimentality. "I wish I could stay forever."

She meant it. Aden was twenty-five now, five years older than her mother was when she was born. And she still felt, in every way, like a little girl: inexperienced, emotionally and professionally. Confused, unready. She was the oldest sister, and yet most often it was Aden who didn't know what to do or how to be, and sought comfort in her sisters.

The only things about her that were real, the only things she knew she loved and knew to be true: they all came back home, back to this house and this tree. She would stay here forever.

She lay on her back in the grass and looked out at the house, watching down at them from the top of the hill. She pictured them as kids. Five and seven and ten, running in barefoot circles around the backyard, hands outstretched in search of fireflies until they crashed in a breathless pile under the tree, protesting loudly when Eleanor appeared on the deck to call them in.

Twelve and fourteen and seventeen, gathered in the same spot to animatedly recount stories of first kisses and sparkly teenage thrills, looking at each other for approval and captivation.

Thinking about her childhood filled Aden's chest with a warm, fuzzy glow that unavoidably gave way to a sinking, uneasy feeling. It had been her real life once, and now it was an image, intangible. Things that had once been real were now slightly pale in her mind, tinted with the periwinkle haze of old memories. Memories—she could reach out and touch them. That was how close they felt, but when she reached out, they exploded into a million tiny morsels all around her, beyond reach.

Inside, standing in the kitchen, Eleanor raised her mug to her smiling lips and took a sip. She looked down at the tree and her three girls beneath it, thinking that if she could, she would freeze time right here, in this moment, and watch them there forever.

She'd had that thought many times before.

Idiosyncrasies

Isabel Stitchick

Idiosyncrasies: *noun, plural* / id·i·o·syn·cra·sies/ the peculiarly long fingernail (at least 3 inches) on the left pointer finger of the man taking your order at the diner/ your best friend's striking resemblance to her father but only when she says "I'll be honest with you" with a slight italian gusto/ your father's cartoonish laugh that appears following his after-work beers, evoking the same feeling in you as the slightly unnerving, strangely comforting hum of the refrigerator/ the little puffs of air from pursed lips unclasping under pressure, blown into your face by the boy sleeping next to you as if you were the last, most stubborn candle/ your mother's way of repeating your statements back to you inquisitively (oh, she repeats them inquisitively?) / your inability to meet someone without surrendering to the insatiable urge to lift the rock of their personhood and watch their roly-poly-soul squirm.

A Broke Asian American takes on a *Crazy Rich Asians* Singapore

Mimi Calboun

“So... what do you do in your spare time?” The question is dry on my tongue, and I take a sip of my iced matcha latte to avoid the awkwardness creeping into my throat.

Avery looks up at me with wide doe eyes through his rounded wire-rimmed glasses. He takes a moment to finish chewing his brunch of fresh tomato and melted cheese and wipes his mouth frantically. I glance away in my own secondhand embarrassment at the whole situation.

“Hang out with friends, mainly. Video games sometimes.”

In the upscale minimalist café at the Chijmes complex located in the Downtown Core of Singapore’s central business district, all I can do is nod silently and take a bite. The warm chocolate croissant gives me something to do and fills the tension that I wondered if I was the only one feeling.

I had connected with Avery on Hinge before my arrival to the city-state. It was a spur of the moment location switch on the dating app from Hong Kong, where I had been studying abroad for the semester, to Singapore, where I would be visiting during my Easter break. He had liked my profile first, and although he was a bit dorkier than my usual type—with his crooked smile and oversized, knitted sweaters—I had given him a chance. Casual conversations eventually led to the question of meeting up once I arrived.

Who knows? I had thought to myself as I finished the last touches of my makeup in the hotel bathroom that morning. Maybe he’ll surprise you. Be your young, handsome, and rich Singapore bachelor like Nick Young from *Crazy Rich Asians*.

Avery was nowhere close to being my Nick Young. His lanky stature made me believe that I could blow a small puff of air in his direction, and he’d tip over without hesitation. He had a quiet and soft-spoken nature, always thinking methodically over his words with a pause before speaking, a stark contrast to my blunt and straightforward disposition. Even though we were the same age, he was overly energetic like a little lap dog, and a bit naïve with a sort of child-like quality.

Within minutes of meeting Avery, I knew I had no romantic feelings for him. I needed somebody adventurous, confident, and self-assured. I had come to Singapore alone on a whim, and I wanted somebody to match my spontaneity. This whole “date” was my attempt at spontaneity. But Avery was kind and sweet, and there was something platonically charming and endearing about his eagerness to get to know some Asian American girl that lived a completely different life from his.

“What are you doing the rest of the day?” He asks, and it’s my turn to take a moment to think over my words, the slightly awkward end-of-date lull sinking in.

“I’m probably just going to go sightseeing.”

I’d silently hoped that he felt the lack of romantic spark between us and was satisfied enough for the pleasantries of this one-time meeting—that he was just inquiring to make small talk and be nice, maybe give me a few recommendations and leave it at

that. What kind of guy would willingly drag a girl on a date and spend time with her if he weren't interested?

My leg bounces underneath the table and my own awkwardness takes over. I let my eyes wander over the greenery of hanging plants cascading from the ceiling, the open glass windows showing the people walking around outside. The copious amounts of patrons inside are painfully oblivious to the interaction happening right now. I suck in a breath and feel my stomach begin to tighten.

“Can I show you around?”

Just say no, is the first thing that pops into my head. Lie, just lie and make up an excuse. Say you're meeting a friend. Or be a nice normal person and just decline... for safety purposes. He's a stranger for god's sake. Stranger danger is one of the first things taught to you as a kid in America.

The refusal lingers on my lips, and it almost makes its way out, but I take a hurried sip of my drink instead. During my whole trip, I ate alone and went sightseeing alone. The date had been one of the longest strings of conversations I had had in weeks.

I think back to my want for spontaneity and wonder what Rachel Chu, the main character from *Crazy Rich Asians*, would do. I had resonated with her ever since I watched the movie in 2018. I was a bright-eyed 15-year-old, freshly accepting my Asian American identity, and for once in my life, I was able to see a smart yet beautiful, strong yet feminine Asian American woman experience an idealistic romantic fantasy that white female protagonists get all the time. She had a certain self-assuredness and extempore to put herself into an unknown situation for love and take whatever was thrown at her head on. While both of us have our own insecurities, she manages to break free from her own doubts about herself and live without the constraints of outside forces as well. I wanted to lose my inhibitions and just be for once. If she could take a chance, then so could I.

“Sure.”

Avery flashes me a toothy smile and nods eagerly with his imaginary tail probably wagging crazily. I manage to muster a tight-lipped grin and swallow down the lump of anxiety tickling my throat. If my mother back in the States knew I was taking a stranger up on showing me around the city, she probably would have a heart attack.

While I didn't exactly grow up sheltered, I did live a life that wasn't exactly normal. In 2004, I was adopted by an American family and brought from Hunan, China to Columbus, Ohio at just exactly one year and one day old. My adoption was the result of the country's one-child policy at the time, a policy by which, from 1979 to 2015, China restricted families to a single child in order to curb its population growth. In a culture filled with tradition and conservatism, boys were more desirable than girls. Thus, an influx of Chinese baby girls was put into orphanages and adopted by people all around the world.

Growing up in the sterile, clean and crisp white suburbs of the Midwest meant that I was constantly surrounded by people who didn't look like me. No Asian auntie working the corner store telling me to lose a few pounds while simultaneously reminding me to eat. No Asian teacher to encourage my future and give me hope that

people like us would be prosperous. Not even the supposedly common Asian doctor that could understand my body type or genetics. Instead, I received microaggressions from haughty stay-at-home moms with nothing better to do than nitpick other people's children and little boys pulling their eyes back to mimic mine.

So, although my parents tried their hardest to educate me and themselves about my culture, I used to never want any part of it. But as I grew older and more aware of my place as an Asian girl in white America, I had grown to embrace it over time. When I got into university, I knew I was going to study abroad. I knew it was going to be in Asia, and I knew I was going to achieve that dream of mine. I was finally going to be my own main character and become the Rachel Chu that I had always wanted to be.

Now here Avery and I are, citrusy oranges beginning to blend together with peachy pinks in the sky before the dark, impending rain clouds slowly roll in from the West. It's a humid and sunny, late April afternoon in Singapore, and the island is straight out of one's dreams. The wind picks up and causes the water droplets to trickle down the nape of my neck after swimming in the ocean all day, and I bring the cheap, scratchy bathroom towel that I stole from the hotel closer to my body. What had started as the two of us meeting for a one-time brunch date had turned into a day at the beach.

"So... you're leaving tomorrow." Avery says, and I feel him looking at me, but I don't make the effort to look him in the eye. Instead, I watch the clear aqua waves crash against the white sand and attempt to drown him out with the sound of seagulls flying overhead.

"Yep. Bright and early tomorrow, and then it's back to Hong Kong." My fingers grab handfuls of the soft, pillow-like sand, and my eyes focus on each individual grain slipping through my grasp.

To onlookers, perhaps the two of us look like a couple on a sweet beach date at Sentosa. Or maybe it looks like a breakup, depending on who you'd see first. However, Avery is far from my boyfriend and definitely not the Nick Young I was imagining for my own Singapore romance.

He doesn't say anything after a beat, and I choose not to either. All I want to do is take in some of the last moments that I have in paradise.

Sentosa Island is used as the bachelor party venue scene in *Crazy Rich Asians*, but the calm beach is far from the upbeat and wild portrayal on screen. A typical hub for tourists and locals alike is currently empty and deserted. Sentosa could possibly be compared to a tropical Vegas with its thrill-seeking attractions such as zip lining and bungee jumping, while also housing Universal Studios Singapore, a skyline luge, and the Singapore Butterfly and Insect Kingdom, among many other breathtaking features.

We sit beside each other at a respectable, friendly, arm's length away, watching the sun set over the cerulean waters and palm tree islands. It may be no extravagant Marina Bay Sands rooftop romance like Rachel and Nick's, but it truly felt like a story straight out of a coming-of-age movie.

"I should probably get going soon," I finally mumble quietly, sitting up

straighter and glancing at my tote bag beside me.

“Oh, yeah, no, I totally get it for sure.” Avery stumbles over his words and sporadically begins to pack up his own things. He’s quick and rushed with his movements, haphazardly dried black hair sticking every which way. While he moves with purpose, I take my time before glancing at the shiny silver tower in the distance.

“Wait... before we leave, I want to go bungee jumping.”

From the corner of my eye, I see his tall figure stiffen and go rigid. “You wanna do what?” His meek nature returns, and I have to fight my own self-consciousness—he probably thinks I’m some crazy degenerate American.

“I want to go bungee jumping. It’s always been on my bucket list.” I finally look at him and smile, the corners of my lips curling upward. “You don’t have to do it if you don’t want to, but I do.”

It takes him a moment before his shy demeanor appears and he nods in agreement timidly.

“If you insist...”

A newfound energy courses through me and I grab my things quickly, pulling Avery by the bicep and rushing over to the bungee tower before it closes.

“Will you videotape me?” I ask while pulling his shirt—which I had convinced him to let me borrow—over my head, covering my thin bralette which wouldn’t cover much when hanging upside down. “I want evidence for everyone back home that I actually did it.”

“Of course, I will.”

“Just make sure to hold the camera steady, okay?” Avery nods vigorously and I momentarily worry that he’s going to snap his neck. I can also see the fear in his eyes and the tanned skin of his face paling at the sight of the 154-foot metal platform. He isn’t even the one jumping.

“Be careful!” He calls out as I walk away and towards the stair.

The longer I keep walking, the more dread sits heavy and unmoving in my stomach. Never once had I ever hesitated on wanting to bungee jump. I had seen multiple videos, and I was ready to do it, but climbing each step slowly, the ground getting farther away and people below looking smaller, I stopped for a moment, both hands gripping the railing with knuckles white.

I try to reason with myself that I didn’t have to do this if I didn’t want to, but the voice in my head tells me that I do. I want this. *You’ll regret it if you don’t, and you’ll have to continuously live with that. How many people can say that they have had this opportunity? No one can tell you that you can’t do this.*

Avery catches my gaze and gives an encouraging wave, and I barely find it in me to remove a hand to reciprocate. With a deep inhale, I keep trekking along and up the tower, wishing each flight I take will be the last. The bare soles of my feet drag along the cool concrete, as I walk over to the workers, and they get me prepped. Although they speak to me nicely and try to ask questions to ease my nerves, the idea of if it’s too late to go back crosses my mind, but I was going to get my one-hundred-dollar’s worth of experience.

The physical weight of the bungee on my ankles is another reminder that I’m

already committed and weighted down, too. The workers urge me to shuffle towards the tip of the extended platform; with my toes curled over the edge, and my arms straight out at my sides, I have to jump as far as I can on the count of three.

“Don’t look down. Look out at the pretty sunset instead.” The worker says with a laugh as soon as I start heading out and instinctively look at the crystal pool of water below.

The azure color of the Singapore sky had blended into citron oranges and rose dusted pinks with the sun no longer visible behind the fluffy clouds. It takes a few deep inhales and the cheers from spectators to pull me out, and before I know it, the countdown begins. I imagine myself on top of the Marina Bay Sands like Rachel with Nick at the end of the movie. Happy and without worry. I don’t hesitate. I jump out with arms wide like a bird, completely weightless in the air.

I forget about everything while flying down to the shallowness below me. No more Avery. No more Singapore. No more loneliness or self-consciousness. There’s only me and the lack of gravity that causes the feeling of freeness. Nothing else is there to hold me back, and I can’t hold myself back either. As light as a feather in the air, I don’t have to be anyone or anything; I can just be. Soon enough, I see the pool coming into view, and then I scream.

The Steilacoom Sentinels

Madeline Kinnison

The Steilacoom Sentinels

Had marked their territory on the turf and gravel
and stood guard in ceaseless protection of
these faux pigskins and synthetic fibers,
the ground watered with the saliva of young men
and brightly colored electrolytes.

This holy land is now a warzone for
the panting bodies and bubbling testosterone of
second period gym class, the air thick with
shrill whistles of Mrs. Meyer or Mrs. Morris or
Mrs. Whatever-Her-Name-Was, the
swaying ponytails and braces shaped like shark teeth—

Oliver and I have found refuge
in the fallout shelter of the girl's bathroom,
underground, soundproof, and painted a
radiation poisoned hue of pale yellow,
“Some of it must have gotten in,” he says,
his laugh making his concave chest jump.

Cigarette Smoke

Azlyn LaFollette

I watch Sara in the mirror as she meticulously places each hair roller throughout my thick auburn mess. She is mumbling about how we should have gotten steam rollers. With everything that has happened, Sara has personally taken it upon herself to carefully plan every detail of this wedding and take care of all of the things that I couldn't quite get to. At this point, I think she cares more about my wedding day than I do. The mere thought is like a punch to the gut. It isn't true, is it? I have dreamt about this day my entire life. The one thing about the future that I have always looked forward to is having the wedding of my dreams, marrying the man of my dreams.

Alex is the man of my dreams; I am sure of it. When I think about spending the rest of my life with him—sharing a bed with him every night, agreeing on what we want for dinner each day—no part of me feels overwhelmed or doubtful. The thought of it all makes me feel giddy. It feels like my life is a puzzle that I have spent so long trying to solve, and Alex Bardot is the missing piece. He makes everything feel so complete. Not to mention my family absolutely loves him. My dad worshiped the ground he walks on.

My dad.

I allow my eyes to scan the room, careful not to move my head. Sara would kill me if I messed her up while she is working. I listen to the song playing from the playlist that Kayleigh and Margot put together with all of my favorite songs on it. They know I hate getting ready without music. The Goo Goo Dolls' "Iris" fills the room and mixes melodiously with the laughter of my girls and the various scattered conversations that take place as everyone does each other's hair and makeup. This should be the perfect day; it feels like the perfect day. I am surrounded by people who love me and want me to be happy. Every person in this room is making it their priority to make this the best day of my life. I just don't think it can be.

The feeling of one last tug on the hair at the nape of my neck, as Sara wraps it tightly around the final hair roller, brings me back to reality. I open my eyes and direct my attention to her. She smiles widely and looks at me in the mirror. She puts one hand on my shoulder and one on her heart as she stares at our reflection. "You are going to be the most beautiful bride, Lila. I have never been happier for anyone." She bends down, not taking her eyes off of the mirror and whispers, "I am so proud of you. He would be too."

I can't fight back the tears that immediately form in response to her words. They threaten to fall, and I bring my fingers to my eyes, catching them before they get the chance to run down my face. I stand and turn to hug her. She wraps her arms around me tightly, and for just a moment, it feels like everything can be okay. When she releases me, I walk over to where my wedding dress hangs.

It is such a beautiful dress; I couldn't ask for a better one. It's floor length, of course, with a small train that drags about a foot behind me when I walk. There is a slit on the left side of the skirt. It makes it a lot easier to walk in than some of the

other dresses I tried on. It has a tight bodice that is entirely made up of tulle, similar to the rest of the dress. The different intricacies of how the tulle is wrapped—and how it intersects itself over and over—reminds me of a mummy. The sheer tulle wraps around my arms as well, hitting the middle of my biceps and leaving my shoulders exposed. White flower details are scattered throughout the rest of the dress, seemingly encased in their cage of tulle. It is perfect. I have never felt more beautiful than I did when I first tried it on.

He was supposed to see me in it.

After I found out my dad was sick, I went to visit him during my lunch every day. Sometimes I visited him at his house and sometimes at the hospital. Mostly at the hospital. He went to the ER with chest pain one night and was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. It rapidly grew before any of us had time to process it. He eventually was told he was terminal, and the hospital became his new home after that. He asked me about how the wedding planning was going, and I fully broke down, something I promised myself I wouldn't do in front of him. The wedding was only a month away, but none of us were very confident that he was going to be able to be there. He grabbed my hand and told me everything would be alright. He promised me that the day would be just as beautiful and magical without him as it would be with him. That was one of those empty promises I knew he was making just to try and make me feel better. He had been making a lot of those. He begged me to give him a promise in return. I promised him that I would have my wedding no matter what happens to him, and that I wouldn't let him ruin it all. I repeated the words back to him. The thought of him quickly approaching death's door and his only worry being that it would ruin my wedding day was too much to bear. The thought of him not being there was too much. In an effort to calm me down, he asked to see my dress. I was supposed to have the fitting for it the previous evening, but it got pushed back. He told me that the one thing he wants before he goes is to finally see me in my white dress. I told him that I would FaceTime him while at the shop during my appointment on Friday. That was on Tuesday.

I got the phone call that he was gone on Thursday.

I run my fingers over the fabric of the dress and try to imagine his face if he would have seen it. If he would have only made it just one more day. He already had to give up on his dream of photographing my wedding. He was an amazing photographer, and a well-known one too. His calendar was always booked up months in advance. He had to cancel three couples for my wedding date. He did it the second that Alex asked him for his blessing. Him photographing my wedding has always been one of my dreams too. He had this beautiful talent for capturing the magic of love so clearly in his work. I couldn't wait to see what my and Alex's love looked like through his eyes. I don't even know who my wedding photographer is now.

Suddenly, I feel a weight on my chest, and it grows with each breath I take. As I continue to take breaths it feels like I am not getting any oxygen. No matter how deeply I inhale it feels like none of it is getting to my lungs. I struggle to feel some sort of relief, taking in deeper longer breaths, but nothing works. I wonder if this is how Dad felt. The thought only makes it worse. I look around me to make sure I haven't

garnered any unwanted attention. I know I am having a panic attack; I am well acquainted with them by now. It still doesn't make dealing with them any easier. I don't want to make a scene; it will only make it worse.

I walk as quickly as I can to the exit of the room, but Sara catches me before I can slide out. "Where are you going? Your hair is in rollers, and you are in your bride robe!" I turn to face her, and I don't have to say anything in response. She registers my state of panic and immediately understands. She nods her head and says, "Please try and be back in the next hour. If you need me, call."

Sara knows that one thing that has never helped me when I am like this is being around people. Nine times out of ten, it makes it worse. The only person I can stand to be around like this is Alex, but I don't want to go to him on our wedding day in the midst of a panic attack; I can't imagine how that would make him feel. This is something I have to deal with on my own. I remind myself that this will all pass and be okay in a matter of minutes. Hopefully. The realization hits. This won't pass. The absence of my father in my life will always bring on this awful feeling of emptiness. The anxiety caused by the death of my father won't go away with time, it's real and forever and awful. I can't just tell myself that I will see him again because I won't. There are no words of comfort I can say to myself.

Dad isn't here for my wedding. He will not walk me down the aisle today or cry as he dances with me for the first time after I become someone's wife. He is not going to be a part of my special day, but it doesn't end there though; he isn't going to be a part of any more of my special days. When I get pregnant, I won't be able to watch his face light up when I surprise him with the news; he always wanted to be a grandpa, and he would have been so good at it. My children will never get to meet him, they will never get the absolute pleasure of having him be there for them as they grow up. He won't be here as I continue to grow up. He is just gone.

I burst outside of the venue and gasp for breath. When I am still met with no relief, I try every method I have ever been taught. Breathe in and count to four, hold the breath and count to four, breathe out and count to four... Five things I can see, four things I can touch, three things I can hear... Nothing works. A strong gust of wind blows and carries a strong scent with it. It brings my attention to the older lady standing across the street, smoking a cigarette while talking on the phone.

I have always loved the smell of cigarette smoke, ever since I was a little girl. To me, it's a smell of comfort. It's a smell that reminds me of my dad. He wasn't home as much as I wanted him to be when I was growing up. Being a photographer, he had to travel a lot to be a part of any good shoots. He promised me it would be just for a little while, just until he got his name out there. The truth is, the more he got his name out there, the more he had to leave. He was always in and out. When he was home, everything he touched smelled like smoke. His bags, his clothes, his hands, him.

Desperate, I cross the street and approach the frail woman, my eyes gravitate to the pack of Marlboro Reds in her hand. Just like what he smoked. The emotion that the sight evokes in me must be written all over my face. Before I get a word out, the stranger holds the opened pack out toward me along with a lighter wedged between her fingers. I look at her for confirmation, unable to choke the words out. My throat

feels swollen shut. She looks me up and down and pulls the phone from her face for a moment.

“Go ahead baby, you look like you need a smoke! Consider it a wedding present.” She winks at me and brings the phone back to her face, continuing her conversation. I force a smile for her and accept the lighter and cigarette sticking out from the carton. I turn away and begin walking down the road. One perk of living in this small town my entire life, every desired destination is uncomfortably close to one another. I do my best to focus my attention on walking, but I can’t seem to ignore the forbidden contents in my hand.

In the second grade, I wore one of Dad’s shirts to school. He had left the day before. He was going to California for a month. I had cried all night long. This was around the time my anxiety first started. I didn’t know at the time that’s all it was or that there were ways of coping with it. Most of the nights my father was gone I would cry to myself as I tried to fall asleep. I would worry myself sick. I would lay there and just think and think of all the things that could happen, all of the things I couldn’t control. One night, I would convince myself that he would get into a car crash while I was at school. The next night, I would imagine a shooting happening at an event he was booked at. A couple of peaceful nights would come, and then I would remember a deadly illness I heard my mom and her friends talking about. Then I would convince myself I would wake up to my father’s diagnosis and by the time we got to where he was, it would be too late. The world was awful, I knew that. Bad things happen to good people; I also knew that my dad was the best.

Every step I take feels like it drains all of my energy. The tremble of my hands makes me clench my fists harder, crumbling the precious cigarette slightly and bending it in ugly ways. The warm lighter digs into my pinky finger in an uncomfortable way. I still don’t loosen my grip.

California was the furthest he had traveled. It turned me into a mess. I was desperate for some reminder that I would see him again, that he is just at work, and I had no rational reason to be afraid. So, when I was getting dressed for school, I went into mom’s room while she was showering and stole one of his shirts that was crumpled up in the corner of the room. I put it on, pulled up the hem into a big ball, and tucked it into the front of my pants. Then I put on one of my big, comfy jackets. Mom was late, so I knew she wouldn’t pay attention. She would just be glad I got ready by myself.

The weight in my chest feels like it is growing heavier as time passes. I open my empty hand and press the open palm against my chest. I feel my rapid heartbeat immediately, pounding like it is working overtime to keep me alive, to keep me moving toward him. I imagine it just deciding to give up instead of continuing to work so hard for me. I rip my hand away and quicken my pace.

Once I got to school, I took the jacket off and proudly let the shirt dangle past my knees. To everyone else, I looked ridiculous. I reeked of an intense mixture of cigarettes and cologne.

To me, I was wrapped in the comfort of him.

The rest of the kids didn’t understand it, why would they? They laughed at me and plugged their noses. I thought they were laughing at him.

I stop in my tracks once I reach the archway over the entry of the cemetery. I haven't been back since the day of the funeral. It has just been too hard; a harsh reminder that the only thing left of him for me to visit is his decaying, trapped body. My mouth feels drier, and a wave of nausea washes over me. I swallow hard and am met with no relief. I continue walking.

My teacher took me to the hallway and asked why I was wearing the shirt and where I got it from. In between sobs I said to her, "Miss Hansen, it's my daddy's. It makes me feel like he is with me. I need it because he might never come home again."

As I pass each grave, the flowers left by loved ones draw my attention. They are all so beautiful, trying their best to bring a bit of brightness to this dark place. A pink and white bouquet with accents of purple mixed in lays on a newer grave. The planted grass has just barely begun to grow. It is almost identical to the ones my bridesmaids are supposed to carry today.

Miss Hansen took me to the office. I sat in the chair by the window with my nose under my shirt inhaling the scent deeply to stay calm. Mom arrived shortly after. She took me home and got me ice cream, and then my dad came home and spent the weekend with me. They never talked to me about the shirt or what I said to Miss Hansen. All my mom said as she pulled the seemingly forbidden t-shirt over my head was "Mommy's clothes are mommy's clothes. Daddy's clothes are daddy's clothes. And Lila's clothes are Lila's clothes." The next week, I started going to therapy.

I spot the shiny black headstone that reads his name. I walk to it, fighting everything in me that is telling me to turn and run away. I finally release my grip and look down at the contents in my hand, the cigarette is only slightly crumpled. I sit cross legged across from the headstone and the fresh mound of dirt that accompanies it.

I don't realize that I have been crying until I notice the tears that have puddled on my bridal robe, darkening the fabric in an unpleasant pattern. I wipe my cheeks and pull my hand away to see the streaks of black that paint my palm. Sara is going to have to redo my makeup, I hope she won't be too mad as long as I make my way back within the hour. I ignore the thought and bring the cigarette to my mouth.

The soft object feels foreign against my lips. It's almost as if it knows just as much as I do that it shouldn't be there. I am thankful for all the years I spent watching my dad, studying his every move. Otherwise, I'm not sure that I'd know what to do with this. I light the end of the cigarette and take the longest drag I can, attempting to mimic my memories of him. I am taken aback by how horrible it feels. My throat burns in a way I have never felt before. My eyes water, I feel dizzy, and I immediately become nauseous. I fight back the urge to vomit, but it isn't easy because I can't stop coughing.

He died for *this*?

The harsh smell of smoke wraps around me like it is hugging me on his behalf. When I close my eyes, I can almost pretend that he is sitting right next to me on our old porch swing smoking a cigarette as I tell him about my day. I take another drag, this time shorter, and it doesn't hit me quite as hard the second time. I continue to do this a couple more times, pausing each time to breathe in the smoke around me before the wind sweeps it away, forcing me to repeat the process. The more I do it, the

more I understand him. My anxiety fades and I get lost in the false sense of security the smoke provides me with. The weight in my chest is replaced by a faint buzzing feeling. I look up at the sky. I have spent countless nights since my dad's diagnosis staring up at this sky, praying to a God that I'm not sure I ever believed in. I shake my head.

My father is dead. Gone. Buried. I will never see him, touch him, or speak to him ever again. He doesn't exist in this world anymore. I take a long drag of the cigarette in my hand. The funny thing is, I don't think I've ever felt closer to him than I do right now. I smile and let the smell of cigarette smoke consume me.



Rinse/Repeat
Sophia Hoersten
Oil on Canvas
24 x 30in

My approach to painting is done with a level of precision akin to that involved in applying makeup to my own face. Both processes require hypervigilance; the end result will be assessed and potentially scrutinized by others. Unlike my personal cosmetic and hygienic routine, which has turned tedious and tiresome, I find a sense of freedom in the creative processes involved in painting.

To explore the complex interplay of personal authenticity and cultural expectations, I focus on capturing primarily female subjects in domestic spaces, where these exchanges often occur. In *Rinse/Repeat* I employ a cool color palette espoused with moody fluorescent lighting to evoke a languid feeling caused by the pressure to conform or exist within societal notions of beauty. Rendering my subject as gazing into a mirror, I immerse my viewers in the narrative and prompt them to reflect on their own experiences in conforming to conventional ideals.

Many women grapple with arbitrary societal standards which ultimately shape their concepts of beauty and self-image as they grow up. The expectation to present a certain way becomes impossible to ignore, leading to a monotonous routine of obsession triggered by one glance in the mirror. *Rinse/Repeat* aims to address these universally experienced issues by fostering a dialogue surrounding the female experience while offering solace to those with which the work resonates.

swiss roll

Bee Burns

this routine only lasts as long as the box.

i never said it was a good routine,

but it's a routine.

every night, after i'm done for the day, when i'm tired of people,

after i've showered and put on the dirty pjs,

i shuffle out of the bathroom and dig into the box.

the plastic crinkles

the little logs squish under my fingers, the chocolate cracking.

i sit at my desk

peeling open the wrapper

and sit my medications out before me - ducks in a row.

all of these pills to keep things away: anti-allergies,

anti-baby, anti-fat,

anti-depression.

they might be working. or not.

but i take them anyway. big, heaving gulps of water

save me from a death of choking on a minuscule chalky pill.

the swiss rolls break up the tension in my stomach.

once all the pills are swallowed and the swiss rolls are gone,

the routine can continue.

sometimes that step can take longer if my throat is tense.

i stand and shake out my foot numb from how i sit,

and go to floss my teeth.

i don't know if i'm doing it correctly but i can tell the dentist i floss every night.

i brush the swiss roll out of my molars, spit,

rinse,

wipe my mouth, and i'm done.

i tiptoe into the bathroom, always the last one awake.

the lights turn on and the images that play in my mind quiet for a moment. i wash my hands,

avoiding my face in the mirror,

and scurry up the ladder to my bed before anyone can touch me.

i turn off my lights with a remote. i curl up under

my blankets.

and i lie awake. my heart pounds.

my eyes won't shut

and when they do, i see horrible things. the lights are bright.

(they're barely on) my head hurts.

i'm grinding my teeth. this is the part of the routine that

i dread.

so i take melatonin.

Letters to the Men Who've Wronged Me

Carli Rettig

I.

In another life, we wouldn't have hurt each other beyond repair.

I think about how losing you is my fault, my burden, my failure. I could have been a better friend, a better listener, a better person for you to hurl insults at. I wonder if you hated me from the beginning, if you wanted to watch me become the man-hating, devious lesbian woman you judged me to be. You bear witness to my yearning for the sins of your manipulations.

Though it's cliché to say, we were dealt a bad hand from the beginning. A hand reaching out for the first sign of comfort from another person as we grieved the loss of our youth. Some might think it was only a matter of time before we succumbed to the pressures of resentment, and they were right in thinking that, as disdain became us.

The night we stayed in your dorm to watch a movie you'd already seen, that you picked out, as you always did when we were together. You told me that I would like it because you like it.

Adapted from Delia Owens' novel of the same name, *Where the Crawdads Sing* shows the main character, Kya, face what many women—including myself—experience as she gets sexually assaulted by someone she thought she could trust, someone she thought she knew.

You knew this. You forced me to sit there and watch as Kya is pinned under a man she did not consent to, a man she had grown to fear. She feared men as I feared a man who trapped me like the man on screen did to her.

I *begged* you to skip the scene.

You ignored my pleas.

At one time, I thought I couldn't exist without you. Maybe it's you who can't exist without your constant distaste for me and the life you didn't carve out for me.

II.

"You know me in your marrow." You and I first consumed David Fincher's film adaptation of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* after that snowy night full of gloom and cold food we shared in my childhood bedroom. I consumed that film and its vengeful protagonist, Amy Dunne, much like I wanted to consume you and spit you out at the end of my time with you.

You, with your ink-stained hands from the shitty art you made as I sat in submission beside you. You, holding the pens I stole for you in those same ink-stained hands. You, with an ego bigger than what you called my "porn star titties" as you caressed my body with those same, *stupid*, ink-stained hands.

Fresh out of a three-day stay at the Nationwide Children's Hospital Behavioral Health department, I went back to you. Winter break and fresh snow and all I could think about was seeing you.

Seeing you and the black and red colors splattering the botanical tattoos etched onto the skin of your left forearm. Seeing you and the dark, brown hair I once loved running through my barely painted nails. Seeing you and being cradled in the thinly drawn plants on your tattooed arms as your ink-stained hands roamed my relenting body.

Did *you* know me in *my* marrow?

Did you know me when I'm high off your drugs, your words, your touch? Did you know me when I'm pinned under the weight of you and your athletic swimmer's body? Did you know me when I told you "*no*" the first twenty times you asked if we could have sex? Did you know me during the last time you asked, *pleaded*, to have sex with me, to *sexually assault* me, and I submitted to you in an attempt to silence the whiny, pathetic voice that you'd use to blame me later?

I watched *Gone Girl* three times after you. After you called me words I do not dare to repeat, after you said your violation of *me*, of *my body*, was all in my "delusional, little head." I kept going back to Amy Dunne for something unknown at the time; in hindsight, maybe it was for validation. I placed trust in her motives of hurting the men she's loved. Hurting the men she's wronged could validate what I was going through after the time I spent with you.

The first day without you, another snowy night of gloom and cold food. Without your tactics of coercion, your use of force, your methods of emotional abuse that left me only wanting more, more of the harm you caused me as you encouraged me to go off my antidepressants. More of the grief you caused me when you wanted me to stop seeing my therapists, saying you were the only one I should take my troubles to. More of the time I craved to feel Amy Dunne's thirst for vengeance.

I wanted you to feel the hurt I felt from convincing myself what you did was my fault, my burden, my failure. Though my friends did not get that, and my mother will never understand it, Amy Dunne *did*. She made herself perfect for a man to love her, only for that man to take what she could offer and manipulate it to fit his will and his advantage, leaving her to pick up the pieces of herself he did not wish to see.

To want you to feel hurt is nothing compared to the harsh slap of emotional whiplash I feel as you seep into my dreams at night, and suddenly, I'm back in the dorm room where you first kissed me.

None of that should matter to me anymore. I awake from those dreams only to hear the words Amy Dunne writes in her diary ringing through my head. She's etching pen to paper, carving words to memory, writing, "I feel like something he loaded by mistake. Something to be jettisoned, if necessary. Something disposable. I feel like I could disappear."

To disappear was to hide a part of myself I couldn't let myself become—a victim of yours.

After a night of endlessly scouring through French-inspired Pinterest boards for a bedroom renovation I didn't have time for, I bought a gallon of pink paint to cover the bright blue walls I stared at, as the ghost of you watched over me after that fateful night of gloom and cold food. Maybe an unfinished bedroom could make me forget the pain and the bloodshed caused by you and the men before you.

I started painting my room to hide the sins of the past I had tangled in the bed sheets with you.

My childhood bedroom was left unfinished to match the closure I never got from you.

III.

It took a coastal town by the train tracks to assure me your face could not be found in a crowd crossing the street. The street of Fontainebleau where I could run late into the night to get away from you.

You were the first one, the first man to *really* dig your nails into my skin and peel back the layers of innocence in the hollows of my flesh.

I'm on vacation and I'm *still* thinking of what to write about you. How can I commit to this piece when writing about you feels redundant? It's been three years and I'm spilling what feels like my guts, my organs, my *entire being* on these pages full of my words and my consciousness.

The safety of my uncle's little blue beach house in the coastal city of Ocean Springs, Mississippi can do little to console a woman. I felt reduced to a girl whenever she spots the man who abused her in the place she used to call home.

You're a man with blond hair and blue eyes. Your skin is as pale as the ghost I can't recognize in the mirror anymore.

At night, I search for you in shadows, illicit thoughts crossing my mind as I plan the ideal way in which I could disarm you.

I became a servant to my anxiety, falling into lonely spaces of despair as I faced the paranoia of not being able to escape you and the men that would follow you.

Even now, I can feel the indents of your fingers bruising my hips, holding me in place as if you wanted to carve my skin in a display of power and possession.

They say, "all should be forgiven, he didn't mean to hurt you, he's a good guy, he would never do that to a girl."

They're right about one thing—I was a girl. A sixteen-year-old, self-absorbed, insecure *girl*. I still yearned for the cradle of my mother's soft, comforting arms. I begged for the love of my father. I cried for a friend to listen.

I wanted you to be a true friend so badly that I ignored the other boys who told me you had a crush on me. I consciously picked out an outfit with an absurd amount of buttons.

Five buttons on my high-waisted, blue jeans. Three buttons on the black sweater my mom bought for my fifteenth birthday. Eight buttons for you to treat me with respect.

Sixteen and drunk on the feeling that a male friend only wanted me to hang out. How was I supposed to know that for a boy to ask a girl to "hang out" is some sort of sick and twisted form of consent for men to force themselves on unassuming girls? How do I tell my mother that the only reason you didn't rape me was because I told you I was on my period?

You were so eager to undo my absurdly buttoned pants and strip me of my

virtue but couldn't stomach a bit of blood. I could be a motionless ragdoll for you to unstitch the threads of, but a reminder of my femininity, of my autonomy, proved to be a step too far for you.

It had been four months since you, and four months since the Covid-19 pandemic isolated me to pace the gray soles of my slippers through the beige halls of my childhood suburban home. It felt like a part of me was missing from not knowing the extent of your violation toward me that chilly spring mid-afternoon.

The scariest part of the pandemic was how easily my mind was able to block you out, to blur the lines of what you put me through. I can't remember what I watched, what I listened to, what I read, what I ate, what I wore, what I did following the days after you. In a time where the artistry of music, of movies, of television became so ingrained in my life during the pandemic, it pains me to know I'll never get the threads of memory stitching me together redone because of the way you unlaced me.

I wonder if not remembering you is my fault, my burden, my failure and not just an intricate thread missing from the stitching of the me you tore three years ago.

I can slit my throat and watch the crimson words spill out on the hardwood floors, but you'll keep living, bloodied shoes walking past the crying girl you once knew.

The Garden of Eden

Jenna Brown

Therese could best remember her grandmother on late summer nights, when she could perfectly envision her wrinkled hands and elbows deep into potting soil, the smell of dew fresh on the tongue. When her grandmother gardened on those hot midsummers, the hose would run soundlessly on the sticky pavement, drying hot and musty in the afternoon sun. Whenever these bittersweet moments encroached upon her skin, she would take out her grandmother's hands from the small freezer in her damp garage and suck on the tips of her fingers. The year after her grandmother died, she had unwrapped the rest of her frozen body on Christmas Eve and thawed it in the oven, lathering the tangy skin with butter, lemon juice, thyme, and parsley. She had licked the fat from the rinds, lips wet and heart full. This was how her family commemorated each other—sucking the marrow from their bones and lolling on frozen tongues and shoulders.

Her grandmother's name was Eveline, named after her great-grandmother who had first started the garden in the late twenties. It had started small—baby tomatoes, piquant peppers, mellow squash. It was not until her great-grandmother's first husband died that limbs began to sprout. He had been buried under the great oak tree, body cold and stiff. A few months later, his toes surfaced in the dirt. Her great-grandmother, as the story went, had not been scared; she had been expecting it, as one does a baby. Once fully grown, she cooked him with potatoes and onions and licked her utensils clean.

"How come I can't speak of the garden at school, Nonna? Why is it bad?" Eveline asked her grandmother as a child, feet wet from the dewy grass and a half-eaten apple in hand.

"Some people celebrate life and love differently than we do. They may not understand—but our love is special; keep it close to your heart."

By the time Therese's grandmother had inherited the garden, the trees surrounding the tresses of legs, hands and feet were dappled with pears and tart peaches that she would make into creams, butters, and pies. On Therese's seventh birthday, they had plucked her grandfather Antonio from the grimy roots next to the carrots and baked his cheeks into a casserole, which melted and liquefied on the tongue like molasses. Eveline had brought out stacks of scrapbooks and polaroids, smiling at each photo as they suckled on his insides. With each swallow, she'd remember bits and pieces of his laughter, the lullaby he would sing her to sleep with—"Ninna nanna, ninna oh questo bimbo a chi lo dò? Se lo dò alla Befana, se lo tiene una settimana. Se lo dò all'uomo nero, se lo tiene un anno intero. Ninna nanna, ninna oh, questo bimbo me lo terrò!"—"*Lullaby, lullaby, oob, Who will I give this baby to? If I give him to the old hag, for a week she will keep him, ahb. If I give him to the bogeyman, for a whole year he'll keep him, Lullaby, lullaby, eeee, I will keep this baby for me!*"

Therese's mother had been the first to sprout in her lifetime—then her father, her unborn child and Chiara, Therese's wife, who she had loved between nose kisses, giggles, and tender touches. Her mother had gone well with red wine, her favorite

giggles, and tender touches. Her mother had gone well with red wine, her favorite drink, in sparse bites with coleslaw and buttery, warm bread. Her leg fat had gone slack on Therese's tongue, wrist bones crunching under her teeth like sand in clamshells. Therese lapped up every last bit and still felt hungry, bones licked clean on her plate. After her father she needed a cigarette. His skin had been plump but slender, sweet but sour, and her eyes had watered after each bite. Her unborn daughter, who had died three months into her surrogate pregnancy, was a small thing—two inches long, smaller than her palm. Amelia was her name, was supposed to be. She had been stirred into blueberry jam, which they had layered onto a baked crust with slats on the top. She had tasted like melancholy, and Therese had laid awake all night thereafter, lips still sticky.

Chiara had tasted the best. It was Therese who had found her after she died, lungs bloated with water and lips blue. She kissed her neck, cheeks, and breasts after failing to pump air back into her limp body. She waited by the garden nearly every day after that. Finally, a month later, her feet had emerged, and a month after that her head sprouted. Therese had eaten her without any seasonings. She had sat in the garden until only the bones remained, which she cradled as she cried in the wet grass. Chiara tasted sweet, of warm nights and stale kisses, and her blood left lipstick stains on Therese's lips and neck.

"I want to go early, Nonna," she bawled, cheeks wet and chest heaving. "I cannot live without her."

Her grandmother cradled her and said, "You go when you go. It is not your time to be harvested." The world took when it wanted to. The Garden of Eden did not rush or maim. It was delicate and perfected. It was the garden of memory, of love, of sorrow, of life and of death. Its fruit was not forbidden; it was sacred.

Therese remembered these moments as she rocked in her wicker chair on the back patio, wind moving the leaves on trees and a light rain dusting the ground below. She chewed an orange slice, eyes somber. Soon it would be her time. She could feel it from the tips of her toes to the top hairs of her head. Her limbs felt lanky as sprouts and there was a pressure in her chest, as if she were to be minimized into the tiniest of seeds. There were no descendants left to inherit the garden's unruliness, but she knew as the trees knew of incoming rain that someone would come. Someone would water, monitor, harvest, and savor her bones on cold nights under knit blankets. And that someone would understand its sacredness.

Thousand-Yard Stare

Nathan Phillips

Sex is like Goldilocks—at least according to societal standards it is. This porridge is too hot; you have too much sex, so you’re a whore.

This porridge is too cold; you have too little sex, so you’re playing hard to get, and you’re gonna die alone.

This sex is just right.

It never made much sense to me personally. Why do we care so much about other people’s genitals and what they do with them? As long as no one is getting hurt, no one should care. I mean, people don’t seem to care when someone does get hurt. “You were asking for it,” and “are you sure you didn’t want it?” Now, when I say all of this I’m sure that you probably thought that I had some woman or women in mind. You’re right, I did think about some women I know, about how they’ve been looked at like a piece of meat since they were 12 years old.

However to present this as a solely female issue would be ignorant at best and malicious at worst. You see, the way society presents sex is that women never want it and men always want it. As if having intercourse is some secret treasure that women hold and that men must pass some trial to obtain. To some, men are just dumb animals that are driven by their need to fornicate. To some, they are emotionless beasts that chew women up and spit them out. To some, the idea of a man refusing sex is as ridiculous as a pig taking flight.

At 18 years old I was raped.

Imagine this: your abusive ex is coming to your house for a hookup that you did not ask for and that you do not want. You’ve told this person “no” several times but they responded with “I’ll make you want it.” Now they’re at your house. You have two options, two doors. The door that leads directly to the outside. A pane of glass that shows your small neighborhood that’s out of the way. As well as a door on the inside, one to keep things out, strong, sturdy, secure. They’re walking up the hill, getting closer to your home, closer to your doors, closer to you.

To shut the door in their face TURN TO PAGE 2.

To open the door and let them in TURN TO PAGE 2.

You reluctantly open the door letting them inside. I’m sorry. You probably feel cheated that I didn’t really give you a choice, only the illusion of one. You may even be sitting there smacking your hand to your head saying “you idiot, why on earth would you choose that?” Honestly, I ask myself the same thing, and in hindsight, it’s an easy question to ask. I had two options in front of me, two doors. She just parked the car, *close the door*. She got out of the car, *close the door*. She’s walking up the driveway, *close the door*. You don’t want her here, you’ve made that very clear, *Close The Door*. She’s here, *CLOSE THE DOOR*. You open the door. You see, like that option I just gave you, there never really was a choice.

My rape was not a normal rape—that is the funniest and saddest thing that I have ever written. When people think of rape they mostly think of shady men in dark alleys waiting to force women into violating acts. They don’t think of the people

going mute and just praying for it to end while their significant other does what they want to them as rape.

In the summer of 2022, a movie came to the theaters called “Where the Crawdads Sing.” I went to see it in theaters with my loving partner. There was a particular scene in the movie that stuck with me, that had me in tears, that had me shaking with fear because I did not see her in the scene; I only saw me. Around halfway through the film, the main character, nicknamed the Marsh Girl, is in a motel room with one of the men in the movie. She has very reluctant sex with him, and when they finish she is left with this Thousand-Yard Stare. In that moment I felt the most seen that I had ever been. My friends didn’t understand me like that, my partner didn’t understand me like that, but the Marsh Girl did. This wasn’t some violent encounter, such as the one we see later in the movie, it was a single, silent moment for which she was praying to be over. It was horrible that I could only feel seen when reliving my trauma and watching someone else get raped on the big screen. If my saying the word “rape” makes you uncomfortable, I’m saying it because for a very long time I couldn’t. Because the first time I tried to, I was told “are you sure you didn’t want it?”

my dogs share a mouth sometimes

Alyssa Goodenow

I. my dogs share a mouth sometimes.

teeth caught, jaws laced,

an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

when i witness the act of two bodies becoming one, scripture itself is rewritten.

II. I have been trying for too long to explain myself, but

I swear that god visited me in a dream once.

he handed me a broken rib,

told me about synthesized blood and goat hearts,

how they would make the razor blades in my stomach dissolve faster,

then he asked for my forgiveness.

II. listening to god speak is not what you'd think

on tuesdays he comes in swarms,

on wednesdays he bears gifts

and on thursdays he brushes the hair on my head

he tells me grasshoppers have ears in their bellies and that is why things are the way they are for me,

that some things just are, and others aren't.

he said he was sorry that he's been laughing at me all these years

my heart stopped beating but i said i was sorry too

III. empty chairs at empty tables

my shoes, grinding down upon the hollow brick streets

a ballad of my drunk walk home,

did you know i wore this dress for you?

mitski cries in my ears and my

mouth turns to a wild creature

gag on the bone and hear me pant while

i choke on the leash that anchors me

god is not my friend, but sometimes i wish he could make me more like my dogs



Two Lovers Dying

Sophia Hoersten

Oil on canvas

36 x 48in

In my artistic exploration, I utilize oil paint to depict predominantly female subjects, adopting an ecofeminist perspective. Through this lens, I delve into the impermanence of both the earth and humanity within the framework of a patriarchal capitalist society. The organic shapes inherent in both nature and the human form serve as constant wellsprings of inspiration for my creative process. Whether it's capturing the graceful curve of a jaw or the meandering flow of a creek, my aim is to convey the inherent beauty and transient nature of our world. Through my work, I prompt viewers to reflect on the sustainability of their contributions to systemic exploitation.

By consistently engaging with the symbiotic relationship between humanity and the environment, my art encourages contemplation on the consequences of supporting structures rooted in exploitation. The juxtaposition of organic forms in my paintings serve as a visual narrative, challenging viewers to question the long-term viability of societal practices that perpetuate ecological and social imbalances.

Something About Alyssa

Nathan Phillips

LIGHTS UP ON PASTOR *he is center stage
behind a podium giving a eulogy.*

PASTOR

We are gathered here today to mourn.

LIGHTS UP ON MATT

MATT

To grieve.

LIGHTS UP ON IVY
The three are in a triangle formation
PASTOR is in front while IVY and MATT
are behind him

IVY

To celebrate.

MATT & PASTOR

IVY

The death.

The life.

ALL

Of Alyssa Bradley.

PASTOR

She was the light of whatever room she was in.

MATT

She didn't talk to a lot of people.

IVY

She had social anxiety. She always did; I basically had to force her to talk to me in kindergarten. It took awhile, but I knew she was opening up when she told me her favorite dinosaur was a triceratops.

MATT

Even then she was really funny once you got to know her. She had this really funny joke. It was, like... like um. I don't remember. But it was hilarious, trust me.

PASTOR

All of her friends and family knew her as a truly kind soul.

MATT

Alyssa was like cake—no, ice cream—so sweet that you couldn't get enough of her.

IVY

She put gum in my hair.

MATT

Speaking of, that's actually how she asked me out. She found out my favorite ice cream—rocky road—and she made a poster for Homecoming that said, "My delivery may be a bit rocky, but Hoco with you would be sweet."

IVY

She asked me to help her make a dumb poster to ask some guy to Homecoming. "My delivery may be a bit rocky, but Hoco with you would be sweet," or something like that. I helped her with it; of course I did. She was my best friend. We braided each other's hair and would walk to CVS everyday after school, talking about the newest Taylor Swift album. She would talk about boys, and I would listen. I knew as early as thirteen that I loved her and that she would never feel the same.

MATT

We got to Homecoming, and there were so many people. I think she actually might have gone pale from seeing it. I don't know, though. She just looked so beautiful. A slow dance song came on at one point, and I was like "now's my moment" and said—

IVY

"May I have this dance?"

IVY gags

MATT

We got on the dance floor.

IVY

I hate John Legend now.

MATT

They were playing John Legend. When he said, "all of me loves all of you," I thought it would be the perfect time to go in for a kiss. I had liked her for a while, and man, this was going to be the best shot I had.

IVY

She threw up all over his shoes. Nerves, ya know?

PASTOR

Alyssa was a gifted girl—smart and talented. She was going to be an artist.

MATT

She was gonna be a singer.

IVY

A country singer.

PASTOR

Her laugh could fill a room and was more contagious than Covid. Sorry, bad joke. It's what she would have wanted.

IVY and MATT cringe

PASTOR

It is impossible to express how truly tragic her loss is with only words. The world lost a beautiful young woman too soon, and heaven gained a new angel.

IVY

Okay, I can't do this anymore.

*IVY steps forward breaking the triangle,
The three acknowledge one another for the first time.*

IVY(CONT.)

(TO PASTOR) What's your deal?

PASTOR

What?

IVY

You didn't even know her.

MATT

Ivy, take it easy.

IVY

No, why are you giving her eulogy, and why is it such crap?

PASTOR

What? I don't know what you-

IVY

Heaven gained an angel? Words can't express the tragedy? She was the light of whatever room she was in? It's such, such bullshit. That's not Alyssa! That's not anyone; none of it means anything!

MATT

If words can't express how tragic her death is then why even try?

PASTOR

Someone has to.

IVY

She would make me laugh till I cried.

MATT

She always snorted when she laughed.

PASTOR

Well I didn't know all that.

MATT

Then why are you here?

IVY

Why are you just saying stuff that doesn't mean anything?

PASTOR

Well, I don't see anyone else jumping to take the pedestal. How are you supposed to sum up someone's life in less than a thousand words?

IVY

Not like that.

PASTOR

Easy for you to say.

MATT

We should be talking about how much she meant to us. About how sad we are that she's not with us anymore.

IVY

No! No, we should be talking about how she made us laugh and smile.

MATT

Why? That'll just hurt more.

IVY

We should celebrate her life, not mourn her death.

PASTOR

Why?

IVY

Why? What's the alternative? I look at my childhood best friend sitting in some box? I won't do it. I won't watch them throw dirt on her. I won't accept that she's dead and that I'm probably the reason why. I won't accept that the last time she talked to someone it was me throwing her insecurities in her face. She wanted me to help her plan her one year anniversary with Matt, and I, I just couldn't do it. I told her I wouldn't and that I didn't want to talk about it. She kept pushing and pushing, so I told her. I told her that I loved her and that I always had. You know what she told me? "I can't support that lifestyle." So, I told her that I couldn't support her shoving her fingers down her throat. I told her that she bruised her knuckles for nothing since it clearly wasn't helping. Was it right? No, of course not, I was just so angry. She left my house crying and alive. But she didn't make it home. So now we gotta stay here and say a bunch of bullshit to try to sum up what kind of person she was.

PASTOR

She was the light of a room.

MATT

She was the light of my life.

IVY

She was a person. That's all. A person as flawed as the rest of us. There were no angels singing as she died. She was here and now she isn't. She isn't here and it's... it's all my...

IVY sits down.

MATT sits down with her.

PASTOR EXITS

*IVY does not look at MATT
avoiding his gaze.*

IVY(CONT.)

What are we doing here? Are we grieving her death? Celebrating her life?

MATT

We're remembering.

IVY

I don't want to remember. It would be better if we just never met each other. She'd still be here if she never met me.

MATT

Maybe. Maybe she would, maybe she wouldn't. But, she did meet you, and there's no going back.

IVY

She had this really funny joke, you know?

MATT

Yeah, I can't remember what it was though.

IVY

Me neither.

MATT

Remember that time she gave herself bangs?

IVY

They looked so bad.

MATT

Terrible.

IVY

We would scream-sing in the car, "I wanna dance with somebody!"

MATT

She loved the stars.

IVY

God, the stars, how could I forget? She wanted to be an astronaut when we were kids.

MATT

Who didn't?

IVY

She was set on it, 'till she found out about all the math that went into it.

MATT

Wasn't really her strong suit. Did she ever play you one of her songs?

IVY

No. Were they good?

MATT

Nope. Well there was one that she showed me.

IVY

Yeah? How did it go?

MATT

Part of the chorus went, "Love was only an idea until I met you."

IVY

That's nice.

MATT

Yeah. I'm sorry that she said those things to you. I like to imagine that you two could have made up if she was still here.

IVY

Thanks. Maybe we could have. I'm gonna miss her.

MATT

Me too. Do you still want to forget her?

IVY

Remembering is so painful.

MATT

Isn't the pain worth it?

BEAT.

IVY turns to look at MATT

IVY

I don't know.

END OF PLAY.

My Idaho Forever

Clare Hickey

Rick is my motel's only patron. Every eight to twelve days he drives up in a dust cloud from either the East or West and asks me if there's vacancy. I stand tall and proud behind my ply board desk and tell him that I'll see what I can do. He asks for the penthouse suite of the single-floor building. I tell him that I keep it reserved just for him, and he shoots me a sun-worn wink. I pluck the key to room 107 from its hook on the wall behind me and drop it into his open palm. He tells me that I'm the best concierge this side of the Mississippi, and I worry about who bests me on the other side of a river I've never seen. On his fifth visit to my fine establishment, I asked him why he embarked on his continuous pilgrimage across the United States.

"What did you do all that driving for?"

"I can't pick a favorite ocean."

"What's the difference?"

"One's blonde."

The twelfth time he visited—and I asked again—he stared over my shoulder for a few beats before answering. I suppose that, by going up to his car and asking, I had caught him off guard. Perhaps I was being rude.

"Don't you get tired of being in the car so much?"

"Well, someone has to make sure that there aren't large pits in the highway."

"Is that your job?"

"Yeah, sure."

"How much do you get paid?"

"Paid?"

On his twenty-seventh visit I ask again. I'm working on a website in order to counteract my lack of customers, and I'm hoping he can offer some insight to what my location offers. Maybe he just loves driving through southern Idaho.

"By Jove Missy, somebody has to keep your lights on. Besides, if I provide enough patronage maybe you'll finally put a pool in for me."

I keep my chlorine allergy and misinformed fear of sharks to myself.

Rick always checks in around 7 p.m. and asks what there is to eat around here. The empty highway boasts no ideas, so I microwave us some Salisbury steaks. I don't advertise dinner service as an amenity, but there's no sense in making Rick drive forty-five minutes into town; I've kept the freezer stocked for him since his eighteenth visit. After the nineteenth I started microwaving them as soon as I see the sun glint off of the front of his bug-splattered car. We chew on the processed meat while sitting in the lawn chairs (a listed amenity) on the front patio. (Rick says that it's not really a patio, because there is no wood or paving, it's just an area I cleared the rocks from by the parking lot, which is also just dirt I cleared rocks from.) In between bites he tells me tales of the road, which largely consist of various animals that he almost or did in fact run over. He recites the tunings of various radio stations that have transmission along the groove he has worn in the country. He lists off songs he heard during the drive.

After his plastic container is scraped clean of gravy he pulls out a thin white cigarette, but I have a strict no smoking rule, so he walks out to the parking lot to light up. I bring my legs up to my chest and tuck my head into my knees. The mountains shield his outline from the setting sun as the sky dies in shades of dandelion. After his cigarette joins the rest of Idaho's debris, he makes a show of putting a mint in his mouth before walking back to the patio. He knows that I hate the smell.

Rick keeps a surfboard tied to the top of his car, but complains about hippies on the West Coast.

"I thought that hippies were from the 70s?"

"Hippies are a constantly renewing resource."

"They surf too?"

"They don't do it right. They don't respect the water."

"You sound like a—"

"Shut up. My carbon footprint is too high for that shit."

I remind him that the hotel has a strict no cursing rule, and he tells me that that's why no one else stays here. I tell him that he always just misses the other customers; they pull away as he drives in. We both know I'm lying. We sit in silence for a while after that, but I don't mind. The silence is quieter with someone else around. When the sun is gone, and he gets too cold, he stands up in a big stretch. In unison, we say, "Welllll, long drive tomorrow" and I escort him to his room, because I'm the best concierge on this side of the Mississippi. I remind him that checkout is at 11 a.m., and he reminds me that he'll be gone before sunrise. I let my hand graze the walls of the motel as we walk, feeling the parts that need to be repainted—rough against my fingers. When he unlocks the door he turns to me and grins.

"You coming in?"

I blush, duck my head, and turn to go back to the office without replying. I walk steadily until I hear the door shut behind him. I lean into the wall again; light blinks from my northern stars. I go inside and fall into my cot. I dream my same listless dreams.

Rick comes back into the office at the time of morning when frost dreams of the desert, but I'm already awake. He tells me that it was the best night of sleep that he's ever had and drops his key into my ever-waiting palm from across the desk. It's still warm from his hand. My fingers curl around it unthinkingly, and the edge of the desk digs into the bone of my hips.

"Come with me. You'd love Connecticut."

"I can't just leave."

"You'd rather stay in the middle of nowhere?"

"Isn't that what you do?"

"I'm not staying anywhere."

"One day, someone will find gold in those mountains and put in a strip mall. Families will need someplace to stay, so they can wake up early and go to the wax museum. I'll need to order new paint and stock a vending machine. Besides, where would you sleep? If I left you'd have to reroute."

He shakes his head softly at me before turning to go, but I rush around

the counter to open the door for him. I follow him to his car like a stray dog that has memories of a single Christmas. He opens the car door he never locked and winks before giving me a line about going off to hunt for adventure and turning his engine over. He's all lines. The radio crackles emptily as exhaust burns lightly in my nose, and the gravel snaps against itself into rubber tires. After his car joins the endless void of horizon, I go to check his room.

Cleaning motel rooms isn't about removing a mess. It's about making it so the mess never happened at all; no one has ever been in the room before, no one knows the carpet pattern. Strip the linens from the bed. Rid the room of any trash. I'm not stuck. Wipe down every surface. Lift the indent from the mattress. Rewind the water back into the faucet. Bleach the shower. Bleach the bathroom floor. Bleach any tiled surface. Let the chemicals burn inside the ridges of your fingerprints. Run the vacuum back and forth and back and forth. Tuck the blankets into the bed frame. Re-case the pillows. Restock the coffee. Stare wantonly out the window. Wonder what I'd like about Connecticut.

One day after he heads East, my feet stick to the tracks his tires etched. I can't lift them towards the single task my life revolves around. I collapse into the dirt and let the dirt crawl into my hair. Memories of dreams I used to have flash against Idaho sky, bright and blue and endless. There were big ones, but when I blink them away the one thing I really want is for someone else to make my bed. Or to not have a bed at all. There's another motel further down the road. They have a Coca-Cola vending machine, and so I never told Rick about it in case he'd like it better. Idaho sings a song of warming sun and silence until I hear the sound of an engine enter my frame again, but I don't lift my head from the ground until the car pulls into my parking lot. It's Rick.

"What do you say we take turns?"

"What?"

"I'll run the motel for a bit and you can take the car. That way someone is here if that damn wax museum shows up. Just drive East until you hit ocean and then turn back around."

I sit up all the way and stare at his grizzled head sticking out his car window. I can't speak.

"You know how to drive?"

I nod, and, taking that as my agreement to the idea, he gets out of the car.

"Just pay attention to the gas, you wouldn't want to get stranded again. Steak still in the freezer? I know where the keys are."

He gives me a hand as I get back up on my feet and an exhilarating feeling of displacement weakens my knees. I hold out my palm to him for his car keys. They're still warm when they drop into my palm.

The Other Side

Jonah Casbel

This is a strange and beautiful sunny day. An excuse not to dress myself and step out into it evades me, despite my grasping for it. It is beautiful because the sun streams warm light between fluffed but heavy clouds. The wind is willful and loud but just cool enough to cleanse my lungs and spirit. It nudges me along up the hill. It is strange because just over that hill there is a gathering, to say the least. In a way, it is a celebration of the break of winter.

Today is the first true spring day and the first of a string of weekends dedicated to enjoying that. An entire street of town, lined with houses inhabited by the movers and shakers of the local party scene, explodes into the renewed energy of the season. Even I, in my lonesome uphill trek, am drawn to its passion.

Spurred on by the wind, a nicotine fixation, a tinge of hunger, and last night's fortune cookie, I make my way out of the valley. My side of the hill is quiet, peaceful. There is no indication of what swells on the other side. The full-time residents live over here; I share my building with them. It is domestic; dog-walkers and work trucks are all that populate the streets. The air is clean and unaffected. The feeling is restful and accommodating but notably empty.

When I reach the hilltop, hunger beats out fixation in the struggle for my wallet—at least for now. Undersized burrito in hand, I beeline for a quiet spot to enjoy it. From my secluded picnic table island, my last bastion of peace for the moment, I overlook the student side. From here, it too appears quiet, my view limited to the neatly arranged, identical dormitories. I know why it appears this way, surely depopulated by the draw of madness just a couple streets down. I don't need to see or hear to know. The vibration of it can be felt for miles. In earnest, the fear of crowded bodies claws down my throat and threatens to settle in my gut, but I know I must go. To feel it firsthand, up close and personal before I journey home, seems necessary. I am but a moth to it, drawn by some innate nature to a light beyond my comprehension.

As I descend from my perch, it becomes more impossible to ignore. There is no turning back or avoiding this time. Not when I begin to see the streams of people stumbling out—and I mean really stumbling—away from the ever-growing roar. Between houses, I begin to see it. Bodies packed together on back porches, an ambulance blinks but is helplessly drowned out. I turn the corner and become engulfed in the stream, feeling stranger as I grow sober. My heart begins to race, confused if it's excitement or fear. Another corner and I'm in it now.

My senses are inflamed on all fronts. As far as I can see there are people—moving and yelling, dancing and singing—entangled on porches, balconies, yards, and sidewalks. Every house plays different music, yet there is no cacophony. Voices and beats blend; bodies, walls, sounds lose all distinction. The air has been replaced, pushed out by the thickness of the scene. The smell of alcohol and body odor somehow fill every space, strain every breath. I am utterly invisible. Surrounded at this point, I weave through the only sometimes flowing foot traffic, stopping repeatedly to accommodate conversations I'm not a part of. Panic encroaches on my wonder. The only eye

contact I make is with a fat cop on a literal high horse. Behind those aviator shades hides fear.

Unlike him, I breathe out the tension in my lungs with a single deep exhale. Like an amusement park roller coaster, I am thrilled for only the moment—eyes wild and mouth open—but I know it soon will fade as the crowd thins. I look around wildly, attempting to absorb all the energy I can before reaching the street's end. Exposure has done me good, but I will not stop and meld with it. Not unless a familiar face were to call out, grab my arm, and pull me back in. Another decisive breath releases a harbored hope for this. I continue on to sleepier streets.

I know I cannot exist for long amongst the tunnel vision and simple pleasures. Not because I am critical of them—I am endlessly jealous—it is just not in my nature. I leave them behind and return to the hilltop. I belong on the quiet side, taking the long way down. Stopping on a stair set for a few puffs, I make nice with some vaguely recognizable hippies on a dog walk. It comforts me to know that peace is preferable to some. From this vantage, there is no chaos to be seen. The empty asylum across the river and the rolling green behind it soothe my weary eyes.

As I step on down, I feel raindrops grace my skin. The sun still shines, but the wind carries droplets from distant gray clouds. I raise my face to it and welcome playful splashes. One lands on my lip, and it is sweet like flower nectar. I hope for the cloud to cross the hill and give its freshness to the heavy air. All I can do is wish well for the living and hope they'll let me glimpse them there.

When I get home, I feel more present. My upstairs neighbor with the young, stomping toddler brings me a home-cooked Indian rice dish. I must be in the right place.



to be an appalachian woman

Morgan Gang

Textile art

6ft by 8ft

For me, the inspiration and means to create is everywhere. I find it in the natural world, in its mystery and beauty; its destruction. I find it in communities where injustice is rife and less commonly, where justice has been achieved. I am driven to create by the silencing of the stories we need to hear. I tell the stories that go untold, those that are spoken over, and those that are silenced. The purpose of my art is to interrupt, to intrude, to expose.

In an effort to bring awareness to the ways in which we are not only destroying our home but our people as well, I tell stories of environmental crises, from the far-reaching issue of climate change to unique, regional concerns. I work with found and thrifted objects, many of which carry meaningful connections to place. Through my mixed-media and interdisciplinary practice, I tell the stories we need to hear: the stories that will bring about positive change for both people and planet.

Cybele's Hips

Isabel Stutchick

The smell of a freshly butchered chicken
is surprisingly sweet
and the way of undressing it,
like a child who's fallen
and requires the gentle plucking
of dead leaves and grass sheaths
from her summer knees,
decidedly doting.
The smell envelops me
like a matted farm dog:
all heat-seeking and joyous.

Perhaps the quiet,
yet steadfast women behind this
weighty work, occupying the next room over from me
are the ones who lend this scene
such delicacy and devotion.
They work with heavily practiced efficiency
silent except for their eyes
which glance around the room at one another
in complete understanding and appreciation.
With each blink they are building
an oculute intimacy
that sustains the entire homestead.

I remember how a rural midwife once told me
that an Amish woman will dance,
in perfect figure eights,
amidst birthing throes.
Despite the puritanical culture that encloses her,
leaving no room for dancing, especially
of the sensual or celebratory sort.

It seems as though
the human inclination towards movement persists,
usually, within women;
It is the only way, this swaying movement, to survive
the violence of the day-to-day.

We must keep moving, like relentless tempests,
enduring the hip-ward parade,
even in torment
so that new divinities may continue to be birthed
out of this eternal, brazen tango.

Colophon

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