



**the
normal
review
spring 2023**

the normal review

A Literary and Arts Publication

Montclair State University
Spring 2023

A Special Thanks To: Our Executive Board & Production Staff

Cover art: goldfish beard by Alex Tully

Cover design by Kyle Velez

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Montclair State University

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How to Submit

Only those affiliated with Montclair State University are eligible to submit. Discretion is left to The Normal Review staff and editorial board.

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Hunting Deer With Dyanmite

Tyler Ventura

The fuse was as lit as my Daddy's
As he stared down the massive beast
Silver tips and scabbed gashes marring the beast's muscular build
Legs as sturdy as Ma's new boyfriend's
'Cept the beast never kicked me square in the chest
Arms as big as Daddy's brother's
'Cept purple dots didn't parade up and down the beast's veins
Teeth as white as my sister's
'Cept the beast's premolars weren't knocked out in a sidestreet alley
Eyes
Those eyes
Wide abysses
Fear
I saw in the pools of dark
My mimicking expression of the waterside reflection
And I knew
And I took the dominion from bloodied hands
And I held it to the sky
As the flames of hate simmered
As the deer bowed his regalness down to the rain puddle
As I filled myself with the air of smoke and stared at the voids of my eyelids
BOOM

Don't Look Back, It Isn't Real!



Fiona Nuredini

I grew up in a city, in an apartment.
And it's irrelevant, but we liked to sleep on the pull-out couch.

At some point, in the early beginning,
My mother brought home this anatomical model.
A figurine. One of the realistic ones that show you
how big your stomach is compared to your heart.

It had one creepy blue eyeball.
And removable guts.
I would have loved to have kept it.
But, unfortunately, it doesn't exist.

As a kid, you slide effortlessly through tall crowds of people.
No one sees you because you're not real when you're a kid.
There was a peculiar feeling of being seen
When I spotted someone small like me.

I would skip strategically from line to line on the concrete.
I was so scared of losing my mother.
That doesn't exist.

I watch her count her money bill by bill by bill.
She stores her earnings in a cold metal box.
I never worried about money as a kid. Turns out that was the final blow.
It's fine. It doesn't exist.

Clumsy girl. She's fallen over the fence.
The bump on my forehead and the cherry cold medicine I took for the pain.
My mother, my creator, my god. She holds me until I rest.
Well, too bad, it doesn't exist.

Today and tomorrow, though.
That exists.

I will see today, and I will see tomorrow
And I will see it
Until I no longer exist.



Fiona Nuredini

The blackened slash across my chest.
And my crooked spine.
Look!
My hands are up in defense.

You cannot ignore that.
It exists.

Drowning In Static

Editor's Choice for Nonfiction

Eric Rosier

The era of COVID-19 drastically changed me as a person due to my solitary confinement and lack of self-control. I was only 15 years old, and I had a lot of misguided emotions boiling inside of me when the school closed, I trapped myself in my room for months. Of course, my family was stuck with me as well so I wasn't completely alone; however, I started to feel the effects of secluding myself from the people around me. Everything I ever needed was in my home and the world was too dirty for a boy like me to step into, so I gazed at the burning world through the screen of my phone. I watched as every citizen's anger in America grew with a growing animosity toward one another. Riots, police brutality, murder, and corruption, it was a fascinating sight for my not-so-innocent eyes. I could never look away from this strange force of edgy fascination, fueling the people and myself around me. I allowed it inside of me and let it move my being for years.

My pride and stubbornness grew as I lay in my empty room, praising myself for existing. I couldn't help myself as I bit into the forbidden fruit, it felt ravishing to separate myself from everyone and everything. My thoughts became a mix of anger and bitter judgment and it came to a point where my impulses took control of my intuition. Close friends stopped talking to me, and my high had finally dropped. I watched my once innocent form lose its luster and value through years of embarrassment and hate. I yearned for it.

In 2021, my school adopted a hybrid system that allowed some people to be online while others could stay home. My dad decided to always make me go to school. The hallways were empty and gray, and everyone was too afraid of getting sick to talk to me. I'd left my room, but my loneliness came with me in the form of sagging emptiness. The year went by in a blur, and I can barely remember anything about it. It was a year of silence and thought. I learned that justice is blind in 2021 because I was living right beneath her nose. No chariots and angels were coming from Heaven to smite me, my shadow had won, and I had become a faded form of myself.

In 2022, I was able to adapt back to being around people, but I never really felt the same after quarantine. There's a sour taste in my mouth when I recollect the memories of it because all I can hear is the raspy breathing of my mom and dad clinging to life while infected with COVID. Because of the quarantine, I tend to refuse the aid of friends, and I push away people who I trust due to my malignant nature. And it makes me wonder one simple question, did quarantine create this version of myself, or was this meant to be?

A car has nearly run me over 2 times in my lifetime. The first time I was 2 years old, and I was saved by my neighbor and the second time I was 15 and saved myself through blind luck. I allowed the world to take me away where her cold dark hands, yet I live to breathe and sing for another day. I can't change nature, stop, or rewind time, but I can breathe and see a future I hope is brighter than my past. Let the sand eat me, I don't mind, I've lived out my thrills and have seen it all through my 2 years of solitude. My mind has changed since quarantine, but I'm no cruel misguided degenerate. If I can't see myself at my lowest, then how will I know when I've hit my everlasting peak? Quarantine allowed me to see the pits of lies and deceptions that I've allowed to creep into my soul. Now I can gaze at the 2 paths ahead of me, one of righteousness and the other of self-indulgence and violence. My body may thirst for pain, but I've never been more clear-minded.

I've listened to the world and prayed to Nothing in hopes of getting a clear answer, and I ended up doing the most irrational unhinged activity for fun. Now I'm free from myself, and I see the extener-



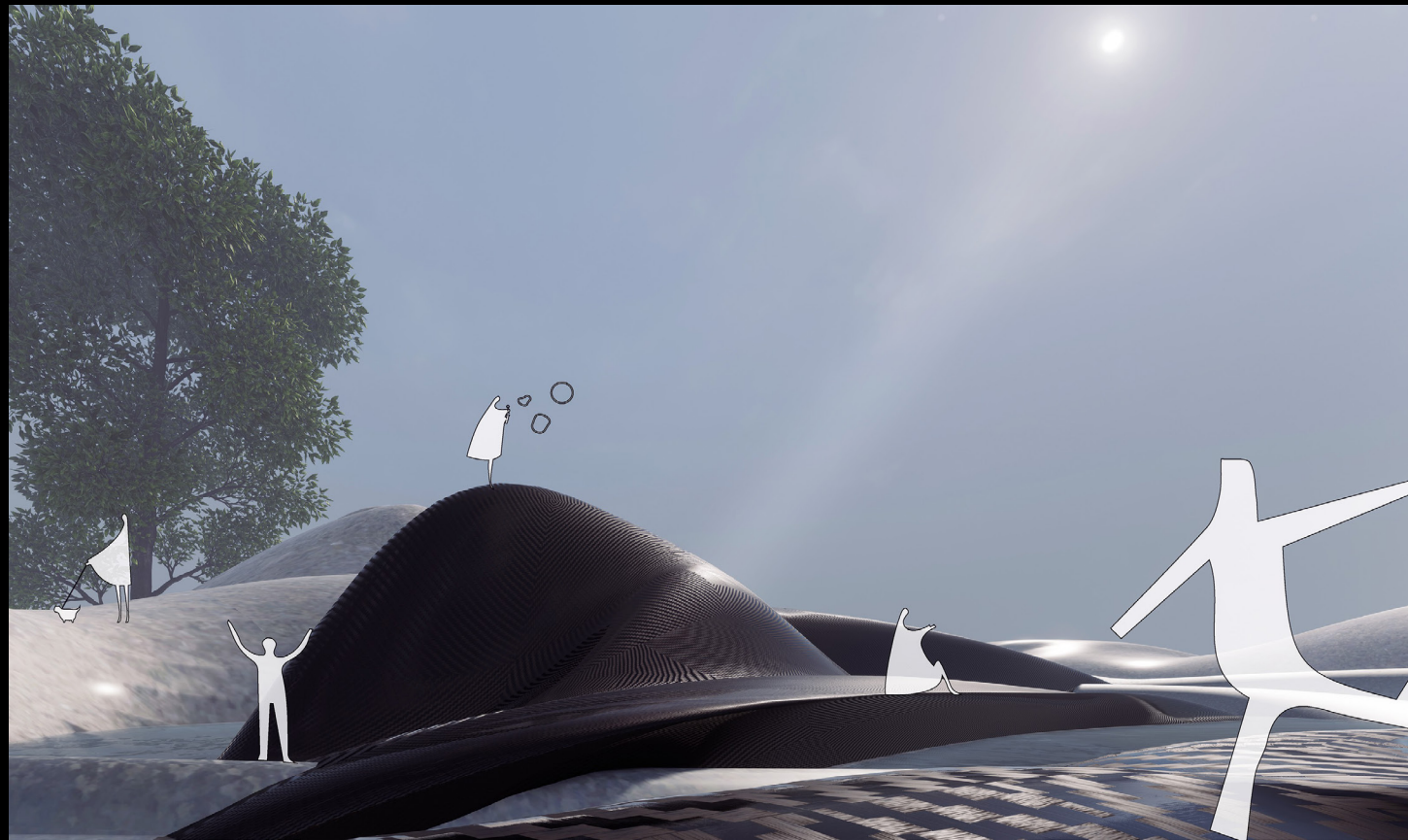
Eric Rosier

nal outlines ahead of me. So far ahead...maybe there is a quicker path. I'll gamble my voice and inhale fire in hopes of getting a proper answer one day. Until then, I'm at the very center of the universe while alone being nowhere. Maybe I should have let the sand devour me.

Dayglow



Saori Takahashi



Skin Tight



Alyssa DiPalma

The Bins were always full this time of year. Bones flocked the buckets of Coats like birds to seed, sifting through sizes in a flurry of thin arms and glassy gazes. This one too small, that one too wrinkly, all a little too itchy. Winter was a weapon that growled in gusts of wind and gnawed on bare bones. Coat season made the upcoming months bearable, just about livable, but more importantly, it was a frenzy of fashion. Freezing wasn't an option. Dying coatless was scarier than dying at all.

"This one looks nice. A little leathery though, don't you think?"

He put his leg into the hole of the coat. The skin sagged but it was barely noticeable, he reasoned. The tattoo on the upper right torso complemented the complexion. Maybe a little too light for his liking, but you couldn't afford to be picky.

"It looks great. Can we go?"

He rolled his eyes and one popped out. That thing had been loose ever since his last replacement.

"Better get used to the Bins now or it'll be worse when you have your first fitting. You don't want to soil your first skin suit." He put the eye back in its socket with a sigh. Her face paled, her natural skin glowing under the room's fluorescent lights. The other skinless couldn't help but hunger, drool dripping down the raw muscle of their mouths like dogs. You don't go around parading in natural skin, not near the Bins, not when coat season was only days away.

"Just pick one and let's get out of here."

He ignored his sister, shrugging and shuffling through the next Bin, just in case something caught his eye. Most he ruled out immediately. Freckles had gone out of style two seasons ago and acne never matched with anything. Elderly skin wore out too quickly; it would never last the whole winter. He'd be lucky if the skin on his hands made it to next spring. "I'm not going to be caught coatless just because you're afraid of a little bone. Do you understand how lucky you are?"

She swallowed her complaints. Her first skinning was only a couple of years away but she could feel it looming over her. The idea of someone else wearing her kept her up at night, more than the sound of the skinless freezing outside. "Be thankful that we can afford new coats every coat season. Not everyone has that luxury." He threw his discarded coats back in the Bins for the next Bone to pick at. "Don't you remember my first coat? I barely fit in it. The kid was nine. My back hurts just thinking about it." He tossed his chosen coat to her. She caught it with a startled jump, the leathery skin of the coat between her fingers. Bile started to rise in her throat.

"I know." She cast a suspicious glance around the other Bones, worried her angry tone would attract more ravenous eyes. As her eyes swarmed the room, a tuft of blonde hair in a nearby Bin caught her eye. She moved towards it, her gaze glazed over in fear to reveal a whole head of blonde hair. An empty Coat. One that looked almost exactly like her.

Is this what it's like for your body to return to the Bins? The question was suffocating, almost debilitating. She couldn't move, not even when the nearby Bones began to notice the similarities. They pushed past her, grabbing at the Coat with round bloodshot bulges filled with hunger.

"Eager to replace the Coat you'll soon shed?"

"No one gets to be blonde twice."

The first Bone gripped the blonde so tight she could hear its bones rattle in their exposed cages. The second Bone hissed in response, grabbing the other arm of the Coat.

"I saw it first."



Alyssa DiPalma

"I grabbed it first."

The Bones turned in unison, both possessed by the same idea. Coats were freshest straight off the bone, anyway.

"I'm not for sale." Her voice shook with fear but there was a fire in it, a flame dampened by years of Coats but hot enough to burn through them.

The Bones didn't like her answer. They moved towards her. She took a hasty step back and bumped into her brother. In an agitated spin, he turned to the rogue Bones and gave them a glare. He didn't speak, he didn't have to, but the throbbing of that loose eye told the Bones everything they needed to know. As if there was no interruption, they went back to bickering over the blonde. She let out a relieved sigh. Her brother was never one to provide protection but perhaps he proved himself worthy of the title today. She smiled at him.

"Thanks. Forget the Coat. We should go."

His posture stiffened. Patience was something he rationed for his sister and she had already used her share. He spent too much time saving for his next Coat to empathize with those who still had their natural skins. They were greedy, blind, and clinging to a life he shed a long time ago. He stepped closer to her, his loose eye darting back and forth so frantically that it threatened to dangle.

"Next time I take you with me, you keep your mouth shut. Or I'll make you give it to someone who won't complain."

She held her ground, despite her heartbeat flooding her ears. Goosebumps raced down her bare arms. The Bones stopped their digging to witness the prickling flesh in action, their eyes wide with want. A raw steak among a pack of hungry wolves. She looked over at the Blonde in the hands of the first Bone, the Coat already torn from their greedy fingers. In a low voice, she made a promise:

"You will never have me."

But only the bins heard that. And they couldn't respond.

lamplight static



Bailey Dunn

I've been taught to forget
myself between the radio

static. Find me where cigarette
paper lips whisper against teeth

and the moon is high, but the stars
are smog silent clouded in street

lamp fluorescent. Where moth
wings and tails trail amber outline,

remembering the land before us;
reminding, the land is not for us

alone. They eclipse, a quake of hands
and leave me in the static night.

They go to their god(s). I take you
in my arms and you bring me

back to mine.

In Love With Chemicals



Eric Rosier

The throat is clogged,
My head is filled,
Existential dread is my only friend.

I've spoken my lie, lived out the thrills,
and left with only a mass of sharp, dirty guilt.
Who can I trust when feeling as if I'm about to erupt?

Inside, I'm swelling and forming,
slowly growing, hoping that I can see beyond my course of rough lies,
but I've deceived myself once again.
Living life, staring through a broken view and foggy eyes,
my body is merging with the pillar of smoke and being digested by flies.
God is my master even if I dwell in white Mather,
but I'm oh so shattered and tattered.

I need to see it to believe it.
The feelings and thrills are my master,
but they leave nothing but disaster.
I have no control over them, being held captive by the captor.

It's not my fault,
I can't take responsibility.
The Immortal Divinity chose me to live a life of frail abnormal masculinity,
I'm only living my word hoping to be saved from this suffocating reality...
but I'm left drowning.

The chemicals are right, they've always been.
The consequences cannot yet graze my dark skin,
but I will one day meet my end and see the almighty fin.

Until then I will let this malignant manifestation within me grow and fester,
and I won't be cured by the end of the semester.
But I'll hope and maybe even pray to either God or the ropes binding me;
One day, I'll be free.

The Chair



Nicole D. MacGregor

I placed my lifted right leg back onto the chair. My body felt stiff, my neck elongated, and my arms stuck to my sides. My eyes shifted and focused on the violet light that beamed through the translucent curtains that covered the only window in my apartment.

The metal pipe above me reflected the color around the room. Purple shadows danced over my freshly made bed; the light dispersed on the empty mini fridge next to the griddle. The image above the small collapsible griddle caught my eye. The four walls around me are now blank, except for an old photo I could never take down. There must've been a family that lived here prior.

The yellowing photo with crinkled edges showed an older woman sitting on a wooden chair in a loose floral dress with glasses perched low on her nose; standing behind her was a young woman with curled hair that rested on her shoulders and her hand on the older woman's shoulder. A small child with a bonnet and onesie sat in the lap of the old woman, a rattle occupies the baby's attention.

I've memorized every detail of that photo, there isn't a smile on any of their faces but there isn't anger or sadness in their features. I wish I knew what they were thinking, at the time and about me living here.

Should I keep living here? Why?

I'll end up like that photo anyway. Forgotten. No one knows me, they don't know my feelings or what's hidden behind my smile. If I ever decide to put one on that day. If some random girl found a picture of me, would she try to piece together the shards of my life that scattered near and far? Pieces that people were supposed to return but kept to themselves or took from me and threw away. Pieces that I dropped, and I never looked back. Would she bother to make it true? Would she even care about what she found out? Maybe she'd make a story up about me just like I have about the people in the picture.

I already put too much pressure on this imaginary girl's shoulders. Damn, must be human nature. Or maybe just me. Why do we ev--

My weight shifted and the chair wobbled. I tried to steady myself against the back of the chair but couldn't. I hurried to slam my palm up on the metal pipe. My hands trembled. Air continued to fill my lungs.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I don't know what I want. Or is that what I'm supposed to think?

I know I want to be happy, to be loved. I don't want to feel alone anymore or hate myself. I want to have a purpose. I need to feel like I'm here for a reason. In this apartment. In this world.

The photo on the wall calls out to me. For the first time, I can read the emotions on the three faces. The old woman is worried. Her features tight but light. She wants better for the younger woman and the baby.

The younger woman's face conveys the same worry but she's new to the feeling. Age hadn't yet made creases or worry lines, but small bags peaked out under her eyes. Those eyes once filled with naivety, good, and hope lost part of that spark. The baby with her full attention on the rattle encapsulates everything the older and younger women lost with no worry. I want to be like the baby.

Is it possible to be like that again? Is it worth trying?

My mother used to keep my old rattles. She'd repaint them or change the beads on the inside, so they made another sound and used them as shakers for her students. Instead of raising their hands in class to answer a question they would shake the refurbished rattles. When I visited her classroom in the years after high school, the five and six-year-olds were still using the colorful noisemakers. Some-



Nicole D. MacGregor

of them were the originals and others had been brought in over the years which the students had customized. But I loved knowing that a piece of me was being used.

I didn't come up with the classroom rattles, that was all on Mom. What had I done to actively make myself useful? There had to be ways to bring that childhood joy and excitement back. I just had to figure out what I could do that would bring back that feeling. I could do that. *I can do that.*

I'm sure I could find something that would give me a purpose. Something that would make me feel needed and helpful. Maybe even loved? Baby steps.

The purple light had vanished. Now I was alone in the darkness, but a new light illuminated me. I didn't want my features to carry the same worry as the women in the picture, but I'd rather have that over never being able to reach the old woman's age. With people surrounding me that I cared enough to worry about.

I couldn't see much in the dark, but my fingers crept to the rough material around my neck. I slowly unwrapped myself and pushed the thick string away from me. Instead of stepping off, I sat down.

(auto) immunity



Alyssa Roberts

Eager knots devour hunger in carnivorous rage,
a lightness defines my whole body tremors,
tingles that extend beyond any range of active pines and needles,
of thrushing,
of throbbing,
a weakness of heart,
of head,
of ligaments,
and in a scurry for salt --- a sedated panic
where I ask no one at all:
"How am I alive?"

Pooling as an unnecessary reluctance to divert;
a limb accidentally cleans the mass of its life force,
and with a few moments of vengeance,
contracting veins prove as only a party trick.

Thoughts like clouds in a lazy river,
a whirling rush of forgetfulness pinned against the
vast
emptiness of my under-oxygenated brain;
Invisible illness.

Nerves Ending



Conor T. Curtin

These days I feel like I'm sick.

I get a feeling most days when I am here or there. It starts at my stomach and builds its way up to my throat — I force it down. It's a rotting vomit-poison that hates me and wants to be free. When the Poison learns it cannot be free it shoots to my arms and legs and they tingle and they shake. I become restless when this poison flows through my veins. Sometimes I can feel my heartbeat, a revolting reminder that I am simply a combination of throbbing and contracting pieces of flesh. **I did not eat for two days.**

I cannot help but move my arms and legs—I **could not sleep for three days.** I don't remember. I don't remember?

It was on the first day that I began to beat my arms and legs. I hit them with my fists until they bruised. I clawed at them until they bled. I hated my arms and legs, and I begged my mother for amputation. "My arms are filled with the Poison," I told her as I bared my battered limbs to her, but she did not understand. When she denied me my amputation, I switched from my hands to a belt. I whipped my arms and legs for hours. My legs got the worst of it, as my arms were harder to reach. Eventually, when my arms became too sore to lift the belt, I resorted to using silverware (I don't know why I didn't use my mother's silverware in the first place, it is very efficient).

On the second day, I struck up a conversation with a small rubber ball in my room, named Marvin. I carried Marvin with me. I remember telling it about the Poison. Marvin watched as I smashed fruit on the floor. Marvin disapproved of this, unable to understand how it could alleviate my pain. I explained to Marvin that he could never understand, for Marvin had no arms or legs. We argued on this topic relentlessly. As I stuck a nice-looking fork into my left arm I dreamt of all manner of ways I may subject Marvin to my torture. I remember licking Marvin that night, commencing a downward spiral of hate.

On day three I cut Marvin in half with a serrated kitchen knife. I began to feel he was mocking me and that perhaps he was responsible for this state of affairs. I had just run out of fruit to smash and my mother had removed all the belts and silverware from the home. My arms and legs seized wildly. I was in a state of distress and began to cry when I saw Marvin. I began screaming at him while I was sawing. His skin was very crunchy against the blade, I remember. I searched inside him because I thought I would find something intrinsic there, but could only see yellow foam. I imagined that Marvin was still alive at this point and the pain he was in and I liked to think of him as myself. I cut him into pieces and imagined each piece was an arm and a leg of my own. I became euphoric and, in my state of immense hunger, tried to eat these pieces of Marvin's body. I drank wine I found in the cellar and managed to get down three pieces. The wine made it feel like blood was gushing from Marvin's flesh as I chewed. I fell asleep, drinking two-thirds of the bottle. I think it was a Port.

I do not remember the fourth day.

When I woke on the fifth day I felt sick to my stomach. Marvin's flesh began to rise to my throat. I feared throwing up would reveal the murder to my mother. Perhaps irrationally, I imagined her sorting through my vomit with her fingers, picking out bits of flesh among the wine I had consumed. I feared that she would see what I had done to Marvin and would be disappointed. Because of this, I forced the vomit down my throat.

This sour spew rushed to my arms and legs and they began to sting and I could not help but move them.

spider makes his best friends on the highway



Editor's Choice for Art

Alex Tully



auras of a night-walk



Emily Paluba

we can't ever get rid
of that feeling, how
different the world feels
before and during
and after the music,
can we? at first,
the night is black like
chocolate milk,
absolutely fucking
loaded, joy for a
kid's heart, sugar-love.
then the notes,
and the black night
is a wing, layered,
fluffy pockets that
can hide something
but can never hold it.
a wing in the wind,
vibrating even without
movement. then
the silence. it can
be soft, really.
especially if you look up
and actually listen.
especially if you
breathe in and exhale
a chromatic scale
of heart-jumbles. yes,
especially then. when
the hand on your
cheek is your own.

Firefly Rescue Mission



Aram Bavoukian

EXT. SHRUB - EVENING

The sun begins its descent over a suburban neighborhood somewhere in North Jersey. It's early July, school is out, and children are busying themselves with typical outdoor activities like soccer, water gun fights, and worst of all: catching fireflies.

Within a crowded shrub beneath a gnarled bundle of pine trees, the local Firefly community is having an emergency council meeting before they emerge to light up the backyards of thousands of suburban homes.

Hundreds of Fireflies crawl about the spindly branches of the shrub, waiting for the meeting to take place, being weary not to produce too much light from their bioluminescent rear ends.

Before the Fireflies sits PRESIDENT ALAYSIA. To her right, VP GREGORY. To her left, SPEAKER HUGO. This isn't their first meeting, and it surely won't be the last.

SPEAKER HUGO

Order!

The hundreds of Fireflies in attendance begin to quiet down. There is still a low murmur echoing within the shrub.

SPEAKER HUGO (CONT'D)

ORDER!

Silence.

SPEAKER HUGO (CONT'D)

On this, the 4th day of the month of July, 2023, by Decree of President Alaysia of the United Firefly Federation, this Emergency Council meeting is called to order.

PRESIDENT ALAYSIA

Thank you, Speaker Hugo. Friends, Insects, Fireflies, lend me your wings! Tonight, we face the disappearance of a beloved Firefly sister, Gina. She was taken from us last night, while enjoying her nightly strolls, lighting up her abdomen, searching for a mate. In an instant, she found herself in the fleshy prison of the human hand, trapped, and with limited air.

Aram Bavoukian

A murmur of confusion from the Fireflies.

PRESIDENT ALAYSIA (CONT'D)
The injustice--

She waits for the Fireflies to wind down. Then she continues.

PRESIDENT ALAYSIA (CONT'D)
The injustice facing our sacred community cannot continue. Every year, hundreds of our brothers and sisters fall victim to the dirt-ridden, clammy hands of human children. Some are quick, and lucky enough to escape through little gaps between human fingers, but the few that cannot make it face unimaginable circumstances. Here's what we know: Gina is currently being held captive in a glass jar, with nothing but a stick, a leaf, and pebbles.

(beat)
We will get through this, and we will get our lovely Gina back. But to do this, we need everyone's cooperation.

She takes a pause, looks around the shrub.

PRESIDENT ALAYSIA (CONT'D)
Any questions?

An uproar from the confused and frustrated Fireflies. She points to one in attendance.

PRESIDENT ALAYSIA (CONT'D)
Yes?

The fireflies quiet down.

FIREFLY 1
Where's my Gina? You said my little girl is in a jar! A jar where?! How do we get to her?

PRESIDENT ALAYSIA
We'll get your daughter, ma'am. We believe she is on the West side of the yard. Our shrub faces her, but she is still very close to the human's home.

(MORE)

Aram Bavoukian

PRESIDENT ALAYSIA (CONT'D)
We believe the jar is sitting on the edge of the deck, so getting to her should not be too difficult.

The Fireflies get noisy again, talking amongst themselves, but FIREFLY 2 calls from the far end of the shrub.

FIREFLY 2
And how exactly do you plan on getting her out?

Sounds of agreement from the Fireflies.

FIREFLY 2 (CONT'D)
We can't exactly unscrew a jar lid, now, can we?

The Fireflies grow louder.

SPEAKER HUGO
Order!

The Fireflies disregard the Speaker. They grow in frustration and in volume. They want answers.

SPEAKER HUGO (CONT'D)
Order!!

Again, the Fireflies disregard him. VP Gregory loses patience.

VP GREGORY
Quiet!

A hush falls over the shrub.

VP GREGORY (CONT'D)
Listen! We have a plan. We will get Gina back. We--

The Fireflies start up again.

VP GREGORY (CONT'D)
I'm not done!

Silence.

VP GREGORY (CONT'D)
We know, firstly, that the jar does not have a lid screwed on, rather it is upside down, so the opening is facing the ground. There will be no lid to unscrew.

(MORE)



Aram Bavoukian

VP GREGORY (CONT'D)
Secondly, we have word that the humans are having guests over this evening. It's Noise Night.

Fear and panic fall over the Fireflies.

VP GREGORY (CONT'D)
I know. I know how frightening the human's Noise Night can be. Once a year, these humans light the sky on fire, sending loud, thundering bangs throughout the night. They hang their striped banners from long poles, gather in groups in backyards, and the earth rumbles with each burst of light.

FIREFLY 3
They're monsters!

VP GREGORY
As frightening as this night is, with more children running around than usual and carrying sticks of sparkling light, it is the perfect opportunity to get Gina back. President Alaysia, do you wish to continue?

PRESIDENT ALAYSIA
Thank you, Mr. Gregory. This is our plan. When the first of the sparks in the sky ignite, the human's dog will get scared. He will run behind the older female human. We need to make sure that before the sparks go off, the dog is in the right place, so that when he gets up to find safety, he knocks over Gina's jar and she is able to escape.

FIREFLY 4
How do you expect us to control where this dog sits?

PRESIDENT ALAYSIA
In case you haven't noticed, the dog is attracted to and calmed by our light. We will congregate in an area just near Gina's jar. The dog will strut towards us, and sit. Lay down if we're lucky. He's old. He'll stay. He won't want to move too much. Now, let's get our Gina.

Mis Rizos



Chanel E. Suero

Tengo rizos pero luego no
Mi madre me dice que me arregle el pelo
Straight hair week after week
Rizos lentamente muriendo
Mis raíces dominicanas se desmoronan lentamente
Pretty straight hair
Blending in with the others
Mis raíces gritando para ser soltado
Water to straight hair leads to a curly explosion
An explosion of a thousand years hidden within my roots
Coconut oil, Cantu, honey and other aromas fill the room
Dominicana en mi sangre
"Girls wish for hair like yours"
"It's a mess straighten it"
¿Por qué no te gustan tus rizos?
I don't know
I simply don't know
Cada rizo cuenta una historia de mis ancestros
Cada golpe de la plancha de hierro disolviendo mi historia
Straight hair is supposed to be elegant
Es una trampa
Mis rizos enmarcan mi cara como una imagen perfecta
Cada rizo perfecto a su manera
mis rizos soy yo

Animal Handlers



Anastasia Ramsey

"Who would like to come solve this problem on the board?" Miss Steel raises her eyebrows over her pinched expression. She can't be older than thirty, but her stiff and cold manners make her seem much older.

"Um. I can." Suzie, who sits in front of me and often smells like cigarette smoke, raises her arm.

"Yes, Suzie. Come up here, please." Suzie limps to the front of the classroom, the snake that is usually wrapped around her ankle sinks its teeth into her soft, pink flesh above her dingy gray-white sock. Suzie winces.

"Suzie. Focus." We are all used to Suzie's focus problems. Miss Steel says she shouldn't use the snake as an excuse. Suzie holds the dry-erase marker in her hand and stares up at the board.

"Um." Suzie looks at Miss Steel, who is now staring down at Suzie with a warning face. Some of the other kids in class are looking at each other and pointing to the sock cuff that is turning red with Suzie's blood. The snake continues to squeeze her little ankle.

"Class, quiet! Quiet! I don't want to hear any more about the snake. Everyone has struggles in life. Suzie, if you worried more about your arithmetic and less about feeling sorry for yourself, you wouldn't even notice the snake. Maybe it would go away." Suzie looked down at the ground and walked to her seat. Miss Steel started talking about history and the kids got busy pulling out their history books.

"Why don't your parents get that thing off of you?" I whispered to Suzie's back. She shrugged without looking back. After a pause, she looked over her shoulder and whispered to me.

"They took me to a doctor once. He gave me a medicine to take to make it not hurt so much, but it made me feel funny."

"Oh." I didn't know what else to say. My dad says everyone in life has problems, but that doesn't mean we have to make them our problems. But all day, I couldn't stop thinking about Suzie's sock.

We have library today. The school librarian, Mrs. Saffer is the kindest adult I've ever met. I can tell by the face Miss Steel makes when we go to library that she doesn't like Mrs. Saffer. Mrs. Saffer talks a lot and is chubby and smiley, and she has a crow that sits on her shoulder. Sometimes the crow flaps its wings against Mrs. Saffer's cheek and caws, and that interrupts the story. She just smiles and apologizes and keeps on talking. A few times I have seen the crow peck Mrs. Saffer on the arm and it will take a piece of her skin out and blood will trickle down. Mrs. Saffer just says, "Sorry about that, friends. Mrs. Saffer is having a hard day today, but we won't let that get in the way of storytime." Then she keeps reading us *The BFG* or *Charlotte's Web* or even *Captain Underpants*. Miss Steel said that some books aren't appropriate for schools, and that she tried to have them banned. Mrs. Saffer said she doesn't believe in banning books. She believes in reading books that make kids excited to read. Miss Steel's face was even more pinched after that conversation.

When we get to the library, Mrs. Saffer is waiting for us by the door. She greets all of us by name. I take my place on the reading rug. Mrs. Saffer asks if anyone wants to share what they read over the weekend. Josh read a kids magazine about animals and science. I say I re-read *Matilda*. Zack says he read a Spider-Man comic again. He reads the same thing every weekend. The parrot on his shoulder squawks "Spider-Man! Spider-Man!" Mrs. Saffer high-fives him, and we sit down to read the BFG chapter about frob-scuttle. It always makes me laugh.

We are getting to the good part when I hear screaming in the hall.

I hear adults yelling, "Lockdown! Lockdown!" I hear loud *rooooooaaaaar* noises. I hear chains-



Anastasia Ramsey

rattling. An alarm sounds, ringing through the hallways.

I hear a boy screaming at the top of his lungs, "Help me! Why won't anyone help me?" I walk out into the hall to see a boy a few years older than me. On each of his wrists is a chained tiger.

The tigers are scratching at doors, causing wooden splinters to fly through the air. Something about the boy's eyes makes me uncomfortable. Something devilish, but he looks so scared. I look around the hall for an adult, but no one is around. Behind him, the doors of the school clang open and men dressed in all black with big guns run towards him, shouting something. Time slows down. The men shoot the boy in the back, and the pain leaves his face. The men congratulate each other, and some of the teachers come out into the hall and thank the men. But the tigers are still there. They are running free down the halls, dragging their chains behind them. Mrs. Saffer drags me back into the library, but it is too late. The tigers see me and they see the other kids, too. Zack's parrot is so loud, they get him first, then Suzie. Mrs. Saffer puts herself between us and the beasts, but she is only one hero, and we need more. Everything goes dark and the sounds of screaming fade.

A few weeks later, I am healed enough to go back to school. All the adults act like everything is back to normal.

There is a new boy in my class. He sits next to me. He has a little chain on his ankle, connected to the collar of a panther cub. When no one is looking, he pokes the other kids with his sharpened pencil. I should tell the teacher, but I am scared of him.

A Horse Standing Still



Nyla White

A horse standing still
in a field of hay is like
a frog washing near otters,
a babe paddling in streams,

A hatchling teetering
near the cliff of its twigs,
and a bee resting
in the thistle of a web.

What will it take for you to move?

Peaches



Ronnie Hom

1 INT. KITCHEN - DAY 1

POPPY JONES, 21, clothed in a waitress uniform and vibrant accessories, carefully and lovingly prepares ingredients to bake a peach pie.

Poppy picks up a slice of peach, eats it, and closes her eyes in bliss.

POPPY
He's gonna love it!

Poppy puts the remaining sliced peaches in a large bowl. She begins preparing a sugar mixture in a saucepan.

LILY JOHNSON, 21, Poppy's best friend, walks in with a bag of groceries.

LILY
Got the Peach Schnapps.

POPPY
Perfect, I'm just about ready for it!

Lily pours some Peach Schnapps into the saucepan.

Poppy adds the peaches to the mixture and pours the filling into the crust. A few finishing touches to the crust. She puts it into the oven.

LILY
So what do you have planned for tonight?

POPPY
We're surprising each other. He's taking me to a mystery restaurant for dinner, and I'm gonna take him to eat dessert under the stars.

LILY
That's so cheesy.

POPPY
Shut up, it's cute!

LILY
(smiling)
I never said it wasn't cute, I just said it was cheesy.

POPPY
I hope he loves it.

LILY
Of course he'll love it, he loves
you.

Poppy smiles.

A timer goes off. Poppy takes the peach pie out of the oven
and puts it in a nice box.

2 INT. BEDROOM - EVENING 2

Poppy gets ready for her date. She puts on a new dress and
decorates herself in accessories.

Lily helps Poppy do her hair and makeup.

POPPY
Thanks Lily, for helping make
everything perfect.

LILY
I hardly did anything.

POPPY
But you did! All this - you, Toby,
everything is just right.

Lily gives a few finishing touches on Poppy's makeup.

LILY
Well, I guess I can't argue that,
so I suppose you are welcome.

Lily cheesily bows. Her and Poppy giggle.

Poppy signs a CARD that reads HAPPY ANNIVERSARY and seals it
in an envelope with a kiss. She places the envelope on top of
the pie box and secures it with a red ribbon.

Poppy grabs the pie and her purse and heads out the door.

3 INT. DINING ROOM - EVENING 3

TOBIAS CHARLES, 22, Poppy's boyfriend, leads Poppy into his
dining room to reveal a HOME COOKED MEAL - fried chicken, mac
n' cheese, and sweet corn.

TOBIAS
Okay Peaches, open your eyes.

Poppy opens her eyes. A huge twinkling grin takes over her
face.

POPPY
You cooked for me?

TOBIAS
I can't promise this meal will be
anywhere near as tasty as anything
you make, but I thought that maybe
you'd like to have someone cook you
a meal for once.

Poppy looks at the meal, clutching her hands to her heart.

Poppy and Tobias sit down and start eating.

TOBIAS (CONT'D)
(cont'd)
So, how is it?

POPPY
It's wonderful, baby.

TOBIAS
(laughing at himself)
It's really bad, isn't it?

Tobias and Poppy giggle uncontrollably.

TOBIAS (CONT'D)
(cont'd)
I was trying to make a southern
style meal!

POPPY
Well baby, it's the greatest New
York style southern food I've ever
had, if that makes you feel any
better!

The two continue laughing and eating. Tobias stops and spits
out a piece of chicken.

TOBIAS
(smiling)
Alright Peaches, I know you must've
made something. Why don't we eat
that instead?

POPPY
Aww, are you sure?

Tobias nods.

Ronnie Hom

POPPY (CONT'D)
(cont'd)
Okay, well then follow me. We're gonna go on a little adventure.

Poppy leads Tobias out of the room.

4 INT. GARAGE - EVENING 4

The garage is illuminated with romantic lights. Poppy and Tobias sit on a picnic blanket on the floor, eating the peach pie.

POPPY
How is it?

TOBIAS
It's perfect. Everything's perfect.

A gentle kiss.

5 INT. BEDROOM - MORNING 5

Poppy lays in bed, sleeping. A phone rings. Poppy picks it up.

POPPY
Hello? This is she.

Poppy's face drops.

6 INT. DINER KITCHEN - DAY 6

Poppy walks into work, colorless and numb. Lily is already there, noticeably concerned.

LILY
Poppy, is everything alright? I missed you heading to work this morning.

Poppy is silent.

LILY (CONT'D)
(cont'd)
Poppy?

Still silence. Poppy walks out of the kitchen.

LILY (CONT'D)
Poppy!

Ronnie Hom

7 INT. DINER - DAY 7

Poppy takes an order from a REGULAR CUSTOMER.

REGULAR CUSTOMER
Hi Poppy, I'll have the hot cakes and a sweet tea.

Poppy writes the order down quietly.

POPPY
Will that be all?

REGULAR CUSTOMER
Yes. Everything alright Poppy? You don't seem yourself today.

POPPY
Hotcakes and a sweet tea comin' up.

Poppy puts on a half-hearted smile and walks away.

8 INT. DINER KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS 8

Poppy walks into the kitchen and hides in a corner, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath.

A PEACH sitting on a table nearby starts talking.

PEACH
You okay, Peaches?

Poppy jolts and opens her eyes. She looks around, finds no one.

PEACH (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
Peaches, you alright?

Poppy looks at the Peach.

POPPY
Toby? Am I hallucinating? Are you here with me? Please be here with me.

PEACH
I'm always here with you, I've always been here with you.

POPPY
Don't leave me baby.

PEACH
I haven't left you. I'm still right here.

Lily walks in.

LILY
Poppy? Table #3's order is ready.

Poppy ignores Lily.

A LOUD CRASH is heard from off screen, interrupting the silence.

A WAITRESS, frenzied, covered in a collage of condiments, busts the door open hastily. Lily snaps her head over to look at the waitress.

WAITRESS
Lily! Help!

Lily looks back for Poppy, but she's gone.

9 EXT. DINER - CONTINUOUS 9

Poppy walks outside, Peach in hand, with an equally determined and clueless path.

PEACH
Remember what I said to you the day we first met?

POPPY
You told me I reminded you of a song.

PEACH
And when you asked what song--

POPPY
You said you'd have to write it for me. And then you did the next day.

10 INT. DINER - DAY 10

The diner is empty except for Poppy, the Peach, and Tobias.

Poppy and the Peach watch Tobias, who sits in a booth strumming a guitar.

TOBIAS
(singing)
Poppy, Poppy, sweet as ice cream,
Poppy, Poppy, your eyes are a dream...

PEACH
It wasn't the greatest musical masterpiece ever made, but it made you smile.

POPPY
I'd never been serenaded before, it felt like I was in a movie.

Tobias reaches the end of the song.

TOBIAS
(singing)
Poppy, Poppy, will you go out with me?

POPPY
(chuckling)
Yes!

11 INT. RESTAURANT - EVENING 11

Poppy and the Peach sit at a table across from Tobias.

PEACH
You remember when we had our first date?

POPPY
April 23, 2018. How could I forget? You talked about how--

TOBIAS
(nervously)
It's Shakespeare's birthday today. And death date. Or, well, they're not entirely certain that today is his birthday but it's the day everyone chooses to recognize as his birthday.

POPPY
(to Peach, smiling)
It was so cute, the way you nervously talked and talked. I coulda kissed you right then!

Poppy and Tobias kiss.

POPPY (CONT'D)
(cont'd)
Why'd you have to leave me?

PEACH
It was out of my control.

POPPY
If you had just--

PEACH
If I had just what?

POPPY
I don't know.

PEACH
I think you do.

POPPY
I don't!

12 EXT. DINER - CONTINUOUS

12

Lily walks up to Poppy yelling at the Peach.

LILY
(apprehensively)
Poppy, I heard what happened.

Poppy doesn't break her gaze from the Peach.

LILY (CONT'D)
(cont'd)
Poppy, I know this is hard. But I'm
right here for you. Talk to me.
Please.

PEACH
Are you gonna go to my funeral?

POPPY JONES
No, I'm not letting go of you! You
weren't supposed to leave me!

Poppy runs away with the Peach.

13 INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

13

Poppy rushes into her room with the Peach, upset and
exhausted to the point that she falls asleep.

DREAM SEQUENCE

Poppy and the Peach are living together as a loving couple.

POPPY
Since you made me a southern style
meal for our last anniversary, I
thought I'd try and make you a New
York style meal for this one!

PEACH
And what'd you make, Peaches?

POPPY
Pizza!

Poppy reveals a homemade pizza.

PEACH
Marry me, Peaches.

Poppy gasps, shocked and ecstatic.

POPPY
Yes! Of course I'll marry you!

Poppy and the Peach are married.

Poppy and the Peach grow old together. The Peach slowly
becomes moldier over time.

END DREAM SEQUENCE

14 INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

14

Lily gently knocks on Poppy's bedroom door. Poppy doesn't
respond. Lily opens the door and walks in anyway.

LILY
Poppy, come to the funeral.

Silence. Poppy avoids eye contact with Lily.

LILY (CONT'D)

(cont'd)

For crying out loud, you can bring the damn peach if you need to! Just come. You need the closure, you can't just spend the rest of your life holed up in here.

PEACH

She's right. You need to let me go.

Poppy looks at the Peach. Then she looks at Lily.

15 INT. FUNERAL - DAY

15

Poppy brings the Peach to the funeral with her. She sits anxiously, trying to contain herself. Lily sits next to her.

The funeral starts. Poppy starts to get up to leave, but Lily stops her. She looks at the Peach for comfort.

The funeral approaches the end. MRS. CHARLES, 50s, finishes her speech.

MRS. CHARLES

(looking at Poppy)

And more than anyone, he loved Poppy Jones. And I know she gave him so much love back. Poppy, would you like to say anything before we wrap up?

Poppy reluctantly walks up to the podium, shaking, still holding the Peach. A pause, a deep breath.

POPPY

Toby is the greatest man I ever met. Since knowing him, I always dreamed of growing old with him. And now I can't. And I don't know what to do without him.

Poppy struggles to contain herself. She looks to the Peach.

POPPY (CONT'D)

(cont'd)

I don't know what to do without you!

16 INT. DINER - LATER

16

Poppy sits at a booth, Peach in hand. Lily gently approaches.

LILY

How are you holding up?

POPPY

I can't do this. I can't be without him. I don't know how to go on.

LILY

I know it's going to be hard, but you won't be alone. I'm right here.

POPPY

We were supposed to have more time. We were supposed to have a life together. Now there's just nothing.

LILY

You don't have nothing. You have a life with me.

Poppy looks at Lily.

POPPY

What?

LILY

Remember our plan?

POPPY

We were gonna have a diner of our own someday, you, me, and Toby.

LILY

Don't you think he'd want us to still have that?

Poppy looks back at the Peach.

POPPY

He would.

LILY

Move in with me. Let's make that life together. For Toby. For me.

17 INT. DINER KITCHEN - EVENING

17

Poppy and Lily bake a peach pie.

You and Me



Brandon Lima

Remember yesterday when I took you to the moon?
Why don't we go back today?
Or wherever you'd like
Whenever you're there it feels like home
I know tomorrow you'll be busy and I'll be alone
But we still have time for tonight
I've stumbled my way through the darkness
But found you, my match and my light

My Tower



Nicole D. MacGregor

Fear is unpredictable, overwhelming, and paralyzing. One of the best feelings in the world is overcoming one's fear and learning that there was nothing to worry about in the first place. Fear can come in many sizes, like a child that's scared of the dark or even an elephant afraid of a mouse. Well, the object of my fear wasn't so tiny.

A small medieval-styled town on the outskirts of Tuscany housed "Torre Grossa" in San Gimignano, Italy. While walking into Piazza Luigi I was blown away by the architecture and stone walkways; that was until my eyes climbed up a gorgeous limestone tower that overlooked the town and nearby fields a chilling presence captivated my attention. Immediately I was set on going to the top of this tower.

The shadow cast by the fortress acted as an arrow that led me to the entrance. I couldn't make any sense of why I wanted to commence on this journey, but I was determined. As I walked into the entrance with extreme pride, I figured my aunt was right behind me. That was until I turn around and she was sitting on a bench, I yelled, "Aren't you coming?"

She responded simply, "Hell no!"

So, I started on my merry way. Looking upward from the bottom of a seemingly never-ending loop shook my nerves, especially due to the chipping and inconsistency of the original staircase. I took a step forward, but was taken aback by big, red, bold writing on a sign that I was going to ignore which said, "Warning." Under the warning, it stated that there were four-hundred and twenty-seven stairs to get to the top. I shrugged and began climbing.

About a third of the way up I noticed a projector looping a ten-second video down the middle of the stairwell that started off with "Medieval Vertigo" and I thought to myself, "Wow yeah, this place is pretty medieval but what's vertigo? Oh yeah that was a great movie, but why is this vertigo?" My question was answered as soon as I looked down. I backed into the corner away from the railing having a full-blown panic attack. I was surrounded by stairs and stone, there wasn't anything else to ground me. I tried to calm myself down, but the fear wouldn't leave. My legs were shaking, I felt dizzy, and my chest tightened. In and out, in and out is all I could say to myself because my brain wouldn't allow me to move. Eventually, the metered breathing worked; through tears, I slowly lifted my legs and continued up the stairs. I knew that I couldn't look down again and tried to think about the destination of this adventure. I calmed down and only freaked out a little bit when the stairs changed to metal ones with slits that let you see straight through to the bottom. There really weren't a lot of options of where to look at this point but I trudged on.

Finally, I reached the last level of stairs before arriving at the top platform. There was a huge step ladder with a worker standing next to it, he asked me, "Ma'am are you okay?"

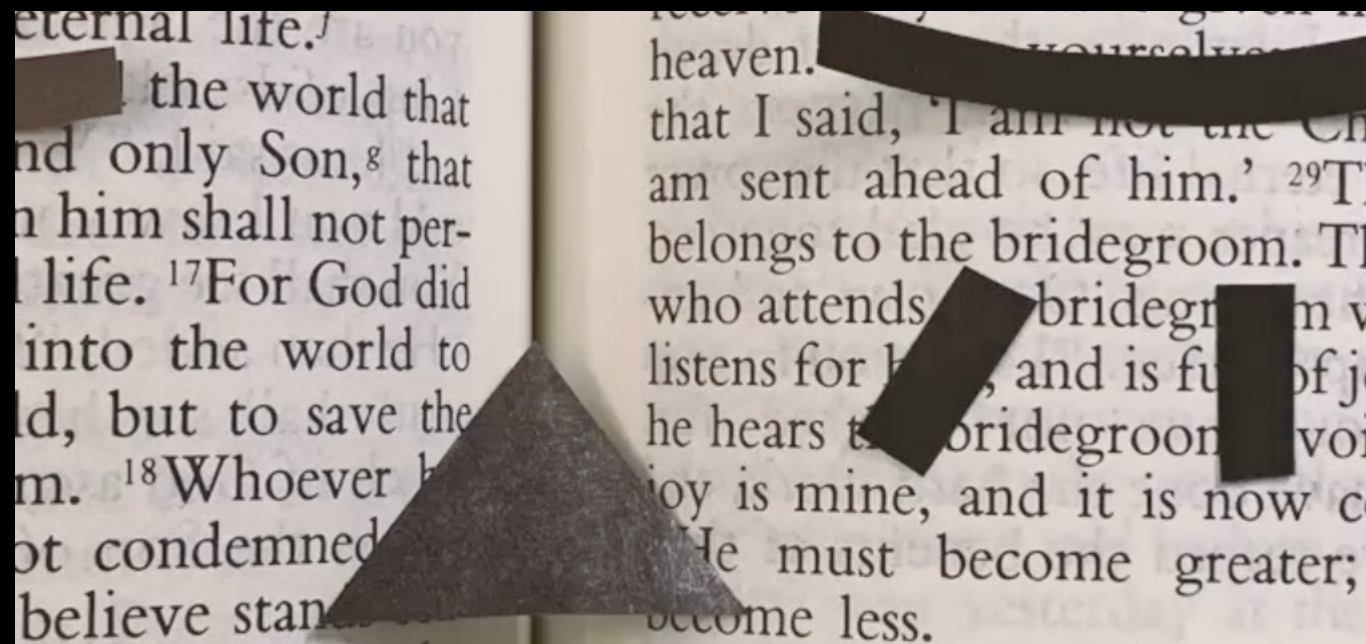
Through my red and puffy face, I let out an extremely meek, "Yup." He moved over so I could climb up and of course, this entire time I was wearing flip-flops. While climbing the ladder I could feel one flip-flop slipping off. After all this work I wasn't about to turn into Cinderella, so I slowly reached down, grabbed both shoes, held them tightly in my hands, and continued.

I discovered why I felt so compelled to put myself through this torture when I took in the breathtaking view that was waiting for me at the top. The air was so clean with beautiful blue skies and the clearest view of the town and surrounding countryside. This time when I cried, I had a smile on my face. The view which will forever have a home in my memory will remind me of a difficult journey that I was able to work through to achieve my goal. I took millions of pictures and enjoyed my time up there; until I realized what goes up, must come down.

WaterDrops



Sophia Kim



It's a video. Click the link to watch!

Septembers



Camille Chomiczewski

Four years after.

"I made a friend today."

"You did?" She put all the excitement she could produce into the words, like an exclamation, question, and wonderful statement, all at once. "What's this new friend's name?"

"Jackson," he said, "and he likes dinos."

"Is that right?" Again her words formed an exclamation, question, and wonderful statement. All at once. All for him. She bounced his *Thomas & Friends* backpack further up her shoulder and thought. "So did you and Jackson play dinos together in the classroom?"

"No, we played with the farm because that's what they have there. It has a tractor, a horse, two cows, a chicken, some carrots, a sheep."

She watched him count on his fingers, on the hand not tucked in hers. In the high sun, the top of his little head glimmered, the strands and pattern of his hair changing with every skip he did on the sidewalk. It was a narrow sidewalk, crooked and littered with cracks and divots that he used to stumble on. Now he was older, and she needed only to watch for ruts at the end of driveways and the cars inching out of them. There were common dangers with a child, but even more so with hers, for he often didn't look where he was going. It would take some more time for him to learn.

Tighter she held his hand.

"Sounds like you had fun today."

"Yeah." He swung his arm back and forth in hers, to the rhythm of invisible robins chattering across the block.

At the end of the sidewalk their house greeted them. It was a small, shapeless thing, but it wore a nice-looking front porch on its hips and stood proudly facing the train tracks, which the two of them liked to watch when the crossing bell sounded.

"Mommy?" He looked at the rail sign, humming something familiar.

"Yes, Gio."

"I want hot dogs for lunch."

She laughed and gave his hand a tug. "You know what? I want that, too."

September twentieth.

"I want an abortion."

She said it plainly, glaring at her parents with red, wet eyes.

Her mother looked at her with a fullness and an emptiness she had never seen before. "Can we talk about it first?"

Mandala Teaház

Editor's Choice for Poetry

Bailey Dunn

bocsánat, allergias vagyok levendulára

ghosts wrapped in
lavender leaves
and bourbon smoke

sneak in my nostrils
drag down my throat
zöld haze smothers

elnézést, méz? köszönöm

crushed fekete and
I sip and I sip and I
clutch no-handled

ceramic, tongue still
can't shape the sound
but I can taste it

bocsánat, beszélek nagyon kicsit magyarul

Population Structures of the Endangered Armored Snail: Examining the Collapse of a Species

Editor's Choice for Fiction

Evelyn Moulton

My Uncle Eddie loved apocalypse movies. He raised me on them, and let me stay up past my bedtime on Friday nights so we could watch one. It affected our lifestyle; there were times when I feared Uncle Eddie couldn't draw the line between his movies and our lives. He kept cans of beans and corn, and boxes of bullets in his basement and slept in his recliner with his rifle leaning against the arm. Our house, nestled in quiet suburbs, was surrounded by a barbed wire fence, and he had written plans to dig a moat that the HOA kept denying. When I'd call him a crackpot, he'd say, "Oh, January. Jannie, Jannie, Jannie. Would you rather be the stupid bastard who was prepared or the stupid bastard who dies? The world's gotta end someday."

He died three years before the asteroid came, and despite still thinking he was a crackpot, I took his beans and bullets when I moved out and settled in the cramped fourth bedroom (that was more of a closet and less of a bedroom) on the twelfth floor of a New York apartment. I didn't sleep with a gun or worry about the world ending, I was just prepared. But when they named it Nephele, I became the crackpot. Uncle Eddie was right: the world had to end someday, and I was the stupid bastard who was prepared.

We were put on lockdown. Anyone caught leaving their apartment would be arrested, and the last place you'd want to be during an apocalypse was a jail cell in the strike zone. They cut off the internet and the phone lines; all we were left with was cable, where they only ran the lottery announcements of who the National Guard would take out of the city the next day. The once-crowded apartment was soon emptied. Minnie left first, though she didn't really leave as much as she didn't come back. She flew out to see her mother in Indiana the week before day 82 and promptly canceled her flight back. She called to tell us and let me take over her room, which was the biggest. Miller's girlfriend, Nadia, worked for some tech startup. Her boss was close with someone in the government, and got all of his employees early tickets out; she was gone on day 79. Miller wasn't taking it well, but he still had Rhodes. Then Rhodes got lucky and was picked on day 53. We didn't know it would be one of the last buses out. He didn't say goodbye, and I think it was because he couldn't face Miller.

Rhodes and Miller had been best friends since elementary school, when they empirically agreed to go by their last names after their teacher said having two Max's would be confusing. "Well, you can go by Max now," was the first thing said between us two days after Rhodes left the apartment. Miller locked his door and didn't talk to me for three days after that. I could hear him crying through the walls at night. He tried to cover up the noise with his music, but then it was just him crying mixed with jazz and Barry Manilow. Sometimes he'd call out Nadia's name like a hurt animal howling in the woods. I was barely getting any sleep. If I had to choose between dying from a broken heart or by an asteroid, the choice wouldn't be hard.

On day 47, our few neighbors that were left were leaning out their windows and singing songs, trying to reach out to a community that had been lost. Then on day 46, the other people left behind were-



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shot.

So, on day 46, we reconciled with the fact that we were left behind, and agreed to be civil. We never got along too well in the three years before the 82 days. He was loudmouthed and brutish. He'd smoke cigarettes indoors even when Minnie would chase him around with a bottle of her sugary perfume, yelling about secondhand smoke and our security deposit. Once he came home wasted and threw up in the kitchen sink all over the chicken I was defrosting. Every Sunday during football season, he and Rhodes would invite their shitbird friends over to spill beer on the floor and yell all night. And I was the weird girl who kept a gun and cans of food under her bed. I was also—using the language of the shitbirds—a bitch. Partly because one Sunday night, they refused to shut up when I was trying to prepare for my thesis presentation the next day. So, I shut off the circuit breaker. But mostly, I was a bitch because they were shitbirds, and those types of people rarely get along. And the end of the world wasn't doing much to help that. But we only had each other, and I was the one with the cans. He had to be nice to me. And he had the radio scanner that could pick up on chatter from the Guard. I had to be nice to him.

"You listen to a lot of Barry Manilow for someone under the age of fifty."

"We agreed to get along five fucking minutes ago and you're already being an ass."

Even though all of the windows were closed, Miller lit a cigarette and laid down on the couch with his eyes closed.

"Would you rather die from lung cancer or an asteroid?"

"I'm not worried about fucking cancer anymore."

"So, asteroid?"

Miller took a drag, and I took that as a yes.

"You cry a lot."

Miller didn't open his eyes, but it still felt like he was glaring at me. "The world is ending. Everyone I love is going to die, and instead of being with them, I'm stuck in this fucking city with bean girl."

"Bean girl?"

"How are you *not* crying? Can you feel things, or were you not programmed to do that?"

Uncle Eddie said to never be the one panicking because it meant you were on the wrong end of the barrel. Nephele was going to kill us, and it was going to kill everyone that ran, too. We were getting the best end of the deal. I could spend every night crying and feeling sorry for myself, or I could be pragmatic. I accepted my death.

"Don't call me Bean girl, jackass."

Day 40 was the first time I ever made Miller laugh.

"Five dollars says I can break that window." I showed him the rock with Proverbs 17:17 painted on it that I found in Minnie's room and pointed across the street to an abandoned apartment building. A fire went through it on day 55 and anyone still in it had to leave.

"The fuck do I need five bucks for?"

"Okay, if I break the window, you have to play rummy with me."

"And if you miss, you'll stop asking me to play rummy with you?"

"Fair deal."

"No, I'm just asking."

"Asteroid. I think I'd rather be ash than mush."

"Yeah, me too. Throw the rock, I'm getting bored."

What Miller didn't know was that I'd played softball for seven years growing up. Uncle Eddie al-



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ways said never to make bets you could lose, and that taking a risk was for circus clowns and politicians. He used to go to the bar to hustle the high schoolers that would sneak in, and bet them a hundred on a game of pool. He was sixty-five in a wheelchair kept together by duct tape, and he'd wear sunglasses inside because of his cataracts. But he waited until after he won to tell them that, for two decades, he'd played competitively, and one of those decades was played in that chair. He bought my first prom dress with just one night's worth of going to the bar.

The window wasn't too far, about sixty feet away. I wound up my arm the best I could. "Hope you're ready to lose at rummy." And I threw it. It went well over sixty feet, only it went sixty feet down instead of across, and I watched as the little pink proverb rock plummeted directly down onto our sidewalk. Miller laughed so hard he was doubled over and coughing. I slid onto the floor and pouted, and he grabbed the deck of cards, and while he pitied me he didn't pity me enough to let me win at rummy.

We lost electricity on day 38. Our stove was gas, so we could still cook, but our air conditioning was electric, and it was the middle of a very hot July. We had enough windows to see during the day and stocked up on some candles when raiding the empty apartments in the building. The apartment started filling with a confusing array of scents. Scents like jasmine, birthday cake, and "Midnight Moon," which smelled mostly like wet linen, all mixed with the overwhelming smell of the decaying city. Summer rain, lemon verbena, and cotton was the best combination we discovered.

We were in front of the open window, two big fans on either side of us, sitting in hard plastic beach chairs eating canned peaches when the air conditioner gave out.

"No, no, no!" Miller reached for the fan by him, desperately flicking the switch on and off again to try and get it to work. It had to have been over ninety degrees that day. "Would you rather die from heatstroke or an asteroid?"

"Asteroid. But we might die from heatstroke anyway."

Miller stuck his head out of the window like a doctor coming into the exam room, cautiously peeking around. Even on the twelfth floor, there was barely a breeze.

"Do you miss Nadia?"

Miller turned back around. "Yeah."

"And Rhodes?"

"Yeah. Of course I miss my girlfriend and my best friend. Those are weird fucking questions, January. Don't you miss people?"

"I don't really have people to miss. My parents died when I was a kid, and my uncle that raised me died before I moved here. I don't really have any friends, I worked from home and I never went out. I mean, you're one of the only people I know."

"January..." Miller shook his head. I never really cared before Nephele that I was alone, in fact, I preferred it. I chose to isolate myself, and maybe it was to avoid being hurt. Maybe it was because I was an asshole. The reason for having no one never really mattered to me until I realized that I had no one to miss.

"Don't get all soft and fucking sorry for me, Miller. It's gross."

"I'm not. You're fucking weird, of course you didn't have any friends then."

I threw my empty can at Miller, and he threw his empty can at me. It was nice to have someone.

On day 30, Miller asked why we didn't kill ourselves, and I laughed.
"I'm serious; what's the point? We're not getting out of here. The Guard hasn't sent out a truck in weeks. What's the point?"
"Do you want me to shoot you?"
"Fuck, January, no."
"Well, there's a reason why."
"There are other ways to kill yourself."
"Yeah. Like waiting 30 days for an asteroid. Which would you rather do?"
Miller briefly thought about it, then shrugged and lit a cigarette. That was his way of agreeing.

On day 25, we found a rat. The building was probably overrun by then; I think we were the only ones left. But I guess the rats were trying to run out of New York too. Uncle Eddie used to take me hunting, so my problem wasn't with not knowing how to kill a rat. The problem was when Uncle Eddie made me shoot a deer, I hit it right between the eyes and threw up.

Miller didn't have the stomach for it, either. That morning when I walked into the living room, he was standing on the dining room table clutching the broom and squealing. "Rat." It was the only word he could say. "Rat, rat, rat."

"What are you gonna do with the broom? Hit it like a hockey puck?"

"Nudge it! I was gonna nudge it!"

I climbed on top of the table with Miller and observed the rat scuttling around our kitchen. It bumped against the cabinets, trying to open them with its little pink hands.

"What if we make peace with it? Like, offer it something so it'll leave us alone."

"It's a rat, not a diplomat."

"What's your idea, then?"

I pulled my gun from the waistband of my jeans and aimed it.

"You can't shoot it!"

"What else are we gonna do?"

"If you shoot it, it'll probably explode."

"That's not how shooting things works."

"It'll still be disgusting, and we'll have rat blood all over the kitchen."

"If you keep talking, I won't shoot the rat, but I will shoot you."

"Fuck off."

"I'm shooting it."

I shot it. Miller and I both screamed, and I climbed off the table to throw up out the window. Miller came over to awkwardly pat my back.

We covered the rat with a shoebox and slipped a manilla envelope beneath it to flip its body into the shoebox. We put the shoebox in a deep stainless steel pot we got next door and took the pot that held the shoebox that held the rat up to the roof and set it on fire. It was Miller's idea: "Viking funeral. Coolest way to go out."

Miller shrugged and lit a cigarette.

On day 19, Miller ran out of cigarettes. He had a carton of Marlboro Reds in his room, one of the only essential items he bought on day 82. He took whatever we found in other apartments; for a few days, he was using loose tobacco and pages from one of Minnie's bibles. He spent a few hours curled up on the couch, punching a pillow.

"I'm gonna be an asshole."

"Gonna be? What were you before?"

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you, too."

"I have something to show you."

I went to my room and came back with something wrapped up in a green knit scarf. Miller was confused but unfolded it to reveal an unopened pack of Virginia Slims and a jazz CD. "I don't smoke, but I found all that stuff going through the apartments. I figured you would run yourself out at some point."

"January—"

"Please don't be weird about it, Miller."

"Can you be a person? For a minute?"

I was about to protest but chose not to. I gave him a minute.

"I'm glad I'm spending the end of the world with you."

"Don't be nice to me just because I gave you something."

"I'm not, I swear. I just... It's nice to have someone."

On day 14, I came to the conclusion that I liked Miller. I don't know if I would under different circumstances. If Nephele had never existed, I probably would've moved out that summer. I would've met up with Minnie and Nadia for coffee once a month, they'd tell me some annoying things about Miller and Rhodes, and I'd roll my eyes and be glad that I didn't have to live with them anymore. Maybe I'd lose that tether to him, maybe I would've left New York and wouldn't think of Miller again until I was 40 and mused to my children about my youth.

Someone set a car on the corner on fire on day 7. There was only a week left, and whoever was left in the city. Miller had shut the radio off on day 10—the Guard had abandoned New York. Religious groups were competing for who could cram the airways with the most propaganda. Every channel-wa-either advertising the now \$100,000 rides to freedom or 24-hour prayers. We found a bottle of red-



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on the ninth floor and climbed out on the fire escape to watch the flames.

“Do you think it’ll spread?” I asked.

“Would you rather die by fire or by asteroid?”

“Asteroid. Quicker.”

We were drinking from the bottle and didn’t have glasses to cheers with, so we bumped our fists together. The fire was clawing up at the sky, begging to spread. And then it started to rain. Not a drizzle, but torrential, act-of-god rain. It suffocated the fire and soaked our clothes, and we toppled back inside through the window, slipping on the ground and giggling.



Day 5 was when I felt it. It was strange.

When they first announced that Nephele was going to hit us, I felt fear. The things you’d expect to feel when hearing the end of the world was coming. But it quickly turned into survival. An innate animalistic need to live through it, despite knowing the end. If the world was going to end, I was going to see it.

When it was only 5 days away, that’s when the fear came back. I loved Max. Not a raw, romantic love or anything close to it, and not as a friend, either. It was an undiscovered kind of love: the love you have for someone you’re spending the end of the world with. It was hard to think of something to compare it to.

Four summers before Nephele, I went to the Grand Canyon. I stood at the edge of a rock and stared into it and felt the smallest I’ve ever felt. A few feet to my left was someone else doing the same thing. They felt me staring and turned to me and said, “It makes you feel so small, doesn’t it?” And I said yes, and we both smiled the way you do at a stranger, then turned back to look into the canyon and feel small. That was how I loved Max. He was just a few feet to the left of me.



On day 3, we got drunk. We went through almost every bottle we had left. Vodka, beer, sangria, and some pre-mixed drink that was so violently blue it looked like glass cleaner. We listened to all of Max’s CDs and danced through the apartment. I don’t remember much past the dancing. We woke up on the kitchen floor. Max threw up in the sink, but it didn’t matter.



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It was the last day before the end of the world. We woke up late and shared a cup of coffee. We took blankets and pillows and brought them up to the roof. You could see Nephele like it was a second, smaller sun. It was like taking a lighter to thin paper; it was burning a hole in the sky. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yeah.”

Max had saved two cigarettes, one for each of us. I never liked smoking, and I was afraid of cancer. We lit them and sat in silence.

When the sun started to set, Nephele grew. The sky was red, with a burning white hole. Max and I held hands. We were small.

waning gibbous: the embrace



Emily Paluba

you understand now, how it feels, my little venus.
the way the first color you ever recognized travels
from your hips to your throat in that moment,
welling in your prickled chin, spiraling into the corners
of your cheeks, demanding to be spoken
through those lips i love. the ones i like here,
and beg for here, the ones i've missed like pine trees
miss their needles. you, my horseshoe, golden above
every threshold i've ever crossed, know what it's like
to scream for silver, and i held you until the pink-orange
sobs stopped, until you grieved for everything all at once,
until you felt gratitude like snowy mountaintops,
my trail-arms your necklace, a clinging monkey-love.
i told you i'd cry with you, i told you, my little cup of cocoa.

Bird of Red



Tyler Ventura

His flush is that of the blood shed in his place,
Yet the true battlefield lies in his nest

His name, the very sin he commits,
Yet forgiveness is the nestling's nature

His bright feathers flaunted to entice,
Yet humbleness is but a suggestion

His cry, a perpetual warning,
Yet all but their own are predators

His streak of facial shadow, prestigious,
Yet it now serves to contrast his tone

How ironic, I pray
For the clipping of wings

Wedding Bells

Christy Rolling

Natalia taps her brush against the side of the cup. Loose gray droplets slide back into the ink wash. A small, leather-bound notebook sits at the corner of her giant mahogany desk. Satie's low notes ripple from the spiraling record player across the room. Her old power suits, stained with blood, line the perimeter of the dark office, displayed in tall glass cases. Mementos. She polishes them herself every evening, twenty minutes on each.

The black doors swing open. Vittoria is loud as she crosses the office, sparkling black heels flashing. She stops at the desk and drops a giant fruit basket on it, overflowing with grapes and jasmine and lavender, cradled on a bed of ivy. It spills over the wicker edges.

A grape snaps off and hits Natalia's painting. Ink splatters. The smear is ghastly.

"Oops." Vittoria takes the grape and pops it into her mouth. "Sorry, Nat."

Natalia studies her ruined painting. It's salvageable yet. "Get that thing off my desk."

"It's from Elios. He says he can't wait."

"Of course he can't. I'm not hungry."

Vittoria rolls her eyes and shoves it off in one fell crash. Then she leans over the desk, planting her palms wide. Her hair is already styled in Tahitian pearls and curls, and her mother's bridal necklace is draped on her neck. Her smile is saccharine, identical to the one she gave Elios the night they met.

"Don't come."

"Out of the question."

"Nat. I can handle him."

Natalia's hand remains rock-steady on her brush, the lines of ink long and elegant. The grayscale mountainscape on the thick paper is high enough to reach the sun.

Vittoria continues in the silence. "He'd never get his hands dirty."

"He's below you."

Vittoria preens a little. "I know."

"That's enough of an incentive for him. He's bankrupt. Desperate." Natalia hesitates. But it's the wedding. Now or never. "Don't go through with this. Not this time. He will take your money and leave you destitute."

"It'll be the other way around." Vittoria leans closer, the onyx pearls around her neck dangling. "And—since you *insist* on coming—I promise you'll enjoy watching every second of it."

The wedding is a painted dream, worth millions. But there are no guests; the manor is empty, by request of her brand new husband-to-be. He'd declared it to be more romantic.

He especially hadn't wanted Natalia there, requesting her absence repeatedly. Luckily, Vittoria's sense hadn't waned so much that she outwardly agreed with him. Presenting a united front is crucial.

And now, with just him and the organist and the officiant and all the space in the cavernous hall, Elios gives her a strained version of his famous winning smile. Natalia doesn't bother giving one in return. The front row was open; why shouldn't she take it?

Purple drapes line every glistening window, hundreds of lights are strung across the ceiling, and a sickening amount of flowers cover every square inch of the venue.



Christy Rolling

The white doors burst open. The organ blares.

Vittoria is a vision, in the flouncy wide ivory dress that she's been prattling about since they were kids. She takes long strides down the center aisle, outpacing the music, looking straight at Elios as she bounces past Natalia. The organ speeds up to accommodate her.

Natalia watches as he lifts her veil and appears starstruck.

The officiant says the traditional words, reading straight from a worn booklet. Natalia favors watching Elios instead of listening to the words she's heard hundreds of times before, waiting for a slip-up or a familiar tell. When this one lies, his fingertips twitch at his sides and his face reddens. But he holds himself well, with perfect posture and his attention squared on his grinning bride.

The two exchange rings. He puts the shimmering circle of pure gold around Vittoria's slim finger. In turn, she puts on a heavy black one. He reads her a poem. She sings him a song. Unity candles, tying a knot, and a time capsule.

An hour passes. The clock ticks in her mind like a steady hammer.

Finally, the officiant snaps his booklet shut. "You may kiss the bride."

Natalia almost doesn't see it. Elios shifts his weight the slightest inch and the hint of silver catches the glittering light from above. She's on her feet, going for her own concealed knife but it's too late.

With the kiss, he plunges his knife into Vittoria's stomach and she wheezes, caving forward.

Natalia jumps the stairs and yanks him away by his shoulder, shoving him to the ground and hacking him again, and again. Distantly, she hears the officiant run and Vittoria's screaming.

The blood runs down her own hands like ink, slick and glistening in the lights. Elios is nothing more than flesh hanging on bones now. His remaining eye is glazed.

Finally, she sits back and wipes his blood on her stained pants, ruining the suit further for its glass case.

Vittoria stands behind her, dismayed, holding a ripped piece of her dress to her stomach. It's not bleeding nearly as much as it should. Protective padding, Natalia realizes.

"I told you I had it."

"He stabbed you. You had nothing."

Vittoria's chin raises. Ever regal, despite the blood slipping over her clutching fingers. "His fortune belongs to me. Cross him off the list."

Natalia tugs her small leather notebook from her inner jacket pocket. Old blood stains cover each page, lighter and lighter the further she turns. Finally, she lands on his name. Vittoria hands her a pen. She crosses off *Elios Rossi*.

Vittoria crouches next to her, shoving what's left of Elios out of the way with her free hand. "Who's next?"

Natalia turns the page.

bear trap around my heart



Emily Paluba

to clamp is to begin, and I have
a list of beginnings. ridges of
too far and almost, somewhere
between wonder and shame. a bear
trap around my heart, beautiful
in design like all things made out
of fear, made in case of emergency,
pretty to the eye, but not the limb,
the darkest part of the pupil, like
the inside of the moon. ridges
of we-should-all-look-away but don't
look away, lift out the metal
in me even if the sound of branches
cracking scares you.

Watch Out! Those Sharks Can Smell Blood.



Fiona Nuredini

They know.

They can see the rot poking through the corners.

The decay on my tooth. Once white, lily, fresh grown.
Now yellow, rotten. Smoking and coffee and coffee and smoking.

Look at how you stand. Head falling over your shoulders.
Shoulders squeezed together. Hunching over yourself
like you can't handle all the weight.

Is it written on my forehead?
That my father doesn't know me?

Shit. Sorry. I'm so sorry.
I'm bleeding all over your floor.

Still young, I've wrinkled.
Everything is asymmetrical;
and only worsening.

You wear your heart on your sleeve,
So I've been told.

This is a bad thing. I know that now.

My spine is crushing over itself.
Hold yourself up! C'mon.
Try harder!

My god. You snail.

You drag your burdens behind you
like a trail of icky, pitiful slime.

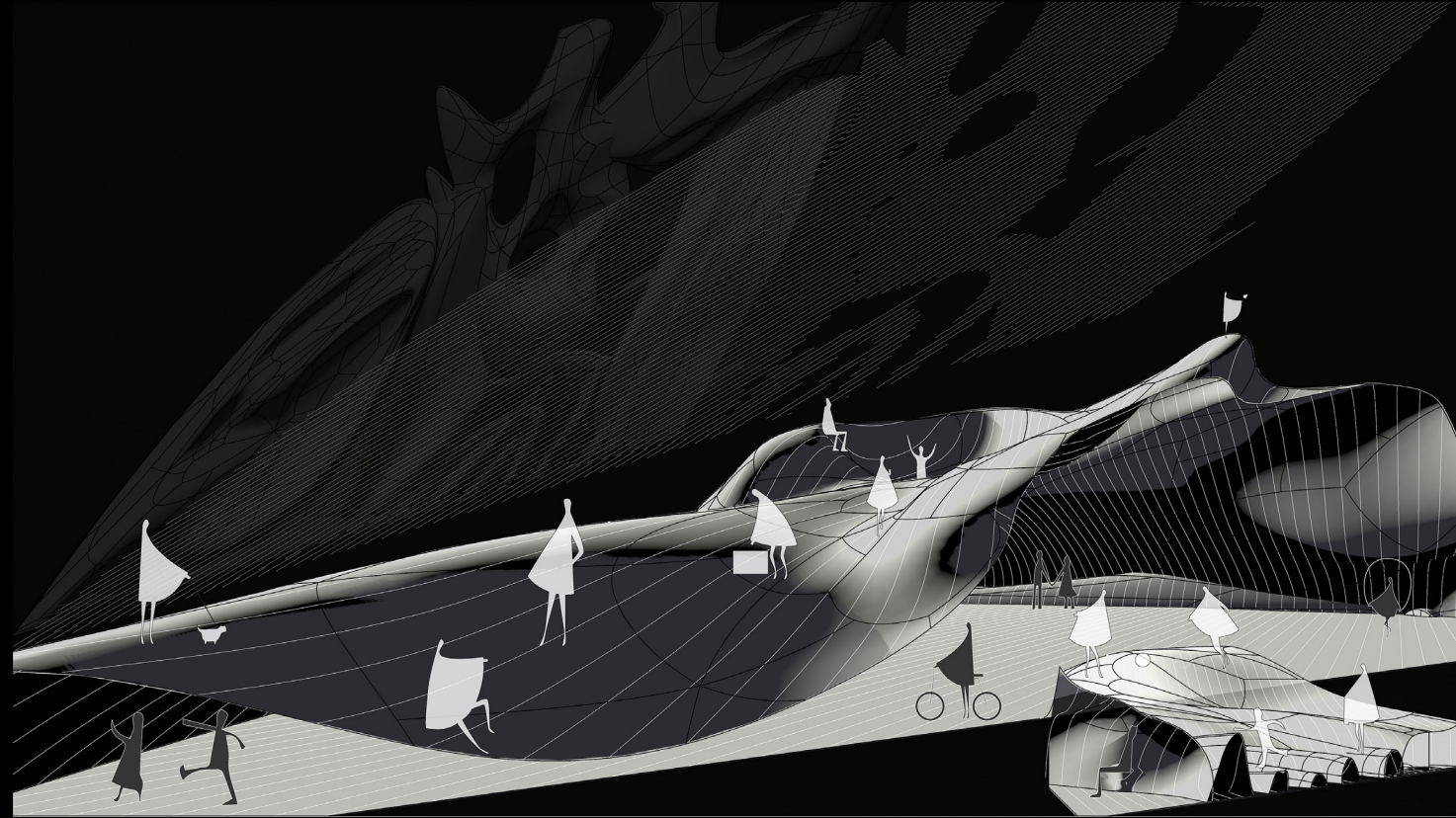
They can see it now.

They all know.

Fairies in the night



Saori Takahashi



Smokin' In Unfamiliar Territory



Brandon Lima

The man lights up his cigarette
It's not his brand
Unfamiliar territory, an unfamiliar land
The smoke in his mouth tastes strange
He yearns...the familiar exchange
But beggars can't be choosers
so the man lights another
Another fix for the users

What's For Dinner?

Briana Tolbert-Fitzgerald

"I have somebody I want you to meet, sweetheart," Alyson's father said at the holiday party they hosted every year. Being towed behind the small man was a much taller guy around her age with a dark blue-black beard and piercing blue eyes. "This is Greg Bleu's son, Gorman," her father continued. He beamed excitedly and seemed to push Gorman right at his daughter. She shrank back a little, and her breath caught in her throat.

"It's nice to meet you," Gorman said. To Alyson, it sounded like a distressed, croaking frog was stuck in his throat. And his hair was so *dark*. She was sure a color like that didn't even come in a box of hair dye from the drugstore. His eyes startled her and seemed to never wander anywhere except her own.

She hadn't noticed that Gorman had stuck his hand out. She shook it, saying, "You, too. I'm Alyson." She didn't think it was a pleasure to meet him at all, and his hand was damp. Before she could pull it away, he put his other hand over hers and started to lead her away to the fireplace. Something stopped her from protesting, and she followed along.

While his beautiful daughter and his boss' son made small talk, Alyson's father Timothy watched from the other side of the room. He felt guilty for shoving the creep at her, but he had no choice. Greg Bleu was a powerful man, and the only way he'd keep Timothy's financial issues a secret was if he managed to marry off his unlikeable son. Since Gorman was a thirty-five-year-old wealthy business owner, he'd have all the money to save Timothy's house before the bank took it, and he'd be able to keep up appearances by hosting all the lavish parties he wanted.

By the fireplace, Gorman pulled Alyson into a dizzying conversation in which he mostly talked about himself. Alyson fiddled with a loose string on her dress but was brought out of her silent trance when Gorman asked her a question that shocked her.

"You want to do what?" she asked a little too loudly. A few of the neighbors in the room turned to look at her. She dropped her voice. "Did you just ask me to marry you?"

"I did," Gorman answered. "We just met, but all this talking makes me realize how much we get along. You're so beautiful, and our fathers know each other. It all works out. So, why not?"

Before Alyson could utter a reply, Gorman interrupted her.

"Aren't you almost thirty?" he asked. Alyson nodded. "Time is ticking, huh?" He chuckled, and it made Alyson's skin crawl. Usually, she'd have a witty remark in response to something like that, but something seemed to stop her from speaking. "Don't you want a husband? Don't you want kids? I'm sure it'd make your dad so happy to have grandchildren running around here. And don't you want money?"

A husband would be all right, Alyson thought.

I guess I want kids. Maybe just two.

Money? This word echoed in her mind. Yes, I want money.

It all seemed logical to her. Suddenly, Gorman didn't seem all that gross. Maybe she could learn to like his voice. She'd have to think of a nickname for him. Who would name their child that? And his blue beard against his stark white skin didn't seem to scare her all that much anymore. She was warming up to his eyes, but they reminded her of raging ocean waves. You could get lost, but not in a romantic way.

"Sure," Alyson said automatically. "I'll marry you."



Briana Tolbert-Fitzgerald



While Timothy seemed ecstatic and hadn't wanted his daughter's help with any of the wedding planning, Alyson had a pit in her stomach every day that didn't go away until she fell asleep at night. She would be married to Gorman in one more day. She never questioned her father about why the wedding had to be within a week. She felt it would be ungrateful after he had matched her up with such an ambitious, rich man.

She met with Gorman that snowy Friday afternoon at a coffee shop where they talked about planning their honeymoon. After Gorman happily went with Alyson's choice of Paris, he said, "We're engaged, and you haven't even been to my house yet."

I mean, it's only been less than a week, Alyson thought, but any words of her choosing refused to come out.

"Yeah," she said involuntarily. "I'll come over."

"How about tonight?" Gorman asked. A hungry glint shone in his deep blue eyes that scared Alyson. She hoped he wouldn't expect any favors when she came over. They agreed that Alyson would come over at seven for dinner.

"And don't forget," Gorman added, "I live with my grandmother. She's getting really old and doesn't make sense all the time, but I want you to meet her before..." Alyson nodded and smiled.

"That sounds lovely," she answered.

Lovely? When would I ever say a thing like that?



That night, Alyson drove to the address that Gorman had given her. It was almost an hour's drive on the black, icy road. Something in the back of her mind seemed to tell her to turn back. She ignored it. When she arrived, she noticed that the house was a mansion set back in the snowy, white woods with a winding, perfectly plowed driveway. When she parked, Gorman came out to greet her and let her in. All the windows in the house were dark except one on the first floor which was illuminated with white light.

Gorman led his fiancée down a long hallway to the left and they entered the kitchen. Sitting at the breakfast nook was his grandmother, a woman just as pale as him, with white hair. She stared down into her tea.

"Grandmother, this is my fiancée, Alyson," Gorman said loudly. The women still looked far away. "Grandmother!"

His voice startled Alyson, but the old woman looked up as if he had whispered. "Hi, dear," she answered. "Your fiancée, yes, I remember." Her voice had a frog in it and was frail.

Gorman's cell phone chimed, and he pulled it out of his pocket. "I hate to do this, sweetheart. I've got to run back out to the office, but I'll be right back." He seemed in a hurry. "Why don't you help Grandmother with dinner?"

Before Alyson could say anything, he had given her a rough kiss on the cheek and rushed out of the house.



Briana Tolbert-Fitzgerald

"Sit down, dear," Gorman's grandmother said. Her voice sounded stronger and more serious than before. Alyson took her place across from the old woman.

"Thank you for having me over, Mrs. Bleu," she said.

"Call me Grandmother, dear," the old woman replied. Alyson noticed that the woman's blue eyes seemed glazed over, but she wasn't completely blind.

"What can I help you with?" Alyson asked. When the woman continued to stare at her she spoke up. "What's for dinner?"

"I heard you the first time," Grandmother answered. She stirred her tea with her small silver spoon, scraping the bottom of the cup. "My grandson doesn't know I skipped my pills today. He feeds me those things like candy. They make me quiet, and he likes that. He and his father always think I talk too much. I get so tired of not living on my own anymore. I have to do what little *Gorman* wants all the time. What an ugly boy! I never liked his mother, but sometimes I wish she was still alive." Alyson thought this was all just some senile rambling.

"What's for dinner, Grandmother?" she asked.

The old woman's eyes sharpened, and she leered. "Why, you're what's for dinner, dear."

Alyson was about to laugh uncomfortably to appease the crone but soon realized that she wasn't joking. She darted her eyes around the kitchen, noticing for the first time that all the surfaces of the counters were empty. It didn't even seem like anyone lived there. The island was metal and resembled a slab. In the middle sat a block full of knives that seemed too big to use for food. And that bright white light was centered right above it.

"Do you think you're the first 'fiancée' I've met?" Grandmother asked sharply. Alyson's attention returned to the woman across from her, and she felt glued to her seat. "He's had three in the last month. Haven't you heard about the girls going missing around here? Don't you look at the news?" As she continued to speak, her voice became shrill.

Alyson shook her head. Truthfully, she never cared about the news. Surely nothing bad would ever happen to *her*.

"You're all such stupid girls," Grandmother said, but it wasn't judgmental. Her tone was sad, like she sympathized with them. "His mother was such a stupid girl to ever love his father. Anyway, he eats all of them, dear. He plans on eating you, too. He'll cut you up and salt you right on that slab," she said, pointing a shaky, crooked finger at the island, "And then I'll have to boil you in a big pot in the basement."

Alyson was shaking with fear but could not move or even scream.

"Don't be so afraid, dear," Grandmother said. "That's why I hid those pills under my tongue and spit them out. I don't want to participate in this madness any longer. But you need to hide, quickly. He didn't go to the office. He's just driving around to give me time to drug you and go pick up another one of his victims, that poor girl. Go hide in that pantry. There's room enough for you."

Whatever magic had kept her still then lifted from her shoulders, and Alyson darted to the pantry attached to the kitchen. She had only been there for about a minute when she heard the front door crash in. She could hear a girl screaming and footsteps belonging to multiple people bounding down the hall. Through the slats of the pantry door, Alyson witnessed the scene.

"Where's the other one?" Gorman asked his grandmother gruffly. The old woman went back to pretending to be decrepit and shrugged, looking down into her teacup. Gorman waved her off angrily-



Briana Tolbert-Fitzgerald

and grunted drunkenly. There were other men in the room with him, holding the girl to the table. One of the men plunged a needle into her neck, and she went slack, the fight over.

Alyson wanted to squeeze her eyes shut but was fascinated by the horror of the men's actions. They each took the sharp knives and cut away at the silent girl. Another man noticed a gold band on the girl's middle finger and tried to pull it off. When he realized it was no use, he hacked the finger off. It flew through the room and rolled through the space under the pantry door. Alyson shrank farther into the small space, but there was no room. Just as the man made his way to retrieve the finger, Gorman shouted at him to forget it.

Gorman's grandmother had gotten up and was pouring the men's wine into glasses. None of them noticed the crushed-up pills she was slipping into the drinks. When the dead girl's body was prepared, the men sat down and started drinking. Grandmother carried the parts in a giant pot to the basement. Alyson stayed silent until, one after the other, the drunk and drugged men fell asleep at the table.

Before she left, she reached down to grab the girl's severed finger. Then she rushed to her car and sped off.



The next morning, Alyson made her way down the aisle. Gorman looked disgusting to her again, but she bared a grin and kept moving, her father holding her arm and almost pushing her to the groom. She stood hand in sweaty hand with Gorman in front of the officiant, in front of neighbors, friends, and some family. She recognized everyone as being her guests. No one belonged to him except his father, grandmother, and those few friends from the night before.

Gorman spoke his vows. *Is he wondering how I got away?* Alyson thought.

Then it was her turn to speak.

"Gorman," she said breathily with a smile. She wanted to play this part well. "I already had my vows written out, but I had such a vivid dream about you last night that I had to rewrite them. Last night, I imagined that I came to your house, the one we would live in together, and I met your grandmother. When she and I were alone, she told me that I wasn't really over to enjoy dinner. She told me that I was for dinner." At the mention of this, Gorman's smile fell, and he looked panicked. "And then you came back with some buddies and drugged this girl so that you could chop her up and eat her. I was supposed to end up just like her, but I escaped. Not before I picked this up as evidence, though." Gorman's face went even paler as Alyson revealed the severed finger caked with dried blood that she'd been hiding in a fold of her dress. She held it up for all to see. "But it was all a dream, I guess."

A gasp ran through the room as the wedding guests witnessed this. Gorman looked around frantically, laughing nervously.

"Is this true?" Alyson's father asked with a red face.

Instead of answering, Gorman tried to dart to the back of the church, but the guests grabbed at him, beating him with whatever objects they could find; shoes, flowers, and purses. His murderous friends jumped up to escape but were also seized, and they were incapacitated until the police showed up and sent them to prison.

Intrusive



Logan Henley

My favorite band is Blonde Redhead. They're playing at Le Poisson Rouge in Manhattan; my brother says it's a great venue. It's 7:40 and they go on at 8:30; I'll have some time to kill there, being uncharacteristically early. As I wait for the local train, the express blasts by, rolling a wave of hot subway air through my knit top and triggering a new bout of perspiration. I always dress for live music as if I'm going to meet someone important, but I don't expect it to happen. Looking the part is half the fun. I wonder how many other people on the subway platform are visitors dressing differently from their habits at home. Three platforms over a talented man covers Steve Lacy on double bass. Someone passes behind me wearing perfume. A fleeting sandalwood respite in the piss and garbage water miasma. A sound of scuffing soles along the platform from a man in a stupor coming my direction. He passes outside the metal pillars leaving room for the crowd and I step back toward the platform to reciprocate. Someone yells something at the man as I watch people's shoes on the stairs three platforms over. I glance back and there's a frightening bang as the man falls onto the rails. People scream. Some rush toward him, some away. I drop my bag behind me and kneel on the platform to reach out a hand. Mouth open, eyes closed, the man's not responding to anyone hollering at him to get up but surely this is a fixable scenario. I yell "Let's lift him", slide down to the tracks, and beckon at a man agape nearby.

He's on his knees reaching down as I was a moment ago but someone up the tunnel is calling out "Train! Train! It's coming!".

The kneeling man screams, "Pull him over, it's fucking coming!" but there's no room on either side of the tracks, and standing over the passed-out man, I can't lift him all the way. The train's squealing brakes and blaring horn are overwhelming, drowning out witnesses screaming. I grab the kneeling man's hands with my own and get pulled onto the dirty tile just in time. Nothing but screaming brakes and screaming, crying bystanders as I hear the train's rhythm punctuated by cracking bones. The man died. The train finally stops and no one knows where to go.

Medical Examination Report



Eric Rosier

MEDICAL EXAMINATION REPORT

For New Applicants:

1. The Medical Examination may be done by any registered General Practitioner (GP).
2. It will feel like hell, and you're stuck in an eternal abyss with nothing but a needle forced into your nose.

Time means Nothing in the abyss of purgatory, and you will never know how much time has passed. Phlegm filled with blood will stifle your breathing, and you'll lay in an uncomfortable bed for hours, silently praying for it all to be over. Seconds turn to minutes, minutes turn to what feels like hours, stitch by stitch, and over and over. Just stare at the white light and think of Nothing.

3. Do not worry! We'll make sure to numb you enough to keep you awake for the whole process and provide you with a long metal centipede over your nose.

For Renewal Applicants:

1. The Medical Examination MUST be done in New Jersey by any registered GP.

Notes for All:

1. This Medical Examination Report is to be completed by a registered doctor and returned to the examinee.
2. If you hear screaming and crying, it's all right! Please, trust us and our process, and it will end well.

Name of establishment: Mountainside Medical Center	Name of attending physician: Dr. Eric Harbinger of <i>Death</i> Life	Reason for injury: <i>Shark Tale</i> and a cartwheel whip to the nose
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I Personal Particulars

Patient's Name: <u>Eric Alain Rosier</u>	Date of Birth: <u>June 7, 2004</u>	Biological Sex: M
Nationality: <u>Wetback Negro</u>	Address: <u>150 Bloomfield Willard Ave</u>	Sexuality: <u>bisexual</u> <u>2 Lover Succubus</u>

II Medical Examination

1. Medical Diagnosis or Description of Injury:

An 11-year-old negro got kicked in the nose. Do you know what that means? Hours of metal fun coursing through his red and blue veins! Inject everything into this little boy's face and have that nice long tingly wire stitch his tight flesh back together. Let that nice flaming hot feeling steam through him while his pulsating eyes ask for freedom. We're the heroes, and we do what we want, how we want when we want, and to whoever we want. Don't give that boy freedom, and let him stare at the bright white light. I want this moment to feel like a numb hazy red blaze, and let him smell the SCARLET SUN!

2. Clinical Findings:

Red blood keeps coming out of its nose as if it's human. We're trying to make this thing a little lighter, but for the life of me, I can't tell what I'm staring at anymore, it's not natural. He refuses to follow the code, the centipede needs to grow and fester on him for the transformation to continue as we please. Also, he won't stop crying! God, we all wish his mouth got injured, so we could sew it shut.

3. How the patient feels:

Feelings have left his hollow body. I assumed chimpanzees were a little stronger than this, but I was wrong. His pupils have turned jet black, he's breathing slowly, and he no longer seems present. Like a ghost almost. Either way, I don't necessarily care because the patient has already paid for the process, and my pockets have been filled. The deed is done, and the boy is gone; although, I can't tell if it's a boy anymore. He reminds me of a purple moray eel, a fish that can't even stay the same gender throughout its life, but I doubt he's anywhere near as dangerous.

DECLARATION

I, Eric Alain Rosier, declare that the information above is true and pertains to me and my medical crisis. I also declare that I'm not free under the SCARLET SUN, and nothing can change that. The curse of the metal centipede is stuck in my Soul, I'm left feeling like an empty hole. It felt nice, the intense radiating pain coursing through me. Like a warm red bath, I was being bathed in my insecurities and weaknesses. I should have known that men don't cry. Keep it inside, let it burn and fester like roadkill, but you don't show that shit to the people around you. I'm an empty marquee, and may as well be blind, but the cut has healed, and I'm worse than before.

WARNING: IT IS AN OFFENSE UNDER THE IMMIGRATION ACT TO MAKE ANY FALSE STATEMENT, REPRESENTATION, OR DECLARATION. IF THE TRUTH ISN'T STATED THEN WE ARE NOTHING MORE THAN VENOMOUS SNAKES. THE LIE CAN TRY TO HIDE FOR THE REST OF TIME, BUT SOON IT WILL BE UNEARTHED LIKE A DIRTY CRIME. WE WANT THE TRUTH!

True Declaration

I, Eric Alain Rosier, declare that I am free with responsibility. You like the sour taste of vanilla ice cream, and I prefer dark melted chocolate stuck to my gums. There is Nothing and there is nothing, and I am in between; I've lived with control over my life, but the walls of God are yet to be seen. Freedom, oh freedom, I wasted so much of it, and the simulations felt real, I thought I was in control of it. I'm not a prophet, nor a god, but my name is Eric Alain Rosier, and that has to be more than a facade. Something, Nothing, a centipede here, and a snake below me crumbling, smaller than a hare. Nothing can control me, and I'm better than one, I have three in me! I'm a mixed 2 half/half boy, a man with twice the desires, and I've created multiple fires, but I am free. Freedom isn't a choice, but a twisted authority, and I'll run with that possibility while being a thunderous minority. We're the result of scientific evolution, but that doesn't mean we aren't a disproportionate fusion. We are all snakes and angels, you can't see my metal centipede, and I can't see yours. A big blue border is blocking all of us, and the consequences are coming out of a dirty black and white prison bus. But I, Eric Alain Rosier, am free under the Sun, but Nothing can take that away from me. I am the Mind, Body, and Soul, but 2 will be gone, and I'll be left with 1. The New Era begins in solidarity, I'm ready to remove the metal centipede, and I'm longer a slave to impulse and impurity. The fire inside won't stop burning until I'm done working, learning, and disconfirming.

Dissociating in My Bedroom



Fiona Nuredini

I've been alone for so long.
Sat in my bedroom for so long.
Sunk into my bumpy blue couch for so long.

My spine curves painfully.
A hole persists at the center of my chest.
Is that where my heart should be?
I'm not sure, I cannot see.

I am myself and my mother.
Please don't ask.
I cannot bear to tell. I am myself and my father.
How terrifying it is to know someone so well.

No, the wound never closed,
but it doesn't look as bloody anymore.

Someone qualified, like a doctor or a saint,
Will see me soon and stuff it full.

We're Gonna Send An Asshole to the Great Beyond!



Kyle Velez

OVER BLACK

The sound of eggs sizzling on a kitchen stove.

FADE IN:

INT. APARTMENT - MORNING

BENNY, 26, is cooking in his underwear. He's a bit scruffy.
Too many nicks from the same razor. Drops of oil from the pan
splash at him.

BENNY

Shit.

He jolts back. He sighs. He slaps the sides of head with his
hands, then keeps shuffling those eggs.

BENNY (CONT'D)

(mumbling)

Just be nice. Can you?

JAI, 26, trudges in from the bedroom hallway, yawning. He's
only in a sweatshirt that's not his size and wouldn't fit
Benny either. The yawn curdles into a loud grunt. Benny turns
around. He studies Jai.

BENNY (CONT'D)

Where have you been?

JAI

I was just--

Jai bites his nails. He lets go and smiles.

JAI (CONT'D)

Getting to know that boss of yours.

Benny's eyes narrow. He ditches the cooking, grabs Jai, and
holds him to the banister. A cross on the banister, nailed
high up, rattles.

BENNY

(whimpering)

We talked about this!

Jai gives him a kiss. Benny lets him down, like he's been put
under a spell. Jai slips under his shoulder, scurrying
towards the refrigerator.

JAI (O.S.)

We didn't talk about shit.

Benny is frozen. His mouth has flown open. He's like a puppy stranded on a little girl's poster.

JAI (CONT'D)
Dancing around the subject is not talking about it. Complaining about him is not talking about it.

Pan over to Jai rummaging in the fridge.

JAI (CONT'D)
I gave you several opportunities, but you always pussy out.

Jai walks into the living room and hops on the sofa, turning on the TV.

Benny goes from shocked to pissed. He looks at the cross on the banister. He jumps up and smacks it, and then rushes into the living room.

BENNY (O.S)
(yelling)
Let's lay it all out!

JAI (O.S.)
Hey! Give it back!

Benny has snatched the pizza out of Jai's mouth.

BENNY
Where did you do it?

JAI
Do what?

BENNY
Kill him!

Jai looks lost for a second, then lets out a big laugh. He doesn't stop until he looks at Benny's face. Benny is tearing up; the pizza droops in his hand until he lets it fall on the carpet.

JAI
Benny. Benny, I was joking. I just broke into his house. I just watched him for awhile.

He stands up and takes Benny's hands.

JAI (CONT'D)
I know you should do the honors. Do you think I'd do it without you? Without your permission?

Benny starts into a quiet sob.

JAI (CONT'D)
Jesus. You really think I would, don't you?

Benny nods. Jai guides him to the sofa, gently pushing him down. He reaches for some tissues before sitting in Benny's lap. He starts drying Benny's tears.

They stay like that. Shots of the rest of the apartment linger. When the camera cuts back to them, Jai has nuzzled his face next to Benny's ear.

JAI (CONT'D)
(whispering)
I would never be bad like that to you. A few shades of cruel, but never like that, okay?
(beat)
Tell me you get it.

BENNY
I get it.

JAI
Good boy.

We see Benny's face, still puffy, but now in a soft kind of smile.

JAI (CONT'D)
Your eggs are burning.

Benny jolts up, tossing Jai next to him. He rushes into the kitchen.

BENNY (O.S.)
Shit. Shit. Shit.

Jai lays there, giggling.

CUT TO BLACK

Island Poem



Chanel E. Suero

Abuelita left a lover on the island to move to the states
I thought I saw him in a picture once
Gabriel
Lean brown boy with glasses and wiry hair
She told me before she left he gave her a plant
A delicate cactus
Soft pink flower blooming at the top
Quisqueyana through and through
He said you can't ever forget it you can't ever forget it
I thought she forgot it
Sometime between leaving the island and meeting my grandfather
She forgot it
But even with 40 years at the states
She moved back
And my abuela speaks in sing-songy spanish to the plant outside her window
A plant like a delicate cactus
Quisqueyana
Blooming through and through
She can't ever forget it
She can't ever forget it

Wisdom Teeth Painkiller Dream



From the Staff at The Normal Review

My dentist knows where I live
My dentist assumed I was British...
My dentist is a college grad
He went to Rutgers, like his dad.
But the professors that he liked
All went on strike, too bad.

A question of love hinders me as I walk,
To shuffle around without speech
All confessions go to die in the dark
And there is no imagination in the shadow of a threat.

I must find him before he finds me
And drill his cavities.
A drill big enough to pierce the heavens.
Snatch the collar,
Tussle the hair,
Appreciate his tired blushed face.

The old ladies are looking at me and licking their dried lips;
Listless eyes of multicolored fish.
I'm drooling on your favorite bib,
Acidic droplets cleanse our skin,
You've become my kin.

All from that tiny indent screwed into the throat
You can never breathe, simply denotes
Like a cicada's skin shed, sacrificial devote.
Cripple into soil seldom peaceful.
Take that, muffinfucker.

If we get reborn, I promise I'll find you once again.

Ha. Ha.
Dentist.

Contributor's Notes



Aram Bavoukian is a freshman English major with a minor in theatre. In his spare time, he enjoys reading, writing, gardening, and watching musicals.

Camille Chomiczewski is a junior who does what her English major urges her to: read, write, imagine, reread, rewrite, reimagine, think, rethink, think again, and sometimes talk. When she's not bending to the will of the English major, she scribbles facial expressions with a BIC pen in college-ruled notebooks and watches anime with sub-par writing. Both activities just make her want to write. So she does. And sometimes she talks.

Conor T. Curtin is a sophomore from Chester, NJ. He is a philosophy and film & television major who is interested in screenwriting.

Alyssa DiPalma is a senior film and television major with a minor in creative writing. She is a passionate reader, writer, filmmaker, and most importantly a bagel enthusiast.

Bailey Dunn is a senior double majoring in German and gender, sexuality, and women's studies, and minoring in creative writing. They are a queer bookworm who loves to write, read, travel, climb trees, ride their bike, and above all learn new things! ig: @baileynicoledunn

Logan Henley is a transfer sustainability science major and a lover of PC Music, Wikipedia, and shooting 35mm around campus's ruderal places.

Ronni Hom is a senior filmmaking and theatre Studies major. She is currently working on her thesis film *Peaches* which is set to release in the summer of 2023. When she isn't working on film or theatre projects, she enjoys reading, watching TV, eating great food, and going on adventures with friends. You can learn more about her work at ronnihom.com.

Sophia Kim is a junior visual arts major with a concentration in art education and a minor in psychology. As an artist, she loves to explore colors and create sculpture and installation art. Nature inspires a lot of her artworks. She enjoys photography, all kinds of museums, walking in trees and seashores, and traveling the world.

Brandon Lima is a senior double majoring in business administration and psychology. He writes in his free time but also spends his free time practicing guitar, acting, Muay Thai, and lifting weights. His favorite thing to eat is ground beef.

Nicole D. MacGregor is a graduating senior English major with a concentration in creative writing. I'm so thankful for my family that has encouraged and supported me through my writing. "My Tower" is dedicated to my wonderful Aunt Kathey. There will be many more stories to come from me!

Evelyn Moulton is a senior English major with a concentration in creative writing. All of her stories are edited by her cat.



Fiona Nuredini is a junior in the filmmaking BFA program. She primarily writes and directs screenplays but she also enjoys writing poetry and prose as a hobby. She loves well-written television, sad free-form poetry, and recycled sitcoms.

Emily Paluba (they/she) is a queer poet and writer who studies English and GSWS, where their passion for advocacy meets their love for poetry. When they're not in their notebook, you can find them horse-back riding, doing yoga, walking their dog, or napping. Learn more about them at emilypaluba.com.

Anastasia Ramsey is a junior English major with a concentration in creative writing. She enjoys writing, reading, and spending time with her husband, three sons, and pets.

Alyssa Roberts is a graduate English major with a passion for creative writing. She likes chocolate, 70s and 80s rom-coms, and most fruit.

Christy Rolling is a junior English major with a concentration in creative writing and a minor in film. She writes as often as she can, but besides that she enjoys late-night cooking, photography, reading, and bingeing TV shows.

Eric Rosier is a remarkable individual with a bright future ahead of him. He is currently pursuing a degree in journalism while minoring in psychology, a testament to his diverse interests and thirst for knowledge. Eric has been honing his writing skills since the tender age of 11, and his passion for the craft has only grown stronger over the years. Eric is a devout believer in God, and his faith has been a source of strength and comfort throughout his life. With his exceptional talent and unrelenting drive, Eric aspires to become a successful author in the future.

Chanel E. Suero is a senior double majoring in fashion studies and psychology. Besides writing poetry she loves to read, create art, and go on drives!

Saori Takahashi is a student at Pratt Institute.

Briana Tolbert-Fitzgerald is a senior English major with a concentration in creative writing. She writes poetry and writes and produces her own music under the artist name of Luvenia.

Alex Tully works as a legal secretary and dog walker. They love to hike, kick-box, make art and music. They are majoring in Drawing and Painting and eventually want a masters degree in art therapy.

Kyle Velez is a senior communications and media studies major with a minor in creative writing. His hobbies and interests include: writing (duh), DJing, working out, and finding the secret to the perfect omelet. Kyle is deeply proud of The Normal Review's Spring 2023 issue.

Tyler Ventura is a sophomore English major with a concentration in creative writing. When he's not writing he can be found reading unhinged fanfiction, failing to naturally interweave knowledge he learned from obscure video essays in conversations, and communing with his rat brethren.



Nyla White is a junior majoring communications and media studies with a minor in creative writing. Her poetry along with her makeup, content creation and song-writing is an outlet for creativity and an expression of her faith.

