

Letter From the Editor

Oh, Friends. Here we are again, and I couldn't be happier about it. I want to thank you all again, readers and contributors alike, for supporting this little dream wag of mine. I love my job and what I get to do for people, and it's a constant thing, so imagine having a constant joy for your JOB?! Crazy, right? It's a blessing, really. I don't know how many of you actually read these letters, but if you do, as you must to get this message, I sincerely appreciate you. Enjoy these works, and share them. I love you all.

All the best,

Sheld.

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POETRY

I bow my head in Sunday School class and
close my eyes and clench my hands
in prayer but together, each choking
the other, and I'm ready to begin
the Lord's Prayer. It starts with Our Father
and ends with Amen and what's in between
is like the body so the other two
parts are the head and feet and if I
make a mistake as I'm going through then
it's like a spear in the side of Jesus
and blood will flow all over again

which means that He'll be dying one more time.
But if I say an honest prayer later
He'll forgive me for my sin and even
say words I can't hear but make me feel that
it was no sin, I just made a mistake,
and that He won't condemn me. I don't want
to be condemned and I'm not even sure
what that means unless it means I'll go to
Hell and I don't want to go to Hell—I
want to live in Heaven with the angels
because maybe I'll know some of them, like

(Beans, continued, stanza break)

my dog, who was run over last month and
I'm still not recovered. I found him on
the side of the road as I walked home from
regular school. Gee, was he dead or what
—bloody and stiff and his tongue curled over
the left side of his muzzle and the right
side of his muzzle stuck to the blacktop
and his eyes open and looking at—what?
—death, I guess. I looked in that direction,
long, deeply, but didn't see what he saw
or was even still seeing. Probably
that was for the best—it isn't my time
but when it comes I'll try not to be surprised.
So I rescued him, a little too late,
but better late than never, I guess, and
carried him back to the house and around
and behind and below the garden—beans

are looking good and it rained last night—and
put him down on the grass by the back fence
and went for the shovel and got it and
brought it back and it was easy digging,
the ground soft from the sassafras' shade and
then there was the rain, too, and how it flows
under the grass and downhill to the fence,
our boundary. On the other side is
our church, where I go to Sunday School. Then
I put him in and covered him up and
there was dirt left over—out of it God
could make another dog, or another

(Beans, continued, stanza break)

boy. When I come home from Sunday School
I climb the fence, careful I don't rend my
good clothes, and visit him, my dog I mean,
to make sure no raccoons have dug him up,
then go inside the house for lunch, hot dogs
and potato chips and Tang, and look through
the Sunday comics in the big paper.
Now Caesar's an angel—Caesar's my dog
but named for Julius, not Augustus,
if it makes any difference. It does
to us. Last week I dreamed I was throwing
a stick for him. He flew far overhead
to nail it, then descended and threw for
me but too high and behind. I woke up
still chasing it. May I never find it.

—Gale Acuff

I don't want to die. But my teacher says
I have to, one day anyway, I mean
my Sunday School teacher. It's natural
that she should know more about dying than
my teacher in regular school or my
parents because she's closer to God, she
works for the church, you can't get much closer
to God than that unless you're the preacher
or Jesus or an angel. Miss Hooker
is her name and she is, an angel or
pretty damn near, even though she works at
the Curl & Dye the rest of the week. She
went to college, too, vocational school
it's called. She drives a South Korean
car, five speeds it has. You can't be stupid
and use a manual. And when I die
God will judge me, she says, for Heaven or
Hell and that will be that, I'll go either
to dwell with Him forever or down to
Hell to live with Satan, if you call that
living. Anyway, it lasts forever
but so does life in Heaven, so long that
it really isn't life, she says, but much
better. She says that to dwell up there I
can't sin, even though I will, Adam and
Eve brought sin on us all, we weren't even
born yet, that's how serious sin is, so
I've got to fight it by not doing it
and praying for forgiveness if I do
and praying even if I don't, asking
Jesus to forgive me, or, she says, He
died for nothing and it's all my fault and
I wasn't even alive but I'll be

(Pistol, continued, no stanza break)

to blame. Pretty scary but it's the truth,
Miss Hooker says. Read your Bible, children.
I try but I fall asleep—no pictures.
But I've seen The Ten Commandments twice and
The Greatest Story Ever Told and King
of Kings. And Ben Hur. And Spartacus. But
it's the word of God I need and straight from
the horse's mouth. That's a figure of speech.
Wouldn't it be straighter if God spoke it
directly to a body? I listen
at night after I say the Lord's Prayer
and pray for my parents and teachers and
my other enemies, and my dog and
the pistol that I want for Christmas but
I'm too young even for a BB gun.
I guess that I can learn to live with death,
as if I have a choice. Miss Hooker says
I don't, and I don't know when it will come
so I'd better be prepared, she says, to
stand before the throne of God and answer
a few questions. I wonder what He'll ask.
I hope that there aren't any trick questions.
I hope that there's a bonus question worth
enough points so that I can save my soul
in case I miss a few of the others.
I wonder if He'll ask me for my name.
If He does then I'll ask Him, Don't you know?
I wonder how He'll answer. Be honest,
I'll tell Him. Don't be afraid to admit
that You don't know. But if He answers Gale
I might ask Him if He knows my middle
name. After all, nobody uses it,
not even me. I'm not here to judge you,

(Pistol, continued, no stanza break)

I'll say. But He might say, like my parents,
that I've got an attitude and with them
that's enough to send me to my room. I
sneak out the window sometimes. In Heaven
I'll just use Jacob's ladder to slide down
to earth again. I guess I'll be a ghost.
I'll go to Miss Hooker but try not to
scare her—I'll just watch, like she watches me
in class to make sure I haven't smuggled
in a comic inside my workbook. She
still has my copy of Superboy. She
still hasn't returned it. It must be good.

—Gale Acuff

Gale Acuff
What to Call Love

I love Miss Hooker—she's my Sunday School teacher and beautiful, red hair and green eyes and a zillion freckles and knows all the dope about God and in class tells us good stories from the Bible and she'd be perfect for me, to marry I mean, but she's 25 to my 10 so what to do? Nothing, I guess, but grow on her or grow into her but the older I get the older she gets and when I'm her age she'll be 40, too old for anything. Still, if I love her I shouldn't care, that's what love's about, I guess. Maybe I'll find out when the time comes and if she's single still but if she's married to some other man then I'll do the decent thing and not try to pry them apart, I think it's adultery is what that is and if it's not adultery then it's something bad and whatever's bad, Miss Hooker says, is a sin and sin too much, it adds up, and you go to Hell and I don't want to burn forever, I already sweat seas as it is and in Hell I'd truly be

(What to Call Love, continued, stanza break)

lost. Besides, Miss Hooker's bound for Heaven
if anybody is so if I don't
go there I'll never see her again, not
ever, if I still have eyes I mean, and
even though I'll be dead I doubt that I
can live without her. It's hard enough now,
dreaming about her at night—we're married
and playing cards or checkers or watching
baseball or wrestling and when it's time to
sleep we kiss each other—on the lips, they're
really sweet, hers I mean—and then sack out
and when morning comes I wake but she's gone.
And I see her only on Sundays and
toward the end of the week I can get
excited and it's hard to get to sleep
Saturday nights except that Miss Hooker
will usually return in my dreams,
she's pretty faithful that way and I'd like
to tell her so but in dreams I forget
and if I tried to confess for real then
she'd probably think I'm crazy or just
another screwy kid and she'd be right
even though she'd be wrong, too, sometimes love
makes fools of us all. How do I know that?
I guess I don't, not from experience
but maybe God put it in my head, or
is it my heart, a little bit of
wisdom but I'd trade it all for the whole

(What to Call Love, continued, stanza break)

Miss Hooker. After Sunday School today
I went up to her after my classmates
had gone and asked her if she believes that
an old woman could love a young man and
she asked me why I was asking and I
said, I'm in love with an older woman,
and she asked, Do you mean a fifth-grader
because I'm just in the fourth and I said
No, a bit older than that, and she said
Oh, you mean some junior-high school girl, and
I said, No, a little older than that,
and she asked, Well, how old is she, and I
said, Well, maybe about your age, and she
said, You'd do well to wait a few years, so
I asked, Well, how many years is a few,
and she said, Well, wait until you're 18,
and then I said—me and my big mouth—Christ,
you'll be 33, and she looked at me
like I was the stupidest boy on earth
and said, Don't take the Lord's name in vain, and
I said, Yes ma'am, I'm sorry for that, and
she said, Well, if I'm still not married then
you can call me, and smiled, even took off
her glasses, a good sign, I'm not sure why,
God might tip me off again, so there's hope.
Yes ma'am, I said, I surely will—call you,
then thought again and asked her, Call you what?

—Gale Acuff

Gale Acuff
Our God is a Jealous God

I think I love Miss Hooker more than God.
I mean I love her more than I love God,
not more than God loves her, but then again
I'll bet I love her more than God loves her
too because He hasn't got a body
that I know of. Oh sure, there's the Body
of Christ but I don't think it's the same thing.
Speaking of bodies, Miss Hooker's got one,
red hair and green eyes and more freckles than
stars in the sky, I'll bet. Some I can see
and some I can't, and if we got married
one day then on our honeymoon I'd get
to see them all because that's what married
folks do on their honeymoon, get naked
and watch TV or play cards or Yahtzee
or Parcheesi or read the Bible or
comic books and if they really love each
other I guess they do 'em all. They've got
time and there's really nothing else that's up
until it's time to hit the sack and get
some sleep. Out of all that fun come babies,
I'm not sure exactly how, I'm only
ten years old to Miss Hooker's 25
and even though she's not married something
tells me that she knows, it's just a feeling
I get whenever I'm near her, that is,
whenever I'm too close and want to reach
out and kiss her but of course my lips aren't
close enough, not until I'm grown, 16
maybe, when I'll drive and shave and use Mum,
I sneak Father's sometimes, and aftershave,
and when I give up my clip-on bow tie for
the real thing, the kind Father has, the kind

(Our God is a Jealous God, continued, no stanza break)

that looks three feet long and you wonder how
all that length can fit around one neck so
well. It's like magic. Then I'll be a man
and if Miss Hooker's still single—she'll be
31 by then—I'll ask her out to
take a stroll around the duck pond behind
our church. In the moonlight. And we won't talk
ducks but romance, and there will be the stars
above us and her freckles beside me
and the mole on her nose a little moon
and her red hair the color of Mars and
her green eyes the color of earth, the green
planet times two, because she has two of
them, eyes I mean, even though from space
the earth looks more blue than green but who cares.
Then I'll drive Miss Hooker home, to her house
I mean, and walk her to her door and then
she'll turn and give me a kiss, and in case
she's planned it only for my cheek I'll throw
my lips in the way and intercept her
and she'll like that and so will I even
though it surprised her. It surprised me, too.
And God might be angry, jealous even,
and run me off the road on my way home
or smash me into an oncoming Kenworth
and I'll never know what hit me until
I'm standing before the Throne of Judgment
and God's getting his revenge on me, Our
God is a jealous God and all that, just
how jealous I'll be about to find out
and He'll send me to Hell where I'll burn and
burn but what becomes of poor Miss Hooker?
I guess she'll pull through and marry some guy

(Our God is a Jealous God, continued, no stanza break)

not as hard on God as I was. Oh, well.
They'll go on their honeymoon and I'll be
burning and burning while he gets to count
all her freckles. But if God kills him, too,
we'll have it out down here, in Hell I mean,
but he might turn out to be the nicest
guy I'd ever want to meet. In that case
we'll have something to talk about, that is
Miss Hooker. Yesterday in Sunday School
she said that if we go to Heaven we
get new bodies. But there's nothing wrong with
the one she has, though it will decay but
even then I'll bet it's still beautiful,
like the toy soldiers I used to bury
and when I dug them up months later they
looked like veterans. It's good to die some
but not completely, I guess. I should know,
being there. It's good to be broken up
some but I was killed before my time so
I can't speak from experience. Just love.

—Gale Acuff

I'm not afraid to die I think because
I'm only ten years old so death is far
away if I die naturally, no
accident nor murder nor disease to
slay me before my time and now I know
what time is, it's when you die - they don't teach
that in regular school so maybe that's
why I come to church and Sunday School, to
learn about what only faith can teach me,
God and Jesus and the Holy Ghost and
all that spiritual stuff I don't quite
get but grownups do, my parents as well
and they don't even come to church with me
but sleep late Sunday mornings so what am I
missing that they and the folks at church know
and I even asked Mother and Father
that and they looked at each other and smiled,
then looked at me and frowned, or damn near, and
told me You'll know what you don't know but we
know when you know it so just be patient
and all will be revealed to you in good
time, which might mean that they can't wait until
I die even though they'll die long before
I do. That's pretty damn faithful, I think,
and probably wise to boot and I'm just
ten years old and so maybe they're right, too bad
I can't die for a few seconds, then be
resurrected so I'll know what the Here
-after is like before I die into
it. I mean I could make some real mammon.

—Gale Acuff

Alondra Adame
Beginnings

The world does not begin in the dirt, *mija*.
It begins in the stars and the nothingness.

Humans begin in the dirt, sifting for some semblance
of home and creating something new like I created you.

That is why we sit on the lawn and stare at the stars,
feeling the grass beneath our hands and pressing our feet into cool dirt.

That is why you feel the universe beating inside the blood in your heart
racing and aching to continue the intermingling of celestial and terrestrial.

You and I will be forever, *mija*. Because the world does not end in the dirt.
The world began in the stars and the nothingness. You and I will return again.

Do not weep when it is my time to be laid in the dirt. Look up and find me
waving from behind the northern star and playing with the *conejo* on the moon.

I write with pens that drip
with the blood of my people

that settles and sinks into
the slimmest pieces of stolen land.

I recite my poems with the audacity
of the colonizer's manifest destiny

their words split my tongue
with swords and syllables.

What can I do when I am
both contradiction and ambiguity?

How do I untangle the veins
and cells inside my body

to send them across the ocean
back to dead kings and queens

and southward over imaginary lines
back to the spirits of warriors and priestesses?

What am I permitted to keep?

Will you take the color of my eyes?
Will you rob me of the shape of my smile?

Can I no longer call my mother *Ama*
and call myself a Chicana?

I am past present and future
held together by the American suture

I am the cross-breed, the mixed blood
the first generation of something else.

Nothing must change.

Nothing must be disturbed, and so I breathe softly. While the rest of the street pulses gently with city life, I flow in on myself, holding the years outside my walls. Inside, I cradle your furniture. Your desk with its ink well and pencils, the sheets of paper settled quietly under the weight of your writing. The bed with its covers drawn back. Just so. Everything as you left it.

Nothing must move, and so the curtains hang heavy with dust - none of them dance in the sunlight anymore - and the tap in the kitchen has stopped dripping. The last petal of water still clings, as if glued, to the spout.

Nothing must speak, and so the splintered pieces of the mirror lie silent. Sometimes I think those pieces reflect more of life than there is; that they are glinting and hinting at things that I can't see. A broken object always has more surface area than a whole. A broken object can touch the world in ways others can't. I worry that one day you'll return and cut yourself on them, and that the sudden burst of life and pain will shatter the stillness beyond repair.

Everything must be still, so that somewhere in time you are still here, happy, with her.

Kendall A. Bell
My heart got caught on your sleeve

and stayed wedged in the hem under your arm,
left to hang on out of desperation while you
drifted between the lives you waver on each
day. Now, I wander around unlit hallways.
Now, I search for the pieces of me hidden
under box springs and medicine cabinets.
Can you hear the mournful pulse through the
fibers of your shirt? Will your escape with
this pounding muscle signal my end? I will
walk quietly in my heavy shoes and gather it
with soft gloves while you doze in front of
Saturday evening reruns. I will feel its slow
cadence in my hands, sneak out a basement
window, and find someone who can make it race
before it shatters.

Kendall A. Bell

We leave a litany of doors left open

of unwashed glasses and silverware in
the bottom of a tarnished, porcelain
sink. We leave the fan blowing, turning,
unattended—a candle wick burning down
to a nub in the living room. We leave
the front door immobile, unable to open,
unable to allow forgiveness to drag its
feet over the rug, and into the bedroom.
We leave secrets in emails, shame in the
bottom of a night stand's drawer. We are
the slow sink of light before dusk, the
pink and orange sky waning.

Below the floor boards and
the disheveled sheets,
there is a corner to be
shared with dead spiders
and their drooping webs.
Their meals never came—
our zenith was a stalled
elevator, a barren pantry.
Sunlight is brightest just
before the horizon starts
to disappear. We are the
unblooming of hanging plants,
the ants crawling around
the hard plastic. We are
the fingers undone from each
other, the chapter unwritten.

Kendall A. Bell
Lies

Fill me with line after line of
deception—anything to make me
believe that the sliding doors
will stay open, a prelude to a
merge, that we will be the surge
of flood. Document this union with
blood, with the friction of struck
matches, the spark of flame. Bodies
are kindling, are dried leaves
desperate to ignite. We bruise and
scrape, we slide and subterfuge.

Kendall A. Bell
The truth is a saw blade

is an ending, at a cafe table,
the sound of exhales, fingers
untangling in permanence. The
truth is always complication,
is the lie that cannot be
overcome. The truth is that
love is only buried in shallow
dirt, to be forever exhumed,
even in separation of miles,
of bodies. The truth is that
we are all an abandoned drive
in theater, a movie ending that
leaves the chill of a deep chasm.

Gail Bello
Most Massive Golden Shovel
After Madeleine George

I am a child, blind to my size. My body is just itself, in a time when
I have no sense of my own plumpness or how the limbs, hips, waists and tummies
of the other little girls in my community theater Xmas show are slimmer than mine. We are
all wearing the same dress, pure white faux silk angels with metallic gold embellishments. There is no
time to restage without me, so when Mr. E. says I'm too big for the dress, my mother and I stay longer
after rehearsal for a sweet old seamstress who gently wreaths her needle of nickel and steel like a little
magic wand, through the fabric, never piercing my skin. She gives me room to take form as a girl
in the dress that was always too small to contain me, a fat angel, proud and cute.

Gail Bello
What's in Fashion

In tenth grade english I read *Macbeth* shocked to find the line *liver of blaspheming Jew*.
When I questioned the teacher she said that back then, Antisemitism was “fashionable”
as codpieces, corsets, ruffs and farthingales, the style of the day was hate
for those with whom I share such a blasphemous liver, nose and blood.
While I was disheartened by this moment of education,
I just had to accept the trend.

History class would show a resurgence of this trend.
In Germany where they'd decide to gas the Jews
because Hitler made blaming us for the world's problems fashionable
as girdles, shoulder pads, bobby socks and utility dresses, the look of the day was hate
of those who shared my traditions, culture and blood.
There must be education

because acts of violence are bred from a lack of education,
this is a common trend.
In Squirrel Hill Pennsylvania, there were some Jews.
And being a Nazi has once again been made fashionable
as brand logos, snapbacks, streetwear and athleisure, the fad of today is hate
of those alive like me who share this earth, this country and blood.

(What's in Fashion, continued, stanza break)

A man felt entitled to spill that blood.
And here I am, just living here in the place I chose to get a higher education,
fearing someone nearby will decide to try out the trend
for themselves. And now, my Hamsa, Star of David, Chai and Tree of life Jew-
elery suddenly feel very fashionable
to me as protection charms to ward of this hate

like the witches who maybe had no hate
for any of the bits of beings in that cauldron of bubbling, boiling, blood.
Maybe speaking the language of the oppressor, was part of their education
as they endeavored to survive this intersectional trend.
Because like that now liverless Jew,
they were blaspheming too, maybe they found it fashionable.

But being Jewish is not fashionable.
I am not on a runway. I am running away from hate.
There is no escape from those who deny the humanity of my body, soul and blood
And dreading that I will become breaking news, interrupting someone's education.
I don't want to trend.
On computers, televisions, smartphones or newspapers, the face of a slain Jew.

Gail Bello
3 Women Lost in 2013

April 9th 2013: Lexi

My Theater camp companion. Although I only knew her briefly, Eight weeks across two summers.

She, the vivacious belter of power ballads taken in her sleep by her own heart's unknown irregular rhythms.

I took scissors to the lime cotton of the t-shirt on which she signed a sharpie autograph. The "L" swirling out of a treble clef and her Canadian pride showing:

"Don't forget your Amie Francaise!"

I had always thought all the world's a stage, but for the first time, it felt as though its set is about to be striked and my character could be written out of the script at any time.

October 12th 2013:
Aunt Sue

That demon Parkinson's had its trembling control of her body. But through the tremors, bug eyes and drool,

I saw her, he 1960's rebel Lover of The Beatles, cats, white chocolate and sprinkles, but ahead of her time with adult coloring books. Her completed works taped to those sallow nursing home walls. Orange and green marks jutting out of calicos in the grass.

Joggling in her chair
In that horrid place
Wondering if I was truly living. Her last question to me:

"Do you get out much?"

No.
Not enough.

December 6th 2013:
Gran

The incredible shrinking woman fell out of bed. And though she wore her hair in stiff curls like Betty Boop, She was a Negative Nancy She always had a death wish and thought all her doctors were quacks.

But only with her loss did I realize that her leeriness came from love. I think back to when Over bagels and coffee She admitted:

"I love that you like everything, and you enjoy everything, because everyone on my side of the family is so negative."

Perhaps she was comforted that I could not yet see the morbid side of enjoying. Everything cherishable, perishable, fragile, precious, temporary.

I never wanted to live in a body. I want to exist in some realm where my feet never touch the floor and my head never twitches. I want to float, unnoticed and unfeeling, where men can never look at me and whisper about my boobs or thighs or ass. no one can ever touch me while I lie petrified and pull my own womanhood out from inside me. I tell my parents I won't ever forgive them for creating my existence inside of this body, instead of a sage plant or a moth or a happy banana slug. they tell me to stop being dramatic. tonight, the man who raped me likes my pictures on instagram and I dream with his hands around my neck. I wake up and still feel my throat burning and throbbing. this body hurts. it aches from every movement I make. I am trying to make it into a home but it swelters and shutters and warps beneath my touch. I am trying to love this body but am coming to grips with the fact that it never liked me much either. my body exists to taunt me for how little control I have over it. it sticks its tongue out at me before screaming. we are both miserable.

Wanda Deglane
June (reprise)

June has long eyelashes like a child / and I'm barely noticing them now
/ June is unusually soft this year / swimming in sixties before rocketing
to the nineties / but never quite hitting those 110's we're so used to /
we don't know what to do with ourselves / when we're not peeling our
thighs off leather seats / June moves in silence / makes itself a banana
smoothie before gazing thoughtfully out the kitchen window / *are you
okay?* / I ask, feeling its forehead with the back of my hand / it doesn't
answer until late that afternoon / while we watch the cats sleeping
sprawled in their flowerbeds / *I want to have steady hands / I don't
know who I am when I'm not boiling* / and I answer, *me neither* / we
venture out to California, June and me / not to the beach this time,
but to blooming fields so vibrant / my eyes turn somersaults in my
skull / June carves a bouquet into my arm and calls it *resilience* / and
I'm almost disappointed with how little it hurts / we're unrecognizable
in this light, June and me / our edges are rounded but we look so spent
/ like falling in love right after hitting the pavement / I tell June / *I
wonder who I'd be if the misery hadn't swallowed me so young* / June
shrugs, like it doesn't matter either way / *you'd be no one near as tough
or tender.*

today hurts a little less.

my brother threatens to drive us into a wall again,
his rage as tangible as burnt metal scraps flying
across asphalt, another red light and he's seeing
red. we could've been siamese twins once,
connected by one furiously screaming heart. two
wild heads, two bodies splayed spider-like from
the ribs. I had to slice myself away to survive, let
him keep my half because he needed it much more
than I did. he's become so much I am terrified of
and I want to tell him there's life beneath his anger,
peaking green out at the carnage. a whole person
babbling newborn outside his hurt, waiting to become
him. I want to tell him, *I want to love you but you
make it so impossible. I want to dull your edges but
I keep cutting myself and I'm almost bled dry.* all his
weight's on the gas, he doesn't know his way around
the brakes or the words *I'm sorry*. he only knows how
to spew venom and curse god, lives like his one
purpose is to let death engulf him in flames. but I
will throw myself from this vehicle, ash-covered and
grief-shaken. I won't look back at the wreckage. and
I will teach myself to stop feeling guilty about it.

my mind has floated away from my body,
hovering at the ceiling like a freshly
murdered ghost girl. my roommates'
voices overlap, dance circles around
my holographic ears, more sound than
sentences. when I leave, they'll wonder
what drugs I must be on. I trudge out
in the cold in a t-shirt and skirt because
my skin needs to remember there's
still time. the cold does nothing to tether
my head back to my throat. my body
is flickering, more off than on. at
the supermarket at the corner, I reach
for one of those pudding cups I used to
love as a little girl and my hands pick up
an 8-pack of mountain dew several
aisles away. [*what am I wearing again?*
would my corpse be identifiable?] I stagger
across an unfamiliar grass field dragging
more food than I can afford, more than
I have room for [*subconsciously, I am*
stockpiling for the end of the world.] every
time my brain shivers, I can't tell where
I am. either it's snowing in phoenix
or the stars are finally scattering seeds
into my hair. my mind is floating away
from my body, but it will resurface in
a few days, concerned at the new cuts
and bruises strewn all over my hands.
in my dreams, I beg myself not to wake up.

persephone, I confess / I turn my pain
into homoromanticism / each synapses
dripping sweet and syrupy / persephone,
every Tuesday in this life has crystallized
into a girl / who beds the sun and makes
paper cranes from monogrammed
stationary / who twines catholic guilt
around knife-tipped eyeliner / dots her kisses
in neon pink gel pen / and I am hopelessly
in love with her / I'd sell my summers just
to know the backs of her fingers / I eat
the dry laughs that fall from her lips / and,
persephone, I swear it is enough / every
little frosted death melts from the trees /
your greened hands pawing out of a
graveyard / she doodles rainclouds in
the corners of her notebooks / her eyes
like spring hurricanes / and it is enough.

Nathan Dennis
This Boy is a Cathedral

I blamed my emptiness on my Romanesque chubbiness:
An awkward amalgam of thickened walls and stunted growth.
So I stripped the marble from my belly,
And carved myself into erasure.

Starving after renaissance musculature,
I hammered my marble into submission.
I pulverized it.
I hollowed my ribcage to a rib vault,
Pried my clavicles to belfries,
Twisted my sternum to a spire.

I enshrined my fatless heart
Under gossamer strands of sinew,
Draped over bones: a caged reliquary
Framed in the stained glass where I stood,
Scouring my naked body:
A master mason, unrelenting in his criticism,

Hacking away at any imperfection,
Until all that remained of me
Was the Gothic skull of Plague and Death
Who trumpeted our victory:
“This boy is a Cathedral.”
“This boy is a Cathedral.”

I came to,
In the hot sun with a reed in my hand.
A beveled edge that I pressed in the mud
To make pretty markings.
Markings that I arranged in lines
And the lines meant something.
Many times, when the sun shone,
People would walk over,
And look at my markings
And say how nice they looked
And thank me for making them
And say how much they made them think.
They liked my markings.
It was nice to hear how much they liked my markings.
So I would say thank you.
But the sun was hot
And I had to make the marks where the light was,
So people could see them.
And I was very thirsty.
So I said I was thirsty.
I made markings that said I was thirsty.
And the people nodded and said that making markings was thirsty work.

The world is not a box

it is a glass-green meadow
with a huge heavy sky above it
and a kite careening through the air
and handfuls of violets
and maybe a heaven or two
so we have something to wish for

and oceans of daisies and sunlight
yellow as marigolds,
a prairie aching with bent grass

and lakes deep as black wounds
with the winds scissoring surfaces
into tiny jagged teeth
like mountains growing
out of the soil

the world is full
of things that call and screech
and blow and move
that walk and creep out of their places

¹ Bric-a-brac comes from the French bricolage, which means something made up of various, mixed pieces; it's also referred to "making do."

(Bric-a-Brac, continued, stanza break)

the world is not a box

it has a heart
and ears and branches and hands
that heal, of course—of course

and hope, hope in the breathing
of trees and birds

the birds
who find little forgotten remnants
of string or fragments of broken
hearts and small crumbs
of everything—

the bits and pieces
of the whole world
they carry in their beaks
and gently fashion into nests.

Sarah A. Etlinger
Of Love; or, the Pansies

i.

We are not only what we belong to.

We are bigger than that and yet so small
like fingers of honeysuckle
tickling the vines that hug the house

and the fence and the birds
as the scent seeps out to dissolve
in the air. In lungs. In light.

Our eyes and ears and fingers
remind us and our tears how it all sounded
when we hid under curtains

of light. Of love. And there were wings
and flowers that held wind's colors
fragrant as youth and day and new.

Maybe to exist is to think always about breeze,
the leaves in summer light
in their rhythm of liquid stillness;

to bathe in green and freckles of purple and white,
not to stop. To be. To love.
This is not what it is to stop.

(Of Love; or, the Pansies, continued, stanza break)

ii.

I could never stop loving you.

Not with the way your eyes carry
sapphires too holy for earth.
Not the way your body
haunts dusk and the shape of every hour.

Not the way your hands carry tears
as if they were marbles of dawn
and morning light.

Light conjures spiderwebs
when it wants us to notice it.
Notice it holy in the bend of trees.

Maybe the best thing about light is that it bends.

How could we ever stop without bending
along the curve of it all,
the curve of the earth at night?

To stop is to not have a heart
that loves you—
and memories to keep you always in comfort
like pansies keep velvet always as their bodies.

This is what they are—all they are, and beauty.

Sarah A. Etlinger
Time Equals Distance Over Speed

The thing is, there are many ways to measure time:
seasons, years, eons, hours, sunlight

there's the way time passes when we're driving
in a car, scenes pausing for less than seconds
before rearranging themselves back into blur

there's the way light curtsies on summer leaves
in a flamenco with the sky

there's the spaces between breaths,
brief when you're with me
long as your sleep

there are egg timers and sand
timers and many many millions of parsecs

there are ways to measure spaces between words
syllables, phonemes

(Time Equals Distance Over Speed, continued, stanza break)

ways to measure distance: it's 87 miles (exactly)
to get to you, or 1 hour and 22 minutes
(less if the wind is right and there's no traffic)

there's the way wind slows us down
or can make things take longer or lets us fly
like quicksilver along the invisible angles
we call the earth

there's the hour clouds become angels
shifting and remaking all the things we'll ever see
and how long it takes to notice one thing
or the other before it all disappears

there are stops and lines and spaces
to measure even insignificant things
yet nothing—

nothing measures the lengths
I've gone to forget the things
I should not want.

Kristin Garth
A Planting Song

Do you believe I am entombed—a box
of bones you could exhume and count
components of a corpse—that I will rot
alongside your remorse? Will I amount
to nothing more than a lone headstone
to mar your pristine lake shore, cleared by you
but undefined—negligibly as known
as adolescent minds, like mine construed
to be insane—or addled from the heat
and pain? Was I naive enough to think
I could explain how woods defeat bedsheets,
ancient griefs, offer nectar you could drink
to blossom worlds if you were to devour
power? You will believe I am a flower.

When I die,
no, after I die, long enough after
that the flesh is gone and the bones
are clean, then please take the bones
apart. Use them to make art. Use the tiny
bones of the feet and hands
for jewelry, embed stones, string
on delicate chains. Stand my ribs upright
one next to another, tie feathers and bundles of herbs
in bright cloth to their tips, hang a row
of chimes between each two,
leaving room also
for safe passage for small creatures.

You get the idea.

And then my skull. Oh this is the part
I do not like to think of, the empty sockets,
the poor broken teeth, the no longer smiling
jaw that seems to grin, but there it is,
the skull that was mine. Carve a tattoo
into the brow, of the text of a verse
of some small poem or other, you
pick which one. Then for the eye sockets please
place ribbons, blue and gray and silver,
dangling down. I know they will not really
look like tears, but we can pretend they will.

(Death Wish, continued, stanza break)

In my mouth, what was my mouth,
I want you to place a scroll, partially unwound,
upon which mathematical formulae
are scribed in some kind of invisible ink
which imply the location
of a storied treasure horde,
and the skull itself
lodge firmly
in a tall tree.

Perhaps one day someone will unravel the clues.

There will be no prize for doing so, only
the knowing of it.

What I will have out of this
is a skeleton that frames
a larger interior than any
it held in life.

Perhaps then
I can breathe easy.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPEDIMENTS CAUSED BY RECENT HYSTERIA

Not wanting to prolong my contrariness,
I canceled several appointments
and went for a long walk.
The birds singing were surprisingly off key,
although flying above oppressive criticism.
The city's ocean loomed blue and flash.
Two others and myself
stood on the single arch bridge
and watched a plethora of raincoats
look for enlightenment underneath.
I stopped at a cafe and ordered
tea with two buttered scones.
The waitress was chatty
and suggested I join a tour group
which I did despite knowing the city well.
The guide was intense
spewing facts and words with cold passion.
His hair ignored the situation's solemnity
and danced as if restraint would never do.
I passed the cafe again as it was closing.
The waitress recognized me and waived.

Cassidy Jones
New Found Light

I found my way through the dark of the night.
Through roads and dirt paths when the moonlight was hidden behind
the clouds.
I found my way through the overgrown tree branches and vines with
no one to help me but myself.
Through the days where the sun never rose and my eyes refused to
open.
I was the one to finally let the light in once again.
I began tearing apart my own walls and letting the love and happiness
pour in through the cracks.
The amount of times I lost myself in the darkness of the night can
never compare to the feeling of the light of day.
I stopped letting the branches and vines restrict me from growing and I
began to grow myself.
My whole world seems to have shifted from the darkest colors to the
brightest hues.
I'm no longer afraid of the dark because I have become filled with
light.

A moment of silence
A deep breath to calm my nerves
An unusual feeling rushes through
my veins and soothes my heart
The darkest parts of myself have found a light to bring them back to life

The world has become warm again
The cloudy days haven't seemed so dull
And the cloudless days seem more beautiful than before
Happiness seemed like a foreign feeling to me
One I hoped for but could never quite get a hold of
Always at the tip of my fingers but never close enough to grasp

Everything that once broke my heart found a way to hold me hostage
from any happiness I could've ever known
I desperately searched for a way to free myself from the ropes my sadness
tied me up with
My heart and soul trapped, tied up - never to know any other feeling
I was bitter and tired with a heart too heavy to go on

Seemingly overnight the way I viewed the world changed
The ropes loosened each day and I could feel something again
It felt like I was falling in love with life again

It felt like what I imagined being happy to feel like

Griffon Kaye
all my blessings

all my blessings come down at two am like hidden constellations
didn't lose my keys or crash my car,
cat shedding into my coffee, coffee left in the jar
all my breaths move slow, because
there is a universe in which the house is burning down
but it is not this one-

all my miracles move in silence while the streets are sleeping
stolen peace between the sharp-edged pieces of life
all my bruises bloom and fade
as if to say see how it only hurts a little, now,
taking your lumps, how you got off light
as the dawn that's coming.

don't ask me to smile pretty
or sit in traffic- I met god last week in a dream
she sang to me and wrapped me in petals of snow.
came to with a cough I couldn't shake and
walked right back into the storm.

pull the devil out of me
through the knots in my back while I curl over my keyboard
at midnight. the kid downstairs has the same cough as me
like we're a pair of dying prophets
calling down separate apocalypses.

Sunken.
At the bottom
of the oceans, only
noticed by the quietest ones
above.

Will you spend all day staring at the sea?
Take your boat and sail across the water.
I'm going, too—or you could come with me,
I know the way. I am my mother's daughter.

I am my mother's daughter. My mother
knew how dangerous the water was, how easily
a child might sink near the farthest edge of a pool, how easily
they might go unnoticed, how a sailboat could be blown away
too far to be rescued. Will you spend all day staring at the sea?
I know; I'm scared, too. When I was young, I jumped in a pool,
sliced open my skin and put blood in the water.
A week later, I did it all again.

(Ocean Sonata, continued, stanza break)

What do you think is the purpose of sailing?
In the shipwrecks we find sunken treasure, in the ghost ships,
mysteries; in the stories I heard growing up they say all the heroes
sailed across the oceans to find a place to call home.
I know the way. It leads to the blue-black of the ocean floor,
the place where even precious metals are tarnished
and the skeletons of seafarers rest in peace, almost forgotten
noticed only by the quietest of us.

Will you spend all day staring at the sea?
Take your boat and sail across the water.
I'm going, too—or you could come with me,
I know the way. I am my mother's daughter.

Above,
noticed only by the quietest ones
of the oceans, only
at the bottom,
sunken.

Callan Latham
On Making Raspberry Pie

I cut cubes of frozen butter to make a pie.
The birdhouse is slick with rain. Every time
the pond swells I find a nest in my hair,
a weaving of seashells, old salt. Here, the path
thickens. Over water the air becomes a mirror,
cracked in the places where your eyes fit just
right. The oven implodes itself just as the timer
makes it sing. Crust around the static ground
folds into a pastry, brown and burnt and
buttery. I measure the weakness it takes to stand,
one teaspoon after another. The drawers are
cluttered with spoons, banging and bashing into
each other like heads, like hollow ships. Nails
rot away and leave the wall, a pressure point
for plaster. The sun doesn't forget the days
it succeeded. My fingers burn like the crumbs
in the bottom of the oven. The rain does not stop.
It does not know. I reach to you and red feathers
come away in my hand. I wish you could feel
the hardness of my spine again. It flutters in the wind.

Callan Latham
Contemplating Existence in a Strip Mall

Waiting in a Chinese restaurant the
door is open and the breeze decides
to feast, intermittently, on wind chimes
clattering like teeth against chopsticks
it reminds me of when we were just beginning
something so ready to be awakened
as if afraid it would end before it could take hold
so order the spring rolls and
wait in the buzzing evening light
and listen as the woman takes calls,
writes down what the customers say

and I sit in the chair by the door
by the fridge full of two-liter Diet Cokes
(free with your meal if you spend \$30)
and I think of you, hands knotted
in something like prayer
I'm with you as the day fades
my lips still taste like you
and my thumb drags down your cheeks
to wipe away the tears and you do the same
to me, bartering our heartbrokenness like currency
it's my turn to pay for dinner, please

and sometimes I think you love me too much
for who I am
but you always laugh when I say things like that,
so I study the wallpaper, marvel at its
peeling red splotches and I can feel
your eyes on me, marveling at the simplicity of me,
so I grab the brown paper bag with the smiley face on it
(*have a nice day*)
and push past the wind chimes
and think of you

In the postcard the children sit perched
on the ledge of an unbroken sidewalk
in Paris. Her hands clasped in her lap,
his hand angled toward her. They
are seven or maybe eight and flirting—
innocent as bees drunk on pollen, bumbling
and gentle. They have no way of knowing
their nights will soon be filled with the shriek
of air raid sirens, that bombs will sing
through the air, an unending
dirge. When I was in Paris I didn't
look for the strike marks of bombs.
Instead I bought expensive lingerie
and ate chocolate crepes and ignored
my imploding marriage. The trip
was my idea, the city I'd lusted for
since I was a teenager. My husband,
indifferent to travel and French wine,
tolerated everything but me. We
separated two weeks after we
returned, the suitcases pulled again
from the attic and filled with his
things. I taped the postcard to my
bathroom mirror, a reminder
of a time before the destruction.

Courtney LeBlanc
They Call Us Siamese

We grew together, our lungs joined as one giant breathing wing, each controlling one hand, one leg. We floated in the fluid of our mother's womb, her belly growing abnormally large. The ultrasound showed our development – the way we began to separate but then held fast, refused to let go of the other. The doctors convinced our mother to end us so now we hover forever in formaldehyde, our arms clinging to the other's back, fused to our spine in a permanent embrace.

Richard LeDue
Third Date

I hate when the middle is still frozen,
what was supposed to be hot
cold on a fork washed by hand,
and I chew and swallow because
it would be impolite to complain
after she cooked all afternoon,
after I kissed her cheek
when she moved towards my mouth.

Richard LeDue
My Dead Neighbours

He used to cook breakfast naked
(she used to tease him about that)
like in their first apartment,
where the elderly landlord
left his dead daughter's room untouched
because he still felt her suicide
nine years later (they never told me
if the girl left a note). Grease splashed him
more than once and they'd embrace.
The bacon burned on those mornings,
but it was cold long before they were.

D.S. Maolalai
The best chinese restaurant

he told me
in the village
that their best
chinese restaurant
was shut down - it had been connected
by the back wall
to a veterinary clinic
specifically for putting down animals. the sad eyes
of dogs
looking up at their owners, unable to understand
their legs
going cold.
fuck it. death visits
when you're out
and doesn't leave a message.
no, I won't do it.
make up
your own
punchline.

Neha Maqsood

Zolpidem may cause hallucinations and dizziness

I only see God in
dreams and Arabic
calligraphy
on an off-white canvas;

Fire embers burn through
August and tea leaves leaving
behind green noises
and accusations.

The target kills of a
floral printed shirt as
chapped lips stutter over Urdu
literature and

the whiteness of scalps
flakes off into the
scalding tea as they weep
reading my palm lines,

we thought we were growing up in
cahoots; shape shifting
co-conspirators
sliding along latitudinal axes
and envisioning the faces of princes
and prophets,

but we were merely
outliers.

Neha Maqsood

the conversations girls have at midnight

i asked her did you hear about the monsoon rains killing 15 in Pakistan
do you want to become a Wall Street banker or retain your sensibility
how does depression metastasize within things i touch why can't i be
fluently bilingual without compromising on my native language why is
fluency in our colonisers language an indicator of our worth how do
we stop feeling 'lesser than' the white people at university do you know
that white people are surprised we exist but the diaspora knows we do
do you think Allah will forgive me for my indecency or is jahannum
my next destination speaking about going to hell, how do i look into
my conservative mothers eyes and tell her that i'm not her little girl
anymore how do I tell daddy that medicine is his career goal and not
mine how many times do I reiterate to aunties that I'm not a child
producing factory but would rather retreat to the mountains &
dissolve lakes into diamonds do you think trumps' america is better or
worse than johnsons' england i ask her if these anxious thoughts are
recurring does she know the world bailed on us?

jahannum - hell

We meet sometimes, like any old friends do
But your sweet voice, a soothing brew
Stays with me, longer than I'd like
It hits a nerve, somewhere deep, a lovely strike
to the emotions, bottled deep inside of me
Not forgotten, just ignored, they can't be set free
And your unbound smile, makes me come undone
Like I don't know this is how you are with everyone
I can take several more nos, in the hope of a yes, but for what?
When the answer kills all hope, and makes me stop
But, what you say, forever remains within
my bunch of pleasant memories, we stay akin
Nothing will change, I'll do what I always do, I'll loom
You should know, the social recluse is my nom de plume.

P.S. Nolf
If a Pony Penned a Poem

Here comes the two-legged friend.

Is it carrots or apples today?

Ginger snaps or peppermints?

Better than spring green grass.

Heavens no more broccoli.

Oh no, she is carrying that head trap thing.

Time to distract.

A bow for a biscuit.

A spin for a scratch.

Does she laugh? Try again.

Path is boggy. I lend her a butt for balance.

How sad to have only two legs.

Does she see the grass?

There's grass over there.

I point with my nose but she doesn't care.

We reach the pen, time to trot. Let's not.

It's now time for man-nip-you-lation.

I stand on the tire, I knock over the cone.

She laughs. The peanuts come out.

No more starvation.

Hava Özbas
Comparison

I am the reflection that shows up in a puddle of water when you look in my direction with eyes glassy. Don't be fooled by the calmness I radiate. For I am not the water. Yes, I pull. Yes, I push. And yes, I destroy. I exist because I had to. Now I am asking: what are you more?

Ada Pelonia
not a clairvoyant

today is the day
i feel like shutting
down curling up
like a baby in the
womb of my mother
hearing only her
voice & every
thing else muffled
today is expected
as i've said yesterday
and weeks ago

Amanda Pendley
Fortune Cookies

Sometimes I go through days where I will buy a whole bag of fortune cookies from the Panda Express drive-thru and eat them all in one sitting, just so that someone can tell me something good.

I know how to calm myself down.
My compulsions are often drowned out by sound
so the snap of breaking them open is much more productive than
breaking bones or mirrors or hearts.

It may not be as satisfying as my need to throw a bowling ball at
everything that wills to hurt me and hear it crash, but it is better than
burying myself in the broken glass.
Most of my life consists of teaching myself to convert my rage into
something manageable so that I don't end up breaking myself again.
And there is something to be said about the fact that I follow through
with it.

I snap to count time when I feel panicked
I use my typewriter to distract me from the screaming behind the door.
I hoard bubble-wrap to calm down my ticks.
I prefer shoes with a chunky heel so that I can focus on the noise when
I walk
I have learned to adapt, and that is proof
that I care about myself enough not to break my skin open, not to start
the scratching, the peeling, the analyzation, not to turn myself inside
out in attempt to understand: the thought that it's not worth it to fall
apart every time I feel like breaking something drastic.

(Fortune Cookies, continued, stanza break)

So I break fortune cookies so that I can have someone tell me something good.

And it almost starts to feel like a conversation.

They read “good fortune lies ahead” and I hope it does.

I hope I become rich in all of the things that make me feel.

“Your warmth radiates upon those around you” and I am learning to believe it.

I am learning to accept that I am worthy of love and light.

And it is a start.

I should not equate my state of mind to a manufactured message in the folds of a fortune cookie, but it is a start.

I will start to write my own manifestations and turn my words into predestinations, and I will tell myself something good.

And continue to break open my bad moods and only remember the feeling as a nutshell of what I used to be, and will inevitably be again.

And my fortunes may come true, or they may not, but regardless I will still be here to write and fulfill them.

To hurt and to heal,

to breakdown and sew myself together with a new needle to puncture through skin,

to pierce the preconception,

and to finally get through to me that I made the right decision to destroy things other than myself.

Amanda Pendley
Muscle Memory

There is absent space in my chest where pain used to be
And the muscle memory has not yet learned to let go
It has not yet been filled or replaced by a new substance
There is no donated blood or honey to fill in the gap
No replacement for rot or a mold for something better to come along
It just remains vacant like an empty hotel room until the next murder
mystery is set to take place
And it will already know the best ways to remove stains from the
carpet and to hide the body in the bathtub and to rig the doorknob
with a lock that can't be picked

This space is apprehensive and prepared
Knowing much too well that our visitor will return like an abusive
relationship
Take me back
Take me back
I'll never leave you again *I promise*
Give me one more chance

So, I take out the bleach
 And the rags tainted pink
 And the air freshener that smells like apple cinnamon

And I forget what pain first felt like as quickly as I start again

I can feel my body adjusting even before it comes
Like a prediction
 Like a tradition
 Like a form of conditioning,
of knowing how to define familiarity and how to depend on it
as if it were life support even when it's poison
How to crave it like a morphine drip, like a sign of salvation

(Muscle Memory, continued, stanza break)

When I was a training en pointe I got used to the company of
unfamiliar feeling
Of adjusting to ache
Of allowing pain and tension into my body to stretch my tendons and
elongate my limbs instead of pulling at them like a stubborn door
handle
It was always an easing motion, like lowering myself into the bathtub
It made me trust, even if it hurt, even if it was coated in betrayal
It was an act of practice
Practicing to make our bodies strong and full of dichotomy
Heavy yet weightless
Sharp yet fluid
With sloping arms and curving middles.
I never knew my body could feel like a storage vessel.
For knowledge.
 For pain.
 For memory.

It is a well-known fact that the more you repeat an action, the easier it
becomes
That is where the phrase “practice makes perfect” comes from
And I thought that if I could channel every aspect of my life
 that was losing shape,
 and falling apart,
 and becoming limp and helpless
into my control over my body, it would make me feel like I was in
control of my mind.

(Muscle Memory, continued, stanza break)

But when my pointe teacher wrote on the mirror the words “practice makes...” with her blunt black marker and instructed us to finish the phrase

It didn’t end with perfect

The answer was permanent

And she was right

I was molding myself into something I couldn’t undo.

The more you repeat an action, the easier it becomes

So unknowingly, I built, and I molded, and I sculpted myself to be a granite effigy: cemented and unable to move on.

I was used to the routine

So time and time again,

I’d take out the bleach

And the rags tainted pink

And the air freshener that smells like apple cinnamon

Asking me to take it back

To let it back in

I don’t know how to sever the tie without my statue of a body shattering completely.

(Muscle Memory, continued, stanza break)

She called this response muscle memory
How after doing something so many times, your body knows exactly
how to align.

Spine straight
 Ribcage in
 Relevé locked.

Reminisce
 Blame yourself
 Get lost

Until it was automatic
She said “you won’t even have to think about it. Your arms will be
strong, your ankles crackling and reaching, your chest lifted, and your
ribs tucked in as if holding your breath”

And I am holding my breath
Waiting for that all too familiar feeling
But also, waiting for a day when my muscles won’t remember

Amanda Pendley
Room 502

If time could be measured in words
I would handwrite novels until my knuckles bled
Analyze every single piece written by Stephen King twice
Type poems so complex so that the meaning gets lost
Construct every screenplay to give you the ending you deserve
Switch my major to songwriting and throw in a full-on band
Become a motivational speaker to find the right tone
Scream the lyrics at a rock concert so loud they land on the stage
And whisper to myself that I'd find the right words eventually
I'd find the right time eventually

I hope you know that as much as I love words
there are not nearly enough perfect ones in existence
And there is not enough time left for me to find them

You know my voice as well as you know your own
Who knows, maybe you even hear me in your head sometimes
So just imagine the syllables coming out in that fragile way I always let them go
These words are made of glass and if they shatter
it will sound a lot like my headspace while writing this

To the women of many words; to the women who can alter time:
I found a home in you in room 502
Each and every one of your stories deserves to be heard by the world
And the stories that we sculpted together still stand as a monument to who we will become
as our plotlines wind down unknown alleys and onto sacred grounds.

I would write forever if it meant our story could withstand the tests of time
And I think I will.

Have you ever smelled death?
It's not always the stench of a burning carcass
which will cause you to look away
a breaking heart doesn't make sound
the rotten doesn't always smell

the ripped twigs of the fallen oak
doesn't always rub its pain in the wild
there is something secretive about the pain
it moves surreptitiously

the thin blade of moss capitulates
encumbered by the frost
a frozen death:
the tip of the pitcher flower
slowly circling and devouring life

Death moves slowly
like the slithering snake,
moving towards the nest of the frantic sparrows
devouring their existence slowly

(Not with a bang, continued, stanza break)

a body slowly moving—
losing itself to the air
like the mothballs;
neatly tucked in the old crochet shawl of my granny
her memories lost to time
from her vibrant mind,
like the peels of a chipped sepia-tinged wall

Death always comes slowly
a whimper of the last breath:
those warm sweaty hands
once tightly clasped,
now losing slowly to time.
Death doesn't always come with a bang.

Loneliness draws a wedge between our souls
Silence is neatly tucked within the folds of our skin. Waiting to be discovered.
That fleeting touch;
the filigree sense of acceptance.
Dawn brings a veil of quietness over this town of mine
when the sparrows fly together blinded by the need for survival.
Robbed of their shadows by the evening sky.

A distance, a mourn of a whisper
in the quietness of the night
Fingers clutching the soft pillows a little more
the drapes unable to carry the soothing winds
in my sepia-tinged room

There are fear and anxiety mixed in equal measure
As I gulp my day down with those oval sized white pills.
Trying to dilute the pain with a pint of water.
The pain never dilutes. It keeps churning within our souls;
Keep strengthening its existence.
Gets more potent by the even exchange of breaths.

Creeping around the covers of darkness
with my heart shuddering with the feeling
of its bare existence,
thoughts rummage through my tumultuous mind.
I breathe with the broken raspy breath.
Waiting for the truth, like a wolf in the dark
to appear and reveal its transgression.

“Do not beget me,” you mishear. So we stop before
it gets out of hand. John Cage plays and plays again.
I drop a stone back to where it was. You reclothe
like the dissipating heat of print paper. I part my hair
the wrong way and you don’t tell me. The room
subdues laughter- its manners intact, like a virgin.

“Do not beget me,” I say. But it’s too late. I drown
on the other side of my day of birth. If only
my parents had your forbearance. As a by-product
of the Grandmother Paradox, I live. Isn’t life a tyranny.

“Do not beget me,” protests my melancholy. You leave
an invisible pelt on this pillow as a souvenir, upon which
I cry. The present moment hardens the hard days ahead.
And thank God, we will die.

1

Elevator ascends.
Orange mist snatches us,
tarnished by preterm
disenchantment. We deride
our amateur eye contact.

11

May the sanctimonious pacing in
the narrow room and the golden
silence before that moment
stay.

Amen.

Your black eyes smoldered behind lashes
in the dark like life itself. My lips
incandescenced within yours. We existed in
and out of it involuntarily. Your ferocity
is how I know you're alive. You ask, do you
know the Freudian theories? I think, do not
mention my father.

(Ascension, continued, stanza break)

1

Elevator descends.

My younger self joins us

on our way. Sights of us

she steals in the mirror:

her infallible desire burns

down the plural pronoun.

Hotel lobby returns to you

your sanity and to me

my mundanity. Three walks out

and becomes two. The two kills

each other in the best possible way.

Even the pure sense of loss is a god-sent gift.

A phantom of you and I ascends.

Sometimes I hate poetry. I mean, what's the point of all this ache? Sometimes I'm excited for the day when I am finally empty of words. When poems choose to leave me alone. Leave me in peace. I see a coffee maker and I think "poem." I see a toddler go down a slide and I think "poem."

Just once I would like to see or feel something and not immediately see its beauty. It's exhausting. I think it would be different if I could be one of the beautiful things. I think it would be different if I could be anything other than whatever it is that I am.

I haven't been in love in years. I'm fine with that but it does make poetry difficult to write. What do people write about when they're not in love? I wrote a poem about teeth. Wrote a poem about staying silent. Wrote a dialogue between my now self and my future self. Wrote a dialogue about writing dialogue. I don't share my work with my parents because I use words like fuck and fucking and fucked. Fuck. I am fucking fucked.

(322 Words, continued, stanza break)

There is a moth in my chest,
dusty and yearning for light.
There is a vacuum next to my bed
that I won't use. I won't clean. I'll just
sit here in front of my laptop pretending
I'm writing when really
most of what I'm doing is watching
some terrible movie on Netflix
that I'm sure I'd want to boycott if I
learned the politics behind it.

Most of what I'm doing is learning to be.
It sounds fairly simple but it really isn't when
I spend a lot of my time clicking and scrolling
and clicking and scrolling and clicking and scrolling
and eventually I will run out of things to click.
Eventually I'll have read all the tweets. I'll have
watched all the shows. What becomes of me then?

Rachel Tanner
She Used to Buy Me Lettuce

I'm annoyed by how much I hurt when she's gone.
How all my softness disappears and is replaced
with hard longing. How much light escapes
through the pieces of me she shatters.

Think *prism*. Think *home*. Think me back
to the first time we kissed and she told me
how my gentleness was a welcome surprise
because she had been expecting something else.
Someone else. Some high-up holy lips that
don't dream in color but in black and white
behind libraries and castles and tire stores.

I don't know what I'm saying. I rarely do.
The further she gets from me, the further
I get from me. I spend my nights
staring at the popcorn stucco on the ceiling,
wishing it was real popcorn. Wishing
it was enough to help her miss me.

Angel L Villanueva
If Only

If only I could dial back the years,
Return to days when we were married young,
I would erase the times I brought you tears,
And move your lips to beam to words unsung.
If only you could hear those words in songs,
Then you would know my heart has ached for you;
Regretful for the hurt and all the wrongs
I caused you on those days that I now rue.
If only you could read my aching heart,
You would then understand the pain I hold.
A pain that lingers still and won't depart,
Until the day my blood is running cold.
But now in silver years all I can do
Is love you even more than when we wed,
And treasure all the moments I'm with you,
As I recite the words my pen has bled.

Angel L Villanueva

Salam Wosu

Postcard to a city I've been to only in dreams

It is not a thing of joy how we see only at night behind shut eyelids and
crippled limbs / how I was seduced by your curved hills in my plain
city that sits like a canvas smeared with people / sucking money from
the dry nipples of the earth

Are your beggars also begging for coin instead of cure / faith instead of
feet? Whilst we neglect them on the wayside & cry at their faces on TV
/ Does sweat corrode your roads too & rain stain your clothes /
because as far as I know, we were born into so much haste / even our
aged leaders are still running

You told me dance is your only lingua / because the tongue's pinkness
is just a deception of water washing away blood / When will I come for
you or you for me? & yank me fast by air, slow by land or even slower
by boats / away from this sea of bodies / so even if I die on the way I'll
dance / to your drums all day on you curved hills / & not behind
closed eyes.

Dominic Wright
Poultney River

It has been a little under a year and yet

I still feel my soul locked in a dimensional prison,

Banishing the tiniest bits of happiness my brain desired to seep into the darkest corners of my mind, body, and soul

Until today

When I stood across from the Poultney river,

locking eyes with the ripples in the water where his last inhale was his final one.

I felt it all.

Compassion. Pain. Curiosity. Fear. Existence. Tranquility.
Nothing—All draped over my aching soul.

I wanted to cry. I wanted to protect. I wanted to be at the river that day and offer him my hand.

To save him.

To save me.

To save his loved ones from this unsettling feeling of grief that submerged us in the sea of sorrow.

(Poultney River, continued, stanza break)

Thoughts about life and the whimsical sense of humor that was
painted on his canvas in the days where
his soul was the ray of sunshine on gloomy days,
Vacated each depressing thought that hindered behind every nook in
my head.

A hushed silence cloaked the atmosphere,
The wind brushed away the trail of footprints, I left behind along with
the ash from the fire that burned
the night before,
I planted the seeds I cuffed in my hands across from the spot where his
final breath filled his body.
As the tears trickled down my face,
I felt something that I have never felt through my twenty-two years of
life,
The clarity and closure of knowing that everything that dies doesn't
leave earth.
It exists in the air, plants, water, and our hearts.

SHORT FICTION

Christopher Acker

Something Cold, Something Very, Very Cold

The wind smacks him in the face like he's a somebody in a convertible without a care in the world. After sitting still for three hours, it feels good being in motion again. The further James presses on the accelerator, the stronger the wind blows, and the quicker the knot in his chest unravels.

The air gushing into the car prevents Winona from going any further into her deepening exercise. She opens her eyes and can't resist peering at the speedometer. She then says to her husband, "Would you mind slowing down, Mario Andretti?"

There wasn't any reason in the world the instructor couldn't cram three hours-worth of hypnobirthing materials into two. James counted at least four moments of pointless chatter that could've been eliminated. Even now, ten miles from the instructor's office, it's difficult for him to let go.

But once he sticks his head closer to his window, the air helps curtail his irritability. No longer does it feel like a bodybuilder is giving him a bear hug. With that, he eases his foot off the pedal.

Winona still doesn't feel right. She tries again with her meditation but something blocks her from getting into it. "Would you mind putting on the AC?" she asks after wiping her forehead.

"You're hot?"

"Getting there."

The temperature on the dashboards read a comfortable seventy-seven degrees, certainly not what James considers air conditioner weather, but he figures he can loosen up his strict parameters for air conditioner usage given his wife's pregnant state. He rolls up his window and turns the air conditioner to full blast. He hopes Winona appreciates this momentary display of recklessness.

Specks of dust slips out the vents after nearly a year of hibernation. Once the vents have time to clear their throats, the cool air that finally arrives feels refreshing on his skin.

“Is there anywhere else you want to go?” James asks, feeling calmer than he has all day.

“Home, I guess. I need to practice these new exercises.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I’d like you to sit with me and practice your light touch technique.”

James checks the speedometer before saying, “If you wish.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Why would it be a problem?”

“You hesitated.”

“I was just thinking I was going to watch the Mets. Santana is pitching tonight. But I can watch the game after helping you out.”

Winona leans back onto the headrest. Her eyes drift shut. Her body sinks into her seat cushion. In finding her relaxed state, the certificate on her lap slips towards her feet.

James leans over to grab the certificate. “Careful, honey. You don’t want to get that beauty ruined.”

The gold trim around the certificate’s border glimmers under the sunlight and causes Winona to open her eyes wide. A faint smile soon tugs at the corners of her mouth.

“This *is* a good-looking certificate,” she says. “You can tell they took real care with it.”

“Nothing but the best for my wife,” James says and gives her thigh a good squeeze.

“Maybe I should hang it on the fridge. Looking at it every day might help my confidence.”

“Bad idea,” James says. “You’re going to want to put it in a frame. Preserve it first, then worry about hanging it up somewhere.”

Winona had her suspicions that James was going along with the whole hypnobirthing plan not because he believed in it, but because he just wanted to make her happy. But his suggestion of preservation makes her rethink things.

She then says, “Let’s stop off at Michaels. It’s on the way home.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s on the way home. I’d say it’s in the general vicinity of our route.”

“Do you have anything else planned for today?”

One glance at the speedometer creeping back up to seventy-five torpedoes Johan Santana shutting down the Phillies from his mind. His foot barely has time to ease off the pedal when his wife, who was more intimate with the sensations that poured out of her Civic, detects the sudden surge.

“How many times do I have to ask you?” she pleads.
“Please—slow—down.”

James lets the car coast to an unbearable fifty-five. He watches car after car zip by. His need for accelerated movement is further curbed after he exits highway and reaches the clogged entrance to the mall.

After pulling into an empty parking space outside of Michaels, James asks his wife, “Do you want me to go in for you?”

“Could you?”

He grabs the certificate from off her lap. “What kind of frame do you want?”

“Whatever looks good. I trust your judgment.”

“And if you don’t like what I pick out?”

“I said I trust you.”

James reaches for the keys still in the ignition, but Winona’s hand latches onto his wrist.

“Don’t,” she says. “I need the AC.”

“But the car will overheat,” he warns.

“This isn’t your shitty Cadillac.” For added emphasis, she rubs her hand along the dashboard. “Things operate quite smoothly in here.”

“Just turn off the car if you see the needle go up.”

“And if *I* overheat? Then what?”

James throws one leg out of the car and answers, “Visualize an ice cube or a meat locker. Something cold. Something very, very cold.”

His approach of the automatic door outside Michaels is so swift that the sensor doesn’t detect his movement. James comes within inches of barreling into the glass before he halts, backs up, and tries again. The door opens this time and releases a brutal odor coming from a crate of discounted potpourri. He steps inside and runs right into an invisible cloud of vanilla and peppermint emanating from display of Yankee Candles. The entire store seems like one chemically-enhanced aroma after another. Fresh air suddenly becomes a luxury.

The enormity of the frame selection at the far end of the store doesn’t help matters. James feels both dizzy and confused wandering up and down each aisle that offers hundreds of framing possibilities.

He ends his aimless sojourn by grabbing the first certificate-size frame he can find. He takes a deep breath of the somewhat unpolluted air at the back of the store before trekking to the front of Michaels.

The teenaged cashier stationed at the very last register spots James' frantic approach of the checkout line. She finishes sending out her text and then hollers, "Can I help you?"

Strands of the girl's natural brown hair poke through her red dye. Together with the skull-and-crossbones stud that pierces her eyebrow, James wonders why anyone, let alone a pretty young girl, would hide behind such artifice.

The cashier stops tugging on her stud to scan the barcode on the back of the frame. She fights back a yawn with little conviction, and the yawn transitions into a sigh. She then asks with zero genuine interest, "Did you find everything you were looking for today?"

James can't help but speculate about this flaunter of natural beauty. He wants to know more about her birth story. He'd like to ask what trials her mother went through to bring her into this world, what classes – if any – she took in preparation for the event, if she used a midwife or doula, if she caved into pleasures that came with a needle shoved directly into your spine, and if so, would she recommend it to other mothers-to-be.

Only after he hesitates to slide his Visa through the credit card reader does the cashier notice James drilling her with his eyes.

"What?" she asks.

"This might sound weird but have you ever heard of a doula?"

She considers the question while she puts the receipt into the bag. "What? You mean that kitchen tool that slices up vegetables real quick?"

“That’s a mandolin,” he answers as he whisks the bag towards the door that, this time around, has no problem opening upon his presence. “Close though.”

Three times his knuckles tap on the window. The sound of bone on glass immediately causes Winona, cowering inside the car with her seat fully reclined, to flinch in alarm. Once she sees that it’s only her husband, she waves him to come inside.

“Get down,” she calls out.

The inside of the car feels like an icebox. James checks the gas and temperature gauges. Both cause him alarm.

“What’s going on?” he asks.

Winona points out her window. “Look over there. Tell me what you see.”

James follows her thumb towards Burger King where a heavyset woman stands outside holding a soggy bag of fast food. The door behind her swings open and out comes the woman’s equally-large husband leading their wolf pack of four boys, ranging from five to twelve. Each of them wears a paper crown.

“You mean Fats Domino?” James asks, and while his wife has her attention elsewhere, he lowers the fan.

Winona declares, “That’s the doula.”

“Her?”

“Yes her.”

“Huh,” James says. “She’s rather large, wouldn’t you say?”

Winona ducks her head down. “She looked a lot more trim yesterday. Maybe it was the lighting inside Starbucks.”

“Why are you hiding?”

“I want to see how she interacts with her family before I go any further with her.”

“So you’re taking her for a test drive.”

“Sort of.”

The doula’s oldest boy swipes his youngest brother’s crown and dangles it above his head. The hysterical sobs this causes in the five-year-old prompt his other two brothers to start poking him in the stomach.

James takes his eyes off the circus to ask his wife, “What do you see?”

There is nothing but calm authority in the doula’s strides across the parking lot. The hand she puts on her oldest son’s shoulder is firm, and even though Winona can’t hear the words the doula uses, she imagines they are gentle in tone but unyielding in content.

James sees right through the doula’s Supernanny routine. He gives her points for showmanship and a few more for effort. But when her oldest son returns the crown to his brother’s head and the four of them transition into an impromptu game of tag, James doesn’t know what to say. He turns to his wife, who returns her seat to an upright position. A look of glee is plastered on her face.

Winona lowers her window so she can holler outside, “Hey Linea! Over here!”

The doula scans the parking lot for the source of her beckoning. Once she spots her new client, she throws Winona a friendly wave and approaches the Civic.

“Howdy, stranger,” the doula says and is hit with a refreshing wave of cold air coming from the Civic. “Funny seeing you here.”

Winona says to her husband, “Honey, I’d like you to meet Linea. Our doula.”

James thrusts his arm across his wife’s pregnant stomach and shakes the doula’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you,” he says.

In bending over to peer inside the car, Linea offers James a glimpse of her sagging breasts supported by a bra fit for a grandmother. He tries to look elsewhere, but like a train wreck, finds it difficult to turn away.

Linea tells James, “I’ve never met someone who was more prepared for a natural childbirth than this woman right here. She’s quite inspiring.”

“We are all very proud of her,” he answers and wonders who he meant when he said ‘we.’

From the other side of the parking lot comes a voice that hollers, “Are you coming?!”

Three more shouts of impatience follow.

“Duty calls,” Linea says, “as you will soon find out.”

The doula’s attention shifts to the Burger King bag in her hand. Deep from within the greasy bag she pulls out an apple pie tucked neatly inside a cardboard sleeve.

“You look famished,” she says and hands Winona her untouched dessert. “Remember now. You’re eating for two. You need nourishment.”

The zest with which his wife bites into the apple pie makes James wonder how much the pregnancy has changed her. In all the six years they’ve been together, he has never known her to have a sweet tooth, especially not for sweets processed a thousand times over. Watching her lick the filling off her fingers, James wonders if the old Winona will ever come back.

Six days after her son's death, Sharon stood in the small apartment on Locust Street. Stood as if she desperately wanted instead to sit. With Dana visiting her parents, she figured on four or five hours to accomplish her most pressing short-term goal: collect her deceased child's possessions.

She would have gone about the task with all the fervor of a cheetah bearing down on a gazelle, but for the young girl dozing nearby. The thought of relocating her granddaughter from couch to bed provided Sharon no small torment.

Tragedy had made Sharon a tactile person, and no one refused the touch of a mother in agony. The outpouring from friends and colleagues burst through the noxious clouds of bereavement, revealing her enormous fortune in having people in her sphere that not only spoke the clichés but backed them up. Anna brought enough food for a family of eight. Renee took her shopping. Felicia cleaned the house.

Keeping her son alive was not an issue, for in Sharon's mind he could not be dead so long as she drew breath. That belief roused her from a restless bed each morning. The necessity of routine beckoned, imbuing her with subdued vitality. Maybe death clung to the walls, crept along the carpets, fiddled with the fixtures. Likely, death would not come out in the wash. No use in consulting experts, no point in collecting estimates for comparison's sake. She had one job, and she would do that job.

None of her prior visits, and there had been dozens, involved stepping foot into the bedroom. Part of parenting was realizing that she was not entitled to encroach upon every aspect of her son's life once he was an adult. Realizing all would be fine even if she *didn't* know everything that went on.

Spine straight, shoulders square, she opened the bedroom closet. The local Goodwill would appreciate most of what she found; she would cherish the rest.

Once the closet had been liberated of clothes, it was on to the dresser, one drawer at a time. Up top, all jeans. Further down were shirts deemed unfit for hanging but perfect for lazy days, all frayed hems, stretched necks and stubborn stains. These would serve Sharon well when the time came to hunker down on housework.

In under ten minutes, she'd filled three trash bags. A hand placed on either forehead or chest would indicate how strenuous the effort wasn't.

A bedside dresser was bare save for a small framed picture of Kayla. The single window was concealed by chestnut-and-cream curtains crafted especially for the couple. The crosshatch design struck Sharon as inhibitive, overly cautious. Every morning Jim and Dana rose to the safe sight of intersecting lines.

Sharon reached out a hand to shut the closet door when she saw it. She stepped one foot into the small enclosure to confirm the writing along the back wall, just at her eye level. The letters seemed to have been scrawled out in lead, and were so small they could have realistically appeared across a hospital wristband.

HI MOM J.

Dana requested (in a painfully polite voice) that Sharon clean the bathroom. The older woman imagined she'd be scrubbing the sink, scouring the tub, de-scumming the tile, and running a mop swiftly over the eight by ten space where her son spent his last minutes.

Tub first—likely the most intensive chore. Then, sink. Likely the easiest. Finally, the floor. (Before having a place of her own, and a husband who snorted derisively at the slightest suggestion that he be

involved in a household responsibility other than “pay the goddamn rent,” Sharon didn’t recognize the value of a domestic game plan.)

She flicked the light switch, turning the room from grave-black to asylum-white. She stared straight ahead, taking in the shelves of towels, wash rags and sheets, wondering what effect such harsh illumination would have on someone struggling with what they mistakenly thought was just a nasty headache.

“I’ve been taking like eight Tylenol a day.”

“Honey, forget about your head, you could do some real damage to your stomach lining.”

“I’d rather deal with that than a pounding head all day.”

Jim went quickly. The second his body bucked, the second agony forced the scream from his throat. Before his head struck against the porcelain’s edge, before the rest of him slapped loudly onto the beige tile. Sharon could not keep her gaze from dropping, and when it did, her spirits followed.

The doctor assured a stunned Sharon that her son’s death had been near-instantaneous. The fiancée filled in what she could of the blanks.

He had gone to take a shower. He was shirtless when he died. She’d been pondering the nutritional value of a corn dog dinner when she heard him. He reverberated throughout their apartment.

The dark red stain, close in size and shape to a fifty cent piece, was not required and yet there it was, inches in front of the toilet.

No one’s fault. Such a crazy time for us. People forget things. Overlook things. Avoid things.

Start with the floor, then.

The clipped, cold cadence of a drill sergeant and the agitated naivete of a cadet co-existed within her, guiding her to the kitchen, where she retrieved a bottle of ammonia cleaner. Back in the

bathroom, she stopped up the sink and splashed together a diluted solution. She tossed in a washrag that had been dangling from the sliding bar along the shower door and allowed it to soak. She grabbed the rag, gave a few angry squeezes, and let it drop onto the floor.

Jim had been three years alive when his mother first saw his blood. A typical backyard frolic turned horrific when the boy slipped and smacked his forehead against a fence post. The sudden red slid sickeningly down, dripped onto a shirt covered with orange and white designs. Sharon went from contented to horrified, powerless to do much but scream. Her husband raced outside, assessed the damage, then wordlessly strode back into their house. Within minutes, he was driving them to the hospital, silent with worry for his son and contempt for his wife, both chalk-faced and shaking in the back seat. He was the parent who carried Jim into the emergency room, the parent Jim reached for when the doctor secured the first of five sutures above his left eyebrow.

Ten years since the dissolution of their sacred bond, Sharon still resented Mike Ridenhour for his cool head. She saw his pinched, weaselly face as she scrubbed the bathroom floor. The ammonia aroma was powerful enough to coax forth a wet cough; she spat, most of it striking the bloodstain.

The pricks of sweat along her forehead, behind her ears, down her jawline, all went untouched. She felt as though she'd spent quality time heroically cracking a rib or two.

The sight of Sharon knelt on the floor, attacking what little blood remained with a lioness' ferocity, could have made an onlooker laugh aloud.

Which is what happened.

Sharon's head shot up even quicker than her heart rate. Tracy stood in the hallway, clutching a McDonald's cup and chuckling as she watched her mother wipe away a part of her brother.

"How did you get in here?"

“You left the door unlocked. Not very mindful, Mom. I could have kidnapped Kayla and—”

“Don’t joke about that, Tracy, please.”

Sharon stayed in place to appraise her daughter. A slip in attentiveness to one’s inner and outer selves in the wake of tragedy was hardly unforgivable. Tracy had taken to wearing tops either a bit too large or a bit too long for her body, and if the colors didn’t coordinate, tough.

“I stopped at McDonald’s and got a chocolate shake.” Tracy shook the cup as if expecting the contents to create sound. “Thought I’d share some with the rugrat, but looks like she’s called it a night.”

“She’s clearly a brilliant mind,” Sharon grunted, standing and tossing the dirtied rag into the sink.

“Dad called before I left the house.” Tracy’s voice and face were both admixtures of disdain and disbelief. “I had to check the calendar to make sure it wasn’t Christmas.”

Both mother and daughter had decided, independently, to avoid Mike Ridenhour at Jim’s funeral. Much is made of the indelibility of first impressions, but last words are also notorious for scarring deep and long, and the ones exchanged between the former spouses over the holidays convinced Sharon that few causes are more utterly lost than a double-talking manchild.

“You should wear more striped clothes.”

“What?”

“You should wear more striped clothes. Like shirts.”

“Are you saying I’m getting fat? This milkshake is the only food I’ve had all day, and considering where I got it from, I don’t think it really counts as food.”

“You want to help me clean up?”

“Help how?”

“Well, I just got finished wiping up a two-week-old bloodstain...so why don’t you just tidy up the sink while I start on the bathtub.”

By 10:30, both the bathroom and kitchen were virtually spotless. The two women took seats on either side of a plank of wood considered a kitchen table and began the charade of decompression.

“You tricked me, Mom. You told me short hair was easier to maintain. Look at this.”

“Maybe next time you try and spike up your hair you shouldn’t be so passive-aggressive about it.”

“Did you say ‘spike up’? What other direction does a spike go?”

“Down,” Sharon deadpanned. “Icicles spike downward. And I do not remember telling you that cutting your hair short meant never needing to use product or that you could go a day without running a brush through it. I just said you don’t need to do *as much*. As usual, you heard what suited you.”

Tracy grumbled and flicked at the straw protruding from the milkshake.

Sharon turned towards the living area, where her granddaughter still slept. For a few ticks of time, waking the child up seemed a fine idea. Just to run a hand over her father’s hair. Just to see her father’s eyes.

“Guess there wasn’t a lot of time for Dana to clean up before her folks took her back to their place.”

Sharon frowned. “That’s what mothers are for, I guess.”

“Then Dana should have had *her* mother do it,” Tracy sneered. She wondered how Sharon was keeping the volcano dormant. She could tell it was there, buried and burning, could practically see the lava glow and bubble underneath her skin.

“Seriously, Mom, that doesn’t make you angry? She knew what was in there. She knew you’d see it.”

Sharon sighed. “No, we don’t know that for sure. Dana hasn’t been back here since it happened. It’s very possible she had no idea. So, uh, I’m going to take the rags we used and wash them at the house.”

“Okay, yeah.”

“You were too young, but when Jim was little and had this nasty fall, he bled all over his shirt. I just threw it in a grocery sack and then threw the sack into the trash. I didn’t want to deal with it.”

“We try harder as we get older, I guess?”

“I figured, what the hey, he’s a growing boy, he won’t miss one shirt. Kids go through clothes like crazy. I remember you accidentally tearing your dress and getting so mad you sat down in the kitchen and just started ripping it up. And soon there you are with just your underwear on, surrounded by all this pink cloth that used to be an adorable little dress.”

Tracy chortled. “Was I crying?”

“You *never* cried. That always seemed to bother your father, but I was proud of you for that. I was grateful, really.”

Talk turned to Dana’s—and thus, Kayla’s—imminent relocation. Tracy did the polite thing and expressed regret that the Ridenhour/Fernandez household would not be providing shelter for two additional bodies. Sharon thought briefly of upbraiding her daughter for undue sarcasm—to remind her that they as a family were damn fortunate Kayla would be remaining so close to them—when her eye failed to catch something.

“Where’s the vase?”

Tracy took a sip of blended who-knew. “What vase?”

“The lavender vase I bought them as a gift when they moved in. It was always right there on the sink. Always.”

“Maybe they moved it. When’s the last time you were here?”

“Three weeks ago,” Sharon replied, voice weak. She detected the mounting irritation in her daughter’s words and decided the matter of the missing (or misplaced) lavender vase could rest until the next time she saw Dana.

“I can’t help myself. I need to move the munchkin. Be right back.”

The bedroom light was still on, but Kayla didn’t stir. Nor did she show any signs of breaking slumber as her shivering grandmother leaned over to deposit her, face down, onto the center of the queen-sized bed.

After triple-checking to assure that the child’s cheeks and forehead were warm, that her breaths were coming and going comfortably, Sharon covered her in darkness and did not look back.

Tracy relocated to the couch, sitting as if she desperately wanted to stand back up. Sharon took one quality look into her daughter’s eyes, made a quick read of the mischief frolicking in that glistening jade. Just one pointed question, and she could set Tracy free.

“Here.” Tracy held up the cup. “You keep looking at this like you’re about to tear my head off.” Sharon accepted, not caring to clear the air or come up for any until she’d polished off the remainder of the shake.

“I suppose,” she began, before a coughing fit overtook her. “I suppose I should visit the Hirschbergs soon.”

“Why shouldn’t they visit you? You’re the one who had to bury their child.”

“It’s smart to stay on friendly terms with Dana’s family.”

“Because of the rugrat. I can get with that. I’m gonna head back. It’s been real, Mama.”

“Dana’s supposed to be back before eleven, so I won’t be far behind. Will you be okay to drive, sweetie? You seem tired.”

“Yeah, and you don’t. Go figure that out.”

Sharon didn’t know when her embraces would revert to their usual length and pressure; in the meantime, she would savor every second.

“How about Ivy?” Jay’s arms wrap tightly around Eliza from behind, his two palms resting at her lower stomach.

“It is a living thing, Jay, not a plant.”

“But a plant *is* a living thing.”

Eliza groans as Jay buries his face into her dark curls. She closes her eyes for half a second, desperate to forget it all, and her shoulders loosen.

“How about Summer?” Jay whispers, his breath hot against her ear.

She shakes her head. “My least favorite season.”

“Autumn?” He rubs her stomach gently.

“Stop, we’re in public,” Eliza says, pushing his arms down from her stomach and squirming out of his grasp. “Plus, I hate Autumn.”

Eliza’s eyes scan the brightly lit aisle. The fact that the pregnancy tests are located right by the condoms feels like a sick joke from God, but Eliza knows it’s actually just CVS’s stocking policy carried out by the balding middle-aged man standing behind the counter.

“Autumn is your favorite season,” Jay says slowly, his voice low.

Eliza pulls at the bottom of her sweatshirt and debates if she should buy a test from First Response or Clearblue. Her eyes dart back and forth between the two, as if she’s a girl watching a tennis match and not a girl on the cusp of peeing on a stick that will determine the rest of her life. She grabs both.

Eliza clears her throat and turns towards Jay. “You need anything?” She tries to keep her voice steady. Like everything’s normal. Like they

had just popped into CVS after dinner on a whim, for some shampoo or bubble gum. Like they didn't speed over in the world's tensest car ride because she had finally gained the courage to tell Jay her period was two weeks late. She knew she should've just tested herself during winter break, but the words, held captive for the last couple weeks, spilled out of her mouth.

Jay scratches the back of his head and looks around at the other aisles for help. He glances at his phone. "They close soon... But some snacks for tomorrow's car ride isn't a bad idea." Eliza looks forward and stiffly nods her head. They hurry over to the snack aisle and Jay grabs a box of Clif Bars from the shelf.

"I don't have to go tomorrow if you don't want me to," he whispers as they approach the counter. "It's a long break. I can stay with you for a bit."

"Of course you should go. I'll be busy with rehearsals during break, anyway."

"Yeah, but I can stay for at least a few more days."

Eliza shakes her head. "Your family wants to see you."

They drop the pregnancy tests and Clif Bar box on the checkout counter, and Eliza forces a close-lipped smile. The clerk stares at Eliza for a moment with glazed eyes before scanning the items. Eliza looks anywhere but his face. Her eyes find the mustard stain, bright against his navy blue polo shirt. The monitor hanging above the exit that show a grainy full body shot of the three of them. The candy bars set out directly beside the register for those susceptible to impulse buys.

Eliza grabs a packet of peanut M&Ms and tosses them onto the counter as she removes her wallet. Impossibly, Jay laughs.

"She might be eating for two now," he says eagerly to the uninterested clerk, who adjusts the wire rimmed glasses that sit perched on the edge of his nose.

“Would you like a bag?” His words come out slow and Eliza taps her foot as she removes a twenty dollar bill from her wallet. He takes it from her and she notices his bitten nails.

“No, that’s okay.” She quickly shoves the pregnancy tests into the very bottom of her purse.

“If it’s a girl, we’ll name her Natalie,” Jay declares loudly to the empty CVS store. Eliza shuts her eyes tightly before turning to glare at him. Jay shrugs. “I like Natalie Portman.”

“I like Natalie Portman, too,” the clerk says, raising his eyebrows as he lets out a laugh that sounds more like a wheeze. He looks from Eliza to Jay, then back to Eliza. His eyes trail down to her stomach.

“Thank you,” she says in a strained voice, grabbing her candy from the counter. She hurries out the store, Jay right on her heels. As soon as the cold air hits her face, she says, “definitely *not* Natalie.”

Eliza opens the candy and tosses one into her mouth, sucking on the hard shell. She moves it to the inside of her cheek. “And why do you keep saying only girl names?”

Jay unlocks his car. “Easy. If it is a boy, we’ll name him after me.”

Eliza doesn’t even try to hide her eye roll as she pulls open her door and falls into the passenger seat. She slams it shut. “What is it with guys and wanting to name their sons after themselves? Seriously.”

“Hey! I’m named after my dad.”

Eliza bites down on the M&M. “My point exactly,” she says, popping three more into her mouth.

Jay pulls out of the parking lot, and there is silence in the car for a few minutes. Eliza fumbles with her purse strap.

“I’m sorry about all this,” Jay says finally, his voice small. “Thinking about the name is kind of how I’m dealing with it.”

“Well I wish you wouldn’t,” Eliza mumbles. She looks out the window. They pass a few houses decked out with colorful strands of lights. One has a gigantic inflatable Santa that Eliza figured once blew side to side with the wind but now lay flat on the ground, deflated and defeated. “Thinking about the name makes it feel real.”

Jay reaches across and grabs her hand as the car slows down at a red light. His palms are coated with warm sweat. She wonders if he notices her fingers are shaking.

“We can get married, you know.”

“What?” Eliza turns to him with wide eyes and straightens in her seat. Her purse tumbles to her feet. Jay is looking at her, the left side of his face illuminated by the traffic light.

“I said we can get married. We can create a family for this baby.” He gently guides their hands, clasped together, to her stomach. “Ivy or Autumn or Jay or not-Jay or whatever you want to name it.”

A faint smile forms on her lips. “I like not-Jay. It has a nice ring to it.”

Jay mirrors her smile, and the light turns green. He releases her hand and turns away.

Eliza notices now that her own palms are damp, too. Had Jay just proposed to her? Just laid out a future of diapers and sleepless nights, parent-teacher conferences and chaperoning loud field trips, white picket fences and dull cul-de-sacs?

And had she just agreed to it?

Her breath catches in her throat, and she clutches her knees so tightly her knuckles turn white.

“Eliza?” Jay says, glancing at her, his eyebrows furrowed. “You alright?”

Surely her heart would burst from her chest, it was pounding so hard. She put a hand over her mouth, swallowing back bile. Lights flash by their car in a blur. Her head spins and she leans forward, squeezing her eyes shut.

“Eliza?” Jay’s practically shouting now.

“Do you remember what I said on our first date?” The words pour out of her, filling up the car.

Jay opens his mouth but nothing comes out. He closes it. Clears his throat. Tries again. “That was over three years ago. I mean-”

“Do you remember what I said?”

“Eliza, I don’t know. You said a lot of things.”

Eliza sighs, perhaps more exaggerated than she meant. She sits up straight, tucking a curl behind her ear before cracking open her window. She places her elbow up on the sill and rests her hand on her forehead. Her head is warm, and her eyes remain closed.

“Our first date, Jay. When you asked about the future. Do you remember what I said?”

Jay bites his bottom lip and his eyes stay focused on the road.

He was a classmate in her Arts Seminar 110 class. It was mostly a blow off class where students read classic plays they already read in high school and held shallow discussions about them. All the Musical Theater majors were required to take it; everyone else took it for an easy A. It wasn’t hard to tell who was who.

Eliza sat in the front row of the large classroom with her fellow Musical Theater majors, her family away from home. She noticed Jay on the very first day, slinking in fifteen minutes late. Out of 100 seats to choose from in the massive classroom, he grabbed the one right next to the exit. His dark red hair was cut short, allowing her to fully take in

his face. Strong cheekbones, full lips, thick eyebrows that hung perfectly over his large, dark eyes. *So these are college boys*, thought Eliza, and she was smitten.

Over the semester, Eliza sat further and further toward the back, chalking it up to needing to focus when her Musical Theater friends complained. But the further back she moved, the stronger her feelings became. Before even learning Jay's name, she knew there was no going back.

Arts Seminar 110 required the class to see two stage shows that semester, and Eliza was over the moon to discover she was cast as Crissy in the musical "Hair." As a freshman, no less! On opening night, when she entered from stage left for her first scene, his face was the first she saw in the audience. It somehow glowed, even with the house lights dimmed.

Some would be terrified to have their crush see them completely naked before even holding a conversation, but this thrilled Eliza. As she and her castmates cast off their costumes for the Act I finale and proudly sang on the edge of stage, Eliza stood tall and held his gaze. Goosebumps covered every inch of her naked body. The energy between them was palpable.

Yep, definitely no going back.

After the show, Eliza ran out to the theatre lobby and was surprised to find Jay waiting, almost expectedly, near the exit doors. She felt oddly exposed, even now with her everyday clothes on, no longer hiding behind the mask of Crissy. Still, she clasped her hands across her stomach and marched straight up to him, her heart thundering against her ribcage.

"My name's Eliza and I think we should go out sometime." Her cheeks burned and she almost couldn't believe her boldness, but the ecstasy one feels after a good opening night is unparalleled.

Jay blinked. Apparently he couldn't believe her boldness either. "I, well, um. Yes. Yeah, let's do it. I mean. Of course. Are you free now?" He fumbled his way through the ask, and Eliza's heart soared.

She glanced back at her castmates, excitedly hugging friends and families and each other. They had all planned to go to the director's house to celebrate the successful opening night. To hell with it, she'd see them the next night.

"Absolutely."

They ended up at a nearby diner just off campus. They sat across from one another in bright red booths. The first few minutes were filled by flipping through the tabletop jukebox and laughing at the ridiculous names of the songs. Jay dug out a quarter and handed it to Eliza, who gleefully selected "Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weenie Yellow Polka-Dot Bikini," to no one's amusement but their own.

One burger, a large order of fries, and a chocolate shake soon sat in front of Eliza. A vanilla shake sat in front of Jay. By the time he was halfway done with it, Eliza had slurped her's dry.

"Sorry," she said, dabbing her mouth with a napkin. "Judge me all you want, but I didn't eat before the show. Too nervous."

Jay waved his hand. "Totally fine. I get it."

"You do?" Eliza grabbed a handful of fries and, imagining how gross she would look to Jay if she shoved them all into her mouth, set them back. "So you perform too?"

Jay snorted and some milkshake shot from his nostrils. Eliza howled as he scrambled for napkins, his face redder than his hair.

"I take that as a no," Eliza giggled, taking a bite of her burger.

“Definitely not a performer,” Jay said, wiping his nose long after all the milkshake was cleaned off. “But I did play on my high school basketball team. I could never eat before a game.”

“That’s performing!”

“I never thought of it that way, but you’re not wrong.” He spun the straw around in his shake. “You were really great tonight.”

Eliza’s cheeks burned as she looked down at her lap. She scrunched her nose and shook her head. “No way.”

“Yes way.”

“I was terrible.”

“You were amazing.”

Finally, the edges of Eliza’s mouth turned up and she looked at him. “I was pretty amazing, wasn’t I?”

Jay laughed. “You were so natural up there. I couldn’t tell you were nervous at all.”

“Well, that is what I want to do with my life, so I’d hope I look natural!” She took another large bite of her burger and offered some fries to Jay. He took one.

“What’s your goal? Hollywood? Broadway?”

“Both?” Eliza said, raising her eyebrow. “I mean, why not? Shoot for the stars and all that. I love performing. The characters and stories are just so *fun*. I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

Jay leaned forward, placing his elbows on the cream-colored table. “Where do you see yourself in five years?”

Eliza also had her elbows on the table, resting her face in her palms. She looked up at the ceiling and began to grin.

“God, five years from now. Who is to say! I hope I’m living in New York City. Going audition to audition, maybe writing a few things of my own. I’d love a chance to direct something. And I better have an agent in five years!”

Jay tilted his head, his eyes never leaving her face. “What else?”

“I want hundreds of people to come to see a show, and when you look at the poster, my name is there. I’m the star, or the writer, or the director. I’m a part of it.” Her eyes found Jay’s again. “It’s all I want.”

“And you’ll get it,” Jay said matter-of-factly.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you want it so badly. Nothing is going to get in your way.”

Eliza sat back in the booth, crossing her arms across her chest. “As long as you understand that early on, then we’re good here.”

Jay slurped down the rest of his milkshake and smiled at her. “We’re good here.”

“You’re going to have to look at them for me,” Eliza says, pacing back and forth between the sink and the bathtub. Who knew five minutes could feel like an entire eternity?

Jay stands in the doorway, his arms crossed. “We’ll look at them together.”

“Nope. No way. You have to do it.”

Jay glances at his phone, pressing his lips together tightly for a moment. “It’s been five minutes.”

Eliza’s lip quivers. “Jay. Please.” She sits on the edge of the bathtub and puts her face in her hands.

Jay glances at the pregnancy tests, both sitting by the faucet. “You sure you-”

“Just look!”

Jay takes a deep breath and picks them up, holding them side by side. “Oh.”

“Oh, what?” Eliza peaks out from her shaking hands.

“Eliza.”

“Tell me!”

He turns to look at her and holds the tests up in her direction. “They both have one line. Negative. You’re not pregnant.”

Eliza slides off the bathtub and onto the floor, her hair falling in front of her face. “Oh thank God.” Jay lowers himself down on the tiles next to her. He hands her the tests and wraps his arms around her. “We’re not parents.”

“No. Not yet,” Jay whispers, pulling her close to him and gently kissing her temple. She clenches her jaw and looks down at the tests in her hands. One extra line, and everything would be different.

“Let me just clean up,” Eliza says softly. Jay squeezes her before releasing and pushing himself up off the ground. She lies on her back and listens to his footsteps trail down the hallway. His bedroom door opens and shuts.

The cold tile feels good against Eliza’s skin, sending goosebumps up and down her arms. She breathes calmly in through her nose and out through her mouth, but still the tears come and disrupt it. Her chest heaves with silent tears. They drip down her temples and disappear into her dark hair.

She can feel freshman year Eliza in the room. She can feel her fading.

After multiple minutes, Eliza uses the sink for support and pulls herself up off the ground. Her body is heavy with exhaustion. She tosses the tests away and places some toilet paper on top of them in the trash, burying them from view.

Negative. No baby. There never was a baby. Thank God.

And yet.

How do you mourn the loss of something you never wanted?

Eliza leaves the bathroom and quietly pushes open Jay's bedroom door. In the darkness she hears his rhythmic breathing, slow and heavy. The hallway light leaks in and she spots the pile of laundry in the corner, laying in front of the full length mirror he hasn't bothered to hang up yet. She stubs her toe on a textbook that lays sprawled out in the middle of the floor, and curses under her breath. This is not a man who is ready to be a father yet, but one day wants to, and one day will. As Eliza draws back the comforter and lies still beside him, he, in a slumbered state, wraps his arms around her and pulls her to him, so that his stomach tightly presses to her back as it has many times before. And in the darkness they lie so close together, but Eliza is far, far away.

Bryan Grafton

The Colors of Community Organizing

Tytus Pittman decided to attend the meeting after all. He didn't live in this neighborhood any more but he owned three fourplexes there and he wanted to hear what these community organizers had to say and how it might affect his income properties. So he sat in the middle of the crowd at the Martin Luther King Center and watched as a cast of characters, black and white, milled around and talked to each other on the stage. Finally a young man, a white towheaded youth, went up, grabbed the microphone, tapped it to confirm it was working, cleared his throat, and spoke up.

"Ladies and gentlemen let's begin now. My name is Sven Lief and I'm from the." Mr. Pittman did not catch the name of the organization that Mr. Lief said he was from only that it was a non profit tax exempt corporation which he proudly made a point of and therefore a tax deduction when one gave them a donation, which he encouraged them all to do of course. Mr. Lief then introduced each of the local people sitting in a row behind him who acknowledged themselves by nodding their heads and the audience acknowledging them in return by clapping after each one was introduced.

Tytus Pittman elbowed the old man next to him, a man that he didn't know, and said to him, "What the hell this organization doing here by sending a Swede to talk to us."

The old man whispered back jokingly, "Well you know what they say, us negroes we's just Swedes turned inside out." The man chuckled slightly to himself. Mr. Pittman did not appreciate this lame attempt at humor. He had never heard that one before in all his sixty six years of existence and didn't appreciate hearing it now even if it was from a fellow black man.

So he responded with his usual. "They? Who's they? Tell me who they is. I don't know who the 'they' are that you you're talking about." It annoyed him to no end whenever someone said, 'they say.' He

always countered with his ‘Who’s they speech?’ “Give me some names, phone numbers and addresses of these ‘they’ people so that I can contact them,” he always said knowing that inquiry usually killed the conversation on the spot and put the speaker in his place which was the intended result of course.

And it worked here as the man in the chair next to him shut up, turned away from him, and pretended to be paying attention to the speaker.

Mr. Lief droned on and on promising how his organization can unite this underprivileged neighborhood, bring them all together for a better life, and give them a meaningful voice in community affairs. But he spoke in the same old general generic dull boring terms, nothing new, nothing specific as far as Mr.Pittman was concerned. Mr.Pittman had heard all this before for years and now hearing it from some white young man he’d never seen before was to him just plain too much to bear. As far as Mr.Pittman was concerned his young man was just one more community organizer come to town to preach to them and tell them what to do. Like he would know never having lived here. And even though Mr.Pittman wasn’t buying any of this, he knew that the local folk here were. They always did.

“And another thing we can do,” Mr. Lieff rattled on, “is get some of these rentals properties owned by the slumlords fixed up and become livable for families, so that they aren’t a haven for drug addicts and drug dealers.”

Mr. Pittman immediately came to attention with that accusation. Good thing I showed up after all he said to himself as he rocketed up from his seat.

“Hold on there a minute young fellow,” he hollered. “Who you calling a slumlord?” His anger was palpable. Tytus Pittman had retired from the federal government as a civil engineer. He had worked hard all his life and had saved up and invested in properties here in the neighborhood. They represented a substantial part of his retirement income and his retirement time as well. In fact it seemed now that all of his time was spent keeping up his units and dealing with tenant

problems. And he wasn't going to sit here and take any of this bull lying down. He wasn't going to be called a slumlord for he worked hard to keep his places up and presentable.

The youth was taken back by Mr. Pitman's outburst, not expecting anything like that. Actually the naive youth had not been expecting any resistance, of any kind, from anyone. He thought everyone would be glad to see them and welcome them with open arms and go along with whatever he said.

Behind him sat the Reverend Malcolm Wright from the local Baptist Church. He sensed the youth's awkwardness in dealing with the situation and rose from his chair, went up to him, took the microphone from him and came to his rescue.

"We don't mean you Ty. We know you keep up your properties."

Tytus Pittman hated Reverend Wright with a vengeance. He called him a thug behind his back, and 'Reverend Alright' to his face. Reverend, hell no, he was some former gang banger from Chicago who suddenly got religion and came here downstate to preach to them. He was just another outsider who had no business here at all as far as Mr. Pittman was concerned. In fact he and the reverend had tangled a few times already about church policy. Mr. Pittman had grown up here in the neighborhood and though he had moved away he remained a lifelong member of the church in which Reverend Wright now preached. That they were not friends went without saying.

"But you could be a little more diplomatic with your tenants Ty," Reverend Wright added. "And be more considerate of immigrants and their ways. Mr. Lief's organization can help you with things like that."

It had become personal again. The Reverend had hinted at the problems Mr. Pittman had with the Nigerians that he had recently evicted.

"Look here Reverend," Mr. Pittman shouted with the emphasis on 'Reverend.' "I did that all legal through my attorney. I followed the law." He had kicked out the Nigerian family because of their cooking.

He didn't know what they cooked, some food they ate in Nigeria, but it reeked something awful and had a terrible obnoxious nauseating aroma that filled the entire building. The other tenants constantly complained about the smell and asked him to do something about it. Furthermore the fifty pound open sacks of rice they left on their patio that drew mice. Some of his good tenants even threatened to move if he didn't correct these things. So he gave the Nigerians proper notice when the lease was up but they didn't get out. He got a lawyer. Eventually they were gone after it cost him a few hundred dollars in attorney fees and court costs which he knew he would never recover from them even though the judge had awarded him fees and costs in the judgement per the lease.

"Well," countered Reverend Wright, "that doesn't change the fact that they were immigrants and we as Americans should try to help them, make them feel at home here. Make them welcome here."

"Our organization encourages helping immigrants," added Mr. Lief. "After all that's what America is all about. Welcoming newcomers. Helping the downtrodden."

Mr. Pittman was smart enough to keep his mouth shut. He knew he couldn't win this kind of a b.s. hokum argument. He originally tried to help this family but it just didn't work out. Try to help people he thought and they hate you for it.

Then as if on cue one from Reverend Wright, one of the church's deacons, one of Reverend Wright's flunkies as far as Mr. Pittman was concerned, stood up and asked him. "And why did you kick out that young white gal and her baby awhile back, a single mom on food stamps and all. Tell me why'd you do that Ty?"

Mr. Pittman had tried to help that person too but when she didn't pay rent for three months, she had to go. She had cost him more money in lost rent and attorney fees and court costs too.

Mr. Pittman kept silent. This was none of their business anyway. But these community organizers had done their homework. They knew how to counter punch him with when he spoke up. They were

ready for him. After all Ty Pittman had a reputation for speaking his mind.

“These are the things we can help you with Mr. Pittman,” continued Mr. Lief. “One of our goals is to organize a diverse community here. That’s what America’s all about too, diversity you know.”

That did it. That diversity nonsense that is. That pushed Mr. Pittman over the edge. The dam burst. He had had enough. “Bull! It’s obvious that your goals here are to tell us what to do. Take over our community, run our lives. You already got your people taking folks to the store, handing them pamphlets with calorie counts, nutrition value etc. etc. on them. Telling them what to buy, what not to buy. What to eat. Like they’re too dumb to feed themselves and their families. Telling them to come to you if they have landlord problems and you’ll take care of everything for them. Telling them that you’ll put those blankety blank slumlords in their place.” Mr. Pittman stopped to catch his breath. Then continued.

“You’re always thinking you’re doing good by trying to help people. Hell nobody helped my folks when they lived in this neighborhood and raised us four kids in a two bedroom tar papered run down shack of a house we all lived in. But now there’s grants to bring foreigners here. Grants for housing, food stamps, free medical care etc.etc. Grants for everybody for everything. Hell we never had any assistance of any kind when I was growing up. Didn’t need any. We took care of ourselves. We pulled our own weight. No one helped us and we don’t need any community organizers now to help us now either. We already got township, county, city, state, and federal laws regulating and organizing us enough. Telling us what we can and can’t do. We don’t need any more organizing. We’ve been organized to death.”

Mr. Lief interrupted him. “If I could explain please.”

“I don’t need any explanation young man,” countered Mr. Pittman. “The explanation is simple. Your organization gets a government grant to operate doesn’t it? But it’s just us taxpayers

funding you anyway through our stupid politicians. Enough is enough for God's sake. It's time all this nonsense stopped. It's got the point of ridiculousness. You can take your traveling circus show, pack it up your you know what, and leave as far as I'm concerned."

And with that said and with stiff upper lip Mr. Pittman sat proudly and defiantly back down in his chair. His back ramrod straight. His head erect arms folded. His chin stuck out. His shoulders squared away. A few in the audience started to clap their approval but went quiet when Reverend Wright stood up and glared down at them.

"Mr. Pittman," spoke up the Lief youth. "A lot of good can come out of our organization. Give us a chance. Don't forget the President was a community organizer for us in Chicago and got a lot done there." The youth said all this hoping that the popularity of the President would resonate with the audience.

"Oh yeah," said Mr. Pittman. "Those neighborhoods he 'organized' I bet there gardens of Eden now. I bet you'd want to raise your family there. And oh yeah, don't forget about that other great Chicago community organizer, Al Capone."

A few chortles burst forth and then quickly fizzled out as Reverend Wright took the microphone back from Mr. Lief. His former gangsta demeanor came through loud and clear and intimidated the audience into silence. But not Mr. Pittman as he was on a roll and not to be stopped.

"We didn't ask you here did we? Yous just decided to show up on your own and force yourself upon us," and here he paused, thought about what he was going to say next, smiled, and then continued, "cause we's all jess poor underprivileged black folks ain'ts we?" He said all this in his best 'darkie' accented voice letting Mr. Lief know he didn't appreciate his condescending attitude.

"Tell me," he continued, "how many white communities have you organized. I'll bet the farm it's none. You're always trying to help us

poor underprivileged black folks. Why aren't you trying to help white folks. Aren't they underprivileged enough for you? Answer me that."

Reverend Wright shouted out, "Ty that's quite enough. if you're not going to behave and be respectful we're going to have to ask you to leave."

"Oh now you're trying to 'organize' my right to free speech. Trying to bully me into keeping quiet huh."

"Ty if you don't behave, I'm going to have to ask you to leave." .

"What you gonna do? Call the police on me?"

Reverend Wright nodded to a man in the back of the room, a big man, a big muscular linebacker type of man. The man took his cue and started his robotic zombie like lumbering walk toward Mr. Pittman.

Mr. Tytus Pittman saw the handwriting on the wall, or rather the machine coming at him, and started for the door. The muscular man ground to a halt. Mr. Pittman had left the building.

He knew he couldn't fight these community organizers. Knew that they would keep on pushing their agenda to ensure their jobs. To insure their weekly paycheck from the federal government subsidy. Knew that they wouldn't stop until they got what they wanted. They always did. And that the ironic part as far as he was concerned was that a lot of people here would actually believe them and be convinced that their organization was necessary, was doing some good, and welcome them with open arms. After all this had been going on for years now. Nothing changed.

"Too bad I wasn't born white," Tytus Pittman mumbled to himself as he slammed his car door shut and started the engine. "Then I wouldn't be needing any community organizing."

It was an early summer evening, but the sky was grimy like the yard they were sat in. A pile of bricks was gathered and collecting moss, or weeds, or flowers. The party had gone the way of many parties, the noise had caught up about the people like a carpet rucked under a door. The mass had moved, first into the kitchen and then into the yard. It wasn't a garden, not enough green for that.

He was sat in a chair. The party was in full flow around him and he was watching, laughing sometimes, drinking, but mostly watching. He was watching the people, the ones who laughed and joked. The party was standing but he was sitting, on a chair he'd taken from the kitchen when the mass had moved. He had stood with it for a while but the gathering pressure of being with it became too much and he ended up sitting, his back against the wall of the red brick house. The party carried on its way above him, like a gathering storm that had no intention of ever coming down from the heavens.

He'd watched a lady talking for a while, she was beautiful in the way that people are when they are caught in a flash of glory. He knew nothing of her other than the talk, the way she held an audience, which was everyone and the World with them. Then she left, not the party as a whole but she had a better place to be in that moment. Somewhere better than the yard with the brick pile and the grimy sky.

The rest of the group didn't seem to notice her leaving, he did. He didn't move. The mass carried on their way with talk and laughing, but there was a hollow ache in their gut. His attention wandered, first to a tree which blew a little in the half wind that was there. The leaves fluttered a bit and showed their pale sides before settling back again. His attention drifted from the leaves and the tree and the wind, to the pile of bricks. They'd been laid with care, but left long enough for the gathering of moss, or weeds, or flowers. Behind them was a brick wall, maybe once covered by the bricks that were now a pile. A green paint did its best to cling to the wall, it had flaked as it got tired like its fingers were all that was holding it on. He almost looked away at that point of

noticing. But he didn't. A white caught his eye, a white of graffiti that came from a time before cans, when brushes did the work. It said, 'Bob was'.

All a sudden the bricks on the floor, the pile, gathered a touch of meaning. They would have made a shed, or an outhouse, and they would have covered 'Bob was' for so many years. He began to wonder who this unknown Bob was. Why he'd been harried from his scrawl. He assumed that Bob had been dragged away, caught at the fray, because surely it should have read 'Bob was here'. That was the way graffiti worked, 'Bob was here'.

This imagined picture took form the more he let it. Bob, painting himself on the wall. A man, respectable and hard of work, bringing out a fresh load of bricks to carry on building his shed. The man, rough like a man carrying bricks would be, shouts out a fury and Bob runs. Runs, leaves the paint, leaves the brush, maybe they were there before, maybe not. Either way Bob runs, and the message is left half scrawled and the man, the one with the bricks that would become something only to then be nothing, is left alone in the yard, alone and years away from the imagining of the whole thing.

The grime in the sky is falling, the mass have moved back into shelter. It started with a spot here and there and that was enough to get them moved. He didn't notice those first drops. He stayed sat where he was, his head was with Bob and the rough man. Soon enough those drops had turned to deluge though, and that was enough to rinse them from his mind. And here he is, alone in the yard with the rain, and the pile of bricks, and the white paint of 'Bob was'.

And there it is, he knows the truth. 'Bob was' is not a half-finished scrawl, it is complete. He knows and the knowing aches at him and he lets the rain fall around him.

Lucy Rose
My Greatest Shield

A suit of armour is a gift we all give ourselves in our humble little existence, especially as women. A skin made from metal forged in flames and set to rest in cold water. We're given swords from our fathers and shields from our mothers and we're expected to make peace with items such as these. There are those, who through no fault of their own don't have a mother and a father and are sent into the world in a most defenceless state.

We'll all face harrowing and bitter tragedy while we live on this rock. Sometimes we know it's coming as it stands in its malevolence at a safe but temporary distance and sometimes it's out of the blue. Wherever the monsters stand, be it in the dark or before our very eyes, we can't defend ourselves against creatures quite like that because tragedy is incapable of death.

Some of us drink to drown our sorrows or smoke to numb the pain but I've been quite blessed in finding a shield made from something more powerful than even the strongest metals that can be plucked from the earth or the most numbing aliments that can be harvested from a garden.

It's made of flesh and bone and it pulses with a mighty heartbeat.

My greatest shield is my found sister, my best friend and my confidante.

My found sister has taught me the strength that lies in vulnerability, she's taught me to be strong when my tears fall into a perfectly made cup of tea that she's placed in my grasp to heat up my cold hands and fingers.

If it were any other human, her ridiculously precise recipe for exactly how she likes her tea would give me grief. But because it's her, the pipette drop of milk and heaped spoons of sugar doesn't sound as vile as they used too; it's a recipe that makes me safe in the highest

regard. Even the once annoying measuring of the exact amount of milk now feels endearing. It's a ritual I look forward to when she lets herself into my house as if it's her own home.

When I tell her of how empty I feel, she fills me with warmth and wraps me up safe. My found sister has no obligation to love me as she does, but she'll love me fiercely anyway and without any conditions.

I've always been told that blood is thicker than water, but there is no purer liquid than that from the spring that babbles and fumbles through the earth as it makes its way to our parched lips.

My found sister is my best friend, she's the absent family that I wished for so badly when I was growing up. Never in my wildest dreams did I know that such a formidable woman was making her way to me, just as I was to her – without even knowing. Sometimes, I wish I could speak with my younger self in my most difficult seconds. Seconds that felt as if the molten ceiling was crumbling above my head ready to bury me in the soil. I'd take her hand and tell her to *hold on, because there is someone who very much wants to meet you and she's on her way.*

My found sister is the person that stands between me and the monsters.

She is my greatest shield.

Have you ever seen an apple tree bathing under the sun, the largest apples sagging toward the ground, tinted red from overexposure to light, waiting to be picked? Rows and rows of trees—Pink Pearls, Golden Delicious, Jonagolds—bending towards a path you meander through thrice a day, tempted. I pluck the apple hanging closest to my foot; it comes off the stem easily—any day later and it'd end up on the ground, bruised and invaded by ants and worms seeking the respite of sweet flesh. I stuff three Pink Pearl apples into the largest pocket of my bag.

I bite into the fruit: sour—not fully ripe—a taste that forces me to catch my tongue between my front most gum-receded teeth and clamp down hard with the same strength I use to crush ice between my molars the few times the Man permits me water; then sweet—a flavor I want to savor forever like when I watched him set up a one-person REI tent in the woods over a soft patch of dirt and tarp—*this is your home now*. He leaves plates of stale whole wheat bread and peanut butter for me, but I save those for winter, when the trees leave their skeleton behind, and for spring, when flowers blossom into prepubescence—no fruit yet. The bread normally stays fresh—as long as I ask him to stow them away in his freezer. Once, after I saved up three sandwiches, he threw out my entire stash and told me my face gained weight, so now I only ask if I know my cheekbones protrude, if my chest feels like an ironing board, if my right hand wraps around my bicep like a cuff. But I can live off Pink Pearls, Golden Delicious, and Jonagolds; just beyond the evergreens blocking my view of the sunset, apple orchards grow for miles. When I sink my teeth into the skin, it feels like lightning strikes the corners of my mouth as the cracked skin stretches and tears. I devour the whole apple—better not risk the Man sniffing up the saccharine scent of rotten cores.

When I walk through the orchards, I notice which apples seem starved of sunlight. These are the smallest apples, their color a uniform green-yellow, their tree's branches unable to reach the next tree over,

leaves lacking in all but chlorophyll. This tree is weak, leaching what little it can when the others need nutrients too. I pull out the Swiss Army knife in my pants back pocket and begin to cut at the trunk, only specks of young bark flaking away from the mass. I cut until the sun leaves no more light for me to distinguish finger from bark—until everything fades to silhouettes and the moon reflects off the blade into my pupil, a piercing glare.

The Man finds out about my apple excursions when I fail to return to the tent for a meal. Surprisingly, he says nothing and watches as I dig the dirtied blade into the now one-centimeter-deep wound on the tree. The temperature drops over these few weeks—I think it is September now; I continue to cut while the leaves fall to the ground around me, cushioning my steps. My fingers and toes grow numb, my nails purple and my body shivering no matter how often I soak my hands in fresh urine or how many times I dance my feet against the soft cotton of my jacket. I drop the Swiss Army knife and watch my arm reach out toward my executioner's axe only for my fingers to play deaf to my commands *extend, grasp, tense, clench, retrieve*. My head sways and I see stars glimmering among cloying apples. I fall into arms, hard and bony and sturdy like branches embracing a child who only knows the comfort of hiding behind trees. "See, this is what happens when you stray from home," the Man says, his voice like a hummingbird's wings beating against my cheek. *Maybe next summer, I think. Next summer I'll chop the tree down so the remaining ones will be bountiful and strong.*

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Nathan Dennis
It is a very beautiful dot to me

I was older, you know.
Nineteen.

It's not that I had been saving myself.
In high school, a girl texted me that she was underwear shopping.
And asked what she should wear for me.

I stopped texting her. I was scared.

Scared that somehow I was about to make the wrong choice.
That I was about to...do it...to get it done with.

I'm not sure why I'm telling you this.

I'm not sure why I feel compelled to tell you about my first time.
Not enough men talk about it.
We talk of it. Of numbers, times, minutes, inches, cup sizes.
But we don't talk about it.
I want to talk about it.

She – a different she – was my friend. For over a year before it happened. We met at our first class at NYU. Six months later, I stayed up late at night thinking about her.

That Summer, she stayed up thinking about me.

The story of the day is a funny one, but everyone tells the funny part of the story. The part where Hurricane Sandy hit Manhattan and she lost her birth control and we took a cab to the Upper West Side to the only functioning Duane Reade that could fill her prescription – the unspoken understanding that since I found the pharmacy, since I paid for the cab – since she let me find the pharmacy and pay for the cab, and I got us there with undiagnosed mono that she gave me in the weeks prior meant that *tonight was the night*.

There was no power in my dorm, so we lit seven or so tea candles. It was Halloween.

Five days before she told me she loved me. Four days before, she told me she had been drunk and wasn't sure. Three and a half days before she confirmed that she indeed loved me.

Some people tell that part of the story.

Not many people tell the part where I was naked above her and she was naked below, underneath me in my dorm bed on 23rd and 3rd. I think I weighed 135 pounds. Not many people tell the part where I slid the condom on. I think it was Durex. Not many people talk about how scared I was. Scared I would make a fool of myself. Scared my erection was an embarrassment to be laughed at. An undeniable admission of attraction I could not wield with poise.

Not many people talk about the moment when we both helped my erection inside of her and the fear collapsed into a matrix of skin upon sheath upon skin upon sweat upon sweat upon acceptance.

It was warm. She was warm. I was warm.

I don't really remember much else. I guess that's why people don't tell that part of the story. The expectation of years of anticipation and a year of falling in love with a girl melts away into a few moments of giving a small part of myself to her – into her, caught in a small receptacle that I would tie in a knot and dispose of later.

And somehow that small part seems so fuzzy.

Fuzzy like the light of our first kiss. It was so dim and purple that night. I told her she looked like a Seurat painting.

The ones made of little dots, you know. Points of paint. Only when I step back do I see the image.

But upon close examination, when I squint very closely at the memory.

It seems so fuzzy.

Is there worth in taking the time to paint with such detail
One fuzzy memory dot?

Memory made fuzzy by giving a small part of it and myself
To another.

It's a very beautiful dot to me.

Nathan Dennis
Joy, we have run

A treadmill...is a hamster wheel. It is a cage to the body, that has no bars, only incline, only speed, only time.

My feet sound the drums of pain and agony and sweat that mashes through my mind as I grab anything I can to drown out the incessant beating, the incessant war dance, polyrhythm of my body.

The body is a temple. A gangly temple of bamboo limbs and sawgrass skin, wicked with sweat that gets clipped on the nipping heels of sticky plastic and worn down tread, yet still, I run. Still, I run.

I run, looking out on this window, jamming earplugs into my canals, burrowing earwax into my ear drums, drums, war drums that pound with metallic, digital compressions of audible battle gasps, going nowhere. At war with myself: war with the pain in each stride, the heat of my kneecap that radiates and squeals like a busted signal on the A-line, like a track fire on the A line, like an unlubricated A-train on the A-line, grunting along a curve it isn't built to handle, that is my body. That is what I fight! I fight my brain calling to my brain shouting, hey we have a track fire on the right kneecap, hey we have a fire on the right kneecap, cap, cap, cap two three four, three four, exhale through the mouth, flare nostrils, in through the nose. A crooked nose makes for tough breathing, but breathing is fun. It's better than not breathing.

All I fight is pain, and the unrepentant urge to look down, look at the numbers that tick up, up, up two three four, up point 27 point 28 until I hit my distance. The math I distract myself with, the addition of song times, subtraction of moments skipped, estimations of scrolling lengths, how many songs remain, how many moments remain, until I can look down to see how many of the longest minutes of my life remain on this testament to my masochism.

.65 mile remain, 64, 63. Adjust the speed, race the time itself. Beat time. A countdown to expiration. There is no one here but me and

time. Distance is me. I am distance, I am velocity. I exist as numbers and legs, racing past the march of time. March of time, of feet, of paces dropped, of measures counted, of blood pumped, all mental function shuts down, as I increase the speed, and drop the incline, flying past absolutely nothing, hurtling over the same plastic, seeing the same yellow uncaring numbers, until point zero zero remains, and the air floods my lungs, as the blood vessels in my eyes snake blood black, till

Dawn bursts open like a blood orange squeezed afresh: on the trails of the city. Of any city where I have lived. A patchwork of memory permeates every groundswell, every cobblestone I've clipped, every cypress knee I've planted my knee onto pavement, rock, dirt, dusted off, shoelaces retied, and miles thrown underfoot: the battle against time cast to the wastebins of BC/AD: time melts away in the rays of the sun and glimpses of moon which wax and wane through the minutes and months I throw myself on gangly limb out into the toning of a temple, the atonement for anxiety: the war drums of creativity versus (ha verses!) insanity stretch out into a vast epic: a Ben-Hur of the runner's soul that I supplant with a soundtrack cribbed and ripped from Hanz Zimmer and Van Halen. Of Johann Sebastian Meatloaf. Of Bruce Springsteen and the Seven Trumpets Band.

Pain swims through my innards in quivers of beauty. Pain is as beautiful as the brilliant light that flies at me at the immaculate speed of mach point 01. Look at me fly at one percent the speed of sound! I take a hundred footsteps to catch my first footstep, and I find such wonder and joy in these little inklings of problems that find my way into my mind: the true cleansing of the soul comes from clearing my head, from clearing the snot out of my nose with the cold dry air of a dusk run on 135h street, with the freezing wet air of a midnight run on 135th street, with the god-given humid air of a summer run on 135th street. There is no war to be won on 135th street, as my right and left legs strike evenly over the pavement of junior, senior, freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, years: unfurling a streamer of God reaching to man to me. I reach to myself to spark my own creativity, reaching, reaching back to myself, with low arms swinging brushing my hips, clutching invisible eggs as my mother told me, digging deep as my

father told me, crying as the world told me, the beauty and order of life, the purpose of life too great: as if holding an unstable tesseract for a few crumbling seconds,

Before she disintegrates, into sick, base reality. Base reality that gnaws itself raw with the rabid jackal of anxiety: a mange bitten living carrion comfort that Stalks me back over highway nine, oh God, hunt it with volume, it rips our own bones from our back. It stalks us, yellow i'the cataract, sliding disks of logical opacity into milky uncertainty.

And I am blind. And we are blind. And you are blind. You feeble fucking flailing limbed motherfucker, I caught you, gazelling over the hills, holding the pieces of heaven in your hand, the music of ecstatic understanding deafening you to my approach. Oh God, is this how a gazelle feels? In the final moment before the snap of it's neck from the crunch of a yellowed tooth? Oh God, what a glorious last moment the gazelle must have. What a sweet orgasm into death. Shut the fuck up! I whip your pasty body to the ground, shaking your spinal column with my pointed teeth of thoughts of anguish, of ruminant fears of ruminant spears. Do you smile, your death to see? Did he who make the lamb...really make thee?

You are fierce. I am strong. Our endurance is strong. Our endurance grows from the swamps of the south to the orange groves of Italy. I endure you! I outlast you as you whittled my body away to nothing, 'till I saw my own heart beating inside my chest, lub dub lub dub lub dub two three four, I count those beats, those steps, five six seven eight, eight eight eight steps eight breaths eight three times for the trinity. I endure you in octaves an amulet of compulsion I hold against my mind as you threw my frailty, my mortality, my infinity of existence or annihilation into my intestines, you rabid cur you rabid curse that plagues me at camp four below euphoria. You thrash me as a tempest of hatred and self doubt, of guilt and shame, but I rock forward on steps of thunder, on pavement, and dirt, and grass, and rubble, and mud, and snow, and mud, because one day I will beat you.

One day, one day eight days in a row you won't be there, one day the steps I count will return to joy and not count count count pulse three four 168 per min, split pace 7 minutes 48 seconds per mile, and not not not to ward off the legion, not as exorcism.

You dumb motherfucker. We are us. I am you. For all your rapturous joy, for all your shekinah laden words of ex nihilo grandiosity—of baroque turkey dressing on a mottled bird: I am you. I am your monster, and you are tainted.

Sorry, sorry, scuse me, no after you. We are so courteous when we are interrupted by real life. By a kid tripping in front of us, by a dog jumping on our leg, on my leg, wanting to race, of a kid wanting to race, of a man laughing at my shorts, at our American flag shorts, shorts are funny. I laugh too. Why am I wearing shorts with an American flag? Why am I wrestling a jackal in Riverside park? Israe-kehlev: he who wrestles with Dog.

With dog. With dog. The sun hits my eyes, and I shut them, dreaming if for a moment that my lost tramps who taught me I was born to run, run with me on this highway nine turned Elysian field, where steps race away, where pulses and splits simply cannot exist because they cannot be fathomed, and good Adonai how great the dog must be that cannot create self doubt but must love the sun on its black fur for the intense joy it brings, but love so immediate, so simple, the love of just existing in a moment that can't be grasped because time is not understood.

I run so with my pack of dogs in a unit of time I can't quantify. I open my eyes, and my jackal runs by my side.

My jackal loves me.

My jackal runs with me.

We run in this self indulgent fantasy of mere comprehension, down this jammed highway, a couple of broken heroes,

On a last chance power drive.

Up the poplar lined hill.

The heat is unbearable. My tunic itches with sweat that no amount of olive oil can clear. Great Helios brings no mercy, not for three days from city to battlefield to city to bring news to my men and my gods. We have won. My legs brim with pain, and my chest wheezes with the dust of Ethiopia that blows over Poseidon's domain. From Poseidon to Athena I must run. Guide me, Pallas Athena, tell me a tale, O muse to give me strength to give me ignorance from the pain, to give me endurance so I may tell thee a tale, O Athens, O world, that we have won. That darkness has been snuffed out. I have caught the sweet honey light that streams from my eyes in tears of ambrosia that drip sweet sweat of exfoliated agony into my mouth until I have consumed myself into an ouroboros of light and revelation.

Athens! Harlem! Jerusalem! I cry out at your gates! I race your steps to the Golgotha of your Acropolis: the Parthenon of your Sepulcher. Mary Mother of Saints, guide my steps! Great Apollo guide my words. All steps I have taken, all worship at this temple of my body, all wrestling with logic and insanity has been to forge forth this singular instant of atonement through intonation.

Joy to you! We have won! Joy, we have run.