


Letter From the Editor

First of all, WOW!! Second of all, I love you guys. And again,

WOW! This is over a hundred pages of incredible work. I feel like all my tiny dreams have come true. It has been so much fun reading so much great material, and I hope you all enjoy the love and sorrow within these pages.

All the best,


The Things Herein

POETRY

[I just jumped]	6
[It was the interlocking ...]	7
a clean break	8
A Small Space	10
Acceptance	11
Alternate Universe	13
Birth Day	14
Black Body	15
Bleed the Radiator	16
come here, go away.	19
Cork as missing	21
A History , <i>a photo by Lisa Lerma Weber</i>	22
Daddy's Little Girl	23
des baisers aux amies	24
Don't Even Blink in the City that Never Sleeps	25
Double Diamond	26
Double Hunger	27
Emporium	28
For Nick, an Inconsistent Friend	29
Frances May	31
Garroted	32

I Write My Body Awake	33
If She Happens to Ask	34
Internet Travel	35
Galaxy in a Succulent , <i>a photo by Lisa Lerma Weber</i>	36
Mellow in the Voyage Fantastic	37
Morning text.	38
Nostalgia Sonnet	39
Proposal	40
Second Hand	41
See You Later	42
Sonnet Ending with Nick Drake	43
Squirrel Song	44
Staccato Sonnet	45
Reaching Beyond the Wall , <i>a photo by Lisa Lerma Weber</i>	46
Still Beating	47
Stolen Water	48
Survival, A Delicacy	49
Syzygy	50
The bones remember	51
The Flight	52
The New Lover	53
The Ritual	54
Things unsettled	55
VI. The Friend Zone	56

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE LOVELY VENUS DAVIS

Venus Davis on their forthcoming chapbook	58
Seed pods on a tree in Boston , <i>a photo by Tucker Lieberman</i>	62

SHORT FICTION

Wicked Slip	64
Curdled Paint	71
Fresh Meat	73
Hanboks and Moccasins	76
No Particular Reason	82
Not the Same, but Close Enough	86
The Unceasing Complaint of the Sea	120
Thumbelina	122
Until There Was Nothing Left to Cut	131
You both need to leave right now!	132
Violet Eyes , <i>a photo by Lisa Lerma Weber</i>	133

CREATIVE NONFICTION

A Drop of Sweat	135
I Will Stop and Smell the Roses	139
Playbill	145

POETRY

Rebeca Chapa
[I just jumped]

I just jumped
I wanted to be consumed
I wanted to feel surrounded
I wanted time to stop
I wanted to be aware
I wanted to feel
Something
Anything
Even if it is the overbearing feeling of fight or flight
I never tried to drown
No why would I?
I've been drowning for years
I know how it feels
No I just wanted to jump
So I jumped

Rebeca Chapa
[It was the interlocking ...]

It was the interlocking of our fingers
It was the first kiss
It was the way your body pressed against mine
It was the way you held me through the night
It was the tiny promises you told me about our future
It was the way you told me it was me and you forever
It was all of this that made it seem as if you were the one
But it was the way I felt nothing that made me hate myself even more

Lee Dunn
a clean break

this bitter end
more than I can chew
I shrug on a windbreaker
kick shoes out of the damn way
dramatic exit vexed by that fucking screen door
I didn't fix
and I kick it too
adrenalized thoughts come in a billowing storm
careful what you wish for
drop the car keys on the front mat
a clean break
well I got one hand in my pocket
and the other one's hailing a taxi cab
but, actually, I walk
seeking scenery into which I can blend
crazily I scan with lowered brow

graveled shoulders as they go by
while raucous weeds and dog ends
call out their derision
I once heard that a King knows what to do
and does it
but I am no king
and I never did Believe, you know
I never did
but this night
as I hunker down
ditch-bound for a smoke
is it my spirit that rises
ventriloquist of my heart
and I hear,
in my hallowed halls,
“Please.”

Julia DeStefano
A Small Space

My radio plays a forgotten song,
old like me and overlooked
but gold to the blue-eyed one who swims in my colors
and has named me Red Queen.
I thought about him while boiling the water for oatmeal,
then again when rinsing the blueberries,
brewing the coffee and pouring it -
the flying man soaring overhead.
I've known him forever.
I wrote him into existence.
He hears the music and dips down to meet my face by the open window -
warm lips to brush against mine
while we breathe in the fury of wanting
to the thump, thump, thump of our caged hearts.
We trip the light fantastic and build each other up with the excitable gift -
moving deep, past our knowing,
wanting to enter each other like some dream.
No more pretending or moaning in secret.
We've won the world.
We know that some chances never come twice.
But the mood shifts to familiar solemnity
as the bells tremble to herald his imminent departure from our small
space.
He'll vanish if I hold on too long.
Listen world — I want him to stay with me.
Thunderclouds tell me I've no choice but to wave him on.
Now the radio beats to itself
and the story, mine to write.
Forgotten song -
it's just you and me tonight.

See if I can practice acceptance and toleration/the problem with that is
that humans bother my patience/a lot of placing/individuals in
categories/I wonder what category I'm placed in/because I walk with a
twist and my hips be swaying/then to you I must be gay/I don't
know/maybe that's what you saying/ or I'm a black man that was taken
and placed in/a slaveship/full of niggers/and if you say that then you
racists/what's my placement/is it a criminal who life is wasted/because
of my skin color/I'm locked up/with a minimum/of 20 years I'm
facing/or do you see me on a corner with a sign/and you
sigh/thinking/why won't he get a job/it's not that hard to make it/or
maybe I'm a thug because I love/to have my pants hanging/below my
waist/so to you I'm slanging drugs/or smoking it/I don't know what
you thinking/it's easy to lose focus when/you don't notice/your own
boat is sinking/drowning/too busy trying to fix other people/instead of
keeping ya eyes fixed on your surroundings/the tide is rising/water is
climbing/above sea level/see shovel and dig a hole for your problems
and try to hide them/expose every one else/I suppose every one else to
you is a tyrant/but the only one that's standing beside you/is you/and
you/if you only knew/or had a clue/that no one is really as bad as
you/and that includes/rapists/murderers/drug dealers/but it's sad that
you/don't know that love heals us/and covers a multitude of
offenses/bringing me close to you/coming over fences/but hopefully
you will get it/but so be it/criticize every other human being/I believe
it's/an epidemic or an disease/that sits within us and bleeds/and seeps

into another person's war/and what's more is that not ours to fight/ I
can't control nothing/I ain't got enough might/can't change another
person's life/only mine/so divine/is my quest/there's no question I am
in line to be blessed/and so is every other person/who gets on your
nerves with/their imperfect/imperfections/there's a purpose/perfect
it/grow in my service of others/purpose perfected/wash someone else's
feet that's filled with dirt and respect them/hurt and rejection/will
cause us to hurt and reject them/instead of accepting/the level that
someone else is/at or on/take em off your platform/they can't reach
your standard/so don't let em stand on it/people are prone to fall
off/it's placed too high/on a tottering beam/it's seems/they can only
reach the top in your dreams/soon as you awake/the next day/they
placed on the ground with two feet/walking right next to you/acting
the same but in they own way unique/no one is different/everybody is
broken/split in pieces/afflicted with dis-ease-/it's/no peace on this
land/so a man has to have a piece in his hand/resort to violence
couldn't be/part of the plan/but man/is so hard to live with/especially
when all you do is take in this life/ and not give any/thing/not wealth
or diamond rings/but to help a guy in a time of need/or accept this
man when he on his knees/instead of sitting around and judging
others/the human race is one/that's your sister or brother/niece
nephew or cousin/maybe your mother/maybe this world would be
different/if we learned to love us.

Dead leaves squish into wet dirt
under my feet, twigs scratch ankles
poke at soaked sneakers.
Azaleas spill onto themselves, gush
color shamelessly up and down
this fracture line of old road
In another life, I'd twist dandelions
into your hair, pick spider webs from your
fingers, long and restless, like mine.
In that life, I'd spoon peaches
onto our stamen tongues,
suck the juice like greedy birds
Watch our bellies grow
over and over
with doubt.

Sarah Marquez
Birth Day

I entered the world a surprise October 1994 saw coming. Cried out to Friday's first hour
like a full moon to a new night, as my mother held me in enclosed arms. My father
knew me as Danielle— a name he chose before I came to be conceived in that
magical way humans have with each other. Mother said later, he was the perfect lover
but that name did not suit me. As I gazed at nothing, then all the hospital lights
after floating in cozy darkness, & finally, at mother's breast, the moist nipple
waiting for me to latch on, a storm brew in my eyes. Mother cooed something
like a song to calm blue fog swirling in my head. The doctor encouraged her to feed me
while she had energy, while her milk had me enticed. But she said let my daughter
take her time. She will eat when she's hungry. & I did. I made happy viewers
out of them, crooking my baby-soft elbow, folding four fingers into a tiny fist
over mother's heart. This is how I prepared early on to break it open & collect
its tragic secret— my last name is not mine, but borrowed for convenience. My father
lent it to me for a time. He expects it back, surely, but he's dead now & I'll never know.
I wander the garden inside me, listening for a gale of wind, the reaping of children
sired out of wedlock by still-married men & mother's soft humming heralding
the passing of another birthday.

Day Sibley
Black Body

Paint her body soft
welcome her warmth
dare color her dark
get lost in her essence
look into her eyes
see goddess
she'll make a believer out of you.

Julianna May
Bleed the Radiator

He never forgot the feel
of the Playboy, even after
he felt real breasts
for the first time: firm, perky,
pointed. But, he had to close
his eyes, only the glossy images
helped him.

So, he grew his collection
behind the radiator.
He imagined the glossy pages felt
like lip gloss and he
touched them to his lips
before devouring and staining
them and himself.
When he searched for the pages
in the fall, they were gone.
You have to bleed the radiator
before the heating season,
his brother told him.

Heating season after heating season
he bled the radiators
and moved his collection
to closets, beneath duvets,
briefcases, even disguised
as home movies.

Home from college, in his
basement bedroom
full of board games
and red children's toys,
his mother caught him.

He changed majors,
prayed reading the God-breathed
words would wash the glossy
pages from his soiled
memory. Prayed the pulpit
was high enough to place
him above his sins.
Prayed a good woman
and children could move
his spirit and he rid himself
of his collection.

They moved away from farmlands,
cow manure no longer
filled their nostrils, and crickets
no longer in their ears,
but he felt peace in the newness.
Till his children aged; his wife, too.

He hid his collection better now,
the church didn't have radiators,
but it had closed doors
and an internet connection.
His family watched him bleed the radiator,
the plastic bowl beneath
the bleeder valve, cover against the wall,
till he realized he was crying
and his family was gone
all he had left
was his glossy collection.

Liat Miriam
come here, go away.

betrayed by the psychic
 says i was polynesian, cat
eyes looking through curtains of
dark hair tickling my backside, my
tanned hide as i lay in the sand suck-
ing sweet nectar from a fruit skin, little
 beautiful thing, i walked
into the sea and held my head
under the crash
 of the ocean floor.

 i was ugly
cursed to walk the world
 alone
for the man who loved me was slashed
apart by a wild animal on the hunt
for meat my salt
tears mixed with the salt sea and i
gasped for air. maybe

this is why i am constantly on
the hunt for food, so
hungry for your fist; mango juice
running down my chin, You called
me whore, i changed my
mind i was

betrayed and we were in a
car speeding towards heaven or
nowhere
at all, she sees i will never bear
children, little fists at my
breast i will never know if
they'd call me ee-ma or mom-
my.

Frank G. Karioris
Cork as missing
(from Ljubljana Notebook)

This, the submelodic tempo of the way we move
through the world, away from one another,
waking from slumber that tricked us home,
is to say that I miss you. That I miss you.

That, bent against cold window panes,
long-loved blankets held closely to chest,
placed alongside a still-wet cork stopper,
means I miss you. I miss you.



A History
by Lisa Lerma Weber

Sarah Marquez
Daddy's Little Girl

Friends find it shocking how long I can go without
drinking water, how sweat beads on my skin & dries
in seconds. I tell them I am a cactus. My body craves
simplicity like my father's fingers craved a rolled cigarette.

I like my coffee instant & warm inside the cup,
after the steam has dissipated. I hate to ruin the bitterness
of too many crystals by adding sugar to the mix. I stir in milk
& sit with it, watch the surface change— black to brown to caramel.

My father was the same color under long-sleeved shirts.
The desert sun burns whatever it touches to tomato red.
He could not tan like other men. If he worked during the day,
forgot to layer on sunscreen, he came home unrecognizable.

Modeled after him, a blend of darkness & dust, I am the same—
an easy target for golden arrows. Sometimes, the sun will grace
my arm with another freckle that will maneuver its way to my face
& back. Every day, I wake to a stranger marked in some other place.

I couldn't say where she came from. But she is part of me like the aroma
of coffee beans roasting, like the two syllables of my five-letter name
growing around me & the rainbow lanterns hanging from my ceiling.

My father taught me to hide from the light as though it were after me,
how to summon shadow out of a faint intake of breath & release it. Before
dementia set in, he held me to his chest & told me the secret to living longer
is learning how far to stick my hands out to touch the remains of a season.

I wonder what I would recover if I reached out now with all my might?

Aiden K. Feltkamp
des baisers aux amies
(a kiss between friends)

there is a bending
that leads to breaking
a cattail so flexible
brought into an angle too deep

I bent our tight tension
into a crisis – pouring beer
& whiskey over the open flame
of our most amicable interactions

your teasing:
the whip
that broke my resolve
– lightning –
and catapulted me into you

teeth on teeth
pelvises knocking
my lips finally conquering yours
stealing that which is not mine
(and may never be)
but in that moment of breaking
was

April Frances Federico
Don't Even Blink in the City that Never Sleeps

The last time I was in New York City,
I was with a boy who wasn't
committed enough to show me Times Square,
but instead anticipated seeing the girl he said he could never date.

I am no longer in the Triangle--
I go to New York on my own.

The last time I was in New York City,
I only saw the MET and the Museum of Natural History.
Now, without any planning,
I hop on that Double Decker Tour Bus, grab a pair of headphones
to listen to the tour guide, pass by the CNN office, Columbia, Saint Patrick's Cathedral,
and Broadway, and I think to myself,
If I even blink in the city that never sleeps, I'll miss what I could've seen when I was with him.

Julianna May
Double Diamond

I don't think you would be able
to handle my body, darling.
It bends and dives, daring you
to try. Daring your fingers to ski
down it's hills. You don't need
to dash. Though the slipperiness
taunts your tongue, take your time.
Zig zag with your lips,
caress each curve and bend;
taste what it has to give.

Do not try to double cross,
skis are easy to lose if careless,
and the trail is quick to slicken to ice.
It can knock you off your feet
so fast the daze will be damning.
So, dear, I do not think you
would be able to handle my body.
Better men than you have tried
and their hearts are still frozen in the ice.

I have a bruise on the inside of my thigh,
a reminder of some prehistoric insect's dinner.
It was intoxicated by my scent after a morning run,
bare legs swinging in the midday heat -
and who wouldn't be?
I am decadently sweet.
I even come with a cherry on top.
The bugs, they know this, and crowd outside my door
to feast at first sight of The Red Queen.

Single file, please.

Do they wish to turn me, as a vampire does its unsuspecting victim?
I do not know and shudder at the thought.
I migrate my fingertips towards the unsightly mark -
this remnant of incisors that tore
through blue-veined, porcelain skin
without so much as a thank you note.
How dare it maim me!
It must be punished.
You see — the wound throbs like a bassline through my chest,
unafraid to make its presence known with each graze.
Calling Dr. Love — the wrong one has kissed me!
What are you going to do about it?

My father polishes reality:
a marionette
-- thin, white, & tireless--
with his face.
My mother dusts replicas
of Nephilim: feminine demons
calcified into Biblical fact.

I suffocate in the front closet,
pinned beneath the glassy gaze
of taxidermied fear.

I breathe through the minutes.

My father and mother
bore me into this house,
but I must bear myself out.

Kelly Martini
For Nick, an Inconsistent Friend

I rediscover you today; my breath
surges to saturate dry
surfaces you often haunt. It creeps
as you have crept, behind
vivid green eyes, gouging a channel
between past and present.

I imagine: your breath,
ragged with passive aggressive turmoil,
now undulates. Its successive waves
mask mental black & blues
from seven years earlier, the bloody stump
of a severed connection.

You are nothing
more than a protégé struggling
to discipline his master. I refuse
this unfamiliar face – so young
and abused by amphetamines –
room to root.

Even your firm arrogance fails
to sway memory: a puerile boy
undressing for the first time,
the melancholy I caused when
moving toward older prospects,
new experiences.

Maybe I used your youth excessively
for my own devices, left you weak
and hungry. (I rarely analyze my own role
in your nosebleed crusade or how
events could have played out differently.
Soles do not have mates, they have shoes.)

I withdrew from you far too easily,
filled the space with philosophy,
religion, literature. Knowledge's sweet
nectar flowed through my fingers,
and I embraced the sticky sugar
saccharine boundary between us.

I no longer stole the juice
from Mother's eldest; her ripe fruit
turned sour, aged with thumbprint
bruises. Pale skin stretched
over screaming veins; they mapped
the way south.

The you I remember lingers
still, beneath starving muscles
and their ignorant ink (foreign
to both tongue and skin). His spark fades
as you insufflate powder lines
through a rolled-up banknote.

Julianna May
Frances May

You never spoke about it
 But I could see the pain:

a luggage tag, claiming you
 as his though his home

was barely your own and that
 bright red tag barely left town.

It could have been romantic,
 when he read to remind

as your mind slowly waddled away
 like Nicholas Spark's "Allie Hamilton."

Instead of a gesture to show devotion
 he demanded your memory be lit

though it was a lighter lacking
 fluid and only quick flickers lingered.

Your eyes glossed over, empty,
 opaque, wasted away.

Your fingers twitched, muscles
 remembered what you could not:

a desire to create, crochet, clean
 for no one but yourself.

When earth was piled on your small frame
 your flame finally renewed.

You garroted me with my dream in your dream,
felt cheery in reverie; I, hoodwinked
led to the door carved out of faith and tossed
into the beyond, screamed, “You should manifest my death”
to the bloody bees, and freedom should be
made available to them so they might
carry my sins on their wings for a flight
traversing the river Styx.
Behind on the gravel of your euphoria
impelled my head detached afresh in all its gory,
in all glory, and murmured to the ears beneath the dirt’s cowl.

Karen Janowsky
I Write My Body Awake

I know how to enter myself
like a secret room where
breath rolls in, stays put
in shadows and stillness.

Like a secret room where
there are no windows, I listen
in shadows and stillness
for gaps in the truth. The walls are
that alphabet I read

with skin, with palm of hand
but cannot pronounce. I memorize
that alphabet I read
each time I come to this place

but cannot pronounce. I memorize
The shape of dreams
each time I come to this place,
touch meaning, chant like a mantra

the shape of dreams.
How does one dance language,
touch meaning, chant like a mantra
the jaw, breasts, belly?

How does one dance language;
the sound of my breath quickening
to movement of fingers on
the jaw, breath, belly
fading into light, into quiet.

Day Sibley
If She Happens to Ask

Maybe you will see her at the mall
a grocery store
casino or somewhere down the street.

You always thought about what you would do
if the day was to come.
You said that you would ignore her but
it's rude not to acknowledge an old friend's hello.

You don't stare into her eyes, you hate how they light up
each time she talks about her new boyfriend.
You do not want to think about that night
when you feel in love. You two didn't speak for days—years actually.

She asks *do you still write?* You say *of course* but leave it at that.
You do not want to seem like you're bragging.
You're waiting for her to ask if you
wrote any poems about her. This you will be prepared for.
You have this mapped out already. You will smile before answering and say
no, the poem is not about you.
This is when you will know for sure that you are a poet
because poets lie.
Luckily she doesn't ask, but even if she did she would have already known the
answer.

On a tiny box, watching
places far off, unknown,
explored by strangers acting as friends,
shaky camera angle of your heart

Redesigned holiday envy
magnified x1000 by the internet
voyeur into other's travels
wishing to be there to be them

Cloud your cynical heart
forget the veneer painted
over the photographs
and the edited memories

Take you away, on a plane
through wisps of html
peering through the window of envy
at other people's joy



Galaxy in a Succulent
by Lisa Lerma Weber

Marielle Songy
Mellow in the Voyage Fantastic

She wore a dress of melancholy
and skin stretched over splintered bones
that barely held her together
With a face of purple perfection in a mirror
that only she could see- vampire
Turning away from the reality of reflection,
she had hoped that the morning dawn would capture her
essence- hands outstretched for acceptance
or, at the very least, tolerance
And eyes that would welcome some kind of embrace
Where she would feel protected from broken words,
stolen lies, forgotten hopes

She had searched for a savior, but she could
only save herself
It was up to her to follow the broken
path to enlightenment and wallow
in the foreshadowing there

The journey was hers alone and only her steps
would fill in the footprints to mark the occasion of
her own belief- mellow in the voyage fantastic that
took place against the backdrop of a golden setting sun

I.

Things like I heard the voice of another G-d and my headache is growing louder.

Thought I saw a speck of blood on the paper in morning; body plays tricks of eye. In my dreams last night I said the sentence perfectly, but my accent still laughed. Who waters the flowers on the side of the highway in dry season? Who scaled the tower to paint some words? We know cheap things cost less. Things like what he said like I was a cruel trick of design, that my design was that of a snake. A kind of slum tourism; found a needle in the park. Thought I heard you tell me if I believed I'd change; but I dress as easy as I am.

II.

In my dreams last night my belly swelled, in morning I thought I was sick. Things like my conversion; some Orthodox skirts cover arms of ink. Righteous men can find holy in desecration if there's pleasure like in touch. Words like glad I make you funny. Glad I make you kidding. The word is laughing.

I annoy him, he says, as I thrust on his hip bones. Makes me lean right. So that night I slept without white noise. The dinner was cold, anyway.

II.

Thought I knew how to sing a prayer I never heard; turned doorknobs instead. Only remembered to kiss it half the time but that used to be none at all. Who thought that we would benefit from the instillation of a train; things like the divider of a door? If only I took note of the make and model of his car when he jabbed his thumb into me. Things like what he'd say like that he'd pay for the abortion, but he wouldn't place his teeth between my thighs. Where is that ring he said he'd make me? When I woke up there it didn't feel as inevitable as before.

Ottavia Paluch
Nostalgia Sonnet
(after Fiona Apple)

When I was younger, I would pray for good
But the good never came except in spades.
I would wish to be older, didn't know
about the loss of innocence, of time.
Here's what I want: to go back to the
way it was. In my mind I start to think
of a place no one has visited, wait
for the mountains to cover me up and
swallow my pride. It's true: no one knows who
what where when how why I am and once was.
To hide in places you'll never see: to
wish that this world was purgatory all
over again. The angels knew nothing.
What would they say? The devil wants to know.

I cannot see it, but I can almost hear the knife in your voice: don't be such a coward Mari. Don't think you can be free of me, the only man who still puts up with you. All the rest ran away, covering their ears to all your pitiful screaming. They left you. But here I am, investing in you, pretending the way you say my name as though speaking around the ache of an impacted tooth does not bother me. You remember how the dentist prodded the root of your wisdom with steel pliers? How he had no choice but to expand your gum & sever the ligament binding it in place? The whole day after, you held your hand to your jaw thinking never again. If your father were alive, you would have asked him about me. He would have said no, not him. He's not for you. But I'm more than a figment of your imagination or ghost you keep haunting. I'm a brown shield from the rising sun, your pale skin's enemy, the car you refused to learn to drive at sixteen, the bag of money you need to survive after your mother dies, leaving you nothing, the eyes that see a prize worth coveting. Another man would not find it attractive, the way your stomach sinks in, the way your breasts float to either side, the way your hip bones grind up whatever passes between them into dust. He would call you witch & fashion a noose to hang you. But I do not scare so easily. Let me in, *all the way*. I will water the garden inside you, admire the snapdragon offering fragrant nectar to the bumblebee & hummingbird. I will listen to you reciting to them what you are too afraid to tell. & when I stumble in shadow, on my way to hell, I will bring you with me to prove how well suited we are, how right you were to walk beside me in the dark.

The constant pursuance
makes me almost believe
I witness my eyes
afloat on the clock's crystal.

The third child of time
sweeps the dial, white.
Every tick clouds my vision.
Rainless forest outside,
sleep preys on my senses;
somewhere hisses the noise
of sand pouring through my mind agape.

Once upon a time,
we walked along the trail,
just lacking your hand in mine.

I think of that day
now that everything's changed
and I wonder if you'd known the whole time.

Fast-forward and there we sat,
Landon Pigg and Nickelback;
coffee, tea, a juice, a beer.

Then the irony, a fire
and not just in your eyes;
the dark, the cute, the chilly night.

Finally we sat, at our side an awkward laugh
filling the silence desperately
until you'd pull me to your lap.

Time, it sped incessantly
until the day I had to stay behind:
Not goodbye, see you later.

"See you later," you whispered,
as your lips brushed mine.
"See you later, not goodbye."

Ottavia Paluch
Sonnet Ending with Nick Drake
(after "From the Morning" by Nick Drake)

When the day arrives, it is so windy
outside, and it is part in our dreams and
part everywhere, our minds a harbor from
which boats and vessels can enter and say
THIS IS HOW I WOULD LIKE TO LIVE MY LIFE
and we go from shadow to sunlight, from
hour to week, from a minute to the
middle of the midnight, and when the clock
strikes we aren't even asleep, and more
alive than we thought we could ever be,
and we sleepwalk, hearing a chord scratched low
on a guitar or some cracked violin,
and we walk away from the harmonies
and now we rise, and we are everywhere.

Juliette Sebock
Squirrel Song

A bird caws overhead,
A squirrel lies in our bed,
As I hum some old song and you dance along.
He watches the song
And the song goes on.
The song comes again,
In another bed,
With another bird and another squirrel
And you just in my head.
They both seem wrong.

I heard that song and, for once, you're still gone,
Instead of dancing through my mind.
That squirrel and I, we're moving on,
Kissing you and the bird goodbye.

It's not that easy,
Never was, never will be.
So I'll just avoid the squirrel song.
I'll try again to move on
And forget the bird's ca-caw.

Ottavia Paluch
Staccato Sonnet

So much time that I'm too scared to lose. It's
passing at a tempo my heart can't beat.
I wanted to go, but not after this.
I wanted to go, but not before you.
You ran too quickly, in staccato bursts
of sound. And I chased after you, because
this game of tag will never end. You were
born of noise so white that it didn't have
a colour. The songs ringing in your ears,
worn like a blindfold over my blind eye.
We coexist. You're only in my head.
What if it's all just stones you get to throw?
Fast song humming inside my brain.
I play pretend by myself forever.



Reaching Beyond the Wall
by Lisa Lerma Weber

Siobhan Dunlop
Still Beating

She stalks the night to reclaim her place
on the dull grey pavements
between the fuzzy orange glow of the streetlights
budget cuts have not yet forced into silence

Once those streets were not safe
but now one night every now and then she can walk
with her head held high and feel the protection of a secret those streets forced upon her

Rushing home from a shitty job in a pub
where leering old men only jeered harder at her insistence
she wasn't interested, she had a girlfriend

Footsteps behind her
and though she curled
her fingers around house keys
he came from an angle she didn't expect
and sunk his teeth
through her jacket
into her arm

Now the moon fills the sky and she takes to the alleyways

Once a month she protects the unsafe
walking home in the shadows of night

Her monstrous form hides her true purpose
so she keeps herself hidden from those she protects
and though she longs for a heartfelt thank you
she will take what she gets

The still beating hearts of local creeps

When grandma comes over, mother forgets her English as though she does not speak it. She adheres to the family custom of keeping secrets in a foreign tongue. Rumors spread by my cousins reveal all she's done to erase her heritage, portray a persona this world can count on: She shunned her name, flat-ironed wild curls, forgot the exotic face & hot neck white men were eager to remark on. She swears we are Mexican with Spanish blood– not brown like sunlit earth, but soft moonshine from another country, brighter than home. We know our way back by the screams of lambs in the open field where the shepherdess abandoned her flock to write songs & draw pictures of babies in the womb, trembling under an invisible knife. Once, I asked her why she taught me to give hugs that end in kisses on both cheeks & that Feliz Navidad is not about me, but the birth of some biblical king whose miracle food changed the world. She said, when I am dead, you will thank me for not burdening you with everything I tossed away but just this much. Then she pinched two fingers together. We do not draw near the subject again, afraid it will end like the days that passed between her generation & mine. Instead, we drink the stolen water keeping the family tree alive. We hide in the portion of night that is ours.

Marielle Songy
Survival, A Delicacy

The crow dances on the dry earth,
knowing that it belongs to him
And when the water falls from the sky
he bathes, quite knowing that his life
has distance and he will soon be replaced

He will climb to the highest peak
and look down from the cosmos
He can see for miles and know that
it all belongs to him because he
considers himself one with the depth of night

Brooding, brooding in the warmth of life
Hunting, instinctually knowing that it's
Eat or be eaten, hunt or die
This is the life you have chosen for yourself-
like it or not

Try to find the purpose in it
Try to find the beauty

Karen Janowsky
Syzygy

Words and worlds apart, I stop breathing
when you hover your hands and press hard.
Each letter is a wrist or thigh as you mark
words and worlds. Apart, I stop breathing
anything but language. Fingers kissing
keystrokes, I arch my back to the stars,
words and worlds apart. I stop breathing
when you hover your hands. Press hard.

Lee Dunn
The bones remember

A little boy of three who misplaced his mother.
And, as he grew,
a bird of shadow brought to him
a terrible knowing.
Aloneness and fear.
How to bear?
How to do?
Who will care?

Singleness incubates a strange and strong beauty,
and the bones remember the learning.
At marrow's end they keep, in plasma, our stardust.
Revere them. Lay them well,
that a life may knit with the cosmic.

These distances between us
expanding & collapsing – fate’s accordion –
taunt me with their mere existence

How can I open a tesseract
between our lungs
between the infinitesimal spaces
science stacked between our atoms

How can I draw you closer,
ever closer,
until we lose the need for lightyears
& space travel & equations
& those lonely lab techs
to get us breathing the same air

I remember features of a face I never knew,
through the eyes of friends I never met.

Their photographs force me to realize
your sanctity, unaffected
by his patronage, transcends my own.

We exist to coexist, separate planes overlapping
at a single rigid vertex: his infinite affection.

Your freckled cheekbones pull his gaze,
obscure his vision, suppress all vestiges
of me. Memory blends our images;

You turn from wanton apparition to isolated
comet visible only in summer tide, radiating
past the moors and illuminating coastlines!

Will Beloved ever sever our orbit,
cleave my lithe tail from the misshapen ice?

I am perpetually forced to follow
as a diluted shadow, linger in suspended animation
and hung on a rusted nail behind your bedroom door.

The wooden floor creaks beneath my weight.
I designed what you built!

I may have lost the battle; my soldiers
home with lactating wives. But the war
still wages in the void where soul touches body.

I sat up on the couch with my writing
to pump the poison from my veins
because the world pollutes me.
But the poison becomes thicker with each day
and it takes much prodding from my pen -
the extractor, the purifier -
to descend into the recesses of my mind,
that place I would rather not visit.
I must be quick -
move feverishly in this, the purging of my soul
onto the immortal page.
Only then do I feel the desire for life
opening inside of me -
that wild parade of love,
awash with renewed peace,
and a smile gathers upon my lips
in celebration of the woman that I am.

Lee Dunn
Things unsettled

Have you felt it,
dear one?
The oddness,
the forced smiles,
the hurried looks.
The swift shutting of doors
at dusk in huddled houses.
Poisonous seeds have been sown.
Short fuses in broad day.
Scripted horrors bring us to the brink.
Our world is waiting.

My softness intrigues and confuses her.
She kisses me.
We lie in the grass under the stars,
opening our souls as our fingers entwine.

Twice she cries
after I dismantle her
amidst incense and Mozart duets.

“I think I’m too straight for you,” she says,
but what I hear is, “You’re not what I want.”
I suppose I can steal your girl,
but I can never keep her.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE LOVELY
VENUS DAVIS

Venus Davis on their forthcoming chapbook

1. *What made you want to compile a chapbook?*

- So, I had just dropped out of college and I had just gone through a terrible breakup. So, I needed a new place to live. To convince my (now ex) roommate's parents to give her permission (they were super controlling) to move into her student apartment, shared with a third roommate, we needed to lie and pretend that I was still in school as a senior. Her parents were super particular and they basically needed to think that I was an accomplished honor student working on their thesis. So, what did we do? We lied and said that I was working on my honor's thesis, a chapbook about astrology. The lie was so fascinating to me that I just decided to run with the idea and write a chapbook. I had been wanting to work on a longer project and really start trying to get my work published. So, writing this chapbook as a real project just sounded like the direction I wanted to go in.

2. *What does your chapbook discuss or focus on?*

- My chapbook, *Sensitive Divination*, is a series of letters to the twelve zodiac signs. Each letter is based on someone in my real life. So, mostly, the poems are written about/to friends but I have two for people that I know and hate and two for family members. Overall, the chapbook focuses on form and expression of deep emotions - positive, negative, and longing.

3. *Who inspires/influences you as a poet?*

- I love the intricacy and suggestiveness of Mitski's lyrics. She's often clever and profound in ways that many people would not

notice. I think that's why her work resonates with so many people, though. She ignites something in every person that her lyrics resonate with and I think it's because we feel like she is seeing a part of us that no one else has. Her lyrics are so specific and yet so universal. It's almost like listening to your own thoughts with an instrumental playing in the background. I mean that in the most complementary way. She is just so honest in her work and I love that.

4. *While compiling Sensitive Divination, were there times that you felt you weren't ready to share some of your poems?*

- Oh god, yes! There's this one poem, "To my enemy, the Sagittarius", that I know is an absolute BANGER of a poem. However, after I wrote it, I just sat and looked at it for months because it is the most vulnerable that I have ever been in a poem. It is so angry and raw and it's also a villanelle, so it's beautiful. There's this pressure that I felt to release something so strong into the world. Once you do something amazing, people expect you to do it again. That is why I took such a long time writing this chapbook. The poems are so emotional - even the positive ones. So, I really sat with each poem for months, terrified and excited for the future. I love these poems dearly but they are so brutally honest. To tell someone you love them or to profess hatred in all caps - it's draining. So, when I drained all of my objective poetry reading energy - I wasn't even sure if the work I had written was even good or just whiny. So, for months, like I said before, I was absolutely not ready to show any single soul my work. Though, I think that's why I'm so sure that this book is done now. I've sat with it and thought about every different approach. So, now, I know for a fact that this is the best version of *Sensitive Divination (SD)* that I will ever write.

5. *How long did it take you to complete SD, and what kind of changes have you seen in both yourself and your poetry from start to finish?*

- I started this chapbook in August of last year. So, it took me about eleven months to finish *SD*. I've seen myself become a more stable person obsessed with my own personal development. When I started this project, I was going through a breakup and serial dating and just generally ruining my chances of happiness. As I did more self reflection and internet research - I became more career and goal oriented. At first, I only wanted to live for the hope of finding love with someone else. I didn't know what I wanted and I didn't know what I was capable of in terms of writing. I thought that this project was just going to be another empty promise or trash idea, like the ones I've had before. In the past eleven months, I've buckled down and gotten to work. I've unleashed my inner capricorn and my poetry has thanked me furiously. My writing was emotional in an immature way before. I could just tell that I was not writing to my full potential. All throughout college, my professors tried to tell me that. They tried to explain ways for me to work through that immaturity and to grow as a writer. Though, the truth is, I could not accept any advice until I had grown as a person. I can finally accept critiques on my writing and not feel like my heart is going to shut down. I can work through most of my own problems in my poems without feeling like the work is incomplete. I think, basically, I have grown to be more independent.

6. *Looking back at the beginning of this process, would you have done anything differently?*

- Yes! I would've sat down and set realistic goals. At first, my goal was to finish a poem a night. That is way too much work! To produce quality, sensual, venus style poems - I definitely needed more time to actually sit down and write. I would've

also nailed down a concept sooner. I knew from the jump that I wanted to write about the twelve zodiac signs but, at first, I was really concerned with proving that I could write in a bunch of different forms. I wasted a lot of time worrying about the lack of diversity in the forms of my poetry instead of actually writing poems. I think that slowed the process of writing down a lot. However, I do think that if I hadn't had this exact experience with writing *SD*, I would not have learned all of the things I learned about myself. I would not have become a much stronger writer, either.

7. *Which poems are you most looking forward to sharing?*

- "To my enemy, the Sagittarius" and "To my friend, the Gemini"! These poems are probably my favorite two from the chapbook. They are both entirely opposite in terms of content but I just love the route of expression that I chose in both poems. "To my friend, the Gemini" is a very pretty poem with a curvy path to the concept of loving a friend. While, "To my enemy, the Sagittarius", is a very dark poem that deals with the aftermath of abuse from the point of view of a victim. I am really looking forward to hearing what people think of each of these poems!

8. *When can we expect it to be available?*

- Sadly, I have no idea! I've submitted the chapbook to two presses and I have not ruled out the idea of self publishing. I assume, it'll be out sometime between October 2019 - May 2020. That's such a large window but I am really just not sure yet!



Seed pods on a tree in Boston
by Tucker Lieberman

SHORT FICTION

I was only going to say that heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy.

–Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*

“Haunt me then!” Heathcliff had demanded over my still body.

For once, I had done what I was told. For years, I tickled his knees as he walked through the moors, I clung under the beds of his fingernails, and I brushed his hair back off his forehead as he walked.

Let me out! What used to be my living voice blew up through the cool, loose dirt and into the mist. My spirit did not stay buried long. I sprang up and spread out towards the Heights.

“Catherine Linton” is scrawled across a stone above a grave on a hillside next to another, but lies here does she no longer.

I am no longer here nor there, exclusively. I am the heather, the dirt, and the wind billowing through it.

I have watched my daughter, my namesake, grow from a babbling thing on the floor to a girl with a familiar, flighty spirit on the moors. Often, I have heard Edgar call out “Catherine!” and forgotten it was not me he called. Though I was still called for, from restless sleep or drunken rage.

One night of many, the cold chilled my wind fingers, and I crept icy tendrils into the glass of my old bedroom window. An intruder, a

stranger, stood gawking at my things, scribbling in his notebook, and itching to tell my secrets.

My cries bounced off the branches of the tree outside and into his ears,

“Let me in!”

The irony does not escape me. While alive, all I had wished was to be out of doors. Now dead, I ache to be let inside. The man buckled in horror, but I was horrified at the sight of him in my room, running his strange fingers along the carvings of my name, of Heathcliff’s.

That name, his name. Heathcliff bore into me as he had when I was alive.

Not so long ago, as he and Hareton walked along the road to the Heights, I followed them through the dust they kicked.

“Linton will not live much longer,” Heathcliff said, plainly. I wondered how he steeled himself so.

“What will happen to Catherine? They are to be married...” Hareton sounded concerned, though over what, I was unsure.

“Do not concern yourself.” His answer was curt.

He had never been much for words. He stopped and stared at the dust gathered around his heels, and I whirled around his ankles. He paused for a moment, confused, then looked up to the sky, sighed, and continued walking on.

Tonight, a mirror of countless others, he lies in my bed full of spirits. His breathing labors as I imagine he sucks me in with the stale bedroom air. He knows I am there, outside. He always does. All our lives we never parted. I could always feel him near – in my life and in my death.

When we were children, I would hide during our games, and he would always find me.

“Cathy! Cathy! Where are you, child?” Father would call. I could hear Hindley banging about, looking in closets and slamming doors.

Heathcliff would find me, hiding in the open, beside the stables. He never spoke as he slunk up beside me, grinning and leaning against the wall.

I have waited years for him to join me. For years, I have held my tongue and wrestled with breaking my silence, often teasing but never giving in. The living can only hear the dead when we choose to be heard.

“Drive me mad!” He had languished.

So, I had. The madder he became, the nearer to me. Our children kept me from taking him with me all these years. Not mine and his, but ours nonetheless: Catherine, Hareton, and Linton. Linton is gone from this place. I imagine him at peace with his mother, Isabella, the young fools. Catherine and Hareton are older. They do not need him anymore, but I do. They would be free without him. Our lives were cursed of freedom, maybe our children can have more.

Perhaps the children were not the only thing keeping me from taking him. My mother is here. I have spent more time with her dead than alive. It is curious, why mother and not father, not Edgar either? Is it only the women in our family cursed to wander these moors? Mother and I are stuck in this afterlife together it seems, until Heathcliff joins me. She makes her appearances scarce and primarily to chastise me. I would have so rathered to be with father. Father would let me take Heathcliff. He would understand.

Instead, even now, mother’s voice prattles through the branches into my leaves, disapproving.

“Selfish child. Willful to the last.”

“He should be here with me by now. I never...he never should have lasted this long.”

“Maybe he has more wit than I had always assumed.”

“All he needs is a push. Let me alone. This does not concern you.”

“You are my daughter, willful or no. I watched you. Saw you playing in the sun in the grass and climbing wet rocks in the storm. Everything you do concerns me, child.”

“You keep calling me child when I have not been one since your death. The children are grown now. They do not need him anymore. Not like before.”

“A daughter is always a mother’s child. You should know. Should you not?”

I always thought I favored my father. Perhaps I was mistaken in ways I could not have known. Mother is searing. She disapproves of my leniency with Catherine, as if she had any power over me after her death. She may have watched, yes, but she never interfered. I never heard her whispers on the wind, never felt a warm breath of air that reminded me of her. I suppose I did what she wanted me to, in the end.

I betrayed myself for my name, for my family. I married Edgar. I became Mrs. Linton, my love for Heathcliff, my nature forsaken.

She never mentions just how well that turned out.

“I would, yes. Catherine is free to do as she will, like I should have been. She can marry Hareton, stay here at the Heights or better yet, they can leave this place. They can have what we lost.”

“You never learn. You cannot be and have all things at the same time. We must choose. You cannot preach of freedom and look to take a man from his life. Leave Heathcliff alone. Stand by your own professed principles. You cannot be free to do as you please and still expect society to accept you. You could not and cannot have Heathcliff. Maybe soon you will understand.”

“Mother, you speak as if the world tolerates no contradiction. Look around you, that we even linger here! Our spirits are both bound to

and break the rules of nature. Father and I knew differently. Heathcliff too. You sound like Joseph, strict, intolerant fool. What did his rigidity ever afford him? Catherine knows the truth as we did. She does not need to live by your rules. Rules ruined me, but she will be different.”

I watched Catherine run free on the moors. As a child, now as a young woman. Her and Hareton exploring, running their fingers over the peat and heather, like me and Heathcliff used to do.

“Rules did not ruin you. You ruined you. Your inability to live by any sensible rules made your life impossible. Do not allow your daughter to suffer under the same error. Sway her.”

“Hush now, mother. He is stirring.” As I glance inside again, Heathcliff has started to move, sitting straight up in bed and staring out of the cracks in his window, my window.

“He knows I am here! Let me go in, do not follow me.”

I blow past her and surround the window in a fog. She is muttering something as I pass, but I choose not to hear her any longer. His dark hair is long, disheveled. His face is long and thin as his body; he needs to eat. He needs a good washing. He needs to be with me. His eyes keep darting back and forth to me and then towards, something I cannot quite see. What is he looking for? I press against the fragile glass; a creak sounds and catches his attention.

“Who is there?” he stutters drowsily.

He sounds unsure of himself; his voice is low and dry, cracked. I have never answered his questions, and there have been many. Countless questions, curses. I wonder what would have drove him madder, the lack of answers, or if I had.

“Speak to me!” He is louder, now.

His voice fights for what his body cannot. He has called to me like this before, but I would not come. This time is different. The children are grown. They do not need him anymore. I could take him. I know it is what he wants. He can fill my days and I his nights. We will ride the

same gusts, grow in the same blades of grass. We can be what we always wanted: natural and free. No more worry, no more death, no more misery. Mother will scatter in his presence. She will know how wrong she has been all these years. Her constant denial of our fate, her skepticism. She will see she and the rules of nature hold no power over us. We can be together; all I need to do is speak.

“Let me in.”

A deep, lingering howl curls out of his parted lips at my voice, a sound he lost long ago. He kneels by the pane and runs his fingers along the cracks in the glass. I breathe into them, and warmth flutters around the blood vessels pressed onto the hard, cold surface. His face searches for mine, brightening for a moment at the possibility, then fading back to darkness with my absence. His long tresses falling over his face to shade his sharp cheekbones.

“Let me in!”

He pulls his face away from the pane now, away from me now. He must be afraid. His eyes are darting back and forth again, but his hand is reaching toward the window. The latch is rusted and leaves grime on his fingers as he switches it open, and I fill the room, his and my room.

My connection to this room tethers me, and I feel whole for a moment. I settle into the bedposts, the wood swelling, pregnant with my spirit. We are children again, laughing in the dark together, whispering secrets, and hoping not to wake father. He sits with his mouth agape; his eyes are softly gazing about the room as if he can see me in every speck of dust, every crease in his sheets. His breathing slows into a methodical rhythm, and I fill his lungs.

“Come with me,” I whisper.

He nods his heavy head and rests his arm on the sill. His eyes shine brighter than I have yet to see.

“Cathy...” his last breath echoes me out of his body until I can feel him no longer.

Much like father, and like Edgar, he does not linger. My anger blows the lattice, cutting his hand. My sorrow falls in drops from above, covering him and all around him.

The stranger rushes in to touch his face, my face, moving the hair from his eyes and studying him cautiously at first, then worriedly, then scaredly. He calls for Joseph and Hareton now. Hareton's cries surprise me, and I try to calm the storm to soothe Hareton's tears. The men gather around his body and speak of illness, of burial.

"Where should we put him?" Joseph asks coldly.

"He should be with Cathy," Hareton sounds defensive, "He always needed to be close to her." His face crumples; his emotion is palpable. Joseph seems annoyed, uncomfortable.

"So be it. Glory be."

He will never be close enough to me. No matter how long I wait, I know he will not come. I can feel him, gone. The women in our family must be damned. Damned to wander these moors. Damned to haunt.

I rode the gust alone and wrapped myself around Catherine, standing over Heathcliff's grave.

"Get out," I pleaded, brushing her hair away from her ears and lightly stinging the tears that hung in her eyes.

She looked over to my grave and calmly smiled, nodded. I watched her take Hareton's hand and leave our graves, never looking back.

Alone, I wander still. I brush the dirt around his grave, tossing and turning in the wind. My mother frets about me, making me feel more alone. But the people in this town speak of ghosts, of spirits, of Heathcliff and me. They see us in windows and on the roads. They see us together, finally and again. Only in their stories do we wander these moors together. Their stories make it real, make it so.

I made the nesting-box in the garden shed, one frozen, half-lit afternoon in December. We'd fallen out over something, usually something trivial; the brittle truce that re-formed each night, stepped on, shattered like an iced over puddle.

The length of white painted wooden shelving had been a remnant from a bedroom redecoration, from a time when we cared what the bedrooms looked like. I'd cut the plank into six, nailed the pieces together into a cube and drilled a bird sized hole through the front.

Whilst I sawed and nailed, I remembered my grandmother. She'd taken me on Spring walks across meadows, into woods. After picnics of home-made fruitcake and warm lemonade she'd rise from the rug, brush crumbs from her skirt, and lead me to a barely discernible hole in the hedgerow. She'd part the thorny branches with a stick, then whistle-tweet through her false teeth. The fledglings would answer with their yolk-orange beaks gaping up at us.

I screwed the nesting-box to an ice-rimmed alder tree, the frost clenching in the last light. In the corner of my eye I saw Sally watching through the bedroom window, but she didn't speak word of it, as though the box wasn't there, invisible.

That night I overheard her on the telephone to our escaped daughter.

"Your father's cobbled together a nesting-box but its painted white. Nothing will ever go near it. Homebuilding never was his strong suit".

On the day the removal lorry arrived I took a last look inside that nesting-box. The cobwebbed space, a bird-sized version of the rooms in our emptying house; lifeless, loveless.

Sally was wrong. One year a pair of blue-tits did make a nest and fledge their young to the point when the chicks were preparing for flight. I remember watching crows plucking them out of the box by their tiny heads, swallowing them whole like flapping oysters.

I yanked the nesting box off the tree and lobbed it into the skip, on top of other detritus from thirty years, including half empty pots of curdled paint, some of them white.

The man and the woman sat across from each other. On the table wedged between them sat an uncooked steak.

The steak was still in its packaging, tight saran wrap keeping it secure, styrofoam soaking up its juices. It was a cold deep red. Bits of fat decorated it like brush strokes. The sight of it made the woman feel sick and the man feel hungry.

The woman had been vegan for seven months. The man had spent all seven of those months arguing with her about this, claiming that it was ruining their lives. The woman normally cooked for the man, even though she did not live with him, but now, she would not touch any meat, so he would either have to eat vegan or cook for himself.

“Baby,” he would whimper like a talking dog. “No one makes chicken/pork/beef/fish like you!”

She did not like hearing this every day. So she told him she would start eating meat again if he ate a raw steak in front of her.

The woman did not know what came over her when she made this proposition. Maybe she was tired of the way the man was treating her both over the veganism and over other things, the way she dressed or who she talked to on the phone. Maybe she wanted him to see the error of his meat-loving ways and thought that forcing him to consume meat in its rawest form would accomplish that. Maybe she believed wholeheartedly that he would not be able to do it, that he may have been acting overconfident up until this point and once the steak was in front of him, he would back out and they could move on.

Yes, when she met the man, she did eat meat. Then, she read a book about a woman who stopped eating meat. The book was strange, but it indulged her guilt. She had claimed to love animals her entire life; how

can she claim to love something and then consume it? At a co-worker's behest, she watched a documentary about meat manufacturing. She was so horrified she threw out all the animal products in her apartment and began researching how to go vegan. She bought recipe books and vitamin supplements off the Internet. She texted her co-worker, who came over and cooked her her first vegan meal. Cutting out meat made her feel free, like she had been cut loose from something that was sucking her dry. When she told all of this to the man, he told her she had become a madwoman.

The man was very smart and had a much better job than the woman. She had not finished college and waitressed in a local dive bar. He wanted her to move out of her small studio and into his clean one-bedroom apartment that had a view of the city across the river. He had begged her to move in with him for the past nine months, and this begging got more intense when she became vegan. The woman's coworker told her that if she moved in with him, he would find a way to force her to consume meat again. The man claimed that both the woman and her coworker were militant, the kind of vegans that look for fights with strangers on the internet. The woman's lease renewal notice had been mailed to her two days before the raw steak was to be consumed. The woman signed it and hid it in her desk drawer, as she did not want the man to see it.

The man had a fork. He used the prongs of the fork to cut through the plastic wrap. The woman could no longer look at the steak, and instead chose to look at his polished hardwood floor. She didn't know why she had done this to begin with, how she had let this get this far. This was her idea, sure, but she felt like she had been talked into it. They were here, at this table, because he had pushed her to a breaking point. She did not know why she was still with him. Maybe she was bored. Maybe she was content, resigned to a fate. Maybe the man was right about her being militant, always looking for a fight. She could feel the man looking at her, his eyes tired, his lips flat, sucked in.

The woman was waiting for the man to give up. No, she was hoping, praying, that he would give up. That's the whole reason she proposed this, right? She knew he couldn't do it. He had to not do it.

Until then, until he gave up, she did not know what else she could do but think.

She thought about the way the man always dismissed her to his friends. She thought about that documentary and all the other documentaries she watched after it. She thought about the time she was crossing the street and she saw a MACK truck coming towards her and she wanted to stop in the middle of the road just to see if it would hit her. Her thoughts were broken by the sight of him taking a chunk of raw steak, bringing it to his mouth, and taking a lustful bite. He said it tasted rich and fresh. He said chewing it made him feel primal.

That afternoon, while he was napping, she packed her things and left him.

He met her at some American diner that reeked of burger grease and dying nostalgia. The kind of place where the past was being sold for a profit. He hated everything from the Art Deco designs. To the colorized photos of dead celebrities and vintage cars. He'd even spied a photo of Donald Trump's dad by the bathroom. Though, she didn't mind the retro aesthetic as much. All his significant other needed in a food place was free coffee refills.

Set on the table between them were two large shoe boxes. He's brought one and so had she. Hopefully, what they were doing would help them envision a possible future for their relationship. For now, they were in the middle of a conversation.

A conversation he was having a hard time focusing on. "Yeah? What about the new owners? No, I haven't met them." He replied to her. His withdrawnness was thanks to the smooth and shiny ceramic tiling everywhere. The contrasting black and white squares compounded with the ring-ding from a revolving door. Continuously distracting. He felt he was in some science fiction dystopia. Where family men carried ray guns and drove flying '55 Ford Thunderbirds. Something about this environment did not help his epilepsy. He often avoided these restaurants reason but went because she enjoyed them.

"They're Asian-American. The husband is from Taipei and the wife is from Seoul. They're nice people. The wife once tried speaking to me in Korean. I had to inform her that I'm adopted and can only speak a little bit. It was awkward, but we had a good laugh. That happens more than you'd think. At least it's better than when random white people expect me to know the Korean language."

“Most don’t even specify Korean as far as I’ve seen. They’ll ask what kind of Asian you are and then still assume you speak Mandarin.” He added.

“Yup.” She nodded. “It can get pretty cringy. Sometimes when I say I’m Korean I get asked whether I’m the good or bad kind? South or North? Water Nation or Fire Nation?”

“Damn. I bet the new owner’s get that stuff too since they have an older white customer base.”

“Yeah, she seemed happy to see another Korean, that’s why I hated to disappoint her by only speaking English.” She said while reaching for a packet of real sugar from her purse to add to her coffee. She avoided fake sugar at all costs. “Didn’t you know the older owners?”

“Frank and Betty, yup, I knew them. They came to my parent’s poker games. I heard they moved to Alaska. They used to call me ‘Chief-Cowboy’ because of my Native mom and my rancher dad. I’m glad they’re far away. I do feel bad for the Natives in Alaska who have to deal with their racist comments now.”

“You never feel bad for anyone. You like to pretend that you do.”

“It’s too early in the morning for me to deal with truth like that. I’ll need to eat something at least. I haven’t even finished my first cup of coffee ” He took a sip from his cup of black coffee and looked at the shoe boxes. They’d kept themselves from this topic long enough, he decided. “Are you ready?”

She didn’t respond right away and he noticed her attention had drifted elsewhere. That seemed to be the theme of this meetup. They were meandering at a crossroads. Both hesitating at the direction to go.

What had caught her mind was a ding from the revolving door. And the person that followed that ding. She was a pregnant lady in a white maternity dress. Most people would hardly notice she was carrying if it were not for her hands placed over the belly. He thought nothing of the woman. Besides the fact, her belly bump looked like a white elephant. Though, his partner fixated on her. She was visualizing

something, something he didn't see the need to have her explain. In her head, she played a game where she would guess the decisions that led a person to walk through those doors the way they were.

"Hey, Yoon!" He said raised his voice, but not with aggression, to snap her attention back to him. "Are you ready?"

She jerked her head back to look at him. "Ready for what?"

"Ready to swap the shoeboxes? I figure we do it now before the food arrives."

Realization dawned, she took a deep breath and a gulp from her mug. "Ready as I'll ever be."

They swapped the shoeboxes. He had hers. She had his. "We open at the same time." He told her. "I'll count down. Three. . . two. . . one. . ."

With the lid lifted his eyes fell upon the daintiest looking hanbok he'd ever seen.

She, of course, would be looking at miniature regalia and moccasins.

He picked up a striking yellow garment. It came with a dark blue skirt decorated with red flower petal images. When he moved the hanbok the skirt followed, flowing with graceful curves. At the bottom of the now empty shoebox was an old photograph of Yoon in the hanbok. Instantly his mind traveled back in time to imagine the woman in front of him as a child. She was more than likely inquisitive and charming back then, too.

"My adopted mother got the hanbok from my birth mother. The Women who fostered me as a baby in Seoul taught my adoptive mother how to tie an ot-ogreum. I remember how frustrated she was with me that I kept untying the coat strings that formed the bow. I thought it was a fun game."

“How cute! Your hair is braided and done up with ribbons and bows in this picture!” He told her while running his fingers over the rose petal designs. “The skirt is gorgeous. I like the pattern.”

“The patterns and colors separate the nobility from the lower classes. Dragons, tigers, phoenixes, butterflies, and cranes worn by the ruling classes. They also wore brighter colors. Their commoners were only permitted to wear lighter shades of whites, pinks, greens and greys.”

“Dang, I didn’t know any of that. What does hanbok mean?”

She laughed at that. “You’re asking the wrong person. Korean clothing, I think? I could be wrong. And the shoes I wore are Gomusin.”

“Do you know what the shoes in my box are?”

“Yes? They’re little baby moccasins.” She answered with her lips still on the coffee cup. “And the picture is of a little baby you in the little baby moccasins. I adore it.”

“The ones I wear currently as slippers are a repro item. A moccasin-type varies between the many diverse Indigenous tribes. People grossly generalize it as sewn Indian footwear with any tribal design. The word comes from the Powhatan language. And stuck because white colonizers had contact with them first. The subtle difference in the soles and seams identify tribes from one another.”

“Your baby moccasins look hand-sewed.”

“My mom made them for me when I was still preheating in the baby oven. This being an intensive and sacred process. Regalia is often commissioned by those close to the wearer. She used deer hide and learned from library books on how to get the u-shape above the toe. Then she added the beadwork, quillwork, painted designs, and fringes to the moccasins.”

“They look like penny loafers.”

“Wow, don’t be insulting.” He joked with her. “That’s because the creator of the penny loafer. G.H Bass blatantly ripped off Native designs with his products.”

“That makes sense. The hanbok has modern versions. With various new Korean fashion designers putting their own spin on it.” She drank more coffee, nearly finishing it to the bottom. She could go through at least four cups in a meal. They always had to stop at a gas station for her to pee on the way home. “Did you dance in the regalia?”

“Yeah, my mother has it on an old VHS somewhere. I did it for several elders.” He sept more coffee to match her. “Afterwards I unbraided my hair and put on a white tank top and my green bandanna. I’ve always worn a green bandanna for some reason. Most of the men in my family wear bandannas with their own unique color as well. Funny how that works.”

“My anthropology professor actually brought up Klamath and Modoc Natives recently.”

“What they have to say?”

She stopped analyzing the moccasins in her hands. Setting them back in the box to answer. “They brought up the sandals found at Fort Rock Cave dating to about 10,000 years of old. That would make the sandals of your ancestors the oldest dated footwear in the world. Ethnographers documented all the three tribes you’re connected to using them. Klamath, Modoc, and Paiute? Am I correct on the pronunciation of the last one?”

“You’re good. I’ve seen those at a museum once with my grandmother. I also learned what made a Paiute shoe a Paiute shoe. Tule reeds, sage bark, and sometimes they stuffed dry grass in them. This was to keep them insulated from the icy marshlands where they walked. And---

“I love you!” She interrupted.

“And I love you.” He repeated while reaching over the table to hold her hand.

Her brown eyes looked into his they’d done countless times before. “Can you picture a child from us in a hanbok and moccasins?”

“I can after this.”

“So can I. It’s almost bringing me to tears”

“Remember that I’m with you no matter what.”

“Thank you. I know that.”

“Have you made your decision?” He gripped her hand tighter. Embracing the answer that would decide the future of their relationship. Sweat dripped from his palms onto hers like nervous raindrops.

“I have. I’m going forward with terminating the pregnancy. It’s just not the right time and with my history of endometriosis---”

“Say no more.” He brought her hand forward to her and kissed the top. Then let go. “Let’s do this together. One step at a time.” He closed the lid on her hanbok box. She then closed the lid on his moccasins. They set them underneath the table.

That’s when the waitress arrived with their afternoon meal and a pitcher of fresh coffee. She said something about that she liked the Asian dress and Indian clothing. He almost laughed at the woman, but that would’ve been rude. Yoon thanked her for the compliments and smiled to make for the fact that he didn’t. He liked the way she smiled more than anything in the world.

Josep Corcorán
No Particular Reason

I counted out the beat in my head. People said it was like music, can't you feel it coursing through you? Its rhythmic, melodic even. Its like something crying out from the depths of your soul, its anthem traversing every inch of your body. I was told so at least. It was different than before. I'm quite sure of that but, lacking any kind of occult ability, I'm unable to determine whether the fault lies in her mouth or in his words.

Yes...The tongue in the mouth

The words fall upon me from above but they are not meant for my ears. Tonight, I am once again a voyeur. A witness to an intimacy that I have been denied. I heard they got up and walked out the first time she uttered those words. Of course, it was a different them and, I suppose, a different she.

What?...Who?

The rooms are not so different when they are stripped back. Bright lights impose themselves upon you while you're strapped in to some piece of machinery presumably looted from a medieval torture museum. Legs up or face forward becomes an irrelevance when all is said and done. They're ogling all the same. Their gaze envelops her just as it once enveloped me. Despite it all. Despite all the empty words they say to us. All the times I was told they'd help me. Help me to take it away. They lied. They left something behind. Something indelible, but I feel it all the same like a brand upon my soul.

I remember feeling in enormous pain. The kind that beats like a rival heart, pumping agony through corrupted veins. I wonder if the suspended figure above me ever felt such pain? Does she feel it now? I could ask of course, later...but perhaps that'd be the worst thing to say. We've been asked that question for as long as there's been questions and as long as there's been us.

Regardless, I assume she feels pain. I think I can hear it when she speaks but, again, it could be the fault of the words. One isn't responsible for the words we say when we're in such pain, but always for the way we say them. Tonight, those words are forced – screaming into a world that'll scream back at them before long.

Begging it all to stop

She's not wrong. We all beg for that. The difference...the crucial difference is that it does stop for most of us. But not me. Not I. Not her. Poor little girl. Rock the little baby now they said. Gently from side to side they said. The crying'll stop before long. How many years do they cry for, my husband asked. Long enough to get used to it I think I remember answering. I liked to be funny then. My little girl has been crying ever since she was born, but only I have ever heard it. Those weak, pitiful sounds have never once awoken another person in the night, nor have they disrupted a trip to the cinema or caused anyone to excuse themselves from church on account of the racket. No. Not them. But I hear them day and night; their melody echoing through my hollow, barren body.

He having vanished

I suppose they all headed for the exit...

Buttoned up his breeches

Breach. Never in my life had a word struck me like that one. A never ending punch in the gut. Something not right. Sweat trickling. Fuck! He calls to me. Dark. Darling talk...Pain – hot cold steel. Bring her out. Her. Me. I. Where was my mother? Long passed. But now it was me, to take up the mantle. To walk out upon the field of battle and return, blood spattered, weakened, but victorious. Funny – it is the most masculine moment of a woman's life.

Then die of shame...crawl back in

Shame was agreed upon in court but not all of us have the luxury of a place to crawl back inside of to die. Some of us freeze in that moment, never to truly be alive again. It seems only fair to me – it went wrong. I went wrong. The spark of life that I carried was snuffed out at that moment. Now I bear the remains. Perhaps I'm a car and my engine has stalled? I continue to move forward but I am no longer driving myself. Merely moving without purpose or direction, fuelled by gravity and Newton's laws and anti-depressants and the overpowering force of the people around me who yell that I must move on! Perhaps this is what grief is like. Perhaps this is what death is like. No. Cars don't feel pain and, to be dead, you must have once been alive. At this precise moment in time, I cannot be sure that I am either.

Go back to work. That was about the only advice I took. Certainly trying again wasn't an option. The first time had left me half-dead and I was afraid that a second failure would finish me off...perhaps. Her, above me... there is something different. Every time I return here, to the dark scaffolding behind the curtain it is like I'm going back. Only it has never sat right. Is she me? And who am I? Her pain would indicate that she is me but there is something not right. I constructed the equipment that holds her.

Vain reasonings...till another thought

Another thought. It must be so. I built the equipment that holds her. I am the body which bears her and presents her, writhing and frightening to the swathes of people who stare in horror. Half the horror of understanding and half the horror of not. Not I. We. We together know the feeling. The thousand times we had felt it previously meant nothing. Now we must feel for the first time. She is in great pain. So am I. Her pain is the sharp agony of never having been. Mine is the dull knowledge that I will never be again.

That feeling was coming back...Imagine!

I know what I must do. The girl. The girl who couldn't be born and the woman who couldn't die. I shall free us both from this shattered prison. I shall free us all. She will stand there, tall and beautiful and silent. My girl shan't cry anymore. She will be greater than God, for she won't need a cross to bear her. I bore her and I bear her still. The nails that bind us together will be stronger than steel, and when the blood runs from us it will pool together upon the ground. Flowers and fruits of all description will spring up from that fertile ground. A bad joke. But I can bear it now. Her touch will be balm for my scarred soul. We'll stand, side by side, high above the heads of those who do not understand us. Rocking, gently side to side. Dangling as sisters, as angels from the silent heavens.

Sarah Jake Fishman
Not the Same, but Close Enough

Tom liked to ask questions. After making love, he would ask her if she was okay, if she needed anything, if she wanted some water. She would always say no, nuzzle her head into his chest, close her eyes. He would kiss her throat, run his tongue over her parted lips, nibble on her earlobe, whisper words like *beautiful* and *incredible*. He'd light up a cigarette, offer her a puff or two, exhale the smoke through the cracked window behind his head.

Then he would ask the question he really wanted to ask; it was always something she was reluctant to share unprovoked but desperately wanted him to ask, wanted to tell him, wanted him to know about her, wanted anyone to know about her. The very first question he asked was, "What is your greatest fear?"

"Being alone," she had said without even a moment of thought. He had pulled her closer and didn't say anything more for a very long time. His breathing slowed and she assumed he had fallen asleep until he said, "You'll never be alone again, Margaret. I promise." She jumped when he spoke, startled by his voice, terrified by his words.

The questions continued, a ritualistic response to his coming while looking into her eyes. Sometimes he would ask if she came too. Mostly she did but when she didn't she would lie, too tired to go through the effort of coaxing her body over the edge and into his control.

He asked her things like *what's your earliest memory?* and *what made you the most jealous of your friends when you were a kid?* She told him things she thought about frequently but had rarely told a boyfriend before. Told him about being three years old at Sephora when her mom taught her about contouring and the underrated importance of a good smokey eye, told him about wanting to eat

Mickey Mouse ice cream pops and Cheetos like her classmates but her mom kept her on a strict diet.

Sometimes he didn't ask, he commanded: *tell me about the biggest fight you had with your mom and show me all your scars, explain how you got them.* She complied, told him about being fifteen and refusing to enter another pageant, pointed to the faint white lines on her forearm where her mother had scratched her with her bubblegum pink acrylics while trying to keep her from leaving the America's Little Miss Teen semi-finals. He ran his rough fingertips over her scars and kissed her head.

Today was a commandment day. "Tell me how you fell in love with me."

Margaret sucked in a deep breath and rolled to her back, stared up at the ceiling. Her mind began to race, heaving and sweating its way through their entire relationship. *When had she fallen in love with him?*

She thought about the first time they kissed. His tongue tasted like the cigarette smoldering between his fingers, hers salty like the tears rolling down her cheeks.

She thought about the first time he told her he loved her. *I am so in love with you*, he had said. The words – *I love you too* – tumbled out of her mouth before she could stop them. He smiled so wide that she decided she meant them. She wasn't sure when they became true.

She thought about the first time they met, just moments after his big brother had made her come.

"I need a cigarette," she said, rolled out of bed, pulled a t-shirt over her head, walked out the door. Sitting on the dimly lit front stoop, she used her right thumb to flick the lighter a few times before bringing it to the cigarette perched between her lips. She inhaled, the cigarette crackled, she sighed. Smoke left her mouth in wisps. She stared at her bare feet, watched an ant find her skin, tap her with its antenna, lift and lower its little leg, try to climb her. Eventually it lifted its body up onto

the side of her baby toe and crawled across the vast expanse of her foot, dodging her protruding veins and getting lost in the valley between her toes.

“Good job, little fella,” she said, and flicked ash at it.

Through the screen door behind her she could hear Tom in the kitchen, filling up a glass with water. When the faucet turned off, she could hear his footsteps coming closer, stopping only a few yards away. She sucked on her cigarette and pretended she couldn’t feel his eyes boring into her back. After a moment he turned to walk away and she waited until the footsteps grew very quiet before exhaling.

She looked down at her toes again and remembered the very first time she walked across this cement and up these steps and into this house; it was after a date with Neil, Tom’s older brother.

Nights with Neil were what Margaret planned her entire week around. He would suggest a movie night on a Monday. She would tell her boss she couldn’t work that night. “Family thing.” Neil wanted to meet for dinner at Mister Sushi on Tuesday instead of Wednesday like they planned? No problem, Margaret would call in sick. Neil mentioned in passing that he would be out at a bar on Friday or Saturday night. Margaret sat at home all weekend, waiting to be invited along.

From their first date she *knew* Neil was the one. He was the most attractive man she had ever been on a date with, let alone *been* with. Ginger-speckled hair, a five o’clock shadow, perfectly white teeth. The whole package.

Before Neil, Margaret was a cynic. She was so sure that every romantic comedy she had ever seen was merely a fabrication of society’s desire to tell women they needed a man to be happy. She believed each romance novel that featured leading ladies who would lose their ability to think at the touch of a man, not because they were so airheaded, but

because *true love* was that powerful, was just masturbation fodder for heartsick women.

But then Neil casually touched her hip and her body was engulfed in flame, her head full of smoke, in a haze. He kissed her and her mind emptied. The only thought she had was *keep moving your lips against his, run your hand up his back, under his shirt, touch his skin, connect, stay connected, breathing is unnecessary, he is your oxygen now.*

“We can’t go back to my place,” he had said, breathless and between kisses. “My brother is there.”

So she took him back to her apartment despite her promise not to bring men home until at least the fourth date. But Neil was different. She knew it. She felt it. He was it. Besides, her roommate was out of town that weekend so no one would be around to judge.

They kissed until dawn and when he tried to remove her panties, she instinctively stopped his hand.

“You want to wait,” he said. “That’s okay.”

And she thought to herself how wonderful he was, how understanding, how amazing a man not to pressure her for sex, as if it wasn’t simply being a decent human being.

When he finally did bring her back to his house, it wasn’t intentional. He had shown up at the bar where he’d promised to meet her, stumbled in 45 minutes late, already drunk after spending three hours drinking at a pool hall with his brother. Three more drinks with her and Neil was in no shape to drive himself home, so she sat behind the wheel of his massive truck with barely any resistance from him and listened to his slurred directions.

“Are you sure this is the right way?” she asked.

“Promise,” he said, his head leaning against the window, pressing his cheek against the glass, his eyes closed. “Take the next left.”

She looked at him, unconvinced, but turned left anyway.

“You’re so little,” he said. She turned her head briefly and saw his eyes were open in little slits and a goofy smile rested on his lips. “Look at you. So little. Big car. Little girl.” He laughed and his eyes closed again.

They pulled up in front of the house he claimed to be his and Neil stumbled through the door, clumsily leading her down the hall to his bedroom. Her eyes skimmed his walls, she saw the calendar that hadn’t been changed since April of two years ago, the baskets of clean and dirty clothing mixed together in overflowing piles on the floor, the paint stains on the ceiling from an unprofessional paint job, probably Neil doing it himself. And then there was Neil, leaning against his bed, pulling his shirt over his head. She watched the muscles in his back move under his skin and when he turned to face her she reached out to lay her palms on his chest. He grabbed her by the wrists and pulled her against him and together they fell onto the bed.

His hands traveled along her body, pulled the hem of her dress to her hips, grabbed the parts of her body she was most self-conscious of and breathed against her ear, “God you’re so sexy.”

He hooked his thumbs in the elastic of her underwear, pulled them down, pressed his finger between her legs and she moaned against him. Something overtook her and she shimmied her panties down past her knees, used her toes to pull them over her ankles, discarded them somewhere at the foot of the bed. She crawled up his body, leaving kisses the whole way, until her knees were on either side of his head. She looked down at him and he up at her and she smiled and settled down atop his mouth and he obeyed her unspoken order, finding his last drink of the night between her legs.

Her hands found the wall, the window, whatever was in front of her to keep her from collapsing. Her fingers wrapped around the plastic blinds, pulling them open so if anyone was outside they would be able to see right in, could watch her face as she came, her mouth open, her eyes closed, her knuckles white.

Neil fell asleep almost immediately, his arm wrapped around Margaret's naked body, his fingers draped over her breast, fingertips brushing nipple. Wide awake, Margaret wriggled free and pulled one of the t-shirts from the floor over her head. It smelled like Neil so it must've been dirty but she didn't mind, happy to be inside something so full of *him*.

After peeing and spending no less than five minutes clearing blackheads in front of the mirror, Margaret splashed some cool water on her face, used the shirt to dry off, and walked out into the living room.

"Sounded like you were having fun." The voice came from the darkness and, after practically jumping out of her skin, Margaret squinted her eyes and made out a lump on the couch. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. You must be Margaret."

"That's me. Are you...the brother?"

"Tom, yeah." He hopped over the back of the couch and extended his hand to her in greeting. As she shook it, she noticed his arms were just like Neil's, freckled in the same patterns and places, but beefier. His fingers were thicker, but the nails were shaped the same. She found herself wondering if anything else was the same. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Oh yeah? Good things, I hope."

Tom tilted his head to the side and nodded slightly. "Of course."

Margaret's eyes narrowed slightly. "You don't sound so confident about that."

"No, no," Tom laughed. "Really. All good things. He's, um, he's pretty smitten."

"Oh..." Margaret wanted to ask him to tell her more. What did Neil say about her? Did he think about her as much as she thought

about him? Did he like her just as much? But instead she asked, “What are you still doing up?”

He smirked at her a bit and her face went red. “Or...oh no, did we keep you up? Oh god, that’s so embarrassing.” She covered her face with her hands, thought back to how loud she had gotten, was it really that loud?

Tom laughed, “No, no. I was watching a movie. Turned it off just a few minutes before you came out of the room.”

“Oh.”

She lazily fingered the tattered hem of the t-shirt and, unsure of exactly where Tom was, avoided looking directly into the darkness and instead stared at her toes, counting how many chips there were in her pedicure.

“Well I think I’m gonna head back to bed.”

“I was just about to go out for a cigarette if you want to join.”

They spoke at the same time and Margaret felt her cheeks flush as they laughed.

“You first,” she said.

Tom stood from the couch and pulled a pack of Marlboro menthols from his pocket, handed her one. “Smoke?”

“Um,” Margaret glanced towards the bedroom and she could’ve sworn she heard Neil’s snores coming from behind the closed door. “Sure. Menthols?”

“Yeah.” Tom rubbed his hand on the back of his neck. “Sorry, it’s all I have.”

“No, no. This is great! It’s all I smoke. Usually people make fun of me for it...”

“Me too! I don’t get why.”

“Me neither.” She smiled and toyed with the cigarette between her fingers. “Shall we?”

Outside the air was muggy, a Florida staple.

“Neil smokes reds, you know.”

“I know,” Margaret giggled, thought about the taste of tobacco on Neil’s tongue when he rubbed it against hers. “It doesn’t bother me for some reason. I kind of like it, actually. How his mouth tastes.”

Tom gave a short laugh and took a drag in lieu of a response.

“Sorry,” she said, taking the lighter from him, “is it weird for you if I talk about the taste of your brother’s mouth?” After a second she said, “Yeah, even just saying it out loud made it sound weird.”

“It would be weirder if I said something about hearing you guys fucking.”

“Oh!” She could feel her face turn red and she rubbed her fingers along her cheek as if she could cool her skin, keep the heat from rising. “We didn’t fuck. We actually...haven’t ...yet.”

“Hmm.” He took another drag as he contemplated his words. “Then my big brother is way better with his hands than I ever would have imagined cause, man, the sounds you were making...”

“Oh my god.” She covered her face with her hands, embarrassment flooding through her.

“Sorry. I’m sorry,” he said, but the sincerity of his words was marred by the laughter accompanying them. “I should save my ribbing for Neil tomorrow morning. I don’t know you well enough yet.”

“No, you don’t,” she said, but her breath caught on the word *yet*. She kept her face neutral but fought back a combination of shame and laughter. Together they continued to smoke and Margaret watched as Tom’s lips wrapped around the tip of the cigarette and smoke curled

out from between them. She watched his nostrils flare slightly, faint smoke trickling past the short sprouts of blond nose hair.

“And it was his tongue, not his hands.”

“What?” Tom asked, choking on the smoke in his throat.

Margaret cracked a smile and looked sideways at him. Together they broke into giggles, their laughter mixing with the humidity and smoke, carried away on a heavy breeze. As they smoked and laughed, his voice echoed in her head. *Yet.*

The next morning Neil woke up at six o'clock, complaining of a pounding headache and cottonmouth, but rolled out of bed and began getting ready for work without hesitation. Margaret opened her eyes as he walked back into the room, completely naked, his toothbrush hanging from his mouth, a bubble of toothpaste balancing on his bottom lip.

“I’m getting up,” she said lazily.

“No, don’t rush. You can stay here and get some more sleep.” He used the back of his hand to wipe his mouth clean and gave her a kiss on the forehead. “I’ll be out of here in a couple minutes and you can get some rest.”

He left the room and came back a few minutes later, his hair that had been unruly only minutes prior now combed and styled perfectly. She watched him shuffle through a pile of clothing on the floor, sniffing shirts and throwing them back onto the floor until he found one that didn’t seem to offend his senses and pulled it over his head. He followed the same method for boxers, jeans, and socks until he was fully dressed. After tightening his belt around his waist and patting his pockets, checking for his wallet and keys, he walked to the bed and kissed her hard on the lips.

“I’ll call you later this week?” he asked and she nodded in response. He began to leave the room but paused in the doorway and looked

back at her. "And whatever that was last night...it was hot." With a smile, he left.

Margaret laid in Neil's bed for about an hour, her eyes closed, reliving the night before over and over in her head. Her hand traveled between her legs, her finger rubbing in circles, making her moan. She played with herself, not coming but not really wanting to, until her alarm went off. *Cable guy* flashed across her phone screen.

"Fuck!" She put her fingers in her mouth, sucked them clean, dried them on the bed sheet. She easily found her underwear on the floor at the foot of the bed but spent five minutes searching for her dress, which she eventually found shoved between the bed and the wall.

Realizing her car was still in the parking lot of the bar Neil met her at the night before, she called a taxi and then texted Mikey, her roommate, that she was *only five minutes away, be there soon*.

"About damn time," Mikey said as she walked through the front door of their two-bedroom apartment. He was sitting on the couch, an overstuffed pillow tucked under his arm, supporting the hand he was using to hold the remote as he absentmindedly stared at the TV. "Where have you been, Maggie?"

"Don't call me that," she said as she shut the door behind her.

"You said you'd be here to meet the cable guy. I had to tell the Kellers I couldn't walk their dog this morning. You cost me ten dollars."

"I'm sorry. I'll pay you back. Promise," she said with a grin and waited for him to answer. When he said nothing, just flicked to another channel, she added, "Neil finally brought me back to his place last night."

"Mhm," he responded, his eyes never leaving the TV.

"Yeah, and I met his brother."

“Cool.”

“And, um, I sat on Neil’s face.”

Mikey turned off the TV. “Tell me more.”

Margaret laughed. “I don’t know. It just sort of...happened. I wanted it and I did it.”

“But...you’re never that aggressive.”

“I know.” She hid her face in her hands for a moment, shaking her head. “I just...I feel very comfortable with him.”

He snorted. “You say that about everyone.”

“I do not.”

“Mhm.” He rolled his eyes and reached for the remote.

She huffed and sat down on the remote, trapping his arm under her body. “Whatever, this time it’s different.”

He pulled his arm out from under her, causing her to flop onto the arm of the couch. She sat up straight and playfully shoved him. Through his laughter he asked, “What on earth makes this time so different?”

She paused for a moment, opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again, closed it again.

“Jesus fucking christ, you look like a damn fish. Just say what you want to say.”

She gave an over-exaggerated sigh. “I think I’m in love with Neil.”

Mikey rolled his eyes. “You’re not in love with Neil.”

“You’re going to give yourself a migraine if you keep rolling your eyes at everything I say. How do you know I’m not in love with Neil?”

“You can’t be.”

“Why not?”

“You’ve known him what? A month? You’re not in love with him.”

“I could be in love with him.”

He scoffed. “You’re not in love with him, Margaret. You haven’t even fucked him yet.”

“So? Maybe I’m waiting to know he feels the same way about me before I give him that part of myself.”

He snorted. “Yeah, okay, do you *want* me to list off all the people you’ve fucked for giving you much less attention than Neil has?”

Margaret sat back against the couch and crossed her arms. “I’ve changed.”

“Into what? A different person? For as long as I’ve known you, and that’s been a long damn time, you have been at the mercy of male attention. I don’t think this is any different.”

“Fuck off, I have not been at the ‘mercy of male attention,’” she said, her fingers curling into air quotes on either side of her head.

“Oh come on, how many times do we need to have this conversation?”

“We don’t need to have it again,” she said, stood from the couch, shuffled towards her room. “I know what you’re going to say: *being in pageants as a kid conditioned me to seek male approval, blah blah blah, I’m so desperate for love I’ll let guys walk all over me, blah blah blah, my mother is a heinous bitch, blah blah blah*. Am I close?”

“Spot on, *Maggie*.” He winked at her.

“Don’t call me that,” she said and slammed her bedroom door shut.

That weekend Neil invited Margaret over to an empty house. She didn't like getting high anymore. She hadn't liked it for a long time. But he packed a bowl and offered her a hit and, for him – this man who made her thoughts stand still, her skin come to life, her animal instincts surge forth from inside of her – for him she would do anything. She took a hit, the smoke burning her throat, and together they laughed until their eyes watered and their faces hurt.

They sat on his couch with the intent to watch some sitcom, but the show's laugh track blurred into the background of their own. When Neil started kissing her, she melted into him. They were one being, glued together by THC and hormones, their desire a swirl of energy binding them for the night, for eternity.

His tongue was hot against her throat, burning her skin like a cattle brand. He kissed her there, his lips like a salve, soothing his claim on her body. His teeth scraped her ear and his breath carried his words like a secret, *you are so beautiful*. His fingertips traced every edge of her, from her wrist to the depths of her consciousness, and goose bumps rose to meet his touch, a split second shy of contact.

His hand moved to her waist so slowly she barely noticed until her hip burst into flame from the contact. He moved towards her wetness and she hoped he would put out the fire burning between her legs. Instead his touch was like kerosene, igniting an inferno within her.

She could hear laughter somewhere in the distance, the sound wrapping around her body like a breath of relief entwined with the intensity of *want* and *need* and *now*. Her thoughts fought with the cloud in her head, forcing themselves into acknowledgement.

"Wait," she struggled to say.

He looked up at her, his eyes a mix of too many emotions to count. "What?"

“I’m so high. If you do this now...I won’t be able to return the favor.”

He grinned and dove back between her legs with the desperation of a fish returning to water.

With each flick of his tongue, scrape of his teeth, stroke of his finger, she watched the universe fly past her eyelids, stars and dizziness becoming all that she knew, until she witnessed the Big Bang itself, blasting her mind clear of everything. Her body burned hot as the sun and she cried out in pain, pleasure, emptiness.

The fires that had spread across her skin slowly went out, his kisses on her stomach like sprinklers, cooling even the hottest embers. Her breath slowed, extinguishing the remaining fires in her soul and slowing the beating of her heart.

He pulled her on top of him, her back against his chest, and held her close. Together they giggled, her body rocking in sync with his, shaking with every laugh that vibrated through his body. His arm curled around her, his fingers tracing circles on her belly. She shivered against him and his arms tightened around her, pulling her closer.

Eventually his hand traveled back down again, idly stroking her. She closed her eyes and listened to his heartbeat, the pulse between her legs pounding in time with the booming against her ear. His hand kept moving and her heart kept stuttering and she melted into him. She was hot; not like the inferno she had been before, but instead like a candle, slow and deliberate in her reaction to the fire.

A fuzziness slowly leaked into her head and her eyes snapped open, which was a mistake because the room immediately started spinning. She clenched her eyes shut and grabbed his hand, stopping its movements.

“What’s wrong?”

“I...” The fuzziness drained from her head to her mouth, absorbing her words. She shook her head side to side, her eyes still closed, trying to shake her head clear. “I’m just dizzy. I need you to stop.”

“Okay. Okay. Shh.” He moved both hands to encircle her body, gently stroking her arms and rocking them both from side to side. “Shh. You’re okay. It’s just you and me and whatever is on the TV. You’re okay.”

They stayed rocking for a few minutes and she burst into flames in a different way. She felt warmth, right under her skin, heated from a fire in her chest, burning hot and white in the way only real feelings completely separated from lust can burn. She reached out to grab his hands, gripping tightly, and he gripped back. She felt glued to him again, this time by THC and feelings, hormones be damned.

She stood up from the couch, their bodies separating for the first time in hours. Her skin missed his almost instantly. His hand reached out for hers and she grabbed it without hesitation. She pulled him to standing and led him to the bedroom where they curled together on the bed, legs entwined, their entire beings connected by a tether, pulling them closer and closer.

The fuzziness in her head cleared and four words pushed their way to the surface, forced themselves out of her mouth before she could stop them.

“I really like you.”

He exhaled heavily, his breath painting a cloud in the darkness above them. “I really like hanging out with you.”

His words left his mouth and hid in the cloud of his breath, poking out their heads, then one at a time dove from the sky, plummeted towards her head, burrowed into her brain, took hold of the hairs on the back of her neck until they stood on end.

Finally she said: “That’s not the same thing.”

“No, it’s not the same thing, but it’s close enough, right?”

She didn’t answer and that seemed to be okay with him. Neil rolled onto his back, his arm lying haphazardly across Margaret’s body, and his breathing slowed. After she was sure he was asleep she rolled onto her back, allowing his arm to disconnect from her body, their connection broken for the second time that night, but this time he didn’t reach for her again.

In the morning Margaret awoke with the sun and dressed in the type of silence only a morning after could provide. Neil slept facing the wall, his heavy breathing the only goodbye.

She walked through the front door and jumped, her heart racing, when she saw Tom standing on the stoop where she expected to find no one.

“We’ve gotta stop meeting like this,” he laughed.

“Neil said you were away this weekend. I didn’t expect to see you, anyone here.”

“Yeah, I got back an hour ago. Drove all night.”

“Where were you?”

“Tallahassee. For work.” He glanced at the bag over her shoulder. “You heading out?”

“Yeah...I gotta go. Mikey called. My roommate. Got...stuff to do. You know.”

“Up for a smoke before heading out?”

“Um,” Margaret glanced towards the front door, thought about the man still asleep inside, the man standing before her offering her a menthol. “Sure.”

They stood in silence, the only sound that of the smoke entering and exiting their lungs, passing through their lips as content sighs. After a few moments he reached out, pushed her hair behind her ear.

She looked up at him, met his eyes, thought he might kiss her and the thought sent a chill of panic across her body, buzzing under her skin.

“I like your earrings,” he said and dropped her hair, looked away.

She released a breath of relief, of disappointment, and pulled her hair forward as a curtain to hide her face. “Thanks. They, um, they were my mom’s.”

“They’re nice.”

“You said that,” she laughed and pushed her hair back behind her ear using the hand holding the cigarette, which slipped from fingers and landed in her curls. “Oh! Oh no. Oh god.”

Tom laughed and picked the cigarette out of Margaret’s hair. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” she insisted and took the cigarette from his outstretched hand. “I’m fine.”

“I mean I know I make you nervous...” he teased and she shoved him gently, turned her head away to hide her smile.

“I had my ears pierced. Well, ear,” he told her with a grin.

“No way. You must’ve looked so...” she paused, looked into the distance, searched for the right word, “stupid.”

His laugh was hearty, a deep belly laugh. “Oh, I did. But I was eleven and thought it was cool.” He took a drag. “How old were you when you got yours done?”

“Oh, my mom took me to get them done when I was two.”

“*Two?!* ” he said, choking on smoke. “Why so young?”

“It was for my first pageant.”

“Wait,” Tom said, holding his hands up as if protesting her words, “pageant?”

She blushed and nodded, but for the first time in years found herself detailing her years as Little Miss Maggie Salinger, America’s sweetheart (in some circles) and child pageant star. She told him about when she was three and her mom had her sized for a custom bikini and when she was four and her mom taught her to curl her own eyelashes and when she was six and three-quarters (a big milestone for her) and her mom put her on a diet because her “thighs should have slimmed down by now.” She told him about when she turned nine and all she wanted was a birthday at McDonald’s like Mikey’s mom had done for him and she was sent to bed without dinner, which, she told Tom with a smirk, she was more than happy to do because dinner was three stalks of asparagus and a block of tofu.

She went into detail about having her very first crush at thirteen and wanting to skip a pageant preliminary to go to Ronnie Feingold’s Bar Mitzvah. He thought *the pageant stuff was dumb anyway*, she had told her mom, to which she responded with, *You see those judges out there? Their opinion of you is the only one that matters. Not mine, not yours, and especially not Ronnie Feingold’s. Only those three men at the judges’ table. You understand me?*

“No offense,” Tom said when Margaret was done, “but I do not like your mom.”

She laughed, “Yeah, most people don’t.”

“So does anyone still call you Maggie?”

She rolled her eyes. “Only my mom. And Mikey when he wants to get under my skin. I hate it so much.”

“Noted. I will never call you that.”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

She looked at him and smiled. He smiled back, met her eyes, held the eye contact. And, again, she thought he might kiss her and the panic came buzzing back. She looked away and took another drag.

She asked him what he does for work, mentioned Neil had said he worked in construction. Tom went into further detail, told her about his career that takes him all around the greater Florida area building...something. She listened as best she could, the buzz of the panic loud in her ears.

The following week Neil told Margaret he wanted to meet her friends.

“You know Tom,” he said, “and he’s practically my best friend. I want to know your best friend. What’s his name? Mitchy? Marky?”

“Mikey,” she giggled.

“Yeah, Mikey. Why don’t you invite him out for drinks with me and Tom tomorrow night?”

“Um, yeah, I’ll ask him. No promises though. He doesn’t really like...people.”

That night after Neil fell asleep, Margaret slipped out the front door for some fresh air and found Tom already sitting on the front step, lit cigarette in his mouth and another one tucked behind his ear. Wordlessly, he handed her the fresh cigarette and she sat beside him, taking the lighter from his outstretched hand.

After a few moments of silence, she said, “Neil wants to meet my friends. He said we should all go out for drinks tomorrow.”

“Oh yeah?” Tom laughed. “Who’re you gonna bring? Your roommate? Mikey, right? Best friend since childhood?”

“How did you...?”

“You’ve mentioned him before,” he waved his hand in the air as if brushing her question away. “It should be fun.”

She sucked on her cigarette in agreement. He watched her closely.

“But you’re not so sure about it, are you?”

“What? Of course I am. It’ll be fun.”

Tom stared at the side of her face for a few more moments before turning away, sucking in smoke, slowly exhaling. They sat in silence, both wiping away the sweat forming on their foreheads.

“It’s hot,” Margaret noted.

“Yeah, that cute weather girl on channel five said it’s gonna be a scorcher this weekend.”

She scrunched up her nose. “Isn’t that kind of a given for a Florida summer?”

He laughed. “I said she was cute, not smart.”

Margaret smiled and put the cigarette back to her lips, inhaling deeply. On her exhale she asked, “So that’s your type? The weather girl from channel five?”

“Big boobs, tiny waist, bottle blonde hair? Isn’t that every guy’s type?” Tom laughed and Margaret laughed with him, their giggles intertwining with their smoke.

She wrapped her fingers through her brown hair and looked up at him, joked, “Ah, that explains the years-long dry spells.” She laughed harder. Tom’s smile softened and he looked away, taking another drag.

The next evening the foursome met at the same bar Margaret had driven Neil home from. There were rounds of beer, a few shots, endless games of darts. Neil and Margaret versus Tom and Mikey until Neil and Mikey wandered off to the bar, leaving Margaret and Tom alone

with the darts. They were approached by two guys, challenged to a game, loser buys a round for the winner.

For the first few rounds, Tom and Margaret had a solid lead, until Neil returned and slid his arm around Margaret's waist, causing her to melt against him. With him in such close proximity, her head became a ball of fuzz and she missed her target on every throw for the rest of the game.

They left the bar, everyone teasing Margaret for losing them the game, but were all smiles when they flagged a taxi and headed back to the house. In the living room, they spent hours entertaining each other with childish anecdotes – Mikey regaled the brothers with stories of Margaret's pageant life, Neil and Tom took turns embarrassing each other with stories from their own lives – and a joint passed from mouth to mouth.

Eventually Neil tugged on Margaret's ponytail and whispered in her ear, still loud enough for everyone to hear, "You ready to head to bed, Maggie?"

"She hates being called..." Mikey started, but Margaret cut him off.

"I'm definitely ready for bed," she said, shooting a look at her friend. "Come on."

Once in the bedroom, Neil gently pushed her to her knees, begged her to suck him off. She obliged more than willingly, took him between her hands, between her lips, into her mouth. When he came, she swallowed and laid down on the bed, taking his hand and moving it between her legs. He pulled away.

"Too tired," he said. "In the morning."

"Okay," she said as she watched him get under the covers. After a moment, she followed his lead, pushed her body against his. As if on reflex, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close.

They laid in silence for many minutes and she was sure he was asleep until he said, "You know, I really do like you. I'm scared to like you. I like you so much. It scares me."

She tilted her head up to look at him, saw his eyes were closed, kissed his eyelids. "You have nothing to be scared of." She nuzzled his head against his chest, shut her eyes.

"I think Tom is in love with you."

Her eyes shot open. "What?"

"I was watching you two tonight. It makes me nervous, how well you two get along. I'm scared you'll leave me for him."

She rolled over until she was laying right on top of him and kissed him deeply on the mouth. "I'm never going to leave you. I'm never going to leave you for him."

He smiled against her mouth and squeezed his arms tighter around her. Within a few seconds, his breaths deepened and a quiet whistle periodically came from his nose. She wriggled free from his hold and left the room, going through the front door to get some fresh air.

She was both surprised and thoroughly unsurprised to find Tom already sitting on the step, cigarette perched between his lips. She sat beside him and he took a drag before passing the cigarette to her. They smoked in silence until there was nothing left to smoke.

"Where's Mikey?" Margaret asked.

"He left a few minutes after you guys went to bed."

"Oh."

"Yeah," he said, he sighed, he laughed, somehow all at once. He turned his head and looked at the side of her face for many moments before she turned to look at him too.

"What?"

“You have...something...” He reached forward to brush her cheek with his hand.

She leaned back and self-consciously brushed her palm over her face. When she pulled her hand away she saw her fingers were streaked with a clear-white substance and her face immediately drained of blood. “Oh my god,” she said and jumped up, covering her face with her hands. “Oh my god.”

“Is that...” he asked, stifling a laugh. “Is that my brother’s jizz?”

She turned and walked a few steps away from him. “Oh my god oh my god oh my god.”

He broke into a fit of laughter, walked up to Margaret. Gently placing his hands on her shoulders, he slowly turned her around. “Don’t worry about it. Just glad someone got some tonight.”

“Oh my god,” she said one more time, burying her face in his chest.

When she crawled back into Neil’s bed a few minutes later, the smell of Tom’s t-shirt was still lingering in her nostrils. But she curled up next to his big brother, idly noting that they smelled nothing alike, and fell asleep within seconds.

That night she dreamed of laying on the couch in the living room, Neil’s head between her legs. She’d had variations of this dream before, plenty of times. She would be on her back and he would use his tongue to make her see stars. But this time Neil was between her legs and Tom was right in front of her, gently grazing her cheek with his finger, resting his lips against hers, waiting for her to reciprocate. And she did. Passionately.

Then they were in the bed, the brothers’ hands exploring every inch of her body outside and in, touching her and playing with her and, she knew, loving her. She felt butterflies in her belly, between her legs, in her fingertips, her toes. The brothers became a blur, one force entering her and exiting her and making her grab the sheets in her fists, arch her back, throw back her head, cry out for mercy.

When she awoke, her panties were soaked through and a small aromatic puddle had collected on the sheets.

Neil woke up a few minutes later, rolled out of bed, barely acknowledged Margaret.

“Can we talk about last night?” she asked as he got dressed.

“Oh no,” he said and looked at her. “Did I say something stupid? I don’t remember a thing. I always say the stupidest stuff when I mix alcohol and weed.”

“You don’t remember what you said to me last night?” she asked, her stomach filling with lead.

“Not a word of it. Why? Was I mean? Whatever I said, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean any of it.”

She swallowed hard, trying to get rid of the lump that had taken root in her throat. She coughed slightly. “No. Don’t worry about it. Don’t worry at all.”

“Okay,” he said and kissed her quickly. “I gotta go.”

Once he left, she texted Mikey to *order the regular, I’ll be home in 20.*

Margaret arrived home to the welcoming smell of eggs Benedict and French toast wafting from a brown paper bag on the coffee table. Mikey walked out of the kitchen and wordlessly handed her a cup of coffee before they both took their usual seats on the couch. She considered revealing her dream to him, but decided to keep that to herself. Something private. Something she couldn’t decide if she was ashamed of or wanted to experience for real. Instead she told him everything that Neil had said the night before and that morning.

“Ditch him,” Mikey insisted. “That guy is a real tool.”

“What?”

“Date Tom instead. He seems like the better brother.”

“Oh come on! You know I don’t have feelings for Tom,” Margaret said, and could feel her cheeks getting hot. “I told you, I think I’m in love with Neil. And I think he really cares about me too. I think he’s just scared of how much he likes me. He said so.”

Mikey scoffed, “He also said he says stupid things when he’s inebriated. He’s messing with your head. Cut him loose.”

“Be reasonable.”

“Look, I’m a guy. You can’t fool me into thinking this dude is secretly harboring the most passionate of feelings for you. I am telling you right now it’s bullshit.”

“You don’t know him.”

“He was mercilessly flirting with the bartender right in front of me. He’s a douche.”

“He’s just a very outgoing and charming person!” Margaret insisted.

Mikey looked at his friend, opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. “I just think you’re not letting yourself see who this guy really is.”

“And I just think I need to talk to him when he’s sober. Tell him what he said to me. Ask him if he meant it.”

“Okay,” Mikey sighed and shoved a large piece of French toast in his mouth. Once he swallowed he said, “But you let him call you Maggie and I’m pretty sure that’s a *huge* red flag.”

“He just doesn’t know how much I hate it!”

“You usually never hesitate to tell people to shut the fuck up when they call you that. You let him walk all over you.”

"I do not!" Margaret said and aggressively cut into her eggs, took a defiant bite, stared angrily at Mikey.

"You have to stop letting guys treat you like a doormat. You do this every time."

"Whatever," she said, chewed steadily.

They ate in silence for a few minutes until, around the food in his mouth, he said, "He talked about you all night."

"Neil did?"

"No." He shot Margaret a bored look. "Tom. I think the only thing Neil was honest about last night was Tom having feelings for you."

"He does not," Margaret protested, but kept her gaze on her food, refusing to look Mikey in the eye.

The next day Neil invited Margaret over to the house for a *special dinner*, said he had to tell her something. She showed up thirty minutes early wearing her favorite dress, breasts pushed together, legs shaved, makeup perfectly intact. He greeted her at the door, kissed her on the mouth, told her dinner wasn't quite ready yet but would she like some wine? She accepted, sat on the couch, slowly sipped from her glass.

"Where's Tom tonight?" she asked.

"On a date," he called from the kitchen over the sound of sizzling vegetables.

"Oh," she mumbled into her glass, took another sip.

He asked if she wanted wine or water with dinner, told her everything would be ready in just a minute if she wanted to move to the dining room table. Her eyebrows cinched together and she laughed, "Dining room table?"

“Yeah, in the dining room.”

“You have a dining room?”

She stood from the couch and walked around the corner towards the kitchen, a route she had taken plenty of times before, and expected to see the usual sight: a room full of miscellaneous crap. There had always been three bicycles (never used) piled up against the far wall, a heap of paint splattered tarps pushed into a corner, and various video game boxes and gaming consoles scattered across what she realized was the dining room table that now sat before her, completely clean except for two lit candles in the center. The bicycles and tarps were gone and the floor had been swept and mopped. She wasn't tiptoeing to avoid strewn bottle caps and cigarette butts as she had become accustomed to.

“Wow,” she said just as Neil came out from the kitchen carrying two steaming plates, “it's so clean.”

“Yeah, things are going to be changing around here a bit. Figured it was time to get rid of some stuff.” He put the plates on the table and gestured to her seat. “Come. Sit.” She sat. “Eat,” he commanded.

She took a bite of stir-fried onions and a piece of grilled chicken, moaned as soon as the food touched her tongue. “And you can cook? You're the perfect man.” She took another bite, chewed, swallowed, moaned again. “Marry me?”

“Actually,” he said, put down his fork, shifted in his seat, “I do need to talk to you about something.”

“Oh?” She put down her fork as well. Her eyes watered with anticipation.

“So...I've been offered my dream job.”

“Oh my god! Neil! That's amazing!” She grabbed his hand, squeezed it gently, grinned at him so wide she thought her face might crack.

“It is,” he smiled, nodded, looked down at his plate, all at the same time. “It’s in the Dominican Republic.”

“The...oh.” Her hand released his, slowly pulled away. Her head began to buzz, drowning out the words he was saying – something about how it’s what he’s been waiting for his whole life and he’ll be sad to leave her but he can’t pass up this opportunity.

“I...I have to...” She pushed her chair back from the table, stood up, walked to the left, to the right, in a circle. Her mind was in a complete daze, tears streamed down her face, her breath caught in her throat. “Go. I have to go.”

She ran towards the front door, had it half open, about to run out, when Neil grabbed her arm. “Maggie, wait.”

“It’s Margaret,” she stuttered through her sobs, refused to turn around to look at him.

“Babe, come on. Don’t go.”

“I just...” she said, took a breath, turned to face him. “What about all those things you said to me the other night?”

He led her to the couch, sat her down, touched her shoulder, curled his finger under her chin, coaxed her head up to look at him. “What did I say the other night?”

She let the words tumble out of her mouth as she tried to catch her breath, told him everything he had said to her about how much he liked her, how much it scared him, told him nothing he said to her about Tom. “Is it true? Is any of it true?”

He sighed again, deeper this time, and sat down beside her. “Fuck, I really wish I hadn’t said any of that to you.”

“Because it was all a lie?”

“No,” he laughed mirthlessly, “because it’s all true.”

He shifted to his knees and sat in front of her, taking her hands in his, using his eyes to seek out hers until they connected. She felt the same fire he always lit inside her burst aflame. “When I found out about the job in the Dominican Republic, my first thought was that I couldn’t leave you. You make me want to stay here.”

“Really?” she smiled and he used his thumb to wipe mascara-streaked tears from her face.

“Of course. I’m crazy about you.” He leaned in to kiss her and she didn’t hesitate before meeting him halfway.

He stood up, took her hands, pulled her to standing, led her to his bedroom. They fell into bed, a fit of laughter against skin and hands pulling off clothes. She wrapped her legs around his waist, let him inside for the first time, stared into his eyes as she rode him.

She whispered, “I love you.”

He pressed his mouth against her ear, whispered, “Me too.”

They looked into each other’s eyes as they came and she was sure she had never and would never be as connected to a person as she was in that moment. He pulled out, a mixture of bodily fluids spilling out of her onto the bed and the floor and they laughed. They wrapped their arms around each other and he stroked his fingers through her hair.

“I’m so happy,” she said. She nuzzled her head into his armpit, closing her eyes, feeling safer in his arms than anyone else’s before. Her euphoria was a fortress.

“Me too,” he replied. “I can’t wait for you to come visit me in the Dominican Republic. It’s going to be amazing.”

Her eyes opened slowly, her fortress turning to sand and crumbling around her. “Visit you in the Dominican Republic?”

“Yeah. I know I didn’t actually ask you if you would visit but I figured you would.”

She rolled onto her arms and propped her head up, looking at him. He stared at the ceiling, a genuinely happy smile spread across his face. “Okay,” she said, was all she could say.

Shortly after he fell asleep she slipped from the bed and walked out to the front porch. Tom was already there, already had his arm outstretched, handing her a cigarette.

“How did you know I’d be out here?”

He shrugged, “I figured he told you about the Dominican Republic tonight.”

She nodded, “Yeah, but...how do you always know?”

“I don’t know,” he said, taking a drag, “I just hope.” He handed her the lighter without looking at her.

She took it from him and lit her cigarette, wordlessly handed it back. The buzzing under her skin returned but it didn’t feel like panic this time. She blinked at him slowly. “How was your date?”

He shook his head slightly, then chuckled a bit. “It was probably better than yours.”

She wanted to be angry but found herself cracking a smile. She took a drag, said “yeah, probably” on her exhale.

“You smoke?” Neil’s voice floated through the screen door behind them and they turned to look at him.

“Yes,” Margaret said and took a long, deep drag.

“Tom, could you give us a second?” Neil said to his brother, opening the door for him to come inside.

“Yeah, sure.” Tom stood to go inside but Margaret grabbed his hand and pulled him back down.

“No, don’t go.”

“Tommy, go inside,” Neil said, shooting his brother a look, his face obstructed by the mesh of the screen, making him look deformed.

Tom looked to his brother, to Margaret, to their entwined hands. He stood. Their clasped fingers slid apart. “I’ll see you later,” he said and opened the door, walked inside. Neil walked out, took the seat Tom had vacated.

“Look, Maggie...”

“Don’t call me that.”

“I always call you that.”

“I know. And I hate it.”

“You never said...”

“I never said a lot of things. Look, I can’t do this right now,” she said, stood from the stoop, put out the cigarette beneath her shoe. “I just can’t.” She turned and ran to her car, drove away without looking back.

At home she gently knocked on Mikey’s door, didn’t wait for him to answer before quietly pushing it open. “You up?”

“No,” he mumbled from the dark.

She hovered by the door for a moment, leaned her whole body into his room, whispered, “Can we do The Fourth Grade Thing?”

He groaned and covered his head with his pillow, but only for a second. Then he threw off his blanket and shot out of bed, walked past her and straight into the kitchen, turning on every light on the way.

“Okay, what’ll it be? Frosted Flakes and chocolate milk or Jell-O and Goldfish?”

She followed him slowly, managed a tired smile. “Both.”

He leaned forward, propped his arms on the countertop, looked into her eyes. “Must’ve been a tough night, huh?”

She nodded.

“Both it is,” he said with a comforting smile and turned towards the ingredients, ready to make magic.

Two days later, Margaret decided she was ready to see Neil again, to talk it all through with a level head. She pulled up to the front of his house, saw Tom outside mowing the lawn, a cigarette clasped between his lips. She greeted him with a wave and he cut the motor on the mower.

“Is Neil inside?” she asked as she walked towards the front door.

“No,” Tom said and hopped off the mower. “Margaret, wait...”

“Is he out? When will he be back?”

“Margaret...” he trailed off, looked around, stuffed his hands into his pockets. Finally he offered her a cigarette and a seat on the stoop.

“What’s going on?”

He finished his cigarette, stubbed it out beneath his toe, lit another one, took a drag. “He’s gone, Margaret. He left for the Dominican Republic yesterday.”

His words crashed into her like a tidal wave, like a brick wall. She felt cold and wet and bloodied and bruised, all at the same time. Tom kept talking but his voice turned to white noise the moment it hit her ears.

“He’s...gone?” It was as if her own voice wrapping around the words made them real and sobs began leaving her body, one right after the other, like soldiers marching on.

“Let’s get you inside,” he said, lifted her, led her to his bedroom. “Lay down. I’ll get you some water.”

She curled into a ball on his bed, sobs wracking her body. When she awoke some time later, realizing she must have cried herself to sleep, she rolled onto her back and looked around the room, at first unsure of where she was. The floor was clean except for a burn stain in the carpet near the bed. There was a dresser in the corner with six drawers, each closed except for one that was overflowing with t-shirts, spilling out the side. Three of the walls were covered in posters from video games and sports teams, the fourth a collage of team rosters dating back to 1933.

“You’re up,” Tom said as he walked into the room. “Water is on the bedside table if you want some.”

“Thanks,” she said, reached for it, took a tentative sip as if it might be poison, placed it back on the table. “How long was I out?”

“A couple hours. I think all that crying took a lot out of you.”

“Yeah.” She averted her eyes.

“Look,” he said and took a seat beside her on the bed, “I’m sorry my brother is such a dick. I love him and all but he didn’t handle this well.” He took her hand in his and she moved her eyes to his face. “You deserve so much better.”

She met his gaze, felt a spark light the buzzing under her skin on fire. It raged through her. She looked down at his fingers wrapped around her own. Tom’s fingers; Neil’s fingers, but beefier. Looked at his arms. Tom’s arms; Neil’s arms with more freckles. She met his eyes again. Tom’s eyes; Neil’s eyes, just specked with green. She glanced down at his lips, once, twice, three times, then back to his eyes. He stared at her for a moment, then leaned in slowly, pressed his lips to hers.

She wasn't sure when she started crying, just that the kiss became salty, but she didn't mind, explored his mouth with hers, tasted every cigarette they had ever shared in the curves of his tongue.

"I have wanted to do that for so long," he said between kisses.

"You have?"

He pulled away slightly, looked at her. "Of course I have. I am so in love with you."

She looked back at him, felt the pull of his fingers, his arms, his eyes, leaned into him and whispered, "I love you too."

"Hey, you," a voice behind her said, pulling her back to the present, to the dimly lit stoop. "You've been out here for a while. Everything okay?"

Margaret looked up to see Tom standing in the doorway behind her. She smiled up at him, lifted the barely-smoldering cigarette in her hand. "I just needed a smoke. I'll be back in soon."

"Okay," he said, unconvinced, but turned to leave her.

"Babe," she called and he turned back. "I just want you to know...I've loved you since the moment I met you."

He smiled at her and she could see the relief wash over his face. He blew her a kiss and turned around, disappearing into the darkness of the house.

She re-lit her cigarette, took a long drag, looked down at her bare feet, idly noting that the ant who had summited her foot was long gone.

Hibah Shabkhez
The Unceasing Plaint of the Sea

Ash-grey shafts shot out of the cliff rock, racing into the embrace of the clouds. Stone sewn seamlessly to stone, the jagged steely glitter spiralled thrice, curtaining a little piece of the earth from the hungry sea. The chain of craggy cliffs slung out along the wavering shoreline, their hoary heads held high in defiance of wind and water, splotted with egg-yolk-gold and weed-green, had once been kin to the sheer, gigantic shelf of rock that had borne the castle aloft. Fettered to the earth, they could but moan and fidget now, as they watched their gouged and blackened cousin wrestle the urge to sag wearily into the sea.

The Castle, yearning heavenwards, knew naught of the battle waged below. Ever she stood in peril of being shorn off and sent plummeting down; but the blue-white sky entwined about her tall, perforce sloping towers, and the sun that set them aglow, conspired to restrain her, to check her fall. Morn after morn, eventide after eventide they had done this, ever since the castle had first bowed her ravaged head over the sea.

Once – and the hour was well within living memory, if the living only cared to remember – once the four mighty stone towers had leapt impetuously above the silver-stone curtain, higher than the sharpest gaze could pierce. Radiant with life and laughter, the Castle sent forth a welcome her stern visage could not belie. The gallant pennants and the gay draperies, the ring of merry jests, the vigorous echoes of feet quick with joyous life had ridden out upon the sea-spray, coaxing home canoe and warship with the same ardour. But the harbour once hailed with resounding cheers lay scorched and crumpled at her feet, desolate. And in the fickle memories of men it had been consigned already to the realm of legend.

And yet the thrice-curtained castle held her secrets still, behind the lattice shadows no sun could now leaven. Within the shrouded stone chamber the eerie green of a flickering taper flung coiling, dancing echoes of light, warring with the blue-flamed fire of Rvalenlore, shadowless and dauntless, born of cool stone and thin air. Within the sanctuary glided

dark-robed wraiths, shrouded, latticed themselves, scarce breathing as they stooped over the flames and the figure cloaked within – another shadow, another wraith, spun lifeless into the flaming cocoon. Anguish lay stilled upon its marble-pallor, stilled almost to tranquillity. Black hair bounced off indifferently off the gaunt face, wormed their way into the cocoon's staring eyes. It never stirred.

An age crept by. The flame-cocoon pranced and spun, pranced and spun, swallowing the taper-echoes. The green-glowing taper, snatched up into the rising whirl, struck into its very core, suffusing it with its emerald blood.

"Llanlach Trébori!" It grated through the castle walls, a sound deeper than thunder rolling off the high sea winds; it trembled through the very heart of that blighted earth, that cry of the shadows. A gorgon, a veritable gorgon, shattered the shell, casting the limp green-doused form at her feet. The Summoner alone met her stare for stare; and for all her hideous savagery, he was the more sinister. Now they chaunted, the wraiths, a strangely soft lilting tongue that cracked and hoarsened as they vied for ascendancy. And then with one wild laugh the gorgon yielded.

"Aye!" she shrieked "A soul for a soul!"

"Behold thy hunter!"

She vanished in a whirl as dazzling as her coming, and the purple vapour streaked out, cloaking, enveloping the corpse-like form, lancing it upright. Green eyes locked with vacant black, bored into and past them with implacable ferocity.

A dove flew out of its nest in the turret above, its heart fluttering with a fear it had never before known. The kite, who had watched it hungrily since daybreak, swooped. The dove died ere its strangled scream had faded from the salt sea breeze.

And then there was silence, save for the unceasing plaint of the sea.

“One must have sunshine, freedom, and a little flower.”
—*Hans Christian Andersen*

Toad

A pair of stiff, brown gloves pierced the blanket of warm, dark dirt surrounding Saffron. Ten rough, leather fingers wrapped around her bulb, held firm, and tugged, wriggling her loose until her roots were untethered from the earth. Her sisters groaned as the hands shoved them aside, parting their stems from each other, cutting them apart.

In the shock of bright sun and hot air, her stem flopped between his fingers and a few, yellow petals loosened and fluttered to the ground. These abductions weren't unheard of. In the surrounding hillside, sometimes men came with their trowels and buckets. If you hid too deeply, there was the danger of never tasting spring's first, crisp breeze. Remain in the dark, and you could perish; make a show of yourself and you were sure to be taken.

He carried her in his fist. She blinked, unable to look away from the bumpy calluses on his palms and the gray dirt in the lines of his hands and under his jagged fingernails. He held her upside-down by the bulb, and her stem and petals jostled and bounced as she watched the grass and gravel sweep past them. When they reached the edge of a dark pond, he stopped. A plastic bucket was directly below her, and she flinched, waiting to be dropped. Creatures gurgled and belched from beneath the pond's surface. He clamped around her root bulb; with his free hand, he scooped fistfuls of wet, black muck into the bucket.

They began to move again. A small, stone house sat on top of a nearby hill, surrounded by bur-weed and skunk cabbage. The gray, splintery porch sagged, and he dropped her on a wicker rocker whose seat was covered in fuzzy, black and white mold. She watched him slop

the pond's mud into a cracked, plastic window planter. He tamped her feet into the dirt, and sprinkled sharp, broken walnut shells and broken pieces of dull razor blades all around them.

Her stem sagged, and her roots chilled. Two more petals fell to the ground.

"Give it a couple of days, hon. You'll be good as new in no time, and no one's gonna sneak up and get you," he said. He caught a fly the size of his thumb by the wings, smashed it between his hands, and wiped the green and yellow guts on his dirty trousers.

From her box, she watched, day after day, as huge flies buzzed by, their stench hanging in the humidity. At night, moths menaced around the single, hanging lightbulb that flickered above her by the front door. She kept her head low and tried to stay as small as she could. When he went to her, he wriggled his fat pinky finger around and exposed her secret purple insides, splaying them out to the sunlight. She grew up and out. Fleshy tubers formed from her roots. Sometimes the sharp fence he'd constructed around her for protection made them sleep and go numb.

Summer passed, then fall. In winter, he looked at her and shook his head. "Ugly damned thing when they start to fade." He cocked his head. "They say I'm not supposed to do this, but I can't stand looking at you." He produced from a box of tools a pair of rusted shears and opened them at her throat, at the point before the sepals extended outward. The blades scraped across each other, sending orange dust floating in the air and settling over her box. Her stem bent and leaked, and her head sagged. She stared at a crack between the floor slats.

The man cursed. He yanked the blades apart and pressed them into her again. The crack seemed to widen, then there was only silence and darkness.

Saffron awakened to the familiar, warm blanket of the sun on her emerging leaves as they poked through the soil line. Days passed, and she basked in the long days and soaked in the heat that filtered between the spaces of her closed bud. Visitors came and went. They often brought children who stuck rocks into her sides or poked her with

sharp little pine needles. When there were visitors, she often faded by the end of the day. He would find her hiding, her stringy stem sticky and rootbound. In the spring, sepals gave way as new, yellow petals unfurled, and silvery-silk filaments sprouted.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?” the man said to two guests: a man and woman. That man wore a long, black fur coat in spite of the warm weather and leaned on a walking stick with a silver ball at its head. He waved it around like a divining rod. He wore dark glasses that hid his eyes. The stranger leaned forward, leering down his long nose, which hung over a mustache that resembled long, black whiskers.

The woman had short, brown hair and her dress was plain and gray. She stayed outside and sat on a rocker in front of the window. The rocker squeaked each time she shifted.

“If my friend decides to take you, he’ll make you happy. He’s quite kind and very wealthy,” she said.

When the door swung open again, Toad was smiling. He scooped Saffron from out of her box. Razors and walnut shells scraped her barely formed feet, and clumps of wet, black mud hung from her tuber toes. He dropped her in the same sack with which he’d originally carried her and handed her off to the stranger. “She’s not thriving here,” he said, patting a pocket full of coins.

Mole

Mole’s home was underground, which felt familiar to Saffron. Instead of warm, brown silt and small, cozy pockets where the smell of fresh earth and the constant feel of soft petals surrounded her, there were narrow tunnels so heavily packed with stiff, gray, clay that the air was stale. Whereas at home, sunlight poked through tiny holes in the surface, here, she could barely see for the darkness.

“Come and go as you wish, whenever you aren’t seeing to my needs,” he told her. “I’m as old as I am blind, and I do not quite

remember what is where anymore. If you get lost, I will not be able to find you. I can send Mouse to look for you, but she tires easily.”

Saffron was certain that Mole was being facetious. She had a stem whose bottom consisted of two tubers and a tangle of root hair.

Mouse sat with her each night, tucked her in, and told her stories about life outside of Mole’s home. “There are predators overhead,” Mouse told Saffron. She ran her fingers through Saffron’s bright hair which was still silvery like the filaments they once had been. “You wouldn’t last, small and strange as you are. The rest of us can drive off in a carriage if we’re in a place we oughtn’t to be. But you,” she said, lifting Saffron in her arms, “You would be snapped up before you could blink twice.” She set Saffron down on a low bookshelf.

By the following summer, Saffron’s roots curled back inside her. The nodes that had once unfurled into soft, green leaves from the stem of her body lengthened, and metamorphosed into arms and hands. Her internodes bumped out like rosehips at the middle of her stem, which split halfway down the center. There were hardly any fibrous root hairs left at the bottom; they sloughed from her new skin as she moved. Her entire body turned pinkish yellow. There was sensation everywhere she touched. Where once there had been style and stigma, she now had a face whose skin was smooth and supple, like a petal, but denser. She pressed her new fingers against cheekbones, jawline, and the bridge of her nose.

Mouse fretted and dressed her in materials that reminded Saffron of the long, glossy petals of calla lilies. “Mole won’t like this,” she said.

“What’s happening to me?” Saffron asked. Her voice resonated in her throat like the vibrato of a reed flute.

Mouse held Saffron’s chin between her sharp fingers. Saffron was almost as tall as her, but not as sturdy. “He’s blind. He’ll still want you if you set roots again.”

Saffron shook her head. “I want to see more.” She extended a soft, uncalled foot, wiggled her toes, and smiled. Smiling reminded her

of the warmest part of the spring, when her petals stretched away, lifting her stigma to the sky.

Mouse admonished her to stay close to their living quarters. “What if you do get lost, dear little one,” she squeaked. “Or what if you wander off too far and then your little feet are too exhausted to bring you back? We won’t know where to look for you.”

On the rare occasions when Mole sent for her, it was always nights when there was company. He clutched at her elbow, furrowed his brow, and twitched his nose, making his whiskers bounce. He squinted and pushed his face so close to hers that the mirrors of his lenses blurred into a gigantic, convex mirror. “You weren’t like this before.” He kept her as close as the carnation in his expensive suit pocket and showed her off to other guests, all of whom wore their own variations of lustrous colors and textures.

“A strange creature,” they’d marvel, and stroke her skin, touch her sleeve. “What is she?”

As her leaves gave way to wrists, palms, and fingernails, and as her anthers sank back, rounded into eyes, her novelty lost its charm. Mole stopped calling for her.

“Tell me about the adventure with the cat,” or “Where did the carriage take Mr. Mole today? Tell me about the city he visited,” she begged Mouse, over and over. She sucked every detail she could out of Mouse: the red, gold, and green of the leaves, the way fresh night air felt on her face, phases of the shiny moon, the people she met and how they dressed.

“But here is much nicer. You have everything you need here.” Sometimes Mouse’s love stabbed at her more painfully than the broken walnut husks and razors.

A year had passed. Mole had left her to her wanderings and to Mouse’s frantic tenderness. Mouse even made a bed of dirt for her, hoping she’d plant herself in the earth and be still so she could tend to her.

She walked on shaky, weak legs, one hand on the cold, hard wall for support, for hours every day, until one day, she saw a rounded-out room where there lay an old woman. Saffron had never seen anything like her. “Are you lost?” Saffron asked.

“No,” the woman replied. Her voice was a series of musical notes. “I am injured though, and I’ve come here either to rest and heal, or to die.”

Saffron stepped closer and extended her hand. The woman laid her fingers over Saffron’s. They were soft as down. “My name is Swallow,” she cooed.

Swallow

Toward the far end of Mole’s compound, the corridors slanted upward, and tiny light specks glowed across the floor and walls. Saffron’s shadow stretched and curved in front of her, longer and longer each day, as she attended to Swallow. She had no petals by now, and her long hair had turned the same hue as her name.

Saffron’s legs and feet ached from the constant journey from Mouse to Swallow. She tripped, scraping her soles on the rough floor, leaving bloody footprints that pooled together and dried on her heels.

“Make every move deliberate,” Swallow instructed. “Set your heel down, then the ball of your foot, then the pads of your toes. Feel your connection to whatever supports you from below. Then you will always be free.”

Saffron sat at Swallow’s side and stroked her downy, gray hair as she fed her carrot broth. “Sometimes,” Swallow said, “I run through the grass with my arms spread like wings, and I think the wind will lift me into the air so that I can fly.” She closed her large, gray eyes and inhaled through her small, pointy nose.

“I want to feel grass beneath my feet, and to run in the sunlight,” Saffron said. “Maybe I’ll be able to fly.”

With each story she heard, Saffron grew a little more. Swallow told her about places she'd never dreamed of. There was a place made entirely of warm sand and cold, moving water that tasted like salt. There was a dark forest. The soil was black as night itself and the iridescent moss was the softest carpet.

At night, Saffron's dreams were full of color and sound, and of strange, fascinating people who didn't point or call her freakish, exquisite, or even beautiful. She rarely spoke to Mouse now. Mouse would only shake her head when she saw her. She was taller than Mouse by that spring. She was so tall that she had to crawl into their living quarters.

By summertime, Swallow's health was restored. She stood, stretched, and extended her pinkish-gray fingers to Saffron. "Come with me," she said. Leave this place." She pointed at the ceiling. There were small holes above. Saffron shielded her eyes and squinted at the light shining through.

Swallow perched on a wooden stool and stood, extending her arm to the gleaming yellow crack. She reached the other arm down and took Saffron's hand. Saffron was so tall by now that she too, could touch the ceiling. It was warm. As they clawed their way through, dirt caked under their nails. Swallow squeezed through and pulled Saffron up behind her.

They stood together. She had forgotten there were so many colors. The grass was small and wet, and crushed under her feet. "It used to come up the length of my stem," she said, mystified. The sun was more yellow than she'd remembered, and the sky bluer. At her new height, she could reach the low branches of trees. She curled her fingers around one and laughed when the bark scratched her palms. She tugged on it, and it bent under her weight. Saffron closed her eyes and inhaled. The atmosphere was clear and green. She smiled. Swallow let go of her hand.

“And now, my dear, you are strong enough to find your own home. I have my own place to go, my own things to do, and you cannot follow. My path and yours diverge here.”

Saffron snapped her eyes open. Her chin quavered. “Please, let me come with you for a little while.” Her legs, which a moment ago had felt so sturdy, began to shake.

Swallow took a step closer and held Saffron’s face in her hands. “It is time for both of us to fly, little one,” she sang. She kissed Saffron’s forehead, smiled, and stepped backward a few paces. Then she turned around. She spread her arms wide and began to shrink. Her nose hardened into a brown point, her gray hair and dress separated into feathery strands. She shook out her long, dark tail feathers, chirped once, and flew away. The fluff from a patch of dandelions blew in all directions when she flapped her wings.

Saffron sank to the ground and hid her face in her hands, sobbing. She couldn’t go back underground, not to Mole and Mouse, and not home to her sisters. She wouldn’t fit there anymore. She wouldn’t go back to the toad who plucked her from her happy, cosseted existence in the first place.

“Well, I suppose I am my own home now.”

She took her palms away from her face and looked up, blinking away the tears until she saw clearly again. She was sitting in the grass by a small stream. Her moss-green tunic was torn up the right side almost to the armpit. When she got up to stretch, extending her arms past her head and turning her interlaced fingers to the sky, the warm summer breeze swept under the fabric, pulling apart a few more threads along the tenuous side seam. Sunlight filtered through the canopy of trees, giving her skin a slightly green hue.

She took a few careful steps along the edge of the water. Silt slipped beneath her.

“Heel, ball, toes. Heel, ball, toes.”

She began to notice sounds: crickets and bird calls, the occasional rustling movement of some unseen creature through the woods. Unfamiliar flowers burst out in unexpected places: off the branches of trees, in patches in the grass. Magenta, white, yellow, and pale blue were everywhere. Occasionally, Saffron stopped to inspect them. She held a sunset-orange petal under her fingertips and marveled that once, she could have worn it as a dress and before that, it could easily have been part of her body.

The path along the stream ended. To the right, there was a narrow, overgrown footpath. She heard leaves rustling, movement through the trees and underbrush. If she kept left, there was tamped-down dirt—a well-traveled carriage road. She stopped, paralyzed with indecision, and cried. She would have to find shelter, a way to take care of herself. Swallow’s stories of freedom were one thing; now she understood Mouse’s warnings about the open, dangerous world. She wiped the corners of her eyes with the edge of her tunic.

The sun began to sink into the horizon. Water rolled down her face. She put her fingers to her cheek and looked down at them. Tears and dirt streaked her hand and seeped into the lines of her palm like tiny tributaries. She wondered at the intricate, filthy map of her hand. She held her palm in front of her face like a mirror, and the dirty water spilled down to the heel of her hand and traveled past her wrist.

“What do I do?”

She raised her palm up to the green and gold light filtering through the trees. She squinted through the spaces between her fingers and put her lips to her palm to suck up water and earth. It tasted like an answer. She raised her foot and took another step.

Hibah Shabkhez

Until There Was Nothing Left to Cut

Slowly, lock by tumbling lock, she let her hair glide down her shoulders. Rich, black, mane-like, it snuck its snarly bristles into her bare chest and into the raw shin of her back.

Inside the locked, shuttered, mirrorless store-room, with shrouded caskets on every side of her, she shrank still, shrank instinctively within herself as she stepped out of the black frock with its one white frill on the collar.

She knelt upon the faded black cotton, the razor blade a silver glimmer in her pudgy fingers. There ought to have been some pathos to this moment, she thought desperately, some thrill, some deep overwhelming emotion ...

When Slumber took the first few strands of hair and yanked them until her head throbbed right down to her left temple and she could feel the pores of her skin ready to pop. She laid the razor against the root of the pain and struck it away. And the cool hardness of the metal was a balm to her keening new-shorn flesh.

She watched the first few strands slide off her thighs and coil up on the black cotton frock with one end swathing the white frills ... And then her shingled hair began to fall around her thick and fast, like a cloud reminded of its destiny by the first plopping drop of rain.

Now she was panting a little with the pain, and her eyes glittered cruelly, feverishly. With every strand of hair she hacked off, the desperate triumph in her eyes was stoked to a blaze again.

Until there was nothing left to cut. The hair down her neck was not hers any longer: merely an irritant to be jerked off. The rush of about her weightless head, bobbing on her neck like a child's balloon at the end of a thread made her look down suddenly at the sliver of steel in her bloodless fingers; and as the pain in her sore skin subsided, she began for the first time to survey the dark maelstrom about and upon her with the beginnings of panic.

Jonathan Darren Garcia
You both need to leave right now!

The two brothers met in a home away from their homes for a reunion. One arrived early with the sun rising behind him, the other in the evening with the sun setting behind him. They never truly got along; any issues of the past lingered. The family upstairs heard the shouting. The family downstairs felt the quaking of their fists in the air. Their voices competed against each other and they would not accept the interference of others. There was no resolution that would result in an apology or an embrace. The night settled in the sky with all the clouds and stars hiding behind them. The wind began to whistle through every crack in the house. The family left in a hurry. Both of their phones rang and beeped without answer until midnight. "I think I'll just go now!" The only sensible words that were uttered. He walked towards the entrance door and opened it, and then slammed it shut. The other stared through the window longingly with his hands in his pocket. The dark clouds above began to funnel, turning into a tornado. The brother retreated inside. They both stood shoulder to shoulder for the first time in years, staring out the window.



Violet Eyes
by Lisa Lerma Weber

CREATIVE NONFICTION

I don't want to know why you called me. You probably weren't even trying to call me. You were probably drunk. Maybe you were trying to call someone else. Maybe you just wanted to text me. Maybe none of that's true, and it was just a butt dial. It doesn't matter what the reason is; I don't want to know it.

But maybe you called me on purpose. Which doesn't make any sense, because you have no reason to call me.

I could've texted you in the morning. I could've looked you up on Facebook. Instagram. Snapchat. I could've looked you up on whatever the fuck social media I'm supposed to be on right now and see what you did last night that led to this notification of your late-night call. I could've asked you why you called, and those maybes would go away.

But I don't want to know. It's not that I don't care, because I do. I know what I want the answer to be. I want it to be true that you tried to call someone else, or tried to text me, or accidentally clicked my name when my phone was in your pocket and you were dancing with your friends. I want it to be true that you don't think about me. So that's the truth I'm going with. I'm not asking you why you called me because *I* get to decide my truth this time. *I* get to decide why you called me. *I* get to decide this story of this night.

So, I don't ask.

I made bad decisions in 2018 that I want to leave behind. This new year means that last year is over and I can close the chapter on those childlike mistakes. But you weren't my mistake; I was yours. I wanted to leave you behind too, but 144 minutes into the new year, you're still there. In my list of notifications in the morning, amidst the texts from my friends and suitors, there you are.

I didn't even know you had my number.

All I have from that night is a single memory. Brief, not even two seconds. I blink and you're on top of me. Grinning, happy, excited. My blinds are open to the alleyway, so the light from the streetlamps is shining on your face and I can see that dumb grin. You're sweaty, and a drop of sweat falls from your face onto mine. I blink, reacting to the foreign perspiration, and it's gone.

The next morning, I woke up to this memory. I thought I'd dreamt it. I was still drunk when I woke up, and vivid visceral dreams are not uncommon to my drunken sleep. I tend to mix reality and fantasy when I'm drunk; that's what this is. We were hanging out the night before and I considered going home with you earlier in the night, earlier when I could remember. I didn't hook up with you; I dreamt it, narratively finishing the story I started, and the alcohol made it feel real.

I rolled over, the drop of sweat soaking my mind, the salt and the water blending into the juices of my brain permanently. I opened my eyes to find my phone on my night table, the surface of it exactly at my eye-line. And then I saw it. A single, wadded up, dry condom. I looked around the room. Everything else in my room was perfectly untouched, exactly how I left it when I went out last night. Last night's clothes were strewn amongst the clothes from previous nights. My laptops plugged in on my desk, maintaining their charge. My phone attached to the cable, my watch even placed delicately on its circular charger. It was disturbingly normal. Nothing was odd or out of place. My desk, my floor, my bed, my night table. Everything was exactly the same. Like you had never been there.

I stared at this wadded up condom. I poked it, my skin connecting with the dry rubber, only partially used. I rubbed the plastic between my fingers, feeling the slender grooves of the ribbing, made for my pleasure.

Closing my eyes, I feel the drop of sweat on my face and see you on top of me. That brief, two second image. The one that simultaneously

feels real but can't be. No, that can't be real. That can't be the only thing I remember from last night.

But it is. And that single, wadded up, dry condom is the only remnant of your existence in this room. I wonder if it's mine. I wonder if it's one of my three condoms in the top drawer of my dresser, living with my nail polish and deodorant and jewelry. No, those are still there. You brought this with you. You're the kind of guy who keeps condoms in his wallet.

But you're also the kind of guy who takes home a drunk, vomiting girl. Tuck her in bed, fully clothed. Shift her night table beside her and stuff a backpack with clothes to keep her from rolling over in the middle of the night and dying alone. Place a full glass of water on the night table, filled using her bathroom sink. Gently close the door behind you, leaving her untouched. Because you did that, too. Just not that night.

Later, I would wonder what would happen if the condom wasn't there. If it wasn't there, or if you didn't use one, or if you took it with you, or threw it away in the bathroom. Would that memory have remained a dream? Would that drop of sweat, so wet in my mind's eye, be reduced to my own? This condom changed the story of last night, taking it across the line from fantasy to reality. In the grand scheme of my life, it really doesn't matter what actually happened – only the story mattered. And this condom told the story of last night.

It's no use asking what would happen if the condom wasn't there. Because it was there. There was a condom, which means there was a drop of sweat, which means there was you. I didn't get to pick this story, I didn't get to decide what truth I told myself. You decided this story for me. You decided my new truth.

In the months that followed, I pursued sex with any boy who would have sex with me. For a while, I thought this newfound passion for sex of mine was about me. I thought it was about me and my newfound single girlhood. I thought it was about me exploring my sexuality in an adventurous and thrilling manner. I thought it was

about me trying to be the twenty-one-year-old girl I thought I was supposed to be.

I didn't know that these months were about you. That these months and these hookups were about me giving my body to be consumed. If men were going to consume me, like you did, I might as well give them permission. So that's what I did. I was a body to be consumed. I let them expend me before they had the opportunity to ignore my wishes.

I was fine thinking those months after you were about me. I was fine being fine with what you did to me and not calling it assault. I was fine until you called me, and I realized I didn't want you calling me, thinking about me. I realized *why* I didn't want you calling me, thinking about me. I didn't get to pick this story. I didn't get to decide my truth. You decided for me. When you called me on January 1, you wrote yourself into my story again. So, I didn't ask why you called me. I wasn't going to let you keep writing my story. It's my story now.

Malini Chaudhri
I Will Stop and Smell the Roses

More than the rose itself, I was captivated by the essence of rose. My senses succumbed to the whiff of aromatic fragrance, and floating petals in a bottle of liquid ambrosia, dressed for skin therapy and daily spa. The combination turned my head in a beauty store if ever the presentation met with a precision of geometry, beauty and synchronized system support. Close kin to *rose* was *bouquet*, with the essence in oils of calendula, chamomile, lavender and rose with enchanting top notes. The bottles were infused with chlorphenesin, or essence of chlorella, in a pharmaceutical process to minimize harmful solar radiation. All this was divine nectar arranged for my sensory whims to elevate my experience of daily cleansing and grooming. My rose body spa bath gel had premium fragrance. My rose bath sensory salts with Epsom relaxants and transformational ingredients that were not produced from hype but from real scientific technology. Petal by petal, leaf by leaf in advanced encapsulated, time released, synergized formula, skin cell life awakened to participate in an indulgent, sensory rhapsody of aromatic notes. Neuroscience was experienced at its most advanced support possible for self-starters in spa sciences. I favoured Japanese aromachology which I discovered when I used Shiseido. The wonder at the drop of sleep inducing ‘lavender’ facial oil I was treated to at Kiehl’s called Midnight recovery. A drop on and the fatigued brain could forget the hard pricks of the day. The pillow could swallow the head and put the spirit to rest. When I remembered, I sprayed apparel rose fragrance on my linen. The dark night visitors, shamans and underworld dream calls stayed away.

I rejoiced in the spirit of an orange blossom tree, promising abundance and sun power every Chinese Spring festival when it came, even to my terraced home in India. I researched plant food and soil lifters for best yields. I did not count my oranges, pray for gold, and display the beauty. I had bottles of citrus aurantium, or bitter orange aroma oil around my home. They carried top notes and made my spirit

rise. My heart felt the energy and could draw it in. The olfactory anatomy promised me a system of retrieval, balance and recovery based on the aromatic notes that activated messenger phytohormones in the hypothalamus, associated with the deep brain limbic system. I had a very special recall to this Chinese orange tree since thirty years when I lived in China and celebrated the turn of the year. I recalled buying the orange tree and visiting the river for a view of the dragon boats and festivals, rowing in numbers, boat after boat, with a group of college teachers. China did not show me roses, but they revelled in very exotic flower cultivation, fields and fields of display for visitors to buy. Good solid foundations of memory and sensory association. There were building blocks arranged in my brain to rest upon before time tested my capacity to live when asked to die.

When roses did not reign, and destiny turned away from a sublime secret paradise world of mind and extended matter, there was a churning going on, a deep pit, as with smoke fumes and dangerous incantations. A big black kite above circled the sky looking down on my open space. There was a warning of an evil eye, of witchcraft, of something ominous spying on my space. I followed the messenger bird which was a symbol of power and transformation in magical realms. It traversed the sky in a figure eight. Two circles. One circle symbolized mine, and one another. The manifestation of change and shadow work showed a weaving of magic through unsuspecting victims. One half of the figure eight extracted from the other in constant flow.

*Ringa- ringa- roses A
pocket full of posies
Ashes! Ashes!
We all fall down.*

A flash recall as a schoolgirl in a famous Irish convent in Kolkata was reviewed. We were made to form a circle in the Loreto House playground at nursery school and sing this song of the Great Plague of England. One victim formed in the rhyme and was to collapse. I noticed a girl in our group soon lost her hair and reported alopecia. She was given mental help and support to leave India after school. Since then, when Loreto girls reunited in a circle, even thirty years later, even

during mealtime, I noted a danger, and someone from the circle collapsed. Mysteriously died. And a hush with secret murmurings moved the circle into another angst of spell or mystery.

I grew up to become an adept. I had acquired special skills in mind control. I had training in Ki transmission from a Ki aikido trainer. I could remain connected with friends, family and pets and yet balanced internally. Psychics and readers noted my aura presence with a Buddha palm. I had healing gifts and foreknowledge of the future.

Antisocial arrangements were marked when some school friends were scolded by parents and elder sisters and ordered to stay away from me. This was an elite Indian social circle connected to British royals. At age six, I was too young to be shocked at the betrayal. As a teenager in school, there were obscure details and notes given to me about boy in a car daily following me for many years. Perhaps this was a security system activated in the wake of danger. Even as we became older and social relationships formed, I received powerful signal messages from friends ... "you are a misfit." It was likely they wanted to rearrange my abundant grace from god in wealth and wellness, for a reversal of circumstances through a ministry in control. All these circles of friends contracted ministries and moved abroad. My mental association of this circle of girls, where a core formed of pasty white faces, was to see their faces in an ugly snigger. I retained a distaste for my years in school and the society I lived in. None of us followed Christianity or the teachings of Christ even in a catholic school. We never went to Church. Moral education, good and bad, behavioural systems were not discussed. There were mystical undercurrents based on foreign influences which preferred to rearrange hubs of humans to accelerate salient powers. I never judged the system. I never collapsed. How blessed the meek that never asked or pointed a finger..... I was to inherit the earth.....

Times had changed. The old had given way to the new. It was the era of the Internet of Things. Satellites and robots were overtaking normal life. Life had become controlled as there was a global investigation of terror, threat and supernatural dangers effacing human

lives. Some suggested this world was not good to live in. Some suggested it was the end.

During my private moments of communion, ritual, cleansing, watering, nurturing and bathing, I stayed in the proximity of the rose essence. Yet the familiar experience of betrayal and impending doom interfered. A new world had formed around my paradise, and a Satan alike looked into it for control. I was aware of privacy invasion, of tantras and mantras around secret people with handling to specialized technology interior view. I was aware of occult stealing, shadow stalking, energy depleting, destiny robbing, astral reconfiguration, energetic mandala invocations to trespass into the human astral and redefine cosmology. I knew how to refuse, to say 'no' to resist the luring astral vibrations of ghosts. When the onlooker grew stronger, and Thelma rites moved through aerospace to target my genes, my core, my god presence, and then my lungs resisted and my breathing became short. I found a wardrobe for shower, a mask for my face of charcoal or fruit salads to hide from invasive view, a sarong to wear during hydro massage therapy with my bristled German body brush. Night bathing rituals maintained spa essence recovery treatments, but in pitch darkness. They even had technology for luminescence and secret night cameras that were real. The new technology revolution turned predator. Quantum vibrations from out of space centres were in the hands of the wizards of lore.... cultures transmitted by alchemists and their voluminous teachings which sacrificed goats and girls for demonic powers. My sixth sense had become activated to other phenomena. The water seemed radioactive... by now, organized for energy conversion to put to use in satellite work, and arranged for view from secret workers in advanced spy technology, using drone cameras for 360 degree alignment. No light was safe. No dark was safe. No silence was safe. No sound was safe. The machine had overtaken the human and the systems were alien to normal human experience.

I had noted my entrance door broken into. I called the carpenter and replaced the lock. I continued to notice erratic footprints even in my bathroom mat. It seems a glaze of paint, plastic strips, or adhesions

were arranged for view. I had all this removed. I continued to notice police were ignoring my reports. At night I noticed dead lizards in my kitchen. Someone was entering the premises at night and was arranging candida in my pasta sauce. I noticed the slime and removed it. I bought only tetra packs if pasta sauce with small openings after that for refrigeration. Sometimes my bathing water showed acid fumes, coming from the overhead tank. I had to evacuate the tank and run the water several times. An arrangement had been planned to remove my water several times a day. Ministries of reverse order for people power engaged in voodoo theft around water stealing from my tank using remote controls. The arrangement was known and secret police force were working simultaneously to ward off threat. Many different groups had spy controls in my rooms within my apartment, anticipating danger. Some could provide relief in case of damage. Some could aggress. Quantum control is meant for killing insects were sometimes used on my knees and arms. I took pictures of the violent gashes appearing on my arms, neck and face and sent them to satellite companies. I removed pain from targeted areas through a photonic device which supported satellite radar issues.

The leatherette on my bedroom chairs were ripped to bits without reason. It seems that plastic attracted radar, especially if I was in the seat. I placed cotton sheets over the seat to maintain them. One day, after watering my flowers, I gaped down at my feet in horror. There were black speckle s forming on the exposed area. The exposure to unhealthy radar was very high on the feet. It seemed my feet were mapped and followed within the interiors of my apartment. A view could be generated through open gaps beneath doors on a top floor apartment. Many were following me through the feet, inside the building and outside. How many around by this time owned Amazon Echo and Google home hub to stay watchdogs. After this, soon, some more billion device s were to be connected to everyone in space and the world.

The figure eight, the circles of black gas and endeavours in extraction of dreaded occult could be dissolved into nothing through prayer and spirit symmetry to cosmic intelligence. For the first time I

discovered a new path. It was based on sensory activation for recovery. There was grace and goodwill in my mind, stable resistance and non-co-operation to evil. I was not in my soul seat in prayer during emergency. There was no fight and flight from fear episodes, flying sorcerers, accomplices of martial art daring feats as in Bruce Lee films on Kung Fu. There was no yogic levitation or super spiritual accomplishment. I had a special support of scientific origin that prepared the deep brain to stay synchronized for soul experience through devastating danger. It was neuroscience in aromachology.

Petal upon petal, leaf upon leaf, the merging, like the blossoming rose flower, was towards the crown of the head, remaining beautiful in solitary silence, showing its presence to the ecological world. There was no fragrance in the natural process, yet in the laboratory of the neuroscientist in special senses recovery technology, the molecules were produced to convey the epitome and spirit of the rose flower for millions to move humanity with in lifestyle trends. This was just the beginning of the road ahead. I needed to calm my over exhausted brain, adapting to many new environmental phenomenon.

There was war. There was peace. There was terror. There was aroma.

The deep brain preferred poetry and eloquence at bedtime after prayer: Theta waves and symphonies of sound validated the human experience with divine control. The soul rested on a bed of fragrant roses, uplifting, dreamy notes with blessings of a godhead.

GWYNEVERE ELLIS (*Swing, Ensemble, Young Gwynevere, Old Gwynevere*) is proud to play *New Woman* in the gifted company of *Life*. After her previous role as *Victim* in *The Family Show*, she celebrates this challenge.

Born and raised in the Midwest, Gwynevere led a charmed childhood filled with yard games, piano lessons and Barbie dolls. She majored in music at a local college, married at 22, then produced two daughters. Cast in the familiar role of *Young, Tired, Working Mother* she combined her love of teaching with parenting. As a *Swing* during those years, she also played *Cook, Housekeeper, Gardener, Sister* and *Friend*. When not on stage, she took behind the scenes parts, playing keyboard in pit orchestras and accompanying solo performances.

In one of her longest roles, Gwynevere played *Choir Director* in a production of *Suburban High School*. She is best known for missing only five performances in its extended run. In this musical, she fostered young hopefuls who now pursue careers in New York, Chicago and regional theater.

Mid-career, Gwynevere was unexpectedly cast in the role of *Victim*, with a narcissistic family member playing *Villain*. The antagonist ridiculed her appearance. Accused her of neglecting her children. Discredited her accomplishments. While playing her beleaguered character, Gwynevere appropriated happy gestures when her psyche favored tears. She perfected her poker face when *Villain* hurled insults. She practiced ad lib against false accusations. Like flash mobs, improvisational scenes appeared unexpectedly. Always anticipating contention, Gwynevere grew panicky, shallow-breathed, and weak. She read at *Cosmopolitan.com* that “stress causes skin issues to flare up...” and found evidence in the mirror: deep lines, puffy eyes, flaky skin. She considered advice from *Psychology Today*: “The decision to go ‘No

Contact' is a big one but is made when [the person] is too toxic...and continues to be abusive." When Gwynevere read that 200 million people worldwide reap the benefits of meditation, she studied the practice—a sort of method acting—and restored her ability to sleep. She allied with a family member—also a target of the narcissist—and together, they formed a duo, performing in tandem to stifle the *Villain*.

Although playing *Victim* temporarily crippled her spirit, Gwynevere is grateful for the experience. She is now proud to ignore bullies, recognize dysfunction and trust her intuition. She hopes to educate others about signs of emotional abuse—using insults to belittle or demean; using technology to harass or threaten; using words to discredit or silence—and show that in real life, as in theater, the bad guy can be disarmed, and the good guy can win.

In retirement, Gwynevere longed for small bit parts. Rumors circulated about a potential role in *The Charmed Life*; instead, she played *Caretaker* for 12 months in *Medical Catastrophe* when a routine operation left her husband in ICU. The role demanded devotion and energy and she is grateful for family and friends who played supporting roles.

Her most recent work is in *Retired* where Gwynevere and the talented Joel (*Husband* and *Father*) dote on their adult daughters, one a high school English teacher, the other a professional athlete. Reprising skills learned as *Mother*, Gwynevere also plays *Grandmother*, once again deft with infant props—diapers, bottles and baby shoes. She is deeply grateful for the opportunity to take this role when her daughter travels with the *Working Mom* show.

In her free time, Gwynevere reads, sews and bakes, and can be found at house parties playing Renaissance recorder, piano, and melodica.