

Litmag
2020





E. DESMOND LEE

REGIONAL INSTITUTE OF TUTORIAL EDUCATION

ABOUT

The E. Desmond Lee Regional Institute of Tutorial Education has provided tutorial support and service programs to area youth since 1998. RITE networks with other universities and community organizations to expand services for children in the metropolitan school districts.

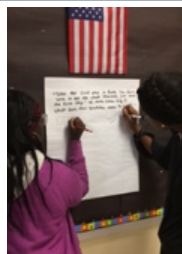
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UMSL

litmag 2020

Cover Art:

Red Herring

Luna Noelle

oil on ceramics

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About

Mission and Purpose

Litmag's goal is to nurture the creativity of the students, staff, and alumni of UMSL by increasing awareness of diverse literary and artistic talent. We aim to provide an inclusive, professional, and high-quality publication free of charge to UMSL and the local community.

Review Process

Submissions are open to all UMSL students, faculty, staff, and alumni. All submissions are reviewed anonymously, and selections are determined after thorough discussion by the editorial staff.

Contests

Litmag conducts four individual contests for best poetry, best prose, best multilingual writing, and best artwork. This year, the editorial staff determined the winners of the poetry, prose, and art contests. Madame Trapani from the Department of Languages determined the winner of the multilingual contest.

Sponsorship

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We cannot forget Ashley Marsh, Assistant Director of Annual Giving, for helping us organize and promote our crowdfunding campaign.

And last but not most certainly not least, a huge thank you to all those who contributed to our crowdfunding page.

Creative work solely reflects the views of the author and not necessarily those of UMSL or the English Department.

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Editor-in-Chief's Note

Welcome to the *Litmag* 2020 Pandemic Edition. We could never have imagined that we would be quarantined mid-semester. So, please spend intimate time with this special edition. In such novel times, we uncover the encouragement and inspiration provided while editing the artistic voices of the UMSL community. It is our pleasure to share these works with you.

I want to commend our staff for their monumental efforts in a time that the world seems to be frozen. We have coined the term *Litmag* 2020 Pandemic Edition while working remotely. The *Litmag* 2020 edition amid COVID-19 is the result of a united and dedicated staff. The quarantine presented us with the challenge of staying connected while being disconnected from the campus and the world. Thus, *Litmag* 2020 is not merely the medium of expression; it yields our obligation to legacy. The staff's flexibility and efficiency have been most impressive in the fluid COVID-19 crisis.

Congratulations to the creative minds that provide us with wide-ranging material. We were selecting the literature and art created before the pandemic. As *Litmag*'s digital pioneers, we incorporated works that reflect the beauty in human relationships with various ideas. The cover art prevails as the voice of nature speaking to humankind. Where humans are somewhat fragile in regard to defense, our brains allow us to dominate the world. *Red Herring* speaks for nature's discontent with man's negligence. It forces us to consider what is to come with what we understand to be normal. Our cover art, I would say, is peculiar, necessary, and relevant to humanity's vulnerability to nature.

Last, but certainly not least, I want to thank the faculty advisor, Mrs. Kate Watt, for her dedication to the *Litmag* staff and her family. It was inspirational observing her care for her children from home while instructing Zoom classes. Those moments bring commonality and motherhood to mind. For the first time in our history, we all shared the same experience of being confined to our homes. The art and literature themed after motherhood and nature shows the appreciation children have for their caregivers. As love is reciprocated in this theme, these pieces allow this inanimate item known as *Litmag* to feel human.

I imagine creative expression will be refashioned during and after the uncertainties of COVID-19. Having the opportunity to work with the staff and the works composed in the 2020 edition was rewarding. I hope that you find time to be uplifted and inspired by the diligent works in this edition.

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Cracker Barrel Store #546 Ferguson, Missouri, August 2014

Alex Balogh

Poetry Contest Winner

Faux country store
Nestled around Home Depot Steak 'N Shake & 1-270 freeway ramps
Rocking chairs vacant amidst oversized checkerboards
Digitized hoedowns piped onto a ghostly front porch
Enter & exit thru gift shop
A childhood fantasy of Silly Putty, jaw harps
Raggedy Anns or Andys, Lincoln Logs
Gumbies, Dodge City cap guns, Tinkertoys
penny candy (now bagged by the decade), Nik-Nips
candy buttons, Yankee Candles, Erector Sets

American flag posted in front of stone fireplace
Logs smolder under hanging kettle
Mounted buck heads, fish, fiddles & snowshoes
Empty kerosene hurricane lamp on each table
Menus tout Grandpa's Country Fried Breakfast
Smoke House Breakfast & Old Time Breakfast
& remind us year-round that *'Course this time of year, just relaxing in a
comfortable rocker on our front porch
is a pretty nice way to pass the time.*

As servers, managers, cashiers, almost all women of color
labor perfunctorily in this Americana gone wild
in this retrofit holler contrived to capture the almighty dollar
as decked out African-Americans fresh from church
dine amongst good ol' boys in hunting jackets & camo hats
Is this merely a rest stop on our journey
through these disunited states of America
a temporary refuge, a universe with no parallels
a momentary detente as assault vehicles gear up
volunteers nail plywood to smashed storefronts
& brickfaced cops in riot gear
& firefighters stand poised at the ready . . .

Checks bar coded, folded lengthwise, time/date stamped 257999 Sherry B
Remind us: "Gratuity Not Included."

The Goat

Blake Hunt

Art Contest Winner



edited digital photograph

Busan 부산 감천문화마을

Luna Noelle



photograph

Lusophilia: A Conjugal Visit

B. Ready

Prose Contest Winner

You might dispute the sky and ocean until they give up and finally move out of the way. You might fast, or sweat, or expel your breath. You might light a candle, or ring a bell. Anything for her.

She greets you with a kiss on each side of your face. The lavish scent of unrepressed pheromones compels. For you, she pours out Fado in flood rains.

She wears layers of black but guides you in technicolor, casting the glow of her skin against antique projector reels. Blue fractals twist and squirm on China white. In Saint George's castle gardens, the peacocks fan their tails in a feverish lek. You follow her to the fig tree where you press thumbs into soft purple flesh, break it wide, and swallow the wasp's suicide. Walking through a hypnosis of pink, purple and gold lantanas she leads you to the Mouth of Hell. The tide pulls hard. The cave erupts. You shiver in salty mist. Holding you over the edge, she begs you to discover something new.

This is your bliss: the sublime absence of all human error, the sureness that nothing ever is. Every construct undone. Words like *currency*, and *territory*, and *hierarchy* are blown away in the sand. You are joined to her in saline and in saline she faithfully departs; the solution remains floating on the backs of your eyelids.

Pas Intitulé

Tarika Walton

Multilingual Contest Winner

Je n'avais rien besoin
Ce qui n'était pas moi.
J'avais toujours voulu
Tout que je pourrai être.
Maintenant, je me tiens
À la frontière du début.
Je suis où que j'avais su
J'avais dû finir.

Untitled

Tarika Walton

Multilingual Contest Winner

I never needed
What was not me.
I always wanted
Everything I could be.
Now, I hold myself
At the edge of the start.
I am where I knew
I had to finish.

Ma

T.L. Kirk

You tried to teach me when I was twelve
how to do my own laundry, how to find light
and keep it separate from everything that's dark,
how many small moments should pass
when adding bleach – how best
to make everything brighter.

But I never learned to fold a fitted sheet,
and every time I try,
I wish I still lived at home.

Every single time I try,
I want to be standing across from you,
with a corner in each of our hands
– arms stretched out, as if to say,
“I love you this much.”

It's been years since I've said that,
but you should know
my arms have only grown longer,
and there's still so much
I can't do without you,
and I love you
for not having to.

The Becoming of Mother and Cub

Tareq Issam Nabhan



acrylic, colored pencil, ink

Mother's Day

Julie Harms



photograph taken at the Missouri Botanical Garden, St. Louis, MO

약손

Danbi Kim

Multilingual Contest Honorable Mention

우리 엄마의 손은 일하는 손이라
말랑하고 부드럽고 이젠 많이 부었지.

30년 넘게 수고를 아는 손이고
누굴 섬기는 일이 아니라면
자기가 잘 하는 일도 잊은 손

하기 좋아하던 것도 잃은 손

우리 엄마손은 맵고 작고 또 연약한 손

내가 잘못했을 때는 맵고
나랑 손을 비교할때는 작고
잡고있는데 너무 힘을 주면 연약하고

내가 손대기 싫은 것도 따지지 않고 다듬고
항상 열이 많아서 그런지
못난 내 두 손을 잡아주면 따뜻하고

날 너무나 잘 아는 손

너무 창피해서 낮가리고 싶을 때
내가 숨겨둔 부끄러운 부분
하나 하나씩 빠짐없이 찾아주는 우리 엄마

엄마랑 내 사이에는 거의 비밀이 없어요.
하지만 아무리 애쓰거나 말거나 우리는 엄마를 잘 모르죠.

엄마의 속마음
엄마가 후회되는 것
엄마가 너무나 갖고 싶었지만 단순한 몇가지

욕심을 못내서 놓아 둔 것

궁금해서 여쭙봤자

몰라도 된다는 것

엄마에 대해 모르는게 수없이 많아도
오른손 손가락으로 셀 수 있는 몇가지는
잊지않고 있어요.

내 엄마손은 약손

그래서 세월이 흐르면서
엄마 손을 꼭 잡아줄때
힘조절은 조금씩

모든 걸 차분하게

엄마 마음 속상하지않게
이 몇가지만 꾸준히 지키면

우리 엄마의 손도

매일 조금씩 고와질수도 있도록

이 자그만 약속들을 지킨다면
조금이라도 욕심을 낼 수 있겠지?

그러나
그 강력한 빛이 나는 촛불에
연약해지더라도

그 많은 사랑을 받고
잘 자라서 씩씩해진 우리는

도저히 잊지 못하는
엄마의 애정이 꼭 담긴 목소리
웃음 또 날 쓰담아주면서 위로해주는 손길
그대로 나랑 평생 남아있겠지

(Healing Touch)

Danbi Kim

Multilingual Contest Honorable Mention

My mother's hands are hands that do work
They're soft and squishy, now puffy and swollen.

They're hands that have known work for 30 years
If they're not doing something to serve others
They're hands that have forgotten what they're good at

Hands that have forgotten what they used to love to do

My mom's hands are incredibly strong and small.
They're also quite fragile

They're harsh when I've done wrong
When we compare hand-size, they're smaller
But when I use too much strength while holding them, they're fragile

They're not selective and prune the things I'm reluctant to touch
It may be because she stores so much heat
But when she grabs both my hands with hers, they're warm

They're hands that know me very well

When I want to shy away when I'm just ashamed
My mother, without fail
Finds all the embarrassing things I've hidden, one by one

My mother and I don't have any real secrets between us.
But try as I may, I don't know my mother that well.

I don't know how my mother feels on the inside
I don't know her regrets
Little, simple things that my mother

Couldn't be selfish enough for, and let go

Even if I ask her out of curiosity
She tells me, "You're better off not knowing"

Although I have so many things that I don't know about my mother
There are a couple things that I can use my right hand to count
That I haven't forgotten.

My mother's hand is a healing touch.

So even as the seasons pass
When I hold my mother's hand steadfast, gingerly
I adjust my strength little by little

Everything, step-by-step

That I might behave so that I won't upset her
If I'd just stick to diligently practicing these few things

So that my mother's lovely hands
Might turn fairer with every day

Should I keep these small promises
Her hands might even be able act a little bolder, wouldn't they?

And yet
Even if that strong candle's flame
Grows a bit weaker

Us few that grew up bright-spirited,
From receiving that boundless love

Try as I may, it's unforgettable
Mother's voice, steeped in affection
Her laughter, and her caressing touch which soothed me

It'll last with me forever, won't it?

The Elephant

Levi Hale

Snow falls lightly outside of the window, illuminated by the yellow light of the subdivision streetlamps. Charlie looks out, observing the three-day old snow that's been piled up on either side of his driveway and on the edges of the road beyond it. It was beautiful when it first fell, and draped the earth in a five-inch blanket of white powder. Now it lies in clumped masses and in dirty grey heaps on the sides of highways. Its beauty has passed, and now it does nothing but remind Charlie of how cold and miserable it becomes during a Chicago January.

Lighting up the living room is a Christmas tree that Charlie hasn't gotten around to taking down yet. He and his wife, Lauren, decided to go real this year. He isn't sure why they made that decision. They've put together a fake tree for the last eleven years. He always enjoyed putting it up. They'd always put some good music on, make a few drinks, and spend the evening putting the branches in their slots and hanging ornaments. Charlie would always hang the star last, after Lauren had hung the last ornament.

It was the Sutton family tradition. The kids even joined in over the past two years. It made Charlie happy, seeing them reach an age where they could help. Their boy, Liam, and daughter, June, would fight over the ornaments that they liked the best. They'd waddle to the tree and hang the ornaments as high as they could. It wasn't very high, so sometimes Charlie would pick the kids up and let them reach the tallest branches. They'd giggle as he twirled them through the air. Charlie would smile. Lauren would smile. The family would be happy.

But this year, for some reason, they decided on a real tree.

Charlie looks at it. The limbs weep, vacant of life. Brown needles lament on the skirt. Some have wandered as far out as the carpet. The dead tree, combined with the cold gloom of the new year are quite depressing. Charlie decides that he'll take the tree down tomorrow morning.

"Dadda!" shouts June as she runs across the living room toward him.

Charlie fetches himself from his thoughts and becomes a father again. He grabs June and launches her into the air, catching her as she comes back down. The little girl cackles, her tiny body folds with laughter. Charlie repeats this a few more times before wearing himself out. He forces himself to smile as his daughter continues her laughing.

Lauren watches from the couch, wearing a broad smile, along with

her night time sweatpants and one of Charlie's t-shirts. Liam is nestled up next to her, his head on her lap, curly blond hair spilling over his childish face. The boy is sound asleep. The two of them look lovely—polar opposites of the harsh weather and dead tree that Charlie was examining only moments ago.

"You about ready for bed little one?" Charlie asks as he hoists June over his head.

She shakes her head no, yawning while performing the gesture. This makes Charlie smile. His daughter is so pure. The nature of her youth.

"Go hug your mom and say goodnight," He says, setting the girl down. June then runs to her mom's legs and offers the biggest hug that a three-year-old can muster. Lauren leans forward and squeezes June as tight as she can.

"I love you so, so much darling," Lauren says.

"Love you mommy," June squeaks.

Lauren kisses Liam on the forehead and whispers something to him. Charlie picks both of the kids up in his arms. Each of their little heads falls onto his shoulders. He walks them down the hall, eventually finding their bedroom. He tucks them into their beds. Liam's eyes open briefly as his head meets the pillow but they close again just as fast.

"Goodnight kiddos," Charlie says as he flips on the night light and turns off the overhead. "Me and your mom love you very much."

Charlie walks back down the hallway and into the kitchen. From the fridge he snatches a couple of Heineken's. He pops the tops off, but before he can make his way to the living room, he finds Lauren has snuck into the kitchen. He observes her, leaning against the beige wall. Everything is beige in the winter. Neutral. Cold.

"Easy now," Charlie says, handing his wife a bottle. "You don't want to watch some TV or something?"

Lauren takes a drink and shakes her head, *no*.

"Just wanna talk?" Charlie asks, admiring the strength of his wife.

Lauren shakes her head, *yes*. She takes another drink.

Wearily, she finds a seat at the kitchen counter. Charlie stands on the other side of it, looking into her pale blue eyes. They're glassy, rich with emotion. Her lids appear to be damming a river. The eyes behind them might burst at any moment. Charlie knows that they won't. The levee that holds the water back has too strong a foundation. Nothing will break it. Nothing can break it.

"I love those kids," Lauren says after some time passes. "And I love you."

"I know."

They both laugh, neither one knowing quite what to say or what to do. They haven't done much talking the last few months. They've done even less touching. They haven't really done much of anything, besides drink. Each of them has just been trying their hardest to make it through the winter.

"I almost booked those flights to *Barthelona* today," Lauren says, forcing her lisp. She finishes her beer, "But then I didn't."

Charlie empties his bottle as well. He grabs two more from the fridge.

"Oh."

"Yea. I just couldn't commit, you know?"

They both look at each other. Charlie isn't quite sure how to respond. He searches for the right words to say, but the only thing he can come up with is, "Yea... I know."

Lauren has always wanted to visit Spain. She's been telling Charlie since they met. They were initially going to go on their honeymoon, but they couldn't afford it. So instead they settled for a cabin off of Lake Michigan. They nearly went again five years ago, but found out that Lauren was pregnant with Liam. So they booked a hospital bed, one with a C-section view.

"Do you think you'll be alright?" Lauren sips from her second beer and pushes it aside. She can't finish it.

Charlie looks down at his own bottle, shrugs, and smiles.

"Yea," he finishes what's left of the beer. His body grows heavier with every word that escapes Lauren's lips. "I'll be fine."

They both look into each other. The light of the kitchen is reflecting off of Lauren's cheeks and illuminating her eyes, making her look like an angel—one who decided to abandon the skies and find company in the weathered arms of a stone mason.

Lauren decides she's had enough talk for the night. She stands from her chair behind the counter and attempts to move toward Charlie. She just wants to hold the man, but loses control and stumbles into the wall. Falling to the floor is prevented, as Lauren uses the wall to support her slender frame. She wants to cry very badly. She wants to scream. She can do neither.

Silence.

Charlie grabs his wife before she collapses to the floor.

"My hero!" Lauren gawks.

Charlie holds her tight against his chest and looks into her eyes. They look haunted. She smiles.

"Take me to bed, Charlie," Lauren demands.

"Okay."

Charlie picks Lauren up. Her legs hang over one arm while he supports her back with the opposite. Her head falls into his chest. Together they parade down the dark hallway towards their bedroom. Lauren pushes open the already cracked door with a nudge of her foot. Charlie carries her across the threshold, closing the door quietly behind them.

“Undress me,” Lauren’s demands continue. “It’s been months.”

They haven’t interacted like this since they first received the news. Charlie fears he knows exactly what her words mean. Still, he follows Lauren’s commands. He carefully removes her clothes. He lays his wife down on the bed. She looks as lovely as ever.

* * *

It’s after midnight.

Charlie lies in bed. His eyes chase the shadows on the wall. They constantly dance across the room, drifting in unison with the lights that seep in from beyond the window shades. The overhead fan isn’t on. The silence of the room is maddening. The usual tick-tock of the rattling blades during the better part of the year act as a nursery rhyme. The noise can put Charlie to sleep in minutes. But now, in the heart of winter, there is no soothing tick, no pacifying tock. Only silence.

The man’s thoughts consume him. They’re an iceberg. He is a 1912 cruise ship. What’s coming is unavoidable. He isn’t sure what he’ll do. He isn’t sure that he’ll be able to handle Liam and June. He doesn’t know what he’ll tell them. He isn’t sure what he’ll tell anyone.

Charlie lies awake until the morning turns over. He watches as the bedroom turns the color of dawn. The first ray of sunlight slips through the blinds and illuminates the nightstand next to Lauren. On the stand is a sculpture of empty pill bottles and a book of scripture. Next to the stand is Lauren’s limp body.

Charlie sits up in bed. He wipes his tired eyes and looks at his wife. He runs his hand over her head. A head that was once covered in strands of long blonde hair. He traces his finger down to the back of her neck. He finds her tattoo, the one that exists right where her neck and shoulder blades meet.

It’s been a long time since Charlie’s actually looked at the tattoo. It had been completely ignored most of Lauren’s life, until she was forced to shave. It’s the size of a quarter, maybe two. It’s of Lauren’s favorite animal. An elephant. Charlie gazes at it blankly, for what seems like an eternity. It isn’t until he hears the rustling of the kids in the next room that he snaps to his senses. He reaches for his cell phone. Seconds later, Liam and June begin to bang their fists at the bedroom door.

Cousins

Sarah Mullin

some days at the atlantic's edge
i see a heritage stolen from us.
we flew there when we were young.
beautiful voices, the best butter,
a green stove, sunny windows,
round stones with lines around.
is this where i come from, or an
experience much colder, hungrier.
we are descended from survivors
and from the children of the dead.
our grandparents died here and our
parents don't talk about it. nothing
for it but speculation. where are the
records. why don't i have a passport.
no question mark for i do not ask.
america, the land of lost families.
i try the language on duolingo. i eat
an apple. where did they live. i flew
there again when i was older. i walked
out to the last point they saw. how
would they pronounce my name
back then. how did they spell my
mother's. is that a fragment in my
father's speech of another dialect.
i'm told i don't have an accent.
none of us have them. i think they
raised us to hide without knowing it.
you'll chase a crow for that someday.
what more can i gather from strangers.
how much history was left behind.
what is it like to know your grandparents

Habibi

Daniel Andrés Brown-Schnurr

I don't speak Arabic,
But I've picked up a few things.
My favorite term has to be
One of endearment.
A name for friends,
A name for family,
Or anyone considered close.
This word flows from the tongue
Like second nature
In almost every conversation.
In my humble opinion,
It goes beyond the walls of language.
Signifying respect and acceptance,
It's an honor in my eyes.
You are taken in and trusted
As part of someone's life.
This act of vulnerability
Is a powerful gift from within.
It is grown from the heart
While given from the soul.
So now I ask you,
Dear reader:
May I call you my habibi?

갈대

Danbi Kim

세상을 너무나 잘 알던 너의 엄마가

그렇게도 소중한 아들을
단순히 내 손안에 넣어주더라

꼭 잡고 있으려고
한번도 놓치지 마라고
날 떠나게 되는 것들이 많더라도

내 손안에 꼭 쥐어있던
숨죽이고 있던 너는

날 꼭 끝까지 지켜줄 것이라고
절대로 날 원망하지 않겠다고

나한테 줄 수 있는 제일 큰 선물이 너라고

너의 어머니가 나에게 그런 약속을 해주셨어

넌 아무것도 모를때
눈도 못 뜨고 귀도 잘 안 들릴때

근데. 넌 그걸 다 들었겠지?

흔들리는 갈대랑 잘 어울리던 강아지 한마리
목에 찻던 끈에서는 밝고 맑게 울리던 종소리

내 기억에는 아직도 생생한데

가지고 놀다가 주워서 물고있던 뭔가
글썽거리고 의심이 잔뜩담긴 눈으로날 쳐다보더니

넌 두 팔을 열어 따뜻하게 반겨주면서

그 길을 잃었던 강아지가 너에게 살며시 다가와
너의 가슴에 얼굴을 품었지

구경하던 내 먹먹한 마음만
못 알아보고

구경하던 내 먹먹한 마음만
못 알아보고

그 순간에 난 깨달았지
내가 얼마나 갖고 싶은 물건이었다면

너의 엄마가 굳이 내 손에 널
꼭 쥐어 줬을까

그런 나를 못 알고 넌 여전히
나한테 따스했는데

그래서 말인데

나는 너 몰래
그 약속을 접었지

(Wheat)

Danbi Kim

Without a thought, your mother who knew the world so well

Put that precious son of hers in the palm of my hand

She told me, to hold onto you tightly

To never let you go

That even if there are many things that will end up leaving you

The you that was squeezed tightly in my hand

Was holding your breath

She told me, that you'd keep me safe until you couldn't

That you'd never come to hate me

That you were the greatest gift she could possibly give me

Your mother promised that to me

When you didn't know anything

When you couldn't even open your eyes, when you couldn't even hear

But you know. You heard all of that, didn't you?

A puppy that suits swaying wheat

From its collar comes a sound of a bell, ringing bright and clear

It's still vivid in my memory

Something in its mouth it picked up from somewhere

With doubtful, teary eyes it looked up at me

As an onlooker, I watched

But you couldn't understand my muffled heart

You opened your arms and greeted it warmly

So, that lost puppy drew close to you
And planted its face in your chest

And it rattled around in that empty space, without rest

And it was that moment that I realized
How badly I must have appeared to want you

That your mom would have put you in my hand, and squeezed my hand
reassuringly

You couldn't understand "that" me, and you
Were ever so warm to me

That's why

Without you knowing
I folded in on that promise

“I Want to Be a Cute Girl! Just Like My Mama!”

Victoria Haynes

“So, Cassandra, let me reiterate the scraps of words you barfed out alongside whatever else you ate before you decided to leave a drunken voicemail—no, three drunken voicemails—on my work number. You eavesdropped on Tyler saying in a call with friends that they wanted to be a girl, and the only thing you extrapolated out of it was that, in your own words, ‘I’m concerned’? Cass, any mother concerned with their child’s well-being wouldn’t go to the lengths you have over your half of the past eight months to sabotage Ty’s identity. And I have receipts!

Back in June, Tyler asked you for a therapist. Anyone rational, anyone who truly cared for their child would oblige and help them find one. And even if you couldn’t do that, you don’t just go and laugh at them! That’s what they told me, that you just laughed! And even when they found Dr. Scallana, you tried to shame Tyler for going; they said that you said that therapy is only for ‘crazy and depressed people’, which... no it isn’t? You do recall that I was going to therapy when we still dated? Are you calling me crazy, Cass?

Then there was the incident with the barber in August. Ty told me on multiple occasions that they wanted to grow out their hair, and I obliged. Those golden locks were sooo pretty, it would be a shame to cut them. I assumed you would be fine with it, with the elaborate styles you get made for those wine parties with Hubert and his gaggle of Yang Gang 2020 tech friends. But apparently, Tyler comes back to me next month in absolute tears and the shittiest bowl cut and bangs I’ve ever seen. You ought to be lucky I have my old wigs, or else I would’ve verbally shredded that barber.

And then there was Halloween. Tyler was texting me up to that point about their costume, a red and black witch ensemble. It was so gorgeous; I envied how they got a hold of something so top-notch for the party they were going to that night. At this point, I was growing wary of what you were doing to them, so I told Ty to come to my house on their own stead afterwards. Of course, we both know that they showed up to my doorstep, hours before the party, sobbing with scraps of that same dress. You said it was Hubert’s dog that chewed through it, but I’m not an idiot, Cass. Those bite marks are the same you’ve left on me at your most... feral, for lack of better phrasing. It’s making me nauseous just saying it aloud.

Let's not forget your Christmas gift, either. *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, really? You're really going to go there? Tyler was shaking just seeing that cover. Couldn't stop shaking for hours, muttering 'I'm just Mom's dumb boy' and similar. It's certainly far from the worst you've done, but it's proof—proof—that everything preceding this is just purposeful torment, that it's not a 'prank of Hubie's that went wrong' or 'just trying to make sure *he's* sure'. And just so that you know, Tyler and I mulched that shit book.

I guess what I want to know at this point is *why*? Why bother calling me now to try and downplay all the abuse you've put our child through? Do you hate me so much that, even now, you'd attempt to ruin Tyler to get back at me? Or is it that your radical view of femininity is still so damn narrow that you're once again on the warpath to destroy anyone in your life that threatens it? You know what, nevermind! I don't really care at this point. You know the court date's in a week. You know that Ty's screening session for HRT's at the end of month. This is the only voicemail you're going to get from me until then. Talk to my lawyer, sobered up mind you, if you're truly 'concerned' for them, not me. Goodbye Cassandra."

...

"Thanks for dealing with Mom, Mama."

Mother Dearest

Katelynn Abraham

My home town, a birth mother, her hands grasped for me.
But jumbled accents and suburban streets tainted my city authenticity,
The mother of multi, mixed, bilingual, tri, a whirlpool kiss,
She was spread too thin and I slipped through her grip.

She recognized my heartbeat, but her features left my face.
I merged, morphed, melded; lost her sharpened, confident trace.

My city a broken beacon,
My truth, fractured dreams, a fiction sequence.
A life that was my birthright;
A life I was denied.

I succumbed to this town's haze, surrendered my birthplace.
Midwest may own me, but Long Island left me lonely.

Third Culture Kid Gets the Re-entry Blues: There's, Like, No Home In This Place

B. Ready

I'm American by birth, but I'm not from here. I'm a missionary kid. I assumed Aunt Emelia's suburban neighborhood in Topeka, Kansas would be safe. So, I took a walk.

As I turned left onto Brick Street, I noticed a neon blue puddle up ahead.

That's where I met the local Americans, counting turds and tampons spilling out from an upended porta-potty. Motioning towards a dog chasing its tail in a neighbor's yard, they said Otto ate all their acid so they decided to play a game. Woody lost, and would have to take the Crow's GED test for him. Braveheart worried about cops, but the Lone Ranger pointed to the phone number Sharpied across her red Chucks. *I told you, you pussy: my dad's an attorney.*

If it had sounded like the neeh-naah I was used to, I would have known to run. But the alien scream of an American police siren sounded, to me, as fake as a movie. I froze dead in my tracks until the cop was suddenly in my face, asking me if I tipped the porta-potty. I turned around to address the gang, but all I saw was four silhouettes, running into the sun.

도시락

Danbi Kim

엄마가 싸준 도시락은
짐이 되지만
굳이 들고 다니기는 귀찮고

풀기전에는 무릎 부딪힐 때마다
머리 들 정도로 무거워

참기름 1큰 술
보라빛 나는 밥 한 주걱
아끼지 말고 꼭꼭 눌러줘야

도시락이 푸짐하단 말이지

"자랑스러운 내 아들" 딱 한 꼬집
가루로 갈아준 인내심

빠질수 없는 자존심 조금 뿌리고
잔소리도 듬뿍

늦잠 자고싶은 마음을 버리게하는 짜릿한 양념까지
입안에 터지면 잠을 번쩍 깨게 하는 방울 토마토

먹기 아까운 정도로 심하게 귀여운
날 보고 웃는 주먹밥: 토갱이 네 마리

그러나 엄마를 속상하게 할수는 없지
남기면 젤데로 안된다는 건 동생도 나도 알고있지

마지막으로 집만 그립게 하는대충 만든 버터스프
온기가 감혀있는 보온병에 차분히 담아주면? 완성

(Lunch Box)

Danbi Kim

The lunch my mom packed me
Is troublesome to carry around everywhere
With its extra weight

Before I have time to unpack it,
And it's heavy enough to bruise
Every time it knocks against my knee

1 tablespoon of sesame oil
A full scoop of lavender-colored rice
Without sparing any, you've got press to pack in as much as you can

So that the lunchbox is full and brimming

Just one pinch of "My admirable son"
Patience that's been ground finely into powder

Sprinkle a dash of confidence that can't be left out
A heaping serving of nagging

Seasoning so electrifying that it makes you forget all about wanting to sleep in
Cherry tomatoes that wake you right up when they pop inside your mouth

Rice fashioned into: Four bunnies, that look up at me, smiling
Far too cute, almost a shame to eat

But we can't break mother's heart
We can't leave any leftovers: My little brother and I both know this

Button soup that's been thrown together last-minute that just makes me miss
home
If you pour that carefully in a thermos that traps heat? You're good to go.

A Letter to Mata Hari: Dead at 41

Cierra Lowe-Price

I can envision your pilot,
roiling within his apartment that
mourning—despicably
frying eggs and renouncing
your conception. As if
your essence was merely insult
to his injury.

I bet you were born on Rosh Hashanah.
I bet you used a rib as a hatpin.
I bet that those twelve barrels seemed a curious affection
as they peered upon you—they say you
blew a kiss to the
firing squad.

You were then deafened by God's silence.
It was French bullets that made love to
your body for the last time.

They say you wore white gloves.
They say you kept your face to the sky.

Blood wept from your abdomen,
and still-blind gathered around its
mother. Undancing legs
curled beneath you like an impossible
chair as you birthed your first
Rorschach test. To France,
it looked like moral ambiguity.
To General Nicolai, it looked like
a breach of contract.
To your creator, it looked like
spilled ink.

Soup

Mei Caldwell

uh oh
spaghettiOs
she got up so
there goes the truth
right beneath her
the soup that spilled
she tried her best
to hide her tears
but isn't there a truth
deep in that soup?
a truth so thick
it must be hid
or the world would melt
in a pool of broth
it's a truth so thick
you look
and go
uh oh
spaghettiOs

Asian Bleeding Heart

Julie Harms



photograph taken at the Missouri Botanical Garden, St. Louis, MO

Hello

Sarah Krueger



photograph

Bouquet

Zara Konstapel

he planted seeds inside of me
roses grew in my lungs
slowly the stems crawled their way up
and the petals began embracing my heart
my body blossomed to a botanical garden
new seeds planted everyday
my lungs overtaken by blooming roses
bursting flowers like a spring day in may
and then he handed me a bouquet of dandelions
“blow and make a wish” he whispered in my ear
with his breath caressing my ear, I tried and tried
to spread the little umbrellas of the fragile flowers
but with every breath I took
my lungs fought the piercing thorns
leaving little wounds inside me
every breath leaving me more scars

The Ceremony

Julie Harms

Melting the jewelry
does not melt the giver's memory away.

Even the beads on the overpriced dress
take longer than I thought.

But the way the shimmering fabric turns from Cinderella
to cinders of lucid lava

brands a blue relief on my heart.

I no longer own anything
that he touched

except for me.



3010 Flora Avenue

Kim Hany

acrylic and latex paint on plywood



Budapest Across the Danube

Jacob Greek

photograph

Coffee With A

Alden Bader

dark roast of dubious origin,
I inhale your strength and drink
to the bottom of my mug where
there may be answers.

not the prescient grains of a sloppy brew,
but caffeinated tendrils of thought or
invulnerable ideas, borne of the morning.
I will meet you tomorrow as the sun rises
and accept your aid in my wonderings.

though I don't need you, I want you,
perhaps liquidly, perhaps licentiously.
perhaps you invoke another body and
the mind of the woman who haunts my
thoughts and reaches out with dark fingers
to touch me, the deep me,
sublevel: soul.

in this moment I forget the coffee
that brought me here. I imagine dumping
the thermos of your essence over my head
in all possible excess, immune to your heat.
no cream or sugar, you're the perfect shade
and sweetness already.

This Dream

Tarika Walton

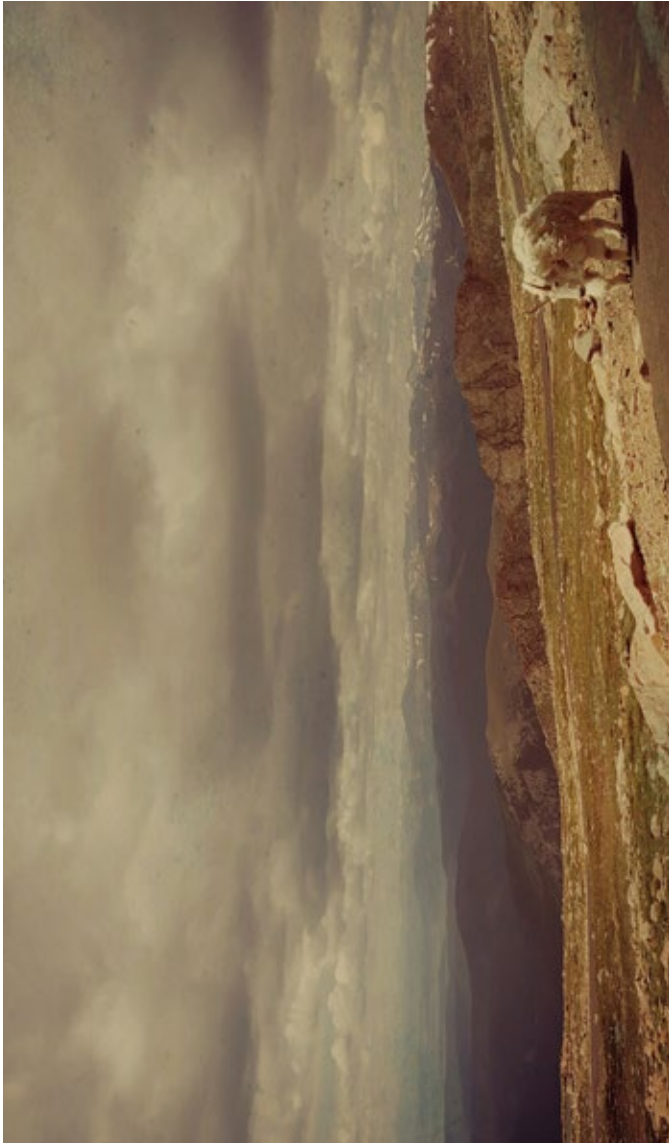
Don't wake me. I'm quite fond of this dream.
I'm a hero. I'm a damsel. I'm a loving queen.
I'm the dragon and the fire, the sword's gleam.
Please, don't wake me and break my wings.

I'm the jester. I'm the knight.
I'm the smile. I'm the fight.
I'm the angel. I'm the fall.
I know about it all.

I'm the apple. I'm the tree. I'm the drifting little leaf.
I'm the ground. I'm the sky. I'm the head that's up too high.
I'm the breeze. If you please, let me raise you up to reach.
I'm the cliff that's a little steep. I'm the one that's in too deep.

But I'm strong. I've been the muscle all along.
I'm the body. I'm the soul. I'm the midnight vigil.
I'm the lost. I'm the found. I'm the world renowned.
Most of all, I'm the one to call to deal with it all.

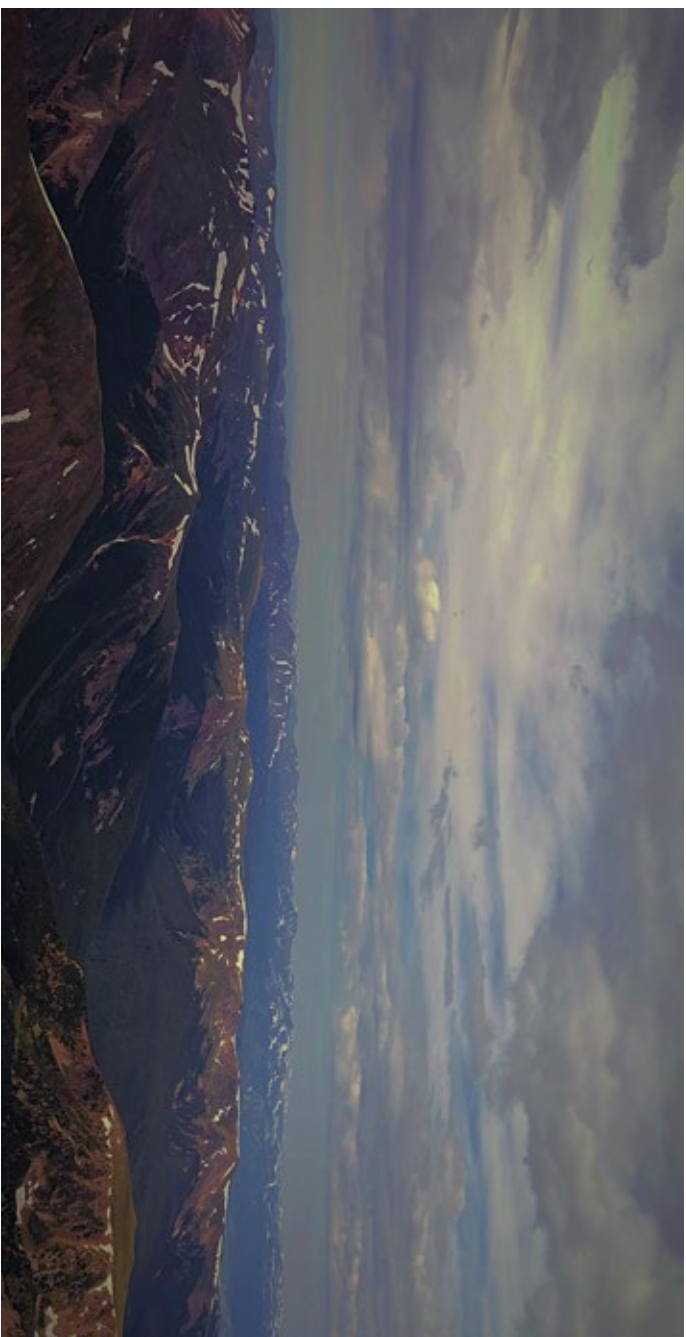
So, please, don't wake me from this dream.
It's the best I've ever seen, the best I've ever felt.
It's the highest I've ever flown without being thrown.
I invite you to join me in this dream.



edited digital photograph

MJ

Blake Hunt



photograph

14K

Blake Hunt

빈편지

Danbi Kim

아쉽게도 빈 일기장
텅 빈 봉투
쓰다가만 편지

도데체 언제까지 조금 더 간수한다고 꼭 쥐고 있을거야?

보내야지
받는이가 알지

네가 얼마나 생각해줬는가
편지 하나에 얼마나 시간을 드렸는가

보고싶어도 못 보낸 소중한 것
한두가지도 아니고

스스로 기억하는 것

전달이 되야지
너를 알게 되고
깨달게 되지

(Blank Letter)

Danbi Kim

The regrettably blank diary
Empty envelope
A letter you started writing, but didn't finish

How long are you going to tightly grip them,
Saying you're holding onto them for just a little bit longer?

You've got to send them
For your recipient to know

How much you thought of them
How much time you sank into each letter

The precious things that you couldn't send,
No matter how much you missed them
Aren't limited to one or two things

The things you remembered all on your own

Those things ought to be delivered
For them to know then understand you

Fading Blue

Bailey Henson

Morning light always looks blue to me. In movies and books, people say it's gold. It's not in my room. Maybe it's because I always wake up before the sun is actually over the horizon. Either way, my world is bathed in blue first thing every day. This particular morning is no different. My phone says 6:03 a.m., no texts yet. Tony won't be up for hours. I can hear my father, Ariel, fumbling around down the hall. I haven't called him father in years. He has to get to the store for the 7 a.m. opening. The neighborhood Muslim women are prompt; they don't like to be late to buy their dates and rice for the week. We have one of the only middle eastern markets in the neighborhood. I haven't been to the store in years, but I used to love the smell: spicy and dusty from the dried goods, slightly cold, somewhat bitter.

The ceiling in my room is so familiar. The crack in the plaster towards the corner has stretched ominously over the years, but never produced any real threat. The long room only has one window, my bed tucked into a corner next to it. Glancing to the walls, I'm met by Tony's crooked Italian grin in the picture of us from middle school. Posters from local gigs, art posters, book adverts. My dingy white walls have some character, despite the emptiness they contain.

Reaching over to my nightstand, I grab the worn pill bottle for this month. Prozac, man. Taking it dry has been a new talent I've developed because I don't want to go to the kitchen and get water while Ariel is home. My day will be sufficiently numb.

Summertime in the Bronx is hot as fuck, always. It's sticky and disgusting. I have no idea why Tony likes it. He got a job working construction while we aren't in school. I was supposed to work in summer tutoring at the community center, but I was told I wasn't a good fit after missing a few days. It was definitely my fault, but I couldn't bring myself to find motivation.

The day is going to be extra dense. Rain is falling outside my window. I can just imagine that it's warm and contributing to the overall city stench. I didn't used to be so bitter. For a while, I was actually happy. After my mother died, Ariel was never the same. We still lived in Israel then, and he hated it. Everything about our country reminded him of her. The colors, the smells, the dry heat. I barely remember it now. We moved to the Bronx when I was 6. I wasn't Israeli anymore, I was an American. I don't even remember Arabic. I hardly remember her.

I was instant messaging with my cousin last week and he reminded me of a memory I didn't know I had. We lived near an olive grove, close to my uncle's house. We went there on a family walk once. My cousins and I played tag around the trees. I can't eat olives now, they turn ashy in my mouth. My mother died only months later of ovarian cancer. Ariel decided that his past self wasn't enough to keep him going, and his only son wasn't enough for his future. We moved a year later, the process having been expedited quickly and efficiently by his grief. Over the years, my father accumulated hollow replacements for my mother: the store, the flat, his walks around the borough.

I finally get up and walk to my desk. The dim, blue glow has slowly faded into a steady stream of brighter light. Tony had texted me. "Hey, whenever you want to talk, I'd like to." This is what I had wanted to avoid. Why couldn't my life just stay the same? I had adjusted. My father was distant, my mother was dead, and I belonged to the city. I didn't need anything more than that. I locked my phone again and sat down at my cluttered desk. Stacks of books, loose papers, notebooks, pens, cups of half drunk water. My empty prescription bottles stared at me: Amari, Ezra. Take once a day by mouth, morning. The little white pills that keep me going.

I let myself wander back to the front stoop the night before. Tony had been smoking before he wandered over. He was high as a kite and I was sipping a beer. It wasn't comfortable to sit outside, even at night, but Tony's presence made me feel at ease. Ariel was asleep, and—though we were usually quiet—there was no point in him possibly waking up. We were most comfortable wherever he was not. Tony was talking about his mother, a round Italian woman who seemed to never leave the kitchen. He loved her more than anyone. She was getting older. Her other sons were all married, some with children. Tony and I were only 18, but there was an expectation for life from Tony. No one wanted anything from me. No one needed anything from me. "I just want to make her happy, ya know, Ez? My pops doesn't care, he's got his woman and his oldest son and his history. He's going back to Italy at the end of the year, ya know." He was just twittering on. His life was the only one I cared about at this point. Tony was easy. Best friends since we were in second grade—my first grade in the US—we had faced so much of life together. Or, rather, I had faced so much of his life with him.

I was sufficiently buzzed, mostly because I hadn't eaten in hours. It helped to dull the numb feeling I seemed to always carry with me. Tony had been talking for hours now. We sat near each other, our knees almost touching. I suddenly realized Tony hadn't been talking for a few minutes. When I turned to see why, he had tears in his eyes.

“Tony? What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I don’t think I’ll ever make her proud, man. I don’t think I’ll ever hold up. My family. They want traditional and tired and slow. I’ve never wanted that. God. I can’t believe I’m crying over this,” He replied, softly sobbing between words.

“You don’t have to be worried about it. It’s just me anyway.”

“I think the problem is that I don’t know what I want.”

Before I knew what was happening, Tony had taken my face in his hands. They were softer than I thought they would be. So were his lips on mine. I jerked back, alarmed. “What the fuck dude?” But the damage was done. I wasn’t quite sure if it was even real, but it felt unfamiliar either way.

I didn’t wait to see if he would say anything. I stumbled up and into the flat, finding my way blindly up the stairs. The walls spun around me and I felt nauseous. What the fuck is happening. My life was mine. I could handle it. Now my one positive constant was changing, morphing into something I didn’t know.

I took a deep breath in my desk chair. There was never a day since I’d known him that I hadn’t loved Tony. But not like this. On a whim, I grab a piece of paper and begin to scrawl out my thoughts. I used to write so often, but I haven’t had anything in my head to write down recently. Maybe doing a free write will help me clear my mind a little. I turn on some music from my phone for background comfort. My heart is racing. There is nothing I can do about last night and yet I cannot sort out why. My palms begin to sweat. All I’ve ever done is live with change until things stopped changing. Now, I’m afraid. Not the anxious, racing heart. But a painful fear.

I hear some yelling outside my window. It’s just common excitement and greetings, but it snaps me out of my revelry. The sunshine is strong now, but still coming in at a misty looking hue. I check the time: 3:07. I’ve been writing for hours with no sense of direction. I’m not even sure what I’ve been writing. There are pages of illegible handwriting on them all over my desk. I see Tony’s name at least a dozen times in one glance, but I can’t bring myself to search for context. Moving back to my bed, I stretch out and try to relax some. Hilarious, give the circumstances.

Why would anyone find me attractive in the first place? I’ve never been a good receiver of affection, just someone to fill the gap where another person could be. At least, that’s what it was like in high school. We graduated last May. I still didn’t know where I was going. My therapist in sophomore year told me I had trouble giving and receiving love because of my family situation. I could have told you that, lady. With Ariel as an example, there’s no telling how long it

will take me to find affection as a normal thing. Bad Suns is playing in my ear and the AC unit kicks on again. City noise. That's what I don't mind receiving love from. I know I could relate with Tony on different levels, but I didn't even know he liked guys. Or maybe he doesn't. Maybe he's just lonely. Maybe not. I've never talked to him about it. I know he's had flings with girls, there was that one last year. I've never been interested in dating because I find the whole idea uncomfortable, but that's never stopped me from at least considering what it would be like, secretly.

I remembered something. At our graduation ceremony, Tony had just come up to shake my hand and say his cheesy line about how our lives are about to start. He's always like that: straight cheese. But then he made me promise I'd never leave him. I remember thinking this was an off thing to say. I had zero plans anyway, but the list of things I did know I was going to do was to be Tony's best friend for the rest of my life. That constant had been there for all the times I had needed it. We people watched in Manhattan on the weekends and bummed it at the corner eating pizza almost every weeknight. We picked up groceries for Mrs. Alvarez and delivered them to her for tips every Tuesday after school. We have other friends, we just don't really care if they come or go.

The sunlight is starting to turn purple now. How have I been lying here for this long? Ariel will be closing the store for dinner soon. I didn't notice how hungry I was until just now, which is strange. I haven't had much of an appetite for a few months. I haven't done much of anything in a long time. Tony and I mostly walked or took the train into the city. Sometimes we talked; sometimes we didn't. I've gone through years without realizing time has passed. Time doesn't belong to me, though. But then, time doesn't belong to anyone. Could the time I have be mine if I made it? I need something to be mine.

I was still afraid, but I could feel a flicker in my chest. It ached a little. But it was warm.

Having Depression As a Best Friend...

Taylor Weintrop

Feels a lot like trying to have
a conversation with my sanity
and always getting put on hold.
She won't let me get a word out.
Constantly one hand around my throat
locking up my courage
ravenously devouring
what little hope I had saved.

But then comes night
and then comes sunrise.

I think she's giving me a break.
I'll start the day by
brushing my teeth
combing my hair
trying to ignore
her violent outburst
from the night before.
I'll put on my make up
concealing the dark circles
she left under my eyes
from the constant doubt
she ticks and tocks
and parades around inside
my mind.

I think I can be happy.

I can feel the sun swaddle me
yet her vexing
and venomous,
vindictive and vicious voice
violates me.
My vocabulary
vacating my brain
I can't find the words to say
"please stop
I'm begging you
just give me a break."

She is unreliable at best.
I never know when to expect
a late night insomniatic episode
or suffocating lack of motivation
when she knows
I need a functioning brain for the day.

I try to focus
on the good times when they arrive.

The days she's too preoccupied
Plotting her manipulations
to use on me another time.
It's easy to take for granted
what life outside of someone else's
hourglass feels like.



monoprint

Murder of Crows

Luna Noelle

Creation

Luna Noelle



oil on canvas

Unmake Me

Jessie Eikmann

I

No, god, don't misinterpret, I'm not asking you to erase
their wedding! Let that day commence, let him carry
her across that threshold if he dares. Just the first anniversary
in Pittsburgh. Let's start there. Let that unassuming place
hold more magic than themselves. Let them chase
each other down sidewalks drunk on their love, or tarry
in some restaurant, an empty theater. Or, should things get hairy,
should he still reach for her and whisper, "Stace?
Can we, now?" should that hot urge
boil their bodies, make him surge
over her open frame, before the merge
of his skin tucked in hers—purge
it. Compress it
accordion style,
bless him with blanks,
weave a shield
from inside
before anything—
or anyone—
can come of it.
Sometimes love's gifts are scary.
Sometimes, a scourge.

II

Or maybe, if the rewrite of that day
repulses you, there are far crueler paths;
you might allow development at first,
permit me hands and feet, a proto-brain,
a primitive heart squeezing in her dark.
Her stomach will puff up predictably,
her fingers idly resting on that mound
where I'll wait like a tumor, gaining weight

and seriousness—until two months, three months
early, suddenly a rupture:
Thanksgiving shattered by terrible screams,
or gentle December snow disturbed
by the heaving, staggering, misaligned
pains stepping on each other's heels
in their premature zeal to reveal me,
until that moment everything is pain,
the channel swollen, sticky hair
thrust forward, showing doctors
the weird color you painted
beneath my scalp.
The horror, the hush:
“She’s blue.”

III

Or, if the thing must leave its sheath of blood
and suck up air, if you insist
it live, reach in while she’s still
full, unzip those fatal fusions
that make me seethe with random rage,
spout off all the fucks I don’t give them,
won’t give anyone, until
the next hospital, the next time
I slip up and come running.

Unbirth me, god, before I can breathe.
Find a thread and pluck
hard enough to unpair and repair. Your finger-sieve
can sift out the poisoned letters, cull
combinations more holy. Just a light grip
and shift can bequeath
the anti-I a warm soul, stable brain, perfect luck,
the kind of child they could love and forgive.
Please, one expert pull
on the helix for a kid more equipped.

Is *this* what you wanted?

In Memory Of

T.L. Kirk

I notice when they're telling stories:
they all remember the good.

I only ever remember the bad.

Some evenings, when I'm lucky
– when the sun has been hidden for hours
and the clocks prepare to serve the coming day
– I remember the good, too.

But greater than this good
is my sense that, as of late,
luck has taken some other side.

So on my worst days, I hope
that as I go along in this life,
I won't remember a thing.

Foreclosure

Taylor Weintrop

A gas is defined as “a substance or matter in a state in which it will expand freely to fill the whole of a container, having no fixed shape and no fixed volume.”

So, he wondered,
does nostalgia work the same way?

He approaches the building
with blind hope
thinking maybe,
his hands can be the mortar
for the stained
and shattered memories
waiting behind the front door.
He turns the doorknob,
gripping the brass
as if the longing behind his fingertips
would be enough to patch up
the crumbling drywall of a house,
that never quite felt like home.
The smell of a foregone childhood
swirls in the living room
like a gentle dust
dancing, but more like
mocking
what he thought a
family was supposed to be.

Stained glass variation of the truth
take turns flashing in his mind.
How many lies
he wonders,
can he count
behind the smiles
in the VHS tapes.

His old bedroom felt more like a coffin.
Bareboned walls exposed
that used to be masked by
football posters and metals.
He could have sworn
at one time or another
all the trophies
and scraped knees
were more than
placeholders
for the hard times to come.
He thought he could
face the ghosts of his past,
nurse nostalgia into a body and
maybe then,
he'd stop getting visits in his dreams.

On the Act of Shunning and the Inability to Speak

Julie Harms

Early January 2014

Both of my mother's parents were reaching a pivotal point in their old age. My grandmother had a hip replacement the previous year, followed a little too quickly by brain surgery. Her past trips to my hometown of St. Louis had comprised of her sitting far in the back of church so no one would notice her ever uncontrolled bobbing head. For many years she was so inhibited by essential tremors that only Grandpa wrote to us in our birthday cards from the Golden State.

My grandma's brain surgery had placed what's commonly called "A Brain Pacemaker" in her brain, which connects to a battery powered control in her chest. By turning the power up, her tremors calmed, but there was a caveat: the pacemaker not only slowed down her tremors but also her ability of speech. Her thoughts could not come out of her mouth as quickly as she thought them, but the tremors had made her voice so choppy that no one could understand her words as her naturally twitching head threw around her jaw, and caused her to feel self-conscious and unstable. My grandma could never communicate verbally as well as she once did, so she chose to not shake, or to shake as little as possible, while she could.

Aside from the slowed cognitive connection with speech, my grandma was still physically sturdy. She was "rocking out" with her new hip, and while a guest in their Granny Flat, I even saw her cut tomatoes for BLTs with ease, something that I had not seen or thought possible before that trip. My grandma cooked lovingly, but not well. Still, she was the full homemaker for my grandpa, the pristine do-gooder wife from the fifties. My grandma Grace's one great flaw was that she worried. She worried to an extreme that I can hardly describe, and this began to unnerve my brother and I who had volunteered to travel from St. Louis in order to help them pack their belongings. They would after all be moving back to the Show-Me State after over sixteen years of living in California.

Now my grandma wasn't worried about the actual packing process; she was worried that we didn't feel appreciated enough. Every five minutes, she walked from her bedroom to the tiny kitchen to thank me for whatever I was doing.

“You just... didn’t have to—ooh... come out here to—do all this,” she said slowly, anxiously looking over my work. Her thinning dark auburn-dyed hair showed some of her scalp, and when she turned around, I could see even more clearly the spot where they’d shaved her for her surgery that past December.

“I’m glad to do it, Grandma,” I replied rather quickly, not stopping my wrapping of glass bowls. She had already said similar comments for the past two days, and every time she said anything else, I got agitated. I knew some of it must have stemmed from her feeling—in a way—useless. Her hands were still not coordinated enough to work as efficiently as mine, which helped me feel a little pity, which still warred against my agitation.

While David and I packed, my grandpa uncharacteristically kept to himself. He directed David in packing his own things, but nothing more than that. He sat out on the porch, threw balls for his youngest daughter’s dogs to fetch, and made little gestures to talk with us. I had never seen him that despondent.

The October before our visit, his driver’s license had been taken away, his dignity and independence along with it. My grandma had her license, but she lacked the confidence to drive.

My Aunt Beverly, when she was in her last years of high school, had been her father’s crutch during his first depression after losing his job. She, like my grandma, was a woman riddled with worry, and could not take the weight of another of her father’s depressions. My mom had been confiding in me for years that she wanted her parents to live in St. Louis again. So, my mother would soon be taking care of both a slowly healing mother and a father steeped in depression.

Early February 2014

Though it was my mom’s dream for her parents to live with us, at the time it was not possible. Even with my three older siblings out of the house, David and I took up two rooms of the three bedroom split level ‘70s home, and the house was in rough shape anyway. My mom found them a better place, the best home that they could ever have had, in my opinion.

Twin Oaks Heritage Pointe was only ten minutes down Highway 70 from us: a senior independent living center where my grandparents would not need assistance, but it was on hand if anything happened. My grandparents’ new apartment had white-washed walls, an adorable intimate kitchen where I knew my grandmother would reign sweetly supreme, sunset views from the

living room windows, two bedrooms, one to use as a study, and an all around warm and cozy feel. They would last for not even two months before my grandpa pulled the depression card.

My grandma, recovering quickly from her brain surgery, would have flourished in that environment. She enjoyed her own space, her own kitchen, and would have enjoyed meeting those that lived around them, but her husband held her back. In my grandpa's eyes, we'd put him away. All of our help—taking them to Walmart, the resale shop, to church, to our house, all of it—was an impersonal shuttle service to him. He couldn't see that my mom genuinely loved and cared for him, and wanted him to gain any independence he could by living at Twin Oaks. He sunk deeper into his depression, self-convinced that he wasn't wanted.

My parents began looking for a bigger house. It was late mid-March, and my grandparents had not even stayed a full two months at Twin Oaks. That May I left for a summer working in Europe, knowing full well that I would come home to a new home and new roommates. My stomach churned with discomfort.

Late Summer 2014

The moment I got home from Europe, I realized that privacy was a concept that did not move from the old house to the new. What would have been the dining room became my grandparents' study, and was situated immediately left upon entering the front door. The entrance was completely open. No fancy French doors closed them off from the rest of the house. In fact, there was also a small hallway from the back of the "study" into the back of the living room that passed by the door to the basement, and allowed easy access to the kitchen.

After the open study, to the right was the master-bedroom, my grandparents' living area, and to the left were stairs to the balcony and the three other bedrooms in the house. My parents claimed the first to the left, at the top of the stairs, and the balcony/loft was proclaimed our immediate family area, seeing as Grandma and Grandpa couldn't do stairs very well. My room was directly above my grandparents' bedroom, and my younger brother's room was directly above their bathroom.

Back in April, when I first visited the house, I was in love with the airy and open living room with the vaulted ceiling, high windows and sparkling chandelier that made the light dance all over the room. Natural sunshine flooded the space, and whirled on up into the open loft. But after

moving in my family discovered that the open loft didn't just welcome in the light, it welcomed noise from nearly every foot of the main level.

At times it was only a little annoying. Grandpa would have a tape playing loudly in his office, an enthusiastic preacher or a slew of old popular hymns. If it bothered us, we'd ask him to put on headphones, or at least turn it down. But then he would be listening to something when Dad and I wanted to watch a movie, or talking on the phone in the living room with one of his brothers, talking as loudly as he can. My dad and I would just have to frustratingly sigh with each other and wait it out until he was done. Gradually we overheard conversations we did not want to hear. My least favorite were their fights.

My grandma, who had taken care of bills and finances for all of their marriage, would be trying to talk to Grandpa about it, and he, ever impatient, would not take the time to understand her or wait for her to say all that she needed to.

"What, Gracie? What?! What are you trying to say?" he'd yell at her.

"Ben, I... the check... check IS..." she raised her voice on that last syllable that she could get out.

"WHAT?! Why can't you TALK, Gracie?"

When she failed to answer, he left her standing alone, blubbering tears combined with unfinished words as he shuffled away swiftly, cane in hand hovering over the floor into their bedroom.

When these situations happened, my mom, if she was home, would go downstairs and either comfort Grandma or confront Grandpa on his treatment of Grandma before he could retreat to their bedroom. He usually came whimpering back to Grandma, and she, faultfully loyal, would forgive him and forget it. Because every time after, her desperate sounds were always of surprise, as if she really hoped the last time had been the last time.

One of my grandpa's many phone calls with his brother consisted of him bragging, "Gracie and I pay for the rent of this house for them." *Them* being my parents. "They wanted this house, and we're paying for it for them. They have us to thank for this. If we hadn't moved in with them, they couldn't have lived here, you know! We helped Bob and Beth get a bigger house."

My dad had been sitting in the loft on the computer and overheard the entire conversation. My dad is not one to often lose his cool or show frustration towards anyone, but his father-in-law's comment took the tolerance of his wife's parents to a much more difficult level. Still, he didn't want to blow up at his in-laws, so he asked my mom to speak to her dad herself.

“Dad, Bob just overheard you saying to one of your brothers that you and Mom helped us get this house, and you know that’s not true. Bob and I did not want a bigger house; that is not why we moved here. We moved into this house because you wanted to live with us, because of your depression. We were very happy back at the Cornell house, and had no need to move besides accommodating you and Mom.”

Grandpa hardly listened past my mom’s first sentence, but exploded, “Oh! Is Bob too cowardly to tell me himself?!”

They were speaking in the study, where, like usual, my dad could hear from the loft.

I wished I had been there when he said that, so that I could have reminded him who it was who was too afraid to live at a beautiful place called Heritage Pointe, and who had begged to live with his daughter like a child.

When my grandpa was born in 1932, his mother wrote in her diary, “He has a funny nose.” It’s a nose that marks many of his children, and grandchildren. From her diary, my grandpa also learned that his mother had contemplated ending her pregnancy while she was carrying him. She already had two children, and coming out of the depression, their family did not need another added financial cost.

“My father was a little guy,” Grandpa once told me. “My mother could whip his hide, and sometimes she practically did!”

He never spoke well of his parents. Clearly his mother was a bully, and his father was a wimp, and both died when he and his siblings were in their twenties.

It took strength for my dad to not approach his boasting, ungrateful, depressed, and unpredictable father-in-law. It took a kind of self discipline that I knew my grandpa had not known for a long time, or perhaps had never known. It was then that I truly began to view my grandpa as a selfish, proud, debilitated wimp. The only difference between him and his father was that he had a wife who loved him, and still loves him.

Summer 2017

Three full years passed, and I grew more distant from my grandparents. I closed my door when I heard them talking. I avoided my grandma’s search for love from her granddaughter. I played my music loud above their own bedroom when I began to hear any arguments between them, especially when I heard more of grandpa’s accusatory words: “You don’t know the Bible like I do!” or, “Gracie, I’m not hungry, I don’t want breakfast!” and,

“I’m sick of Beth pushing me around.” As my grandma’s ability to speak waned, she had grown more silent, unable to rebuttal at all. She just sat there and took it. And I wonder if she thought by doing so that she was still a good wife. I could see her, sitting, turned around in her office chair, left there because she couldn’t walk to the bedroom as quickly as grandpa could. She had begun to slow down in more ways than one.

I became engaged that summer, and the new stage of my life began a different progression in how I treated my grandparents. As I looked forward to my own marriage, I criticized theirs, and promised myself that I wouldn’t resemble them. Jordan would never treat me as I saw my grandpa treat my grandma. I ignored Grandpa because I thought he was awful, and I ignored Grandma because like Grandpa, I began to have little patience to hear what she wanted to say but wasn’t able to.

Two weeks after my engagement my grandpa tried to commit suicide.

It happened after a disagreement with my mother. He left the house in 100 degree weather, and started walking down the main road behind our home; he was hoping the heat would kill him. My mother didn’t know he’d left the house until nearly an hour later, when a stranger brought him home.

He promptly told my grandma that he loved her but didn’t want to live anymore. Locking himself into their separate bathroom stall, he held his head over the toilet bowl for hours. Grandma panicked and called my mom, but neither of them could do anything except beg him to unlock the door. For three hours he cried into the toilet that he felt was his way out.

I can’t remember how long my mom waited. I wasn’t there, I was somewhere in my own world, clueless and not caring. I came home in the middle of the conflict, and at the time didn’t know what to do. And even now, I can hardly remember how I felt when my mom told me. Was I relieved when she told me he couldn’t bring himself to actually do it? Was I hurt that he felt so unloved, so unneeded? Was I even a little guilty? Did my ideas of him, my aversion to him, make him lock his bathroom door?

I didn’t see my grandma until that next family gathering, whatever the excuse was. When Jordan and I arrived, she was there at her desk, sitting quietly, scrolling through her facebook. She turned around to say a stuttering: “Heh-lo—,” but she couldn’t get my name out. I walked right past her to my sisters, my brothers, the little niece and newborn nephew. I was drawn by the youth and disgusted by the excess of age and worry I knew I would find in my grandma. Jordan held back and gave her a hug in my stead.

Late June 2018

Even though my brother's new girlfriend was away in China, my family invited all of her family over for a barbeque. At the dinner table, with many people I had just met, I sat alone but content because Jordan was out of town on a shoot for his job. We were all eating, making small talk, my grandparents so far silent at the left end of the table, when out of the blue my grandpa asked me, "So Julie, is Jordan taking care of you?"

Everyone fell silent.

After a moment of shock and embarrassment that he would even ask such a question, I answered, "Of course, Grandpa, you know Jordan takes great care of me."

I thought he was going to reply with something silly like, "Oh, I know that, just playing with you..." Instead he shot back, "Well if he doesn't, you tell me—you let me know, okay?"

To my right sat a couple who had just met me, who didn't know my now husband, and the last thing a new wife wants is for anyone to think of her husband badly. And here was my grandpa forcing me into such a situation. To my grandpa's last comment, I could only reiterate, almost sarcastically, that Jordan takes the best care of me possible, and I take care of him too. I had wanted to add: "And Grandpa do *you* take care of Grandma?"

My grandpa was of the generation of men who never *needed* their wives, but who were always helpless without them. To this day, I've only seen my grandpa lift a finger to help my grandma a sad handful of times. He saves his strength for writing notes from his personal Bible studies and correspondence letters through snail-mail.

In the morning my grandma is the first out of their bedroom, robe on, two curlers on the top of her head, starting the coffee maker and making sunny-side-up eggs and toast. She'll do this even if Grandpa won't be out of their room for another thirty minutes or for another two hours. While I still lived there, my morning needs would often collide with her usual routine. She would feel ever in my way while I also made my own breakfast in the kitchen, and I would try to ignore her, especially if she asked me questions, about school, or about my then new boyfriend, Jordan, or about him while we were engaged. If I had to answer, I would do so quickly, but then move on with my business. Then my grandpa would emerge from the room, walk in a rushed manner across the living, holding his cane, letting it float just above the floor, enough to render it of no actual use; and then once in the kitchen, he would dramatically collapse into *his* chair at the head of the table. Grandma

would silently bring over his egg, his toast, and coffee, and if it was cold, he just wouldn't eat it. She'd take the sign, reheat all three in the microwave, moving slowly, as surely as she could across the kitchen, and then she'd sit down and eat with him, her food still cold.

This was their routine when they first moved to St. Louis in 2014. And even though Grandma—more feeble than ever—should not be making so much effort for her husband, for her own physical sake, she still risks her unsteady footsteps.

I knew that what my grandpa had said at the dinner table was for his own image. He wasn't trying to make small talk. He was trying to show the new friends at the table that he was the patriarch of the family, the one people came to for help—that I could depend on him to get “revenge”—what even?!—on Jordan in case I needed it. I was so furious with the situation that I completely put it out of my head, until a week later when Jordan, who had not been there, brought it to my attention that my brother Rob and his wife Hope had almost yelled at my grandpa then and there at the table too. I hadn't thought that any of my siblings would have been embarrassed or frustrated for me as well, but they were. They, usually present only at the family gatherings, saw Grandpa's staged side, but had only heard from me about how he treated Grandma.

Being married gave me a new perspective on my grandparents. I wasn't there to see them as often, I gradually distanced myself even more than I had while living with them. And every time I was over there, whether eating at the table with them, or noticing them as I walked in and went straight to my parents, I found myself staring with a confused mind at my grandma's inability to say anything for herself anymore. I found myself hating the oldness. No, more like hating them *for* their oldness, as if their confusion is their own fault and not the natural effect of the aging bodies they have to live in.

October 2018

My mom had sent out the text, a reminder that we would be celebrating my grandparents' birthdays the next day, and we would all be over at the house at 4:00 p.m.

I thought about my grandma opening a card that I didn't want to buy, and reading words that I didn't want to say, and her feeling loved, a feeling that I didn't want her to feel. It feels cold to write that. But it's the truth. I could see loving, happy tears gracefully, like her beautiful name, falling on her cheek, her mouth open, wanting to speak, to say so clearly, *Thank you*, but the message would not be able to come out. I would see a thankfulness in her eyes

that would overwhelm and frighten me, frighten me into feeling the love that I should have, and should have always had, for her.

Jordan and I never made it to my grandparents' birthday celebration. That morning we woke up and immediately went to urgent care due to Jordan being in excruciating pain. When we got home, Jordan was incapacitated from the pain, and I couldn't bring myself to leave him. I was relieved that this would keep me away from celebrating two people that I did not enjoy. I didn't hesitate to text my sister, my sister-in-law, and my mom, that we wouldn't be going, that Jordan was too uncomfortable. And as an afterthought, I told my mom to tell my grandparents that we're sorry to not be there. A lie from me, but not from Jordan. He genuinely regretted that his pain was keeping me from my family. Unlike him, I had been all too eager to say we wouldn't go.

"You can still go, you know," Jordan said an hour later, after eating and letting the pain medicine kick in.

"No, I need to stay here with you," I replied, but I needed to justify it more. "Besides," I added, "I already texted Laura, Hope, and Mom that we aren't going."

Jordan nodded his head, "Alright, I just wanted to make sure you knew you could still go and be with them, even for a short time."

A short time. Perhaps that's all I will have with them now. And the conviction haunts me. My mother knew how I felt about her parents living with us. She noticed my every aversion to my grandma, every roll of my eyes toward my grandpa. Toward *her* parents.

Once, years ago, she asked me, "Is this how your children will treat me?"

To which I could only reply, "Mom, you aren't your parents."

Walk

Sean Scott

The man woke to the sound of his dog whining. “Do you need to go outside, girl?” He reached over and touched her head gently. “Ok, come on, let’s go.” He rose from his bunk and went to the door. He picked up his rifle, which was sitting in its usual place next to the door, and opened the door slowly, peeking out the crack between the door and the jamb.

“I don’t see any bears this morning,” he said to no one but the dog. He opened the door and walked out onto the porch. The dog followed him and then continued on down the steps and into the yard. She was walking slowly, even slower than usual. The man could tell her pain was getting worse—much worse than last month. “I’m sorry you’re hurting, girl, I wish I could take the pain for you.”

The man sat in the porch chair looking at nothing in particular waiting for the dog to finish. As he sat there, he decided that today was the day to go over to the mountain. He went back inside and packed his bag and threw it over his shoulder, then he picked up his rifle and headed back outside.

The dog was lying in the shade half asleep, but she woke up as the man closed and latched the door to the cabin. She watched the man approach and started to get up as the man got close. “Come on, girl,” the man said. “We have a long walk.”

The dog followed the man slowly. It wasn’t obedience, she would have followed if he had said nothing. Maybe it was habit, as she had been following him for almost twenty years, or perhaps it was love. Who can say why a dog follows.

The man walked slowly down the hill toward the creek, the fall leaves crunching under his feet. He winced as he walked through a spider web, and then struggled to get it off his face. As he reached to pick up a stick to protect himself from other webs, he remembered all of the spring days he sat on the porch and threw sticks out into the yard for the dog to chase. He would throw the stick dozens of times and the dog would dutifully bring it back. Eventually the dog would tire and lay down in the cool grass, chewing on her stick as if it were a delicious bone.

The creek had standing water in it, but it wasn’t running, since it had been a few weeks since it rained. The man stopped in the middle of the creek and stood on a large rock, looking back at the dog approaching the creek. She stopped as she got to the bank and looked down. In the past, she would have

jumped down onto the flat rock with the man, but today she stopped and looked. She walked up the creek a few paces, then back down a few, looking for an easier path down.

The man walked over to her and sat on the bank of the creek. He reached around the dog's neck and pulled her head into his lap. "You're a good girl," the man said to her as he stroked her head. They sat there for a while, the dog remaining completely still, while the man continued to caress her head.

"You're the best dog ever," the man said.

They sat there for a few minutes until the man reached back and put his hand under her tail and picked her up. He carried her up the creek a few yards and put her down by a clear pool of water. "Are you thirsty, girl?" he asked as he put her down next to the pool. He wished he could carry her the entire way to the mountain. But he knew he couldn't, she was just too heavy. The dog walked into the pool and began to drink. The man stood and watched her patiently as she wandered around the pool drinking the cool, clear water. She eventually got her fill and approached the man. He reached down and rubbed her ears, and then headed down the creek, picking out the high spots, while the dog followed.

The sun was filtering through the leaves making the forest much darker than it had been while they were still in the yard. It was a hot day, hotter than normal, but while the forest blocked the sun, it also kept in the humidity. The man brushed the sweat out of his eyes and continued walking.

He finally reached a spot in the creek that provided an easy way up the hill. He started up the hill, zig-zagging slowly so the dog could keep up with him. Before he reached the top, the forest ended and a large grassy field appeared.

The man and the dog had been here many times before. They often crossed this field when they were hunting. He remembered bringing her up here the first time she saw snow. As they cleared the trees, the dog saw the large open field of white; she took off running through the snow. She ran directly away from the man, then turned to run in big circles. The man watched her for several minutes and then called her. She made one more lap and ran back to him. That was the day he decided she was the best dog ever. Most puppies would have ignored a call, but she never ignored him. It was as if she wanted to be near him as much as he wanted to be near her.

A fly landed on the man's face and brought him out of his trance. He brushed it away and began walking again. The grass was taller than the man's waist. He left a trail of bent stalks, but the dog still got lost from view. The stalks waved in the breeze, but the movement of the grass caused by the dog could

still be easily seen. "I'm over here, girl," the man said. He stopped walking and called her as she continued her slow progress through the grass.

As the dog approached, the man sat down in the grass and called her. She quickened her pace as much as she could and laid down next to the man. They sat there for a while so the dog could rest again. But it wasn't long before the gnats made it uncomfortable for both man and dog. The man stood and looked toward the other side of the field. "Come on, girl," he said. "Let's keep moving."

The man and dog continued down the other side of the hill toward the lake, stopping occasionally to rest. The sun was high in the sky by the time they reached the lake. The man walked along the bank slowly as the dog followed him. He stepped onto the dock and walked out to the end. He dropped his bag, laid his rifle on the dock, and sat down, his legs hanging over the edge of the dock.

He opened his bag and took out a small bundle. He moved the bag away and laid the bundle on the dock, where he unwrapped it to reveal a stick with fishing string and a hook, and several minnows. The man baited the hook and dropped it into the water.

He loved to fish. He and the dog had come here often. Usually, the dog would jump into the water and swim while the man was fishing. Of course, this always made it harder to catch a fish, but the man didn't mind. Eventually, the dog would get tired and come up on the dock and give the man a chance to catch a fish.

But today the dog didn't go swimming. She laid on the dock next to the man and tried to sleep. The pain seemed to come and go. She would sleep for a while and then half-awaken with a quiet yelp, only to quickly fall back asleep again.

The man pulled the hook in and threw it back out again. Normally, fishing was just something to do while he sat on the dock and enjoyed the view of the mountain on the other side of the lake. But today he really wanted to catch a fish.

He continued to cast and pull the hook back in until he finally caught a small lake trout. He cut the head, tail, and fins off and cleaned it out. He wrapped the filets and string up in the cloth and threw what he had cut off into the lake.

He put his bag and rifle in his rowboat and then helped the dog get in, before he climbed in and untied the boat. The man paddled across the lake toward the mountain. He paddled slowly, like he wasn't in any hurry. So, even though the lake wasn't very big, it took him a while to get across. As he reached

the bank, he heard a flock of geese fly overhead. The dog was looking up expectantly. "Not today, girl. It's getting late. We need to keep moving."

The man started up the mountain trail, with the dog following behind. He walked the trail for about a mile until he found the cairn that marked the spot where he needed to head into the forest. He built the cairn several years ago. He and the dog came up here and found just the right spot together.

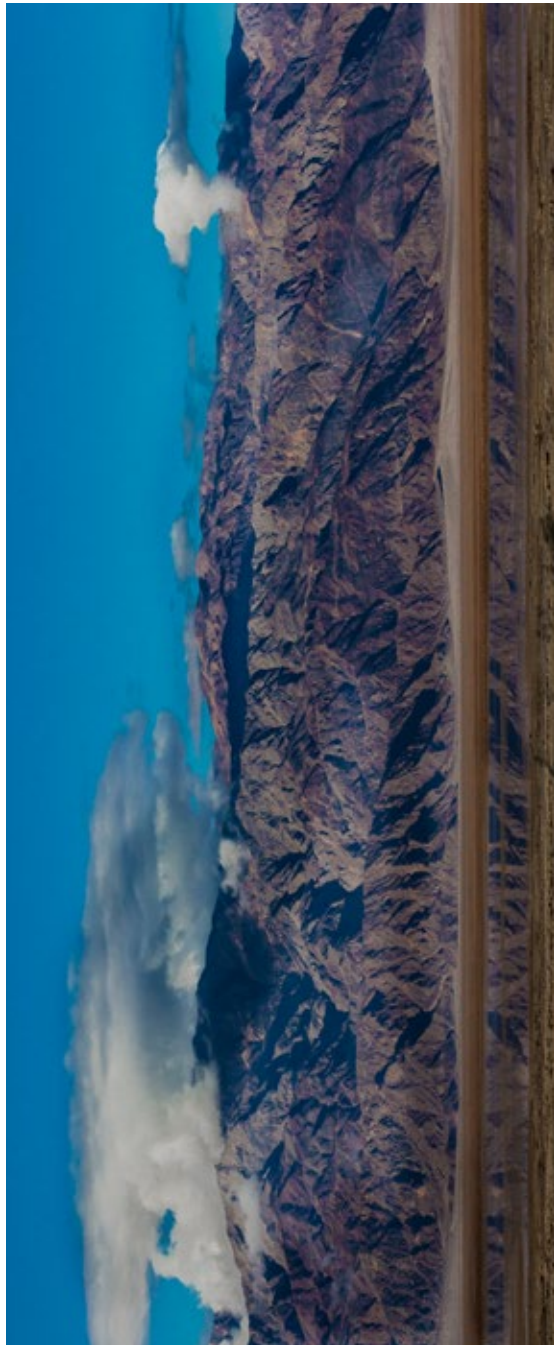
The man picked up another stick, remembering his encounter with spiders in the forest near his cabin. He headed into the forest, following the blazes on the trees he had made years before. The last cairn was in a clear area under a large oak tree. The man sat down next to the cairn and looked down at the lake. His eyes found the dock and then scanned up the hill. He could see his cabin, a small wisp of smoke still coming out of his chimney.

"Look, girl, there's the cabin, right there," the man said pointing. "Isn't this perfect?" He pulled the dog in and hugged her. "You're the best dog ever," he said. He laid his rifle on the ground and opened his bag. He gently opened the bundle containing the fish and cut it into pieces. He held a piece in front of the dog's nose and she gently ate it from his hand. He continued to feed her until the fish was gone.

"Let's just sit for a while, huh, girl?" the man asked. He sat there, petting the dog and rubbing her ears as she laid next to him with her eyes closed and her head in his lap. She was a good dog. A brave dog. The man wished they could be together forever. But they couldn't. He knew that. It wouldn't be fair.

The man put his fishing gear back in his bag and then got up slowly. The dog was still lying on the ground, her eyes closed. The man threw his bag across his shoulder, and grabbed the rifle. He took aim and squeezed the trigger. The shot rang loud in his ear, and echoed all around him. He stood there for what seemed like an eternity, with the echo reverberating in his mind.

The man looked down at the dog's body and was glad she was no longer in pain. But he would feel the pain of her loss for the rest of his life. He had managed to take her pain on himself after all.



Death Valley's Mirror

Julie Harms

photograph



The Missouri River Drowning

Julie Harms

photograph

Pondering Nature's Mirror

Amy Kenny

Murky and full of life, the pond converses with nearby oak trees through the thick air. I wonder what they're saying? It is the language of the wind, of shaken leaves and shivering grass; of minuscule water's form with tinier waves, licking and brushing soft earth with whispered gurgles and pops. I don't know this language. It is foreign to me.

There are millions and millions of gallons of water on this planet, and only the tiniest fraction of it is freshwater. However clouded this collection of liquid before me seems, it is drinkable. Rare. Precious. Yet, these few within the few saltless droplets found their way to the middle of a continent on the top of a hill to land beside an even larger conglomeration of this same rare liquid, only to be set upon by me and my prying eyes. It's entirely too hot for spending time outside, but here I am, staring at a puddle next to its mother.

I hate the heat. Born in February, I like to joke that as a winter baby, I naturally prefer the cold. A more truthful description would be that I hate the feeling of sweat under my arms and breasts, drops slowly racing down my back. When it snows, sleets, and hails, the cold has the decency to slowly eke through my clothes and settle into my muscles. I can rid myself of it quickly; shrug off nature's veil, the temperature she bestows on us, that covers the outdoors from the safety of my controlled home. I can cuddle under blankets with pets and spark flames in my belly with sanitized sustenance. Maybe it's the humidity I don't like rather than the temperature itself. Whatever it is that makes you sweaty the instant you open the door. There is no escaping that temperature, it follows you wherever you run. The sun's heat is a rude, uninvited guest. It follows your escape from sunlight into our sheltered habitats. It doesn't respect the clear boundaries we superior humans have made. And we must be superior if we have chosen to abandon our origin to create our own worlds within the world. Superior, or supremely foolish. With this heat, I'm surprised this tiny world I've found hasn't sizzled out.

As big as my hand, the puddle's shallow depth shows me little pieces of dust and algae, and deeper still are those microorganisms. Small and cylindrical, or no more than what seems like squiggles on an abstract painting. Tendrils reach out, find the limit of the rain water's edge, then glide back. For a moment, I'm mesmerized by the miniature ecosystem. How much bigger I feel: bigger than the world; this world. Before I return to the ponderings of my universe, our planet, and a single person's suffocating irrelevance in it. I'm

careful not to lean too close, lest any of my hair scar the puddle's skin.

When I was younger, the day after a rainstorm produced a minefield of puddles from our yard to the bubbling creek behind us. Saturday came. My day for playing. Carefree and smiling. I plunge my little rubber boots into one puddle. A fine spray accompanied the SPLOOSH as my foot penetrated the water's surface. Delight. I continued for what felt like hours to my small mind, traveling across the water. Inverted island hopping. My journey ended in the creek splashing and stomping through the fluid's form. How many ecosystems, lives, did I snuff out with my oblivious fun?

"Don't do that, it's dirty!"

"That's not lady-like."

"You're getting dirt everywhere!"

Father. Grandmother. Teacher. Friend. I had no problems with dirt, mud, grass. Nature's makeup. Yeah, there's dirt. So it's dirty. But that's nature. Where I began was not where I stayed; I was not taught to embrace, explore, connect to nature. But I learned. Scrub it away. I avoid getting dirty. Unclean.

"Good girl. You're so well behaved."

That was the first and last time I played in puddles. Because that is what I was supposed to do; I am supposed to do.

I see this puddle now and no longer see the carefree fun from my childhood. I've been processed and spat out. Molded into uniformity. Now, instead, I see dirty shoes and mopping floors. The cosmetics from the earth are not allowed past the threshold. Our threshold. Into the human world we've set so far apart, yet just a wall away.

Plants, animals, and earth connect to make a loop that never ends. Isn't that the point? Aren't humans animals? If we are not connected to nature, then what does that make us? Removed. Separate. Unnatural. Foreign. I don't like where my mind is taking me, but I can't stop the conclusion being drawn. We try so hard to maintain this sterile utopia for ourselves, but the truth, my truth, is if this separation is so stark and irreparable, then we are the ones that should be removed. Nature began. Nature continued. We appeared and demanded she bend to our will. Nature refused. She bristled and blew sharp winds across her plains and oceans. And we retaliated by attacking her core, killing her creatures. We use the carcasses of our retaliation to build our little box worlds on her face, and continue to demand from her. What right did we have? What right do we have now? Don't we all want to live happily, comfortably? Why must we stand opposed at all?

Growing up, I thought if water wasn't completely clear, with nothing visible in it at all, it was dirty, dangerous, bad. Sterility was the norm, but nature

denies this human construction, hiding from whence we came. Nature refuses to be tamed or scrubbed away. There is no clean, there is only nature and once scrubbed, she continues underneath.

The smaller the water's surface, the harder it is to see your reflection. Large, still, clear water reflects. Small, shivering, murky water detracts; it seems to swirl and distort any image it could have given. Without the purity of our man-made water, but lacking the grime to create a liquid abyss, what will my puddle show me? Will I see myself in it? But what do we have in common? The puddle lays on the ground, immobile in the free, expansive unknown, and I will retreat once again into my boxes with my air conditioning, clean floors, and transparent water. It speaks the language of wild winds and drifting changes, but all I hear are trickles of the wind's small waves and an echo of a tree's leaf rustled. I'm too far gone, too far removed to understand this original, honest, raw speech. Maybe once, when I could delight in nature's splendor, I could have learned their tongue, but not anymore. Not now. My growth ebbed and flowed back; low tide became lower until dried up, and I've left the natural setting I began in. The puddle is dusty and only slightly clouded, but I couldn't see my reflection anyways.

My refrigerator has a water dispenser in the freezer door. I like it because the water is always cool, fresh, and clear. A few days ago, the filter broke. I had to use the tap to fill my water bottle that day. My sister texted me later the next day saying she had replaced it. Happiness erupted at the return to my spotless routine. The first thing I did when I came home was snatch a glass and fill it from the fridge. Something was wrong, very wrong. The water was clear, but it wasn't. Pure, but flawed. Once my haven of crystalline liquid, now it held grey-blue bubbles in its imperfect form. This was not the same as before. The glass sat on the counter, and I rested my head, watching its contents. I stared at that cup, as clear particles whizzed upwards, wondering how bad it would really be if I drank it. What damage could this glass of lackluster liquid do when its twin was so revered. It is still pristine, right? We have scrubbed the clouded, dirty grime from water's very essence. It is no longer of nature. Now it is of humanity. I didn't drink it.

Fumes

Nicole Newman

"...We will be arriving at Parkland Street in approximately fourteen minutes. Our subway is currently on schedule. Your membership guarantees a timely arrival. We thank you for your patronage."

The seats surrounding me were a deep, plush crimson with a velvet texture that reminded me of castle tapestries. They faced each other in an orderly fashion separated only by three and a half inches. The details reflect approximation, luxury. You really get what you're paying for here. The city has become extremely overpopulated with varying pollutants, and not just the thick smoke that billows in the sky from the industrial district. There's the people, too. Ever since the biome collapsed, they arrived in waves. Desperate for work, dirt poor. Relatively unskilled. The public transit that was an unavoidable part throughout my daily trek became an increasingly nauseating experience as it filled up beyond capacity with sweaty, lost workers without a clue of where they needed to go. They are notorious for ruining the public transit system, often riding without paying, some without a clue of where they were going. I would even try to wake up an extra hour early in an attempt to catch a less crowded carriage. It didn't work.

My job is among the most prestigious. So, I caved and purchased the deluxe transit membership. The membership includes unlimited access to carriages that were dry-cleaned every two stops, complimentary bottled refreshments, and a guarantee of privacy since statistically less than 1 percent of the city can afford it. However, even this was beginning to change. Once or twice, men in suits identical to mine would enter the same carriage. A curt nod, to acknowledge each other's upper class position. But even this was a rare occurrence.

The grotesque scene of the industrial district flashed by rapidly through the singular window across from my seat. It's disgusting how much it's expanded. Disgusting. I sighed with the comfort of knowing that here in this glowing, concealed carriage, I was cut off from that world, and they were all cut off from me.

The carriage smoothly halted to the upcoming stop.

"We have arrived at Section 8 of the Industrial District. The doors will be closing in approximately two minutes. We will be arriving at Parkland Street in approximately nine minutes."

Only two more stops. Just as I lay my head back to drift off, I am startled to see a woman hesitantly walk through those pristine steel doors, just

as a rat would scurry into a kitchen. Her clothes were covered in ash and contrasted greatly with my tailored uniform. Her face gleamed with the sweaty excrement of labor. She collapsed into the seat adjacent to mine, breathing loudly. I could not differentiate her from an unwanted stray dog. There were strict legal penalties put in place for riding these without the membership, but the recent uprisings have made police presence in places like these scarce. Too busy fighting the masses with gunfire to be monitoring the transit systems. Besides, I'm sure their thought process is the same. We have more than enough animals in the cages. It is more cost effective to just start eradicating the problem before it begins.

Is she even aware that she doesn't belong here? Almost as unexpectedly as this woman's entrance, the doors sealed shut as if they hadn't sensed this grand discrepancy, and we were en route to Parkland Street. She peered around aimlessly. Our eyes met and I could feel my face twisting into a frown I didn't try to conceal. She held eye contact. Round, tired orbs of black surrounded by etchings, like drawings in sand. She looked slightly on edge.

Suddenly, the carriage jerked in a rough fashion. The chandelier above our heads flickered and flashed until the tiny glass flames dissipated completely. The only light beamed from the window behind the woman's head casting sporadic shadows around us.

"We apologize for this unforeseen inconvenience. The cause for our power outage is being thoroughly examined. Your membership guarantees the most timely arrival in the city. We thank you for your patronage."

Unbelievable. Of course, power outages around the entire globe were a commonality nowadays. But it was extremely rare here. I scowled at nothing in particular, until my eyes fixated on the woman. She was still examining me. Even her eyes started to resemble a dog, a sad puppy without a clue of what's happening. Her mouth opened as if she wanted to speak, but for whatever reason she didn't. The cool streams of air shut off and hot, foul traces of the industrial district began seeping in the carriage. I tapped my foot in agitation.

"We apologize for this unforeseen inconvenience. The cause for our power outage is being thoroughly examined. Your membership guarantees the most timely arrival in the city. We thank you for your patronage."

The fumes were entering fast, stifling me. Her eyes darted around now and she whispered something in a foreign tongue. I could feel the flow of my breathing becoming less balanced. I wasn't used to the exposure of these harsh chemicals that this woman probably inhales on a daily basis. Particles tickled my throat. I stifled a cough and felt my eyes water, a storm in my throat. This attempt to stifle only lasted a minute more until I couldn't hold my composure and began to violently cough into the arm of my suit. Great, this will most

definitely damage the sleeve. The smell was overpowering now. My cough was beginning to sound intrusive even to me, and the woman was now peering at me with a frightened expression. She zipped her weathered handbag open and began fumbling around for something. Is she going to take advantage of my compromised position of illness to rob me? It's certainly happened before, it has...

"We apologize for this unforeseen inconvenience. The cause for our power outage is being thoroughly examined. Your membership guarantees the most timely arrival in the city. We thank you for your patronage."

She continues digging around in that abyss of a purse, never breaking eye contact with me. My coughing fit continues to escalate in intensity, and my heart begins to beat faster from the sheer lack of clean air. She mutters something to me, and I push myself further back in my seat, repulsed by everything. I think I hear something metallic hitting another item in her bag.

"Do not come near me," I manage.

The carriage suddenly shoots forward and the chandelier lights blaze back to life like an explosion. It's disorientating. The sudden change in speed causes my entire body to jerk uncomfortably to the left. The woman, so plump that she remains unaffected by the movements, is still staring at me with increasing alarm. The particles still burn in my throat and I fight to force them out of my body. I cannot breathe. I clench my throat and gasp as hot whips of panic wash over me. She is pulling something from her bag now. She is probably going to hurt me in what she perceives as defense. At this point, my contorted gasps sound frightening even to me.

"Stay back..." I wheeze.

There are tears in her eyes.

The carriage has now stopped, as smoothly as it always does.

"We have arrived at Parkland Street. The doors will be closing in approximately two minutes..."

She slowly rises. There is no way that she actually lives on Parkland Street. There's simply no way. My coughing has finally subsided, and I avert my eyes to the ground, incredibly annoyed at the entire situation. She stops in front of me, and I force myself to meet her eyes, glaring. She swiftly extends me the item from her purse and exits the carriage. I am in such a daze that I do not immediately register what she has handed me.

I examined it in my hand as if it were something fragile. It was a handkerchief. A type of shame I had never felt caused me to perspire profusely. And even though I knew that there was no one I needed to hide from anymore, I buried my face in the cloth. It was as sweaty as hers was.

358 Stewart Drive

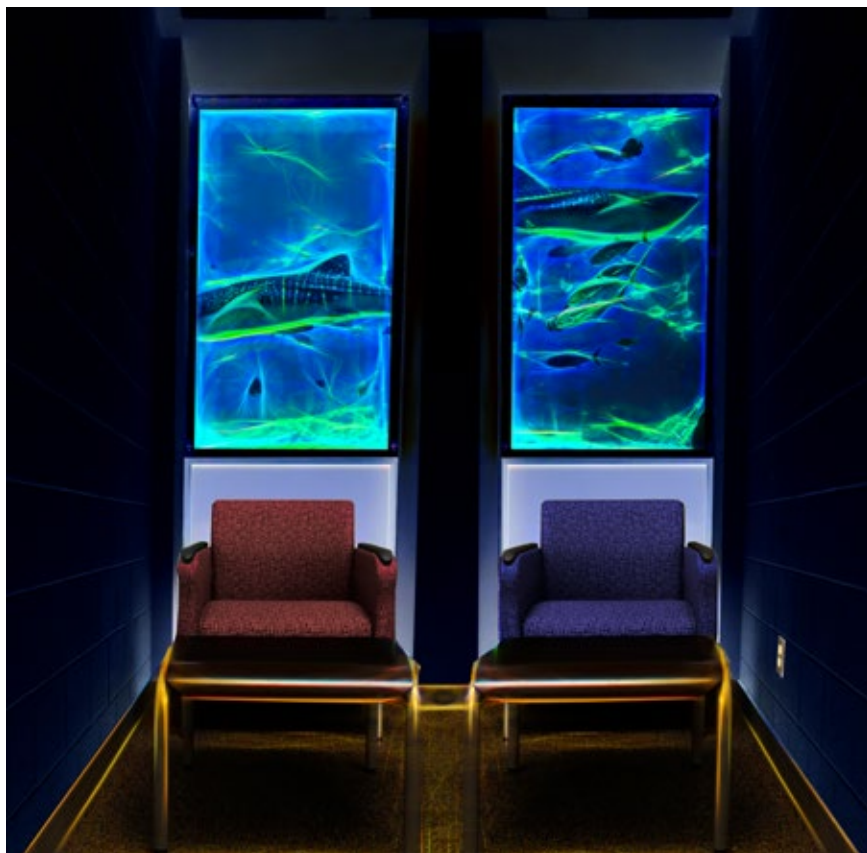
Kim Hany



acrylic and latex paint on plywood

Glow Fish

David Maczynski



edited photograph

The Writer's Bittersweet Sonata

Amy Kenny

Glowing screen,
with small fans whirring
beneath the smooth keys
I click and clack; tap across.

My fingers prance atop letters
flowing into words before my eyes.
Lightweight and thin; cold metal on my skin
melts into a relaxing heat resting on my thighs.

I flit between tabs, paper, and back again.
1:13—the time of dry eyes and cold toes and ringing silence.
Back straightened through pops and cracks, I continue
clicking keys and composing my mandated inspiration.

Self-Portrait With Broken Earphones

Jessie Eikmann

I hear clicking over the bass in my right ear. I wince and yank the bud out. Three blown speakers this year alone. I'll use the same old stopgap: turn the other ear up and pray people don't look at the stupid droop of one earbud and see a person who wants to talk to them. It won't work long. I've got maybe a week before the connection shuts off entirely and I'm left with no protection from the random burbles of human noise.

*

My memory is an unbroken scroll of this strategy going five years back and more, scrambling for my iPod and earphones the second I sit next to anyone. I can't count the times the earbuds are knotted to hell and I'm too late. I settle on a bus bench, they say hello or comment on the weather, and my shrug and "uh-huh" reply give me away. I try to sound neutral; the indignant angle of my eyebrows says *Stop right now*. By the time they ask *What's wrong with you* they can already hear the secondhand hiss of my music. They don't have time for that list. I've been keeping it since '99.

*

There are words people use for excusing people like me. My IEP gave me a few. "Trouble adjusting to new environments." "Challenges empathizing with others." And my favorite deflection, "different." Nobody ever told me why I was trapped in resource class. I knew I was too smart for this shit. I learned what autism meant from another student's presentation in eighth grade. Until then I settled on sociopath because I had all the social skills of the serial killers on TV.

*

I need a less problematic talent. Knitting. Baking. Archery. Right now it's being too honest and pissing people off. Speech therapy taught me that if I can't say things right, I'd better not dick around. Treat each interaction like fishing a spoon out of the garbage disposal. Linger too long and I get cut. People speak slower and frown. I see their eyes considering whether to give up and ask someone else for directions or to help them find the ketchup. Something not quite right about my "s." I'm thinking too hard about my tongue position, still. Dragging my vowels, still. Some people suspect I'm foreign, ask where I'm from. I say *here* because it requires fewer words than *I couldn't pronounce my own name until fifth grade*.

*

Broke another implied commandment today. Apparently one must not call another student's workshop poem "pretentious." Eight other people jumped in to explain how wrong I was. These crimes condense and sit in my body like kidney stones. They only come out when the memory leaves—which in my case means they don't. This blunder's kernel settles among others: asking why my tenth grade English teacher's haircut looked like a bird's nest, screaming *You motherfuckers keep slowing me down!* at coworkers in the dish room last year.

*

The files on me at my schools and jobs are not kind. Some teachers and bosses try to be. I sit in sparse, windowless rooms for mediations. They ask about my medications. They say words like *tact* as if I know what that means. It strikes me that *tact* isn't that different from *tacit*. The sifting out of that troublesome "I." I don't need soft voices and counselors. Just once I'd like someone to look in my eyes and tell me the best thing to do is stop talking.

*

I memorize inflections in songs so well I can fill in the missing part when an earphone goes. I remember when Britney Spears' voice does a flirtatious flip, when David Byrne waxes paranoid, when Bob Dylan goes full slide whistle. In spoken voices I recognize two tones only: the voice my dad uses when he screams at me for an hour, and his syrupy voice the next day when he says between drags on his cigarette that he loves me and won't do it again.

*

I plug in my earphones, press play, and hear nothing. If I hold the cord up like a TV antenna, I get a dim impression of what's supposed to be playing in one ear. At least I can buy new earphones. I'd rather have new ears. Years of trying to tweak the cord in the jack and still getting distortion. Scratches over words, no context. I can't even hear how my own voice sounds. At what point do I accept that all I'll ever hear is static? At what point do I choose silence?

Thursday

Roger Villarreal

Another 100 degree day
as I sit in the old, worn-out wine chair next to the window
The first few drops of rain
that we've had in ages
tap the glass
and all I want is to sleep.

I want to sleep
but there's a mountain of laundry that needs to be washed
There's a chicken breast in the fridge
that needs to be cooked
The a/c needs to be turned off
The ceiling fans need to be turned on
The electricity bill needs to be paid.

I want to sleep
but my paper check for nine dollars
needs to be deposited
I'm supposed to study for an exam
I'm supposed to graduate
I'm supposed to be learning Japanese.

I want to sleep
but the book next to me keeps asking to be read
The front door's knob has fallen off
and needs to be fixed
The toilet needs to be cleaned
The car needs more work
The music needs to be turned down.

I want to sleep
but there's vodka
and cheap beer in the kitchen to drink
There are knots in my hair
that others want me to comb

There are songs
to be hummed
There's a woman to yearn for
There's a painting that needs finishing
There are poems to be typed.

I want to sleep
but I have to help with my father's work
I have to climb ladders and pour concrete
I have to paint dining rooms and give estimates
I have to push carts and cashier
I have to grow up.

I want to sleep
but the phone won't let me
The garbage won't let me
and the heat
won't let me.

I tilt my head back

breathe

and stare
at mouse-colored clouds.

Fuck it.

Instincts

Katelynn Abraham

Listen to your gut. The gut has plans of its own, and when you choose to heed it, you find yourself stumbling down a hidden, awaiting path with the nagging question of, *Is this what was supposed to happen?* pounding your frontal lobe. Sometimes that plaguing question is the most crucial one you've failed to ask.

I didn't see my uncle during that last visit, and I don't recall being told he was in town. He worked for an airline that relocated him often and at that point he was stationed in Texas. When the phone call came the details didn't matter much. His flight landed in Texas near noon. Between then and the time that a random passer-by, who decided to take a closer look at my uncle sitting in his chair, alerted security, his heart stopped beating. They dialed the last number called on his phone, his twelve-year-old daughter, and made the pronouncement. When the news reached me, the details didn't matter much. I was twelve, my sister thirteen. She and I were sitting on the couch in the living room. Our bedtimes were approaching and our parents were due home soon. Being the only family in Missouri, she called my sister, who had the chance to say the two words *AJ's dead* before my parents walked through the door and took the phone. He had a heart condition that he never burdened his wife with. A condition he abandoned. A condition that won his life.

My family and I performed a prayer in my cousin's living room a few days before the funeral. I sat on the ground next to my mother, my sister beside me. Friends and family gathered around us on the couches or standing against the walls. Everyone held a rosary; mine was pink and white, the crucifix a plastic pale pink. I read from a thin book that looked like a pamphlet. I read it with everyone else, our dismal voices softly reciting meaningful words that had no meaning to me. After every section, we'd roll our fingers to the next bead and continue until we touched the last. My cousin and her mother were across from me in front of the TV. They sat on pillows, only their knees touching. After we finished, and everyone dispersed around the house, my aunt hunched at the dining table and began to cry. Her daughter hugged her, my mother sat beside her until she decided to remove herself from our view, into her bedroom, my mother trailing behind.

Music has always been a part of my life. It represented comfort and freedom, and it was noise I was constantly surrounded by. For my uncle's funeral service, I volunteered to play with the small orchestra my cousin practiced with on Sundays. I had attended some sessions with her before,

playing for fun, trying to keep up as I sight read the music that was placed on my stand, so I was familiar with the conductor and the musicians. During the single rehearsal I attended for the funeral service, I was struggling to learn the music fast enough, and I became frustrated because I wanted it to sound perfect for the service. Maybe out of pity, the choir woman the orchestra was accompanying offered me to sing with her. I'd never sung on stage before, let alone for an audience, and she didn't know if I could sing. But I couldn't learn the sheet music in a day, and I couldn't sit in the pews and be just another person paying their respects. On the day of the funeral, I stood beside the woman in her church robes and sang "Ave Maria." I sang the foreign words, matching my pitch to hers, stretching my neck to allow my voice to flow through the microphone hanging from the ceiling. When I wasn't watching, the woman tilted the mic in my direction. I remembered my uncle blasting Lady Gaga and P!nk in the car, showing off his Q-tip cleaning dance move. He always encouraged me to sing, declaring I was going to be on stage someday using the moves he taught me. With that performance, I was fulfilling the dreams my uncle always had for me.

When the time for college came around, I chose music as my major, but choosing a college brought a strange emptiness with it. My father, sister, and I had just returned home to St. Louis after visiting family in Florida. I had one day to rest, because on the second day my mother, father, and I drove through the night, all my possessions packed in our small car, to Chicago for college move-in day in the morning. Nerves were to be expected. I did my best to keep a brave face, to morph those nerves into excitement. It worked for the duration of the five hour car journey as I listened along to the soft music, navigating the misty roads as the warm night turned into a chilly morning. There was one stretch of highway where the visibility was very low. A two-lane, newly paved blacktop, with orange cones still lining the sides. The speed limit was seventy, but I was barely going forty, leaning into the steering wheel, squinting as I tried to see the freshly painted lines ten feet in front of me. The giant street lamps were of no assistance, because every time I drove underneath one the fog seemed to thicken, becoming more opaque, like the light tripled the layer of mist in the night air. The mist failed to stop me; it knew I shouldn't have been on that road to Chicago and it did everything to prevent my arrival. When the mist finally relented and we arrived, we sat in a deserted parking lot near the campus, and I felt an overwhelming urge to flee. My mind was alert as my parents rested, even though they got at least an hour of sleep on the road and I got none. I searched the place that was meant to become my familiar surroundings, seeing shadows hidden behind every corner and ulterior motives underneath every mask.

My gut told me these feelings were unacceptable. Hailing from New York, I've been acquainted with the city. The last time I visited Times Square the air was electrified with billions of lights illuminating the screens, the cacophonous sound of pedestrians roaming between towering buildings that hugged them closer together, weaving through the streets like the electricity flowing beneath their feet. Everything felt natural. But at 5 a.m. on South Wabash Avenue, there was no energy, only shadows and darkness, more road and construction than sidewalk, with stifling buildings blocking the rising sun. My gut screamed *leave*, and I listened. Without staying for orientation, without seeing the dorm room, my father turned the car back on with little questions. He trusted my instincts just as I did in the moment. We drove out of the city, back the way we came as if we'd realized, at the last minute, we'd gone the wrong way and had to turn around.

My choice to walk away from Columbia College led me on the path of abandoning the dream of being a music major. I fought walking away from my dream that was also my uncle's, but during the interlude—the semester I lost—I gained more than I understood at the time. I found a new comfort and love in books. Journaling became a hobby no matter how cliché or how much I resisted the act. I gobbled up and demanded words in every form. It still took me a semester of college in the following spring term to finally give up the path of music. My entrance into the world of English and writing was slowly being formed against my will. Building itself, piecing together the chunks of wood as I ran out of tiles on my current path, desperately trying to reach the end, only for a polished door to pop up, a red light warmly glowing above it. Without questioning it, I followed my gut and pushed through. I left music behind and found my feet planted on a long path of freshly grouted tiles in a world awaiting my arrival.

The Lonely Red Folder

Alden Bader

*The lonely red folder basked in its solitude, its seams burdened
with collected works, its owner oblivious to its longing for relevance*

“You’ve personified dogs and dresses and even
not human enough people. Why can’t you release
my magic, allow me to use what I hold? Do I even
hold enough? Are my pages fit for consumption?

Are you thinking of that insensitive couplet from the
day you were morose and scarred? What if I were to
break, to spill, to leak my contents into the minds of
your peers and professors? Would you stand by me?

But even as you think to open me and think again,
worried that your conversation partner won’t appreciate
me, I know our words could light her ready path
perhaps even reveal something hidden from view

And as a bonus, if you bring me to life, I’ll tell you
of your furtive compeer, the blessed soul who caught
a glimpse of your magic and slipped a name into my
pocket when you dropped your bags in the courtyard.

I’d take you to them and grant you an audience
I’d be your intrinsic bolstering your introversion
I’d be your book of stories and your little red translator
bursting with words in place of the touch
you so clearly long for...”

Kaitlyn Pelant

Black and white keys,
Pounded on all day.
Sweat and frustration,
That's the price you pay.

The blank screen stares.
Weary eyes focus.
Gotta get this done.
I'm feeling hopeless.

What should I say?
I type and erase,
I stop and I think.
My mind starts to race.

I'm too tired.
I need a quick break.
Go get a coffee.
Can't turn it in late.

It's almost done.
I think I did good.
The hard work paid off.
I knew that it would.

Proud of my work,
Time to turn in
I put it aside,
And sit down again.

A blank white page,
A familiar sight.
I have four more classes,
And it's all due tonight.

Acquiesce

B. Ready

I.

They'll come straight for your face
stick and poke such hell on you
that around the globe and all of time
will view
these granite statues
built on a day when you were
hungry
angry
lonely
tired.

II.

Horses cannot uncrack shells,
cobblestones are for cartwheels, and I
can sit on the edge of a wall
for all of time
but an egg will roll and fall

III.

Plexus uncaged, palms open-faced, I
decide only that I will not decide.
The lone movement I may own is to accept
that no choice belongs to me:
to agree to be unsore in failure,
to accept all change with gratitude,
and keep eyes focused dead ahead
for all of time.

What Did They Tell You

Kevin Gruen

What did they tell you about this place?
Expanding your consciousness just isn't safe
Who knows what's out there in the empty space?
There could be lifeforms from another race
You think thinking outside the box is just a waste
So, all of your creative thoughts, they become erased
Time slips by as grains of sand fall in place
Stuck in a rut is where you're comfortable to stay
What did they tell you about this place?



Blender3D CGI

Final Moments of Atlantis

Yang Pan



Blender3D CGI

Castle In the Sunset

Yang Pan

Let Go

Kenny Dickens

You lay on your back, splayed out and broken in the street below your former apartment on the 40th floor. Rain began to pool in your eyes. Police robots took names of bystanders and did retinal scans, facial scans, body scans, the usual stuff. Nobody was arrested, save for a teenager who had coincidentally been doing some new party drugs in an alley nearby when your accident occurred. The teen was taken away, and despite the robots spouting lines about order and civility, people gathered around the perimeter of holographic police tape to see your sad shape on the asphalt.

“Poor bastard,” said someone in the crowd.

“Please move along,” said a robot. People wondered about you, who you were, what you did; some assumed that you were up to no good, that this had to be murder, foul play, maybe gang related. Others thought that you were just stupid and jumped. Some of the more sympathetic among them said they would jump too, living in a place like this. They looked up at the slab of a building that you called your home. Starting from where you had fallen from, they followed the rows of windows with their eyes all the way down to where you lie, looking at your shabby, bloodsoaked shirt, and then up at the robots that patrolled the streets. At these they scowled.

“Yeah,” they assented, looking back at your face, “I might’ve jumped too.”

There was a mystery surrounding you that broke the monotony for these people on the street; it was something to do, to talk about, if nothing else something to walk around when going down the street. People took notice of you, perhaps more now than when you were alive. This was your legacy.

By all accounts you lived an average life, single, solitary; you had no family within a reasonable distance, no friends to call when things got bad, and now you were here, a conclusion that surprised nobody, given the circumstances. Death was common here — suicide mostly — and the tenants that lived with you (or I should say near you, as they spoke to nobody) remarked in silent glances that it was better you had jumped, so that the medical examiner would not need to go far for the body. It was the guns that were the worst, they said, with dead eyes and small shudders. They did it in the bathroom; businessmen, drug dealers, blacklisted company associates: it was all the same. They would sit in the tub dressed in their nicest suits, take their polished .38 or their chromed-out .45 or their sawed-off shotgun, stick the barrels in their mouths, and pull the trigger. It was the rest of them who lived

that really suffered. The thin walls did little to deaden the noise.

Nobody really knew how it got so bad, at least nobody who lives there. Some say it was the druggies and the whores and the rats. Some say it was the smell of solder and smoke from the massive incinerators a block down that soaked into everything and made it stink, that ran day and night with a low rumble that shook the streets and drove people crazy. Some said it's the slumlords, with their neon-baked sunglasses and glass-studded leather jackets and their smooth, boutique faces and the buzz and flutter of their money machines. Some said it was capitalism, and they all disappeared. Whatever the reason, good people stayed out.

An investigative team arrived at your apartment within the hour, the kind on the state payroll. They knew the city well, and knew what they needed to do. Walking into the building they went straight for the elevators. Clicking the call button they stood stoic and focused on the task at hand, trying not to look around too much in case someone got jumpy. Tenants shuffled aimlessly around the space doing incomprehensible circuits on the cracked brown tile of the lobby. They talked about the news. A coup in Russia. The last fossil fuels, gone by the end of the year. The unemployment rate reached a new record high. You could extend your life by 75 years with new RNA tech, and two million dollars. On and on they talked, droning.

"I know I wouldn't want to live any longer than I already am," said a hoarse voice from the back wall with a dry cackle. The person they were talking with laughed along. Ghosts, wraiths, you would have called them, by the way they seemed to float from spot to spot, never seeming to leave or interact with anything but themselves. They took long drags on hand-rolled cigarettes, adding their own smoke to the air. There was a distinct metallic smell seeping in from outside, not of blood, but of solder. City fumes. Live here long enough and it fades into the background.

The elevator doors lurched open to a car washed in a faded, flickering fluorescent light. The investigators stepped inside. One pressed the button for the 40th floor and the elevator began its ascent. Everyone knew who they were, what they were there for. No badges or labels on their coats save for nondescript name tags, but they knew. Black windbreakers, slacks, black leather briefcases. Corporate anonymity.

Your apartment was small, its furnishings bare. The investigators trawled through everything, taking pictures and cataloging them into a folder that would soon be forgotten, on the "back-shelf," they called it. They were spread throughout the apartment, but the majority of them were grouped by the large shattered window. Rain dripped inside, and a large red holographic warning floated where the window had once been, that space now leading

into the cold dark blue of the night. Not that this deterred you of course. They quickly surmised that you had used a now broken chair to smash your way through the window before jumping to your death. This part was easy to figure out, the broken window, the chair; all of this pointed to that one fatal choice that killed you. The motive was almost as easy to sort out. No friends, no family, a refrigerator filled with nothing but condiments and half-eaten takeout, that was clear enough. You were lonely and sad, a statistic long before you hit the ground. Despite this, a formal investigation still had to take place, and as such, all areas of your apartment were searched out of bureaucratic necessity.

They didn't find anything exceptional, as they suspected. Just a sad apartment for a sad man; but the state of your bedroom had them scratching their heads. Bedsheets, dirty clothing, towels, all of the available cloth was used to cover the large window that looked out over the city, facing the same direction as the window you jumped from. Nobody really knew why, and could only guess about why you had done it.

"He couldn't sleep I guess, maybe an insomniac or something," said one of them, pulling up your medical history on a tablet. His name was Johnson, it said so on his crooked, grungy nametag. Johnson, Risk Analyst. Worked for your insurance company. He didn't want to be here; no point, no next of kin to worry about, no loose ends, nobody to send the bill to. You tied everything up yourself.

"Hell, look at his apartment!" said another as he kicked an empty can that had left an indelible stain on the carpet. This one was Richards. Local police. "Probably depressed, fed up. Done with life." Johnson referenced the tablet again.

"Look at the numbers, Rich," he said, showing him the tablet. "He took all his medications, he saw all his therapists, look at this!" A report from a therapist. "Doing better today," it said. That was all it said.

"It's not just numbers, Johnson, there's more to it than that," replied Richards, curtly. "The fuck does that even mean, 'doing better today?' Give me a break." He walked off to look at a different part of the apartment.

"Maybe it was too bright for them?" said another. Coleridge, read his nametag, neat and even on his lapel. New blood. He cared too much. The tension lightened slightly.

"I mean sure, the city can be brighter sometimes, with all the ads and what not," replied Johnson, packing up equipment and moving to the door to leave, "but not enough for me to jump out of the window. Not statistically anyway. It had to be something else." The others agreed, Richards begrudgingly so. It seemed normal enough for this part of the city, statistically this suicide was practically guaranteed, like Johnson had said; they just couldn't figure it

out. Everything was a statistic that could be measured, quantified, and shipped. “Human behavior is just a series of categories, a series of needs.” He started “Shelter,” your shitty apartment, single couch, single bed. “Food,” the fridge, the takeout. “Sex,” you were single, no committed relationships for the past four years. They saw this in the data, the movies you rented, the places you frequented, the meals you ordered at restaurants, the reservations you made: table for one, table for one, table for one. It was all lists, numbers, pure data, and the data didn’t lie. They saw this in your shopping habits. In your routines. When you turned the lights on. When you turned the lights off. The weight on your bathroom scale compared to the weight in your bed. “The data never lies, Coleridge. Remember that. A guy lives in a shithole like this, he’s bound to end it sooner or later.” He stepped out into the hall. They’d do further research at another time, out of curiosity more than anything else. The cursory visit was good enough for the official records.

“Yes, sir,” said Coleridge behind him as he started for the door. Richards scoffed. Then, as he was about to leave, it happened all at once. From the entire side of the apartment, from the huge window with its fateful broken pane, a blazing blue light shone like fire into the building. The apartment, which had once been dark save for the faint glow of street lamps, was as bright as day. Coleridge shouted, startled as it occurred, and the other investigators peeked their heads inside. They were awestruck. As their eyes adjusted to the sudden change they realized what they were looking at. An advertisement appeared on the side of the building, intended for people forty stories below. It dawned on them that this is why you had put up all of the blankets to block the window. Johnson stepped back into the apartment in awe and looked out from the broken window that you jumped from. The advertisement hummed like a swarm of angry bees, projected as a hologram from some unseen source. The rain shimmered as it fell through it. On the massive blue space of the advertisement that was almost too bright to look at directly he could make out a headline:

“LET YOURSELF GO” it read. A booming voice resonated through the room. The rain shivered as the sound raced through it.

“Live life your way,” resounded the voice, smooth, inhuman, vibrating glass and shaking the floor. “Let yourself go, into the unknown. Your future is out there.” Three massive bottles came into view, shifting the light in the room to a burning orange, pink, green.

“Fucking perfume!” shouted Richards over the din of the voice, “It’s an ad for fucking perfume!”

Artist & Author Biographies

Katelynn Abraham is a junior at UMSL, pursuing a degree in English alongside a certificate in creative writing. She hails from New York state with a fondness for the city. The novels she writes are in science fiction worlds that transport, trap, and transcend the mundane boundaries of reality. But as imaginations run rampant and creativity confines her indoors, she enjoys the little intricacies of the natural world and the power of simple acts of kindness among everyday strangers. She plans to finish her unfinishable novels and publish them, preferably in a beach town in the South of Australia.

Alden Bader is a very amateur poet, or maybe an accomplished bard, depending on which loving grandmother you are speaking to at the time. He feels honored to support *Litmag* and his fellow writers. He spends most of his spare time answering the breath of the wild and trying to drink more water.

Alex Balogh is a graduate student in philosophy at UMSL.

Daniel Andrés Brown-Schnurr is a proud half-Panamanian poet. A born animal lover, he studies English, Spanish, and creative writing. Future goals of his include an MFA in poetry combined with graduate certificates in teaching writing and autism studies. He is thrilled for this opportunity and maintains his high school art teacher's mantra: "Everyone is an artist; it depends how you bring it out."

Mei Caldwell has been writing since she was very young. Her first stories were of fantasies and animals, which has since grown to science fiction and poetry. She hopes to continue writing because it is her favorite art form and allows her to step outside ordinary life and into something she can create, control, and make her own.

Kenny Dickens is an English major. He thinks about writing more than he actually writes. He is the winner of the 2019 *Litmag* Poetry Contest with his poem *Ferryman*.

Jessie Eikmann completed her UMSL MFA thesis, *Some Body's God*, in December 2019. She is currently quarantined in her boyfriend's apartment in Ballwin, to her simultaneous delight and dismay. Jessie has spent much of her post-MFA time putting in obscene hours at her job: gesturing at empty shelves to prove that no, her Schnucks does not have more hand sanitizer. She plans to eventually write more poems but is feeling lazy right now, and that is okay.

Jacob Greek: While abroad last summer on a motorcycle journey across Eastern Europe, Jacob took the photo *Budapest Across the Danube* of the Budapest Parliament Building from the Fisherman's Bastion overlooking the Danube. Follow Jacob's next international motorcycle adventure in Buenos Aires, South America on Instagram @Jacob2J.

Artist & Author Biographies

Kevin Gruen is a poet, multi-instrumentalist, and singer-songwriter who is currently a student at UMSL. He previously studied at SCC where he received his AA degree and diversity certificate, and his current studies at UMSL have given him a diverse education in psychology, neuroscience, and biology. He uses these studies, as well as his personal experiences from traveling abroad, to create poetry and music.

Levi Hale is in his first semester at UMSL. He is currently working towards a BA in secondary education. He will teach literature and hopes to continue to publish more fiction. He has been married for five years and attributes much of his inspiration to his lovely wife, Jules. He would also like to thank the late John Kevin Dark for helping him develop as a writer.

Kim Hany currently studies studio art at UMSL. She has a long history as a student of the arts. She earned an associate of fine art degree from St. Louis Community College, and she completed the coursework required for teacher certification in K-12 Art at UMSL. After several years of teaching, she returned to UMSL to complete her BFA. Kim anticipates graduating with her BFA in December 2020.

Julie Harms is a former English student and current staff member at UMSL, and she is happy to be returning as a student this fall in UMSL's creative writing MFA program. Julie's poetry has been previously published in the *Mid Rivers Review* and she is excited to have her photography also featured in this edition of *Litmag* alongside her poetry and prose. In her spare time, Julie likes reading, writing, exploring more nature, photography, or watching the latest drama series on Netflix.

Victoria Haynes is a student at UMSL in the midst of a most transitional period of life. They wrote this story as a way to express the constant stresses and worries they and their friends have about coming out to family members. Victoria has no strong life plans currently, but they do want to continue their transition and become, in their words, "A Cute Girl."

Bailey Henson is a senior at UMSL and St. Louis resident of six years. Originally from Tennessee, she is pursuing her degree in English with a focus in creative writing. Outside of writing short stories and flash fiction, Bailey enjoys painting, hiking, and traveling. After undergraduate school, she hopes to pursue a graduate degree and enter the world of publishing.

Blake Hunt is in the school counseling MED program at UMSL. He is married and has two boys. Blake was born and raised in St. Louis. He enjoys playing basketball, watching the NBA, creating art, being outdoors, and spending time with his family. Some people would consider him a foodie. Blake is rapidly balding, and his sign is Cancer.

Artist & Author Biographies

Amy Kenny is a sophomore at UMSL, a student at the Pierre Laclède Honors College, and a double major in psychology and English. She has been writing poems, short shorts, and short stories since grade school. The pieces included here are the first she has ever submitted to be published. These works are part of her ongoing exploration of writing as a possible career path.

Danbi Kim chose not to submit a biography for *Litmag* 2020.

T.L. Kirk is an UMSL graduate and former *Litmag* staff member. Tyler Lloyd “T.L.” Kirk now works as a marketing consultant in St. Louis. He lives in the city with his wonderful wife and their cat, Winnie.

Zara Konstapel is an international student from the Netherlands. She is majoring in English with a minor in French. That is not the only thing that keeps her busy during the week, as she is also part of the UMSL swim team. Zara has always had a love for the English language and poetry. She wrote a lot in high school, but then she stopped. Her teammates and friends encouraged her to pick it back up again, and so she did.

Sarah Krueger is a hobby photographer who enjoys taking pictures of birds and bugs while hiking. She is a senior studying economics at UMSL.

Cierra Lowe-Price is a full-time nursing student at UMSL. She has a degree in philosophy from Webster University and self-published her first full-length collection of poetry and prose entitled *The Horse and the Water* in 2017. She is currently working on her second. She is married with two small children and enjoys art, hiking, and reading in her free time, which she currently doesn’t have.

David Maczynski, Supervisor of Instructional Technology at UMSL, started taking pictures in his early 20s with a used Yashica 35mm camera and was involved enough in his hobby to put together a darkroom to develop his own color and black-and-white pictures. It was not until a year ago that David decided to jump back into the field and bought a Sony A7M2 camera. In the photo *Glow Fish*, David used Photoshop, Lightroom, and Luminar 4 to create his surreal piece. David enjoys creating surreal and abstract works, when he is not shooting everyday scenes. *Glow Fish* started as a single window, chair and small table. With the use of homemade filters, and clip art of the fish, David expanded the scene, inverted the colors and added numerous elements to make the scene believable.

Sarah Mullin enjoys eating mangoes.

Artist & Author Biographies

Tareq Issam Nabhan is an Assistant Clinical Professor in the College of Optometry. His teaching pedagogically rests on evidence-based clinical practices. His research interests are in developing hardware and software solutions to improve healthcare equity and to reduce rates of visual impairment and blindness through telemedicine. As an appreciative beneficiary of eye care, Dr. Nabhan helps lead charitable and sustainable medical clinic teams in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, North America, and South America.

Nicole Newman is a twenty-two-year-old senior at UMSL, double-majoring in Spanish and international relations with a minor in philosophy. Ever since she was five, her family members encouraged her to dive into her imagination and to never stop writing for recreation. She received a composition notebook as a birthday gift from her great-grandmother every year until her death in 2016. Nicole credits her continuous love of writing to the encouragement from her great-grandmother.

Luna Noelle is a senior pursuing a BFA with an emphasis in art education. Her favorite medium to use is oil, but she also does watercolor, printmaking, and sculpture. She takes a lot of inspiration from surrealism, horror films, and games.

Yang Pan is currently a math and computer science student at UMSL. He is a 3D art enthusiast who creates and renders his models in Blender3D with touch-ups in GIMP. Both are free software available online. He first started working with Blender in 2008. Outside of school and art, he is an assistant for UMSL's cross country and track team, works part-time as a registered pharmacist, and competes in triathlons competitively.

Kaitlyn Pelant is currently a senior at UMSL graduating in May with a BS in psychology. She will be attending graduate school this fall semester pursuing a career in counseling children with disorders and disabilities. In her free time, she enjoys a good workout, being with family, camping and being in the river with friends, and leading a group of middle school girls at church.

B. Ready obtained a BA in English from UMSL in 2018. He is currently creating works of poetry and fiction which focus on third-culture perspective, free-range philosophy, and the transgender experience. He enjoys drumming, meditating, and catching waves.

Sean Scott is a lifelong learner and is currently enrolled in the UMSL MSIS program. While his day job is in IT, he has a creative passion which he has expressed over the years in music, writing, and graphic design.

Artist & Author Biographies

Roger Villarreal is a writer based in St. Louis, Missouri, who focuses on poetry and short stories. Apart from writing, he works as an illustrator, painter, contractor, and farmhand.

Tarika Walton writes short stories and poems that challenge the conventions of identity, love, and reality. Her work features solemn characters, vivid descriptions, and themes about the darker side of life. She fills her free time with audiobooks, podcasts, and fiction writing research. Her greatest aspiration is to have a massive backlist of published books. Currently, Tarika is a liberal studies major in her final year.

Taylor Weintrop is a senior English studies major and political science minor set to graduate December 2020. In the 2019 spring semester, she was awarded the Undergraduate Award in Writing Studies for her essay, “Labeling a Determinist/Amusing Ourselves to Death” from UMSL. Taylor is currently interning for *River Styx* literary magazine and *UMSL Global*. She is eager to continue her career and education in English studies at the graduate level.

How to Get Involved

Join the Class of Editors

Undergraduate students have the opportunity to earn course credit by enrolling in English 4895 Editing *Litmag*, which is offered each spring semester.

Those enrolled in the course edit and publish one student literary journal over the course of the semester.

The purpose of the class is to provide students interested in creative writing, professional editing, and publishing with an internship-like experience that serves as a capstone for their writing studies. Under the supervision of a faculty advisor, student editors participate in the full scope of operations within a nonprofit press, including fundraising, solicitation, marketing and promotions, copy editing, document and graphic design, distribution, and publicity.

Students interested in enrolling are invited to contact Kate Watt at katewatt@umsl.edu or Jeanne Allison at allisonjea@umsl.edu for more information.

Submit to the Magazine

Litmag accepts submissions of original, previously unpublished work from October to February from UMSL students, alumni, faculty, and staff.

Poetry: up to 5 submissions

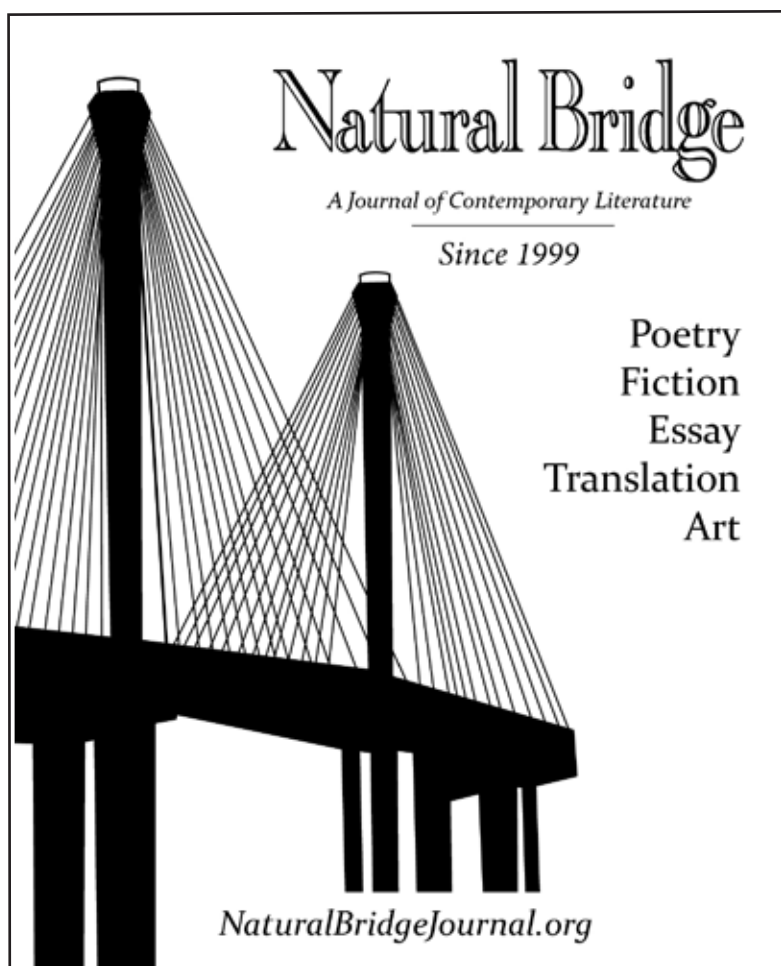
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Photography and Artwork: up to 5 individual pieces of any styles, medium, or subject. All submissions will be considered for the cover.

Artwork should be scanned (rather than photographed) and saved as a JPEG file with 300dpi resolution or greater.

Send your submissions to litmagumsl@gmail.com attaching a separate cover page with your name, email address, and phone number. Contact information should not appear elsewhere on submissions. Hard copies are accepted in the green *Litmag* box outside of the English Department office, 4th floor Lucas Hall.

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tier

AVID ALLY

- Make a donation of any amount to the Crowdfunding Campaign for a tax credit
- Encourage local businesses to make a donation or buy an ad with *Litmag*
- Convince UMSL faculty, staff, and alumni to submit to future issues of *Litmag*

4th
tier

COMPELLING CONTRIBUTOR

- Share our crowdfunding page on social media
- Donate \$50-\$100 to the Crowdfunding Campaign and qualify for a tax credit
- Buy a 1/4 page to full page advertisement in *Litmag* as a business or nonprofit

5th
tier

PARAMOUNT PATRON

- Donate \$200-\$1000 to the Crowdfunding Campaign and qualify for a tax credit
- Buy a full page advertisement as a business or nonprofit
- Convince someone else to donate \$50 or more to support *Litmag*

Nicole Newman - Sean Scott - Bailey Henson

Levi Hale - Kenny Dickens - Sarah Mullin

B. Ready - Danbi Kim - Katelynn Abraham

Julie Harms - Amy Kenny - Victoria Haynes

Alden Bader - Kaitlyn Pelant - Zara Konstapel

Cierra Lowe-Price - Mei Caldwell

“In Times Of Crisis, We Turn To The Arts”

Alex Balogh - Daniel A. Brown-Schnurr

Jessie Eikmann - Roger Villarreal

Kevin Gruen - Taylor Weintrop - Tarika Walton

T.L. Kirk - Sarah Krueger - Jacob Greek

Blake Hunt - Tareq Issam Nabhan - David Maczynski

Luna Noelle - Yang Pan - Kim Hany