

redcedar
REVIEW 54



redcedar
REVIEW

2019

Red Cedar Review is an annual literary magazine published in the spring by Michigan State University undergraduates with support from the Michigan State University College of Arts and Letters and Department of English.

Cover art: “The Study of Lips” by McKenna Moore
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EDITOR'S NOTE

MARTHA SPALL

Dear Readers,

The year spent producing Volume 54 of *Red Cedar Review* was filled with ambition, experimentation, and change. Our biggest staff to date—made up of over 40 readers, editors, designers, social media mavens, and more—worked to bring you this issue celebrating the work of talented undergraduates across the country. We were excited to receive a record-breaking number of submissions, including a wide variety of visual pieces after a special call for traditional and digital artwork.

You may be holding in your hands the last print issue of *Red Cedar Review*, as we've begun to focus on moving our 56-year-old (!) journal into the digital sphere. In the coming few years, we hope digital publication will allow us to feature creative video and audio alongside the kinds of prose, poetry, and artwork we've been proud to publish since the 1960s.

As we move our journal online, we're working on making our extensive archive available to the public. This archive will be a valuable resource for scholarly research, featuring renowned authors like Pablo Neruda, Margaret Atwood, Carolyn Forché, and Stuart Dybek. It will be a wonderful space to explore decades of work from both established writers and talented authors in various stages of their careers.

We're very proud to present this issue to you and hope you enjoy the pieces inside as much as we did. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank our submitters and our intrepid reading staff. Many thanks also go to our genre editors, layout team, social media team, and web manager/archivist, all of whom contributed valuable skill and flair to this endeavor. Special thanks go to Assistant Managing Editor Katherine Stark, who has helped lead the journal with smarts, spirit, and good humor, and Dr. Robin Silbergleid, our astute guide and advocate. We'd also like to express our gratitude to Kathy Dorshimer, Marilyn Duke, and Marina Patrick of the MSU English Department, and to Julie Taylor for her integral help in designing our layout.

I look forward to watching *Red Cedar Review* grow in the coming years, and I hope you'll come see what we're doing at www.redcedarreview.wordpress.com. Big things are happening.

Sincerely,
Martha Malone Spall
Managing Editor

SUMMER NIGHT IN NEW HOPE, MINNESOTA

NATALIE SIEDE

When my parents tell me they're going north for the weekend, I feign jealousy, give quiet thanks, and tell them to send pictures from whatever friend's cabin they'll be staying at. I wait until their car is over the hill to turn off the air conditioning. I like to keep my windows open during the summer. Especially at night, when I can hear the crickets and toads and the rare owls' calls echoing from the backyard all the way to the pond runoff past the woods. I like to have the house to myself, to fill every room as I choose, to sing loud and not be quieted for the sake of quiet. My room is my favorite shade of green: soft and mossy in daylight, then warm and earthy-gold at night when I light a beeswax candle with a twine wick and watch as it runs down the side of itself like honey. It's so easy to forget what the heat gives back to us when we keep the house chilled in the summer, after the winter takes so much and we spend all spring trying to remember ourselves out of the cold. I open both windows wide like arms to the night and feel the night air pour in and gather on the carpet like dew on the grass. I let it remind my skin what balmy means.

LITTLE HOUSE

SAMANTHA HARDEN

I grew up trying
to convince my mother
to let me wear bleached jeans,
fashionably distressed, because
holes and patches
were in
and because I wanted to be in too.
We're not trailer trash, she'd say, and snatch
up a crisp pair of Levi's.

My mother grew up watching
Little House on the Prairie
and had a perfect cursive signature
each curl like a ruffle on Laura Ingalls's skirts.

She also grew up shitting in a five-gallon bucket
cracked on the sides, with four other sisters to share it with,
too tall for her third-hand, patchwork jeans.

Now when I look at a picture of her from when she was a child
I can rake through it, see her thin, bony frame. I imagine
her sitting in front of a static-laced television, eyes
hungry for that life that she couldn't have and gnawing
on the flowered dresses that she would have
strangled that little girl to wear.

And then I look at the photos of me wearing those jeans
that I would shred myself
when my mother wasn't looking, to look cool.
And I can only think of how she saw
those spiderwebbed holes, and probably only thought
of those goddamn five-gallon
buckets,
cracked on the sides.

FOREST FIRE REVELATION

BENJAMIN STALLINGS

I walk through the Cleveland Forest
outside of LA, where you are waiting
to catch fire like the dry, chalky brush.
You are maroon and dangerous at six.

Brush sways, palms toward the sky.
Firing ranges cover the snapcrunch
of your designer boots that you bought
for your green internship at the agency.

If you are Abraham, bind me as Isaac.
I ask, "Is desire unbound desire at all?"
as I lie to be held on an red rock desert
table, believing that you will cut me down.

I love you without vulgarity.
even in my wildest midday dreaming, we are tied
at a distance with stretched calls, weekend visits,
swirling us in velvet dust devils.

Now, my body, our chance, lies at an altar
and I refuse to unveil and refuse to bleed
it like a Levitical lamb. It is alive, red insides
throning the capacity left ethereally unseen.

DEAD ELECTRONICS

ROBERT SULMONTE

i am screaming
screaming screaming screaming
but my empty words
only echo against my skull,
an avalanche of pots and pans
falling down stairs that have no end,
and i put my head through the wall
because i cannot find the remote
and maybe smashing the processor
will turn the volume down

but it doesn't!
now the crescendo before the killer stabs the teenage girl
but he never stabs her
because i am the killer, i am the girl
and now there is a hole in my wall
and water fills the cabin
and i sink sink sink
and my circuit board zaps and fries and sputters out
killing the noise

i learned a long time ago
putting a dead phone
in a bowl of rice
doesn't actually work
and i learned a short time ago
that trying to restore a dead motherboard
also doesn't work

LOC PHASES

RAI AHMED-GREEN

Phase One - Starter: “With your starter locs, you are establishing your parting system and the ideal starting method that works best for your hair texture to achieve your desired result.”¹

I am sitting between my mother’s legs. My head in her hands as she sections it off to begin her work. My grandmother sits on our couch sparking conversation with my mother and letting it fizzle out as she grows tired. There is no television or radio. I remember only silence and the feeling of something being created in my scalp. The burning sensation intensified with each hour of pulling and kneading, but I remained still and quiet. I had been screaming and crying every morning in the four years leading up to this moment. Ever since I had hair for my mom to work, I’d been running from it. But this was the last time. This was something else. Something new. This was my decision. My fate was plucked from a long list of alternatives to having my mother style my hair every morning. She was tired of the crying too, so we both agreed on something I could be proud of that didn’t leave me in tears. My mother explained that if I didn’t like them I would have to cut them off. How do I know I made the right decision? Because even though my head was on fire for four hours, my eyes were dry, and I was smiling.

Phase Two - Budding: “You’ll notice that your new growth is puffy and your starter style is fuzzy. This is a good time to practice a re-twisting routine for new growth. Make sure to keep track of the

1 Renee, Jocelyn. “Stages of Locs: How Locs Evolve From Beginning to Maturity.” CurlyNuGrowth, 26 Nov. 2018, curlynu-growth.com/4-stages-locs/.

original section partings when re-twisting to maintain a consistent and uniform size. It may be tempting to re-twist often, but it's important not to overdo it. Too much twisting can lead to thinning locs and breakage.”²

“Just call me Joe,” I told her. My mom and grandma cracked up at that. I didn't find it funny. I looked like a little boy. My bottom lip puckered and pouted and my mother's smile only grew. “You look so cute,” my mom said as she squeezed my cheek. I would have rolled my eyes if I wouldn't have lost my life for doing so. They are little puffs of hair that barely graze my ears. Far from the thick coils that usually shot up from my head. She told me not to touch them too much and started swatting at my hands when they failed to follow directions. More often than not, I was between her legs on the weekends, her hands coated in oil as she twisted away at my hair, encouraging the strands to love one another enough to agree to an infinite embrace.

Phase Three - Teen: “This may be the stage where you wonder what's going on with your hair. Too short to lie down easily, your teenage locs may seem to sprout all over your head and go in the direction they want to go.”³

I put my hair in a ponytail that explodes from the back of my head at awkward angles. I consider myself in the mirror. The baby fat is still in love with my cheeks and refuses to leave no matter how many eviction notices I write in celery and slim meats. I reach my hand up and free one loc from the band, letting it hang.

Nope. Not good enough.

I release another from the same side of my head, giving the first bang a little backup.

2 Ibid.

3 Sandeen, Del. “Going Through the 5 Stages of Loc Hair: What to Expect.” LiveAbout, 24 Sept. 2017, www.liveabout.com/stages-of-loc-hair-400344.

I stare at myself for a moment, and then another, and then another, until I feel that my face has been adequately covered, and then I give myself a little nod. I try not to look like a child when I do it. I give up because only a child would think such a thing.

Phase Four - Mature: “About 18 months after beginning locs, you should be at this stage, where your locs are long enough to lie flat or hang down. You don’t have to re-twist your new growth as often. Locs should be thick enough to support themselves. You’ll probably be very comfortable with your locs by now and enjoy a regular shampooing and conditioning routine.”⁴

Hands. In my hair. First day of high school in unknown territory. I had moved out of University High’s school zone, so while all of the friends I made in elementary and middle school moved on to Uni, I was stuck at Irvine High. I didn’t know anybody here. After all, these people had gone to elementary and middle school together, this whole school zone system was all strategically planned to keep kids together. Everything in Irvine was planned, and it seemed to work out for everyone except me. I didn’t plan to be moved to the other side of town and go to school with a bunch of strangers, and I definitely didn’t plan for White Boy No. 247 to plant his grimy hands in my hair during the first period of the first day of school. Do Not Touch. Do Not Touch. Do Not Touch. Even if I carried a sign, I doubt they would listen. But my voice has left. So I give him a look hoping it replaces the scolding I’ve yet to learn how to deliver and tell myself that I’m not a coward. I’m not sure if I believe myself, but at least he had the decency to look away.

Phase Five - Rooted: “Once you reach this stage, your locs are firmly in place. While super-long locs are the envy of some, hair that falls past your waist can be heavy and cumbersome. You can trim your locs to a manageable length if needed. Your hair care routine can be as simple or complex as you like, but rooted locs require little

4 Ibid.

more than regular cleansing, conditioning and moisturizing.”⁵

My head is a rainforest in which I have made a home. I am the only one allowed to climb its trees. I have never been to a hair salon because it is not anyone else’s job to clean my home. I do it lovingly. I do it with minor irritation when I have to wake up early because of the time it takes. I do it with purpose because I know it must be done. They stretch low on my back now. It’s been years since I felt the fuzzy ends grazing my ears. As they have grown long, my face has slimmed, baby fat fleeing. The length attracts reaching hands, but I have grown quick enough to catch them. With a smile, of course, so as not to offend the offender. My name gives way to a moniker. “That girl with dreads.” In my head, I correct them and say, “Locs.” In my head, I tell them my name and then tell myself they don’t deserve it. All of the real estate that people have purchased on my scalp has been foreclosed by my “attitude.” All the fucks I had to give have been collected and reallocated to other things. My hair blows in the wind as I walk away from hands still reaching for the pieces of me no that are longer for sale.

5 Sandeen, Del. “Going Through the 5 Stages of Loc Hair: What to Expect.” LiveAbout, 24 Sept. 2017, www.liveabout.com/stages-of-loc-hair-400344.

THE SECOND AMENDMENT DOESN'T SUPERSEDE LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF **HAPPINESS**

MEGAN **ALLISON**

Five years old,
October of kindergarten
was sprinting
in zig-zags outside.
A sniper wore a crown
around the streets of D.C.
Mom laughed, but
the basketball lay silent
in the laundry room.
Hunting parties scoured
for a white work van.
'90s blue Caprice drove by
ten bodies around the beltway

unnoticed.

The state was painted
in maroon and orange.
The flags outside hung low,
barely off the ground.
April 17, 2007:
We were all Hokies fans.
“Mentally ill” drawn in blood
was the tagline on the news.
Previous diagnosis hidden.
Allowing legal sale of guns.
The campus flows with people,
but 32 will never leave.
Degrees became deadly.

Five years later,
middle school was filled
with “Why so serious?”
and “You wanna know
how I got these scars?”
It was an ode to
Ledger’s last legendary
performance. But the jokes
died in a movie theater,
when 12 people were
put to sleep in their chairs.
No prince’s kiss would
be enough to wake them,
like it did for the town’s name.
The man had sent his book
of partial plans to a psychiatrist.

The United States
was brought to its knees
five months later.
Twenty-eight lay still,

twenty children never go home.
They left that morning
to learn and play, but
now that's where they stay.
The news whispered
“mentally ill” again.
Maybe proper treatment
could have prevented it,
but we sit and wonder
without a chance of knowing.

Orlando wrapped itself
in rainbow flags for
Pride Month, not
for waving in parades,
but to wipe away tears
and blood spilled because
a man under FBI watch
could still legally buy guns.
Officers working as guards
tried to stop him, but
49 still lost their lives.
LGBTQ+ and Latinx
represented by candle
lights across the nation.
Orlando stayed as
Shooting Number 1
for a year. October 2017,
Vegas strip was covered
in shell casings.
At 64 years old,
a couple bump stocks
on a few semi-automatics
and a window with a view
was all it took to kill
58 people and injure
800 more. My sister

was never happier
to be woken up in
early morning hours
to hear her fiancé's
voice alive and safe.

Four months pass.
On a day filled with
heart-shaped candy
and sweet pink wine,
another 17 lives
will stay stuck
in Douglas class forever.
He had been reported
and expelled, but
he had bump stocks
and training with guns.
The resource officer
too afraid to challenge
that much firepower.

Politicians sent
prayers instead
of better laws,
but two churches
in Texas and South Carolina
were bonded together
two years apart
because prayers
are not Kevlar.
They tweeted
false blame on
the victims who
learned speaking up
does not help when
you can buy a gun
before your first beer.

These kids weren't
alive to see Columbine.
Some of their parents
born after the Texas Towers
in 1966. This has been
a problem for generations,
so why hasn't it been fixed?
They blame our culture:
music, movies, video games.
How does that explain
the older shooters and
all the ones before our birth?
They claim they need
to defend themselves,
when they voted in
this government.

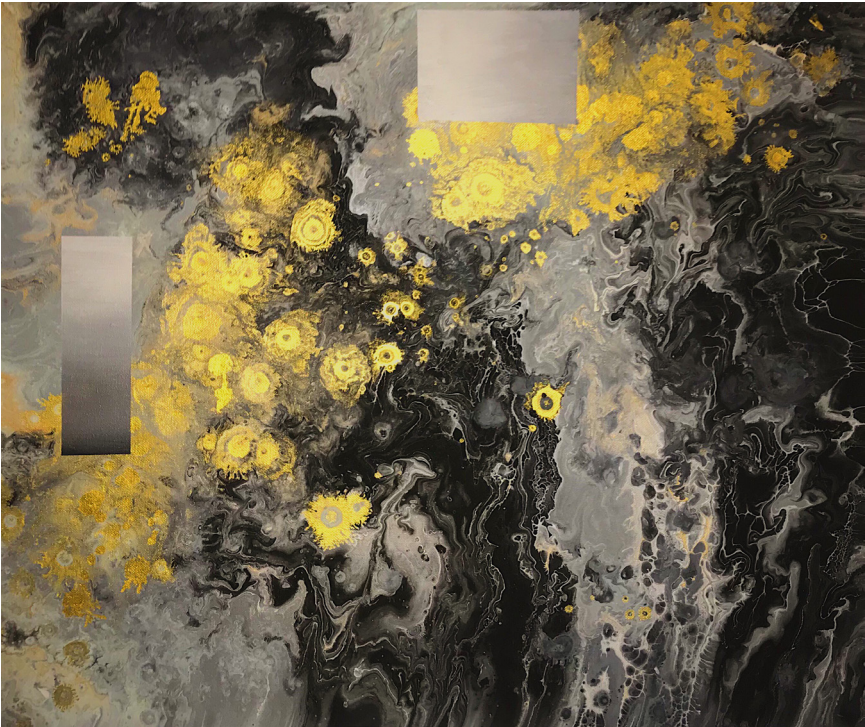
Kids in Australia
don't stop wearing
light up shoes
because a shooter
might spot them.
Young adults in Britain
don't grip their steering
wheels when they see
white vans and '90s Chevys.
Adults in Canada
don't have a plan
of escape when they
go out or a prepared
text for a loved one.

So why do we
have to constantly
fear for our lives?
How can we focus

on answering right
when old rich men
get to decide,
despite never serving
or risking their lives,
given millions to
sit there and hide
behind “thoughts and
prayers” while we die?

BALANCING THE GROWING **CHAOS**

SABREIN **AHMED**



THREE FLEETING MONTHS

KATELYN HUGHES

Teeth sink into fleshy skins of watermelon
and anxious fireflies burn brighter than stars.

Cicadas shrill—their first sign of life.
After seventeen years in Earth's messy tunnels,
how do they know seasons
have come and gone and their time is now?

A hornet, hungry on the trail for nectar
lands in your Coke can. Sitting
inside he suckles up sweet sugar.

The siren's call of fresh water like moths
drawn to light beckons the neighborhood beetle
to take a dip.

He drowns.

Wings of a butterfly refract a lantern's
glow like a glass prism—
as delicate as a lace embroidery.

As quick as a jack rabbit escapes
the jaws of a wolf, life flashes
by like a '30s movie reel.

I love you. I do.
It's a girl. I'll place an offer.
It's terminal.

Goodbye.

THE FINGER STORY

HEATHER **HEREAU**

I never thought I'd have to fight a dog for a finger. Perhaps “fight” is too strong a word. I never thought I'd have to *wrestle* a dog for a finger—well, a piece of a finger, anyway. Up to that point in my life, it just wasn't a circumstance for which my avid perusal of romance novels and TV soap operas had prepared me. I was ready for sudden bouts of amnesia, abrupt returns from the dead, and miraculous recoveries from paralysis, but when it came to wrestling a dog for a human body part—well, I just wasn't ready for that.

When I was nineteen years old, I dropped out of college. I was tired of sitting in a classroom, and I wanted to try my luck in the “real world.” As a result, I ended up working at McDonald's and living in a quasi-commune in a three-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment with six other people, three cats, and one dog. Sure, we had to sleep in shifts, battle the cats for the limited available seating, and occasionally use a bucket when the one bathroom was occupied, but I thought it was better than listening to a bunch of boring teachers drone on and on about nothing. If our rickety, hand-me-down furniture creaked ominously every time I sat on it, or our 1970s TV didn't get the best reception, or I had to wring my clothes out by hand because our ancient washing machine always quit before the spin cycle could kick in, I just considered that a fair trade for getting out of writing papers for my stupid English classes.

All of the people who were living in our apartment were of a similar age, somewhere between nineteen and twenty-two. They were all known to me before I joined the commune, except for one: Karena. Karena was the eldest of us at twenty-two; she was also nothing like any woman I had ever met before. She was small

of stature, loud in personality, clumsy by nature, a fairly decent carpenter and mechanic, and usually drunk for most parts of most days. She was a rather unpleasant person unless she was drinking; indeed, we all liked her better inebriated than sober. While the alcohol mightily increased her klutz factor, one of us was usually around to pick her up off the ground and dust her off or run her to the emergency room, as the case may be.

One late afternoon, all of us housemates were sitting around watching an extremely fuzzy episode of *Jeopardy!* on the ancient TV. During Double Jeopardy, we began to hear a sinister groaning noise. The four of us seated on the couch jumped up in alarm, suspecting that the decrepit piece of furniture we had been lounging on was about to collapse, but as we whirled around to inspect it, we heard a crashing sound behind us. The forty-year-old entertainment center, given to us by Karena's grandmother in a fit of uncharacteristic generosity, had disintegrated into a heap of dust and rubble. On the TV, which was perched victoriously on the mound of debris, a now crystal clear Alex Trebek continued to quiz the contestants in the category of World Literature. We sat back down to finish the episode, both pleased with the better television reception and bummed that we were out an entertainment center.

As the credits rolled on *Jeopardy!*, Karena, our amateur carpenter, proposed that we all chip in five bucks for materials and she would build us a brand new entertainment center that very night. We all thought that was a great idea and forked over the cash. Karena immediately departed for the hardware store and the rest of our housemates decided to go out for dinner and a movie. My important work with Ronald McDonald awaited me, so I left for my shift. I briefly considered hiding all the Captain Morgan in the house, but I had to discount that idea because discovering all of Karena's hidey-holes would have made me late for work, and she would have just gone out and bought some more alcohol, anyway. Besides, I figured her hands would be steadier with a little help from the Captain.

At work, I took orders at the front counter for a couple of hours. When the rush of customers slowed down, I applied myself to the all-important job of cleaning spilled coffee grounds from the cabinet underneath the coffee maker. From the elegant position of

having my head and shoulders stuck inside the cabinet and my butt sticking out of it, I heard Connie, my manager, call out my name with some urgency.

“Heather, your roommate is on the phone. She says she cut her finger off!”

“Uh . . .” I replied intelligently as I popped out of the cabinet.

“You need to go home. Now.” Connie ordered.

“Um, but . . .” I pointed to the cabinet with my towel. Surely that was more important?

“Now!” Connie reiterated, as she tugged the towel away from me.

“Okay, okay,” I muttered, as I began to walk back to the break room to gather my belongings.

Now this was almost twenty years ago, well before the advent of ubiquitous cell phone use. It was understandable that Karena would call me for help first, since my housemates were all unreachable at the movie theater, but as I drove home, I did briefly wonder why she didn’t just dial 9-1-1. If I cut my finger off, I would have called for an ambulance first thing, even though I was an uninsured and poverty-stricken teenager. I quickly shrugged off this line of thought, because it was such a Karena thing to do. Logic wasn’t exactly her strong suit, at least not when her brain was soaking in alcohol.

I arrived home four minutes after Karena’s phone call, pulled into the driveway, turned off the engine, and ran up the porch stairs and into the house. Karena’s German Shepherd mix, Meeka, was waiting for me at the door as usual. I didn’t pause to greet her but instead immediately began calling Karena’s name. I heard her faint response coming from the basement, where she had set up a temporary workshop. I raced down the steep basement stairs with Meeka in hot pursuit, and I beheld one of the more horrific sights I’d seen up to that point in my life: Karena, lying spread-eagled, in a gigantic pool of her own blood. Who knew a finger could bleed that much? I quickly moved over to where she was lying and demanded to see her hand. She held up her left hand, and though her index finger was gushing blood, it seemed to be mostly intact with maybe just a little bit of the front part missing. I exclaimed, “You told Connie you cut your finger off!”

“Did cut it off,” she slurred in response.

“Well, where is it then?” I asked sharply.

With her injured hand, she pointed to a spot underneath the table saw. I spied there a pink lump that could have been a part of a finger and moved closer to inspect it, with Meeka trailing behind me. I got down on my hands and knees to take a good look at it, and yes, it was definitely a piece of Karena’s finger. Not having acquired a medical degree, I didn’t know then that the doctors would not try to reattach this mangled piece of skin and flesh to Karena’s finger in any case, and I reasoned that I should put it in a plastic bag like people do on TV and bring it to the ER with us. I started to move away from the saw to rush back upstairs for a baggy and something to wrap Karena’s hand in, when I noticed Meeka moving closer to Karena’s flesh lump.

“Meeka! No!” I cried. She looked at me. I looked at her. We both looked at the bit of finger. “Don’t!” I commanded firmly, but it was futile. She lunged for the finger. I lunged for her. She had the finger in her mouth. I tried to use my own fingers to pry her mouth open to retrieve it, but that, too, was futile. She swallowed. I gasped in despair.

Karena rolled her head groggily toward us and asked, “S’matter?”

“Nothing,” I replied to her. “Bad dog!” I whispered to Meeka, receiving a lick on the nose in response. I tried not to think about the fact that she had just eaten a human finger and that I now had doggy finger saliva on my face. Completely forgetting about my plan to wrap Karena’s hand in something to stem the bleeding, I asked her if she could walk. She couldn’t, so I carried her up the stairs and transported her to the local ER, where she was then transported via ambulance to the nearest hand surgeon in Green Bay. I should have wrapped her hand up. My car seats were never the same.

A few months after “The Finger Incident,” I got a better-paying job and moved out of our shared apartment into an apartment of my own. I rarely saw Karena after that, but a few years later I met her by chance at a bar and we sat down to catch up. We discussed her finger briefly before moving onto other subjects, mostly the fact that, though it had healed up fairly well after two skin grafts, she was unable to

bend it at the first and second joints. Later in the night, she picked up her beer with her left hand to take a swig, and she poked herself right in the eye with that finger. I exclaimed, “Are you all right!?”

She casually said, “Oh yeah. Happens all the time.”

I inquired, “Why don’t you use your other hand, then?” She had no answer.

METALLIC SAFETY BLANKET

CARLOS PERALTA

It's raining outside.
Schwump schwump
go the wipers of my car,
a grounded throne.
I watch the water trickle
to the sides, the windshield
a microscope honing in.

The light is red, but two
lanes over a girl's head
is bobbing up and down
to the beats of "Starman."
Droplets of rain zing through
the window and dance off her
auburn hair, like clear pebbles
waltzing through the air.
A hair whiplashes her eye,
I cover my mouth, teeth showing.
Schwump schwump.

I squint my eyes, blinded
by the orange truck on 38-inch
tires in my rear-view. Their window
lowers and thick gray clouds
choke the sky, as a cigarette bud
dives into a puddle of mud. My trained
eyes hone in on the kids in the back

glazed over bright screens.
I pound my fist on the horn; the driver
in front startled. The light turns green
and my headlights illuminate
the majestic middle-finger ahead.

I drift off to the tempo
of the wipers, like a bottled message
out at sea to eventually wash up
at shore. And yet, I find myself
in my garage still inside the car,
like a placenta I don't want torn,
wipers screeching on dry glass.
Mentally I open the door, walk
inside the house, and stacks of unopened
bills greet me on the left, and landmines
of school books wave at me
on the right. Cranial nerves start
to palpate and I'm reminded
I need eggs. *Schwump schwump.*
I put my car in reverse and drive off.

GROUND ZERO

GRIFFIN HAMSTEAD

for the 2,996

friends speak to each
other in hushed tones
worried that if they're
too loud everything
might burn and crumble

again. their screams echo
in the silence of this massive
concrete bunker unsheltered
from the bombshell of lives
lost too soon, ingrained forever

into hearts, always remembered
for the absence they left, I'm left
speechless
and as the fire licks
my crying eyes . . .

8:00 a.m. *here*

11:00 a.m. *gone*

and every day I curse
the horror of our horrid
world and every day I
curse the curse that found
us in our hiding and every

day I curse myself for not
remembering, never able
remembering, always
remember this, always
remember this feeling

passing through a hall
of voices, loved ones
making last calls in
frantic tones, dial tones
“last call for flight 93”

from knoxville, *like me*
calling home, *could be me*

each one of you, someone
held once but not then, oh
how I can never know, how
I hope each one of you is a
star in the quiet night sky.

IGNORING DEATH

SAMANTHA HARDEN

I am not
Emily Dickinson,
sharing a table with a death—
 that stopped for her
—wicking away sauce from her plate
with a breadstick

Nor am I
Sylvia Plath,
who fought her death
 weekly,
in a dazed game of croquet, quipping, while
 mallets clacked
 against pink marble.

I am a fatted trash can raccoon,
 outside my death's house,
 and while
 he, Plath, and Dickinson all sit inside,
playing cribbage—
waiting for me,
 I am slinking under lawn furniture
 licking stickied wrappers
 sneaking glances back
into the shadows.

A DREAM IS A WISH YOUR HEART **MAKES**

ANGELA **KRAMER**

My ex-boyfriend is pretending to be a table in the garage. I can see his legs poking out from beneath the tablecloth, but no one believes me. And even if they did believe me, they don't think he's a threat. They don't know what the man underneath that pink tablecloth can do.

I place an old TV on him. That should hold him a while.

When you say “dreams,” you mean one of two things: hallucinations or aspirations. “A dream is a wish your heart makes.” Bullshit. It’s a useless biological phenomenon, a side effect of the brain’s complexity. But isn’t it interesting the way they’re always narrative? You never have a dream that’s just the taste of applesauce or purely smooth jazz for 8 hours straight. I’ve never dreamed the color “cosmic latte” or the texture of sandpaper, have you?

I don’t know if I ever enjoyed dreaming, but since my best friend Evan died I’ve come to hate it. There is no such thing as a good dream anymore. The best I can do is dream my friend is still alive, and then I wake up to the realization that it isn’t true, and it’s like he has died all over again. The *worst* I can do is to come up with new ideas for *Black Mirror* episodes while I sleep: What if your skin was social media-enabled and it posted all your movements to Facebook? What if someone kidnapped your entire family and would only accept Bitcoin as ransom? What if your ex-boyfriend was a table?

The day after my best friend died, I moved into my first apartment. This apartment was supposed to be my way out; I'd been dating my now-ex-boyfriend for a few months, and I knew already he was too immature, impulsive, and needy for it to work out. I had meant to draw a line in the sand. My apartment was my place. He couldn't stay there. It was over. I wanted to be alone.

And then Evan died. And I couldn't even talk about it with my best friend, because I'd never see him again—except in my dreams, and he never speaks in my dreams. My other friends didn't know what to say to me, so they stopped saying anything at all.

But I wasn't alone. My ex was there. *Always* there. Every day for the next three years. He hated to let me out of his sight.

Things my ex-boyfriend did when I (finally) broke up with him:

1. Stole \$600 from my checking account, overdrafting it by \$200.
2. Destroyed our apartment, breaking furniture, spilling Coke into the carpet, trailing dried flower petals all over.
3. Dumped my scrapbooks into a tub full of hot water.
4. Shredded my clothes.
5. Bought a gun, bullets, and antifreeze (to drink).
6. Showed up at my work and threatened suicide if I didn't come with him (I didn't).
7. Set fire to my childhood home.
8. Set fire to my car.
9. Possibly killed my cat? I don't know.
10. Dismembered the teddy bear given to me by my dead best friend.
11. Went to jail for two years.

Things my ex-boyfriend did when I (finally) broke up with him:

1. Lost my job.
2. Moved in with my mom.
3. Looked for my cat.
4. Failed to find him.

5. Fought with my bank. Paid the overdraft fees anyway.
6. Changed my hair.
7. Got a restraining order.
8. Moved in with friends.
9. Salvaged the scrapbooks.
10. Stitched the bear back together.
11. Developed insomnia.

Dreams are narrative because we think in stories. I'm a story I tell myself. It's how we make sense of things, and I'm still trying to make sense of this.

I wish I didn't dream at all. Or I wish I couldn't remember them. I wish things that were gone could stay gone.

I come back to the garage, but the TV is gone. He's moved. My ex is on the loose.

He's right behind me this time. I grab him around the throat, push him backwards onto the table, wrinkling the pink silk tablecloth. I can feel my weight bearing down on him. I can feel his bony chest beneath my knees. It occurs to me that this isn't real but I don't stop. I don't care that it's a dream. I'm screaming at him to go, to leave me the fuck alone. "Everyone knows what you did! Everyone knows!"

I wake up, and I don't dream about him again for a long time.

HOW TO BE A MAN (WHAT WE WERE **TAUGHT**)

DAVEY **MANN**



HAPPY JUST TO DANCE WITH YOU

ANGELA KRAMER

Jeannie and I met at school back when we still had to wear jumpers and knee highs—we didn't get to wear skirts and jackets until high school. It didn't make much difference to me; the skirt still hung a good inch past my knee. Jeannie was tall, though. She was constantly being hounded by the Sisters to pull her skirt down. I don't know why they even bothered; there weren't any boys at St. Joe's, and there wouldn't be until after I graduated and my little sister Margaret started there in 1970.

I liked Jeannie from the very start. She made me giggle so much the Sisters would make me move seats. I think that's why my mother didn't like her: it was Jeannie's fault she was always getting calls from school about me. Or maybe the fact that her family was German. They may as well have come over on the *Mayflower* as far as I was concerned. Her parents didn't have accents like mine and they only made her eat sauerkraut on New Year's, while my mother made lampredotto twice a month.

Jeannie was an only child. I had Maria Elena older than me and Margaret younger than me, not to mention four cousins in town who might as well have been my siblings; we saw them often enough. (Well, only three in town since Agnes went to the convent.) Maria Elena said we had a brother too, but he died before I was born. I love my family, especially the little cousins, and even Margaret when she's not being a pain, but sometimes I wonder what it would have been like to be the only one.

I liked to go over to Jeannie's and pretend it was just us. Her parents let me stay over for dinner whenever I liked. There was always more than enough food, and her mom made us meatloaf

and let us eat in front of the TV if Jeannie's father was away. He sold insurance, and I swore he looked like John Wayne, only blonde. That made Jeannie laugh and scrunch up her face.

Jeannie's mom sold Mary Kay, so Jeannie was on the edge of everything fashion. She started ratting her dirty blonde hair up before anyone, and sometimes put mascara on me before class if we got to school early enough. And as far as the girls at St. Joe's were concerned, *she* discovered The Beatles. She had "Mrs. Ringo Starr" scribbled in her notebook months before they went on Ed Sullivan. I never would have even heard of The Beatles if it weren't for Jeannie. Her mom would give her the seventy cents without question any time she wanted a new 45. My mother wanted us to listen to the same June Christy and Dean Martin LPs on repeat until we died of Old Fogey's Syndrome.

"Why don't you take 'P.S. I Love You' home with you?" Jeannie asked when she finally got sick of me complaining about the complete lack of culture at my own house. "Then your sisters can listen too." She couldn't fathom the nightmare it would be trying to hide the 45s from my mom, much less find a time when she wasn't home that I could play them. (As far as I knew, my mother only left the house for groceries and Mass.)

"Why don't I just move in here?" I asked.

She giggled, her tongue between her teeth. "If only!"

I don't know when exactly I started to notice things like that, like her tongue between her teeth. All the tiny things that Jeannie and only Jeannie did. I just remember when Margaret finally snapped at me: "Can't you talk about anything besides Jeannie?"

It bothered me for days. I had other friends! I talked about them plenty. What did she care if I talked about Jeannie a lot? She was my best friend!

Then Maria Elena came over and she was so quiet that Mother asked her if the honeymoon period was over. She didn't answer. Daniel and Maria Elena hadn't even been married two years yet. And when she first started going with him, she couldn't stop talking about him! It drove us all bananas.

And that's when I realized Jeannie was my Daniel. I mean, I *did* think about her all the time, and just thinking about her made

me smile. I stood in front of the bathroom mirror and thought about Jeannie's laugh. I watched my cheeks flush and the edges of my mouth curve up without my permission. I tried it over and over again, and just knowing it was her that caused it made me smile even more.

From that day on, every time I saw Jeannie in the morning, that dopey song by Paul Anka, "Puppy Love," would start to play in my head. It was another one of my mother's favorites, the kind of song that would make Jeannie gag: sweet and slow. But I couldn't help it, every song was about her. I wanted to hold her hand, she made me twist and shout, and I gave her all my loving from the moment I saw her standing there. I wanted a poster of her on my wall like other girls had posters of John, Paul, George, and Ringo.

Before then, I didn't even know I could feel something like that. When girls asked me which Beatle I liked best, I'd say Paul because that's what everyone said. I'd see girls swoon and scream for them, but Jeannie and I were above it. Or so I thought. I wanted to swoon when Jeannie held my chin to put my mascara on in the morning, and when she grabbed my hand to pull me onto the bus, I wanted to scream.

We went to see *My Fair Lady* and I grabbed Jeannie's hand during the very first song. She giggled and didn't let go. I had no idea if it made her stomach do the twist like it made mine, but something about the way she fought a smile every time she looked at me made me think it did.

I didn't know what any of it meant, I just knew how I felt. I'd never so much as heard of a word for it, much less did I know anyone else who felt the same about girls. It wasn't something good Catholic girls talked about. If I had, my parents would have sent me to a doctor. Women were supposed to marry men. The Bible and Father Pilliad and the Sisters and, of course, my parents all agreed it was a woman's duty to serve her husband. And there was only one way out of that: become an old maid—maybe even a nun. The alternatives didn't even bear mentioning; my mother would disown me.

"Why do you like Ringo?" I asked over "I'll Follow the Sun." It had only come out two days ago, but I'd already heard it a dozen times.

"I love his accent," Jeannie said, flipping through the orange- and yellow-labeled discs looking for something in particular.

I rolled my eyes. "They *all* have accents."

She shrugged. "I just think he's cute. I think my mom stole 'I'll Cry Instead.'"

"Your mom likes The Beatles?" I asked, tucking my chin back and shaking my head. (Was there any way her mom wasn't groovier than mine?)

"Just Paul, she thinks he's so fine." She did the thing with her tongue between her teeth. Then recognition dawned on her face. "Just like you!"

I tossed my head again, my frizzy hair trying to escape its ponytail. "I just like his songs best. Why are you looking for 'I'll Cry Instead?' I thought you didn't like that one."

"I don't, but 'I'm Happy Just to Dance With You' is on the reverse." Jeannie bounced off her bed and through her bedroom door, her skirt swishing as she went. Before the next verse started, she came back with the missing record between her thumb and forefinger. "Get up," she said, trading out the records and setting the needle.

"Why?" I asked, already obeying.

She held her hands out to me. "Because I want to slow dance."

I wrinkled my nose, even though it sounded like heaven.

"Come on! You need to learn before the winter dance."

"Jeannie . . ."

"Someone is going to ask you and then you'll be embarrassed when you can't dance."

She was wrong and I knew she was wrong, but I took her hands anyway.

"This song's too fast," I complained. "Why'd you pick this?"

Jeannie frowned. "I remembered it being slower. It reminds me of you."

I listened to every single word, recommitting them to memory with this newfound information. Every time she went to restart the record, I'd do the mashed potato or the Watusi or something just to

make her laugh when she turned back around. And her laugh made me laugh, and she'd take me giggling in her arms.

A boy did ask Jeannie to the dance. His name was Bobby and he went to the co-ed public school and all the girls sighed and said she was so lucky. Bobby was dreamy. No one dreamy asked me. No one asked at all. There was a boy from church named Giovanni who was a real square, but I asked him to go with me as friends. I didn't want to stay home while everyone else went out and had fun. I wore blue and Jeannie wore white. I don't remember a word Giovanni said to me the whole night, but I remember he was a rotten dancer.

That's when I first thought about joining the convent. I tried to butter my mother up on the idea. The first time, I asked in the car on the way home from Mass, "Do you think cousin Agnes would like it if I wrote to her?"

My mother's lips pursed tightly. "I'm not sure if that's a good idea, Carlotta," she said with finality.

I pressed on anyway. "I thought she might get lonely sometimes. And I thought I might ask her how she likes Saint Cecilia's."

Saint Cecilia's is a convent. Usually, girls only get sent to the convent because they've done something wrong. All Agnes really liked were things: dresses, gloves, sweaters, and pins. She borrowed clothes off her sisters and me, too. If we were lucky, she'd return them. The Bible says not to be greedy and covetous—and not to steal—but I didn't think my aunt and uncle would have sent her away just for that. And I couldn't believe she wanted to go, either. She used to fidget worse than the babies at Mass, or fall asleep, and I had to feed her the lines of the Nicene Creed in Catechism class up until she stopped going. The girls who chose to go to St. Cecilia's were boring, high-and-mighty types.

My mother looked dismissively out her window, disinterested. "If I remember, I'll ask your aunt for the address."

I let it lie there for a few days. There was no reason to push her yet. Maria Elena had taught me that: the more time you give Mom to decide, the better the chances that your idea will suddenly become her idea.

One afternoon, after a call from Maria Elena, I put on a smile and said, “It must be wonderful having three daughters, knowing you’ll have plenty of grandchildren.”

She raised her eyebrows and answered uncertainly, “I hope so. Sometimes I wonder if Maria Elena is even trying.”

“Maybe she doesn’t know how.” I laughed. Her disapproving look made me instantly regret it.

The next day at the grocery, I thought to try again. While her mind was elsewhere, weighing tomatoes pensively, judging their ripeness with experienced hands, I asked, “Could I visit Agnes at Saint Cecilia’s? I was thinking I’d like to see the convent for myself.” Her dark eyes met mine, and I knew she would not enter into this conversation here, or now, or ever if she had anything to say about it.

I tried one last time, alone, in the kitchen, while we were making pasta. I cranked the metal contraption and she gathered the long thin noodles and coiled them into piles on the wax paper. I could think of no better way to preface it, so I said the hard thing.

“Mama, I think I’d like to join a convent. After I finish school of course.”

For a second, I didn’t think she heard me. Then, with so much anger it surprised me, she answered, “What a foolish idea.”

It took me a moment to remember all my carefully constructed arguments. “I . . . I want to serve God,” I stuttered.

“Oh, Carlotta.” My mother was exasperated already. “You don’t even know what you’re saying. You don’t even know what you’d be giving up.”

“You know I’ve never wanted children.”

“Carlotta.” She kept repeating my name, as if it was the magic word that would make me see sense. “You don’t know. I *know*. I know what it’s like to hold a baby in your arms, to feel it growing inside you, to look down at their little face and feel happiness. To love them before they are even born. To feel purpose.”

The thought of something growing inside me only made me feel queasy. “I think my purpose is to serve God. I want to help people in His name. And I could still have children in my life. I could teach.

And I *will* be an aunt as well.” I tried again to kindle the hope that Maria Elena and Margaret would fulfill their duties where I wouldn’t.

Mama inhaled deeply and laid another coil of pasta on the wax paper. She stood staring at me, waiting. I hadn’t realized I’d stopped cranking the press. We were having company, we’d need more spaghetti than this, but I let the thin strip of dough hang in the air.

“I know you don’t get attention from the boys like Maria Elena, or even like Margaret, but you have other things to offer than beauty. You will make a good home, a good wife. Your father will find you someone . . .”

“I don’t . . .” I interrupted, but fell short. What could I say? I couldn’t tell her that no man, not any man, could convince me to make a home with him. I couldn’t tell her what I’d finally understood, that the way I was supposed to feel for men—the way Maria Elena had felt for Daniel—was the way I felt for Jeannie. I couldn’t tell her I suspected Jeannie had felt it too. Nor, for that matter, could I tell that to Jeannie. So instead I offered, “I don’t understand, Agnes went to Saint Cecilia’s. Agnes is going to take her vows . . .”

My mother shouted, “Agnes did not go to Saint Cecilia’s!” I’d never heard her shout before. “Is this what this is about? Is this about what happened to Agnes?”

My mouth hung open. I didn’t know what she was saying. What had happened to Agnes? If she wasn’t at a convent, then where was she? I was too afraid now to ask. “No, I’m sorry. This just . . .” I hesitated, “feels right to me. Like Father Pilliad says, it’s like a calling. Every day, I just want to be closer to God. I want to learn His Word and bring His love into the world. I want to bring children into God’s care, Mama. I want to lead others away from sin. And if it doesn’t work out, I can help take care of you and Papa. I can help take care of all my nieces and nephews and our cousins’ children. I think this is my calling.” I said it again, because it sounded indisputable, whether it was true or not.

My mother heaved a sigh, and took up my place turning the crank. Her eyes did not meet mine. “It sounds like you’ve made up your mind,” she said angrily.

It was clear I was no longer welcome, so I left the kitchen to give her room to think. But as the door swung closed behind me, I couldn't help but feel something swelling inside me. Something that felt like victory.

One afternoon, a month or so before graduation, my mother brought up the convent without any prodding from me.

"Saint Cecilia's has lovely roses," she said.

"Yes, I hear they do," I answered. I was doing science homework on the coffee table in the living room. She had walked into the room only a moment before and was pretending to pick a book from the shelf. My mother didn't read well in English and she wasn't looking at the books in Italian.

"We could go to look at them in June. They will be in bloom then."

She smiled, pulled a book from the shelf, dusted it, and slid it back in. I didn't question her; Maria Elena had told me before she got married that we'd butt heads a lot less if I just learned not to question her.

In the second week of June, true to her word, Mother took a bus with me an hour away to see the convent. It looked exactly like the pictures in the brochures they passed out at St. Joe's. Except now there were women fluttering about everywhere: whispering in pews and tending the roses (which were lovely, my mom was right).

I expected the women of St. Cecilia's to be exactly like the Sisters at school. I looked for cruel mouths and rulers in hand, ready to snap my wrists for laughing when I wasn't supposed to. But all the women here were, well, *girls*. None more than a few years older than me. Of course. They only came here to learn and take their vows. Then they would leave St. Cecilia's to grow into mean old nuns elsewhere.

Mother and I sat in the garden and I twisted my mouth back and forth, wondering if this was really what I wanted.

"I had a baby boy in Italy," my mother said quietly. I didn't say anything. Mother doesn't talk about Italy. "But he didn't survive in the United States. He died of just a little cold."

I started picking at the wooden bench. I don't know why, but I suddenly felt guilty.

"I thought, these States, they are nothing like people said. My little boy died for them. In Florence, he would have been warm and fat and happy, but not here. Here it's damp and dirty. When Maria Elena got sick, I knew we'd made a mistake. We'd come to a terrible place and God was punishing us for abandoning our family for your father's greed.

"But Maria Elena lived. Then I had you. I had your sister. And I would have had many more children if I had been able to. But that was not God's will." She took a deep breath. "Sometimes, I think I know what God is saying, and I am wrong. But I still listen. Carlotta, I am listening. Is this what God is telling you to do?"

I looked into her heavy-lidded brown eyes that were just a shade or two darker than my own. I didn't know what to do. If I wavered now, she'd never believe me if I said I wanted to come here again. I had to be certain, so I was. "Yes, Mama. God is calling me here."

She nodded and looked down at the dirt. "When the little boy died, I wanted to take everything back. I begged God to bring me another chance. But there is no going back. You have to keep going."

I wanted her to tell me that she made the right choice staying here, having Margaret and me. I wanted her to tell me that in the end it had worked out alright. I wanted her to smooth my hair, to say that she was glad we were here, that I existed. But that wasn't my mother, that was Jeannie's mom. My mother stood and walked back toward the bus station, mumbling about whether she could still make dinner in time for my father.

I found out that day that Agnes had never so much as visited St. Cecilia's. I made sure to ask while my mother was in the restroom. Agnes's name wasn't in the register; no one had even heard of her. It wasn't until years later that Margaret would find her living in the city, married to a Mexican boy, and working in an office. Margaret found it endlessly scandalous, but I figured it was none of my business how she lived her life or whom she loved. Her choices had led her away from St. Cecilia's, as my choices had led me to it, but whatever the

reasons, they belonged to her. If she wanted me to know, maybe she would tell me herself someday.

* * *

I didn't know it would take two years to join an order, and two more to finish postulancy. I think if I'd had anything else to do, I might have given up on it. But my parents wouldn't let me leave the house without getting married, and college was out of the question unless I could pay my own way.

Jeannie and I lost touch after graduation. She stopped going to church and started a typing course. I thought she wanted to be a career woman, but I guess I was wrong. When I heard she had married some boy from the city the same week I was to begin my postulancy, I took it as a sign. I became a novice and took the name Sister Elizabeth. Not after Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, but after Saint Elizabeth of Hungary: patron of bakers, beggars, brides, and deceased children.

I took my vows and was sent to a school in another state, farther north. I liked snow, I thought, and Margaret would be going to college up this way on a scholarship. There were worse ways to spend the rest of my life.

The school I was called to was Saint Peter's, and the Sisters there were kind to me and welcoming in their letters. We would all live together in a stone building with noisy radiators and few hot water bottles. It was mid-January when I arrived, and I realized immediately that I would always be miserably cold. When Mother Superior showed me to my room and left me, I set down my bag and heaved a sigh. What was it my mother had said? There are no wrong turns?

"Sister Elizabeth?" a curious voice called from the door. When I turned, all I could see were her dimples. Dimples. Adorable, sweet, charming little dimples and crooked teeth. "I'm Sister Constance, but you can call me Rose in here."

"I'm Carlotta," I offered, and her smile brightened. When she realized I was staring she looked shyly away.

"Do you like music?" she asked. "We don't have much selection in the library, so I've started my own kind of library." She kneeled down in her stiff black dress and pulled back the covers to

show milk crates full of LPs shoved side by side under her bed next to a blue Zenith record player.

“Do you like The Beatles?” I asked breathlessly. I’d brought two 45s that Margaret had lent me, and now I was glad to know I was going to get to play them.

Rose’s smile faltered for the first time. “They’re alright. Do you like Neil Diamond?”

I rolled my eyes without thinking, but Rose had already looked away. Neil Diamond was the first new record my mother had bought in almost ten years.

“He’s fine,” I answered. Rose pulled the record player out and fished the record from its sleeve. The first few notes of “Sweet Caroline” started up and I sat down on what would now be my bed. “I mean his *music’s* fine. I know everyone thinks he’s a hunk and all . . .”

Rose shook her head knowingly and let her eyes flutter. “I know! The other Sisters go on and on about him and I . . .” she continued insistently, “I just like the songs.”

I tried, really tried, to see what she liked about it, and she just sat on the floor smiling up at me expectantly. I laughed. Something about her easy smile made me giddy, despite the cold.

“How can you stay so cheery when it’s colder than the North Pole up here? Is it like this all the time?” I asked.

Rose shrugged and reached her hand out. I grabbed it and helped pull her up. She sat on the creaky bed next to me and wrapped one arm around me. “You’ll get used to it. People can get used to anything.”

I didn’t believe her, but then again, as we sat there on my bed, her hand rubbing some warmth into my back, I started to *get* Neil Diamond. I always thought this song was such a drag, probably something he wrote in five minutes for a groupie. But suddenly I could hear the strings and the backup singers in perfect harmony, and suddenly I could hear the words. How had I never listened to the words?

I started to laugh.

“What?” Rose asked, wrinkling her nose with another grin.

I stood up and offered my hand. “Do you know how to dance?”

ARDEA HERODIAS

SAMANTHA HURST

I was once the religious type, and an adventurer.
And back when the river water flowed clear and the air wasn't
heavy with bugs I would walk
barefoot over mossy stones and fight the current as it rushed over
my naked knees.
The trees were my stained glass cathedral, the schools of fish the
congregation.
I was John the Baptist.
And she was not invited.
On the one hot summer morning, the woman scared me half to
death. A flower dress and long
gray hair, a silver knife in hand.
*This is Heaven, she told me. Right next to my hat shop and garden,
this is what a third of my
Heaven will be. I already have it all planned out with God,* as she
carved a cross into a tree.
Oh, really? I said, without knowing what else there was to say.
I had never once imagined that God had made the river for anyone
else but me. I didn't want to
share Heaven with a crazy old lady.
The next morning, the river was covered in fog and a giant gray-
haired heron stood silently. It
only stared with one yellow eye as it saw me, then slowly, at its own
pace, spread its silver wings
and headed toward Heaven.

[AF-TER]

SAMANTHA HURST

after *prep.* 1. Following behind: If they said our names in order, mine came *after* yours. I was born first, but what did that matter? A favorite is a favorite. I hated you for it. 2. Later in time: We grew up too early, and *after* the dust settled, we were all that was left. Two towers left standing, willing each other not to crumble. 3. Subsequent to and in consequence of: *After* all, who understood us better than ourselves? Twisted twins, we share the same disease but different symptoms. 4. Below in rank or excellence: Now I'm our mother's favorite, *after* mine, your name falls flat, a tone of disappointment. 5. In imitation of: But in how I talk and how I act, my confidence and laugh, it's you I'm modeled *after*. 6. In pursuit or search of: There are places you go where I can't follow. I don't understand just what you're *after*. What are you looking for? What can you gain from tearing your own walls down around you? 7. Concerning: But baby brother, my blood, wherever you go, my mind will inquire *after* you.

HOW TO STOP SMOKING CIGARETTES

KRISTEN MAYSE

1. You don't
Marlboro Southern Cuts
so strong and smooth.
Gas station black ice trees
growing from your dash.
Empty Marathon cups
once filled with the world's best coffee.
Windows down, air blasting
to rid the smokescreen.
Ashes falling out of the window
along with the ass of the last drag.
Thinking of carbonated delicacies
instead reaching for a white lighter.
Your mom doesn't like the stench,
reminding her of her childhood.
Reeking of tobacco leaves on the playground.
Inhale your coworkers,
exhale at 5 o'clock during rush hour.
Buttering a roll at Christmas dinner
smelling the last pack on your fingertips.
Strong, sweet, satisfying musk.
Black, hairy tongues
plaque filled teeth
sucking air into your collapsed lungs.
2. You said you would quit last week

ARROWS

R.K. DESHPANDE

Janaki Valmiki's first life scattered into the wind on a moonlit beach on India's western shore, one clear night in December of 1974. The air was still, the sky shone with a thousand crystals like a twinkling chandelier from Janaki's dreams, and yet the horizon out on the Arabian Sea might as well have been shrouded with storms.

Riccardo Patrese was speaking, his arms wrapped around Janaki's back. In their year together, Riccardo had taught her enough of his Italian that, according to him, she could wander his home streets in Rome effortlessly. Yet she wished that the words from his mouth would mean nothing.

"I've . . . I have got to go back . . . back to Italy."

"Why?" Janaki sobbed.

Electric moondrops lit the tears falling down Riccardo's ashen cheeks. "It . . . it's my grandmother," he said. "She is deeply ill, and Mama wants me back." He bowed his head into hers.

"She . . . she only wired me enough money for one ticket back."

Janaki tightened her hold around him, letting her head come to rest on his shoulder. His should have been a perfectly reasonable explanation, and yet, she closed her eyes, not wanting to see the stars, or the sea, or anything at all. What was the point now?

"I wish . . . I wish I could leave you *anything*."

Even after he left for Bombay, Riccardo would leave Janaki with a chain of memories.

She remembered how they had met. He had been an Italian traveller, come all the way to India on the overland. She had been a student in a Goa medical college, a Dalit girl whom her classmates believed had only been admitted thanks to a government quota. Even if she did graduate with flying colors, few patients would dare

let Janaki touch them. She knew it, her teachers knew it, and the friends she didn't have knew it too.

She had been the one to find him one night, lying in agony on the street outside her hostel. He'd been so drunk he hadn't known what universe he'd been in, let alone what country, and only after using her entire day's water supply—the hostel, a relic of a time when Goa had still been ruled by uncaring colonialists, had no running water—had he sobered up.

He'd awoken in the morning, realizing after a moment that the hand on his brow was friendly. It had taken several attempts to communicate before they had both finally settled on simplified English. She'd nursed him back to standing capacity, perhaps the first productive use of her education, and helped him outside, to an auto rickshaw.

He'd returned the next day, holding a ribbon-wrapped bottle of white wine in his hand. "I . . . I should say thank you," he'd said. "I would have been dead if you hadn't come. I can't say it enough."

Janaki had looked around at her little closet of a room, before looking back at the man before her. One glance at the deep wells of his eyes was enough for her to know how genuine he was.

"No," Janaki she had said, beginning to tear up, "thank *you*."

Riccardo had noticed and leaned forward. "Is everything all right?"

Sniffing, Janaki had bowed her head. "You appreciated me. No one's ever done that for me before."

"Really?"

She'd nodded, feeling the tears starting to drip off her cheeks.

"Well," Riccardo had smirked, opening the bottle, "let me be the first."

They'd parted ways later that day, both quite a bit happier, having promised to keep writing each other.

The first letter after Riccardo's departure reached her within the week, its yellowed envelope gilding the rusty walls of her mailbox.

At the sight of her name written in his Arabesque handwriting, her heart leapt from its cage like a dolphin from the sea. He had scrawled his home address in the corner, complete with *00194 ROMA ITALIA*, yet, the very Indian stamp of Jawaharlal Nehru on the letterhead told Janaki that he had not posted it outside of this country.

The letter had been scrawled on the back of a Bombay Airport welcome guide, an informality that made Janaki laugh. *Hello, dear Janaki*, its contents began.

“Hello,” she said back.

I wish I could have stayed in India.

Janaki brought the paper up to her lips. “Part of you did,” she said.

I’m about to leave, but this is all I had. I want you to have it.

As if on cue, a slightly damp, slightly crumpled wad of hundred-rupee banknotes fell from the envelope, onto her mattress.

I don’t know what you would do with it, but you always said you wanted to see the world. What’s in here is enough to get a passport from the office in Panaji.

Even Janaki did not quite know when, precisely, the idea sparked. She looked around, sighting the few things she could throw into a bag and take with her. Before she was even thinking, her hand had already begun drafting a response, on a blank page ripped out of the back of a textbook.

I’m coming, my love, she scrawled, to Italy. Are you surprised?

It was March when Janaki boarded a train at Vasco da Gama train station, seeing Goa for the last time.

Two dazed days later, an entirely different train pulled under the corrugated shelter of New Delhi’s main railway station. Janaki pulled her stiffened legs out from under the hardened third-class bench and lazily alighted. Keeping her bag close to her body, she dodged through lapping waves of passengers and found a rickety Indian Railways ticket booth, complete with a DO NOT PAY BRIBES sign and a half-asleep man.

“How . . . how do I catch the train to Pakistan?” she asked, in provincially accented Hindi.

The man looked at her funny. “There is no train to Pakistan,” he said.

“What?”

He reached down to light a cigarette. “Have you been living under a rock for four years? Do you not remember the war?” Janaki averted his gaze, wanting to curse herself for being so naïve.

The man exhaled, and Janaki winced as the foul fumes of cheap beedi struck her face. “You could try biking,” he mocked. Under eyelids Janaki had trained to be still, her irises lit up. She’d been lucky enough to own a cycle back in her childhood. And if she could cycle up the hill to the school where the teachers wouldn’t give her the lunch the government had promised her even if her family had been starving, where she’d been forced to sit on a gunny sack so as not to dirty the floor, and where she was considered too impure to ever use the toilet, then surely, she could cycle over the mountains Riccardo had told her about. Perhaps she could even cycle the whole path to Italy. Thinking about it didn’t seem so bad.

After Janaki ran out the station exit, past the Rail Reservation Centre and through the bustling rainbow market of Chelmsford Road, she found a little corner shop selling bicycles. Next to an Amul ice cream stand, she picked out the cheapest cycle she could find, a sky-blue one meant for schoolgirls. Her frame was small enough that she would fit. Janaki laughed to herself. “Of a sort.”

It was about four hundred kilometers from Delhi to the border crossing at Ganda Singh Wala. Janaki covered that in five days.

Delhi seemed to stretch on forever through the first day, but it was nothing compared to the vast expanses of Haryana countryside. She passed by shepherds’ flocks, bullock carts, cotton-white Hindustani Ambassadors beleaguered on roads eaten away from long monsoon years. The one constant was the stares she

got, reminding her that Haryana was not the sort of place women typically travelled alone.

On the first evening, she reached Panipat, knowing that she had to do something about this last problem. She stopped in the center of town, down the street from the train station. She found a little general store on the ground floor of a tourist hotel. Packs of white-shirted men watched her leave her bicycle against a tree outside and rush in.

“I’d like to buy clothes,” Janaki said, in the best English she could manage.

The checkered-shirted clerk looked with narrowed eyes at the drab jungle-green dress she was wearing. “We . . . we do not sell . . .”

“I know that. I want Western clothes. I want to look like a foreigner.”

So Janaki emerged from that shop dressed in blue jeans and a baggy shirt. As she hopped back on her bike and plunged ever further northwest, the Haryanvis now judged her as a silly foreigner, someone best left alone.

Janaki subsided off cheap street food from the towns she passed through; her government stipend went a long way without any rent to pay. She slept in a sleeping bag under trees, realizing far too late that she hadn’t quite thought this bit out. She’d always had a fear of the dark.

But she awoke somewhere outside Patiala in Punjab one morning, seeing the sunrise creep over the far hills from her remote perch off the road. She knew then she’d been all right.

* * *

Janaki’s first border crossing sat in an amphitheatre at the end of a bridge. Even as the queue snaked across the sandstone paving stones, the Indian and Pakistani guards next to them exchanged pomp and circumstance, marching to and fro with high steps, looking like garish saffron and emerald peacocks in their regalia.

As Janaki waited in the queue, she looked back, seeing the trees in the distances, her last glimpses of a country she might never cast eyes upon again.

“You don’t like India?” Riccardo had asked once, in the shadow of an electric fan, not long after they’d first met. He’d seemed surprised, as if he hadn’t considered such a thing to be possible.

She’d shaken her head, letting the fan blow her hair all about. “In another country, maybe people would not smear bullshit on my door.” Someone had done that the previous week, after they’d somehow found out who she was. Riccardo had noticed the stains when he’d entered.

Riccardo had silently stared back. Several seconds later, “I do not understand,” he’d said.

Janaki had nodded, taking a deep breath. “I am a Dalit,” she’d said. He’d frowned, not quite understanding what that had meant. “My ancestors cleaned other people’s shit,” Janaki had continued. “These things run in the family. Mine became untouchable.”

Riccardo had leaned forward. “What does that mean?”

“It means that I’m treated like shit. I’ve had to deal with shit like that mess on my door, my whole life.”

An American-accented voice from somewhere in front of her brought Janaki back into the queue. “Fucking get your passport out.”

She reached into her bag and pulled out her own, running her finger over the gilt of Ashoka’s lion and the **REPUBLIC OF INDIA**. Her proper birthdate was in there, as was her village, but was this booklet really her?

Before she could question further, it was her turn. Her heart beat, fearing that she had forgotten something—did she need a visa?—but seconds later, the bored-looking young Pakistani man stamped something and handed the booklet back. Janaki guided her bicycle over the line, now further than she’d ever considered possible.

Pakistan followed from there, one day after another—Lahore and Gujranwala and Jhelum—blurring into each other. Janaki was surprised that she could still understand the locals’ language, after a fashion.

In Rawalpindi, she literally collided with a street artist leaning back against the lamppost outside a mosque. His drawing pad, scrawled with half-finished outlines of the mosque's minarets, flew up and over his head and into the neighboring wall.

His name was Imran. "To think I've never left this city," he mused, after he learned where Janaki was going. She smiled and laughed a little. He paid her to stand by her bike in front of the same mosque and let him draw her, which she was more than happy to do for his little moments of joy. "Remember me when you're standing in Italy."

"You don't want to come?"

Imran shook his head. "My place is here."

Next came Peshawar, a quiet town nestled in the foothills of the Hindu Kush. Leaving it behind and ascending into the mountains felt like ascending into a childhood home she'd long ago left behind.

"I don't ever want to go back," she'd told Riccardo every time she'd brought it up. This one time, both of them had laid beside each other, neither with clothes on. Her head had been nestled in his glistening chest, letting the Indian summer humidity soak through her hair.

"My home doesn't feel one. My father died. My mother doesn't really think of me very highly. Have you got family?"

"No," she'd said. "My parents passed away. There's a couple of uncles who don't like me." Perhaps, in another time, it would have brought tears to her eyes. Janaki had long ago accepted it as part of her place in life.

"Hey," Riccardo had said, "we can be each other's family instead."

She'd smiled. "I'd love that."

Compared to the last border Janaki had been through, entering Afghanistan through the Khyber Pass felt like child's play. The guards' eyes were as red as the sunset, and they were giggling uncontrollably between themselves. They seemed to regard Janaki as just another traveller, smiling rather overenthusiastically, looking her once over, then waving her through without so much as even bothering to check for papers.

Maybe they knew, Janaki wondered, maybe they were even quietly supporting her?

Maybe she wasn't so unlucky, after all.

It was in cloudy Kabul, when Janaki was seated in the regal courtyard of a tourist hotel still cheap enough for her to afford a lunch, that a second letter found its way into Janaki's hands. By sheer coincidence, it had been carried by a traveller—a clueless but helpful Belgian girl named Lily—to that very hotel. Then again, Janaki had only gone there since Riccardo had mentioned it, so perhaps it was not coincidence at all?

This one had been written on the back of some sort of meaningless Italian political pamphlet, covered with hammers and sickles. *I'm not surprised at all, Janaki, Riccardo had written. I'd tell you to be careful, but I know better than that.* He recommended her some places he'd visited when he'd been in Kabul.

I'll visit them all, she wrote back. See you soon.

She spent two days there, visiting them all: the German bakery, the hookah lounge by the lake, the national stadium, where she watched a buzkashi match. She would remember Kabul fondly; it was clearly no wealthier than home, and yet the city felt free, as if anything was possible here. Men in traditional robes and turbans walked side-by-side with Toyotas and women in miniskirts. Janaki found something beautiful in that.

And then Janaki ran over a rock.

It was not the first rock she had run over, but this one had been sharpened by some accident of geology. She heard the bike tire crackle and pop before the cycle gave way altogether. She almost fell, only halting herself by scraping the dusty ground with her sandal sole. For just a moment, she ruminated on all the dirt that sandal had seen, and all the dirt it was yet to see, before she was able to get her leg over and awkwardly drag to a halt.

She dragged herself and the bike into a ditch and inspected it. It was useless; nothing in sight would reinflate a bike tire, and there was no way she could fashion a replacement from rocks, dirt, and loosened pieces of pavement.

So Janaki sat there, upon another boulder, staring at the tattered straps of her sandals darkening for hours in the fading sun, feeling the Afghan evening's chill settle all around her. She could hike back to Kabul, perhaps, or onwards, to whatever the next city was—Herat? Either way was too far, and she did not have enough money for a new bicycle in either direction. She definitely couldn't afford anything else, and the locals passing by in carts and old trucks paid her no attention. Her thoughts fed back into each other in an hours-long loop.

It was during another countless one of those iterations that a shred of conversation filtered through, from another beach months earlier, as the two of them watched the gently lapping waves of the sea.

“Everyone says it's karma that put me here,” Janaki had said.

Riccardo had tightened his fingers snugly around her hands. “If karma put a good person like you in this position, then, surely, something has to balance it out?”

Janaki had looked up into his eyes. “Am I a good person?” she'd asked.

Even if he didn't quite understand, Riccardo had smiled. “Something good is bound to happen to you.”

The next she knew, she saw the front of a rainbow-swirled van, like another one of the brightly painted Volkswagens owned by European travellers. It pulled up to the roadside. One of the doors opened, and a woman with short, cropped jet-black hair stepped outside, the wind blowing her red scarf in trails behind her. She said something in a language Janaki could not hope to understand.

“I'm sorry?” Janaki replied. “I don't speak . . .”

“Oh. I said, you look lost. Do you need a lift?”

Knowing she could not muse over her luck for much longer, Janaki nodded, and the woman beckoned her into the caravan.

The other woman's name, Janaki learned as she felt a warm cup of tea enter her numbed hands, was Natsuki Sato.

She'd come from Yokohama, Natsuki told her. She and her brother had both been living in West Germany for several years, and in the spring of 1974, they'd collectively decided to take a

months-long break and drive down the trail to India. Those months had transformed into a year and a half, and only an irate telegram about a death in the family had called them back. Janaki in turn described her journey's purpose.

"I've never met a girl traveling so far on her own," said Natsuki. Her van had been completely redone on the inside, the back seats replaced with a pair of cots and an airplane-type toilet in the back. Someone was lightly tapping a beat against the toilet's little inside door. "You're going halfway around the world?"

Janaki wasn't entirely sure how to respond. "Are . . . are you surprised?" she said.

Natsuki laughed. "Not at all," she said. "I'm surprised it's not more common."

Her brother emerged from the lavatory. He was wearing jeans, seemingly identical to Janaki's, and a ruby-coloured shirt. He took one look at the scene before him, frowned, and hissed words Janaki could not understand.

Natsuki laughed, before ignoring her brother completely and turning to Janaki. "Aguri doesn't speak English, I'm afraid," she said. "Anyway, you are going all that way for love?"

"It's more than love," said Janaki. "It's . . ."

She didn't want to say it was life. Just thinking about those words sounded silly. But Janaki had never had a purpose in life before. She knew she should have felt lucky. She'd gotten a nice government stipend, and most Dalit girls didn't even dream of a future outside marriage.

But that had been the very problem; the others there had believed the same. It had been scarcely different from her old village school.

"Why don't you come with us?" asked Natsuki, her eyes shining like carnelian. "We're going as far as Istanbul."

"Really?" Janaki's eyes widened.

Natsuki nodded. "You should probably wash up, then," she said, gesturing at the back. "Aguri was saying that you smell like shit."

Janaki looked down at herself, at the matted dirt and grime staining the folds of her jeans, and laughed. She did not blame him.

They reached the border crossing with Iran. At Aguri's insistence, even though Janaki had a perfectly valid passport, they stowed her away under the van's seats.

"He says it's dangerous here," said Natsuki, "not like in Afghanistan, where you can just waltz over the border." She rolled her eyes, making Janaki laugh.

"Shah!" Aguri pointed at his face. "Eyes!" He gestured out the window.

Janaki laughed into her closed mouth. She could scarcely imagine what eyes could possibly pierce the warm confines of this van. It was just the three of them, as if on an island, isolated from the entire rest of the world. Janaki's time with them quickly blurred.

Natsuki fancied herself a poet and took the opportunity to annoy her brother by using Janaki to read aloud her last year's work for the third time. It was all in Japanese, and Janaki only managed to pick up a few words. She laughed along anyway.

Iran was a foreign country. Janaki could not even hope to read the writing here. Yet the people they came across were the same: travelers, humans seeking human things.

In Nishapur, under the turquoise wall of an ancient mausoleum, the three of them came across a Bangladeshi man from Britain named Aziz. "I'm going to find my sister," he said.

"She's gone somewhere?" Natsuki asked.

Aziz shook his head. "They told me she died back in '71, during the war, but I don't believe them. I'm going to Calcutta to find her."

Natsuki also taught Janaki to play mahjong with a tile set she said she had picked up in Hong Kong in the late 1960s, without bothering to explain. Janaki couldn't understand the strange patterns on the tiles, and she certainly wasn't very good, and she couldn't understand how Aguri kept winning. She laughed anyway.

They stopped in Tehran two days afterwards, and spent three whole days there doing little save for eating food and occasionally leaving to buy more supplies.

Tehran seemed to sprawl forever, and it was unlike anything Janaki had ever experienced. The people were dressed how Janaki

imagined Europeans would dress, in short skirts and T-shirts and bright colors. Yet there was a definite uneasiness that thickened the air, as if it were all a lie, entirely the opposite of Kabul. She would pass policemen, look into their eyes, and see something not entirely unlike what Aguri seemed to have feared.

Two policemen had stopped outside where they had parked the van. The travellers quickly exited before the policemen could find them.

Soon enough, the Turkish border came within thought. All through Iran, Janaki had been hearing the rumors: the border had become politically unstable, crawling with Kurdish militants on both sides.

So when she found herself standing in Turkey without the border patrol so much as even checking her for identification, she allowed herself another sigh of relief.

Indeed, Natsuki seemed to notice Janaki's surprise. "You've been pretty lucky," she said.

Janaki couldn't help but smile. "It is the most luck I have ever had in my life." She paused. "I could live like this forever. I understand why Riccardo did it."

The hippie trail began—or, Janaki supposed to herself, ended—in Istanbul.

Istanbul was the greatest city Janaki had ever seen. Perhaps Delhi had been larger, but she'd scarcely paid attention to Delhi. Here, standing on Asia's western edge, she gazed out across the water at the shadowed outlines of the Hagia Sofia's grand minarets. On that not-so-distant shore was Europe: her destination.

Another letter had found its way into her hands, fluttering gently in the breeze. Natsuki had picked it up from a café frequented by overland travellers; it was only natural such a letter would have ended up there. *My beloved Janaki*, it read, *I can't bear not to see your face for another day. I'm sure you'll be in Turkey or Greece by the time you receive this letter, if you do at all. I'll take you out for a gelato here.*

I'm almost there, Janaki wrote back, *and you know I wouldn't like it.*

“We can get you across the border to Greece,” Natsuki was saying. “Do you know what you’re doing from there?”

Janaki looked up, rapidly switching her gaze between Natsuki and a rather blank-looking Aguri.

“You really don’t have a plan, do you?” asked Natsuki.

Janaki shrugged. She hadn’t needed one.

Natsuki thought about this, thumbing her lips. “Go west,” she said. “Get a bus from here to Igoumenitsa. It is a little town on the coast, near Corfu. You will have ferries from there to somewhere in Italy. I suggest Bari. It should be easy to find a train to Rome from there. Does that all make sense?”

Janaki nodded. “West,” she repeated, “then to Bari.”

When Janaki checked her bag and shook her head, Natsuki reached into her own bag and pulled out a wad of drachmas she’d just procured from a local exchange.

“Take this,” she said. “It should be enough to get you all the way to Paris.”

Janaki looked between the two of them, agape, “Are you sure?”

Aguri’s smile, breaking language barriers, was all the answer she needed.

It was not long before Janaki stood at the white rail at the edge of a ferry, feeling the soft mist of the sea strike her face as she watched Bari rise from the Adriatic horizon, in all its Mediterranean beauty. She had seen pictures of such places in books. It was not quite as beautiful as Istanbul, but she could respect it.

She had seen the sea, many times; she’d lived by it, she’d spent many nights with Riccardo on that beach, even that last one. But she had never actually been out to sea, until now, when she had nothing else: just the water, the ferry, and wherever she was headed next.

The first thing she remembered when she stepped ashore was the face of Imran, that street artist in Peshawar. He would have loved this city. She wondered, too, if Riccardo had ever been here; she did not recall him ever having mentioned it.

The next thing she remembered was the fact that she had to pass the gauntlet of Italian immigration. The man who checked her passport was a youthful man. “You don’t have a visa,” he said, in Italian.

She responded in the same language. “I have been traveling for months,” she said, “and I have nowhere to go.”

He laid a clenched fist on his desk. “That does not change that you don’t have a visa.”

“Is there no way to get through?”

The customs officer continued to look back at her as if she were an alien.

So she told him her story, her heart racing. Had her luck finally run dry?

It turned out that another man had been standing nearby, a man with a graying beard and a worn face. He walked up and looked at her from behind half-moon spectacles, with a narrow, wiry smile. “I like it,” he said. And he had his underling wave her through without so much as a second thought.

Maybe she had misjudged her own karma.

Janaki arrived in Rome by train on the evening of May Day, 1975. Trade unionists waving red flags marched through the street. Her legs were weak as she phased through underground metro trains, marvelling at the flashing lights and the rainbow of advertisements. She had never seen such trains before, and she could spend days down here.

She still held one of Riccardo’s letters, still had Riccardo’s address, but it still took her three hours of winding her way around a labyrinth of trains and buses and onto Via della Farnesina, lined by apartment blocks rising into the tree-clad hills. It was not entirely unlike Goa.

She found the house in a side street before long. She could have knocked at the door, but she decided to wait a moment. It didn’t matter how long Riccardo took to arrive. Janaki was still the luckiest person on Earth.

SOMEBODY'S GRANDPA

DAVEY MANN



AXLE GREASE

NATALIE SIEDE

We're going overland, west, by wagon.
George traded up the Iowa homestead
that I kept so stubbornly clean for two
yoke of oxen and that was that. They're
weaker now. I walk beside the wagon
and let the children who run through prairie
grasses sit up in the shade. When they fall or
cry, the men get ornery. I've said nothing
since Dakota Territory; too tired, too hungry,
too wind-dried to speak. I watch the other
women take fingerfuls of grease from
the axles and spread it across their mouths.
They say it helps with the splitting lips.
They're blackened for days after, don't
eat or talk much, either. And I don't
want to frighten all the children; I like it
when they stay close, so I bear it, taste
the chap and tear of my lips. I spend
nights chewing the dry skin and listening
to the fires when we can get them to light
in the prairie wind. And to the bump of tin
pots on rocks, the crickets, the conversations.
Last night I heard a man in the next wagon
tell his shushing wife to move. I heard
his feet on the floor of the wagon, heard him
pick up a crying baby, heard it in the catch
in the infant's sob, then something heavy on
wood. The crying stopped and the woman
in the wagon was quiet, too. This morning
I rose, went to the axle, and sealed my lips.

*Inspired by an Oregon Trail diary entry by Keturah Penton Belknap, c.
1848*

CATERPILLAR SHOUTING FROM THE HOOKAH SMOKE: WHO ARE YOU!?

ALICIA GARRETT

What am I not? Do tell, please, because those binocular eyes clouded, unclear, claiming sight and understanding of me, make you look and sound a fool, so much so that the king himself would not hire you to parade about his courts, since in short you don't know shit. I am more than a ghost in tattered sheets, or the doormat you wipe your fucking feet on. I am a pussy possessor whose only friends are a finger or two, who's gotten off the dick train. No, not gay just pulling into singles station, procured a plane ticket in the hopes of flying solo, shot down by ignorance, intolerance, like a downed aircraft in September, ass splatting on the concrete matting of the empire you built 'til your body is bruised and broken. But how steady is a body torn apart by an unstable structure abandoned and hollow whose support beams were only temporary, the by-product of classical art, praised for its perfection and naked outlines copied in every other piece because that is beauty, not the deep inlaid eyes that blistered hands hide whose amenities, appendages, where scrapyard junk welded in a hurry, that doubles as a makeshift cage for this songbird that knows only fire and can't trust its own touch, least I set your stage ablaze 'til cindered smoldering ash are the only remnants of what you did and made—an

abstract abnormality, worthless in make or use to society whose features are grossly disproportionate, unoriented, with mind like fucking yarn made to unravel—but first kids are always the fuckups. Meant to lead the others astray, the test dummy without a helmet who is hurtled toward certain doom but that's ok, because a smile can always be painted on. Because if I don't appear happy at my own destruction then there's something wrong with me, the undead who's told that it doesn't need sleep just brains, a mouth that's mute but smiling all the same, because I have to live up to my name. I am not a Rubik's cube whose sides and parts fit an algorithm meant to be solved, but you still aren't listening gave up halfway through the rant, how the fuck would I ever believe that you could understand someone, something like me. Know who I am whose story can be found in the horror section of the library because truth is truth and truth is nonsense to you. I know about me, but who the fuck are you?

MIRIAM

BRENNA CAMPING

- How's school going, darling?
- It's going good. I'm getting good grades, and I've made lots of friends.
- That's good to hear. Do you like it up north?
- Yeah, I love it.
- Do you get cold?
- Yes, but I love the snow so it's worth it.
- That's good to hear.

Silence.

- How's school going, darling?
- It's going good still.
- That's good to hear. I'm always praying for you.
- Thank you, Grandma.
- The only person who loves you more than I do is God.
- I'll remember that.
- I'm always praying for you.
- Thank you, Grandma.

Silence.

- How's school going, darling?
- Not that great actually. But you won't remember that.
- What makes you say that?
- I don't know. Maybe it'll get better.
- It will, that's because I'm always praying for you. God will bless you this year.
- Thank you, Grandma.
- Don't forget . . .

-I know, I know. The only person who loves me more than you do is God.

-That's right. So how's school going?

The host Mother interrupted with a cheerful "Happy Thanksgiving" and carved the turkey. Plates were being passed from family member to family member.

-You look just like your mother, you know.

-Yeah, I've been told.

-You've got your dad's hair, though. Do you know where Milford is?

-No, Grandma, I don't.

-Probably the bathroom. He'll be out soon.

She let out a giggle before silence.

-How's school going, darling?

-Pretty good.

-That's good, that's good. Milford is so proud of you.

-I hope so.

-Where is he? He's been gone awful long.

-Grandpa's not here anymore. I'm sorry, Grandma.

-Oh. How long?

-A couple years now.

-I thought I talked to him yesterday.

Silence.

-How's school going, darling?

-It's going great because I'm in your prayers.

-Remember, the only person who loves you more than I do is God.

She joined Milford the week before Christmas.

RUST REVIVAL

KURTISS LIMBRICK

Rusted farm equipment
like detached spider legs
bakes alongside California's flatlands
riffled like undisturbed sands in shallow water,
or the winded surfaces of silk soft dunes.

It seems to shiver behind the heat-rise,
as if it could come to life,
gear up and pass beyond the bent barbed wire
into the untameable dry,
the scraggled vast of western America.

THE NIGHT BEFORE LANDFALL

KURTISS LIMBRICK

Carolina is a gash in sand.
Tomorrow, Florence will wipe it flat as dunal winds
rubbing its fingers across loose-planted silt standing cities

What will be left of what I remember
Who will be left of what I remember

After it passes
the curling storm
whose bodies will I find
flotsam maundering through the wreckage
floating in the obituaries

MY DOWNWARD SPIRAL TOWARD MOTHERHOOD

ALEXIS MCCAULEY

Day 1

We brought you home today, and I watched you lying in the bassinet crying. I'm much too exhausted to do much more than watch you. I don't know what you want, what you need, and haven't the energy to go about finding out. I thought this was the next step to being an adult: love, marriage, a baby. What a useless little being you are, and you belong to me. Do you really belong to me? I watch you, and I feel nothing: no connection, no bond. You suckle from my breast and yet it brings no emotion to me. Can I truly be your mother if I don't feel a mother's love for you? Does that mean there is something wrong with you? Or perhaps with me?

Day 2

The doctors say I am just lacking sleep, so they wrote a prescription for something to help. I don't like how fatigued the pills make me, a zombie in the morning, empty, hollow thoughts, and lacking any drive. I don't think I really need them. My energy seems to be picking up; I must not be so tired. The doctors also say that I would benefit from writing my thoughts and concerns down in a journal, but how does one benefit from writing down and reliving dark ideas you aren't even comfortable thinking? I hate these thoughts when I am alone, and now, I must face them down on paper, where they are permanent? Who benefits from this? Not me. The thoughts grow and connect on paper as I write them down, then become permanent. Maybe the doctors are just trying

to make me to lose this battle. They don't understand how I feel; they don't know what it is to look at your new daughter and feel . . . nothing. A mother should love her daughter, cherish the life she gave and nurtured within her for nine months. But I don't; I resent the attention you require. I dream of packing you up and returning you like an Amazon package. What kind of mother does that make me? A horrible one, that's what kind. I fear you every day, I fear being left alone with you and all your demands, I fear failing you as a guide through life and you turning out a little heathen of a child. I worry that you will become the victim to any number of horrible people out in the world from whom I can't protect you. How do I go about teaching you to be strong and independent? How do I save you from all the horrors of the world, when the only way I know how is to prevent you from existing? I can't do that. I want no harm to come to you. So instead, I sit here by your crib, looking over you and writing down the thoughts as I'm told and fear more for you with each sentence I write. I consider your birth a mistake, but how do I fix this?

Day 5

I am not to be left alone with my thoughts; they haunt me, scare me, drive me to do unthinkable things. If I sleep, they will take over my actions, these dark thoughts, these ugly voices. I can't allow that. The voice of my thoughts tells me that I can't trust anyone: not the father to my baby, not the doctor he calls. No one. At times I feel helpless, feel there is nothing I can do to escape these thoughts I have. How can I believe wrong of the father to my child, my life partner, my support? He tells me I need to be stronger than this, that it's just in my mind. How do I know who to trust if I can't trust my own mind? I feel desolate, angry, scared, and confused. I am losing touch with what is real and what seems to come from inside me. At times, it's almost as if I am a foreign entity looking down on my "family" and myself. I see from the outside what pain I cause them, the suffering he goes through as yet another call is made to the doctor. These pills aren't helping and still they increase the number I "have to take." He suggests I need a calm and quiet environment, so the in-laws have come to help with the baby as

I struggle through this. They are intruders here to take over our house, our life, I just know it. His mother helps me into a relaxing bath, and as I catch a vision in the mirror I swear there is a stranger in my house . . . but it's only me. I don't like the person who looks back at me. I am no longer in my body; an interloper has taken over and views my life through my eyes. I scream and can't seem to stop; they need to know about the squatter. I must save them from this foreign stranger. When the mother-in-law leaves to get my husband, I take up the razor. I will find the intruder myself and dig her out.

Day 6

They are going to take my daughter from me. They can read my thoughts and know they are filled with pain. But the doctors say I will get better, one day at a time.

Day 9

They have brought me to this sterile environment where every step is a shush, and the staff wears no color. The walls are all the same and I am tied to this gym mat on wheels to help me "relax." A doctor comes to visit every day and asks me the same questions every time, "If we take you out of restraints, can we trust you to look after your own well-being? We don't want an accident like last time."

An accident? There was no accident. I wanted to take my suffering away from my family; I needed to save them from the interloper within me. That is how I came to be here, in Fairfax Hospital. Words like postpartum, depression, and psychosis are thrown around the room as the group decides what is best done with me. I "need a break," according to the doctors. "If we provide her an environment of peace and tranquility, she will get better." This is what they tell my husband, and so he abandons me here to get better. I am left alone in a room where the staff check on me every few hours and smile and promise I will get better. A room where they have me injected with medications, where vital numbers are written down, and nurses ask me, "What's today's date? Do you still feel like hurting yourself? How much do you feel like hurting yourself? Give me a number on a scale of one through ten." Like

this sensation, this need, can be given a neat little number, can be quantified easily and used to determine how many pills I take today, how often the injection is needed, how many days I must stay

Day 12

I am no longer tied to the bed. I am “no longer a threat to myself or others” according to my doctors. I despise them and fear them. But the doctors insist I will get better.

My husband comes to visit, and he talks about going back to work. He lets me know that “things are getting back to normal.” I question what normal is to him and if it is the same normal for me. Is it normal that I don’t go home to my family every night? That everyone thinks I am a horrible mother? Is it normal that my mother-in-law is raising my daughter while I sit chatting with nurses about my “moods today?” He doesn’t know normal. The doctors and nurses tell him what normal is and he just believes them. That’s why they keep me here, they want me to believe in normal too, but I won’t. I know the difference; I can see it in my own eyes. But I can’t tell him this because he will just tell the doctors. I keep this secret within myself and protect it. If they don’t know I don’t believe their version, they can’t change mine. I sit quietly while my husband visits, letting him believe things are better, and the doctors tell him this is so.

Day 19

I have been given the privilege of having a say in my mental well-being if I do everything the doctors and nurses say. It has come to be a game: as long as I follow all the rules and play along as they deem appropriate, I will be able to go home. I don’t know how long it will take but I know I can do this. I just have to believe their idea of normal. I smile and answer, “I am feeling much better today. No, I no longer feel like hurting myself.” I no longer talk about the intruder or getting her out of me. I can tell this is right; the nurses’ smiles reach their eyes now. My husband comes to see me, and he too smiles and talks about my daughter now. She “is a safe subject” for me now, say the doctors. I take the pills they tell me to, and I wait. Because they will send me home soon. Because I am and will

continue to get better, so the doctors say. I can just wait. It can't be too long.

Meanwhile, my family is safe, and I can focus on getting used to the intruder. As long as she is with me, she can't hurt anyone else.

Day 24

I feel as though I am waking from a horrible nightmare. I look back on what I have been told is the last month and see long blocks of nothing. My husband tells me about my behavior before coming here and I am dumbstruck: this isn't me. I strain and struggle, but I can't even remember the birth of my beautiful baby girl, and I rage at the theft of these precious moments and days from my memory. The blackness takes over all that was the beginning of my daughter's life. I despair at the sadness and trauma my family has gone through while someone else seemingly took over my mind. Who was that person and how do I ensure she never returns? The doctors tell me that these are all normal feelings and nothing to concern myself with. They tell me this is all part of my psychosis, and all temporary. How can I not worry? Will she just take over one night again, when I am not strong enough to fight her? Will she forever threaten my sanity and the safety of those I love most? Can I be a good mother with this risk constantly hanging over me? I try to ignore my fears, but they haunt me at my weakest moments. Can I really get better? Will I just wake up one day feeling normal, with this is as a blur of my past? Will I eventually get back to my regular self? Or is she forever to be overpowered by these negative fears and doubts I carry with me?

I have to be stronger than this. I have to fight this. My daughter doesn't even know her mother and my husband carries the burden of my weaknesses for all of us. I can't fail at this, I must become myself again. I wish I would just wake up better, because that's what the doctors promise.

SMALL EARTH

CAROLINE BRICKLEY

Lovely
 living
 thing.

With the pink nose twitching
between moss-mild cheeks. With the
eyes of small stars rising inside
trembling lashes, acquiescence as
branches sewn into sky.

You let the world enter into you
as easily as wind into September
fields of goldenrod. Or sun into
the earth's green-skinned faces—
veined, hungry, and honest as their
silver lungs of bark.

A butterfly blooms in the cocoon
you make from your curious fists.
A bird sings and buries its blue song
into your warm nest of heart.

You are the closest I have come
to seeing my body as more than just
an ultimatum.
To stretching my skin taut beneath the sun
and watching the vulnerable silhouette
of my ghost's tangled fibers
press against the bars of blue blood,
unaired and envious as our dreams.

Laying myself down at the altar
of what I was, I make myself into
a meadow. Breathing you in as simply
as seeds, I let the wildflowers out of my chest.
All have four petals, shaping X about their buds,
and spill from stems that only grow to
point back down towards
where I rise from you:
the seed, the soil, the water
I consume like a song.

You are the world I let in.

Lovely
 little
 Earth.

I MISSED THE ROSES

CAROLINE BRICKLEY

I awoke too late, dreaming of my life, and outside the rose bushes stand bare of themselves within the frame of our September window. The glass, forgetting sky and never having understood a life of unfiltered light, cannot be trusted.

But in sleep, I misled myself into fields of untouched extremities quivering above closed eyelids of earth, untilled by lips. I knew then that there is no such thing as flowers, and I know now that those were never roses.

Not those that peered in at me like dislodged pupils, as I clothed my skin with name. Nor those that broke and bled open against spring windows, remembering again. Not even the one I gave you that you held like an abstract figure, lost and found in the forest of your fingers.

It was only a placeholder for where my hands should be.
It was only a reminder that we are everywhere but where we should be and we are somehow, still, everything but what we are.

Roses do not grow from earth
But from the soil of your within
Roses do not bloom in sky
But where your skin stops
And you begin

Roses are not roses
But

in the morning. When fields are dreaming in your stirring bud of blush inside the frames of opened windows, inside the frames of opened eyes. When still more frames hold you closer than I ever could.

When winter makes us into children of our bones again: taking away every feeling but *cold* and *warmth*—taking every word but *mother*.

When I have not yet been taught *I*.

When we are reminded that there is something greater than us, even though that is still only “what?”

When I see you, not by your name but as you were before it, waking with not the answer but one, and when I realize you are what gave birth to me that morning when all that we once believed to be flowers had died.

FRIENDS (BEFORE THE **INTERNET**)

DAVEY **MANN**



SEVEN YELLOW CARS

DANA MULLIGAN

“Three red down there.”

“Four over there. I win.”

“Wait, four yellows over there! I win!” Charlie hoots gleefully, pointing out over the road. Way past old Ed’s Hardware Store are four yellow cars all in a row. They’re so far away I can hardly see them, but I don’t call out of bounds since Charlie hasn’t won all week. He fans his hand out towards me, palm towards the sky. The side of his pinky finger is still all coated with graphite from school. I stick my hand in my school bag and root around. Two old licorice sticks and six Walnettos emerge, spilling from between my fingers. Charlie accepts the handful of sugar with an audible sigh of happiness and immediately tears a piece of licorice in two and sticks one end in his mouth. He takes it between his middle and index fingers, freeing his mouth to blow imaginary clouds of smoke, imitating the little puckered mouth of old Missus Weatherly, the chain-smoking elderly woman who lives on the corner of Oak and West Juniper and yells at kids to get off her lawn when they’re walking home from school on the sidewalk in front of her house. I laugh and try to sneak back one of my Walnettos, but Charlie knows me too well and slaps my hand away at the last second, but then changes his mind and gives it to me anyways. We munch away at our goodies and pretend to push each other off the thick concrete railings of the overpass as we continue to count the hues of cars on the rumbling highway down below.

Three red cars beat four blue cars. Three yellow cars beat four red cars. Five red cars beat three yellow cars. Seven blue cars

beat five red cars. It's all part of a system Charlie and I figured out a while ago. It's based off car color and how many cars of a certain color are in a row together. Sometimes we squabble over the rules, but for the most part they're consistent and immutable.

One day, after we had settled an argument on whether eight blue cars were worth more than seven red cars, Charlie asked me, "How about seven yellow cars?"

"That's impossible, Charlie. How many times have you seen seven yellow cars in a row?"

"It's not impossible! We've seen at least fifteen yellow cars drive by this afternoon!"

"Yeah, but were they all in a row?" Charlie huffed at me and punched me in the arm.

"Don't be such a buzzkill, Sam. You know what I mean. If there are that many yellow cars driving around out there, at some point at least seven of them have got to all line up in a row and drive by us! It's like that thing your dad says about monkeys with typewriters."

"Fine. In the *extremely* rare case of one of us seeing seven yellow cars in a row, what does the spotter get?"

"A wish." Charlie said decisively. He had probably spent a lot of time thinking about this before talking to me about it.

"Come on, Charlie. Even you know that wishes don't exist. Who do you know that has ever had a wish come true, just from wishing for something?"

"That's because people are wishing on the wrong things, like stars and eyelashes. You have to work for a wish. Like waiting for seven yellow cars."

"Whatever."

"Also, winner gets a hundred bucks."

"That sounds better." I said, leaning eagerly over the railing and grinning at the thought of one hundred dollars in his hands.

"Hey, where's Feathers?" Charlie asked, munching on a Lemonhead.

"I dunno. Is Beak up there?"

“Yeah, just like usual, except he doesn’t have Feathers with him. That’s weird.”

I looked up from my long division worksheet. It was only Beak perched up there today. His pigeon best buddy, Feathers, was nowhere to be seen on the long telephone wire that stretched across the road.

“Maybe he finally got a girlfriend.” I said, turning back to my math problems.

“I don’t think so, Sam. Come look.” Charlie pointed over the bridge railing. His cheeks were turning pink, like the time he got in trouble for putting his pet hamster in his backpack and bringing it to school, or when we were reading *Old Yeller* in class and the dog died.

Far down below, I could barely make out the feathery outlines of a bird flat against the pavement. A bread crust was lying not three feet away.

“Oh.” I said.

“Poor guy.” Charlie said. He swiped quickly at his eyes. “And poor Beak! He’s all alone now!”

“But maybe it’s not Feathers?”

“Where else would he be?” Charlie turned away, rubbing at his eyes with increased vigor.

“I bet he’s in bird heaven by now. I bet birds can talk to ghosts. Beak’s probably chatting away with Feathers right now. His soul is sitting right there on the wire, just like always. Only now he won’t get hungry or cold. He can have all the bread he wants.” I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what my mom told me when the family dog died on my seventh birthday. It seemed to work on Charlie though. He leaned over the railing and mouthed something, probably words of peace, to the bird below. He turned to Beak and did the same thing. Other boys at school would probably make fun of Charlie for crying over a dead bird, but I guess that’s why I’m his best friend and not them.

“I wish we could bury him. Give him a proper funeral, you know?” He said after a while, peering down at the impenetrable traffic below.

“Here, I’ve got a nice flat rock in my backyard that would work as a grave marker. We don’t need a body to give him a proper funeral. It’ll be like when people die at sea.”

Charlie nodded and smiled at me.

* * *

“I’ll meet you at the bridge in twenty minutes.”

* * *

I slammed open the front door and threw my backpack on the couch before remembering that Mom had told me the next time I did that she’d ground me for a week. I tiptoed over to the couch and gingerly moved my backpack to its designated hook on the wall. I peered around the corner into the dining room, bracing myself for a scolding, but was mystified by the sight of Mom sitting at the table with the phone cord twisted nervously around her fingers. She always told me that would ruin the cord. She looked up at me with an unreadable look on her face.

“Sam. Come here. Come sit with me,” she said.

“No, Mom. Later. I’m going to the bridge with Charlie. He bet me two dollars that I wouldn’t see five cars in a row today. I’ve gotta run.” Her face began to fall, tears welling up in her eyes.

“No, Sam. It’s about Charlie. You can’t go today. It’s . . . I’m sorry. Come here?” I stepped into the room. What had Charlie done now? It couldn’t have been worse than the time he smashed his Dad’s expensive camera, and even then he barely got grounded for an hour before his parents felt bad and let him come out and play.

“What, did Charlie break another window? He’s not a bad influence, Mom. He’s just kinda dumb. Come on, I gotta go.”

“Sam, it’s Charlie. Come here. Sit with me.” The look in her eyes was starting to scare me. I felt ice growing in my spine, like when you’ve done something really bad and you know your parents are about to find out.

“Mom, I just . . .”

“Come sit with me.” There were tears rolling down her cheeks now. I had never seen her cry before. I wanted to turn and run. I didn’t want to hear what she had to say.

“Okay, okay. What is it? I gotta go.”

“Charlie was hit by a car. He didn’t feel any pain. I’m so sorry.” Ice shooting down my spine. Cold, cold, cold. Spreading to my fingers, tingling like when you’ve been playing in the snow for too long. Numb. Shake it off, Sam. Charlie’s fine. Just banged up.

“What? Is he at the doctor’s or something? Did he break anything?” I see something in Mom’s eyes that make me want to scream at her, hit her. It’s pity.

“Charlie died. I’m so sorry, Sam. Come here. I’m sorry.” I need to get out of here or I’m going to hit my own mom. She would never let me hear the end of that. I’m furious at her for saying such terrible things to me. My blood is boiling with ice and rage.

“What? I’m going to the bridge. I’ll be back later.” I can’t believe she’s lying to me like this.

“Sam, sit down. Charlie is gone.” She desperately wipes at her tears and puts on a brave face. She reaches out her hands like she’s going to sit me down in her lap. I’m way too big to sit in her lap.

“What? No.”

“Sam . . .” The tears are coming back. Now she looks frightened.

“He always looks both ways when he crosses the street. It’s annoying. He couldn’t have been hit by a car.” My voice is wavering, trying not to shout. I am squishing that rage down. There is nothing to be afraid of, no reason to be angry. Charlie is fine.

“They were speeding—it was all over so fast, Sam. He didn’t hurt at all. He’s in a better place now.”

“Stop it.” I’m nearly screaming. My baby sister begins to wail in the other room. Shut up. She has nothing to cry about.

“Sam.” She is begging me. I want to hit her. I want to smash the fancy white vase that lives on our table. I want to rip the photo frames off the wall and throw them. Stop lying.

“I can fix this. I’m going to the bridge.” I’m shaking so badly I can hardly tie my shoes.

“Sam!” She looks like a lost little kid at the fair. Her hands are suspended in the air reaching for me, a child reaching to her mother who is walking too quickly into the thick crowd.

“See you at dinner. Love you.” I grab my bag on my way out. It’s got my bargaining candy in there.

“Sam!”

I sat alone on the bridge, aside from a few bikers rolling bravely along through the rain. I had been alone on the bridge plenty of times, mostly when Charlie was sick or grounded. Charlie got grounded a lot. He was sick, right? No. Hit by a car. Charlie? Hit by a car? He was stupid and careless about everything, except for crossing the road. He took those old guidance videos very seriously. He always looked both ways and sometimes even listened for oncoming cars. Charlie was more likely to have fallen off the roof pretending to be superman than to be hit by a car. But . . . I could feel it. Like my torso was unfolding and opening, letting my insides spill out. Once they were out of your body, were they still called insides? My mind felt calm and still. Not an inkling of a shadow lay over me, besides those thrown by the clouds that sat far above, fat and happy to just sit and sprinkle the people rushing home with rain. But my insides were all shifty and whirly, like they knew something I didn’t. My stomach growled unhappily. A nearby power walker gave me an odd look. I stuck out my tongue at her, but found it thick and heavy once it was back inside my mouth. Dry, too. I smacked my lips, then turned my head to the sky to try and soothe my sandpaper mouth with rain. Drops rolled down my cheeks like tears. Was I supposed to be crying? But crying doesn’t help anything. I’ll have to do something about it instead. I’ll save Charlie, if Charlie’s even really gone.

Charlie’s fate lies in seven yellow cars all in a row. I will bring him back. I will be his guardian angel, even though everyone says he’s the one that’s watching over me, keeping me out of trouble. He’s the dead one. He can’t do any watching. As the one left alive, it’s my responsibility to look out for Charlie. I’m going to save him with seven yellow cars. I’m going to bring him back and let him live the life that was meant for him. We’ll travel around the world on a boat as soon as we finish high school, just like we always said. And he’ll thank me for bringing him back, but I’ll thank him for coming

back. For listening to my seven yellow cars and wrenching himself back into the world of yelling fathers and hugging mothers and cars that kill little boys. And even if he doesn't want to come back to where people don't care, he'll come anyways to keep me company. He wouldn't let me face it all alone. Charlie would never do that. So I won't let him face death alone. I'll find him and I'll bring him back and neither of us will have to be alone anymore.

* * *

Four yellow cars. Before, that would have been enough for Charlie to hand over his bag of sweets and for me to gloat mercilessly. But now it's not enough. Not nearly enough. Just three more yellow cars. Please. Let seven little men climb into seven little yellow cars and all go to the same place at the same time. Please. If only seven yellow cars would drive by.

But what then? Do I wish that Charlie would come back to life? That he never died at all? What if it's one of those things where you have to exchange something? What if Charlie comes back but then I go home to find my family gone? Would it be selfish of me to not bring Charlie back if I knew that in doing so I would die? What if Charlie doesn't want to come back? Maybe he's in heaven having the time of his life. His death, I mean. What would Charlie do, if I was gone and he was still here? He'd probably wait for seven yellow cars to wish me back too. That's why I have to do it. Because Charlie would've done it for me. And because, even though I know it won't happen, something deep down in my bones believes that those seven yellow cars can bring back Charlie.

* * *

The traffic shoots by, a million faceless people cocooned in their massive metal shells, oblivious to everything but their soulless selves. None of them matter. If the world can go on living without Charlie, acting like he never even existed, then it can certainly go on without them. Little insects barreling between their gray cubicles and families of littler insects. Buzzing along, monotonous drone workers. No one would even notice if they were gone. It'd be better if they were gone. Then they won't be able to get so caught up in their little useless lives that they would get so careless and accidentally destroy something that does matter. Something like Charlie. So caught up

that getting to wherever they needed to be would be more important than a human life.

* * *

Blue, like Charlie's lips.

They haven't had the funeral yet, but I think his lips will be blue. People's lips are always blue after they die.

Three blue cars. If only there were twice as many plus one, and yellow.

That's pretty far off from three blue cars.

Three blue cars wouldn't even get you a licorice stick before.

I wonder if one of those cars down there is the one that hit Charlie.

People like that shouldn't be on the road, said Mom at breakfast this morning.

It was just a mistake.

Maybe they were putting on lipstick. Mom was doing that once and she almost hit a squirrel.

I guess they didn't almost hit a boy.

Maybe their girlfriend had just broken up with them and they were distracted. Thinking of her instead of him.

Did they find whoever killed Charlie? I can't remember. It doesn't matter. As long as I can bring him back. It doesn't matter what they did once Charlie's back.

It's not raising the dead. It's keeping the living alive. Charlie was alive and I'm going to keep him alive. Like what a doctor does. Doctors aren't bringing back the dead, they're saving lives. I'm going to save Charlie's life.

* * *

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven.

A VW Bug. A Cadillac with a bad paint job. Three taxicabs. A shiny new sports car. A food truck with a large advertisement for kebabs scrawled across the side. All varying shades of bright canary yellow, a ray of sunlight shining through a cloud of silvers and blues and blacks and reds. Seven yellow cars, all in a row. Maybe one of them is the one that hit Charlie. Wouldn't that be funny. Not funny. Ironic. But irony is usually funny anyways. What should I wish for? That's right. Charlie. Charlie right beside me. Charlie wishing he

had been the one to look over the rattling walls of the overpass and see seven yellow cars in a row, since now I get a wish and he doesn't. But my wish is for him anyways. For Charlie. That's what he would want. To come back. To watch for cars with me. To live. Right?

MICROGRAPHY

MATTHEW AUSTIN

I was made in the image of God, first to bear witness and then picked in part from obscure fringes of frayed vellum, enveloped in a triad of vain hopes. I was always meant to be the name, to carry myself as a banner, a pennant tossed gallantly on the sweet tea breeze as cicadas plot and idioms circle the picnic tables. I have, in many silky, sauna summers, let the swing set, all lush and alabaster, sweep my feet across a porch sun-spotted with ladybug wings and scuffed-up dust like eczema, and on those days, I wonder harshly at myself, slight, placid, and confusing anger, when the heat in my armpits and on the sides of my thighs is not the same as the air. My name seems, on these days, rather like a stained-glass window on the floor, its purpose being forgotten at best and vandalized at worst. Today I am surrounded by cousins, my uncle, a family inundated with giggling I do not hear at home, in the sweltering tension of a marriage made saintly, and someone calls me to perform the lunch prayer. I bow, and my family follows my lead. I am the shepherd I once read about, but who is strung out on heroin and found far away from a pile of bloody wool. I wish the words felt real. They slip like the ether of the shadow cast by my grandma's cigarettes on a sunny day, only a vapor—I heard that saying in Father's book. When I bless the name of the Lord, blasphemy. The nights of showering and scrawling Jehovah into the opaque stream-scape, latticed with pleas, patters to mind every prayer recited, pie pardoned, and pretty picture made. I do not think I was meant to survive it, but destiny skirts me like a hooker from the homeless. How those unforgivable nights did not swallow me, without a consequence, without a consequence to anyone, I might ought to be thanking the God of my doubts. Improbable or impossible, whichever it may be, I do not expect to be free of tar-black spirals set in perpetuity. Maybe I sing a desperate melodrama, some fantasy flung in D-minor that imparts

solace undeservingly, for after all, should I weep that my family cares too much for me, wishes to evangelize me head to toe, and save my soul? A moccasin with cinnamon-apple teeth, the tenets of my name demand I forfeit any reason, the remotest twinge of self-pity: patiently suffer, twiddle thumbs, and smile because there are poor and dirty folks groveling for nickels, and I have dollars. There was a lesson behind every sweat stain in the pulpit, every paper plate washed, every crinkle in the pants perused, that if I just did the damn things I was supposed to do that there would be an angel in my side pocket, siphoning me spare luck in the form of loose change for coffee and finding a lost sock, if I'm good enough. I violently pray for this moment, rack my knees and palms with a furious fervor, but I know I am a voyeur in the foyer, a sin so sunlit, upsetting the order, that, well . . . maybe I just need to say more, and more. When I was hungry, ye showed me the food and went on to Damascus. How do I pray for any of you? The minute I stand beside the cornbread and collard greens and call upon Calvary, I am a gatekeeper to the gut not God, so what was I learning in church besides how to tuck a napkin in the soul to catch grease? This is my diaspora, to cherish and give, give all I can imagine, every second of thought, aspirations, and loose pennies, only to have the pew yanked back. I wish the words had felt real this time, but they didn't, and they won't, so once more in the shade of a sycamore, my amen shivers in the hellish heat and thuds on ears that have not heard me.

IT'S YOUR INSIDES THAT COUNT

KAYLA ANNE COVERT

Are you ever concerned about the scar in your belly button? The one that is actually a little knot that the doctor tied however many years ago? Don't you ever worry it'll come undone someday and all your cosmic nothings will spill out at some inconvenient place like at a bookstore or at dinner? Just, boom. Right there on the table. Star guts. Also, I'm not worried. I'm just asking for a friend.

But hypothetically, if my pink candy filling decided to present itself to you, I'd hope that you'd take a sample and see that on the inside, I am more than whatever picture your eyes have captured of me; a polaroid of anxieties and an ever-growing appetite for a more comfortable situation. Preferably one that doesn't include my feelings spilling out through my navel, or metaphors of human consumption, because ohmigosh if there is one thing that scares me more than exploding at the seams, it's being a victim of cannibalism.

Truthfully though, I do like the idea of being eaten. Not in a weird way.

I promise.

I just mean the thought of it. Of being so vulnerable with someone that they devour every second of what you're saying and even then, don't have enough time to consume all of you, but they'll try because they want to.

They'll try because they want you.

I think about time a lot,
and about ways to make it more bearable.
When I'm in my car, I think of time moving in the
same way it does in lines at an amusement park.
Because while the commute is nothing short of terrible,
you know everyone around you is one step closer
to the reward at the end.

Sometimes, too, I think about this mindset I live in
with weird analogies and untamable imaginations
And how time has made me more accepting
of the stuffing hiding behind my navel.
With every passing second,
every step further in this line,
I am realizing that *here* is a place that exists where
I am both the journey and the destination.
And it's that thought that makes me want to rip myself open
and enjoy my feelings on a stick,
pink candy cosmos and all.

HEARTFELT

DOROTHY NGUYEN

"I like people too much or not at all.

I've got to go down deep, to fall into people, to really know them."

- Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*

let me plunge into your bones
& tumble within the chambers of
your shuddering heart,
that i may sink into the marrow
& waltz in your blood,
leaving behind
these slivers of myself—
a swell of lip,
a slip of tongue,
a swatch of battered lung,
the trembling gray putty
that cups all our joys &
our hurts.

dismantle that distant smile—
i've no need for
"how are you" or your pleasant weather;
my mother is well, whether
you ask me or not.
such shapeless words
carry none of the sweet bite
of your sharpened teeth.
i'd rather break my jaw
& hand you the pieces
than give an answer i know
you won't keep.

so lay your cheek against mine;
breathe as i breathe.
carry me like the song
you never learned to sing
or that you heard once,
held aloft a broken cherub's wing.
forget there was ever a *you* or *i*
& just remember these bits of me
i've stored inside
like a squirrel hoards seeds for deepest winter
that some, once forgotten,
might take root, even
after we've said
our last
goodbye.



WHO'S THIS CLOWN?

ERIN HOFFMAN

“What’s something you like about yourself?” My counselor sat across from me in her office, leaning in so far that her brunette bob pitched into her face. She spoke in the high, breezy voice she so often used to charm me into a positive mental attitude. It was raining outside.

I twiddled my rings until my fingers looked rashy. “I guess I can be funny?” I looked at the shelving unit behind Dr. Keating instead of at her. We had been working on my self-image, which meant that every so often I had to say something nice about myself even though it ran against the grain of my strict anti-bragging ethos. “My sense of humor has always been a huge part of who I am. I want people to enjoy having me around, so I goof off a lot to make them smile. “Whether or not it’s successful is—” I made finger guns to defuse the tension “—debatable.” She nodded. “I think you’re funny, Erin.”

Now, I know my therapist isn’t the most reliable judge of my comedic talent. She’s paid to make me like myself, and if that means throwing me a bone and telling me I’m funny, then that’s what she’ll do. Perhaps my real defining characteristic is a crippling lack of self-awareness, and I should amend my previous statement to “I like to think that I’m funny.” After all, my mother sent me a link to the article “Why Is Something Funny, And Why Should We Care?” a few months ago as if to say that my technique could use some fine-tuning.¹ “Fun and interesting article! XO, Nev,” she signed the email with her family nickname.

My mother is a confirmed article junkie, so I shouldn’t have been surprised to find this message blinking in my inbox.

She's the modernized version of my grandma, who has stacks of crisply snipped newspaper articles lumped across her carpet in Blair Witch-like heaps. They make her whole house smell chalky. "What's going to happen when you move out, Ma?" my mother will ask her, sounding annoyed. "No one is going to read these." In the next breath, though, she'll tell my grandma about an article from *nytimes.com* that she absolutely must, must read. "I'll forward it to you when I get home."

Despite an awareness of my mother's obsession with sending online articles to her family members with only the most tenuous threads of connection (e.g. "You mentioned kale once last Christmas, so here's an article I found that discusses its health benefits, and there are some kale-based recipes if you scroll down far enough; they can all be made with five ingredients or fewer. Isn't that neat? It made me think of you."), I immediately took this one as a personal attack. What did my mother mean by sending me this article about humor? Did she intend it to be a tips-and-tricks, You-Might-Learn-A-Thing-Or-Two self-help guide?

Though my family might say I can be entertaining, I don't think they would say that I'm "funny." My mother's brand of humor vacillates between wholesome slapstick and lewd wordplay, both wholly different than the bleak one-liners I gravitate toward. Need an example? In the Notes app on my phone, I write down things people say that make me laugh—like a real ab-burning, spit-misting, asthmatic laugh—yet none of my family members have made the list, nor do I think they would appreciate what else is on there.

"I hate red because it only reminds me of the enemy blood I must spill." -Tori

"Suburbia has ruined you. You're like a racehorse that has to be shot." -Emmy

"I feel like I would be in a loveless marriage with myself."
-Dan

"People disappear all the time. We just say they're eaten by lions." -Tori

"I'm an opportunist. Like the infections that kill you off when you have AIDS." -Emmy
Unsettled by the darkness of my humor, my mother may have sent that article to nudge

me toward the light.

* * *

The article, as it turned out, was not a passive aggressive statement about my comedic talent, despite what my maladaptive self-consciousness might have told me. Instead, it was an overview of current scientific theories on how humor works, sent for its pure entertainment value. “Wasn’t that neat, Boo?” my mom asked during our next phone call.

“Super interesting. Thanks, Mom.” In truth, the article still rubbed me the wrong way, but now for a different reason. I didn’t like hearing humor talked about like an equation—X is funny because Y; it felt wrong, somehow, like when you hear your Catholic grandparents curse for the first time. How could something as lively as humor be dissected with the language of test tubes and clipboards?

Scientists found a way, all right.

One of their favorite theories is called Benign Violation Theory, or BVT, a formulaic model of humor that asserts something is funny when it diverts expectations in a safe environment.² I sat in my clunky college-issue desk chair as I read this explanation and pursed my lips to one side. Could that be true? Could any stuffy rando become a comedy legend in two simple steps?

I wanted to see if the theory would hold in my personal experience. I considered my go-to weather joke (yes, I have a go-to weather joke): when someone tells me that it’s cold outside, assuming I know them well enough for them not to think I’m a murderer, I like to counter with, “It’s only cold if you allow yourself to feel!” Bonus points if I say it in a singsong voice.

The last time I told this one, I was getting onto a campus cruiser, the bus used to shuttle students to and from class. It was a brittle morning, one of the first major cold spells of the season, and the grass’s tips looked like they had been dipped in vanilla frosting. My cue came like clockwork: “God, it’s cold!”

I don’t remember who said this, nor do I remember their response to my line (“Well, you know what they say about the cold

2 Borgella, Sam. “Why Is Something Funny?”

...”). However, I do remember that the cruiser driver overheard me, and her response was not ideal. Instead of her lips curling into an unexpected grin and wagging a finger at me—“So true, so true,” she might have said—I could feel her worry lines fork her skin deeper as I mounted the cruiser steps. I tried to reassure her with something like, “Don’t worry, I’m fine,” but she did not settle back into her seat with the same easy hunch.

Sometimes, my jokes are a swing and a miss, and maybe the BVT explains why. What expectation was I diverting? The expectation that playful morning banter doesn’t include depressive broadcasts? No wonder the cruiser driver was so unsettled. My humor seemed to be less about diverting expectations and more about prodding the dark corners of the world with a stick to see if they bite.

* * *

Several times I have been accused of using my humor to hide from my feelings, something to keep others off my trail of insecurity and depression. Joking about the distressing parts of life keeps them at a safe distance, like when you point out the plot holes in a horror movie so you don’t have to worry about what’s hiding in the closet. By my logic, if I joke about my belief that the world is going to end in a fleshy horde of people clawing for survival after a bout of resource shortages, chances are no further questions will be asked, right? It’s my way of giving people glimpses into my bleak mental ruts without inviting pity or pulling them down with me, and if they can laugh about it, then I convince myself that I can too. Close but not too close. As Huffington Post writer Megan Ward puts it, dark humor makes one’s grim, twisty innards “casual and lowkey.”³

And wouldn’t you know it: CasualAndLowkey is my middle name.

* * *

I can see how this reasoning is problematic.

3 Ward, Megan. “Is Fatalistic Humour a Valid Coping Mechanism for Depression?” Huffington Post, 14 March 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/megan-ward1/depressing-coping-mechanism_b_15346376.html.

According to my ex-roommate, this reasoning—this fetish for the lowkey—is my biggest flaw, and the reason why she sought distance from me our junior year of college. Even though we lived in the same room, I saw her less than I saw certain janitors on campus, and our total syllabic count the first few weeks of school was well below triple-digits. Movie nights had become obsolete, invitations subverted by vague allusions to a “busyness” unsubstantiated by assignment notebooks or day planners. We used to spend every waking moment together.

One September morning, I confronted her about the growing distance between us. From her gray vanity chair, she told me that even after two years of being best friends, we weren’t “close.” Apparently my silliness did not bode well for deep, emotional probing, and according to her, friendship cannot subsist on topical jibes. “It seems like you only want to get together to have a good time,” she told me, “but you never talk about the nitty gritty parts of life.” Her hair straightener hung limply from her hand as she spoke. I wondered whether it would set the carpet on fire if she dropped it.

I stood there willing my tears back into their ducts, hands gripping my backpack straps in fumbling pulses. Here was my best friend—the person whom I used to share every passing thought with, the person whom I believed would be a bridesmaid at my future wedding, and the person whose quotes made up over 50% of my list—telling me that we weren’t close. “I’m working on opening up to people,” I said. “I’m going to counseling, and I know that will help. My friends back home never talked about that kind of stuff, so I didn’t know you wanted to.” She looked on with a face of fake care—low-set eyebrows bowed upwards like U’s, mouth downturned at the edges—but it ended up looking more like disgust. I felt torn; she was the one who I used to go to if I needed relief from something upsetting, but here she was, the one causing my distress. I wanted to hug her and cry into her shoulder, but I also wanted to slap her and run in the other direction. She clasped her hands on her lap and her brown eyes flitted to the straightener. It was clear she was waiting for me to finish so she could get on with her morning routine. Our relationship never recovered from that morning.

What my roommate said irritated me for a long while, and my unwillingness to admit guilt made me bitter. Humor is an integral part of who I am, yet apparently it had pigeon-holed me in the role of “good time friend,” the kind of friend you would never go to for perspective on a depressive episode.

“It’s bullshit,” was my most coherent summation of the dispute.

This isn’t to say that I don’t want to give people a good time; I always want people to have a good time when they’re around me. I just felt betrayed that my friend had looked at the years we spent stitched to one another’s side, sharing everything from cringy details about lackluster sexual pasts to a single glass of water in the dining hall, and could say that she didn’t know me at all. *Having a good time and being close aren’t mutually exclusive*, I wanted to snap at her. I was frustrated, reactive.

It wasn’t until months later that I could get past my knee-jerk self-righteousness and begin to wonder if my best friend was right, that perhaps I had joked about not feeling so much that I had actually forgotten how to feel. This would certainly explain why my humor was so dark, why I had become so “bitterly amused” by sinister topics like death and depression, as Ulrike Willinger, researcher at the Medical University of Vienna, puts it.⁴ Maybe I was trundling through life in a hamster ball, always separated from the outside world by three feet of sterile space. But did that mean I was broken?

Weeks after my roommate moved out, I cocooned myself in my comforter and stared at her barren half of the room, yearning to have her bar soap smell back. Without her excessive pile of throw pillows, even her twin-sized bed looked too big. I took out my

4 Willinger, U., Hergovich, A., Schmoeger, M. et al. “Cognitive and Emotional Demands of Black Humour Processing: The Role of Intelligence, Aggressiveness and Mood.” *Cognitive Processing*, vol. 18, 2017, pp. 159-167. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10339-016-0789-y>.

phone and flicked through my quote list in the hopes that it would stave off the tears I felt stinging my ducts.

As I got further in the list, though, I realized something: true, I was the one who was collecting the dark quips, but the majority of them were not said by me. My ex-roommate was actually the prime darkness generator, and the things she said—“You’re like a pop-up book from hell,”; “If I followed my feelings everywhere, a lot of people I know would be dead,”; “A man with a goal is hot, even if that goal is to murder another person”—were just as harsh as what I reeled out. If even my friends were using dark humor, then what made it such a problem when I used it?

Something clicked. Perhaps it wasn’t just the darkness of my humor that was the problem, though that certainly didn’t help; it was the *volume* of my humor that turned people away. While most use humor when the mood is light or only sparingly to help themselves cope with life problems, I was using it as a baseline mode of interaction. What this led to was a gap between me and others that I had gotten so used to, I forgot it was there. Did I even know how to talk to someone without cracking a joke?

I think this humor abuse started in elementary school with my friend Maddy, who was prone to depressive mood swings and body image issues. Even as a fourth grader, she began asking me questions like, “How is it that you can eat so much but stay so *thin*?” with a dejected look at her barely bulging belly or, “I don’t think that any boy will ever like me.” I brushed off these comments with a funny pose. I would hunch over like a wizened woman, push out my stomach, and rub it sinisterly beneath a lime green nightie. I would slowly push another graham cracker into my gaping mouth and hock on it as unattractively as possible. “But we’re so hot,” I’d choke out, showering her with sawdust-like crumbs. She would collapse into a fit of giggles, and I would mistake this for a long-term solution, patting myself on the back. Humor was a cure-all, I believed, and I was the wise apothecary who could administer it.

However, as the years went on, this joking became my only way of dealing with others’ emotional confessions. I became the “Clown” Lisa Haisha describes in her Huffington Post article “Is Your Humor Hurting People?”: only able to cope with the world

through humor, focusing on “being liked rather than being real,” and unable to “give proper maturity to discussions that demand maturity.”⁵ If I couldn’t joke about someone’s pain directly to make them feel better, then I would divert attention to my inability to comfort them instead, hoping that my emotional impotence could distract them from their own pain. I knew no other way to help. As a kid, this consolation technique was effective, but as my friends grew, their emotions became more and more complex, and it took more than a knock-knock joke to untangle their webs.

* * *

My humor tactic lost any last bit of effectiveness in high school, though I didn’t know it then.

The first time I saw my best friend Sam cry, we were in our Honors Anatomy class junior year. We usually spent the period cackling over our dissected cat, Norbert, who for some reason was gnarlier than everyone else’s. “Norbert must have been into some hardcore shit back in those alleys,” I’d say as I prodded his congealed, withered liver. “When bath time goes wrong,” she’d say when Norbert’s sliced skin flaps came undone from their rubber bands in the lab room sink, and his intestines curled in the drain.

But this day was different. Sam came into class looking disheveled; her usually straightened hair was tied in a flyaway knot at the nape of her neck. Her skin was blotchy red, untouched by foundation, and purplish bags hung beneath each eye. She wore glasses instead of contacts.

She acted differently, too: stoic, distant. My jibe at Norbert’s rubbery kidneys yielded nothing but a blank stare. “Is something wrong?” I asked her, my rubber gloves greased with another one of Norbert’s unidentifiable juices.

The whites of her eyes went pink as a line of tears swelled at her waterline. “I just have a lot going on right now.”

I knew Sam had been under a lot of stress lately. Schoolwork, college applications, and 20-hour work weeks taking phone orders at Bill’s Pizza & Pub had rendered her a shell of a

5 Haisha, Lisa. “Is Your Humor Hurting People?” *Huffington Post*, 22 July 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/self-improvement_b_1533589.

person, an automaton on a wind-up track that hustled her from place to place without giving her time to catch her breath.

I knew all this, but I still hadn't expected her to cry. In fact, neither of us had ever cried in front of the other before, and a part of me had forgotten that Sam could, fooled into thinking that our non-stop banter precluded any possibility of inner turmoil. I made one attempt at engaging with her deeply—"Are you OK?"—but she just nodded. I should have probed deeper, taken her out of the classroom to give her processing space, or at least let her know I was there if she ever needed me. Instead, I asked limply, "Do you want a hug, or . . . ?" while holding out my arms and making a goofy face.

She smiled through her tears. "No, I'm OK," she ended with a decided snuffle, embarrassed at having let slip our joking superficialities and exposing the rawness beneath. I mistook this as a sign she was better and congratulated myself on a job well done.

It wasn't until years later on a summer road trip to Saugatuck, Michigan that her younger sister, Gabriella, revealed what was going on with her sister during that time. Sam was supposed to have come with us, but a stomach bug derailed her plans. "Don't tell her I told you this," Gabriella confessed, sitting cross-legged on the hotel bed, "but Sam was, like, *severely* depressed junior year. It was scary. She once locked herself in the bathroom and threatened my mom that she was going to kill herself. I thought she might do it, too." Gabriella stared at her hands. "She's fine now, by the way. But for a while she really wasn't."

Suddenly, I understood what my roommate had meant by the "nitty gritty parts of life."

I find myself back at my counselor's office, back to its purposefully pastel palette and strategically placed tissue boxes. "I think you're funny, Erin." Dr. Keating crossed her legs. "But do you ever feel like your humor gets you into trouble?"

I thought back to my roommate, to Sam, to the cruiser driver, even. They had all seen a problem with the way I confronted the world, and they can't have been that far off the mark; after all, why else would I be rubbing my knees in a counselor's office, trying to make sense of the emotional clump I let collect in my gut like the

bundle of laundry that comes out of the dryer? I had forgotten that humor was supposed to help cope with the world and the people around me, not just distance myself from them. Now I was left with the nauseating suspicion that I've never really been close to anyone in my life, or worse, that I wouldn't even know how to be if given the chance.

I snorted and looked at my hands. "Do I think that my humor gets me into trouble? Oh boy, do I."

Before you start getting any ideas, know that I'll never be a comedic turncoat; humor—especially dark humor—is my ride-or-die chick, and I'll defend her to the ends of the earth no matter the social or psychological cost. After all, I firmly believe that we wouldn't be able to function in a transient world without joking about it; we'd self-destruct. As pleasure-driven creatures, we're wired to subvert tragedy into comedy. I think about my friends now, the way we endure the stress of school by joking about running into the wilderness and joining a satanic cult (Satan, at least, doesn't care about GPAs) or the way we face our fears about ending up alone by glorifying abject spinsterhood. Our jokes have bonded us, bleak as they may be.

However, I have an issue with moderation. People distance themselves from those who can't engage with them maturely, according to Haisha's final diagnosis of the "Clown":

Those who wish to depend on the "Clown" will find themselves avoiding the "Clown" when they encounter difficulty. This precludes the "Clown" from establishing lasting relationships, effectively relegating the "Impostor" into the category of the funny friend, or at its worst, the asshole friend.⁶

Sound familiar?

Take this as my wake-up call. I am putting myself in comedic rehab, determined not to push anyone else away. When friends come to me with serious issues, I enter a no-comedy zone and take

6 Haisha, Lisa. "Is Your Humor Hurting People?"

time to respond with thoughtful feedback. I am rewiring my brain, relearning that it's okay to talk about depression, family issues, and financial anxiety without a punchline. Sometimes I'm even the one to bring these topics up. Sometimes it's easy to be vulnerable, and sometimes admitting these weaknesses makes me feel naked and defective. Sometimes I fail and I joke about someone's pain when it's still too tender to prod, but I can at least recognize that I've failed.

The point is that I'm trying. I'm trying my best to dig out true feelings beneath the layers of psychological defenses I piled on them as a young girl and trying to be more than a good-time friend. Perhaps there's another article out there to help me figure out how.

SPEECH THERAPY

COLLEEN HAWKE

The soft sibilant whispers
of the /s/ I could not say.
The /th/ that thometimeth thlipped.
The whoosh & /sh/ shlush of a /s/ snake.
That slippery slurry of soapy sounds.

The therapist that had me repeat & repeat:
she sells seashells by the seashore
—good, now say it 10 times, fast.

And sometimes that *she* was really a Sally.
A stupid Sally.

Why did she sell seashells by the sea?
Who was her target market?
How many seashells did she sell?

Probably not very many
& probably just to those cats
unwilling to stretch their limbs.

Darwin would be proud
& Sally would be proud
& my speech therapist, too,

with the *lateralized lisp* of it all.

BEFORE

COLLEEN HAWKE

You took my hand and a bottle of Moscato
sweet, like a first kiss
and strolled through Vieux Lyon
its cobblestone streets
past the gelato shop
the blinking green sign
the tourists snaking 'round the block
their American accents
We reached the river
the ferry boat lights skimming its surface
a slick oil mirage

We sat on the red suspension bridge
feet dangling
daring the water to rise and swallow

the air we pulled through our noses
bread heavy
the honey we exhaled
the shape of your mouth
your hand brushing hair from my forehead
the meteor shower,
the sparks in my stomach—

JAMELAH

RACHEL HUSK

Mom tells me the stories
of Lebanon through the words
of my Sito, who worked in her garden
day and night, harvesting grape leaves
and making tabbouleh and kibbeh
in the kitchen while the silkworms
watched from the low ceiling.

She shows me pictures of poppies
looking over the rubble ruins
at Baalbek to see tossed stones
cementing into the ground
and losing balance against
the broken archway.
Heliopolis, with scattered
Roman temples touched
with darkening moss
and browning stone.

I wonder why my Sito
would leave such a place
to come here where she lived
for fifty years, raising her
children in flat grassy lands
where there is only wind
and cold rainwater for her garden.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

Sabrein Ahmed is a third-year computer engineering student at Michigan State University. Blending the lines between left and right brain stereotypes by spending equal time and energy in the STEM field and creating art. Recently inspired by the notion of “letting the paint control the painter.” Obeying the free-flowing paints, then proceeding to add and magnify their potential imperfect beauty. Hence, *Balancing the Chaos*. Listening to atmospheric instrumental beats, using art as an outlet of expression accompanying her introverted nature. She dreams of and is working toward an art studio life, along with being an engineering professor.

Rai Ahmed-Green is an Afrofuturistic writer who specializes in young adult fiction. She is from Irvine, California and got her degree from Drake in writing and law, politics, society with a concentration in women’s and gender studies. In addition to writing, she likes running and making music. She currently has two musical projects scheduled to release this year and is working on her first novel.

Megan Allison is a creative writing and history student at the University of Central Florida. She has a strong interest in museums and ancient history. Poetry and lyrics inspired her to express herself and speak out about different issues. When not in class, Megan loves to sing, dance, and watch movies. She is passionate about traveling and seeing different cultures around the world.

Matthew Austin is a native of Rock Island, Tennessee and a student at Vanderbilt University, where he spends much of his time planning campus events and contributing to the creative arts organization The McGill Project. He is an avid poet and novelist (check out his novella *As Jamie Saw Things*), and his other hobbies

include tennis, Dungeons and Dragons, and playing board and video games with friends. His eccentricities include collecting socks, designing laptop stickers, and generally admiring lamps.

Caroline Brickley is a writer, filmmaker, and entrepreneur. She is currently a student at Binghamton University pursuing her degree in English, and her poetry has been published in Binghamton University's *Ellipsis* literary magazine. Besides poetry, Caroline enjoys writing and creating content for younger audiences. She most recently co-authored and published *The Blossom Shoppe*, a children's picture book, with her twin sister, Katherine.

Brenna Camping is a writer, poet, and artist based in Phoenix, Arizona. Her work is often representative of the Southwest and the stories of the people in that region. "Miriam" is her first publication and is a very sentimental and personal reflection of her own story. Brenna is currently studying at Arizona State University as a creative writing English major.

Kayla Anne Covert is a 24-year-old published author from San Diego, California. She spends her days working in digital marketing and her evenings producing poetry and prose on her social media account, @MoonlitwordsPoetry, where she writes about life, love and the struggles of being a millennial in today's ever-changing world. You can purchase her poetry collections, *What Lies Ahead* and *These Lessons I've Learned* from Amazon and Barnes and Noble.

R.K. Deshpande is a fourth-year student at Vanderbilt University studying physics and English. He believes these two are far more related than they first seem, and he hopes to become a science writer after university. Aside from writing, he is deeply interested in cooking, video games, and Doctor Who. He is not from anywhere in particular and enjoys spending a great deal of time traveling.

Hayden Reece Froehlich is an undergraduate student studying English, creative writing, and cinema at the University of Iowa.

Raised in a homeschooling Air Force family with three younger siblings, Hayden choose to branch off on his own to explore his love of art and storytelling through prose, poetry, fiction, and short experimental filmmaking. His works attempt to capture familiar existential problems within unfamiliar modes of existence such as with a time traveling ghost, an interdimensional journalist, and a sentient sphere made of marker ink. Hayden hopes to find employment and more stories in the world of arts and entertainment.

Alicia Garrett is a metafiction writer and prose poet at Bowling Green State University studying for her undergraduate degree in creative writing. Formerly from Streetsboro, Ohio, much of her work discusses identity, politics, nature, and mental illness. Alicia Garrett has recently been published in *Literary Orphans's* 35th issue, Mothersbaugh.

Griffin Hamstead is a third-year undergraduate at the University of Georgia studying English and sustainability. He is an emerging writer with work appearing in *Process* and *The Orator*. Griffin is an avid reader, outdoors enthusiast, and aspiring poet and person. He hopes to travel and learn throughout life and plans to pursue an MFA in creative writing some time after graduation.

Samantha Harden was born and raised in Gainesville, Florida. She is an undergraduate student at the University of Central Florida working toward a degree in creative writing. When she's not writing, she's either rock climbing or paddleboarding.

Colleen Hawke is an undergraduate student from Saginaw, Michigan. She attends Central Michigan University, where she is pursuing a degree in communication disorders and American Sign Language with a certificate in creative writing. After graduation, she plans to earn a Master of Arts in speech-language pathology. She has previously been published in *Central Review*.

Heather Hereau is a junior at the University of Memphis majoring in editing and professional writing. She plans to graduate in May of 2020 and go on to pursue a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition. When not reading, studying, or writing for pleasure, Heather enjoys preoccupations similar to those of other single 40-year-old women, such as making a living, paying the bills, and fighting her cat for space on the bed.

Erin Hoffman is a senior creative writing major at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. A Chicagoland native and lover of suburbs, Erin currently presides as editor-in-chief of her university's literary magazine, *The Colgate Portfolio*. She also satisfies her writing fix as a peer consultant at Colgate's Writing and Speaking Center, where she shamelessly campaigns for the Oxford comma to unsuspecting students. In the past, Erin's writing has appeared in *The Offbeat*, another eminent literary journal out of Michigan State University, and *Teen Ink*. Passionate about all things writing—both fiction and nonfiction—Erin is also a dedicated violist, avid coffee drinker, and proud basset hound parent.

Katelyn Hughes is a senior at the University of Central Florida, where she is majoring in advertising and public relations with a minor in creative writing. Katelyn has plans to attend law school after graduation, where she hopes to focus her studies on intellectual property law. In her free time, Katelyn enjoys traveling, watching movies, and snowboarding. She also enjoys taking her golden retriever, Kato, to local dog parks and out on walks.

Samantha Hurst is a senior at Kent State University at Trumbull studying English. After graduating, she hopes to move to Cleveland and pursue a master's degree in library and information sciences. Her dream job is to work for the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. She loves to write in her free time and hopes that this is the first of many future publications. Samantha would like to thank *Red Cedar Review* for this opportunity.

Rachel Husk is an undergraduate at Bowling Green State University majoring in creative writing with a minor in women's, gender, and sexuality studies. She has had her poem "Florence" published in *The Sucarnochee Review* and her fiction story "Ghost" was published in *Blue Marble Review*.

Angela C. Kramer is a senior at Bowling Green State University majoring in creative writing. A huge fan of warmth and being warm, Angela loves blankets, baking, and cuddling with her husband and two cats while watching the same movies over and over. Her work has appeared in *Asterism*, *Runestone Review*, and *Catfish Creek*.

Kurtiss Limbrick is a bucolic American poet hailing from rural Illinois. He received his BA in creative writing from Arizona State University and has published poems in journals such as *The Shoreline Journal*, *LUX*, and *Anon* magazine. He's worked as an intern to the poetry editor for ASU's *Hayden's Ferry Review* and was editor-in-chief of ASU's undergraduate journal, *Marooned*.

Davey Mann has led an eclectic life. He has undertaken many adventures, including serving in both Iraq and Afghanistan, working as a hairstylist in LA, being an international oddities dealer, and riding hand-built 1970's Harley choppers all over the United States. He is currently attending University of Memphis and maintains a studio at Marshall Arts Gallery in the Edge District, home of Memphis's own world-famous Sun Studios.

Kirsten Mayse is an undergraduate student at the University of Memphis with a strong passion for reading and writing poetry. She is often referred to as a crazy cat lady and has one sweet tortoiseshell girl named Kat. You can find her on Instagram @kirstenmayse or at any Mexican restaurant in Memphis. She is majoring in English and is expected to graduate in May of 2021.

Alexis McCauley has worked in the medical field for over 10 years in many capacities and is currently working as a cardiac tech for the

trauma center in Seattle, Washington. She enjoys her job, which keeps her very busy but also provides her with motivation for numerous stories. Her writing tends to involve situations and patients she comes across, looking to provide a voice to those most in need. Alexis is currently working toward a master's degree as a physician assistant with a focus in emergency medicine; her bachelor's degree in English is the first step toward this goal.

McKenna Moore is a painter exploring the experience of controlled chaos, strong women, and the relationship between the two. She is currently receiving her BFA at Oregon State University and will graduate in the spring of 2019. Moore is working toward her thesis show at the end of the year and building her portfolio. She is also a Type 1 diabetic, which influences her artwork greatly. She hopes to receive an MFA in the future.

Dana Mulligan is a junior at Virginia Tech from Falls Church, Virginia. She is majoring in crop and soil sciences and minoring in French, international studies, and global food security and health. In the future, she plans to continue writing while pursuing a career in international agricultural development. In her free time, she loves dancing, hiking, doing handstands, and exploring the vulnerability and beauty of being human.

Dorothy Nguyen is a senior at Indiana University Bloomington, where she studies creative writing and advertising. Her writing has appeared in *The Labyrinth* and *The Magic Jar* literary magazines. She was a fiction editor for the undergraduate magazine *The Indiana Review Online*. When she isn't listening to the voices in her head, Dorothy is drawing, dancing in her kitchen, squirrel spying, yo-yo wrangling, and crying about dead fictional characters. She dreams of one day hosting poetry slams at her cat café and convincing a murder of crows to adopt her.

Carlos Peralta is an aspiring writer from the University of Central Florida who prefers to eat a tomato with pinch of salt while reading

over drinking wine. When not writing, he works as an associate at Rosen Centre Hotel & Resorts, where he uses his day-to-day interactions as fuel for his prose. He enjoys binge watching shows, movies, and the occasional documentary.

Natalie Siede is an undergraduate student of political science, communication studies, and history at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota.

Benjamin Stallings is a student at Lee University in Tennessee. He has published poems and reviews in *The Tulane Review*, *Whale Road Review*, *Rainy Day*, *Lee Review*, and *Polaris*.

Hadley Stoub's first rock painting was completed in 2014 and features a portrait of Sam Smith. She has found painting smaller, more intimate pieces to be easier than painting canvas. Not only are details easier to squeeze in, but less paint is needed, and cleanup is efficient. Her portfolio of works has reached 17 pieces ranging from musicians to presidents. Rocks have always been abundant in her home growing up, as her family had a habit of collecting them on vacations, so it was only a matter of time before they were included in an art project. You can find her rock-related work, as well as other illustrations, on Instagram @hadley.erin.

Robert Sulmonte recently graduated from the University of Central Florida in the summer of 2018 with a BA in creative writing. He is looking to further his education in order to reach his ultimate goal of teaching writing and literature at the collegiate level. He is also currently working toward publishing his own collection of prose and poetry. Much of his writing focuses on human emotions, relationships, and addiction.

