



2022

redcedar REVIEW

VOLUME 57

2022

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redcedar **REVIEW**

2022

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 design by Tor Bickley.

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RED CEDAR REVIEW **VOLUME 57 STAFF**

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Embrace. What does this word mean to you? For us, it means everything. This was our first semester back in person learning at Michigan State University, and although it was exciting, maybe even a little bit intimidating, we had to learn to embrace the unknown with wide accepting arms and the journey for us was nothing less than fulfilling. From knowing little about what a literary magazine entails to now having a complete publication in the span of four months goes to show the resilience of the community in which we worked and from which we gained submissions.

Unlike last year's publication, this publication was done in a hybrid format. At the beginning of the year we were online for the first three weeks and following that period in person learning was the standard with a Zoom format being optional. This presented us with new challenges that we embraced head-on in order to complete acquisitions work, editorial work, publication work, as well as the marketing work. As a class of undergraduate students passionate about the world of literature, we worked relentlessly to ensure this publication was nothing short of unique and filled with incredible work submitted by fellow undergraduates across the country. We were lucky enough to receive a wide range of submissions, each of them unique. This year, we welcomed all sorts of material, ranging from #MeToo accounts to expressions of the trauma of eating disorders; some of these works may be triggering, but we believe they are also important voices to bring to the conversation. I am incredibly proud of the work that was done this year from all of the talented people working inside and outside of the journal.

The production of the 57th issue of the *Red Cedar Review* would not be possible without the editorial staff, the dedication of Professor Milberger's class to read, edit, produce and market these pieces, the entire staff of the *Red Cedar Review*,

and the voracious writers and artists that submitted their work.

We're looking forward to embracing this new world with you all. We wholeheartedly appreciate your interest in volume 57 of the *Red Cedar Review* and hope that you enjoy the art, poetry, and prose as much as we did.

Sincerely,
Caila Coleman
Assistant Editor

ON REPRESENTATION

FLETCHER KIRKWOOD

and time and time again, i go hungry
i find myself begging for scraps that never fall from the plate.
never have i known a full stomach,
only poisoned crumbs left as bait for a desperate mouse
who falls for it every time.
i am aware it is to sate my appetite,
so that i can say i have eaten, and will never whine again.
but bits and pieces will never fill me,
and again, i go hungry.

THE BIG CRASH-THE SICKNESS-THE END OF EVERYTHING

MARENA **BENOIT**

Baby, remember when we hiked
to the top of that mountain?
Your hair was all dirty and flopping around.
Your jacket slung around your neck,
laughing at the sunset.
That was the first time I looked at you.
and thought, goddamn, that is a beautiful woman.

Then it was us in your apartment,
filled with mismatched mugs, physics books, halfway knitted socks.
After watching that stupid movie, you wanted to turn on some jazz.
You needed to get up and “get some blood flowing, have a little fun”
you said.
One hand in your hair and one on your waist as we danced.
Your eyes shone as you brought me in for a kiss.
Kissing you is wearing my veins as a blanket.
Get some blood flowing.
Turn me inside out, make me whole.
Touching your body is a defibrillator.
I will survive being inside out.

Then, I had my hands placed in the exact same way,
but we were not dancing. We were waiting
for the nurse to come in.
She did not deserve to see the contours

of your skin through your gown.

I watched the nurse wrap the blood
pressure cuff around your arm.

She squeezed harder.

I felt as though you moved your fingers to rearrange my chest,
picked my capillaries aside one by one,
wrapped your hands around my heart,
and squeezed harder.

But then, she let go.

Why won't you let go?

I will use these careful hands to reach inside your own organs
to mold every dent in your collapsed lungs.

Fill them out again.

I won't leave this room until you breathe again

breathe again

I WANT TO KISS

JORDYN DAMATO

like I used to kiss when I was 15 and I hope that young age doesn't turn you off (or turn you on) but if I lied and told you I had my first kiss at 20 or not at all yet you would be even more turned off so here is the truth, I was 15 experiencing the height of my libido with boys who couldn't spell libido but they could kiss and kiss they did; some were wet and steamy like I just got out of the shower and other times we were in the shower, his parent's shower, and I felt like a married woman never mind the fact he had a girlfriend that wasn't me, he kissed me like he loved me and it was so different than my next kiss who kissed me like he needed my tongue in his mouth to stay alive and I didn't like being a human life support system so I kissed a girl who kissed me back full of fear then asked me to pray with her once we were done. My point is that it's been so long since I've been kissed in a way that I like, in a way that gives me life and doesn't steal it, in a way that feels like New Year's Eve is every morning and morning breath never bothered me, I like lips in their most organic state and from the 16 out of the 19 people I've kissed, I've heard that I'm the best thing they've ever put in their mouth and truthfully, I would like to hear that again. I would like to feel like Marilyn Monroe or Madonna or another female sex icon that starts with M. I want to get turned on by someone (Am I making you uncomfortable, reader? Please tell me when to stop, or when to keep going, I want you to be comfortable, I need you to be comfortable.) I want to turn strangers on, I want to kiss in public, in the bed of your truck, in well-lit bars, in fancy restaurants we can't afford, in the middle of a round-a-bout with everyone starring as they drive by, in your parents' shower again, again, and again, I want to do more than kiss and I think you know that by now but I want to do it all, I want all of it and I want to not feel bad about any of it, can you do that for me, reader? Just this one time? Please? Can you?

EYES AND EARS

ORION **EMERICK**

Most of the daylight had faded. I watched the stalks of corn flutter in the wind like synchronized dancers. Although, one particular patch in the field moved off rhythm from the rest. It rustled even as the wind died, weaving across the field. Shadows always seemed to lunge and lurch in such unnatural ways when I stared at them too long. I shrugged it off and shut the window; probably just some animal lost in the skyscraping stalks.

Ms. Daphne, the old lady who lived below me, was practicing piano again. I could hear the sound through the floorboards. I rented the second floor from her, which she had turned into a guest house after she divorced her husband.

I grabbed my phone from the desk and wandered to the kitchen. I swept my keys from the little sun-shaped dish by the door—time to get Kit.

Kit and I made a habit of being there for each other. I kept an unspoken promise that I'd always put them first and although I meant to reserve it for high-stakes situations, it applied when they messaged me tonight, needing to be rescued from their studies just as much as I did. Kit was my favorite person in the world, so I didn't mind, plus what else did I have to do tonight anyway?

The cold air nipped at my cheeks as soon as I stepped outside, chilly even for October. The stairs clanged as I marched down and I heard the piano stop. Living in an old house meant every creak and whisper echoed throughout. Ms. Daphne opened her door to the landing and poked her head out. Her cat followed and wandered up the stairs, nudging my little dragon statue on the steps. The old lady asked if I

could try my best to be quiet coming back tonight—I'd been upsetting the cat with my creaking floorboards.

My car zipped from the vastness of the fields to the quaint space near campus. Each storefront was decked in some combination of cobwebs or skeletons dressed as farmhands. All except for the bar across from Kit's apartment, The Neon Palm, who filled their storefront with too many plastic flamingos. They were skewered through bales of hay because the owner wanted to keep up their tropical theme year-round.

Kit appeared; their skin reflected the neon warmth coming from the sign at the bar's entrance. At some point, since I last saw them, they'd dyed their hair. Cherry blossom pink covered the bleach blond. I got a good look since they were much shorter than me, even in their old leather boots. When I looked down at their eyes, brown and warm like the earth, the rims of their glasses flashed a reflection of the sign as they jerked their gaze.

They looked up at me and smirked, "Got an adventure for us tonight?"

"Define adventure," I replied.

"Tipping cows, like real men," they said as we climbed into my car.

"I've got something in mind."

The night stretched like a gray tarp across the sky. My headlights cut through the streets and out onto the lonely bit of countryside that separated the town from the interstate. I parked next to a rotted barn.

They chuckled.

"Are we making crop circles or something?"

"Let's check it out." I pulled a flashlight from my glove box and smiled.

I'd passed this dilapidated barn a thousand times on my way out of town. When I clicked my flashlight on, we saw how torn apart the place really was. Half of the outer panels were missing on opposite walls and the big barn door was stuck open; all the abandoned equipment rustling in the elements. Kit dared me to go inside, and I dared them to do the same. Each breeze caused the rotted wood to croak and crinkled the corn. The ears of corn almost suffocated the old building.

I could've sworn I heard hissing. Something over Kit's shoulder flickered. I'd been so focused on the holes in the walls of the barn that I didn't even notice it there until it disappeared. Whatever it was moved quickly and was partly covered with loose fabric. It had to be my imagination or something in my eye. Just an overgrown raccoon half-stuck in an old feed bag, I bet. In the dark, things changed shape. Shadows jumped around a lot out here, the wind moving the field in the darkness.

Kit turned on their phone flashlight and moved toward the corn. "Y'know, maybe we could move in together next semester so we can be roomies again before we graduate, for the hell of it," they suggested with a grin. I could see the glint of my flashlight in their glasses. "I've been applying to jobs in New York, so if you wind up in D.C., we won't be too far apart. Maybe I could find a job closer to you too."

"I don't want you to be far; you'll get all new friends, cooler friends, and then you'll just forget about me, because you're too busy being cool." I cracked a smile and looked at them. For a second, I thought I could maybe tell them about the apartment I'd found that would be perfect for us. I imagined living with them, watching them make their morning coffee, their arms still warm with sleep. I imagined their voice and the scent of vanilla filling up the apartment as they sang absentmindedly while baking

"You act like I'd just move on." They pushed forward, brushing away stalks as we plunged further. All around us, the field rustled. It almost sounded like a whisper or a warning. "You're not getting rid of me that easy."

“Promise?”

They would find new friends wherever they wound up, that was a fact. It wouldn't take long either. Their smile was infectious, the kind that made you feel warm inside. Since they grew out of that awkward phase from our first year of college, they didn't have much trouble making more friends. I hadn't really met anyone, and I wasn't exactly great at first impressions, so I only had Kit. Whatever happened in the future, it might rip them away from me, a thought that made me turn grey inside.

“Promise. You're stuck with me.”

The corners of my mouth tugged into a smile. Here, in the belly of the field, it felt like we were the only people on the planet. It was so dark, and there was no sound to disturb the stillness of our solitude. Just as quick as it came, that feeling faded, lost to the hiss of the wind swelling. It filled the space around us and pumped me full of the overwhelming need to take off running.

Kit's eyebrows stitched together as they looked past me, to where the barn jutted out of the field. They grabbed my hand and pulled me close. In a splintered whisper, they breathed, “There's something over there. Behind you.”

The hair on the back of my neck stood up at the quiver in their voice. I jerked my head around and saw something between the barn and us. An eerie glow haunted its eyes—that thing I caught a glimpse of just moments ago stuck out of the corn a few feet away, close enough that it could hear us. Old scarecrow skin draped its limbs, it hunched over and dragged a claw along the dirt.

“We're going to be fine,” I promised Kit. I just needed to figure out how to get us out of here.

Our hands tangled together. We looked at each other, dust-covered and petrified. On the other side of us, a narrow path had been tramped

into the ground between two rows of corn. It meandered through the crop, I hoped it would lead us to the road. We crept between the walls around us; I shivered as dry stalks pulled at my jacket. We just had to make it back to the car, then I could get us to safety like I promised.

The top of the Thing's head poked out from the roof of the field. Feathers sprouted from its scalp. It was getting closer; I could almost touch it now. Could it just be an unusually large bird? It couldn't swoop down and grab us, right? I'd seen videos of eagles with baby sharks in their talons. But birds here couldn't be that strong, right?

I stretched, digging my toes into the dirt to try and get a better glance at the Thing near the barn. Maybe it was just some loser with a costume and nothing better to do. It slithered past the structure, further into the field like it was following us, before the tip of its head dove down. I couldn't see it now. It could be anywhere. All my limbs were tied to the spot, I couldn't move, couldn't run.

All around us, that same sinister hiss echoed like whispers in an empty house. Kit's fingers dug into my hand. Besides the pink ends of their chewed fingertips, the only thing I felt were the cold beads of sweat on my forehead.

Something behind us moved. I snapped my head around to see Kit's face illuminated by my flashlight, their eyes pointed further down the path. My heart slammed in my chest so hard that I thought it might break my ribs. Kit flashed a trusting smile and tugged at my hand. I followed deeper into the field, away from where it had sprouted up last. I kept my head on a swivel. That Thing could be anywhere. It was probably lurking just where the shadows started to get too dark to see. My skin crawled, it was watching us. Every time a leaf crunched beneath my feet, I looked over my shoulder. I swore I heard something getting closer, brushing against the corn. I decided to stop looking before I did see something. What was I supposed to do if it was there?

Everything beyond the halo of our flashlights was pure unknown, inky blackness. The perfect hiding spot for that nightmare of a creature. We

needed to make our way back to the road, back to the car, somewhere I could keep us safe.

The hissing surged until I had to clasp my hands over my ears, letting my flashlight clatter to the earth. Murky white light crept along the path tramped between the stalks and at the end of it: eyes. They drew closer, suddenly glowing brighter. I watched Kit's usual bounce fade from their step. Their legs slack and they took slow, heavy steps toward the eyes and gaping jaw that hung below them. Kit's whole body had been struck by that same eerie lethargy; their arms went loose so their phone dangled. The light from their flashlight splattered across the stalks alongside them, making each dark crevice seem just a little darker when the light failed to reach it. The eyes at the end of the path glared, beaming Kit in, inch by inch with their glow.

"Kit! What the hell?" I yanked their wrist.

Something inside them snapped, I felt their shoulder tug. They swung back like elastic and blinked. When I looked at them, searching their faces for an explanation, their pupils swallowed up the glow from my flashlight like perfectly symmetrical black holes. Shadows mangled their expression. Their faces were blank as if they had no recollection of the past few seconds.

My eyes flickered toward the beast, too frozen in fear to point at whatever that thing was. Its pale eyes turned, splitting a blank, steady gaze between us. The feathers on top of its head twitched as it revealed a mouthful of yellow razor-sharp teeth. Blood dripped from its leathery tongue, down its gaunt neck that stretched a whole foot before it turned into a patchwork corpse of leather and scales.

"Get behind me," I snapped. Kit crept over slowly. Then, in the same instant, their breath picked up. Each muscle in their face twitched. Fear contorted their expression into something jagged as horror took over their body. Their fingers dug into my shoulder as they clung to me.

The loose flaps of skin swung as the Thing crept forward. In the overturned beam of my flashlight, I got a good look at it. The scaled torso disappeared into the raw muscle of its thin legs, which ended in crooked hooves. The head, almost human, towered over the corn walls on either side of us. Its eyes glowed brighter, like when you take a picture of an animal with a flash. Behind the light, it was empty. Cold. I couldn't look at the face. I didn't want to call it a face at all. It bent and stitched in ways I couldn't comprehend, like a botched surgery scar that would never fully heal. I could see the bone in spots where the skin slipped off. My stomach knotted and unwound at the sight of it.

"What is that?" Kit shouted at me. I could barely hear them over the hiss that slithered through the ears of corn. Each second it got louder. Closer.

It lowered its snout and snarled in our faces. I could see chunks of skin between the daggers puncturing its swollen gums.

Without another word, we took off in a mad dash. I led us in the direction of the road, away from the Thing. My heart stopped as I realized we could only race towards the light of the houses in the distance and hope we would make it. The corn scraped my face as I bolted forwards. Kit's footsteps struck the ground behind me. If we tried, we could make it to my place. Kit blurred by my side as our feet collided with the pavement. We'd have to bust our asses, but we could make it.

Don't look back. A voice in my head told me. Don't look back. What if it was there? What would I do? My feet hit the ground. Each time, I could swear it was hard enough to crack the pavement beneath me. Don't look back.

As long as I could see Kit, as long as I knew they were okay, I could keep running. I could see the silhouette of Ms. Daphne's gardening shed. The motion-sensing light flicked on.

Don't turn around.

I swore there was another set of footsteps behind us.

Don't turn around.

The duplex stuck out in a dark shape from the horizon, like a tombstone. Kit clambered up the stairs and into the front door, their cheeks stained with tears. My chest collapsed when I could finally stop running. For the first time, I let myself turn around. Nothingness. The night behind us was quiet, still. It almost looked like a painting.

My legs felt like steel as I unlocked the door. We crashed onto the couch. It creaked beneath our weight. The room spun around me. I glanced at Kit, their chest rose and fell in quick, shallow movements.

We heard a slamming at the door. Both of us jumped. Kit yelped. I expected them to dive behind the couch for cover. My breath hitched. There's no way that Thing followed us all the way here. Kit's eyes glinted at me, wide in apprehension. They shook their heads in a fury, pleading for me not to open it. There was another bang against the wood. Harder this time.

"I swear, what did I say about all that noise?" Ms. Daphne shouted. Her shrill voice relaxed each of the muscles in my body. I walked over to the door, Ms. Daphne still wrapping against it. She had a right to be angry. I did the only thing she told me not to do. When I opened the door, she stood there in a bathrobe with a scowl on her face, her cat at her feet.

"I'm sorry Ms. Daphne, see we saw this—this thing," I looked at Kit for a better word to describe it. They stuck their eyes to the world beyond the window.

"I don't care if you saw the pope riding a unicorn, keep it down."

"Of course, ma'am," I sighed, "Have you seen anything unusual lately? Out in the cornfield?"

She squawked out a laugh, then sighed. “Goodnight. Please keep it down. Both of you.”

“I’ll try my best. Night, Ms. Daphne.” I shut the door behind me, puzzled by her laughter. I looked at Kit still quaking yet unblinking on the couch. I took a few deep breaths and tried to shake the terror from my brain. Neither of us was ready to talk about what we’d just seen.

I rested against the window and looked out into the night; at the field we’d just escaped from. My car sat near the barn; my stomach sank at the thought of going back out there to get it in the morning. Suddenly, I was sick of this view. I couldn’t stay here with the threat of that Thing nearby; I needed to find a new place to live. I told Kit about the apartment I’d found.

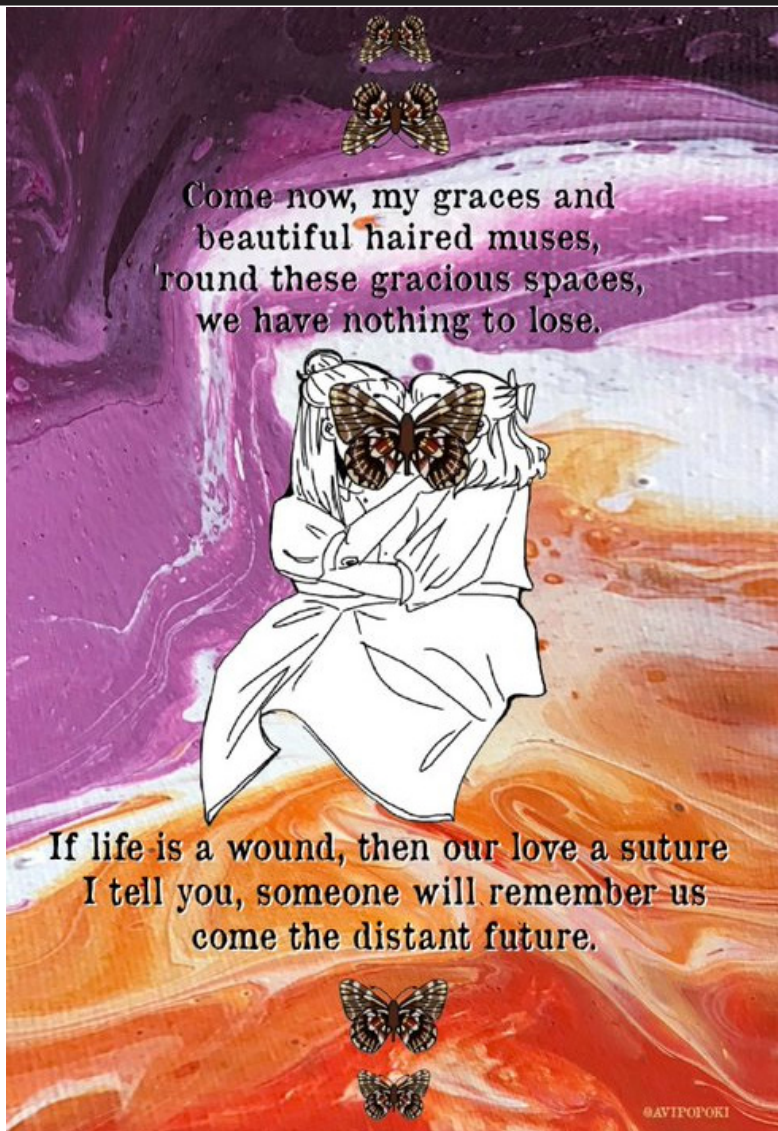
SOMETHING IS HAPPENING

MARENA **BENOIT**

something is happening
ripping
crushing
a hand around my waist
a touch of my nose
a brush of my shoulder,
feels like a punch in the gut
a breaking of my teeth
a ripping of my hair
nothing concedes in nature, save
the crashing of a waterfall
but even that is beautiful. there is no beauty
here, where something is happening

QUEER STORIES - SAPPHO'S POEMS

AVIANA IRRER



UNAPOLEGETIC VERSE

ANNA KUSHNER

I write for an unknown mind that is kindred to my own
For the pained consciousness who parallels my niche experiences
I apologize on behalf of the worlds tragic treatment of your soul
Fear rears its ghastly stingers piercing fate with the force of an
industrial sewing machine

I write to the boy whose eyes locked with mine as I turned the corner
You knew it was me from the passport stamped Hyundai
I you by the evergreen parka. I'd recognize your stride anywhere
An epilogue to a story my mind refuses to believe has ceased

I write so our memories feel tangible once again
Living through the many eyes I've borne out of tragedy
If only there was a way to reverse without regret
Time is cruel, unforgiving, and inimical. The antimatter of my nature

I write because you consume my existence
My consciousness is rooted in the contours of sound emitted by your
voice
By continuing to write about you, I'm bound to run out of thoughts
Only then will you once again be a stranger

A HARD TIME DYING

COLLIN BROPHY

Saturday, July 1

Static hissed through the car speakers. Air rushed in through unopened windows; battering damp clothes that stuck against his skin. Steeped in the stifling heat of the Northern Michigan summer, his body burned and his brain fought against a deepened resolve for nonexistence. At least no one had seen him try.

At twenty-seven, Andrew could feel the weight of his mortality suffocating him. It bubbled and wormed beneath his skin—a black viscous fluid like the shadow of a dark lake. Outside the car, trees reached toward the sky with ever-growing fingers of nature’s skeleton. On the left side of the road, an illuminated marquee with track lettering that advertised food caught his eye. His stomach ached. He hit the brakes, and turned the wheel around.

The sun was setting by the time he pulled into the gravel lot. Pickups and sedans sat packed together next to the Black Star, a small bar with a lacquered pine exterior and entrance lit up in neon. Everything in the world appeared painfully vivid to Andrew. Colors popped with a brightness that drew his attention; the sky a pastel pink, swirled with a violent neon orange, and crested the crowd of evergreens that engulfed the low buildings of the four-way stop. The smallest sounds rose in volume: gravel rattled beneath his car like an avalanche or the whirl of his car windows rolling up felt like it would burst his ear drums. Andrew careened his limping Subaru into a spot next to an ancient pick up the color of burnt umber, far from the entrance of the bar. He tucked the front bumper against a splintering patch of switchgrass that sprouted wildly from unchecked growth. The straw-like foliage desperately attacked the loose border of the gravel lot, as if this cluster

of small buildings was the last marking of humanity and the world was trying to swallow it up.

Andrew killed the car and opened the door in a swift motion. As he stepped onto the gravel and pulled himself from the driver's seat, the world went sideways. His knees buckled as he fell hard onto the ground. The soft gray cotton of his oversized sweatpants did little to break the force of impact. Air escaped his lungs in a wheezing sound as he collapsed to his elbows. His pulse quickened. He could feel the ground shift beneath him through the rolled sleeves of his plaid button down. First the lake, then the shower. He wanted desperately to get away from the dampness that lined his clothes. His stomach churned as he pushed his back against the car, angling his head toward the setting sun. A pill. He could solve all of this with a pill. With some food to keep it down, and water to wash it along; in thirty minutes this panic attack would feel like a distant memory. He needed to eat and take his meds. Just get some food and take his meds.

Andrew coughed into a fist as the past twenty-four hours caught up with him. His lungs kicked up stale moisture. He felt weak—like a boxer that had been in the ring long past the end of his fight. He closed his eyes and focused on his breath, letting the world come back to him in pieces. The sticky syrup of the humid night air. The roar of his own panicked breathing. As his breath returned to normal and the drumbeat of his heart in his ears subsided, more sounds filtered in. The cooling engine of his car clicked to an off-beat rhythm. Crickets chirped their reedy cacophony against the sawblades of cicadas. A car door slammed in the distance. Somewhere nearby a woman sobbed in long pained gasps.

*

Jim Leeper thought about his recent run of bad luck. The mirror above the sink was lined with festering groups of rust. The sole bulb in the closet sized bathroom spasmed through various shades of flickering illumination. He inspected his face between the light's epileptic fits. His slicked-back hair fell out of place in all the right ways, driving wildly

against his face. Grey eyes gave him the gaze of a specter. Despite working long hours beneath the summer sun, his skin was bedsheet-white, veins visible beneath its surface in tendrilled blue ropes along his arms and small clusters around his temples.

He ran water from the sink; using his left hand to rub the coolness across his long jaw. Some of the water splashed the hard cast on his right arm—he was still getting used to its presence. Inside the cast, he could feel the ache of his broken hand, the cracked and swollen knuckles. The only other sign of his recent trouble was a slight bruise that couched a cut just above his right eyebrow.

Jim turned around to face the only toilet in the bathroom. The lid up, no privacy stall. Darkness swallowed the corners of the room on either side of it. From the deepest part of his back pocket, he produced a blue latex glove. It made a satisfying snapping sound as he slipped it on his left hand, snugging it with his teeth and the exposed fingertips of his right. This was his ritual. He unzipped and aimed with the gloved hand, adjusting his stream of urine. When he was finished, he zipped himself up, kicked the handle of the toilet with his boot and dropped the glove at the bottom of the trash can. Turning quickly, he washed his left hand raw in the sink, and brought his focus back to the hours ahead of him. Tonight his luck was going to change. He could feel it. He could taste it in the air around him. It was a sweet metallic taste, riding on the mixture of dank air in the dingy bathroom and the whisper of cinnamon whiskey on his breath.

*

Andrew pulled the cigarettes from the front pocket of his shirt and lit up. The woman's crying echoed through the air. Part of him was jealous of her tears. He took long drags, letting the smoke drift in lazy motes around him. Beneath the mixture of sweat and mothballs, he could smell the brown lake water on his skin; it clung to him despite the vigorous scrubbing he'd given himself in the shower. He wafted the smoke over his body and let it coat him. Each second felt like a day. Each minute, a week. When the cherry hit the filter, he snubbed out

the cigarette on the ground beside him and raised to a crouch on the balls of his feet, arms resting across the tops of his legs. Food, water, pills, he thought to himself.

The sobbing continued, close. Hung in the air like middle-aged depression. He stood. His medium frame engulfed in ill-fitting clothing. Combed brown hair, blue eyes. Skin too pale to be real, like it was made of paper-mache. He held out a hand and placed it over his reflection on his driver-side window and let out a long sigh. If only it was that easy.

A loud series of sniffles brought him back to his surroundings. Through the window glass of his car, he was surprised to see a woman sitting in the pickup on the other side of his Subaru. Andrew considered leaving the woman to her business. There was enough shit on his plate without involving himself in someone else's troubles, but something about her seemed familiar. She reminded him of his mother, his sister. He could see them holding each other at the kitchen table, crying over his own death. Guilt gnawed at him.

He walked around his car and made eye contact with the woman. In the shadow of the cab, all he could make out was the vague impression of her face. When he moved into the space in between their vehicles she jumped in her seat. A renewed sob cut off mid-gasp. He raised his hands in a calming gesture and pulled the cigarettes from his pocket, holding them before him. An offer. She nodded. The tension on her face eased.

He walked up to the open window of the truck and looked at his feet as she dabbed her eyes with a tissue. He'd forgotten he was wearing teal flip flops, the only spare footwear he could find at the cottage. He kept a healthy distance as he opened the pack and held it out. They both took one, the flame of the lighter sparking bright in the dim light.

"Thank you," she said.

Andrew nodded in response. Dark makeup had run from her eyes down her cheeks, a half-finished charcoal drawing. In the dim light of the cab, he found her beautiful despite her agony. Her cropped hair, high cheekbones, and round nose reminded him of Audrey Hepburn. Her left-hand held the cigarette and gripped the steering wheel, occasionally tapping ash out the window. Her right-hand rested on the ignition. Andrew got the impression it might be a bad idea to stand close to the wheels of her pickup. He leaned back against the side of his car, its evergreen paint chipped and rusted in places.

“I’m Rose,” she said.

“Andrew.”

From his left, he heard the crunch of gravel and the snap of a windshield wiper hitting glass. He looked over to see two boys, no older than fifteen, in white dress shirts and black slacks. One had a backpack and carried two buckets, his arms straining from the load. As Andrew watched, the boy with free hands pulled pamphlets from the backpack and slid them under the wipers of the cars in the lot.

Andrew looked at Rose’s windshield and saw one of the pamphlets affixed there. He leaned over the front of her truck and pulled it from under her wiper. It was one of those multi-paneled deals that unfolded into a full sheet. Written along the bottom in purple lettering was “The Church of Her Most Precious Blood.” The inside was full of warnings about the salvation of his eternal soul. He held the pamphlet up to the ember of his cigarette and drew on it a few times. They both watched the eager flame spread across the paper.

“This place will kill you, you know,” she said.

Andrew looked up, surprised at the steel in her tone, her cigarette was gone from her mouth. Her face was puffy and swollen. “These people,” she waved at the air around her, then stopped to collect herself, looking as if she might cry again. “They’re suffocating. This town chokes the life out of you.” Andrew opened his mouth, then

closed it. “It’s enough to drive you crazy.” Her hand turned the ignition and the truck roared to life. “See you later, James Dean.”

The truck pulled forward, out of the gravel lot then onto the two-lane blacktop, accelerating into the low light of the setting sun.

Andrew ran a hand through his hair and stood in the trail of fumes left in her wake, chewing over her words. Her intent had been obvious, to warn him away from the Black Star. It didn’t change the fact that he needed to eat.

He had been sleeping with Amber, a server at the bar he worked at back home. A faithful wife, a mother of three. She had this philosophy that if you experience great pain in your life, no matter the cause, you had to be equally capable of experiencing the same measure of happiness. She brought up this philosophy frequently after their post-work fuck sessions in her minivan. He hadn’t found a way to tell her he thought that the idea was bullshit.

The night before he left, she told him he had sad eyes. He lay half tangled in the liveness of her naked body and wondered how she could be so wrong. How could she see anything at all between the booze, the weed, the pills, and their constant fucking? Twenty-seven didn’t make him a sage but he had no hopeless romantic notions about the spectrum of human emotion. In his experience, there was no limit to pain. Pain was a bottomless well within which you tread water trying to keep yourself from drowning until your muscles ache and your chest burns and you slip slowly beneath the surface. Then, you’re breathing water until your lungs are full, but it still won’t let you go. Everything goes black. This is it; the absolution you’ve been begging for. Then you wake up on the shore wondering how you got back to the place you started. You don’t understand why you’re still alive or how any one person could bear so much; all you can do is exist.

He opened the passenger-side door and unzipped the main compartment of his backpack. Inside lay a casual orgy of translucent orange pill bottles. Beneath the bottles he could see the black handle of

the revolver. A dark part of him wanted desperately to grab the pistol from his backpack, place the barrel against his temple and ventilate his cranium. He thought about what the inside of his skull would look like as it dripped down the side of his car and lay splashed across the gravel. It was a pointless fantasy. He couldn't do it. He didn't have the stomach for it—that much he had learned on the dock.

The medications always seemed foreign to him despite his religious adherence to their schedule. The pills were coated in the elusive quality of brain chemistry that no one could describe to him fully. The hard tubular bodies varied drastically in height and width. White safety caps with blue hieroglyphics. He pulled the necessary bottles, popped their tops, fished out what he needed, and stashed the handful of collected H-framed ovals and perfect circles in their various confectionary colors in the front pocket of his sweatpants, tossing the bottles back into the pack one-by-one.

Medicating himself was a matter of math. A simple equation that guaranteed certain outcomes. Take XYZ pills at ABC time every day and his brain would stay regulated. He could miss a dose of certain medications here and there, but if he skipped more than two in a row, his emotions would start to become unstable. In this state, his ability to observe the world, as it truly was, would spiral downwards drastically while his sensory perceptions would become heightened. It amounted to what was a natural high: mania.

It had been two days since Andrew had taken any of his medication. This was intentional. He had wanted to ride that high one last time. The soaring feeling of grandiose thought and superhuman possibilities. In this place he could never be wrong.

Andrew stashed the handful of collected H-framed ovals and perfect circles in their various confectionary colors in the front pocket of his sweatpants. In reflex, he reached into his back pocket for his phone, knowing even as he patted his pocket it was at the bottom of the lake. He checked his paper wallet, for his ID and credit card and finding both, replaced it in his back pocket where it lay soggy and disintegrating.

Jim exited the bathroom at a fast walk, cruising toward the bar rail. As he moved, he took in the room before him. The Friday night crowd had taken up their regular places. If he looked behind him, he'd see his own crew holding down the table by the juke, warding off anyone from playing music they didn't like. A burst of loud laughter came from this direction. He ignored it, shrugging off his ever-present paranoia that he might be the butt of someone else's joke. This was his first time visiting the Black Star since being fired from Don's Lawn Care the previous Sunday when he'd beaten a day laborer into the ICU. He would find Krista and let her know that he was ready. Ready to leave Angie. Ready to leave all of this behind. Ready to pick up where they left off almost a year ago on a drunken summer night.

He scanned the length of the bar until he found her. Krista was leaning over the short arm of the bar rail talking to a guy Jim had never seen before. There was something about the newcomer. Something Jim couldn't quite figure out. He was wearing a plaid button-down that was three sizes too big, grey sweatpants and flip flops. As Jim watched, Krista and the newbie broke out into a shared laughter. The irrational jealousy that burned across his face was immediate and withering. What could be so funny? Does she know this guy? Why is she talking to someone dressed like that? Get him a drink and move on. Krista slid her order book into the back pocket of her jeans and started down the bar toward where he stood. As she drew closer, Jim leaned over the bar top and flagged her down.

"Hey, Kris—"

"One sec, I gotta put this order in."

Krista winked at Jim, then brushed past where he stood and moved through the swinging double doors into the small kitchen. Her hair always hung in long curls, her bangs straight. Her eyes had a perceptive quality that made Jim feel seen in a way that no one else did. He needed those eyes, now more than ever. The shape of her face was a mix of

soft curves and teasing angles. She had a way of moving through life in a way that made modernity seem seductive. Jim found himself taking in her figure with desperation. He took a breath and tried to compose himself.

To his right sat Dottie in her usual spot at the end of the rail. Her wild, gray hair was a bird's nest; her eyes always staring off into some distant place that no one else could see. She slurped Long Islands like water. A charity case who could never pay her tab, always banking on the kindness of the other locals. He supposed the Black Star was as close to a homeless shelter as you'd find around the lake. Age lines and wrinkles crossed her face. She reminded Jim of his own mother. A bad taste rolled across his tongue.

Jim pictured himself and wondered if his hair still looked the way it had in the bathroom. His mind wandered. First, back to what Krista was wearing, denim jeans and a purple plaid button-down knotted over a tight white t-shirt that showed a hint of her toned midriff. Then, to all of the things he would like to do to her—and all of the things he would like her to do to him. Lost in his fantasy he missed her return.

“What happened to you?”

Jim took in her olive complexion and the hazel of her eyes. She nodded toward his busted hand, her brown hair bobbing with her head as she spoke. Jim raised his right hand and gave it a long look as if he was seeing the cast for the first time. He resolved to lie and shrugged his shoulders, fixing a bored expression across his face.

“It's nothing. Just a work thing.”

Krista raised an eyebrow and paused for a moment chewing her lip, a gesture Jim found adorable, then turned around and fetched a clear bottle from a low cooler. As she bent over, Jim allowed himself a brief glance at the curve of her ass before fixing his eyes on the mirror that ran the length of the back bar. In its reflection, he watched the man he didn't recognize, sitting at the opposite end of the bar. In front of the

man sat a pint glass of water and a short glass filled with red liquid. She placed two shot glasses on the bar top between them. With a practiced motion, she filled the two glasses and raised one up into the neutral air before her.

“To your health.”

Jim picked up his own glass and clinked it against hers. “To my health.”

He downed the shot. A strong rush of mint and the accompanying burn filled his mouth, the heat working at the back of his throat. If he could freeze this moment in time and stay there forever, he would. He had everything he would ever need: a decent buzz, a hot girl, the promise of a new beginning, and his hometown bar. A too-large hand grabbed Jim’s inner thigh from behind. The smell of bubblegum, tobacco and gin told him that it was Angie. In his haste to get to Krista, he hadn’t bothered to check the corner table for her. Jim watched in the mirror with mild disgust as Angie nibbled painfully on his ear. He’d been meaning to break it off with her for months, but the thought of her potential reaction terrified him. Given her tendency for violence and hysterics, she’d kill herself or kill him. Maybe both. It took all his self-restraint not to flinch. When she spoke, her voice had a slight rasp from her two-pack-a-day habit.

“Grabbing a smoke. I’ll be back.”

In the mirror, Jim watched Angie lock eyes with Krista before walking out the front door, her last name “Shaffer” written across the back of her sweatshirt. Jim tapped his shot glass twice on the bar and slid it the short distance toward Krista. The glass traveled across the knotted wood and came to rest squarely in front of her. Jim nodded toward the man he didn’t recognize sitting at the end of the bar.

“You know him, Kris?”

“No. First time I’ve seen him.”

“What were you two talking about just now?”

“His order.” Krista folded her arms across her chest.

“That funny huh? Some tacos and a vodka cran?”

“Juice, actually.”

“Fuckin juice? You’re saying he’s here for the food?”

“I’m saying there’s nothing wrong with someone stopping in for service. Especially if they can make me laugh.”

A smile broke out across Krista’s face. Jim could see her replay the man’s words in her head like they were lit up on a scrolling billboard.

“Could I get a bottle for the table? The usual?”

Krista leaned back and rested her hands against her hips. “You gonna cause trouble tonight?”

“Me? Never dream of it. Oh, and uh,” Jim flicked his eyes toward Dottie, “I’ll take her tab for the night.” Jim pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and placed a wad of bills on the bar. He couldn’t afford the expense, but he wanted to see her reaction. This night was going to go his way. He watched her eyes light up as she did the math. “Keep the change.”

Krista chewed her lip and then turned around to fetch a bottle of whiskey. She set the bottle on the bar top and bent over at the waist to retrieve a small tray and eight shot glasses. Returning upright, she placed the bottle and the glasses in a neat circle on the tray.

Jim picked up the bottle of whiskey and two shot glasses from the tray and started walking. With each step his surroundings faded further into the background until there was just him and Mr. Juice.

*

When Andrew had approached the entrance to the bar, he saw the short figure of a woman standing at the railing that lined the small deck wrapped around the front. Walking up the handicap ramp, he paused beneath the harsh violet and red aura of the neon signs. The smell of menthol and tobacco filled his nose.

The two boys who had been flyering windshields stood in front of the deck, buckets sitting at their feet. They whispered back and forth to one another through cupped hands.

Andrew lit a cigarette and positioned himself beside the woman. Her sandy blond hair was pulled into a tight ponytail, her arms too long for her slim body. She wore jean cutoffs with the pockets falling down her thighs and a blue high school track sweatshirt with the name "Shaffer" written on the back in gold lettering. The tan skin of her face seemed older than the rest of her. Lines showed in soft places; eyes stamped with crow's feet.

They watched the boys.

"You ever read those flyers they hand out?" Andrew asked. The woman nodded and took a drag.

"If you thought those were hot shit, you'll love this," she said.

With her cigarette cupped between her fingers she gestured toward the boys. They pulled off their suspenders and let them fall to their side. Then each raised one of the buckets above his head. Their arms shaking, they began to speak at a volume that rose to a yell: "The time for salvation is running out. Receive her blessing and be reborn. The end is near. There is not long left. There is only God to cry now! There is only God to cry now!"

When they finished with their speech, each boy upended his bucket over his head. Water drenched them, revealing, in their soaked state,

how impossibly thin both were. One wrapped his arms around the other who held his fist to the sky. They kissed each other on the forehead and yipped with joy. After a few moments, the boys collected their belongings and walked off toward the far end of the parking lot. In the looming darkness, Andrew thought he could see figures dressed in all white, waiting where the gravel met the pavement of the road, beckoning the boys over.

“Show’s over,” said the woman.

Gooseflesh broke out across Andrew’s arm. He shook it out and finished his cigarette. Turning to flick the butt, he noticed that the woman next to him was rubbing a small silver cross that hung around her neck.

“Well, that seemed awfully progressive,” he offered.

“How’s that?”

“Their God is a woman. Does this sort of thing happen often?” She turned toward the entrance and flicked her cigarette before pausing and leaning back toward him.

“Every Friday night since that church opened last summer.”

“How long has this place been open?” Andrew nodded at the bar, “Last time I was up here, maybe five years ago, the building was empty.”

“You just missed it then. The Black Star reopened four years ago now. I need a drink.” She fixed him with hazy eyes whose intent he couldn’t read.

“What’s your poison?” he asked.

“Gin and tonic. You?”

“Cranberry.”

Heat worked across his cheeks as he smiled dumbly at the woman, knowing how his answer sounded. She made a clucking sound with her tongue. The interest drained from her body language. With one word he had emasculated himself. Utterly disinterested, she turned and walked through the entrance of the bar, leaving Andrew alone on the deck.

The interior of the small bar was cozy, with just enough space for Andrew to sit along the small arm of the L-shaped rail, away from the other guests. A handful of tables, no two of which were identical, lay scattered around the dining room with guests in varying numbers huddled together in conversation. An ornate chandelier hung high on a needlessly vaulted ceiling. It cast the interior with a dim amber-orange hue. The backwater soundtrack of America pumped through a mismatched assortment of speakers spread throughout the room.

The bar top felt odd to Andrew as he ran his hands along its surface. The wood hummed with vibration beneath his palms. He alternated sips of water and juice. It felt good to get something in his stomach. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten. But then, whatever had been in his stomach had been evacuated all over the dock. He shivered recalling the wet sound of his vomit slopping into the lake as it dropped between the wooden slats. Warmth broke out across his face even as he thought how absurd it was to be embarrassed by an event only he had been witness to.

Carved into the surface of the bar top was a primitive drawing. Andrew traced it with his fingers. A rough and uneven circle dotted the middle of three arms, each of which reached outward at evenly spaced intervals. Two of the arms looked like twisted question marks, though one of these was facing the wrong way. The third arm, which was shorter than the other two, resembled a slightly bent line. It was as if someone had interrupted the artist as they were etching the final leg.

*

The first thing that told Andrew he was no longer alone was the smell, an acrid unsettling odor that reminded him of kerosene. It was strong enough to cut through the scent of the pinewood and sanitizer wafting off the counter. When he looked up, a man stood next to him. He faced away from Andrew, leaned against the bar, and surveyed the small room and its occupants as a king would his castle. The man had a roman nose and a long beak of a jaw. His hair was slicked back, thick torso suffocated in a plain white tee-shirt. Cords of muscle roped across his limbs. A dull white cast encased his right forearm. Even sitting, Andrew could tell the man was taller than him.

As the man turned to face him, and judging by the semi-glossed look of his eyes, Andrew could tell he was well on his way to being shitfaced. Andrew groaned internally and hoped this didn't show in his body language. He took a careful sip of juice. For a moment, he held onto the hope that if he didn't engage with the man, he would be left alone.

"I, uhh, seen you around before?" The man rolled his head toward Andrew as he spoke.

Andrew tried to pause before responding but even on his best days his mouth ran ahead of his brain. "Doubtful."

"n how's that?"

"I'm not from here. My grandad had a place on the lake. We kept it in the family when he passed."

"You come from money then?" Andrew leaned back in his barstool and looked himself up and down.

"The clothes give it away?"

The man barked a single sharp laugh and pulled his lips into a thin smile. The gesture seemed off to Andrew, making him feel uneasy as another pang of hunger squelched in his stomach. The man reached beside him for something Andrew couldn't see and produced two

glasses and a bottle of whiskey. Before Andrew could object, one of the glasses slid his way across the bar top. Whiskey sloshed into the concave clearness.

“In that case, let me formally welcome you to the lake.”

Andrew stared at the glass before him, his hands cupping the base. The noise of the world around him seemed to turn down. His symptoms were getting worse. It was as if someone had spun the volume knob back a few clicks on everything but the two of them. This wasn't his first time playing this game. Every second he didn't pick up the shot and down it he lost ground and he knew it. Ground that seemed increasingly important after the man's goofy smile. Andrew paused, another second lost. He couldn't drink and take his meds. Not if he wanted them to work. He looked from the shot to the man and saw genuine curiosity in his dim eyes, but there was something else there. Something that lurked deeper beneath the surface.

“Go on,” the man offered, “have a real drink. My treat.”

Andrew picked up the shot glass and clinked it against its twin. They downed their drinks and slapped the glasses onto the wood of the bar top. The booze felt warm going down but made him slightly queasy. Andrew had always enjoyed the feeling of a good buzz. In this moment however, he was unable to shake an increasing anxiety. In the corner of his vision, he spotted Krista, the bartender, watching them closely as she ran pint glasses through the triple sink.

Time began to change for Andrew. The music warped and sounded to him like it was being played at twice the speed while the movements of everyone in the bar appeared to slow down. It was like someone had slinky'ed the world. Time scrunched, then unscrunched. A wave of vertigo passed through him as the booze began to kick in. He coughed into his fist and let the percussion clear his head.

“Thanks for the drink. I'm Andrew.” He turned toward the man and extended his hand. The man ignored the gesture, collected the shot

glasses, and unscrewed the top of the whiskey bottle with one hand and filled them once more.

“Name’s Jim.” Drops of whiskey spilled between the two glasses as he poured. Jim set one of the glasses in front of Andrew and raised his arm out in a second offer. Andrew saw it for what it was: a challenge, one that he was afraid to turn down. He clinked glasses again and tilted his head back slightly and took the shot. As he drank, he looked down the length of the bar once more for a pair of friendly eyes. Krista was walking away from the two of them toward the kitchen. The sway of her hips caught Andrew’s attention. His eyes traced the tan skin of her exposed midriff and followed the curve of her jeans around the form of her hips. As the whiskey slid down his throat, alarm bells went off in the back of his head. To his right, Jim leaned toward him.

“See something you like?” Jim’s breath felt hot against his face.

Andrew fumbled the shot glass, clattering it across the bar top. Each hit cascaded through his hearing, some of the percussions louder than others. As if he was experiencing the doppler effect without moving. He shook his head to clear it. The only way he could see himself getting out of the corner he had just backed himself into was to try and clear the air. When he spoke, he didn’t dare look at Jim.

“I appreciate the drinks but if I did something to offend you, I’m sorry.” Andrew watched Krista exit the kitchen carrying a paper plate sagging with food. She smiled as she walked but the look in her eyes hinted at caution. He turned to face Jim, whose body was no longer resting against the bar but squared up in Andrew’s direction. Jim collected the shot glasses once more and reset them in anticipation of another round. He kept his eyes on Andrew.

“Offended? Nah, I’m pretty easy to get along with.” He poured two more shots, spilling more booze. “Keep your eyes to yourself, friendo.”

“Here we are,” Krista said, placing Andrew’s food in front of him with a small fold of paper napkins. “Tonight’s special.”

Both men turned to face her. Andrew watched Jim straighten his posture slightly and work a fool's grin across his face. In a moment his entire demeanor changed. The oversized menace that had been so concerning receded into quiet malice. Andrew locked eyes with Krista, then turned away, self-conscious that Jim would mention his wandering eye. Jim slid the shot glass back toward Andrew. The glass rabbled across the bar top a short distance before Krista scooped it up.

"Come on, Jim. I can't let you give away all your booze to strangers."

Andrew watched Jim's forehead twitch with a flash of indignation. The lapse was momentary, but he was sure that Krista saw it. Jim turned and walked to the opposite end of the bar. Krista moved the bottle of whiskey from the customer side of the bar to her side and gave Andrew a "sorry for the trouble" shrug of her shoulders. There was a sadness in her eyes that seemed to swirl around her irises. Andrew bit into one of the tacos and did his best to focus on the food in front of him. He was mid-chew when the slap of a shot glass hitting the bar top jolted him in his seat. Food caught in his throat. He brought his hand up to cover his mouth and leaned over gripped by a fit of coughing.

"We're not strangers," Jim said, "This is Andrew, and Andrew likes to drink."

Jim peeled a wide grin and slapped Andrew's back and put his arm around his shoulder. Andrew took a long drink of water. When he spoke he sounded emphismic.

"That's right."

Jim reached for the bottle of whiskey. Krista grabbed his arm by the wrist in midair.

"That's enough, Jim."

"Says who?" Anger burst across Jim's face. A Y-shaped vein throbbed from the top of his forehead into his hairline.

“I said, that’s enough.”

“I’m a paying customer; leave it alone.”

“I won’t do that. How exactly did you get that cast?”

“Who are you to be sticking up for him? You don’t know him.”

“Neither do you.”

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?” Krista leaned in toward Jim, her arm that held his wrist pulled taught and shaking. Her face was beat red, her voice full of exasperation. This argument was stale, its motions well-rehearsed. Andrew found himself thinking about sitting against his car in the parking lot. He reached for the sensation of being surrounded by cigarette smoke. He wanted to fade away into the air. To slip endlessly upward above all the noise around him.

“You ever consider it’s not just him I’m trying to protect?”

“He deserves your attention?”

“Just how do you think I make money?”

Their voices had been steadily rising in volume with each exchange. The last rose to a level just beneath yelling. Andrew made himself small on his bar stool and tried to fade into the wood paneling behind him. He kept his hands beneath the bar rail, intent on not giving Jim further excuse for provocation.

“Get your hands off him!” The shout came from over Andrew’s right shoulder.

In an instant the energy of the room changed. All fell quiet except for the music. Andrew turned to see the woman that he had watched the boys with earlier, standing in the entrance to the bar. He could see her better in the light of the room. She was short, her eyes were a shade of

blue that neared turquoise. A vein bulged, protruding beneath her left eye. From where he sat, a few feet away, Andrew could smell the scent she had doused herself in. Something like dying flowers mixed with antiseptic. Her eyes stripped the confidence from Krista. The woman crossed the ten feet from the entrance with a surprising speed.

“Ang, I—” Jim tried.

Angie pulled Jim’s arm out of Krista’s grasp with a jerk and turned to face Andrew. She lowered the volume of her voice, and though she spoke to Andrew, her words were directed at all three of them.

“It wouldn’t be the first time.” With violence, she spun in place to face Jim, who pressed himself backwards against the bar rail. “Do you see what your money gets you? Are you done looking like an asshole?” The words hit Jim, and for a second his tough man facade wilted. Before he could do anything about it, Angie turned and pulled Andrew’s face toward her, kissing him on the cheek. Andrew’s eyes went wide, and he looked at Jim, already shaking his head before Angie had even finished the gesture. She turned to Jim and reached around him, grabbing his phone from his back pocket, “Home, now.” Angie turned on her heels and stormed out the door.

“Fuck.” Jim slammed his good hand against the bar, rattling glassware and spilling the shot he had poured for Andrew.

“Out Jim. Go.” Krista commanded, slapping her hand on the bar.

He turned to Andrew, giving him a once-over before walking away. His boots thudded heavy across the floor as he exited the bar, letting the door slam behind him. The room remained silent as wheels peeled out against gravel.

Conversation slowly returned to the room. Andrew, certain now of at least a temporary respite, resumed eating his food. Krista cleaned up the mess on the bar beside him, careful to wipe around where he was eating. An overweight man with thinning white hair, wearing a

black tee shirt and black apron moved behind Krista and leaned on the bar directly across from the space where Jim had been and stared out the square window in the front door. Krista pulled the half-empty water glass from the bar in front of Andrew. Though he couldn't see her behind the man, he could hear her scooping ice and the familiar whooshing sound of a soda gun. She replaced Andrew's water glass and drank cola from one of her own.

"Thanks for the tacos," Andrew offered.

When the cook spoke, it was to no one in particular. "What happened here?"

Andrew thought about his response as he swallowed another bite of food. Krista leaned against the back bar and continued sipping at her drink while looking at the ground. Andrew cleared his throat and leaned into the absurdity of the night.

"Angie kissed me, and Jim tried to drown me in whiskey."

Krista snorted soda down the front of her shirt and brought her hand up to cover her mouth. Liquid escaped between her fingers. The cook laughed, his round face turning red. Andrew watched Krista as she wiped herself dry with a towel and checked her makeup in the back bar mirror. The cook stood upright and leaned against the bar, his tone resigned.

"Jim. Fucking. Leeper."

*

Andrew had been drifting. He did that sometimes when he drank, slipped into a place where time became funny. The bar top came into focus before him. The slurping sound of a straw, digging around the bottom of a glass for the last drops of liquid, came from his left. Lost in his head, he hadn't noticed anyone take up the stool two places over.

His head felt heavy. He turned and found Rose, the woman from the truck, sitting along the wall, facing him with a drained pint glass in her hand. Any sign of her previous distress had vanished entirely. Her makeup was fixed, her hair perfectly in place. Her eyes sparkled with a glint beneath the soft light. There was a brightness in them where before there had been pain. She wore a red cocktail dress, her legs crossed and bare. His eyes focused on her skin a few seconds longer than he was comfortable with. A plastic bucket full of roses sat on the stool between them. She tamped the ice at the bottom of her glass some more before setting it on the bar top next to her red wine.

Andrew's mind began wandering, his gaze moving from her pink lips to organic folds of red petals. He remembered eating and taking his meds but nothing after that. How long had she been sitting there? How had he not felt her move behind him to take her seat? He went to sip his own water but found a tall whiskey and coke in its place. The sweet cola mixed with booze lit up some of the foggy parts of his brain as it went down.

"Has anyone ever told you that you've got quite the way with people?" Her tone was even, no sign of the slight tremor that it'd had in her truck. Andrew turned his stool to face her.

"I'm not sure handing out cigarettes counts." She smiled at him.

"Of course it does. For as long as I sat there no one else bothered to stop." Andrew set his half empty drink back on the bar top. His heartbeat was heavy in his chest as he fought to keep his thoughts in order. He felt worn thin. Like he was being pulled apart in every direction.

"It could be, and I'm speaking from very recent experience, that this place is just full of assholes," he said. A smile curved the edges of her lips as she took a sip of her wine. "Is it a habit of yours to carry flowers into bars?"

Rose stood and pulled the bucket close to her. “I’m something of a florist. I moonlight selling these beauties in all sorts of dim places.”

She slipped past Andrew’s stool, raising the bucket over his head and circled the room carrying the flowers at her hip like a small child. She started with the couples’ first, catching the eyes of the women, which opened the wallets of the men. With the singles, she took a less forward approach, starting up a conversation about anything but the roses on her hip. She let their curiosity bring them to her. In no time at all she returned to her stool, replacing the bucket between them. A single rose was left, leaning diagonally in the black plastic with a fragile grace. The thin stem reminded Andrew of himself. All of his pedals were falling off. Rose took a long drink of her wine and sighed, her fingers counting out loose bills on the bar top.

“It’s not always that smooth, but when it is, it feels like magic,” she said, her eyes still working over the bills. Her presence put Andrew at ease. There was something honest about her transactional purpose for being in the bar. For a few moments, the chaos of the day faded behind him and he focused on the curious figure before him. She leaned back in her stool and for the first time Andrew noticed that one of her eyes was brown and the other was blue. A twitch of desire jolted him below the waist. He looked away, focusing on his glass, and then picked up his drink and held it out.

“A toast.”

Rose stared him down just long enough to make him doubt himself. He could hear the soda fizz.

“Just what is it we’re toasting?”

“To the prettiest stranger I’ve met today, and the only one that I’ve seen cry. May your nights always be smooth.” They clinked glasses and he drained his drink until the straw rattled the ice.

*

Andrew stepped from the warmth of the bar out into the cool of night. It had down poured in the hours since the commotion with Jim and Angie. Air felt wet in his lungs. A pang of panic ticked inside him. The memory of being submerged in the lake washed over him. He leaned back against the wooden railing and watched Krista, an unfocused blur through the dirt speckled window. She moved around the barroom wiping tables. His hands ran along the stem of the rose that had been sitting in front of him when the world came back into focus. He had been drifting again. When he looked up, she was wiping down the taps and the main room was empty. Through the double doors, he could see that even the kitchen was dark. Not wanting to overstay his welcome, he stood up, left a generous tip, and walked out into the world.

“Fuck,” he stuck his thumb in his mouth where a thorn from the rose had pricked it.

Everything around him felt unreal. Like it was being told to him by someone else—as if he didn’t own his own experiences. The meds pulled his brain in one direction, while the booze pulled in another. A yard light hummed high above him on an unused telephone pole. Purple and red neon lights bathed his face. Crickets chirped in the tall grass that surrounded the bar. Off the road to his left, he could hear the movement of a river that he’d driven over just before pulling into the parking lot.

Andrew fumbled with his pack of cigarettes. The skin of his hands looked waxy beneath the glow of the light. He rubbed the stiffness from his forearms as he took a drag on his cigarette. He needed to clear his head. Thoughts of his family played through his mind. He should get in touch with them. He needed a phone. He thought about entering the bar and asking Krista for the house phone if they had one. Then hip-hop music began blaring over the speakers, and he knew it was time to be gone. He smiled and flicked the skeleton of his cigarette, crushing it beneath his heel as he walked down the ramp.

In the far corner of the lot, he could see the outline of his car. With every step he took the details around him faded further into darkness. He shook out another cigarette and lit up, thankful for the illumination and the small flame of the lighter. His gait hitched as he stepped across the uneven gravel. From what he could see, besides a small sedan parked next to the bar, his car was the only one left in the lot.

As he neared his four-door, a sinking feeling took hold of his stomach. His Subaru was sitting lower than it should. He stepped close, leaned down and ran his hands over the jagged slash marks that had been carved into the front tire.

“Fuck.” He set the rose on top of his car and walked the length of the vehicle and confirmed that the back tires had been slashed. “Shit.” What he found on the opposite side of the car shook him the most.

The passenger side door lay wide open, his backpack wet on the ground. Surrounding it, emptied onto the gravel, partially crushed and bloated from the rain, lay all his medication. Andrew fell to his knees and picked up the empty orange pill bottles one by one, searching them for anything usable but there was nothing. What he had left was already in his system. The sensation of crawling ants broke out across his skin, multiplying with each empty bottle he collected and tossed into the backpack. He ran his hands over the slimy misshapen half dissolved pills. A fierce panic gripped him. He punched the side of the car, his hand rebounding with pain and then gripped his head, digging his fingers into his scalp.

Andrew tossed the backpack onto the passenger seat and swung the door closed. He moved to the front of the car and lay across the hood. The ants were all over him now. They moved up and down his body, into his mouth, ears, and nose. He choked on them. No amount of cutting, scraping, scratching, or brushing could remove them. He had been here before. The hallucination would consume him, then pass. He lit another cigarette and took in the kaleidoscope of stars winking above him with their cosmic indifference.

He pulled his car keys out of his pocket and cycled through pressing the lock and unlock buttons at even intervals. All the door locks made a uniform click when they unlocked. Each its own miniature gunshot in the stillness of the night. When he pressed the lock button, however, all the door locks made uniform clicks except for the one in the front passenger side door. This one made a noise that halted just before the others. In his haste to get into the bar he had neglected to press this lock manually.

Anxiety burned through him as he realized that his meds might be the least of his worries. The stumbling math about when he'd taken his meds, and how long that would last him, had kept him from focusing on the more immediate problem: His father's pistol was gone. He slid off the hood, collapsed to his knees and puked. His vision narrowed, hands and feet tingling with numbness. He held onto his arms and cradled himself until he had the strength to stand and start walking toward the entrance to the bar. The trees that surrounded the lot unnerved him as they reached into the night sky. He pictured himself from their point of view, a lone figure cupped in the spindling skeletal hand of nature.

He lit another cigarette as he walked. Sentences of what he could say to Krista ran through his head. A few years back he had spent a long weekend at the cottage during a mayfly hatch. After sleeping off a few joints and a nice day drunk, he had pulled back the curtains on the sliding glass door to find it covered completely in mayflies. This was how he felt as he moved across the lot, covered in some impossible hatching of squirming dark insects.

When he got halfway across the lot, the deep growl of a truck roaring to life split the silence of the night. The air around him filled with the violent rays of high beam light. The dark sticky mayflies scattered. Andrew turned to face the illumination, shielding his eyes with one arm. A truck across the street peeled out onto the road, pulling the light of the high beams with it, honking the horn as it sped off.

As his vision returned to him, Andrew saw the cook from the Black Star crunching across the lot toward him.

“What happened?”

“Where’d you come from?” Andrew fought to keep his thoughts from swirling out again.

“Across the street, a few of us old timers play cards in the back of the Lighter’s gas station.”

“You let someone tune up my car?” The cook looked behind Andrew at his sunken Subaru sitting alone in the dark.

“Didn’t know you were still here until I heard the horn and came out front,” the cook said. Krista joined them, walking down the ramp and into the lot. She looked concerned, unsure of the situation.

“Andrew, this is Art, he run’s the kitchen and owns the bar. What’s going on?” Andrew took a long drag and then let it out into the sky above him. He could feel the neurons in his brain screaming at him, telling him to run away from this place as fast as he could. An utter impossibility without a car. He rubbed his palms into his eyes as he spoke.

“Someone slashed my tires and dumped my shit out onto the ground before it rained. I had medication in my backpack. It’s ruined.” He decided against telling them about the pistol. Art and Krista shared a look of concern.

“Fuck,” said Krista.

“Fuck indeed,” said Art. “Let’s get inside and we can talk about what to do with your car.” He started up the ramp, followed by Krista. Andrew flicked his cigarette and shoved his hands in his sweatpants, trudging along behind them.

Inside the bar, Art placed his keys on the bar top and twisted the bolt to lock the front door behind them. He moved around the rail and vanished into the kitchen. Krista walked behind the bar and filled three pint glasses with ice water. She reached beneath the bar top and pulled out an ashtray, setting it on the bar top. For the second time in a night Andrew found himself offering his cigarettes to a woman. As they smoked, he tried not to think about the future. Art returned from the kitchen, carrying three shot glasses filled half and half with a dark and a cream liquor. He set them on the bar top between Andrew and Krista and retrieved a can of whipped cream from a cooler, blasting a dollop on each shot.

“Given the night’s events, it would seem to me like each of us could use a blow job.”

It felt like it physically hurt when Andrew smiled. He had no phone, no meds, and no car. What the fuck would he do now? He cheers’d Krista and Art then raised the over-sweet shot to his lips. Whatever it was that came next, getting good and drunk would be a start.

LONG DISTANCE PANTOUM

ANASTASIA SIMMS

That's nice.

Can you hear me?

Oh, okay.

That's nice.

I miss you.

Oh, okay.

Sorry I didn't realize you were busy.

I miss you.

Call me if you can.

Sorry, didn't realize you were busy.

It's not important; I just wanted to talk to you.

Call me if you can.

No, it's okay. I'll talk to you later.

It's not important; I just wanted to talk to you.

I just don't understand why you're so upset.

No it's okay. I'll talk to you later.

What was that?

I just don't understand why you're so upset.

How was your day?

What was that?

Are you still there?

TAKE CARE

TAYLOR KAIGLER

You walked into my life like a butterfly. You had no specific direction, you just needed a shoulder to cry on. It didn't take long to see the ocean in your brown eyes. I told you,

When no one else is present

And the blues is missing an instrument

Know that;

I'm here for you, I support you, and I love you

They say it's selfish, but I'll be here when you need me and even when you don't

Can I guide you through the heat?

Wrap you up in a warm blanket and teach you how to breathe

When your face is puffy and your voice is squeaky from the sobs,

I'll feed you word for thought

You'll get through this

All you have to do is look and see

See the things that once were a daydream

There will be happy rain

I promise to let your heart feel lighter days

No heavy trumpets

Just flutes

You never tell me you need me, so every day I offer

I want to be of use to you

The faucet you turn on to cleanse the wounds

Bandaging all the pain

I believe in you

I'm here to encourage growth

Style your mind with pretty butterflies

Blue grass and green skies

I want to show you more

I sang to you every night and pulled at your limbs in the morning to start your day. I promised to take care of you just as I hummed the night before. I carried the weight of "Take Care of You" by Charlotte Day and Syd whenever you began to space out. It kept you present. It kept you here with me. You never said you needed me, but I feared for you. I prayed for the day you could sleep peacefully and wake up on the right side of the bed.

OVERWEIGHT

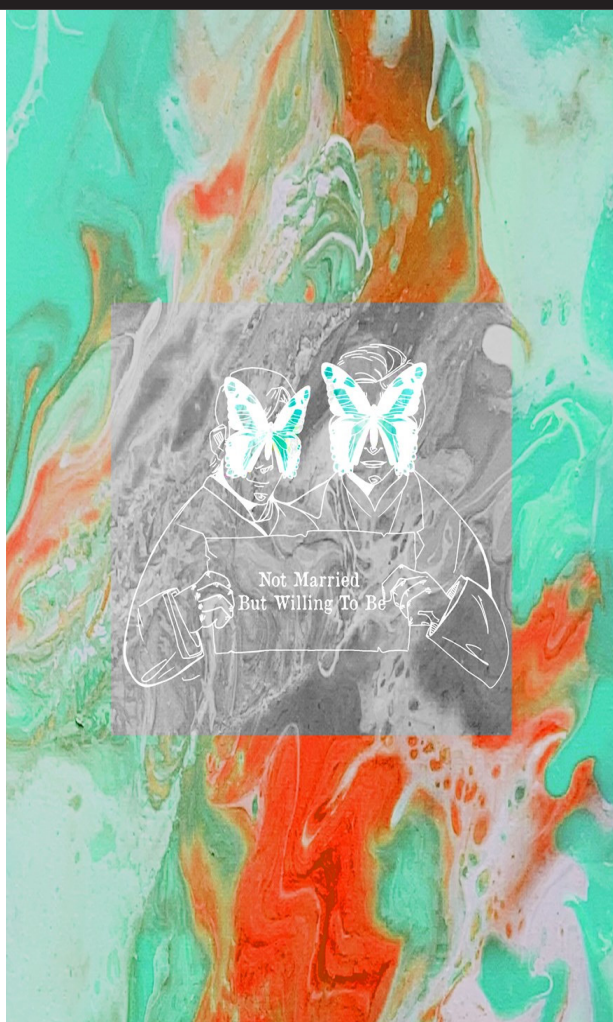
ANASTASIA **SIMMS**

My mama taught me sadness
sops grease
better than a piece
of bread.
And chocolate
can supplement
the dopamine
daddy stole from my head.
Now my doctor tells me
fifteen
extra pounds
will put me in the red.
I told her my brain is dying.
I'm trying
but I'm holding on
by a thread.
She didn't even look at me

"Eat carrot sticks,"
she said.

QUEER STORIES - NOT MARRIED, WILLING TO BE

ARIANA **IRRER**



WHAT DO I WANT?

ANASTASIA SIMMS

I want a boy who wants me for my brain as much as my body.
Who likes the pace at which I want to take things,
and doesn't pressure me to let him stick it in.

I want to understand what everyone is talking about
when they tell stories of being drunk or high.
I want to know why they crave it so much,
and why I don't.

I want to make friends who know me,
who love me,
who give me the benefit of the doubt.
These friendships take time to build,
especially when you have trust issues.
But I want them now, dammit!
I want these things without having to put in any effort
because people are exhausting.
But they better listen to me,
because I want them to.
I want to not want these things as much as I do.

I want to be smart enough to understand
why I feel like I'm never smart enough to.

I want to agree with my teachers,
and the authors of my textbooks,
and the leaders of the field into which
I am propelling myself.
I want to be able to see far enough into the future to know
whether or not my propulsion needs course correction.
I want to know that there is a place
for me in this world, beyond the 5 foot

4 inch space I am currently occupying.
Which, despite my best efforts,
still sometimes feels pointless.

I want to know what the fuck I am doing.

I want to know why I am always so freaking hungry
and why I am tired even when I've slept enough
and I am healthy as a horse
because horses are apparently healthy, I guess?
I don't know. I'm not a horse doctor.
And now I also want to meet a horse doctor
mostly because I think it would be funny to meet
someone who dedicated their entire life
to being a horse doctor.

I want my childhood back.

I want to remember the name of that one song,
that one actor, that one book,
that one movie, that one poem,
that one kid I was friends with in the 3rd grade.
I want a hug.

I want to clean my room,
maybe then I'll feel
like I've got my life together, although
as I continue to check things off of my to do list,
I'm starting to doubt that I'll ever feel that way.

I want that one part of "O-o-h Child"
by The Five Stairsteps to stop
randomly getting stuck in my head.

Or maybe I just want to believe that things are gonna get easier.

I don't know what I want.

I want a bowl of my mom's soup.

FREE

AMBER WILLIAMS



COVID COLLEGE LIFE

CASSANDRA BRISENO

I sat at my laptop as an empty Microsoft Word document stared back at me. I had one presentation, two papers, and three discussion board posts to work on, all due by the end of the month.

I have so much work to do, I thought. Where do I even start?

A few weeks ago, a few students at my school had tested positive for COVID-19. Because of that, 99% of classes would be online until further notice.

Why did they have to go to Italy anyway? I thought, as I reread the directions for one of the discussion boards for the millionth time. Didn't they know that was the COVID epicenter?

I fell into the familiar pattern of switching back and forth between typing and checking the assignment directions. A half hour later, I had half a page.

That's going to have to be enough, I thought. As I was about to paste my response into the discussion board, a gray furball jumped onto my desk.

"Hamilton," I said, before picking him up. My kitten gave me his default "not my problem" expression. I sighed, "You know I have a ton of work to do," scratching behind his ear as he began to purr.

*

After class, I sat on my couch and sifted through Instagram. I could feel the voice in the back of my head nagging at me to finish the as-

signments I hadn't yet completed. I promised myself I'd only look for a few minutes. An hour later and I still didn't have the energy to drag myself to my desk. Just then, my phone buzzed. I minimized the app and checked my messages.

Ashely, we're overwhelmed here. Can you come in? ~ Gigi

I grit my teeth as I debated my response.

I just worked twelve days in a row, I thought, while my fingers hovered over the keys. Why should I go back in now?

I thought about the days when I'd return to my apartment and collapse exhausted on the couch. My bones and muscles ached at the thought of another twelve-to-fourteen-hour shift. Then, I remembered what my friend Sam had told me the other day: "You're so lucky you still have a job. Most of my coworkers and I are being let go."

My fingers trudged across the tiny keyboard.

I'll be there as soon as I can ~ Ashley

"Sorry Hammy," I said, reluctantly pushing myself off the couch. "You're going to be alone again tonight."

*

"I'm not here," I mumbled under my blankets, listening to my cell phone buzz. It was Saturday, and while I normally worked, today was one of my rare days off. I closed my eyes tight and turned over, hoping that whoever was calling would leave a voicemail. No such luck.

"Ugh," I growled, sliding out from under the blankets. "Ashley Mendez," I grumbled.

"Is that any way to speak to your mother?"

I sighed and glanced at the clock. 9:30 AM. Too damn early.

"Sorry, Mom. You caught me at a bad time. What's up?"

"It's Grandma Alice," she replied. "She's in the hospital."

Every thought left my head in that moment. Grandma Alice and I had been close since I was born. If she'd caught Covid ... I didn't allow myself to finish that thought.

"How long has she been there?" I asked, swallowing the lump in my throat.

"She was just admitted a few hours ago," my mother responded.

"Is she on a ventilator?" I asked.

"No, thank goodness, your father's going to visit her."

"I wish I could go with him," I said.

"I know, baby. I know," she said. "Try not to let this weigh you down. You're still in school, you still have a job, and you can call us anytime you need something. You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah," I said, as my voice shook without my permission.

"I'll call you after he gets back. I love you."

"Love you too," I said, and hung up.

After I placed my phone back on my nightstand, I lay back beneath the blankets and stared at the wall for some time.

*

Another assignment completed, I thought, as I turned in my second paper.

So far, I'd managed to turn in most of my assignments. I still had an Abnormal Psych presentation to finish, but that was almost done.

"Hey, Hammy," I said, as Hamilton jumped into my lap. "What's up?"

He meowed and laid down.

"You knew I was going to get up and get something to eat, didn't you?" I asked.

He looked up at me with a “duh” expression. I picked him up and carried him to the couch.

*

“Ugh, what now?” I asked, as my cell phone buzzed.

I saved my notes and glanced at the caller ID. Mom.

“Hey, Mom,” I said.

“Hey, baby,” she said. “I just got off the phone with your father.”

For the past few weeks, my parents had received regular updates regarding Grandma Alice. Because of Covid protocols, my dad had been the only one able to visit her. And even then, he’d only seen her once since she’d been hospitalized. Mom had been keeping me updated on Grandma Alice’s status. The last time Mom had called, Grandma Alice had been on a ventilator.

“How is she?” I asked, practically on the edge of my seat.

“She’s coming home,” she replied, and I could hear the tears in her voice. “Your father’s on his way right now.”

I slumped back in my chair as relief washed over me. I wiped the tears from my eyes.

“Ashley? Are you still there?”

“I’m here,” I answered, my voice cracking on the last word. “I’m just so relieved she’s coming home. More than relieved, really.”

“Me too,” she said. “I can’t imagine life without her.”

“Me either,” I said.

“Well, I have to go. My lunch break’s over,” she said. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” I said, and hung up.

My eyes began to blur as Hamilton jumped onto my desk. I stroked his

soft fur as tears streamed down my cheeks.

*

One two, one two; my feet pounded the pavement as my ponytail bobbed behind me. The stars and moon hung above. Goose bumps appeared on my arm as the early morning wind brushed against my skin. I pushed the sensation aside as I raced across the street. In my head, I went over my presentation.

It wasn't supposed to be very long, two to three minutes at most. But, like most college students, I would rather cut off my own limb than speak in front of others.

Just do the best you can, our professor had said. I know the pandemic has been chaotic for everyone, which is why I'm going to be more lenient with this assignment than usual.

Chaotic doesn't even begin to cover it, I thought, as I passed by another runner. We nodded at each other and continued on our way.

Despite the burning in my legs, I kept going. I wasn't going to let a little fatigue stop me. Not now, not ever.

This wasn't how I'd envisioned this semester going. There were so many things I'd wanted to do and places I'd wanted to go. While COVID had thrown a wrench in my plans, and pushed me to my breaking point, I'd somehow managed to keep going.

As I reached my apartment, the sun rose into the sky. The warmth seeped through my skin and into my bones. For the first time in a long time, I smiled. Regardless of what the world threw at me, I was ready.

CORN BREAD

AMBER WILLIAMS

'That sticky, crumbly, sweet bread
Is synonymous with
Sundays on Pine Ridge.

Boxes of uncooked mix
Hidden high in shelves
Where little hands can't reach.

Cupcake liners make
Perfect beds for the mixture
To lay in while the oven
Does the magic.

Dough covers my homemade dress
And the counters,
But we only care
About that savory,
Long-awaited bite.

'The mess can wait.

MAYA'S TIMELINE (I LOVE YOU MORE THAN ME)

SYDNEY SAVAGE

MAYA'S TIMELINE:

11 years old and younger—you're convinced "boys have cooties" and you can't make it through one soap opera without shouting "eww" to all the kissing scenes

13 years old—you get your period, and it's exciting for all of about thirty seconds

15 years old—it's your first year of high school, where you pick the clique that labels you for the next four years. you grab a guy's attention for the first time

16 years old—you go on your first date and have your first kiss

17 years old—you make it to second and third base. you get drunk for the first time. you dirty dance with a hot senior at a party

18 years old—you lose your virginity on a special occasion; an empty house with a bed buried in countless rose petals, candles that smell like a bakery brought down from heaven, and a loving boyfriend who cuddles with you afterward and who every girl in the school wishes they had. you're officially an adult

PART 1: KYLE

ONE

The first thing I thought about: WHY HAVEN'T I BEEN KISSED YET?

The second thing I thought about: WHY HAVEN'T I HAD SEX YET?

The third thing I thought about: WHY HAVEN'T I HAD A BOY-FRIEND YET?

These were the last things I thought about before I crashed my Chevy Impala into the white Crossover I forgot to yield to.

I pulled over to the nearest parking lot, which happened to belong to the only McDonalds we had in this town. Across the lot was an Arby's, a Speedway. I was completely in the lines of my parking spot and proud of it, the yellow lines equidistant on both sides. The second I got off the phone with the police, I heard a loud knock on my window; it was the driver I hit.

It was more like three knocks in one; a smack so loud I thought he was going to bust a man-made hole straight through the center of it. It wouldn't make much difference anyway: the blue driver's side of my car was already rocking a dent from hell, and the glass in my side mirror fell out instantly during the collision.

I flipped my head around and rolled down my window. "Sorry about that," I shouted. The driver looked around my age. He had blonde curls for hair, and a pair of brown eyes that were about 25% irises, 75% pupils. He had to bend over to match his face with the level of my car window. He looked six-foot at least. I was too busy admiring the dimples on his cheeks and the muscles underneath his DeWitt Panthers football jersey that I didn't think to make things easier and get out of my car; he was number 81.

"So, is this your first car crash or does stuff like this happen to you a lot?" he asked. "I don't know if we had the same driving instructor, but I'm pretty sure yielding is in bold and that we learn it on like day one."

“I did get in a little fender bender with a stop sign once,” I replied, ignoring his hit at me. I blinked a good three times, trying to pinpoint which one of the jocks he was at my school. There was no way I wouldn’t notice someone that hot who walked the same hallways as me for over a decade. DeWitt, Michigan, was a suburban town and had about three-hundred kids in each graduating class; the odds of me never seeing his face were unlikely but not completely impossible.

He laughed, holding one hand on my window and fogging it up; he left a giant hand mark on the glass. “So you’re admitting you’re a bad driver?”

I turned off my radio. Outside was the famous golden arch that looked like a waving hand. I could feel the cold, thirty-degree waves of wind feed my pale complexion and throw my golden-brown hair out of its ponytail. There were plenty of cars passing us on their way through the drive-thru, some honking at us and giving us sarcastic thumbs up just for the heck of it.

“I wouldn’t say that” I said. “To be fair, you came in a little fast and I didn’t see you, so—”

“I had the right of way though,” he argued.

“Fair enough.” I paused, taking my hands and forcing them against my stomach, covering the weight of my body I didn’t want him to see. I let my hair down to distract from the gray sweatshirt I had on that was at least three sizes too big. I didn’t run into hot guys on a regular basis, so I sure as hell was going to look the part as best I could.

“So, Friday is gameday, you guys gonna win tonight?” I asked him. “Crap, I made you miss the game, didn’t I?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not missing anything, Coach never puts me on the field. You’re Maya Davis, right?”

“Yeah. I feel like such a horrible person, are you a senior too?”

“Yeah, I’m Kyle,” he answered, saving me on the spot. “Kyle Peterson. I’m not very memorable, so don’t beat yourself up about it.”

“But how do you know me? I don’t exactly stick out either. It’s my best

friend Joy Colleen, right? That's how you know me?"

"Nope. We had a class together forever ago. Stats."

"Sorry, I guess I can be pretty unobservant."

"Yeah, especially when it comes to other cars."

"Very funny."

He pointed over to his white Crossover. "I mean it could've been worse." I got out of my car to get a better view of it, crawling out the passenger side since my side was currently jammed. He had a dent identical to mine. "It's a good thing it's technically my mom's car and not mine."

"I crashed into your mom's car?" I buried my hands into my face and came back up with red cheeks. "I can pay for it. I mean, I can try. I'm kinda broke."

"Are you always this nice, or just nice to people's cars you smash into?" he asked. "Insurance will cover this, no problem. I crashed into this one dude one time. Money is nothing. The worst part by far is having everyone stare at you while you wait for the cops to arrive. People are so judgy nowadays, it's kinda sad."

I looked behind us at all the little kids pointing at us, asking their parents what happened. I could hear cars driving by, the loud thud from the crash coming back into my head like a morning alarm that knocked me straight out of bed. "I'm just glad I haven't burst into tears in front of all these people. This seems like the sorta thing that would trigger me."

"It must just be me," he teased, "What can I say? I bring out the best in people." His stomach grumbled three times, one right after the other, sounding like skipping rocks. "What do you say we get some food while we wait?"

"I'm starving," I replied, smiling. I held my stomach again. I looked in the window reflection of my car which made me look six times as wide as usual, and I got a lump in my throat looking at it, that lump turning into a grenade once we started walking and I got a glimpse at

my shadow on the pavement, my sweatshirt looking like a dress over my ripped jeans. I felt my face for mascara, realizing I forgot to apply it this morning and left my handbag in my trunk. I was sweating already, my heart pumping, running out of blood.

The first thing I thought about after the crash: PLEASE LET KYLE BE MY FIRST BOYFRIEND.

The second thing I thought about: PLEASE DON'T LET ME SCREW THIS UP.

The last thing I thought about: I'M GOING TO SCREW THIS UP.

TWO

We got in line behind the cash register farthest to the right. "I'm thinking I ask for two Big Mac's stacked on top of each other and see if I can convince them to still give it to me at the same price," Kyle told me. He had to practically scream over the bubbling grease of the French fry machine and the loud shouting of orders from back in the kitchen where we couldn't see anything except for a glimpse of the drive-thru window. The worker behind the cash register in front of us was blonde, and looked like she was about to pass out as the old man in front of us ordered fifty separate things from the menu. I felt bad for her.

"This is why I'm glad I never worked here," I said. "Everyone who says this is a perfect first job, are liars."

"I used to work here," Kyle argued. The door opened and five more people poured in, turning this place into a zoo. The air conditioner felt broken, and it wasn't just because I was standing next to Kyle. "All the hot chicks who came in here always asked me for my number and tipped me a bunch, so I didn't mind it."

I laughed, not realizing I'd jinxed myself until a tall blonde snuck up behind us in line. "Kyle," she said, making matters worse, "I thought you said fast food was a waste of money. Aren't you working at NCG now?"

He turned to her, and it was like Kyle and I never met, like I was just a random customer he happened to run into and now the time had come

for us to depart. I stood behind like a wallflower, took a reality check, and remembered I was the background dancer and not the lead singer.

“Oh hi Sam, nice to see you. Yeah I’m at NCG,” he said, putting his hands in his pockets. His feet were facing hers, a sure sign he was attracted. I mean, why wouldn’t he be? She was blonde. She had the kind of blue eyes that made you look like you were staring at the night sky and an hourglass figure with a chest that puffed out in her low cut sweater.

“How are you liking it? You’ll have to tell me the next time there’s a good movie out, I’ll have to stop by.”

“It’s alright. For sure, you should come. Don’t come at night though, that’s when all the drunks show up.”

“Drunks?” I asked, laughing, “Do you put them in their place I bet?”

My voice must’ve been softer than usual because Kyle didn’t so much as look in my direction. Instead he looked right at Sam. She had a little Vera Bradley handbag curled around her wrist that was pink; my blue one was still in my car. “So this old dude walks in, right,” Kyle explained to Sam, even tapping her shoulder as he spoke, “and he starts pointing at me hysterically thinking I’m a flamingo and then runs out of the building.”

This time I made sure to talk louder. We were almost up to the front of the line, and Kyle pulled his wallet out. “A flamingo, really?” I blurted, “You should’ve messed with him and chased him or something.”

Thank god he heard me the second time. I felt miles away from Sam and Kyle even though I was standing right there because they were so much taller.

“Crap, I’m so tactless,” Kyle apologized, looking down at me, “Sam, this is Maya, and Maya, this is Sam. She was homeschooled but she’s with us this year. She’s gonna graduate with us.”

“Nice to meet you,” I told her, and she nodded at me. “Funny story,” he told Sam. “Maya and I got in a little fender bender, and we’re still waiting on the police for the paperwork and stuff.”

“There was a crash over on Clark. That’s why it’s taking them so long to get over here. They should be here any second,” she informed us. I wondered why she didn’t ask for more details about the crash.

“So Maya, you’re in our grade, right?”

I nodded. I hated how soft and sweet her voice was, how genuine she seemed. I wanted to hate her. But then I pinched myself in the arm and reminded myself this wasn’t even a date, that I had no right to be jealous. Yet I was. I couldn’t stop wondering if they’d ever dated, wanting to know their entire history at once, needing to know for my own sanity.

“So you have a brother?” I asked Kyle after we sat down. Sam decided to join us. She ate a salad with some ranch, and I had the same even though my stomach was begging me for a burger. I got extra dressing so I could hardly taste the cucumbers or tomatoes.

“Yeah,” Kyle answered, rubbing his hair out of his face. His hand went to reach for a napkin, but Sam took it and teased him with it, moving it back and forth in front of his face, until he caught it, taking her hand with it.

Oh how I wish I could have that skin-to-skin contact, or just for one guy anywhere in the world to want to touch me. “Sam dated him. He’s kinda a jackass. And Sam and I know him the best, we wouldn’t lie.”

Kyle put an entire quarter of his Big Mac into his mouth, not minding the giant stain of mustard on his upper lip. He took his sweet time wiping off, and suddenly I wasn’t so hungry anymore.

We were at a table in the corner next to the window so we could see our dented cars full-view. Sam looked like she was about to comment on it, but stopped herself. I wanted her to say something offensive, to say something that would really rattle Kyle’s cage the wrong way, but the only comment she made was how the sun was finally out.

Kyle sat across from me and Sam. Sam stabbed her crouton with her fork. “So,” I asked Kyle. “What’s wrong with your brother? Is he just better looking or something?”

“You think you’re so funny,” he teased. “No. He does whatever the hell he wants and it’s like our parents don’t even care. He should be at college, but he stays at home bringing girls over every night then dumping them the next morning. And he gets in the way of my work and my school and I have to clean up after him and I’m just so sick of him.”

“He cheated on me,” Sam added, speaking openly without a problem.

“He’s cheated on every girl he’s ever been with,” Kyle made sure to say, backing her up. Their hands were so close to touching.

“What a jackass,” I said, feeling like a winner after I saw I got Kyle to smile.

Soon enough we saw the red and blue lights outside. As we go up to leave, Sam lit up to say “Oh Maya, there’s a party tonight after the game if you wanna come. I’ll text you the address.”

I gave her my phone out of instinct. I hadn’t been to hardly any parties; I’d mostly heard about Joy’s adventures. For a second, I hesitated, thought of the puking in the bathrooms and drugs I saw on TV and almost said something to get myself out of it.

But Kyle told me “hope to see you there,” and that was all it took for me to not say anything; to sit there and realize maybe the reason I was so behind on my timeline to start with was because I never took risks like this.

“I’ll be there,” I shouted. “But first we got the police to deal with.”

“I say we tell them we both got attacked by a herd of angry raccoons.”

“Like they’ll believe that,” I said.

Sam laughed with us. “I’ll be your guys’ alibi.” She used air quotes as she said it.

What I was no longer thinking about: THE CAR CRASH.

What I was thinking about now: TONIGHT I HAD TO BEAT SAM TO THE DANCE FLOOR AND GET TO KYLE FIRST.

THREE

I let Joy pick out my clothes for the party tonight. I closed my eyes and let her surprise me. When I turned to face her on my bed, she was standing right outside my closet holding a dress I was pretty sure I bought for my eighth grade farewell dance four years ago and never wore. It was still on the hanger; a sleeveless blue dress with the same lacy texture lingerie was made from. It ended at the thighs and put our high school's dress code to shame.

Miles was sitting in my desk chair, right in the middle of Joy and me. It was a computer chair with wheels and he was spinning around in circles when Joy asked him, "What do you think?" She pointed to the dress and held it up against her waist, cradling it between her legs so it stayed flat. "Would this look good on Maya?"

"Yeah," he said. "Maya can pull anything off." He looked down at the floor, his head in a daze as he looked back up at me, smiling. "Why are you going to this party though, Maya, it's never been your thing?"

Joy and I always teased Miles and told him he looked like a boy scout. All jokes aside, he kind of looked like a retired one; he was only about 5' 8" and he had short hair the color of chestnuts—his sideburns were always combed. Right now he had on this Seahawks t-shirt he'd worn since second grade. The navy-blue matched his eyes. He was like a brother to me, a brother I'd never get in a fight with and be close to until the day one of us had to move out for college.

I got up from the bed. Joy was over by my vertical mirror attached to my wall behind my door, placing her red hair on the blue dress to see if they'd go good together. Any color was her color, just like any dress was her dress—including the short spring dress she wore now even though it was practically winter. It sprouted out like a flower, poofy at the end, with a pink flower design at the top. Sometimes I wished I could be her, just for a day.

"Kyle invited me," I replied to Miles. "An actual guy wants me to go to a party, can you believe it?"

Miles swallowed the lump in his throat as he argued, "Wait, a guy? Is it a date? A party isn't exactly a date, it's just where guys take you to do

the deed. Any decent guy would take a girl out to dinner. Just saying.”

“And I’ve been waiting for that for too long, Miles, you know I have. I’ve just faced it. The Notebook isn’t real life, and some guy isn’t going to just come up to me while I’m on a ferris wheel and ask me out.”

“You never know,” Joy joked. “With guys these days, you can expect anything.” She threw the hanger off the dress and chucked it straight at me so I had no choice but to catch it. I caught it one-handed. “Now go put that on unless you want me to put it on for you. You know I will. And I’ll meet you in the bathroom. I can do a mean smoky eye that Kyle will be drooling all over.”

“Don’t go,” Miles shouted at me as I got ready to skip down the hallway, “Stay with me. I’ll cook you food and watch the Titanic with you again.”

“You hate the Titanic.”

“What do you mean? You didn’t see me bawling my eyes out to the don’t-let-me-go scene at the end?”

“You were just crying because I was.”

“Was not.”

“I’ll meet up with you after the party, how’s that?”

Miles arched his eyebrows up, crossing his legs in the chair. “Fine, but show up drunk and Kyle is dead.”

Joy and I both laughed.

*

The party was at Kyle’s house. Joy and I were making our way up his ridiculously long driveway. His house was at least three floors and it was a distinct light green, contrasting the surrounding white condos in his subdivision. As I made my way up to the front door past the little rows of purple violets, I couldn’t help but notice the white Crossover in the driveway that already looked good as new. It looked like it was repainted, the white looking neon as it glowed-up in the dark. The streetlights were on, and looking behind us, it was surprising to see so

little cars here. I didn't think anything of it.

"Who is she?" Joy sputtered out as we rang the doorbell. It sounded exactly like the iPhone church bell ringtone.

"What are you talking about?" I asked her.

"The girl you're jealous of. I can see it all over your face."

When no one was coming, Joy peeked through the small square window impatiently and I looked through the other one on the right, only seeing a wooden stairway with no carpet and a few lights on that were probably coming from the kitchen.

"Sam," I confessed flat-out. I never bothered to keep anything from her anymore because I knew she'd find out sooner or later. Plus it was either I talk to her or talk to my mom, which was an easy choice. "Kyle and her seemed sort of cozy earlier. We bumped into her at McDonalds."

"Maya, why didn't you tell me before? You said it was only you and Kyle." She paused. "Well, I can tell you Kyle is single, I know that much."

"How do you know? Maybe he and Sam are a thing."

"I know because I know everything," she teased.

Joy knocked on the door. "Jeez, is this even the right place?" She looked back at me. "Anyway Maya, you're a catch. He doesn't like Sam. He's just nice to everybody, don't get in your head."

"I didn't even know Kyle was in our grade. How do you know so much about him? Oh my god, have you dated him?"

She shook her head.

"Hooked up with him?"

"No, I dated his brother. It was a short summer fling."

I remembered all the bad things Kyle said about his brother the other day, about him being a cheater, my reminiscing getting interrupted by the creaking of the front door finally opening.

“Jake!” Joy shouted, and I knew immediately he was the devil we were speaking of. She hugged him, and all I could think about was how she could be more intimate with an ex of hers who she probably hated for a long time than I could be with anybody. Why did she make it look so easy?

“It’s been a while, what have you been up to?” she asked him, tapping on his muscular shoulders. He was 6’ 5”, a giant in a Lakers jersey and gray joggers that were way too attractive on him; he golden-brown, with curly brown hair and a curved jawline. He was huge, I could tell he probably lifted at least twice a day, and under his short sleeves I could see black ink that marked the beginning of whatever tattoo scarred his skin underneath. I had to wipe my mouth and swallow every few seconds to make sure I didn’t drool on myself. I guess good looks ran in the family.

“I’m good, you better not have been partying too hard without me,” he joked back to her, his eyes on her chest, sniffing her perfume that smelled like cherries and never even acknowledging me. “I have something I gotta show you upstairs. And I still have one of your tops I found the other day if you want it back.”

In a matter of minutes, my best friend was gone chatting away like the social butterfly she was and I was finding my way through the living room, stumbling on my own steps as I walked in on Kyle, Sam, and a new face all huddled up in a circle. A football game was on the flat screen TV above them, working as a background noise, the volume turned down on low.

“Hey,” I greeted. It wasn’t what I imagined. The house was mostly empty.

“Not what you were expecting?” Kyle teased me right off the bat. “We’re just playing a question game if you want to join?” He stood up and offered me his seat like a gentleman, crouching down onto the floor.

I went to join him on the floor, but he stopped me, his hand touching me on the waist accidentally. He hardly noticed. He probably thought he hit the couch or something. I took it he didn’t get the tingles in the

lower chest like I did, the ones that made it hard to stop looking at his collarbone. “Don’t be ridiculous. Get on the couch,” he told me.

I hopped on the couch, and sunk into the low-lying soft cushion that made me feel like I was sitting on one of those fancy bungee chairs. “You already know Sam,” Kyle introduced me, “But this is Aiden, my football buddy.”

Aiden was on my right and Sam was on my left. Kyle was below me, but he was tall enough that it didn’t matter. Our feet were far enough away that we could avoid awkwardness but close enough that just in case some miracle happened, and Kyle wanted to make a move he could.

“So, you’re the girl who dented my buddy’s car,” Aiden joked right off the bat. He was similar Kyle with dark hair and a toned body. But while Kyle chose jeans, Aiden wore sweats; and Aiden had thick caterpillars for eyebrows which I was kind of grateful Kyle didn’t have.

“High five,” Aiden said as he held his hand up and smacked it against my weak palm that did about five percent of the smacking. “Please tell me you crashed into him on purpose.”

“Shut up,” Kyle said. Looking up at me, he repositioned his legs into the crisscross position, then replied, “Don’t listen to him.”

“Aidan, if you crashed into Kyle he’d beat you up before the cops even got there,” Sam added.

“Exactly,” Kyle agreed, softly jamming his palm into Aidan’s kneecap, catching him off guard.

“I’d drive away so fast you wouldn’t even see my license plate, man.”

“We get it guys,” Sam said. “You both suck at driving.”

“Not as much as me,” I added.

“Well still, you’re a girl and not nearly as stupid as what I’ve seen these two do, you have no idea.”

“I bet,” I said, not expecting Sam to be so nice to me. I was waiting for her to throw me some passive-aggressive statement acting all alpha

over Kyle—saying he was hers and to back off. But then I got to thinking she probably didn't need to; that wasn't necessary unless I was a threat to her—which I wasn't. I was still trying to get over the fact this wasn't a party date with dancing and music and teenagers being idiots. It was a simple hangout and I felt like the little sister Kyle let tag along just because he felt bad for me.

"What question were we on?" Aiden asked. He reached down into the arm of the couch and pulled out a deck of black and red playing cards, sharpie bleeding through their white bodies.

"Kyle was last," Sam explained. She turned to her right side and flashed on the triangle-shaped lamp that was sitting there on the little nightstand next to the couch. That, and the football game that was now on a Coke commercial, were pretty much the only sources of light around us. I could still see Kyle's innocent brown eyes though. "His question was about the wildest thing he ever did, and he said when he was a kid, he peed on someone else's car in the parking lot and then his parents took off like it was a hit and run." She rolled her eyes.

I belly-laughed.

"Kyle, you should have to answer that one again," Aiden said, "That's not quite what we meant by wild. You're always finding the loopholes."

"There's no rules. To me that was wild. We could've gotten sued or something, who knows."

"My mom's a lawyer," I said. "So, I've got you covered."

"See?" Kyle told Aiden, pointing at me. "At least someone's on my side."

I dug my feet into the carpet, feeling little bits of fuzz coming out from it when Aiden suggested, "Why don't you go next Maya? New girls first."

"I don't know," I joked. "I'd rather sit back and get a feel for how this goes first."

"Nice try," Kyle teased. "I know you've got some dirty secrets up there in that quiet mind of yours." He sat up to reposition himself so he was

sitting on his knees, and I lost my breath, thinking he was gonna get closer. It was disappointing when he moved backwards.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I shouted, getting more comfortable in my seat, sitting up straighter. “I’m an open book.”

Sam took a card out of Aiden’s hands, reaching over me, and she read the question out loud. “What was the worst kiss you’ve ever had?”

This was my worst fear, the question I would rather die than have to answer honestly. It was social suicide. Kyle was staring right at me, so were Aiden and Sam, and I decided to pretend to be the girl in my timeline. The second I told them I was a kissing virgin, they’d pity me and wonder what was wrong with me that not a single guy had so much as held my hand, which was still something I was wondering myself, and I didn’t want to ruin my one chance to fit in by admitting my ironically clean secret.

So I lied.

“It was some dude at this summer camp I went to a couple years ago.” I thought through all the gross kiss scenes in all my romcoms, using them as my guide of what to say. “He went to go for it, and as soon as he did, snot went everywhere.”

“Ewwwww,” Sam sputtered out on instinct. “That is proof guys really do have cooties.”

“Does he go to DeWitt with us?” Kyle asked.

I shook my head. “No, I don’t remember where he was from, but he was far away, I know that.”

“You should’ve made out with me, I was every girl’s first kiss in Pre-K, just as smooth as I am now,” Aiden bragged. Stopping himself, he asked me. “Wait, that snot guy, please tell me he wasn’t your first kiss?”

I nodded. “Of course he was.” I wasn’t about to make up another fictional kiss.

I grabbed a card and read it to Sam. “How many guys have you slept with?”

I sighed. At my sleepovers Joy and I only ever asked questions like what's your favorite movie or artist, never any like this. I'd heard her talk about her wild get-togethers I never got the invite to, but it was different actually being a part of it. I kept waiting for a clean question, until I gave up and realized I'd be waiting all night.

"Six," Sam answered. It was a solid number, not too low or too high for a teenager. I may not be experienced, but I knew of the numbers I was lacking.

So when they asked me the same question, I answered with a solid, "Two," lying again.

Kyle smiled whenever I answered, and I couldn't tell if it was because he wasn't buying the lies or because he liked my answers. Or maybe he was really smiling at Sam and I was imagining his eyes on me.

I lied many more times after that, so much it became as easy as addition and subtraction; I did it without thinking. Aiden told this story about his mom walking in on him losing his v-card, and then it was Kyle's turn again.

"Kiss someone in this room."

"That's a dare, not a question," Kyle immediately argued.

"So? Just do it. Don't be such a buzzkill like always." I wondered what he was referring to. Kyle didn't seem like the frat type like Aiden did. They reminded me of Joy and me; Aiden and Joy would hit it off instantly if her boyfriend Derek wasn't in the picture. I wished I could say the same for me and Kyle. I guess opposites were supposed to attract anyway.

"Where's Joy?" I blurted out, nervous.

"Still upstairs with Jake I think," Sam said. "Don't worry, we can trust them; they'd never get back together the way the breakup went down. Joy's probably just pranking him or stealing his underwear or something again." I hated that Sam knew more about the breakup than I did. I was Joy's best friend. I thought she told me everything.

I couldn't help but notice how calm Sam looked. Had she kissed Kyle

before? She was probably a pro at it, probably knew exactly the right way to move her lips and everything, probably knew the right amount of tongue. All I had was a TV screen, I'd only watched it virtually. I thought my heart was about to beat out of my chest. My veins were all plump and purple, and I had to keep swallowing to clear my throat. The darkness outside looked blurry, the TV like a bunch of dotted lines as I could faintly hear the sports announcer yelling that there was a touchdown.

I looked at Kyle again, this time certain he was looking at me. I lost feeling in my fingers and I wanted him so bad. I wanted to have my first kiss and to be able to say I had it with a guy as hot as him. I wanted to be able to say I was cool like my best friend, Joy. I wanted to know how it felt, even if a few people were watching me.

Aiden was laughing, and I watched Kyle crouch into the direction where Sam and I were sitting, his hips facing us. I licked my lips quick. I figured he probably had already kissed Sam and his curiosity was leading him to me.

I leaned a little farther, only to watch him swipe past my face like the biggest blindside in history and collide his lips into Sam's natural red ones. My heart stopped at that moment. I watched them like I did my romcoms, except I wasn't a cheerleader behind the screen this time; it was like I was the third party on the screen with them, that one jealous girl who was watching them from afar, the one who didn't get the guy.

Once it passed thirty seconds, ignoring Aiden's gross side comments and puckering noises as Kyle had his hands in Sam's hair, throwing it all behind her ears, I got up and raced for the door, faintly shouting, "I should get going. Tell Jake to give Joy a ride. My mom wants me home soon."

What was one more lie anyway? Especially if it meant I could escape?

Kyle got up immediately, pulling away from Sam who was smiling in a red blush, and came after me. "Leaving already? Let me drive you at least."

"I have a car here but thanks anyway."

“I’m still driving you. That’s Joy’s car. She’ll take it home. You seem upset and it’s late, you shouldn’t be driving.” He paused. “Sorry if Aiden took the questions too far.”

“I’m fine,” I lied coldly.

The truth: I WAS NOT FINE.

KUDZU

AMBER WILLIAMS

You get such a bad
Reputation my green goddess.
And for that, I apologize
On behalf of our
Hypocritical world.

We made you.
Spread your seeds
Over our gardens as ornament.
And then we abandoned
You when you became too
Much to handle.

I know the feeling my dear.

Now we watch as you
Take over and scowl
At the houses you envelop
And the posts you climb.

You tower over
Us now, and we complain,
But you were never meant
To be kept in a packet—
To be concealed to just one garden.

We will keep fighting you,
Keep trying to cut you down
For our own good—
Not yours.

I won't blame
You if you keep going,

Growing.

Please tell the stars hello
From me if you ever reach them.

LUMBRICUS TERRESTRIS (ANTROPOCENE)

MAX GILLETTE

When my doctor sat down on her stool, I told her: *I think I'm an earthworm.* She was halfway through dialing the psychiatric department on the next floor before I could coax my tongue into the next sentence. *No...not...well...they have five hearts, you know?* Her index finger hovered over the number seven. *And sometimes my heart gets beating so fast I can feel it thundering in my hands and my feet and my chest, so...* she glanced up at me, unblinking. *Um,* I gripped the edge of the plastic table, *do you compost?* She shook her head. *Oh, well, I do. I like to compost apple peels and melon rinds and onions and all sorts of delicious things because worms have taste buds on their skin—they taste the things they touch! It's a double-whammy for the senses.* Slowly, as if to avoid startling me, she replaced the receiver and reluctantly motioned for me to continue. *And, I mean, I'm sure you can remember how, on the playground, kids who were more cruel than curious would cut worms into pieces? And they would live! Even half-gone—soft flesh scraped against the asphalt—they would live.* She nodded. *I think I've let too many people cut me up. And I guess I was just wondering if you had anything for that.*

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

ANASTASIA **SIMMS**

Yeah I've dealt with it.
Pretty much everyone has, right?
But at least no one ever ripped my clothes off.
Growing up that made me
one of the lucky ones.
They say that's wrong now.
They say I am allowed to be hurt.
But doesn't it make me lucky?

Sure, I've had a nightmare or two;
but I only ever woke up sweating.
I never screamed like the girls
who've had insomnia
forced onto them.
I never screamed like the people at parties
who ignored the bad booze,
the back doors,
and the blood in the bathroom.

I never even screamed like the actresses
they put on TV
that get flustered in scary situations
and make everyone confuse sex and fear.
All under the guise of a half-baked plot
meant to entice us and spike some ratings
because apparently someone decided
this shit is thrilling.

I never screamed.

And you—

You never said anything at all.

NEXT TIME

AVIANNA IRRER

As a dark cobalt sky unfolds before me
spotless. I'm left alone, lest for the chill frosts
slender fingers bring, offering false solace.

Under this late October sky, I
know I'm being watched as towering ink-dipped spruces
dance across my wristwatch. To quell the growing
discord, gathering shakily within my bones,
I think to myself sternly that
I should hurry back on home.

Walking through this dark cobalt sky, I
feel fear melt into fury. 'Cuz if it weren't for all
that cider I drank, then my memory
wouldn't be so fucking blurry.

Stumbling over my own justifications,
I begin to question why.
Why didn't I choose a warmer dress?

Or better shoes? Or better yet,
Why did I even choose to come at all? ...

...
Well Mindy said
He was going, and she
had that vintage shawl...

But why did I not trust myself? Why
answer His inconsistent call of lust? What
good did fleeting pleasures ever bring, at least when involving long
term things?

I'm usually better at avoiding these damn abettors,
so where did I go wrong?

No use now to wonder what could have been,
or should have been, or what went wrong. What I should
be concerned with is this air
of intimidation so thick
My heart beats on, echoing
through my body and
eventually out of view.
This dark cobalt sky is not something I am
safe with, so next time I'll take that ride—without any hesitation.

MOONLIGHT

AAGOSH CHAUDHARY

I.

There was a time when one person could touch another. There was a time when two humans could reach across empty space and grasp hands. Let each other know, wordlessly, that they weren't alone. There were small things. A hair ruffle after a joke. A hug before a goodbye. A kiss after wishing goodnight.

Then, there were big things. When a mother could hold her crying infant for the first time. When one could hold onto a friend's shoulder to reassure him that the world hadn't ended. When two lovers, sprawled out lazily on a bed, could make love.

There was a time for each. There was a time to touch and to feel.

And now, the empty spaces between people were filled with fear. But the longing for each other never went away.

Somewhere in the twenty-first century, people started dying after touching each other. A handshake by a business executive led to him collapsing of a heart attack a few minutes later, meanwhile the one who shook his hand lived on to live a ripe life. Somewhere else, two teenagers high-fived each other and collectively passed away within the next hour. People came together and then withered away. All that was needed, was a touch.

In this world, when two people touched each other, it was a certainty that at least one of them would die.

It took no time to notice the sudden deaths. It took a much, much longer while to figure out why they happened. And by the time they did, there were so many of them.

It is a curious thing, almost poetic, for mankind to almost meet its end by something so alike in nature to us. You see, in terms of behavior, humans are very much like viruses. Destructive in temperament, rapid in growth, and utterly uncaring in consequences. It was only a matter of time till others evolved enough to be the apex predator, competing for the spot.

But what this new virus did, wasn't just killing. That came second. What it did first was isolate us from each other and keep it that way.

In four years, more than a third of humanity had died from the virus. With a statistical analysis of the deaths caused in a social exchange, the leading medical experts had concluded that there was an 84.1% chance of at least one participant dying, with a 15.6% chance of both participants dying.

But within that 0.3%, there was salvation. In that small statistical percentage trapped between two eternal voids, you could risk a hug.

Alas, the scientists hadn't figured out where the virus came from or what vaccine would cure it. But they knew how to prevent it:

Never touch another person again.

II.

Sadik looked at the pretty girl standing in the next bus pod. She held onto the bus ceiling's handle and scrolled through her phone. He was separated from her by a glass partition, which served as a side for each of their pod units. He watched her put her phone in her pocket, sweep her curly black hair from her face, and stare wistfully out of the window. As the silver, driverless bus glided smoothly on the metal tracks, something about the girl's demeanor made Sadik curious. She

dressed like she was from a different time, wearing all denim, a trend that had not been around in half a century. Even her facemask is the simple clinical kind. He thought in frustration. Sadik had prided himself on his ability to deduce something about someone's personality by the facemask they wore, yet hers told him nothing. There really is something about her.

At least that's what he told himself, to distract from the fact that he found her attractive and wanted to strike up a conversation with her. But how do I do this? I'm going to make an absolute moron out of myself. What if she takes it the wrong way and cancels me on social media? He asked himself. It has been four years though. Everyone wants this now, right...?

Sadik braved himself and knocked on the glass. "Adaab." He greeted.

The woman looked around quizzically, saw him smiling, and took off her wireless earphone and mask.

"I really like your outfit." He said.

The woman smiled. "Thank you ji!"

"Do you often wear this kind of clothing?"

"I do, actually. I've always admired more vintage clothing. Makes me feel like I belong in simpler times."

"I know that feeling! It really is a great look on you, I have to say. My name's Sadik by the way."

"Hi, I am Alia!" She replied. "I'd shake your hand but you know..." She tapped the pod wall and shrugged. "Permanent quarantine."

"Not to worry about that. How about we try this instead?" He put his hand against the glass.

“Oh I have seen that movie and I am not doing that. I told you I am a little old fashioned, so how about this?” She folded her hands together and said “Namaste,” as she made a solemn bow.

Sadik chuckled as he repeated the gesture. “Must never forget our Hindustani culture, huh?”

“Never. So where are you headed?”

“Just finished a long day of work so I am heading home. You?”

“Oh, I’m on my way home too.”

“And what is that?” Sadik asked, gesturing towards a large bag near her foot.

Alia froze for a second, almost like she had forgotten it was even there. “Oh, that is a telescope I got.”

“Fancy stuff. But there aren’t any physical shops anymore, so where did you get it from?”

“No, no I didn’t buy it right now. I am just getting it from my boyfriend’s old apartment.”

Sadik’s heart sank at that. You honestly expected a girl that pretty to be single? Idiot. He cursed at himself. But regardless, he continued with the conversation.

“Gotcha. Some important night you both got planned today?”

“Actually, yeah! I’m glad you asked because I have been going around telling everybody I know about this.” Alia said. “Today is the day the star Betelgeuse is scheduled to go supernova. So, if you want to really treat your eyes, don’t go to bed too early.”

Sadik stared at her. “Okay...but I am not too big on astronomy. Doesn’t that mean it is going to explode?”

“Yes!”

“Uh so you’re telling me the world is going to end for a second time then?” He nervously laughed.

“Ha, you’re funny! Nothing like that. Technically, the star already exploded like 600 years ago.” Alia said matter-of-factly. “It’s just the light from the explosion that will be reaching us today. And I can tell you already, it’s going to be breathtakingly beautiful, man.” A look of fervor appeared on her face that made her grin as she spoke. “Just imagine gazing at an empty spot in the dark sky and seeing a tiny little pinprick of light that appears out of nowhere. Then it gets bigger and bigger till it’s almost as big as the Moon itself!”

“That’s nuts! I didn’t know anything about this. How bright will this thing be? Do I need to get a telescope too?”

“Not at all, dude. It’ll be so bright that it’ll be visible during the day and will cast dual shadows in the night.”

Sadik’s mouth formed a comical O. “You said you’ve been telling everyone about it but why do you have to? Why am I hearing about it from a person I happened to meet on the bus, rather than the news or social media? I mean, for an event as big and exciting as this...it doesn’t look like a lot of people know about this supernova event.”

“I mean I’ve made some efforts but I don’t blame them.” Alia shrugged and looked outside the window with the same sad expression she had earlier. “No one has had an easy time in the last few years, right? Sometimes the best things are never noticed.”

He nodded solemnly and they were both silent for a few minutes. The sky darkened into a twilight as the towering skyscrapers and bridges whizzed past and the automated bus took them from the industrial

regions of the city to the residential ones. In a world with no human touch, robotics was the obvious answer. Things that involved physical contact between two people were now obsolete and brought a noticeable change in scenery and structure of major cities. From the center of the metropolis, the smog hidden monotonous steel buildings that housed gigantic vertical shopping centers and repair shops, studded with warehouses in between, paved way for lush, golden-green meadows that enforced social distancing and led to circular neighbors of suburban houses which were built only for the elites. Pretty sure neither of us could ever afford to live in places like these. But that's the dream, isn't it? Sadik thought. That's all it will ever be too though. This bus doesn't even stop in this region.

After an interlude of thick woods came the homes of the majority of the populace. With blocks of apartment complexes that looked no different from each other and resembled the aesthetic of the industrial architecture, the region that birthed the bloodless robots and automatons.

“So what work do you do?” Alia asked, breaking the silence.

“I am a mechanic. They can automate everything, but they still need somebody to fix those machines when they break down or misbehave, right?”

“That's very impressive, man. People like you are the reason this world is still functioning.”

“Normally, I'd be modest and say that's not the case but you're right, it absolutely is the case.”

Alia chuckled and leaned against the glass. “We're living in strange times.”

Sadik leaned against the glass as well and wished he felt her weight pressing back against him. But the glass was called protective for a reason. It was hard and unbudgeable.

“That we are. What job do you do?”

“Oh, I am a blogger and poet for an online newspaper. Nothing too hotshot.”

“Hey, I beg to differ. When the world ended, in those months of quarantine, we turned to artists, remember?”

Alia turned her head at him, and smiled. “Aw, that was sweet of you to say. Thank you!”

“Sweet yes, but also very true.”

“Now approaching Stop Number 37” A robotic voice announced. “ETA two minutes.”

Sadik picked up his backpack and put on his protective gloves and mask. “That’s me.” He said in a muffled voice. “It was lovely to have met you, Alia.”

Alia smiled and put her hand against the glass partition. “You as well.” He knew she had done that gesture as a joke, but he was still oddly touched by it. He put his hand against the glass too.

“Man, your hand is big.” She commented. “You know what they say about men with big hands?”

“What?” He asked, smiling and knowing where this was going.

“Big gloves.” She winked.

Sadik laughed, wishing she didn’t have a boyfriend. “Take care now.” He said as the disinfectant mist was sprayed from the ceiling with a harsh hiss and the door to his glass pod opened.

“Be safe, Sadik” She called out as he stepped down and waved at her.

III.

He was cute. Alia thought, putting her earphones back in. It had been a long, emotionally draining day but for a brief moment, she felt something she had not in many months: The fresh possibility of a deeper connection. He really was that cute. And as she got off the bus, she wished he had asked for her number. He didn't even ask for my socials! But in all fairness, neither did I.

Talking with him had reminded Alia of how things had been when she first met her boyfriend, Yuvraj. The furtive courtship tinged with awkwardness gave her a thrill now, just like it had in the past when Yuvraj had first approached her.

And as she walked, towards her towering apartment complex thinking about her boyfriend, she felt desperate shame. How I could I do that to him? Alia thought, her eyes misty underneath the safety glasses. Yet with each flickering thought of Sadik's dimpled smile, a flash of Yuvraj's crooked one would dance in front of her eyes. I am a piece of shit. She decided, stepping into the dimly lit elevator.

But as she keyed into the dingy apartment that was once a home, she felt harrowing grief. She switched on the lights, revealing a place that really didn't look lived in at all. Most of the furniture was covered with white sheets and a thick layer of dust coated everything that was not. The sink was filled with dirty dishes and rotting foods, while the kitchen slab was lined with rows of empty dust covered gin bottles. An unmade bed peaked at her from a doorway, pulling at her like a magnet. A bed with only one side slept in.

Alia grabbed the only two wine glasses from a cabinet and went to the balcony, where she poured red wine from a bottle she had pulled out from her bag. Swirling the wine but without a sip, she took a deep breath and looked at her only view. Rows of tall, darkening apartment buildings surrounded her, each with columns of windows, some lit and some not. But in each one of them, Alia saw somebody. For in each window, there was a story. In one, there sat a child in the corner

of his room, cuddling his teddy bear. In another, a gowned woman watered her house plants, greeneries and slender vines slithering out of her window. One had an old man reading a tablet and smoking from a vape, remnants of a bygone era, while the next one had someone bald blowing bubbles in a bathtub. All of them were busy, oblivious to what was shortly about to happen. But there was more to it. There was another commonality, a shared factor that united them all. She saw it. She felt it. The yearning for someone else.

If only there was a way to puncture this cloud of isolation, wouldn't that be something? How could we all be here right next to each other but still not say something? But... was it really that different back then? She wondered, remembering her college days when she'd walk to classes and see people with heads bowing at smartphones, people with their glassy eyes and their elsewhere stares walking right past her in zombie-like trances.

Her phone buzzed suddenly with her mother's nth text. Alia sighed. She worries so much about me. She typed back a quick "I am okay, maa hby?" and then switched off her phone. Today she needed to feel that longing. She sat back into a chair and looked at the sky. The moon and the stars were coming alive as the twilight receded more and more into blackness. Alia could practically count the star's appearance one by one and she finally spotted the one she, for so long, was looking for: Betelgeuse, a red supergiant "that sits on the shoulder of Orion". Yuvraj's voice spoke from a memory. "But it's dying. Not because it's old but it's so big, it cannot handle its own weight and so, it'll explode as a supernova. And that could happen at any time, you know? Right at this very second or thousands of years from now. If the astronomers are wrong with their estimates, then it's a Schrodinger's Star. But if they are right, it already is dead. It's a ghost star in the sky that's already dead. We just haven't seen it die yet."

She carefully pulled out the telescope from its bag and set it up, fully knowing she won't need it. The telescope was broken, and the star spectacle would be visible to the naked eye, but it was something he would have done. She then picked up the bag and buried her face in

it. She took a deep breath and smelt a hint of his scent. And in the moment, she swore, she swore she could feel him. She felt his chest pressing against her and heard his goofy laugh in her ears. She could sense the warmth of his breath down her neck and even the taste of his tongue. The memory of every hug and kiss and touch swept over her. So did every shared sunset with a glass of wine, every fight, every making up for that fight, and every time she would wake up next to his warm breathing body.

She took a breath again and he was gone. Again.

Bereavement sank in her bones like lightning bolts. Alia dropped to her knees and shook in the sorrow, a silent scream stuck in her throat as a wave of tears cascaded across her face.

Moments passed until it was time. Alia did not feel like getting up, almost as if she had melted into the floor. But she did it anyway. For it was time. She wiped her eyes and grabbed the undrunk, unsipped wineglass and waited. Waited till it was the right moment. And as the orange star embedded in the shoulder of Orion started receding in its radiance, Alia raised her glass to the night sky and said, "This is for you, babe. This is what we'd have done tonight."

She took the first sip of blood red wine as a star ended its journey of existence in the universe, and went supernova, washing the world anew with its heavenly light.

"Here's to a new beginning for you." She heard Yuvraj's voice in her head and she could have sworn it came from behind her, from the dark shadows and diminished corners of the lonely, empty apartment.

"You know this was my first glass in months?" She whispered to nothing. "And last too." She added a minute later, pouring the second glass down the balcony.

Alia stood up a little straighter and saw all those people she had seen earlier through their windows and disguises, come out to the balcony;

everyone gazing and pointing at the sky in wonder. For a moment in that thin slice of space and time, they had all just witnessed the formation of something akin to a second moon. A moon, neither in size nor proximity and hence, not in definition, therefore not a moon at all. But it gave light to the night as brightly as the full Moon was already giving. And for the next few months, there would be two moons in the sky. She looked on the floor and saw two shadows sprouting from her feet. Now there were two of her.

Alia leaned across the balcony with a lighter chest and a bright smile and looked at the sky again.

She wondered how the cute guy from the bus was doing.

IV.

At dawn, Sadik woke up and watched the dazzling halo in the sky. It's smaller than my pinkie's nail, he thought, but so bright, my eyes burn. Even the moon looks faded compared to it.

Last night, instead of his usual schedule of streaming a tv show, eating frozen food, and jacking off, Sadik did some bedtime reading on astronomy. He had not gone too much in depth; just skimmed over a few articles and watched a couple videos from space agencies that used their powerful telescopes to zoom in and capture the supernova. All because a girl on a bus had mentioned it.

Sadik would have happily spent the next hour thinking about Alia and imagining wild scenarios involving her, but he had a little time left and a big decision to make before he had to leave for work. As a mechanic, Sadik earned what he liked to think of as the perfect middle-class life and income. He had rented a small, cozy cabin out in the middle of the woods between the general and the rich housing districts, chosen purposefully because being around people was simply more temptation to touch them. His salary was sufficient for all his basic amenities and even most small luxuries. But if he wanted something big and expensive, like most people, he'd have to save up, which over

the course of the last year, he already had. Now was the time to make his big yearly purchase.

Streaks of scarlet were already filling the eastern horizon when Sadik sat down and opened his laptop to browse the shopping site. Over the past weeks, he had finalized his choices down to two products, each fulfilling the same fundamental need but in vastly different methods.

Sadik's mouse hovered over the first option, which was a product advertised on the website as a "high end realistic skin latex, self-blowing sex doll with several pulsating speeds in each elasticized cavity, built in non-drip, self-cleaning technology, and explicit, interactable AI dialogue in 40 seductive voices."

Now, a few years ago, the norm would have been to heavily judge someone who makes a purchase like this. But new circumstances inflicted by the virus had driven the remaining members of the human species to desperate measures to feel any kind of contact, whether physical or not. Some people made customized sex toys from the exact measurements of their dead partner's genitals, while some people purchased sex dolls.

See, Sadik was a virgin and he was going to stay that way. However, it was truly never his choice.

As a child, he was razor focused on his academics to please his mother, something he ended up achieving multiple times in his school and college life, but all that hard work in those sleepless nights never really gave him the chance to broaden his social horizons.

Nevertheless, his parents were not exactly what one would call "physically affectionate". He knew they loved him; they stated that multiple times. But his father had passed when he was a teen and his mother withdrew into herself so much, she never came out. When the virus had reached its crux, his mother died in one of the many yearlong quarantines and lockdowns. He had to say goodbye to her through a last moment, frantic Zoom call.

Sadik had been alone his whole life and now it was starting to hurt. A mother's kiss, a father's hug, a lover's snuggle, were all things he would only read and weep about—but never feel for himself.

That's why his second option was something called the Hug Machine. An exorbitant, cutting-edge technology that stimulated the sense of touch so realistically, they claimed it was better than a real one. You could set the time limit, the pressure, the temperature, and the type of hug ("From a coworker's quick side hug in an informal setting to mother's bear squeeze after a long day of school.") with customizable presets.

And there sat Sadik, with the sun rays now filtering through the trees and falling over his cabin, debating with himself on which touch he needed more. His thoughts flickered towards the bus girl and he remembered when he had leaned against the cold glass, hoping to lean against her.

He made the decision. Hugging pillows was getting boring.

Besides that...I'll always have more socks.

With that fresh mentality, Sadik arrived enthusiastically at work, a little earlier than usual. But he was not the first one there. Mr. Verma, the oldest company employee, was already sitting on the stairs of the warehouse entrance, smoking a cigarette, eating salted peanuts, and squinting at the supernova in the sky.

"Feels like a dream, doesn't it, Sadik?" He asked in his wizened voice as Sadik readjusted his protective equipment to approach him.

"It does, Verma ji." He said, standing next to him and watching the glowing nova. "I read it will be visible in the day for at least a month too."

"Heh. This really maybe a sign that I should retire, son. For good."

Sadik laughed. “The world will end, and we’d all be dead before that happens, sir. How’s the wife?”

“What do I say, bachcha? She’s struggling with the radiation. Just because there is this virus out there, doesn’t mean the other diseases stopped existing, does it? No matter how much I beg God for that... But she will make it. I know at least that in my bones.”

He nodded. “Inshallah, she’ll be fine, sir. I promise. I have been praying everyday.”

Mr. Verma didn’t say anything. Instead, he got up slowly, threw the cigarette away, and shoved the peanut packet in his jacket.

“Just wish I could at least hold her, son.” He said, in an almost whisper. “Come on, now. Let’s get this door open.”

I know he jokes about retirement, but I’d be really sad to see him go, Sadik thought as he followed Mr. Verma, who opened the warehouse doors by pressing his hand on the biometric scanner and hacked a cough. Forced to come out of retirement because his wife is at stage III? Haye, Allah. This is cruel world, but this is a good man.

For several hours, work was peaceful. Whether it was repairing inner electronic circuits or welding detached joints, Sadik was breezing through. His hands were on autopilot, but his mind was back on the girl on the bus. He knew she had a boyfriend and for some reason, he still wanted to be in touch with her. Should’ve asked for her number. I really should’ve asked for her number, damn it! That left a bitter taste in his mouth. You can think as much as you want, about whatever you want. Sadik assured himself. But as long as it’s not in your actions, it’s not real. You made the right call. You always do, pal.

With plans of trying to find Alia’s social networking profile later in the day and hopefully reach out to her there, Sadik continued his work. But suddenly, in the hustle bustle of the workshop, amongst hammer pangs and sharp hisses of welding metal, a single sound rang out that

quietened everything else and made even time stand still: a deathly rattling of the lungs and a choked scream rang out in the workhouse. Sadik, who was busy patching a software update of an old android, whipped around and saw a purple faced Mr. Verma tearing at his throat, desperately trying to breathe. Right next to him, scattered on the floor was a packet of peanuts. Around him, his frozen co-workers helplessly watched the old man die. At that moment, Sadik remembered an old video about the Heimlich maneuver, a procedure to help someone who was choking by hugging them from behind and pushing their stomach to dislodge the object stuck in the windpipe.

Without thinking, without consideration of chances or certainties, without a care in the world, Sadik ran to help him.

V.

One moon died as the sun steadily climbed the sky's ladder, but the world was still lit by moonlight.

HOLLAND

AAGOSH CHAUDHARY



NAME THE ELEPHANT

ANASTASTIA SIMMS

r@p3, s3xu@l @\$\$ault, part of the 97%...these are the phrases people online use to code their language so they don't upset their followers, so their accounts don't get taken down, so no one gets too uncomfortable because everyone is uncomfortable when someone, especially someone who looks like their granddaughter, their niece, their middle school crush, their dorm neighbor from freshman year says the words out loud: rape, sexual assault.

But fuck that.

I'm going to say rape and sexual assault. I'm not going to mince my words because my words don't need cut down. If other women like me want not to acknowledge their pain with words, I will respect their peace, but when it is my turn to speak, when I want to eject this cancer from my body by calling it out and naming it, killing it and releasing it from my custody into the world, when my peace can only be born from this violent revolution, I will not be told to hush for other people's comfort. I will not bow in fear to the elephant in the room by remaining silent. I will not censor myself because everyone else in the room is uncomfortable knowing I know the elephant's name. I promise you it was more uncomfortable for me to learn the name than it is for you to learn that I do. I don't owe you making myself even more uncomfortable, twisting and contorting myself back into the shape you want me to assume, just to keep you happy in your ignorance.

It's like asking me to say it's my "time of the month" in front of men because they cower at the word "period." Fuck that and fuck them for being "pussies" when they don't even have to deal with having one. Fuck you for asking me not only to contend with the blood in my pants, but to do so silently and in shame. Fuck you for asking me to contend not only with that, but also your feelings, men's feelings, because those too are apparently my womanly burden.

But alas isn't that how it has always been? "Hush up," you tell me, "About the blood in your pants because you might make my son feel bad. Hush up about the blood on his sheets because you might make my son feel bad," you say as you strip his mattress. And you throw the bedding in the washing machine. And you wipe that last little bit of blood off your hands so they'll be clean when you pat his face and tell him, "It's okay, sweetie. Everyone makes mistakes." And thus, that is all we are reduced to—us women, us dirty vile creatures: mistakes. Perhaps that is why no one wants us to name the elephant. There's really no use in upsetting everyone over silly little mistakes.

(FRIENDSHIP) ON THE ROCKS

AVIANA IRRER

As swelling tides romp roughly against the harbor
Breaks, my heart falls as your words send a
Cold judgment to break the harbor. Looking
Down in misplaced shame, I can't bear to meet your
Eyes. With both your bodies so steely in resolve, all
Familiarities begin to shimmer and fade, while
Growing in its place, a restless resentment reflects
How stormy seas pass relentless judgment.

I can't understand how the three of us got here. Who allowed you to act
Judge, jury, and executioner? If I had
Known you had this planned, would I have
Left within the first moment? Would I have

Made a scene? Balled my fists and yelled and screamed?

No, I think better yet, I'm better

Off with specific candor, so smooth it mirrors west
Pacific water. More

Questions crash and break my brain, as
Reality continues to shift again, with
Swelling tides so strong they break more than just the harbor, I
Think and begin to wonder, how could I have known within
Us, you two harbored swelling breaks? That in matters pertaining to this
Very relation, you both
Would be so quick to jump ship? At least now I can
X you out and choose to walk away. Hating that
You both feel as if you're the winners of this
Zero sum game.

THOSE WHO BROKE ME

ANNA KUSHNER

To those who broke me and the pen that filled the gaps

I would like to thank you
for the months of
overthinking,
gaslighting,
manipulation,
and a twinkle of tranquility.

It was the euphoria you showed me,
reaching into low hanging clouds
of a barely buoyant mental state.

An elevator of ecstasy
soaring up a skyscraper,
splattering on my keyboard,
my notebook,
my phone, in a mess of words
I never dare let slip from my tongue.

Yet the plummet
back to earth's core,
where molten magma warmed my toes,
silence spilled from every crevice
that I found I missed the buzz of thoughts
bubbling under my skull.

I didn't like the story I was living

so, I wrote myself anew.
'The cup holder size hole of koi fish
swimming to the surface

hungry for thoughts of you,
could only be pleased
with ink stains of memories.

In the dystopian
world on fire,
Zombie apocalypse,
Nuclear wasteland
type ruin you left me stranded in,
I created more for myself with our past
than you ever gave me in our present.

MY STORY, MY LIPS

DIANA DALSKI

He seemed friendly and safe enough. It was at a big convention, where it wasn't uncommon to meet guys who wanted to talk and get to know you. Although in retrospect, it was odd he was into me considering, I was cosplaying a guy and he seemed very straight. I didn't look like a guy but I didn't look like a girl either. More like someone you might take a second glance at in question until you noticed the black short wig hiding the long strands of blonde under it that kept falling out because my hair cap got torn before the convention and this was the best that Anna and I could manage.

Anna and I were close friends. We were both in Graphic Arts class together and did some crazy shit I'm surprised our teacher let us get away with. We made some questionable photoshop pictures together, including crude head clippings of other teachers onto strange objects and fake magazine covers that implied our cafeteria served horse meat. We would joke around and nerd out about different animes and video games. We both loved Pokémon and it wasn't rare to find her wearing a Vaporeon hoodie around school. She was a year ahead of me but we felt like we'd been friends for far longer than just the few years we'd known one another. I trusted her and she trusted me.

I trusted him because she did.

Anna was the one who introduced us. I don't actually remember his name, Anna kept using his gamer tag and I've never had the desire or motivation to ask her about his name. I don't want to have that name ruined for me, especially because every name is important and meaningful as an author. He was cosplaying the Bleach character Aizen—who ironically was also a creep—but I hated the name Aizen already, so it's alright he ruined it further. I haven't watched Bleach since I met him.

He was funny at first. He liked my costume, Izaya from *Durarara*, an anime. He knew the character and inside jokes. He ran into us in the gaming room where I was discussing fighting people with lightsabers at my high school lock-in. He thought it was hilarious. Especially since I—a sixteen-year-old girl—had beat multiple upperclassmen, many who seemed stronger and more athletic. He wondered if he could beat me. He was planning on buying Japanese wooden swords in the Expo hall, where artists and collectors bought and sold merchandise or collectibles. I told him I didn't know how well I could fight with them, but I could try. He ran off and I didn't expect to see him again. Things like this happen all the time at conventions, you meet lots of other fans of tv shows, animes and cartoons, claim you might hang out later, and then go to the other side of convention center full of room after room to get lost in—never to see each other again. That's what normally happens, at least.

Later in the night, I left Anna in the game room. She loved playing *Super Smash Bros* and there was a tournament going on. The game room was full of monitors, arcade games of any kind you could think of and groups of people playing their 3DS games off in the corner. The light of the *Dance-Dance Revolution* and their own gaming screens was the only thing keeping them from disappearing into the black corners of the room. Anna had already disappeared from sight as she joined a crowd of *Super Smash Bros* players, ready to beat as many contestants as she could. I knew she'd have fun here. I had other places to be, especially since there were VIP events and my parents had got me a VIP badge for Christmas. I left to go to the Expo center—there was a poster I wanted to grab so that I could get it signed—but as I was entering I ran into Aizen again.

“Hey, Izaya! I got the swords. I told you I would,” he called out and I turned away from the *Pokémon* plushies at the front of the hall. It took me a moment to realize he actually was talking to me. He used my real name, Diana, but I prefer to remember it as Izaya because then I can pretend his lips didn't form my precious name, the name I love, the name I share with my grandmother. So I pretend he said Izaya because it makes it hurt less.

“Oh, hey Aizen. You actually got those, huh?” I asked. He grinned, it was the smile of a cobra preparing to strike but I, being naive, only saw a dopy fanboy.

“Yeah, do you wanna take them for a spin?” he asked. In a lot of ways, he was dangling a piece of meat in front of a dog. I adored Japanese culture and loved their swords. And I was a giant nerd and he was offering me the chance to fight with swords. This was a dream to me.

“Absolutely, let’s go outside past the Star War clique. We don’t wanna hit anyone,” I said. I didn’t realize the snare I was helping to lay out for myself. Like the rabbit tying off the trap for the hunter.

“I agree, let’s go.” He said and I didn’t notice it as he put his hand on my arm and guided me out of the main convention hall. His hand was close to my shoulder, something I realized when he repeated the action later in the night.

It was near eight at night and March in Michigan, so the sun had long since dipped into the night as the fairy-lights lit the rivers near the convention center. There were hundreds of fireflies flying over the water, blinking like warnings in the night, that I ignored.

He tossed me a sword and I took it into my hand before facing him, ready to strike first. The fighting was thrilling. I loved it at the time. There’s a power to having a sword in hand. Something I still love to this day. He didn’t ruin that for me. I could have fought better, gotten away faster if I’d had that sword in my hand. The sword was a sword, at that time. Today I have other swords to protect me. On campus, my sword is pepper spray, because I won’t be taken advantage of again. On paper, my sword is my pen. And at home, there’s my keyboard, I can fight ignorance and depression with my keyboard. That’s the only reason I can relive this story.

When we were both gasping for breath after fighting—neither worse or better than the other—we sat on the ledge facing the river. That’s where one of the coordinators of the convention came over to chat with us.

“I’m so sorry to interrupt, but I saw your fighting and took some pic-

tures. Would you consent to my posting them on the convention website?” she asked. At the time I thought it was awesome. I was going to be on the website for sword fighting. She even emailed me the pictures.

Later, I marked them as read. I didn’t have the ability to actually look at them or the strength to delete them. My trophy of failure was a small 36 KB email labeled “Sword fighting pictures-SO COOL!!” that I was too ashamed to do anything with.

When she left we both decided it was time to go back in, but we had wandered further from the entrance we had exited from. Aizen convinced me that we could take a shortcut through the garage and continue to cool off there. I wasn’t thinking when I said yes. I didn’t have any notion of the plans he had in his head, the things he imagined to do together.

It was in the garage we began to talk.

“So, have you ever ... had sex before?” He asked. This was the red flag everyone talks about or doesn’t talk about, because society refuses to admit that perfectly nice evenings can take a 180-degree turn in an instant and a girl, who was just a new friend, soon becomes a victim. This was the moment where the world changed rotation, the axis of my precious, naive, little world shifted. It was not subtle, not strung out. It was an instantaneous and rapid change. One second I was comfortable, I was happy and enjoying my life. The next I was the next target, and knew with all my heart, I needed to get the hell out of there as fast as I could or I would become another statistic. Another silent, or silenced, victim.

“I-I ... no. I haven’t.” I said, I tried to keep an even tone, I knew men like this, knew them from stories and from my older sister who desperately didn’t want me to go through some of the things she went through. But how could I have predicted this? My friend was friends with this man, had been gaming with him for years, had vouched for him. And this was a convention with a tagline of “safe spaces for all,” and, “safe for all to be who they wanted to be.” It was supposed to be safe for me. How could I have known? Why should I have had to?

His hand was on my arm again. It was creeping further down until he forced it into my own. It was sweaty and uncomfortable. Every skin-to-skin contact felt like pins and needles against my skin as the cold, sickening hand crawled up my spine. I felt nauseous at what might occur, what I needed to prevent. At that moment, I was the rabbit desperate to free my foot from the trap.

“Would you be interested in it?” He asked. His breath was mingling with mine as he moved closer to me, his arm now against mine. Too close, he was too close.

“I’m waiting until marriage,” I said. I’m not. I’m waiting for the right person, but saying anything like that to him was a gate being opened. One I was trying to padlock closed.

“What about blowjobs?” he asked. As cold sweat seeped down my neck. I was glad that I hadn’t eaten much that day because I knew it may come up soon. I was looking for a way out, anywhere to go. The parking garage was under the convention center. There were lines and lines of columns and cars. I could hide if I had to, but would that work as we were the only ones in the parking garage?

There were doors about forty feet from me, but they wouldn’t help me. There were no columns to duck between to get to the doors and a straight dash left me more likely to have him follow me. The doors were two sets anyways, I could make it through one only to have him drag me out before I opened the inner set. I never thought about the strength of our fight or flight instincts until I was prey.

“I’m not really into that,” I said. My heart was racing at this point. I was rejecting him left, right, and center. This was how women died. I was sixteen—not even legally a woman yet.

“So when do you wanna get married?” He asked. This felt safer, less of a pitfall.

“I want to wait, I want to be a doctor which is a lot of school and I want to focus on school before romance,” I said. I was looking anywhere but him. I was memorizing cars, wondering which might be his, which he might force me into. There was a black Toyota closest to us,

but it seemed too clean to be his. The white Mazda with mud all over the outside and trash in the rear window felt more fitting. Or the red Jeep next to it that had a cracked window. I wondered if I would die in the back of one of these cars.

“What if the right person appears sooner than that?” He didn’t let me respond as his hand squeezed mine, tighter, a vice, ready to keep me attached to him.

“I-I don’t know. I haven’t planned for that. Besides, you know I’m sixteen, right?” I asked. I wanted nothing more than to scream take the hint, but like some nightmare, he ignored every effort I made. My heart was beating so fast and my blood rushing through my veins like a drum, pounding against my temple, thrumming against my ears. I prayed he wouldn’t notice, and that it wouldn’t trigger anything from him.

“I don’t care about that.” He was eager with this response. Yet he had to be in his twenties, he looked like the stereotypical thirty-year-old virgin living in his mother’s basement. I hoped he stayed that way, virtue intact. “Well ... are you opposed to changes in the plan?” He asked. I felt sick. Every topic, every subject, seemed to keep pointing back to what I desperately feared he wanted from me. Of me.

“I-I don’t know what you mean,” I said.

“Well if you’re opposed to everything I want, how about a kiss? Maybe you’ll change your mind. Opposed to a little kiss?” He asked. He was facing me now and there was a cement pillar behind me preventing any retreat. I wanted to scream but didn’t know how he’d react or what that would result in. I didn’t want to kiss him. But in these situations, it’s not about what I want.

“I-I well, maybe but—” I never got to finish my sentence as his lips were on mine. Nothing about the kiss was good, although, since it was my first, I didn’t have much to go off of. His lips weren’t sweet and what I tasted was salty like sweat. He tried to force his tongue into my mouth but by some sheer force of will, I kept it from my mouth. When we pulled apart he was looking me over like he’d just had the

first appetizer.

I felt sick. I felt nauseous like I was going to curl over and hurl at his feet. Maybe that would disgust him away or he'd get the message? Or he'd get pissed and take it out on me.

The sound of the doors to the parking garage opening was the most beautiful thing I'd heard all day.

At that moment another couple entered what had before been a painfully empty parking garage. They seemed engrossed in conversation, be it over the shows they were dressed in brightly colored outfits I didn't recognize or something different, I didn't know. Nor did I care. There were people other than the monster who stood beside me in the garage now. I wasn't as alone. I thanked any god that had sent this mercy to me. Be it Diana, my namesake and goddess of virtue, Artemis, who Diana is based on, Baldur, the god of Purity, or the big, and according to my mother only God, God, Jesus, whoever. I didn't know and I didn't care who, but the blessing was my immediate escape.

"Look, I uh, I have a panel I need to get to," I said, loud enough it echoed in the garage. The white-wigged male didn't seem to break off his conversation with the girl he was talking to, but he glanced my way. Good. I started towards the doors to the convention hall and he tugged me back.

"Are you sure you have to go, I thought you said you had an hour?" He asked. He was catching my ruse but I wouldn't let him win, not when this was the only time making a scene would get me anywhere.

"I forgot my friend wanted to go to some panel over a webcomic she likes. I'll probably see you around, alright?" I said and the couple was staring now as I pulled away for a third and final time, finally breaking free of his vice. He followed me up the stairs where I immediately looked for a lone girl, an older one who might know what to say or do if need be. I found a girl who looked eighteen or early twenties and darted to her before he could ask questions.

"Please pretend to be my friend, he won't leave me alone," I whispered and she hid the startle in her eyes as she immediately looked up and

smiled at me.

“Laugh, all you have to do is laugh and he’ll go away if he thinks this is true. Sit next to me.” She said back as she looked back at him but only like a curious con-goer looking at cosplays, then straight back at me as I faked a laugh and sat next to her. She was very pretty if a bit plain. She’d dyed her hair pink and it was cut short to about shoulder length. She was pale and didn’t have any freckles. Her eyebrows seemed well shaped and light brown. I don’t know who she was dressed up as but I remember her yellow sweater. I was too overwhelmed with what had happened to analyze much about this woman. This savior I had forced into heroism.

“How long has he...?” She asked as we both dared to glance as he’d turned away from me and walked off towards the other side of the convention hall.

“I-I don’t know. I felt trapped with him, he led me into the garage and he—” my voice cut off as I choked on my own words, there were tears threatening to leave my eyes as I admitted what had happened. To me. The girl who had to ask out her own dates or not be asked at all and then get rejected half the time anyways. Me, the girl who cosplayed a guy. Me, who was in a long sleeved t-shirt, black jeans and a big brown coat. No matter what I did, how had I asked for this? Why was I the target?

“He forced me to kiss him,” I whispered. The girl’s eyes softened as she looked around.

“Do you want me to get security?” She asked and I shook my head.

“I want this to be over,” I said and she gently placed a hand on my shoulder. It was gentle and welcome, from a pink haired girl who knew what it was like for me to be alone and in that kind of position. Even if she’d never experienced it herself, she knew someone who had. We all do. Women either grow up to experience it ourselves or hear about our family, our friends and our classmates having experienced it. She knew.

He didn’t.

We sat until I could breathe without a hitch in my throat. Until I felt like I could stand without my legs shaking. When I did, I thanked her. She was there to enjoy the con after all and I'd thrown a terrible realization on her shoulders. I felt bad for so many reasons. Shame laid heavy on my own shoulders.

When we departed from each other I went to the bathroom. It was crowded, but I found a sink near the back. I stared at myself in the grimy mirror. I looked no different. I hadn't been wearing makeup, so no ruined lipstick. I didn't look changed, the same face I had always had stared back at me. Yet, it felt different now. Like something had been taken from it. My eyes lost some of the glimmers within their beautiful hazel that had been there that morning. I scooped sink water into my face. There I washed out my mouth. Washed the remnants of him from my lips. Removed his DNA from my hands. I tried to wash away everything of him.

Some days it feels like it worked. Others, I can't shake the nausea as I taste his saliva on my lips.

I was a victim. This was something I didn't grasp or comprehend for a long time before I should have. It took a year later and a talk with my English teacher, his words of comfort and assurance to realize what happened. Sexual assault seemed like such a heavy term, but my teacher was right to tell me that my experience was covered by that term. If it wasn't for him, I'd still be blaming myself for what happened. He further proved what I already knew, that not all men are corrupt.

*

"I want to ask you something ... it's... it's private. I..." I kept fumbling on my words as the door to Mr. Podmore's room closed, leaving us alone in the room. I kept avoiding his eye contact. I knew it was rude, but I'd preferred staring at the paintings of My Little Ponies and Undertale memes on the ceiling to looking at him while I approached the subject.

"Yes, what is it?" Mr. Podmore's full attention was on me. I wasn't quiet, nor was I far from a teacher's pet, so staying after to talk wasn't

rare for me, but private matters was. I talked about writing, becoming a better writer with him. Not about myself.

"I ... you said earlier in class that there's a truth to writing. That we should use honesty in the arguments we make in our essays. If... if I wrote something I've never told anyone before in my essay, could I trust you to keep it private? I wouldn't want it to be used as an example essay," I said. Red flags flew throughout that entire question, I could see them processing in his mind.

"I ... yes. I can definitely keep it private. But..." he paused as he saw the tears in my eyes. I never cried at school. I was so mad at myself for letting myself cry at school that I almost turned away. "Diana, I'm here if you need to talk. There's also the counselor's office, they'd be able to help." He said. I'd considered it. But I was top of my class. I didn't want the counselors to see a different side of me. Most likely because when you're placed on a shelf like a trophy, you don't want to tarnish yourself.

"It's... I don't want to talk to them. It's just... a year ago I had a guy force me to kiss him. It's stupid and I make it more of a big deal than it is, but it connects to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and I thought it'd help to write about it. I don't know. It's stupid." My hands trembled as I tried to move on from it all, I was going to turn around and leave.

Except his words stopped me.

"It's not stupid. And it was wrong for any boy to force that from you." He said. I took a deep breath and wiped some of my frustrated tears away I'm sure he noticed.

"But it was just a kiss," I said, barely audible. I fell into a pattern of claiming this. I constantly made myself feel worse by repeating it over and over. It's not sexual assault. Just a kiss. Part of me feared I was being melodramatic. It's not like I was raped like so many women who had been in similar situations were. It's not like he hurt me in any way, except mentally.

"If you didn't want it, then it was assault. And I'm sorry it happened. I'm glad you're comfortable enough to talk to me about it. If you in-

clude it in your writing then I'll be sure to keep your writing private," he said.

He kept his word.

I've shared my story as I saw fit. I'm not sure he knew how big of a part of it he was.

I ended up writing an essay centered around wanting to forget the past. *In Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie says something along the lines of, "women forget what they don't want to remember." Something I disagree with to this day. Sure, I did my best to forget his hands on my back. I did my best to forget his breath so near mine. I did my best to forget the taste of his saliva. I tried to forget him. But I couldn't.

It wasn't my best essay. But it was raw and honest about what had happened. Something I hadn't been honest about up until that point.

I was a mess of emotions, but there was something about writing the words "sexual assault" in my essay that made me understand the truth behind them.

I'm not sure he remembers my conversation with him. But I know he started my recovery.

*

Even with my English teachers help, there are still bad days. Days where I wonder if I deserved it. If there was something I did wrong, said improperly, should have changed. Some days I wonder if it was truly a non-consensual kiss because I never said no but, I also never said yes.

Then I remember telling him I was sixteen and I feel sick all over again.

Because he didn't care.

*

I struggled for the longest time with the #MeToo movement. I wanted to support it, to shout and scream that I knew what it was like. I wanted

to scream “Me Too.” But shame caused me to hide. Shame, because I didn’t want to be seen as a victim to the people I loved. Shame, because I didn’t want people to think I wanted attention from my story. Shame, because I felt guilty making a big deal over my sexual assault story.

That shame drove me to be one of the only people in my English class that struggled to advocate for the MeToo movement. My English teacher, different from the one previously discussed, wanted to discuss it, wanted to know everyone’s opinion on it. I felt uncomfortable, I had too much of a stake in the movement. I was surprisingly quiet. When I spoke, I said something stupid and matching in my denial to reveal any of my past with the topic.

I still regret letting him take even my opinion on that topic from me.

It was what he did to me that made me have every right to say those two words.

Yet it was what he did to me that drove me into a corner and made me never want to share anything.

That will never happen again.

Me Too.

Me Too.

I haven’t posted Me Too on my Facebook, Twitter, or any other social media. But in writing this story, I’ve joined the movement in my own way.

My favorite picture from the movement is a picture of a girl holding a small MeToo sign and another girl raising the sign higher. I’ve met nothing but support from the people I’ve told my story. For that, I’ll forever be grateful.

*

I never told Anna what happened to me. To my knowledge, she has no idea that her gamer friend took me into a parking garage and took away my naivety. I’m not sure if he ever told her. Bragged about mak-

ing out with a sixteen-year-old who didn't know any better to his gamer friends. I'd imagine he doesn't even know what an impact he had. What he did to me. I don't know what I would do if I met him again. I don't know if I could even talk to him. Even thinking about it makes my throat constrict.

That's why I never told Anna. We stayed friends, I even went to a different convention with her in Detroit later that year, shared a room with her. But I never told her what happened. Part of me believes I didn't want to ruin her relationship with him, or at the very least didn't want to cause drama. Another part of me knows it's because Anna seemed mild, seemed calm and collected, but I was afraid of what she might do to him if she knew. Or worse, I was afraid she wouldn't care at all, that she would cast my story off as melodrama. Cast me as the antagonist in his story. So I didn't tell her, and I buried the story for as long as I could manage until it continued to surface in my mind.

If I'm being honest, it took a lot of effort to write this piece. Both due to the emotions and raw pain it brought to the surface of my mind again. I had a physical response to writing some of this; my pulse would race, goosebumps would coat my arms, my eyes would water or my mouth go dry. But I also had trouble remembering certain details. Some of it was ingrained in my mind. Some of it impossible to forget. But I'd spent so much time burying the memory, content to never share it with anyone, that I had forgotten some of my own story. I got it back, as I remembered details slowly, like a drizzle of water leaking through a crack, until the entire picture had reformed.

I think I lost part of myself by reforming that picture. I cracked open a piece of me in acknowledging the memory once again. A piece I'll never get back, a piece I'll never be able to fix.

Or maybe he did that when he forced his lips on mine.

*

It took me years to get past the issues I had with physical contact and affection. I tried and failed at relationships between now and then, but 2019 was full of milestones. I was asked out by someone who

built a relationship with me beforehand. We spent an entire semester together before he asked me out. And even after that, he was nothing but patient with me. Everything was by my acceptance. I offered my hand to be held. I gave him a kiss on the cheek goodnight. I grabbed the sides of his head and smiled before kissing him. It wasn't long and drawn out, it was a kiss goodbye after he met my parents. But it was everything I ever could have hoped for. It sent the best kind of butterflies fluttering within my stomach. My lips felt like they were missing a piece as we went our separate ways and I loved the tingling he left lingering on them. I loved the feeling of his lips on mine. Loved his hands holding mine. Loved being next to him. Even when we broke up, I still looked back with content and fondness.

Everything in my relationship was as I chose it to be. And I loved it.

He didn't take control of my body. He knew it wasn't his to take. My body is my own and mine to control. I control it.

Something no man will ever have the right to take away again.

FLOWERING

RENAYE GREENWOOD

I must have planted my rose bushes
in a hundred different types of soil.
And in one of those instances,
I think I tried to plant them
in some place no different than Hell.

Demons would pluck at the leaves.
Cerberus would chew on the stems
despite the thorns.
And the ground,
the land was dead and bare.

No rain came pouring
down in the Underworld.
Not a single drop of life
for roses to draw.

They died and I sprouted
new ones from the dirt.
They wilted and I bore them
once more from within
I planted them and they shriveled
wherever I did so.

I'm no good at gardening.
But this hundredth and first try—
At last, flowering.

A FATHER'S VOICE

MARENA BENOIT

Uncle Dicky is collecting all the beer cans strewn
around the living room in a five-gallon bucket.

Getting ready for target practice.

The cans tinkle against each other like
a tin kaleidoscope, as he slings the bucket
around the house, reflecting the sunlight
from the windows in every which direction.
His neighbor Sam is there too. Dicky's got his gun
strapped over his shoulder. He throws it over
his chest. He points it at Sam, laughs and
says, put ya hands up.

Dicky responds to the desperation in Sam's eye by saying, come on
it's not even loaded but concedes by pointing it slightly to the left.

The bullet then leaves the gun and meets the wall with a kiss
as the wallpaper forms a flower behind its path.

The voice of his father Oscar was pulling his aim away.

Never point a gun at another human
was Oscar's favorite mantra, but his father
only opens the bedroom door,
looks at the hole in the wall,
then closes the door with a frown.

UNORTHODOX

FLETCHER KIRKWOOD

heaven's gate has always been blocked to me.
not quite adam, not quite eve; the serpent's amalgamation of the two.
i have disobeyed, they tell me, what He made me to be.
under His steeple i was trained.

never show too much skin, but be sure to accent your femininity.
do not aspire to positions of power. it is not your birthright to lead.
follow behind your husband. attend to your numerous children.

do not question anything.

remember, they croon, His word is never wrong.
but did they know then, that to accept this version of me would be
my death?
if i was made in His image, why did they punish me so?

i am not the soft, pliable young woman. and i am not the serene wife.
i am not the comforting nurse of a mother to her newborn.
i will never be their demure, feminine creature.
i am of my own creation.

i will gladly be His mistake. i accept the mantle of heretic,
of sexual deviant, of a disgusting outsider. if this is to be my fate,
then i reach to claim my title.

because i am learning how to be myself for the first time.

i realize now, i have never needed the punishing hand.
i have parted ways with the constant guilt and expectaions.
in His absence, i found myself

i am my own religion, my own salvation.

SHOTGUN WEDDING (ANTHROPOCENE)

MAX GILLETTE

The moon is stamped against the courtroom—
varnished light clogs the air. I'm in the back row,
next to the damp, wilting blooms,
waiting for the groom and his new shadow.

They asked me to witness this; only one
mistake/miscalculation/misfiring, then
their three jobs, two children, and (soon) one
affair, are bound together in holy matrimony. Amen.

The bride's eyes shine—weeping that begins here and
doesn't end. I want to shake her silken shoulders. I
want to tell her she will lose; she will understand
what it means to hurt and be hurt. I say goodbye.

I step out of the courthouse, and the moon's varnished light
is echoed in tarnished rings across the night.

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

B.I.W

if you can hear my voice,
or sense my presence,
then you have entered a world
of stories yet unpleasant

do not bother turning left,
do not bother turning right.
your eyes will only fail to catch me—
for I'm Cloy the fairy, leaver of no attesting sight

your futile thinking
has led you to a dateless maze;
you do not know if true love is worth
setting your rightful spirit ablaze

so let me tell you
of Anny and Bill,
two cottage peasants who lived
as earnest as can be, up the western hill

freshly married,
couldn't part from one another.
they shared the bed, the space, the clothes—
even features of each other

Bill stole Anny's laugh—
she did the same with his walk.

they even started to look the same
and the townsfolk couldn't help but gawk

but the couple refused to listen
to the commoners concerns
they were so obsessed and devoted
to the point of no return

you see they'd heard of a witch
yes a witch on the eastern hill
they said she was not evil or unkind
she even granted wishes to the blind

they decided to pay her a visit,
and ride their donkey under the tropic sun.
when they arrived and entered her house, they plead—
oh witch, please make us united as one.

the witch refused;
called them a couple of fools.
"you two are not in need of help
but stupidly blind.
love is about finding your right-hand ally in the chaos of this raging
world.
love is far from being forever intertwined"

yet the couple did not listen.
they threw a fit and called the witch an old hag.
she raved back and yelled "enough!"
to cast a spell and end their shameful nags

suddenly,
the two lovers were no more
there on the floor
where their shoes used to stand
laid a silver coin
Bill was the head—

Anny the tails.
the witch mumbled
"let's see your true colors unveil
now that you are one and the same
two sides of the same coin.
two lovers, who shall never reconjoin"

ELEGY FOR 8251 SHORTCUT RD

JORDYN DAMATO

You, my friend
and my enemy,
were my first home.
You smelled like
cigarettes and a
wood burning stove—
and when I hid under
my bed, mothballs.
My sisters and I
threw noodles
on your head,
testing to see if
they would stick
or if they would fall.
And we knew when
they stuck, and they
typically never did,
dinner was done
and we could eat
and speak with you.
I abused you, home,
the same way you
abused me.
In your secret hideout
that I made my own,
I wrote all my secrets
on your skin

in invisible ink.
When I got angry at
whoever, never
you, I took it out
on your body
in my closet.
You've seen
the worst,
the best,
and the worst
of me over
and over again.
I know you
were frustrated
with me.
I know you
were only trying
to protect me
when the storms
began, when
the dishes were thrown
against your tile,
when my body
laid so close
to unconscious
on your rug.
You bared
it all; I never
once thought
about how it
made you feel.
I could apologize
now, but there is
no use. You are
four houses
in the past
and you have

new owners. No,
the same owner,
a new
resident. She turned
my room into an
office. She painted
over the green and
blue—she set
garden gnomes
in front of you.
I know that must
be what bothered
you most. It wasn't
me leaving, or me
leaving you with them,
It was the gnomes.
'The last time I saw you,
a dark night in June,
my sisters and I
did what we had to.
One last act
of destruction
in your honor;
The sound of various
gnomes shattering
against your brick,
the only way
I know how to
apologize is by
saying nothing.

TRIGGER WARNING: THE SMELL OF SWEET POTATOES

JULIA RUDLAFF

I decided to make lunch today
pulled out a box of sweet potatoes from the farmer's market

on the first cut, my amygdala shudders—

I am 12 again
putting orange colored cubes in the oven for the fourth time that
week:

no oil, no salt,
sweet and healthy,
nutrient dense and low-calorie,
delicious and diet friendly.
the ultimate oxymoron vegetable.

they smell like earth,
taste like pulling myself out of the ground

they cut like watermelon,
taste like fall breaking through summer

they hold grit like kitchen tile grout,
taste like washing the dirt off

have you ever noticed how sharp
the blade of a vegetable peeler is?

how precise it must be to shear off
just the skin?

if sweet potatoes could talk,
I wonder what they would say about the ways we butcher them
and forget.

I tried growing them once with my dad

they were left in the dirt until January,
we both learned a lesson
about tending to the things we can't see rotting

when I ate only sweet potatoes for dinner,
no one questioned my taste
until I walked out of the kitchen
in a graveyard body,
and everyone wanted to know what it meant
when I said

I just don't like other foods

I've always been prone to
putting down roots in places I can't grow
or won't remember to be picked
it feels like home,
tastes like every time I had to eat something
but,
when I pull them out of the oven now,

they aren't as sweet as I remember

I WANT (ANTROPOCENE)

MAX GILLETTE

Your hands
in the wet cement
of me.

I DON'T WANT YOUR FUTURE MOTHER

B.I.W

dear future me,
i felt bad that morning
looking at your sad,
deep-like-a-well black eyes.
I truly felt bad.
Although a lot may say I didn't because I left at the end,
'They all have to know
that that was me I was looking at—
sad, sick, unsatisfied with life
future me
when will you learn that this is you,
and that is me.
I look at you and wonder about your life
and possibilities.
You could have been so much more mother,
but he took you as a slave;
that wicked man—he either charmed you
or spelled you.
I expect nothing less,
through my eyes and your eyes as well,
a dilemma of choices.
You took this road, so why shall I
if one took this road then this road is full?
I will choose the other road—
choose to go and
not look back mother,
because you will be sad.

Your eyes will be filled with tears
that will divide this path from its flowers.
Don't look back, because if so,
you will see your past self;
you will see me
there
doing the undone.
Doing the scandalous.
Doing the preposterous
of leaving you.
Leaving you to not become you—
leaving you to avoid this you.
Leaving
me

INTENTION

MICHAEL TURLE

You cry out your vague confessions in the space between hope and
the horror
that she might make sense of your maladaptation;
that the awful secret of your love
might spill over, unbecoming from your shoulders
and relieve you of its awful weight
that she might ever want you, too.

You develop a Stockholm Syndrome for something that's sold as
solitude,
learn to sip selfhood like wine—
to get drunk on the sorrow of aloneness
disguised as the joy of being alone.

*

Every intention feels like a pretense,
condescension or begging questions
and many things that feel like begging—

but she is kind and welcomes bridges,
built towards some metaphor of love
that doesn't exist quite yet. At a minimum, I am thankful to her
for her tenure, however brief,
as a warmer kind of delusion.

*

In my daydreams she is more than that
and we share joints and smiles like thieves

across the couch of an apocryphal apartment
making tarot card tattoos kiss;

she is finally happy with her job and I'm thinking of getting a cat
and we'll name it something stupid like
"Bidet" or
"Tax Evasion"
and we'll call her "Taxi" for short and worry
about if she'll eat our cactuses,

but beyond that we have no worries—
beyond that we are ok.

COLLAGE OF A LOST PASSION

ADRIENNE WILLIS



RAPUNZEL IS NOT LOCKED IN HER CASTLE

JORDYN DAMATO

She prefers to stay indoors—
no bugs in her hair, no
men begging for her hand
(she prefers cats and women
that are prettier than her
and smell like butterscotch)
Beauty is a privilege—
She understands this better than
her mother who always tries
to force her outside; to share
her beauty with the world
and be repaid in riches and royalty
and Rolex's.

Rapunzel has had enough.

Eggs charred on a frying pan,
she brushes her teeth with
the barrel of a gun—pulls
the trigger on a stray chameleon
that's been keeping her up at night.
Knife in hand, en-route to
her scalp, blonde tinsel
falls to the ground—she is nothing
but an egghead now,

She is the before picture
of a princess transformation.
A garbage bag torn
from the trash.
she twirls in her new
gown with a grin.
“Now,”
She tells her mother,
who can’t stop crying.
“Now I am ready to go outside.”

THE FIRST NUTRITIONIST

JULIA RUDLAFF

They weighed me there,
too;
told me my body was like a car
requiring fuel, explaining energy equations like a college chemistry
class

My mother sat
examining the
food pyramids and charts;
considering calories, nutrition labels, ingredient lists

studying the facts and figures

As if she wasn't the one who taught me how to count.
As if she wasn't the one who taught me how to read.

TO 2020 AND BEYOND

AVIANA IRRER

So much visible to the naked eye, I
don't feel the moniker
fits. Rather, the world feels so full;
a closet I can't help but match and mix.

Dressed head to toe in clothing,
so different from the rest, we
stand and gather our voices here
to march up stony democratic steps.

Because you see, a virus has
invaded our bones. So much so
she's rendered lady liberty
to a full time nursing home.

Unfortunately, this virus
Is more than just the flesh.
It's woven into all of us,
And it'll take our all,
Before it can unmesh.

You see, fixing our nation
requires the most delicate hands,
and who can begin to reconcile
differing histories so grand?

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

Aagosh Chaudhary is a writer and an undergraduate student majoring in Applied Engineering with a minor in fictional filmmaking. His novel, *The Last Man*, was traditionally published in India in June 2021, and his essay submission won the OISS Essay Contest in 2020. He's an RA in Wilson Hall and enjoys pursuing photography on the side.

Abbey Behan is a senior at Michigan State University double majoring in Studio Art and Packaging. A lot of her conceptual inspiration comes from the objects that surrounded her. She recollects moments and chapters in her life by the things that she frequently interacted with a lot. She uses common objects along with the fragmented figure to capture seasons of life as she sees them. It is always objects, colors, smells, and small clips of information. The liminality of space and time is emphasized by the checkerboard pattern. Studying philosophy and chess are big parts of her life, and she has always been specifically drawn to the idea of life being a game. Each moment is only possible because of previous decisions you had to make. Just like chess, as each move you make changes your position and leads to a multitude of new choices. Her artistic process starts by thinking of a specific point in her life and recounting how the time felt, what was around her, and how she can use space and color to portray the emotional side of those experiences.

Adrienne Willis often uses memories of her childhood experiences living abroad as inspiration for her artwork. Having resided in Germany, China, and Brazil, she has been exposed to the breadth of art that lies in worldwide museums and cities. This allowed her to gain a great appreciation for the role that culture plays in art, and that art plays in culture. Through her work, Adrienne expresses her past as a global nomad in a manner that conveys how those experiences helped shape her mindset.

Amber Williams is a junior at Virginia Tech majoring in sports media and analytics with a minor in creative writing. She enjoys all forms of writing and is a sports editor with her college's newspaper, the Collegiate Times. She also works as a production assistant with the ACC network. In her free time Amber enjoys writing and reading poetry, photography, painting, and watching hockey.

Cassandra Briseno is currently a senior at Michigan State University. She is majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing and a minor in history. Her hobbies include reading, writing, working out, watching Netflix, playing videogames, and playing with her cat, Oslo. "College Covid Life" is her first published piece.

Collin Brophy is a senior at MSU majoring in English. He was born in 1991, in Fort Wayne, Indiana where he currently resides. His literary practice is inspired by authors such as Gabe Habash, Patrick Cottrel, and Smith Henderson. He will pursue a graduate degree in creative writing starting fall 2022.

Orion Emerick is a fourth-year creative writing major at BGSU, with a minor in English, originally from Michigan. They enjoy the outdoors, rainy days, spending time with their cat and dogs, and reading about all sorts of things that go bump in the night. They discovered a love of writing years ago, in the early years of high school and refused to waver from this creative path since.

Sydney Savage is an undergraduate at Michigan State University, who enjoys writing books based on her own life. She currently writes YA in the romance and chicklit genres; a lot of her novels are coming-of-age stories that tackle themes of love, friendship, and mental illness. Getting readers to feel things is her number one goal, whether it's heartbreak from failed relationships, laughter, or feeling empowered by resilient and relatable characters. When she's not writing, Sydney enjoys movies like *The Fault in Our Stars*, running outside, hanging with friends, and volunteering at The Listening Ear Crisis Center.

Aviana Irrer is currently a sophomore at MSU in the Residential College of Arts and Humanities. An artist before anything else, she is always looking for new ways to convey what cannot be spoken in order to connect with people. As a fulltime student and part-time Starbucks barista living through several “unprecedented times,” art has allowed her a place where she can vent her “unprecedented whines” so to say in the hopes of showing that no one is ever truly alone.

Anastasia Simms (she/her) is a third-year honors student at Kent State University studying English, psychology, and creative writing. She works at the KSU Writing Commons, the Wick Poetry Center, *Brainchild Magazine*, and New American Press. Her work is published by or forthcoming in *Red Cedar Review*, an anthology by Lit Cleveland, and *Outrageous Fortune Magazine*. Anastasia hopes that her writing will positively impact others just as the written word has always done for her.

Diana Dalski is a senior in computer engineering with a biomedical concentration and a minor in creative writing.

b.i.w. is the pin-name of an upcoming online poet/writer. Sole founder and creator of the Instagram page [@beauty_in_words._](#) where she built up her following, her content varies from both short and long poems in both modern and traditional style illustrated by other artists on the platform. Her poems have been published in several print and online publications, including *witchesnpink*, *Dizzie* magazine, *Twist in Time* literary Mag, and spoken word scratch night.

Fletcher Kirkwood is a butch lesbian, Detroit-area local, and current Michigan State undergraduate in geology, with aspirations in paleontology. This is his first literature publication (and with any luck, not the last). When not voluntarily selling their soul to the Natural Sciences department, Fletcher enjoys amateur photography, music, and general tomfoolery with the loveable bunch of goofballs they call their friends.

Julia Rudlaff is a third-year student at Michigan State University studying English with a creative writing concentration and

geoscience. Julia has been writing poetry since middle school and loves the process of translating experiences into art. Their writing primarily explores themes relating to the body, memories, family relationships, and sometimes, geology. Julia was awarded a CREATE! Microgrant from MSU's College of Arts and Letters in 2021, and their chapbook "Unprecedented Body" is currently showcased in the CREATE! online exhibit.

Michael Turle is an English major with a minor in creative writing at Kent State University. He serves as the managing editor of *Luna Negra*, KSU's arts and literature mag, works as a tutor at the university Writing Commons, and plays trumpet in the Golden Flashes' athletic bands. Michael's poetry has appeared previously in *Red Cedar Review*, the zine *REBIRTH* by KCSB, and elsewhere. In the future, Michael hopes to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing and poetics and intends to teach poetry at a collegiate level.

Anna Kushner is from Kalamazoo, Michigan. She is currently a senior at Michigan State University studying international relations and public relations. She writes to express the things in life that often go unsaid.

Jordyn Damato currently attends Central Michigan University where she's an accelerated masters student in the English program, with a focus in Creative Writing. Her prose and photography have appeared in *Central Review*, and she has work forthcoming in *Bullshit Lit* and *Woolgathering Review*. Jordyn has a passion for exploring the strange truths in her work, no matter how difficult that may be. She tweets unprofessionally at @jordyndamato.

Marena Benoit is an English major at Florida State University, and an avid rock climber who has scaled cliffs in Tennessee, Colorado, and elsewhere. Her favorite inspirations for poetry are her rural upbringing and love for nature. She is involved in the literary magazine at her university, so check out the last couple of issues of the *Kudzu Review* from Florida State if you would like to see more of her work!

Max Gillette is a third-year English major at Central Michigan University concentrating on creative writing. They are a member of the English honors society Sigma Tau Delta and the Chippewa Marching Band. Some of their other poems have been published in CMU's *Central Review* and Cornell's *Rainy Day Magazine*. They are currently working on an original chapbook and planning to pursue an MA in creative writing after graduation.

Renaye Greenwood grew up in Cadillac, Michigan, where she spent most of her adolescence reading and writing fiction before trying her hand at poetry as a college student. Now in her twenties, she enjoys a range of artistic endeavors, such as painting, dancing, and making music, which often consists of sixteen second loops made on GarageBand. When she isn't hanging out at her apartment watching *The Chronicles of Narnia*, you can find her around MSU campus, typing up all her newest ideas. "Flowering" is Renaye's first published work of poetry.

Taylor Kaigler was born/raised in Detroit, Michigan. There is where her fear but also curiosity of the world flourished. Growing up she felt as though her voice was too low to ever make it to another and in some ways, she was okay with that, because she became accustomed to the silence. Writing letters seemed to be the only way she could get people to pause for a moment in time to hear her out, understand her purpose, and reply to her in full sentences. Her preoccupations while shifting through life have consisted of love, spirituality, music, and connections. She finds comfort in the unknown sceneries of the world and enjoying all that this world has to offer.