



Variant Literature Journal

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Variant Literature Journal - Volume 3

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Letters and Comments

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FROM THE EDITOR

It seems befitting that, for the publishing of our third issue of Variant Literature Journal, we consider the old adage, “third time’s the charm!” I hope, as with any issue, you find yourself captivated by the intriguing and diverse perspectives that our authors seek to share with you. While it seems as if our journey with Variant has just begun, I find myself proud of how far our tiny publication has come. Variant seeks to learn in ways that would benefit our authors, and I admire the growth we have been able to achieve as we continue to nurture new, exciting projects with each passing issue.

We would like to congratulate our chapbook contest winner and editors’ pick, Jason B. Crawford and Sharon Kennedy-Nolle. These authors will receive publication and author copies for their winning manuscripts. With the success of this contest, Variant is excited to continue publishing other books of poetry and works of fiction alongside its chapbook winners and journal issues. If you are an author seeking to have their own book of works published, please contact us on our website.

A special thanks goes out to Ross White: executive director of Bull City Press, the finalist judge for our chapbook submissions, and a valuable resource and friend for people dipping their toes into the publishing industry. We would also like to thank Kalyani Bindu and Nguyen Le, who have recently joined our team as Poetry Editor and Non-Fiction Editor, respectively. These two talented woman have proved themselves valuable assets of our team, and our long list of chapbook and journal submissions would have been much less manageable without them.

Our work at Variant could not be possible without the creative talents and literary passions of our writers and readers. We thank you for all your support, and look forward to sharing more work with you in subsequent issues.

Best wishes,
Anna Grissino

Contents

Poetry

The Media Promises Radoslav Rochallyi	4
EX CATHEDRA: an ars poetica in one act Callan Foster	5
Reflux Mickie Kennedy	9
Drip Mackenzie Moore	10
Silences of a Summer Morn Ron Tobey	11
Sometimes You Have to Lose to Win Anne Marie Wells	13
Make a Wish, Darling Anna Marie Wells	14
One the ego's ability to bruise itself Sally Runions	15
How she wakes up D.S. Maolalai	16
Little Spangles of Light Aura Martin	17
Button the Flower Aura Martin	18
Belt Bristling with Horse-Pistols Aura Martin	19
Beyond Eye-Shot of the Village Aura Martin	20
The Torn Moon Aura Martin	21
The End, Yours Truly Aura Martin	22

Nonfiction

The Knife Jay Parr	23
Screw That: A Guide to Heart Surgery Erin Brody	33
Coos River Rising Suzan Andrist	36
Cusco Kristina Stocks	41

Portfolio

Stalled Flight Bailey Pitzer	46
--------------------------------------	----

Fiction

Wasteland Melissa Feinman	53
Jericho Joshua Allen	56
207 Claire Zajdel	64
The Best Medicine Kayla Aldrich	78

Comics

The Uber Gig Anthony Afairo Nze	87
Nightingale and Rose Erin Kathleen Bahl	88

Radoslav Rochallyi

The Media Promises

$$\int \frac{\textit{she just showed up} \div \frac{\textit{and}}{\textit{said}} \textit{ no one hurt you}^{-\textit{like i hurt you}^2}}{\textit{i will dancing} \leq \textit{all night} \leq \textit{with you}}$$

Callan Foster

EX CATHEDRA: an ars poetica in one act

Cast:

The Author.....A writer.

Chorus..... A rotating cast of seven people
pulled off the street at random.

One (1) Audience Member..... A Leaf Or A Stem Maybe.

Chair..... The Author, but more metal.

*Lights up: THE AUTHOR
stands center stage, hands
stuffed in jean pockets like
pigs-in-a-blanket. In the
distance, a tambourine rattles.
The audience is a sea of kelp,
shifting in and out of focus. TV
static emanates from behind
them.*

THE AUTHOR

All writing is mourning: a sloughing of the self, writing is dandruff on pages. Sunburnt skin, pink and peeling, catering to the superimposed life of every embroidered eye that glances at the ripped pages. The alphabet discarded (rum-soaked and careless) collecting like dust on a mantel.

*The CHORUS comes in from
stage left and begins to play
musical chairs around THE
AUTHOR. No one can hear
any music.*

CHORUS

It was mine until I cut it off—

THE AUTHOR

—these stories like rotting limbs festering in the hallway. Purple. Pink. Blue. Bruise-hued, and melting. The Chickpea does not know that we call it

“Garbanzo” behind closed doors, nor is it privy to the silent rub rub rub of our fingers against their yellow bodies (so fast that the skin pops off like a cork at a wedding). The freckle of Lazarus that dots my lower lip is the only thing keeping me safe.

CHORUS

Dying and reborn. Dying and reborn.

*The CHORUS begins fighting
for chairs. The member
without a chair is shunned by
the rest.*

THE AUTHOR

Like a salamander caught between two logs will tear his tail like Velcro from a shoe, I steadily suck the nectar from zinnias. Weep into closed fists. Clean my roommate’s dishes, maggoting in the sink basin. What is the point of this documentation? What is the point of this documentation? The dot of the punctuation is bigger than that question, that question which falls into my lap, scratches at my thighs, and begs for a sip of water. Begs for recognition. Begs for paper bags filled to the brim with brightly colored Easter eggs— and still I refuse.

CHORUS

Is naming an act of becoming? Is naming a dissolution?

*Six ribbons fall from the
ceiling and hang there, coiling
like snakes. Each CHORUS
member grabs one and begins
to walk around THE
AUTHOR.*

THE AUTHOR

Giving the word “chair” to the Chair will never create it in full, no matter how much fine cedar rings my voice, my pen. Is everything just a desk chair waiting to be written into existence? Desperate as Adam: clay, silt, mud, dirt, begging for the holy breath of The Author?

THE AUTHOR closes her eyes. A lemon materializes in her open palm. She tears of the peel, macerating the yellow fruit with her incisors. The CHORUS is still walking around her, chirping like wooden birds. THE AUTHOR slips off her shoes. They disappear.

ONE (1) AUDIENCE MEMBER

What the fuck are you saying?

THE AUTHOR

I'm saying that without a name I would be a monsoon, heavy and thick, rung out like a sponge over kelp beds below me. I'm saying I would be a field, cracking and spotted with brown-footed mice. I'm saying I would be as big as the equator and almost as thin. I'm saying I would be a beetle: iridescent, prodding, yellow-winged, and baited—I'm saying I would be a chair tucked neatly into my bed (your desk) waiting to be used.

The poem ends and THE AUTHOR steps forward. Sitting at the edge of the stage, she crosses her legs, one over the other. She lifts her arms into angles at her sides. The kelp begins to whistle. The CHORUS folds themselves around THE AUTHOR like petals of a tulip bud. Spinning counter clockwise, the CHORUS pulls of her clothes, ripping into the fabric.

The whistle stops and each member of the CHORUS peels away from THE AUTHOR,

*until THE AUTHOR is the
only thing left on the stage.
Her arms have become
mangled and metal. Her
mouth, gaping plastic. The
bolts in her chest blink twice.*

CHAIR

MY BODY IS THE PLASTIC WRAPPED WOOD, MY ARMS THE
MOLDED METAL THAT HUG ME INTO SHAPE. HEAT CANNOT
HURT ME. WINDS CANNOT SWEEP ME. WATER CAN ONLY TRY TO
CORRODE MY BELLY INTO RUST. THE AUTHOR IS NO LONGER:
DISSOLVED LIKE SALT IN SWEET OIL. NOW SIT.

Mickie Kennedy

Reflux

The careful moment I pull the trigger
and the buck skips a short dash, its last.

How a rack of antlers resembles the bars
of a small cage, and the warm lifeless body requires
that one empty the entrails here along the edge
of the wood, a strip of knife along the belly,
the carcass now something more appropriate in weight
to struggle to the truck.

On the way out, a clearing of buttercups
and a pair of does. Their tails twitch,
and then they retreat.
I lower the sun visor and drive as the acid
rises to the back of my throat.

Mackenzie Moore

Drip

The rituals I keep
in quiet California
are small,
carry on packable:
grinding
measuring
boiling

When I don't
dictate the day
by virtue of grams
I wobble
off into the morning
my continuity thrown
Off

I think of those
railroad kitchens
my same bare feet
married to cold tile
still grinding
measuring
boiling

I think of
Ira
of Mike
of Jia
building their word churches
back in New York

I was watered down
So I left
to spend long nights
roasting out the acrid bite
One day: I hope
silky stories that
go down smooth.

Ron Tobey

Silences of a Summer Morn

The net of city noise
lies taut on summer's voice.
Sunken freeways pulse
with dull traffic's roar,
low C-17s
wheel suspended
between battles afar
and worries sighing
on the airport floor,
power mowers weave
their looms of grass,
blowers plow leaves
beneath the trees
into loose sheaves
collecting bags take,
century freight trains
a hundred cars a mile make
screech their warning horns.
Yet in the interstices
life finds fertile
silence in which to grow,
draws memory for rain,
hope for fresh air.
A world recedes.
The morning shapes
a silent nave.
A world grows near.
Cooper's hawks whistle,
subaltern finches squeak,
racoons scamper last foraging,
coyotes yawn to bed for the day,
bees contemplate
perfumed purple bells
fallen from towers of
Jacaranda,

gnats hover over
moist grass.
New Hampshire
summers past,
the glassy stillness of Squam Lake,
no ducks or loons or motorboats
break the morn,
deer drink at water's edge
beneath high pines,
long legged bugs ride
a concert of rings.
Distant a trout
stirs the surface of the pond.

Anne Marie Wells

Sometimes You Have to Lose to Win

My
White
Flag is a
canvas pregnant
with wind and
I stand at
the
h
e
l
m
sailing far away
from here.

Anne Marie Wells

Make a Wish, Darling

Maybe shooting stars

are nothing but daisy petals

tossed to the side as

The Universe wonders

whether

or

not

she's

loved.

Sally Runions

On the ego's ability to bruise itself

eight years old she flew
a hummingbird in plastic tunnels
unhindered by flailing limbs around her,
not knowing, not caring
whether any eyes watched her

*Come here, her mother said,
This man is the master of a dojo –
He's seen the way you fly –
He thinks you'd excel under his training*

.
the invitation accepted,
determined to prove the ability
he'd seen in her,
she flung herself through the tubes once more

this time, moved faster –
this time, pushed harder –
this time, strained farther –
this time –
...this time,
clipped her wings on other limbs
spiraled into curving walls
bruised her back on cold plastic

D.S. Maolalai

How she wakes up

cold cuts
like dry wire. morning;
a cold water sponge.
and around the ocean
the coast road
hangs like a necklace,
studded with pearls
and the headlights of cars,
the lights coming on
in the second floors
of houses.

morning; the city
the blue
of nighttime dresses
piled in the corner
and stepped on
by empty shoes. the sea out,
the sand wracked, dry
and spotting with broken
beer bottles.

skin; a woman's skin. tired
getting up in the morning
with last night's make-up
cracking at the eyes like eggs
being broke in the kitchen
on the side of a cast
iron frying pan.

Aura Martin

Little Spangles of Light

We started the ghost tour in front of Sam's shop. She sold bats and sugar skulls she made from old corrugated tin. Sam wore a steampunk corset dress, and a top hat with goggles. Twenty people stood in the cobbled street. Sam pointed to a bed and breakfast with her umbrella.

Ladies and gentlemen, our first stop.

A widow built the brick hotel on Main Street. The hotel had huge dining rooms, because guests would come off the train and eat there. A ghost of a little girl was seen pacing on the upper floor.

A grey cat slinked through the crowd. Dad knelt down, and the cat booped him.

Ali never finishes a tour; Sam said.

Now this place used to be a saloon, Sam continued, pointing to a small building across the street.

After dinner at the railway hotel, you'd stroll over here. Drinks in front, brothel in back.

Yes, in the cafe that now served sandwiches and had religious slogans.

Denise and I would smoke and talk about the baby she heard crying. Folks, it was not her kid crying.

I looked around for the cat, but he was gone. We kept walking.

Aura Martin

Button the Flower

We kept walking, always behind Sam. There was the boutique that used to be a butchery.

If you look through the windows, you can still see the meat hooks suspended from the ceiling.

Only a few naked bulbs were on.

Momma's coffee shop was once a storehouse. A boy long ago was born there. He grew up to be a painter, then he was killed by a train. He was embalmed in the room he was born in. There's a buried jar of his bodily fluids in the backyard.

Whenever I garden there, I hope I don't find it while tilling.

Sam is the town bartender. She's always doing something with her hands.

We stop in front of the inn with the red roof and white pillars. This place almost burned down nine years ago. Sam and innkeeper's wife were bawling their eyes out in the street.

And there was John shouting, save the chandelier! Save the chandelier! Luckily the firemen saved it.

But the fire was so beautiful, Sam said. *In February, the shrubs were iced. The way the fire reflected on those frozen bushes - it was just spectacular.*

She beckoned and we followed. It's been raining.

Aura Martin

Belt Bristling with Horse-Pistols

It's been raining since five this morning, until now! Sam pounded the road with her umbrella. There was nobody driving on Main Street with all the shops closed.

Sam pointed at a dress boutique. *This used to be a bank, and it was once robbed by Jesse James and his gang in 1873. The place that now sold tunics for middle-aged women. Warning shots scared away their own horse, so they grabbed another and got away.*

In the French colonial centre there was a portrait of John Smith T.

He was a notorious dualist, Sam said. He made the finest weapons around. Before the duel, he would bring two guns. Invite you to choose one, because when he killed you, he wanted you to know you were killed by the best. He was rumored to have killed Lewis. Yes, that Lewis, as in Lewis and Clark.

Sam grasped her umbrella.

Did Lewis commit suicide? Unlikely. He had two shot wounds. One in his skull, and the other in his abdomen. And he was shot by a rifle. John Smith T. looked like a fine gentleman.

Sam shrugged. *You never know.*

Along the street, there were scarecrows tied to lampposts.

Aura Martin

Beyond Eye-Shot of the Village

There were scarecrows tied to lampposts, but not in front of the southern hotel. The hotel was right across the street from the pewter shop, the place that sold snuff boxes, steamship ornaments, and fleur-de-lis necklaces. There was a little creek nearby.

Well, it used to be a bigger creek, Sam said. People would come up from the Mississippi River in row boats and people would run up and collect their luggage.

In the 1850's, the hotel used to be a billiard hall, the first one west of the Mississippi River. Only men were allowed in the billiard hall.

There were two murders in the hotel. Both committed by women. The wife killed her husband in the 1870's. Bludgeoned him to death. Over a hundred years later, in the '80s, in the morning, a woman took a rifle and shot her abusive husband.

There was a chill, now that the sun has set. Sleeves rolled down over our hands. We walked on.

Aura Martin

The Torn Moon

In the '30s there was a middle-aged man who was the local terror. One day he set his eyes on a young woman in town. She refused his advances.

So with his Syphilis brain, he decided if he couldn't have her, then no one could.

There were three attempts on her life. He had a chance to kill her the first time, but he didn't want to kill her in front of her little brother. She was too far away the second time, but he saw her. The third time, he ambushed her while she was milking cows. She ran but he shot her down.

The man was caught and paraded in town. It was rumored the Sheriff sold tickets to watch his execution. *One dollar per head.*

Ste. Genevieve built a gallow to hang him, but his neck didn't snap right away. It took nineteen minutes to finally finish him off. The site is now a daycare.

Aura Martin

The End, Yours Truly

Where I come from, by thirteen, you'd be drunk, stoned, or pregnant, Sam said. I saw the signs when I came here, so I gave the kids something to do. She built the community center.

There's a guy living in town. Nice man with kids. Yeah, he was my student. I have never stayed in a place long enough to see a child grow up.

Sam pointed at the Vallé museum. White bricks and red shutters. A photographer came to town and she brought her young son. The child complained of pain. There were scratch marks all over the child's back, like somebody clawed him. Everybody in town thinks it's the ghost of the boy in the museum.

The tour ended in front of a tavern. The bar was named after a doctor. He took the place of his reckless younger brother. There was an island on the Mississippi River that was used for duels. Moreau Island. The doctor died because - well, can't you guess? He was sworn to never take a life.

Some of us lingered in the street. Some of us went inside for a drink.

Sam lit a cigarette. Well good night, folks. And she walked away.

I know by the knife in my pocket that this is when I was in high school. I'm maybe seventeen here. Pocket full of scrounged change—stolen change—I'm out on the dark sidewalks of our crime-ridden neighborhood, seriously jonesing for a cigarette, walking down to Handi Mart before they close because the Save-X is already locked up for the night. The mercury streetlights buzz out their weak little puddles of ghostly light here and there, somehow only managing to make the dark spaces in between seem darker. Under the buzz of the streetlights a coal train rumbles past a couple of blocks down to my right, competing with the screeches of the switchyard a few blocks further off the other way. Otherwise it's quiet, too cold for the bugs, too cold for people to be out on their porches with their glowing cigarettes and crumpling beer cans and boom boxes. They're inside huddled around their flickering TVs instead, behind the few lighted windows that scatter randomly among the dark windows, the vacant windows, the broken-out windows, the burned-out holes that used to be windows. Used to *been*, as they'd say around here.

You stay alert to your surroundings here, especially after dark. Every third house is vacant, likely to have someone drinking or using or squatting or fucking in it. Every seventh or eighth house is either gutted, stripped of its copper, burned out, or a weedy vacant lot. Darkness rules between the little puddles of light, and there's no shortage of assholes willing to pull some stupid shit for no reason other than that they're fucked up or cranked up or fed up or just plain given up. Hope, like streetlights, is a rare commodity around here.

There's a spot along this walk where one night I heard a noise behind me and looked around to see a car on the sidewalk a couple of houses up the hill behind me, engine off, lights off, coasting down towards me between the front yard retaining walls and the parked cars. No idea who it was or even what kind of car it was. As the four round high-beams lit up I sprinted up a driveway and into the pitch dark of someone's back yard—watching the car stop at the foot of the driveway, waiting until I heard the engine start and drive off—then felt my way through some back yards until I could come out somewhere else.

I'm passing that spot when I see the cop car down the hill at the closed service station on the corner, the one with the mechanic's shop. It's a

little past the alley that I would usually use for a shortcut, pulled into the curb cut behind a late-‘60s VW Beetle that has the hood open. Its headlights and spotlight are pointed at the Bug’s rear engine, but the blue lights aren’t spinning, and there aren’t the usual three or four cars that tend to pile in for a call around here. As I come closer I hear the radio squawk, and I can see the cop standing there looking casual, talking to a girl in the light between the cars.

She doesn’t belong here. Especially at night. She belongs in a mall somewhere. She’s got this whole Molly Ringwald presence that just doesn’t fit in with the hoods and the hookers and the crankheads and the bikers, the fucked-up desperates who live around here. She may as well be wearing a target.

Thing is, there’s a part of me that identifies with her. The part of me that’s failing out of high school but knows he’ll go to college someday, maybe even be a professor, maybe a writer. The part of me that got moved here when he was fourteen, from the educated middle-class black neighborhood in DC where he had only recently discovered the freedoms of the Metro system and the Smithsonian, and got landed in this cesspit of racism, hatred, abuse, and despair—all because his dad decided to quit his job as “The Reverend” and take up with some woman he had met at some protest or peace workshop or some shit, leaving my mom high and dry to support me and my little brother on a temp-service nurse’s wages. No way she could afford to keep us in DC on that, not beyond the end of the school year when the church wanted their house back. Nowhere else to go, we ended up here in this town because it’s where that other woman lived, and my mom thought we should be close to my dad for some who-the-fuck-knows reason. That part of me identifies with her.

The part of me that had to learn that around here no teenager is dressed without a knife, or that a teenager who doesn’t smoke or get drunk is probably a narc and definitely shouldn’t be trusted and probably needs to have his ass kicked just on principle. That part of me identifies with her.

The part of me that had to learn to keep my mom’s decrepit Beetle running, because he’s the man of the house now and no way in hell she could afford to take it to an actual mechanic. So he’s had to learn to bleed the brakes and adjust the brakes, to pull the drums and replace the worn brake shoes, to change the fouled spark plugs and plug wires and the distributor cap and rotor, to set the gap on the points and adjust the timing, to change the fuel filter and clean the air filter, to replace and adjust the fan belt, to crawl up underneath in the itchy grass of the back yard, working

totally blind, and adjust the valve-tappet clearance.

So there's the part of me that identifies with her, and there's the part of me that thinks just maybe I can offer some help. I pass my shortcut and walk down toward them.

Between their lights in the darkness and the noise of the cop car's idling engine, they don't notice me until I'm just a few feet away. The young cop jumps, startled and wary, his hand shifting toward his sidearm. The girl doesn't react as if I'm a threat. Hell, I'll take it.

"Hey guys," I say (I haven't mastered "y'all" yet). "Can I help?"

"Everything's under control," the cop says. Straight out of his training manual.

"You sure?" I say, speaking to her. "I know a little about Bugs."

"Triple-A is on its way," the cop says.

"I might be able to save you the trouble," I say to her.

"That won't be necessary," the cop says. "Move along."

"Sure," she says, speaking at the same time. "If you want to, thanks!"

The cop glances at her, then back at me, looking annoyed and a little alarmed.

The girl steps back to clear a path to the engine compartment. The cop steps the other way so that he's directly at my back when I squat down behind the engine.

"What happened?" I say, looking for anything obvious.

"It just quit," she says.

"Sputtered and quit?" I say. "Or was it more like you shut the key off?"

"More like the key, I guess? It may have sputtered once, but I drifted it down here from up on the next block."

"Got gas?" I say. We're poor around here. Running out of gas is a common breakdown.

"Plenty of gas," she says. I can see that there's gas in the clear plastic fuel filter, and the fan belt's intact, and it's tight enough, and everything turns okay when I twist on the alternator pulley. There's no smell of leaking gas—well, not beyond the normal smell of any old Beetle. The carburetor cable's intact and the linkage turns like it's supposed to. None of the obvious wires seems to have fallen off.

"Was it acting up at all before this?" I ask.

"No. It was running just fine."

"Ever done this before?" I ask. "Just quit like this?"

“Not since I’ve had it,” she says.

“How long you had it?”

“A couple of years.”

Must be nice to be a teenager with her own convertible Beetle.

“The hell you doing ‘round here at night anyway?” Shit. There I go.

“Just off work down at General Sales,” she says, without missing a beat.

“Ah,” I say. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” she says, her voice flat. I’m not totally sure she means it. General Sales is a cleaning-supply wholesaler just over the hill, down in the industrial zone along the tracks.

Flummoxed, I start tugging on wires. The ignition wire to the coil is secure. The fat spark-plug wires are all secure on top of the distributor, and down at the other end where they go through their separate holes in the sheet metal to the spark plugs. They’re even the good orange wires that my mom couldn’t afford. The coil wire’s secure in the distributor. Then I pull on the end where it goes up into the coil and I feel movement.

“Aha...”

“Did you find it?” she says, sounding excited.

“Well, we won’t know until it starts,” I say. “But maybe.”

I tug a little harder on the wire and it pops loose, moisture seal and all. Not sure why Volkswagen thought it was a good idea to mount the coil with all the wires coming down out of the bottom where gravity can work ‘em loose, but I ain’t the engineer. Nothing I can do but deal with it.

I jam the wire back up into place, but it doesn’t snug up. I can feel it grinding, swimming, as I wriggle the wire.

“Yep,” I say. “I think this is your problem.”

“So I need a new one?” she says.

“I hope not.” I pull the wire back out, looking for pitting on the C-shaped copper barrel connector. The copper’s not pitted, so it hasn’t been arcing a lot. When the same thing happened to Mom’s bug I just spread that C-shape open a little with a screwdriver and it never happened again. I owe that trick to Mom’s spiral-bound copy of *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive*, which may have been the best investment she ever made. The other part of its title is even better: *A Step-by-Step Guide for the Compleat Idiot*. That’s me. The compleat idiot.

I reach into my jeans pocket and I pull out the knife in question. This is the crappy old knife I had after my brother stole my favorite Buck

knife. This one's an old, rusty folding knife with a fake mother-of-pearl handle. It looks like a switchblade, but it's not. Just a lock blade, with a weird old pin-style locking mechanism. The blade is covered in rust, and maybe half an inch of the tip is broken off. It's an old piece of shit, but it will serve for a screwdriver here. I open the knife, insert the back of the blade into the gap on the C-clip, and twist it back and forth to spread the gap out a little, so the clip fits more tightly into the coil. When I reattach the wire it goes in with some resistance, and feels solid, like it should.

"Okay," I say, looking up at her. "Let's see if it'll start for us."

"This is so exciting!" she says, trotting around the driver's side of the car.

I stand up and step back, folding the knife and slipping it back into my pocket, glancing at the cop's oddly stoic expression.

"Ready?" she says from behind the wheel.

"Yeah," I say. "Give it a shot!"

The starter growls over a couple of times and the engine splutters to life, with the old Beetle's characteristic puff of blue smoke and the whistling exhaust. She gives a little victory whoop from inside as the pulleys spin and the fan belt vibrates, and I feel the momentary glow of a successful troubleshoot as I close the flimsy louvered hood.

She is back around behind the car, with her leather purse in her hand.

"What do I owe you?" she says over the noise of the two engines.

"Owe me?" I say. "What?"

"Well you did just fix my car," she says. "What do I owe you?"

"Um..." I say. "Got a cigarette?"

"Sorry," she says. "I don't smoke."

"Ah well, then I guess we're even."

"What?!" she says. "No. Are you *sure* about that?"

If I asked for it, she'd probably give me enough to buy a carton.

"Nah," I say. "Not gonna take your money."

"Well then thank you," she says, holding her hand out.

I shake her hand. "You're welcome."

She turns to the cop, "Can you radio in and cancel the Triple-A?"

"Yes ma'am," he says.

She starts to turn toward the car, then swivels back, meeting my eye and gesturing at her purse. "You're sure?" she says.

"I'm sure," I say. "Thank you."

"Thank you!" she says. Then, turning toward the cop, "Thank you

both!”

She walks back around the car just as the stoplight for 13th turns yellow, and she manages to get her purse behind her seat, get buckled in, get the brake off, get the car in gear, pull out of the parking lot, and get through the intersection before her green light changes.

I listen to the engine as she drives off toward the lights of downtown. It sounds like a healthy Beetle—inasmuch as anything designed after a 1930s light-aircraft engine can sound healthy. After a couple of blocks she disappears down the slope, and the sound of her engine fades beneath the sound of the idling police car.

“Welp,” I say to the cop with a wave. “Have a good night.”

I’ve already turned and taken a couple of steps toward Handi Mart when he speaks.

“Stop Right There.”

My gut clenches. I won’t actually be diagnosed with the anxiety disorder for another couple of decades, but at this point I have spent my whole life with a domineering father, one who could turn evil at the drop of a hat. By the time I stop and turn around my bowels are already cramping.

“Sir?” I say. Fucking voice shaking. An octave too high.

“Come back here,” he says. His hand is resting on his sidearm.

I close the ten or fifteen feet between us, watching his face, keeping my hands visible.

“Let me see that knife,” he says.

I pull the folded knife out of my pocket and hand it to him, hinged end toward me.

He turns it over in his hands. “This is an illegal switchblade,” he says.

“No sir,” I say. “It’s just an old lock blade.”

He swings the rusty blade until it locks open, then he fiddles around with it, trying to figure out how to unlock it.

Not thinking, I reach out. “Here, let me...”

He recoils, snatching the open knife away from my hand.

“Sorry,” I say, pulling my hand back.

He looks at the open knife, then gives me that suspicious-cop glare.

“Let’s see some I.D.,” he says.

He watches my hand carefully as I reach for my wallet, so I pull it out between my thumb and one finger, holding the other fingers open, if a bit shaky, so he can see that there’s nothing else in my hand. I slip out my

learner's permit and hand it to him.

Oh wait. Learner's permit. I'm not seventeen here, I'm still sixteen. By the time I'm seventeen I'll have my license.

He looks at the unlaminated card with its typewritten information and no photo.

"Got anything else?" he says.

I pull out my high-school ID, basically a business card with a blank where they had us write our own names.

He looks at the card, then glares back up at me. "No photo I.D.?"

I have to pee. "No sir."

He continues to glare at me.

"I'm sorry sir, that's all they give us."

He switches the knife and both I.D. cards into his left hand and reaches into his pocket for his flip book and pen. I wait as he flips to a blank page and starts writing the information into his book.

"Is this address correct?" he says.

"Yes sir."

He writes into his pad. Then, "Date of birth?"

It's right there on the learner's permit, but I rattle it off with well-rehearsed speed because I have this feeling he's testing me.

He nods and writes in his pad for a second. "Social Security?"

It's also on the card. It's my license number. But I rattle it off as well.

"Phone number?"

I give him our seven-digit phone number. He writes it down.

"Now," he says, glaring directly at me again. "If I call this number your parents are going to answer?"

"Uh, no sir," I say. "It's just my mom, and she works second shift." He glares at me.

"My roommate might answer," I say, hesitantly.

"Your roommate," he says.

"Yes sir," I say.

He glares at me.

"Well, our boarder—um, housemate," I say. "He—uh—rents a room from us."

The cop continues to eye me suspiciously. Later I'll wonder if it's some kind of interrogation technique.

"Wait here," he says.

I stand in the lights of the police car, spotlight still pointed at my

crotch, while he walks around and sits down in his driver's seat. He picks up the radio mic and mumbles into it. I can almost make out the radio side of the conversation, mumbling some coded numbers and then a "Stand by."

I stand there with visions of mugshots and fingerprints playing out in my head. Thinking about having to call my mom after she gets home around midnight. Thinking about spending the night out at Bonsack (every teenager around here knows where juvie is), because ain't no way she could get bail money before tomorrow. If she could get it at all.

The stoplight cycles to itself, arbitrarily stopping the occasional car that comes past. At one point three cars come by all together. Each of the drivers looks over at us—at me—standing there in my torn jeans, my mismatched denim jacket, stringy long hair blowing around in the chilly breeze and catching in the fake fleece of my jacket collar. Looking every part the local hoodlum they would expect to be detained by the police in this neighborhood. Hands jammed in my pockets, starting to shiver because I was dressed for walking, not for standing around, and I was planning to be back home by now. And I really need to pee. And I could seriously use a fucking smoke. A relief valve pops off down at the little tar and asphalt plant by the tracks. Its sudden gurgling "PSSSH!" isn't so startling from three blocks away next to an idling engine, but when it popped off one night when I was right next to it walking our dog, I just about pissed my pants. Poor dog shook for an hour.

The cop sits in his driver's seat, fiddling with the knife in his task light. He eventually figures out how to unlock it, and folds it shut.

Another coal train whistles its discordant air horns down where the tracks cut off the corner of 18th and Cleveland, right behind the tar plant and General Sales where the girl in the bug works. I listen to its engines rumble around the curve of the river, almost making a semicircle around where I'm standing. Waiting. For a while I can hear the engines from one direction and the scritchng wheels from all the way around to the opposite direction.

The mumbling radio finally says something that catches his attention. He mumbles a response into the mic and gets back up out of the car.

He silently hands me my learner's permit and high school I.D. I slip them into the empty cigarette pocket on my jacket. The wallet can wait.

He doesn't hand me the knife. He stands there holding it, looking at it.

I wait.

“What were you planning on doing with this knife?” he says.

Umm...doing?

“I dunno,” I say. “Maybe fix a girl’s car?”

He glares up at me. “You getting smart with me, boy?”

“No sir,” I say. “It’s just—”

He waits. “Just what?”

“It’s—just a knife, sir,” I say. “Just a—tool.”

It’s just part of the uniform in this neighborhood. Just what every teenager is expected to possess. Just one little accessory that says no I don’t think I’m better than you. No I’m not a narc. No I’m not going to rat you out to The Man. And yes, I will defend myself with a sharp object if you make it necessary.

Decades later, when I’ve tried to write this half a dozen times, I’ll think to ask him if he wanders around this neighborhood at night without his sidearm.

“Well,” he says. “I know who you are and I know where you live, and I know you’ve got this. So I’d better not hear about any trouble.”

He hands me the folded knife.

“There won’t be any trouble, sir,” I say, dropping it back into my pocket.

“If there is, you’re the first person I’m looking for,” he says.

It will also be decades before I think to mention that *everyone* in this neighborhood has a pocket knife. The teenage boys, the teenage girls, the grade-school kids, the dealers, the thieves, the bikers, the dads, the moms, the church goers—the little old grannies—everyone.

He doesn’t dismiss me. I wait. I’m not turning my back on an agitated cop.

“May I go now?” I finally ask.

He makes me wait a few more seconds. Then says, “Get out of here.”

I turn and start toward Handi Mart, hoping they haven’t closed yet, but within a few steps I can see that they’ve already turned their lights off. I’ll have to walk another mile, over the tracks and the river, to the all-night Citgo that’s in a safer neighborhood, that’s not certain to get robbed if it stays open, that doesn’t need the metal security grating over the windows and the sawed-off twelve-gauge under the counter. The one that charges fifteen cents more than I have in my pocket for a pack of smokes.

The cop drives past me in the same direction, well over the speed

limit, his taillights disappearing around the curve and onto the bridge before I can walk the length of one parking lot. It'll take me almost half an hour to walk to that Citgo. He'll be there in three minutes.

I'm walking back out from the dumpster behind the darkened Handi Mart, my bladder feeling a little better, when I see the tow truck coming toward me. It's moving slowly, the driver consulting a clipboard and peering ahead, scanning the deserted lots, hand on top of the wheel with a delicious-looking cigarette glowing between his knuckles. As he passes I see the oval AAA emblem on the truck's side, its reflective background glowing in the ghostly streetlights.

Screw That: A Guide to Heart Surgery

1. Tell your fiancée you're experiencing a sharp pain in your chest. She'll tell you to go to the hospital, but you'll decide that your heart issues aren't as important as getting enough sleep because sleeping for eight hours is one of the many rules of health you follow.
2. Once you finally fall asleep, have your fiancée call you to tell you that after research, she concluded that you've had a heart attack caused by angina. Reluctantly get ready to go to the hospital, grumbling about how much your fiancée cares about you by researching your symptoms and worrying about you while she's 40+ miles away. Maybe "til death do us part" isn't what you really wanted.
3. Drive yourself to the hospital because why rely on an ambulance with medical professionals with years of training who will help you? Plus you can get that one last cigarette in because smoking doesn't directly link to heart issues.
4. When you're placed in the cardiac unit, call your fiancée and force her to buy you Burger King despite checking in for angina. Make sure she grabs a Burger King crown so the hospital knows you're the King of Unhealthy Diets.
5. When a nurse asks, "Do you have any questions?", reply with, "Yes. Can I smoke?"
6. Your fiancée will leave when it's late, leaving you time to think of why you're in the hospital, before falling asleep to the soothing sound of monitors and alarms going off every five minutes.
7. When you wake up early in the morning and see that you're blessed with another day, stroll through the corridors and go to the first floor. Walk past the front desk to go outside and enjoy the cool morning in your hospital gown with a cigarette in your mouth.
8. Go back upstairs and have a nurse ask why you were disconnected from your heart monitor. Proudly show her your pack of cigarettes and strut back to your room, knowing that nothing will stop you from being the responsible man you are.
9. Later that day, have doctors attempt to put stents in your arm and send you home. Happily get wheeled into the surgery room because after this, you won't have to deal with any of these medical idiots and their "healthy" ways of living anymore.

10. By now, doctors will realize that stents won't work. After they insert a camera into your bloodstream, receive news that six out of nine major arteries are clogged, which means a sextuple bypass surgery needs to be done ASAP.
11. Have Nurse John go into too deep a detail about the procedure. Apparently getting your chest split open and carving through your rib cage is a normal thing to him.
12. Shake your head, say, "I'm not convinced," then discharge yourself from the hospital. Besides, the worst that could happen is that you drop dead without warning.
13. At home, call your friends to get their opinion on the surgery. One friend will tell you that their father went without surgery and lived for seven more years. Seven more years!
14. Happily tell your fiancée the wonderful news and question why she's staring at you with her mouth hanging open.
15. Now you have a two-week period of self-reflection before your surgery. Be sure to fill this time with disobeying all of the doctor's orders: no smoking, no drinking, and no excessive labor. It's not like a culmination of these three things will trigger another heart attack.
16. When two weeks are up, have the surgery and wake up to the most painful things you've ever experienced. Getting a claw hammer stuck in your head both times wasn't this bad.
17. After three days, you'll go home. At home, try to follow the surgeon's orders. There's no way you'll ever want to experience that again.
18. Vow the following: I'll never take my life for granted again. I'll try to be patient with myself and to take it one day at a time. I'll now try to see the best in people and to be a better person. I'll do my best to start a healthy diet and to take better care of my body. I was granted a second chance, and I will use it wisely. With all this in mind, I hope to never find myself in the hospital again.
19. Go back to the hospital because you're experiencing an abnormal heartbeat. It was probably because it's a common thing that happens after open heart surgery and not because you were doing excessive labor, drinking alcohol, eating fatty and sugary foods in large amounts, deciding to skip doctor appointments and rehab, lifting objects heavier than 20 pounds, accidentally tearing out your stitches, driving weeks before your doctor suggests you should, or letting your anger get the best of you. Besides, you take your medicines, so why should any of this apply to you?

20. Have your daughter visit you after school. After talking for a bit, the urge to smoke will wash over you, however you now realize that they monitor your heart, so leaving the room is nearly impossible. Throw your car keys at your daughter and tell her where you parked and to go into the middle compartment of the car. Inside, she'll find a pack of cigarettes, and she's to smuggle them into your room where you can happily puff away, not giving a damn.

Suzan Andrist

Coos River Rising

That summer Mom and I had gathered buckets of blackberries from the field next door and Whinny, the horse that called the field home, would gently eat out of our hands, and follow us around. Our trailer was between the large field and the Coos River. I had spent most of my summer on its bank. When I wasn't there I was up on the Sixes River at my Dad's gold claim. It was warmer up there and I got to keep all the gold I could find, but I never found much. Still I liked being on the river, any river, and either was fine with me.

Winter came and the rain hadn't stopped in days. With nothing better to do, Mom and Dad had been fighting a lot. Although it was more often than usual, it wasn't quite as enthusiastic, nothing had been broken and Mom didn't appear to have any serious bruising. The weather was wearing them down. They had been giving up and going to bed early enough for me to get some sleep before school.

The next day I slogged my way home from the bus down the muddy gravel road. Luckily I was wearing rubber boots, my favorite winter shoe. I loved walking in puddles, feeling the coldness of the water while my feet stayed dry, it was a special magic. Puddles were deceptive. More than once I had stepped in too deep. The cold water found its way around my barrier spell and flooded over the top of my boot leaving my foot soaked. Today did not look like a good day to risk it. The puddles were huge and dark, muddy brown. I chose my path carefully and arrived at our trailer relatively dry. The river roared by with such authority that it compelled me to stop and listen.

It had been expanding closer to the trailer every day this week, and I wondered how long the trailer would float if we were suddenly carried away in the night. Probably not long given the shape the trailer was in. There were places it was safest not to step and the mushrooms growing out of my bedroom carpet attested to the state of the roof. I hesitated at the door taking a long look around at my waterlogged world. I took a deep breath and went inside. It was warm, and something smelled good.

"Hi, I'm home," I said to the emptiness.

"How was your day Boo?" Mom called from the kitchen.

Mom and Dad both called me Boo, it was short for Boo-Boo, after the little cartoon bear that was Yogi Bear's sidekick. Dad said we were just

like Yogi and Boo-Boo. Yogi always had some scheme going on usually involving hassling the ranger, avoiding work, and stealing picnic baskets. Boo-Boo was the voice of reason and he was known for saying, "I don't think that's a good idea Yogi." Of course this advice was never followed and Yogi always managed to get himself in trouble. It made for a funny cartoon, but our live version lacked much of the humor.

"Fine," I said. I threw down my backpack and stepped into the kitchen.

"Whatcha makin'?"

"Ham and beans and cornbread, but we'll have to wait for your dad. He should be home about an hour after sunset."

"Where is he?"

"Billy picked him up. They're at the Coyote."

"Oh," I said with a frown.

It didn't really seem fair that I had to go to school when Dad got to be at the gold claim all day. The Crystal Coyote was my dad's favorite claim, he said we were sitting on the motherlode and I wanted to be there when they found it. Plus I liked my dad's mining partner, Billy, even though he did have a glass eye that he would occasionally pop out and chase me with. But he also told me funny stories and he was one of the only people my dad would listen to when he was angry. I think it was Billy's direct logic that caught him off guard. Dad was smart enough to know that the only excuses for his rage sounded crazy, and Billy would call him on it, so he would usually calm down and just cuss under his breath and throw things around. It probably didn't hurt that even though my dad was 6'4, Billy outweighed him by at least fifty pounds.

"Don't worry Boo," Mom said, "They are just doing some highbanking. They won't be finding the vein with the river this high."

That cheered me up. *Of course*, I thought, *the Sixes must be about the same as here*. I had been picturing it as I had last seen it, but that was last month before the rain had really set in.

"Where's Sunshine?" I asked.

"He went out this morning, I haven't heard him come back." Mom stirred the cornmeal into the mixing bowl.

"I'm going to go look for him," I told her.

"Ok, wear your coat."

I put on my coat and pulled my boots back on. The roar of the river met me at the door. I walked along the edge of the field, Whinny wandered over to see what I was doing.

“Hi Whinny,” I said reaching up to pet her soft nose. I grabbed a handful of grass and held it up for her. She accepted it politely even though it was the same grass that was growing on her side of the fence.

“I will see if Mom will give me a carrot after I find Sunny.” I told her. I continued along the fence calling out “Sunny” every so often. Whinny kept pace with me. Finally an orange cat burst out of the blackberry bushes at the far end of the field heading straight for me.

“There you are Sunshine.”

He looked small, damp, and rather proud of himself.

“What have you been up to?” I asked him. He purred as I bent down and scooped him up.

“C’mon let’s go inside, Dad’s on his way home.” I turned to Whinny, “I will be back soon,” I told her.

A bit later we heard Billy’s old pickup rattle up the driveway. Mom met them at the door. They were wet and dirty.

“Take your boots off boys,” Mom told them.

“Hey foxy, whatcha cookin’?” Billy asked her with a wink.

“I’ve got a pot of ham and beans going, and I’m just about to throw the cornbread in. There’s plenty if you want to stay.”

“Nah, I better get on home or May will have my hide.”

“Did you guys find anything today?” I asked them.

“Nothing to speak of,” Billy said smiling at me.

“No nothin’ yet, but we’re close Boo, I can smell the gold,” Dad said.

He turned to Billy.

“Same time tomorrow partner? I would really like to get down to bedrock by the end of the week.”

“Sure thing. Goodnight ladies.” Billy said. He took off his weathered Stetson hat with a flourish and bowed slightly. I giggled.

“Have a good one Bill, tell May I said hi,” Mom said.

“Tell her hi for me too,” I said.

“Will do, will do. See ya in the morning.”

Dad followed him to the door.

“Get some rest man, we’ll hit it hard tomorrow,” he yelled after him.

Dad turned from the door and sank heavily down on the couch.

“Hop up and bring me a beer Boo,” he said reaching for the TV remote.

That night I lay listening to the sound of the rain. It was coming

down so hard that the rage of the river was reduced to background noise. But it couldn't drown out the sound of screaming coming from the other room, eventually they fell quiet and I was left alone with the rain. The rain and a faint scratching noise, maybe a tree branch. I drifted to sleep. I woke up a couple of hours later to the same sounds, only the scratching seemed to be coming from inside the wall. I lay there listening as the rustling seemed to rise in volume and intensity. The rain hadn't slowed but the wind had died down, and still the sounds grew louder. Parental involvement was necessary and I went to wake them.

"Mom, there's a really strange noise in my room."

"It's just the storm, go back to bed Hon."

I found my way back to bed. Nothing had changed, but eventually I fell back asleep.

"Get up Boo," Mom said urgently.

I blinked in the bright light.

"Is it morning?" I felt like I had only been asleep a few minutes.

"No, but we have to go, get dressed."

I got up and began putting my clothes on. Mom was hastily throwing my stuff into grocery bags.

"Here's your coat."

She put it on me and zipped my two favorite stuffed animals up inside. She handed me a bag.

"Grab anything you don't want left behind," she said.

I took the bag and put a few more of my stuffed animals in it. I grabbed my favorite books and the small porcelain unicorn family my aunt had given me. Mom rounded up the bags she had filled and gently pushed me out of the room.

"I've got most everything loaded up," Dad bellowed from their bedroom.

"Get Sunny and go wait in the car Boo," Mom said.

I peeked behind the couch in his favorite hiding spot and two wide eyes stared back at me. I reached in and grabbed him. Dad burst out of the bedroom.

"They've chewed through the wall, we have to go now!"

I rushed to the door with Sunny in my arms. Mom and Dad frantically grabbed a few last things as the rats began to flood in from the back room.

I crammed into the car next to the majority of our belongings. Sunny quickly ran around inspecting things, then returned to settle on my lap. Dad fired up the car and we started down the driveway. Mom and Dad

were talking excitedly.

“They must’ve been trying to escape the flooding,” Dad said.

Mom agreed. I snuggled Sunny up close to me. *Where will we live now?* I wondered as the bumpy road lulled me to sleep.

Cusco

The taxi wobbles over the cobblestone and nearly clips an alpaca. The last three days have been spent trying not to puke—but I don't know if it's altitude sickness or the near constant stream of Pisco sours that have been stuck in my hand at Loki, the city's most recommended hostel. "A Backpacker's Dream", the party destination for those headed to or away from Machu Picchu, is booked full: swarms of drunk Australian men, crunchy granola types, and exhausted travelers from all over the world—Northface jackets and comfortable pants, relaxed as they lay in hammocks.

Loki's bar is massive, and throughout the blurry nights are chants of "LOKI LOKI LOKI, OI. OI. OI."

I'm one of the youngest people here. The autonomy has quickly begun to wear off and I cringe at the memory of a sozzled Aussie touching the small of my back the night before—I've got a boyfriend back home, a gap-toothed bassist who has a tendency to correct the pronunciation of band names who I haven't spoken to in weeks. I won't be surprised or disappointed when it doesn't work out.

I press my face against the window of the cab as the colors of Peru whiz by- pinks, greens, yellows, blues, browns. Elegant Baroque architecture slotted against ancient stone. The oldest city in the Americas. The finely woven textiles and mountains blur together.

*

I woke up bedraggled and still a little drunk. *Water*: Twelve other backpackers snore gently, and I try not to swear as I stub my toe on the solid oak of the bottom bunk. I sneak out to the shared lavatory, but the view catches my eye. Marmalade orange roofs cascade the landscape and violet blue skies collapse into jagged peaks. *Viva el Peru Glorioso* is carved into the hillside. Cirrostratus frame the message. *Long live glorious Peru*. I grab the window's ledge. The back of my neck tickles and I have no idea how long I stand here for, until I get a tap on my shoulder. Kailey.

*

We met the day before. She's from BC but works in Alberta, which I

think is kismet. She has a youthful face and thin eyebrows, with endearing freckles and a wicked sense of humor.

“Let’s explore.” She says to me, after ten minutes of chatting.

We chase one another down the steep, narrow paths. We peek inside a restaurant that has *Chu* (guinea pig) listed on the menu. We stop at a fruit stand. The vendor is an elderly woman wrapped in a shawl. She hands us the bananas, wider than they are long, nods her head, wide brim of her hat tipping. Kailey and I knock the bananas like swords and peel to reveal the flesh, some parts deeply bruised. I marvel at the sweet yet mealy consistency as we walk deeper into the heart of Cusco.

We make it down the hill to the Plaza de Armas, once the “Great Inca Square”. Colonial churches dot the square, but it is the sandstone Cusco Cathedral we find ourselves in front of. I feel the petals of an elongated bell-shaped flower that dangles above us. Its orange pollen stains my fingers.

“Did you know the Spanish built this in 1654 with the hopes of removing Incan religious beliefs?” Kailey’s nose is deep in her *Lonely Planet* book. I rest my head on her shoulder. There are children in ponchos carrying carvings, tourists with fanny packs and expensive looking cameras, and Peruvian mothers with babies on their backs, wrapped in patterns of abstract geometric designs. A little girl walks up to us with a ladder of wares, one that is nearly her height.

“Earring? *Doce sol*.” She smiles. She’s missing one of her front teeth. She isn’t much older than my youngest sister. I look at the silver earrings glinting in the sunlight and reach for my wallet.

We walk through a market and touch the soft wool alpaca sweaters. We decline vendors as they approach us with trinkets. I pick up a scarf for my mom and tell Kailey a little about my family.

“My mom is so worried. She thinks I’m going to get stolen or something. It’s kind of sweet but she drives me crazy.”

Kailey nods, and I ask her, “What about your family? Do you want to stop anywhere for them?”

“No. I really don’t.”

I don’t press any further.

As the sun sets the outdoor lights flicker, and the plaza dazzles us with an orange glow. There is a dance in the square, a folkloric *huayno*. Kailey and I sway to the guitar, mandolins, *charangos* (lutes), violins, and *quenás* (flutes). A man invites Kailey to dance. He says it’s called *wayñukuy*. He vigorously stamps his feet and swings Kailey back and forth

to the music.

It's getting dark and we race up the incomparably steep *avenida de la raza* for a drink at our hostel. I suck in the thin air and disequilibrium sets in. I plead with Kailey to slow down as I catch my breath but instead, she spins me around in a flourish and whistles an off-tune lute impression. We are laughing as the last bits of sun fade on the city.

We pick up a 4L of wine that by the end of the night will have stained our teeth a pinkish red, calcified by a pack of cigarettes. In Loki's hallway we briefly chat with the troglodyte Australian crew, all muscles and tight tank tops who surely haven't been sober since they departed Sydney's airport.

After we poke fun at the rhythmic party chants, the interchangeable quality that each of these men have. Boys, really.

But I am not very different from them, more mature. I'm nineteen. I'm alone. As we lay in the hostel's courtyard, head and feet in the grass, we pass cigarettes and accidentally ash on our chests. Kailey is twenty-five, she has a career. I find myself admiring her intelligence and ease of self.

"I have no idea what I am doing," I say.

"Nobody does."

"You do."

Kailey ignores this and says, "The Inca were one of the few cultures that found their constellations in the absence of stars. See there, the dark blotches in the milky way? They would have thought those were the animals, and the milky way was a river. What does that one look like to you?" She covers one of my eyes and points to a dark space in the constellation.

"A ferret." I say, and we both cackle as the wine muddles our brains.

I lightly squeeze her arm and stumble into the bar to get a couple waters. When I return, Kailey is sitting on a windowsill in a quiet corner outside the bar. One leg is extended on the ground, the other pressed against her chest. She's crying. I sit beside her, placing the water at our feet. The sill is hard and cold.

There are hard fluorescent lights outside the bar. Her face is swollen.

"What's wrong?"

She doesn't say anything for a long time. I watch the condensation trickle on the water glasses.

"I feel guilty for even being here. For enjoying myself."

I'm about to interrupt. Offer a cliché like, "you deserve to be happy" but Kailey continues.

"We didn't have heat in our house. We didn't have running water. All I can remember about being a kid is being cold all the time. My mom drank constantly after my dad died."

She studies the empty wine glass beside her, shakes her head.

"I found him. I found him after he killed himself." She pulls her knees against her chest.

I hand her the glass of water, and stumble back.

"I'm so sorry. That is so unfair. I'm really sorry, I – fuck."

At this, she snuffles and lets out a bitter laugh.

"Yeah. Fuck."

"I wish I knew what to say."

"Yeah. Anyway." She stands up and chugs the glass of water.

"We should keep talking."

"Nah. Let's get *shots*."

Before I can say anything, she is in the bar. I close my eyes and count the purple impressions left behind from looking at the fluorescent lights.

By the time I make it inside, Kailey already has a tray of shots.

"Courtesy of our friends over there." She lifts her shot above her head and grins flirtatiously at the Australians in their neon shorts. One grins back and waves us over. She downs another shot and I follow suit: one, two.

"Come on." She pulls my hand. The Aussies slap the table and sing.

"Here's to Ryan, he's true blue

He's a piss pot through and through

He's a bastard so they say

Tried to go to heaven but he went the other way

He went:

Down! Down! Down! Down!"

Ryan burps emphatically as he slams the empty pint on the table, wipes his mouth. He grabs a beer out of his friends' hand and plunks it in front of me.

"IT'S THE CANADIANS TURN."

I tilt the beer and the hands clap the table. *She's a piss pot through and through,,,*

I dance with Sam. He's from the Gold Coast. He's got curly blonde hair and tells me I am just his type and I don't stop him when he dances

close and I feel the hardening in his shorts.

The lights are too bright, and Kailey and I alternate between shots, dancing, cigarette breaks, and time outside in the grass. We're sidled up beside one another and pass the box of wine to new friends. They disperse and again it's her and I, the box of wine. She puts her arm around me. I want to tell her I'm happy we met, but instead we sit quietly.

Eventually we stand, and she says,

"You know, I've never told anyone that before."

We stay up until four a.m. I don't remember crawling into bed. This is not the only detail I can't recall.

I've made Kailey a promise.

*

Kailey bumps me with her hip.

"You ready to go bungee jumping?" She asks.

*

Bailey Pitzer

Stalled Flight

Artist Statement

Stalled Flight includes two large scale multimedia drawings, a woodfired ceramic sculpture, and a series of five plates. All of these works focus on the Great Blue Heron and symbology related to unexpected change leading to self reliance.

When I first started this series, I did not expect that it would become such a powerful and ongoing body of work. I couldn't stop obsessing over the Great Blue Heron, and as a result, I fixated on animal mythology in order to understand what this bird signified. According to Native American tradition, the Great Blue Heron is a symbol of progress and evolution, and is said to bring messages of self-determination and self-reliance. Snakes are historically representative of creative life forces, healing and change. That mythology struck a chord with me, so I stuck with this obsession and eventually found flight through growth and enjoyment in creating works inspired by these creatures. The battle between a Great Blue Heron and a snake is seen often in nature, and to me, that can be read as a metaphor about self-reliance battling with change.

My drawings have been created using a free form multimedia approach with charcoal, pastel, gesso, ink and acrylic paint. The large scale of these drawings allows me to use my whole body to create a line rather than just my wrist and hand, which is something that I have found to be really powerful and expressive. According to Andrew Graham-Dixon, "The edge in modern painting is charged with neurosis; it meets a world that no longer confirms it but which is hostile or at best indifferent." Inspired by this, I've taken on an indifferent attitude when making my drawings in order to access that part of my brain, to be free and open to the possibilities. My series of ceramic plates built using the slab process are the part of a much more controlled art making process.

In these two distinctly different approaches to art, the freeform drawings and the more controlled ceramic works, you're able to see the two opposing ways that I work. These two diametrically opposed ways of working also reflect my own personality, which has both spontaneity and control.



Interview with the Artist

In this series you work with multiple mediums. I was wondering if one form was able to achieve something the other can't, and how this played a role in your creative process?

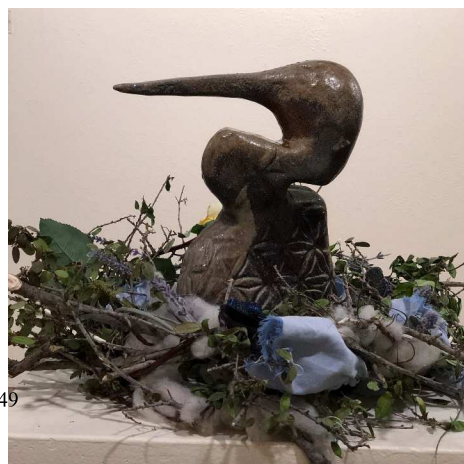
When I draw, I find that I'm able to be much more free than when I work with clay. It's absolutely a personal thing, but I can allow myself to make mistakes more easily and be more expressive and silly with my mark making when I'm working with 2D materials. Clay tends to draw out a more serious side of me as an artist, and I take more time and care to avoid mistakes. Learning how to work with both of them at the same time with such focus and on a time crunch absolutely played a role in my creative process by forcing me to think outside the box. I was shown that I needed to become more fluid and less resistant to change, a lesson that was becoming somewhat repetitive, and thus, a theme for my artwork.

I was immediately captivated by the heron depicted in your art. Can you tell us how you first engaged with this bird as a subject?

As cliché as it sounds, the heron came to me in a dream. I was having constant dreams about this bird, it would be perched close to me in a scene, or I'd see them flying around. After a while, I found that we have one Blue Heron that lives on the lake here in town, and he would always show up on my walks. In the past, I had never really cared much for birds, so this recurring character in my dreams and eventually in my reality, wasn't something I was initially excited about. After it became something I couldn't ignore and had eventually started influencing my art, I looked into the symbology of herons and what this might mean for me. After doing some research, I saw that herons often symbolize independence, stillness and tranquility. After realizing that this bird was sent as a reminder for me to be patient with myself, still and present so that I can grow to be a strong, independent individual, despite the constant chaos or change that I may be experiencing.

What did you find most difficult about this project?

I struggled a lot with finding balance between time constraints for the show and work and other life expectations. It was a new challenge for



me, but it was something I feel happy about in the end. I think I learned a lot through this experience about time management and when to say no, and focus on myself in order to get everything done. I also spent a lot of time learning about clay during this process and how to draw big without the fear of making mistakes, because, as it turns out, anything can be fixed with a little bit of gesso. This series of work was also very emotional for me. I spent a lot of time growing spiritually and focusing on developing my emotional intelligence. This project broke me down and forced me to dig deep to find the parts of myself that needed mending, reflect on them, make art about it, then heal.

What artists if any served as inspiration during this project? What did you learn from them that you were able to take back to your work?

While visiting the Philbrook Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma, I saw the most beautiful piece titled, “*Three Graces Plaque*”. It was an 18th century black basalt ware piece that inspired my series of ceramic plates. My drawings were inspired more by the thought that modern painting can be merged with neurosis of the maker. According to the mind of Andrew Graham-Dixon, when this happens, art can meet a world that no longer confirms it, but which is hostile, or at best indifferent to the results. I started drawing with my whole body, feeling the movement and found inspiration that way, by feeling my way through the drawing until it was at a level I appreciated.

How has this series changed your perspective of yourself as an artist?

This series showed me what I was capable of making and to what scale. It gave me confidence as an artist. I was very nervous to attempt drawings so large, as I had only ever made things that were maybe a third of the size. I learned a lot during the process about how to trust myself artistically, and that not every line drawn or carved into the clay was permanent. I had little experience working with clay before starting this body of work, so when I began that process, I did my best to go with what I knew and draw with the clay. The way that I carved into the ceramic plates in the *Self-Reliance Battles Change Series* and *Patterned Patience* were inspired by the way I draw. After realizing that my ceramic process could match my drawing process, my perspective shifted and art making became much more inspiring for me. I’m enthralled with the learning process, so



that moment of clarity when I figured out how to move from paper to clay and back again seamlessly felt like magic. I was able to maintain my style with both mediums while still displaying how I can be freeform and fluid with 2D work and controlled with my mark making with 3D work.

Are you working on anything now or have any new projects on the horizon?

At the moment I'm working on some smaller projects, more utilitarian ceramics like paint palettes, bowls and plates. My drawings and paintings still feature the heron more often than not. I tried to break free, but the heron still has me. I'll just keep working with it until I find something new, then go from there. For now, I'm really happy with where I'm at.

What advice would you give a young artist following in your steps?

Some of the best advice I was ever given was from my mentor, Steve Hilton. He told me that it was always best to say yes more than you say no, even if it seems like something beyond your reach. Asking for guidance is never a bad thing. Accepting jobs and actively listening, not planning what you'll say next, but paying attention to the people you're speaking with will take you miles. People will begin to recognize you as a helpful hand and as a reliable person. Doors will open and you'll start to meet some of the most incredible people out there. The ceramics world is the most welcoming and loving community, so find a group no matter your medium, I strongly recommend NCECA for ceramic artists, and get involved! Artists help artists, so put yourself out there.

Wasteland

We, somehow, survive the wasteland. We are all that's left. Chris is down in Atlanta, watching an endless stream of exhaust bend through the sky as planes take off and land without a beat. Chris can recite the make and model of each plane from hundreds of feet below with the same amount of speed and agility that he brings to packaging and sealing boxes, marveling at the crested arc each plane takes before dipping into the sky; he remains, as grounded as ever. Alice buries herself in the eternal words of men who many years ago romanticized pastel sunsets and water tossing so ferociously it only leaves behind a white foam in its wake. She can now only imagine such a world as she dodges approaching streetcars in between classes, teetering on the metal tracks as the city traffic whirs around her. Ryan joins Luke in the war, lacing up boots we poked makeshift eyelets into with a dulled switchblade. We imagine them brave.

We remain, crushing rusty cans under the worn soles of our sneakers. We spark fires in the fading daylight, sitting on the lip of the abandoned trailer park, tossing old packs of cigarettes and used tampons and tattered blankets to fuel our fire, saving the naked Barbies and the half-filled journals and the unscratched lotto tickets for when we're desperate. We remain nostalgic. We watch the mosquitos hum low over dead chunks of shrubbery that have not been bulldozed over. We don't close our eyes until the last sparks spit into broken windows, until the last curve of smoke disappears over the V-shaped conglomeration of trailer cars, until it tumbles over either highway that hugs the sides of our V. We don't close our eyes until the smoke dissipates in the crook of our V, which is flanked by Freddie's, the old convenience store that still lets out a faint odor of rotting fruit and old cat food.

We dream of an ocean our landlocked bodies have never been to. At our ocean, it's January, because Midwestern cold is what we know. We marvel at the incessant roll of waves crashing and retreating simultaneously, its heavy thud and slap surrounding us on all sides. The frozen sand squelches within the spaces between our toes, rubbing them raw. We trip over broken seashells and the glowing blisters of jellyfish carcasses as we run to try and catch the white waves lapping the immobile shore, drizzling salt into gray skies. We run forward, into the water now, closing in on the tide. The initial shock of the cold sends electricity pulsing through our jaws,

the ice follows a tangle of neurons through our limbs and bursts at our extremities. But soon, we find calm, a dull swaying as the sea plunges in and out and all around us. And somehow, amidst the gray mist, over the thick waves that get under our feet and force us to tread and lick salt water from our chins, we can see for miles.

We awake before dawn, and if it's cold enough, we have sex to stay warm, craving the taste of dried night sweats and tacky saliva, digging frozen fingertips into warm pockets of flesh. If it's warm enough, we make breakfast. We raid what's left of the Red Cross truck. Bandages and antiseptic. Cold medicine, cough syrup, fever reducers. Medicine to both start a stream of shitting and medicine to turn it off again. Piles of blankets. Matches and charcoal. Prison-style khakis and jumpsuits. White undershirts. Underwear only in giant size and socks that somehow pinch toes. No pads or tampons at all, so I spend five days a month sitting on scraps of army blankets, wads of old undershirts, sometimes layers of the ripped-out padded part of bandages when it's too cold to sacrifice blankets and extra shirts. Cans of tuna and sardines and beans and soupy clumps of tomatoes. Bags of stale cereal. Condensed milk. Peanut butter and crackers. Powered cheese they take on the moon. Dirty, empty plastic jugs of water they said they'd replace but never did. We have learned to boil the water from the trickle of a creek, to strain it through an old Coke bottle filled with bits of charcoal and sand. We have learned to wait.

We make lists of what we will we ask for when they come as we sit by our first fire of the day, sucking down the slippery sardines that top our crackers and chew them so finely they become a gluey paste in our mouths. Breakfast. Sometimes, our lists are practical:

- A map
- A compass
- A lighter
- Twine
- Tarp
- Another knife
- Boots good for snow

Sometimes, we are more demanding:

- Matching velour sweatshirt and sweatpants
- Keds, size eight
- Campbell's soup (chicken noodle or cream of mushroom only)
- Chef Boyardee
- A Teflon cookware set

- Doritos (nacho cheese)
- Quilts, various sizes
- Radio
- A set of novels within the realm of Jack Kerouac, Ernest Hemmingway, Charles Bukowski, etc.
- Tampons (Playtex or better)
- A portable DVD player (complete with best rom coms of the early 2000s, but we're flexible)
- A cell phone

During our second fire of the day, we dredge up half-recollections of strawberry stained mouths and hives blossoming at our thighs where the corn ended, and we began. We piece together fragments of the land before, the land we walked through millions of times with a calloused hand in our own. We recall grabbing at the last ears of corn, the ones that grew stubby and wilted, the ones that remained hard and tasteless. The very last harvests. We remember pulling back unforgiving stalks and chewing rubbery kernels as we listened to stories about how corn used to be referred to as gold, the land, as paradise. Before the endless stretches of cemented highways and clouds of toxicity barreled through our rippling hills, creating cities we had only seen in glossy photographs, leaving behind only little pockets of wasteland in its wake. We remember falling asleep to the old stories of a far-off paradise, feeling the night wind tumbling through a new kind of nakedness.

We remain among the wreckage, somehow both towering above and shrinking underneath the iron and steel that grew around us.

At night, after the last beans are scraped from the grooves of the can and the fire diminishes to a soft whisper, we find each other's hands. Yours is inexplicably soft. We whisper 'I love you' not because we mean it, but because we like to feel the weight of the words leaving our mouths, as if they belonged to someone else, perhaps characters in a movie who had their finale at the end of a ninety-minute reel.

We survive the wasteland.

Joshua Allen

Jericho

The baby came out purple and unbreathing. The doctor dangled it like a fish by a fat stumpy leg and smacked the baby. Its lumpy body was covered with spermy amniotic fluid, and its head was a weird turnip shape, very fat and evenly rounded. Roy didn't like the look of it. It looked nothing like the clean, spongey babies he had seen on television.

The doctor turned over the baby. It wasn't moving. It was dead. He handed it to a nurse and she put it under a heating lamp. Nurses in stark green masks moved around the table, sticking tubes into its arms.

The dead baby's skin was the color of ice on a lake. A mask was placed over its mouth. Water droplets beaded on the plastic. It had come early, a day before Independence Day.

He found the doctor washing up at a sink, scrubbing his bare arms up to his elbows, washing off Jeanne's blood. "Is the baby supposed to look like that?" he asked.

The doctor shut off the water. "Are you the father?"

"I'm the father, yes."

"You shouldn't say things like that," he said. "You're a father now."

"Frankly, doctor," he said. "I was hoping that it would die."

They were under a broad sky of flat sterile lights. All sensation condensed into a seamless foreign hum. His life was over, he could see that now. Henceforth, life would be a series of compromises that would, with gradual but unerring precision, undermine him.

A nurse hurried in. Her mask was dangling around her neck, and she was breathing heavily. "Doctor, the girl," she said.

"The girl?"

"It's the girl, yes."

After the service, his parishioners flocked around him. They were old, young, lost in their middle years, lost generally. He hadn't wanted them to come, but, in their oppressive kindness, they had come regardless. He sat on a bench under the shade of a tree, sweating, bearing their presence.

"A good woman, she was."

"A pillar of the community."

"She really was."

"We prayed for you two. Prayed and prayed."

“So young. But, then again, maybe not young enough.”

Murmured agreement.

“Both of you were there for us so many times, we never thought

—”

“That the consoler would become the consoled?”

“Well said. Well said.”

“This is not meant to diminish the magnitude of your loss, but Pete and I made you something.”

Somebody handed him a pie. It was cold and stale-smelling. “It’s apple. Your favorite.”

He set the pie beside him on the bench. He searched for something to say. “Jeanne’s surely watching us right now, admiring your goodness.”

“You’re going to make us cry.”

But nobody was crying. Eventually, they went away, chattering like geese, and a woman named Francine came over from the grave and took his hand and looked into his face. She was about Jeanne’s age. Years ago, when her father passed, his mind degraded and screaming hurtful nonsense, he had talked her down from the hospital balcony. After that, he met with her a few times over tea, and maybe there was something latent, scarcely moving, between them, but neither acknowledged it.

Now, it was obvious that she was projecting strength and fortitude for his sake. He was grateful for the effort.

“How’s your son?” she asked.

“Recovering,” he said. “Complications.”

“When will you be able to bring him home?”

He shrugged.

She was still holding his hand. “If you need anything,” she said.

“Call me. Any time of day. I’m a good listener.”

She wrote down her number, folded it, and pressed it into his palm.

Soon, they all left in their cars, and he was alone under the tree. The sky was eyeblue, and a light, pleasant wind came over the hill. An arrow of birds winged above him. Soon, he’d have to return home, where the landline was ringing endlessly—the hospital, calling and calling. There hadn’t been silence in his house for three days.

For a few hours, he drove around the town, looking at everything familiar, everything changing. He had no clear sense of who he was anymore. He turned aimlessly down tree-shaded lanes and watched kids run along the sidewalk. He longed to be drunk. Then, before he knew it, he was parking in front of Steamy Jim’s, which had \$4 Margarita Mondays, and

ducking inside.

Hours later, when he emerged into the night, stinking, damp with unfamiliar fluids, everything was lucid. The world was stark and clear, everything apparent. A stray dog crept along the street, nosing burnt-out cigarette butts, once looking at him standing there, and then slinking off. If Jeanne were here now and saw him like this, that's much how she'd react.

If asked the question, he'd say that she had guilted him into believing that God, if there was one, had any interest whatsoever in what they did or did not do.

Unsteadily, he made his way home, and before he even got there, he could hear the ringing, quiet at first, like the whine of tinnitus, then growing. Turning into his subdivision, escalating . . . Turning into his driveway, roaring like a waterfall in his ears . . . By the time he opened the door, he couldn't bear it. He took the thing and smashed it, but the roaring barreled along like a train, without source or feeling. Pretending to be drunker than he was, he drove out to the pond near the back of the subdivision, where they were still developing.

The night was late. Mountains of dirt and huge lurking machines surrounded him. The pond was curdled like expired milk, a filthy corona, reeking. Flies swarmed his eyes suicidally, and all around was this huge unending tone.

He took the screaming thing and lofted it thirty-five, forty feet into the center of the pond.

Ripples spread out. Frogs slid smoothly into the murk. Oblong fish breached the water's surface and, flicking silver, disappeared. The crickets resumed. He hadn't noticed the resounding silence.

Suddenly, he felt small and utterly alone. He found Francine's number crumpled in his pocket. But his only phone was in the pond.

—

Francine wasn't asleep. When she had put on her pajamas, the sleepless night had stretched out before her like a long road that needed to be traveled. She hadn't fought it. Ben was snoring in their room, preparing for his six-a.m. shift. To avoid disturbing him, she was in the living room, watching a real-life murder series, though she wasn't really watching it. She was thinking about Jeanne. How strange she was.

Jeanne had been an odd bird, a minor curiosity, short and painfully thin, with probing, restless eyes. Once, before her father passed on and she finally decided to stop going to New Harmony, Francine had come in late

one Sunday, during the singing, and sat in the back.

Between hymns, Jeanne slid silently into the pew beside her. They had never talked before then.

She said, “I’d very much appreciate it if you’d treat this occasion with the proper respect.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “What occasion is it?”

“The day the walls of Jericho fell.” Jeanne looked at the band. “That’s why we have the trumpets.”

“The trumpets are a nice addition,” Francine said, wanting to be agreeable.

“They were my idea,” she said.

After the next hymn ended, Francine asked, “Do we know the date the walls fell?”

“Yes,” Jeanne said. “Today, a long time ago.”

She left before the next hymn began.

The only other time she saw Jeanne before that strange visit was when she visited Pastor Roy at his home. Usually, Pastor Roy visited her at her house, but something interfered. She was grateful for the chance to leave. Gone was the stranger with the diseased mind screaming at her, calling her all sorts of names—names she never imagined he knew—but in the newfound silence was a thought lurking. A thought that could prove decisive.

She and Pastor Roy talked in his living room, about God and rising up like a phoenix from the ashes of the past. “Have you read Calvin?” he asked.

“I haven’t,” she admitted.

“Don’t,” he said. “He’s miserable. Predestination? Nonsense. Can you imagine? You’re damned or not damned, and in the scheme of things, you’re more likely damned than not. What hope is there for sinners like us? That’s not a God that I can believe in,” he said. “But maybe I’m meritocratic because I’m an American.”

She laughed, but it was fake. After sitting in silence, she asked, “Can I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t think I’m enough of a participant in daily affairs to be a sinner.”

“You don’t sin?”

“I don’t do anything,” she said. “You know Russian nesting dolls?”

“Yes.”

“Sometimes I think I’m the smallest doll, the one inside all of them, and I don’t know anything because there are five people between me and the world. I can’t even imagine the world.”

“Is one your father?”

“You’d assume,” she said.

Later, she asked Pastor Roy where the bathroom was, and, as she turned down the hallway, she heard footsteps and saw Jeanne disappearing into a room at the far end of the hall. She felt nothing at the possibility of Jeanne eavesdropping. She didn’t care enough about what she was saying. She didn’t have the energy.

Then, just three months ago, her doorbell rang, and Francine found Jeanne, uncomfortably pregnant, standing on her doorstep.

Without thinking about what she was doing, she made Jeanne a pot of herbal tea and set out a tray of crackers. They sat at the kitchen table for a while, not speaking.

“I heard about your father,” Jeanne finally said, “about the things he called you.”

“Yes.”

“You must’ve heard a lot of awful things then?”

“I did.”

“I have an awful thing to say,” Jeanne said.

Francine suddenly felt very weary, like something heavy and soporific had fallen across her. She wanted to sleep for a very long time.

“I hate this baby,” Jeanne said, her voice hoarse. “I hate it. I’ve been waiting for the love to grow, like it happens for all these other mothers, but nothing’s growing. In fact, what’s growing is disgust. Like what did Roy and I do to deserve. . . ? I thought I couldn’t have one, then I started feeling sick, and maybe I was carried away by the potential, and it was months before...” she stopped abruptly. Then, in an atonal voice, she said, “I didn’t even enjoy the sex.”

Francine took a cracker and chewed on it very slowly, trying not to make a sound. The cracker was tasteless and stale.

“I guess I’m looking for a way out,” Jeanne said, looking at her hands, “though there is no way out for people like us.”

“There’s adoption.”

“Not for people like us,” she repeated tonelessly.

Francine could hear the house shifting around them, the aches and pains of all this history. Outside, distantly, the keen of a train carrying freight. The wind pressing itself against the glass. She longed for a friend,

or anyone really.

She found herself speaking. "You hate it, but you must love it. You must love it because you hate it. It's not about you. You must pretend you're not there. You must take the part of you that protests and strangle it. Because that's how you survive. You forget yourself and wait for the day it all comes down."

—

There was a knock at the front door. She turned off the television and listened. The knocking came again, furious, urgent. Slowly, she rose from the couch. She went over to the door and, through the peephole, she saw the huge, distorted, ruddy face of Pastor Roy.

She opened the door. He was swaying slightly, like a tire swing in a wind.

"I'm drunk," he said, a bit helplessly.

"I know."

"I know you know. I very much wish I wasn't drunk," he said. "It's been so long, it didn't take much, honestly."

"Do you want to come in?"

"God, what time is it?"

"I couldn't sleep anyways."

He came inside and she led him to the kitchen table. He looked around, seeing other things. Francine opened a window for air. His hair was messed up, unwashed, streaked with gray. He looked as old and confused as her father did, though Roy couldn't be older than fifty.

"I would've called," he said, "but I lost my phone."

"You lost your phone?"

"Deliberately. I deliberately lost it," he said. He found a hairline crack in her table and dug his nail into it. She watched his face cycle through a dozen expressions she'd never seen before. She didn't have the words to describe them.

"Francine," he said slowly. "I haven't picked up the child yet."

"Is he not sick?" she asked carefully.

"Healthy as a lumberjack," he said. "I'll probably be arrested within a few days. Maybe even tomorrow. I don't know the law."

"What would they arrest you for?"

"Dereliction of duty. Supreme child abandonment. Being a cretin. Take your pick." He shrugged carelessly. "If they arrested people for hypocrisy, I'd be the guy."

“You’d have a bounty on your head,” she said.

He stood up unsteadily, leaning against the table. “Is Ben here?”

“He’s asleep.”

“Yes, Ben the worker, Ben who wakes up at the crack of dawn, sleeping like a babe,” he said. “You know, I haven’t woken up before eight in years. I regret that. Imagine how much I could’ve done if I got up one, two hours earlier.”

“What would you have done?”

“I don’t know. But I think I would be a different kind of man.” He moved around, looking at the pictures on the walls: pictures of her with Ben, of her alone, in the woods, wearing a bright red raincoat. “You don’t have pictures of your father anymore,” he observed.

“I made a decision, stuck to it.”

“I think it’s good. It’s good to make decisions.” He sat down at the table again. It struck her, suddenly, what he looked like—like a person who had just emerged from a forest by a road, after being lost for weeks.

“I think I’m going to run away,” he said.

“To where?”

“Somewhere else,” he said. “A foreign country.”

“As a missionary?”

“As a tourist. As a bum,” he said. “Whatever it turns out I really am.”

Francine took his hand. She had clear image of herself taking his hand. She was a long way away from herself. She thought she should be saying something, but she didn’t. They sat there, not speaking.

A precarious balance. The moment was heavy with significance. Speaking would tip it one way or another. Which way would it fall?

“Come with me,” he said quietly.

But, even as he said it, she knew that wasn’t what she wanted, and he drew back his hand, seeming to sense that. He looked away. She felt her body trembling, coursing with an unfamiliar feeling. She could barely contain herself.

“I want to adopt your son,” she said.

He looked at her. “What?”

“I want to adopt your son.”

“Why?”

“Because children shouldn’t have parents like you.”

Slowly, he nodded. He looked toward the hallway. “And Ben?”

“This is what I want,” she answered.

The sun was creeping over the horizon, turning the sky febrile pink with the thin twisted figures of clouds. The light fell dimly upon the hunched-over and scraggily plants of her garden and upon the trowel that she had used, bent over and sweating, to messily dig out the rows for the seeds—rows that had come out crooked and zigzagging across the rectangle of dirt. She remembered looking over the garden in despair, then looking out over her yard and beyond the fences to this small lifeless neighborhood, shrinking day by day, and realizing, finally, what it meant to carve out your existence from your traumas and guard it with your life.

In the other room, Ben's alarm rang. They had stayed up all night.

Roy looked at her, with a ghost of a smile. "Would you look at that?" he said. "Maybe I can be the kind of man who is up before eight."

“And a recent study shows that Millennials are more dissatisfied with their careers than any other generation, and more after the break—”

Drew jerked the old Toyota into park, silencing the radio DJ.

The earth outside was encrusted with frozen rain that arrived just as the snow had begun to decay into thick grey sludge. The resulting dirty crystals were clumped along streets and sidewalks, mid-winter stalactites that did little to improve the suburban strip.

“Do you want anything?” Drew asked. They were parked beside the pump at the Mobil. They didn’t need gas, but Drew needed gum, his distraction of choice. Lauren’s fingers thumped against the door arrhythmically, impatience gnawing at her nervous system.

“Hmm?” she mused. Drew exhaled, releasing a warm puff of breath that broke the cold air. He was snug in a thick down coat she was sure he’d owned since high school. Frugality was a point of pride for him. He had recently put down a deposit on a townhouse near downtown. Lauren, who felt perpetually suffocated by her own finances, could make no such claims. “Maybe a lemon iced tea?”

He smiled and kissed her on the forehead, a gesture that was beginning to feel uncomfortably fraternal. She gave his cowlick a friendly pat, and he opened the car door, allowing a sharp whip of air to snake into the front seat as he slipped into the night.

Out the front dash, the main six lane drag was scattered before her like organized litter. Automotive repair. Pizza chains. Cash for gold. Jewel Osco. It was the same for miles. Lauren felt like she’d spent her whole life driving past different versions of the same strip mall, lightly rearranged. She burrowed into her ski coat and curled her toes against the fleece lining of her boots. She made a point of avoiding her reflection in the rearview mirror — her plain face hiding behind her chestnut hair piled on top of her head like tangled yarn — a painfully homespun reality that she actively avoided, if only because improvement seemed improbable.

A navy minivan sidled up to the adjacent pump. A blonde woman in her early thirties hopped out, an overflowing purse and a pair of wool mittens grasped in hurried hands. She slammed the driver’s side door. Her seat shook in her wake as she walked into the mart, reverberating, Lauren presumed, from the force of the slam.

Then she saw her, the baby in the car. A toddler, maybe two, two-and-half. She was kicking the drivers seat in a fit of spite and injustice. Lauren swallowed her breath. She craned her neck, searching for a stream of exhaust pouring from the rear.

The exhaust was cool. She clawed at her own door, as if it were possible for her to rescue the toddler using its own futile methods. Something — common sense perhaps — stopped her from pulling at the door handle and releasing herself into the frigid night. After all, the baby must be locked in, safe from predators, sure, but not from the elements. How long would it take for an infant to contract hypothermia? Ten minutes? Fifteen?

She would never leave her own child in the car. Not that she had any children, but any hypothetical child of hers would never be left alone in public to contend with the January windchill. The toddler, dark-haired and pigtailed, was as delightful as she was furious. Her puffy face was twisted in betrayal, her tiny cheeks pink with cold and vengeance. Lauren felt an uncharacteristically strong urge to save this small girl from a potentially cruel fate.

Her fingertips were bluing from the cold but still clasped around the door handle. Liberating the child, from what was surely a routine and tranquil Midwestern life, was an act far cry from heroic, perhaps nearer to the criminal. And yet, there was the possibility, however small, that the mother didn't care for the girl, that she held in her an afflicting apathy, endangering her daughter's life daily. Certainly all children should be rescued from indifference.

"Hey, Laur."

Winter snuck its way back into the car, securing icy hands around her trachea, stealing her breath. In the opposite car, the girl had stopped fighting with her absent mother. Tears tumbled in somber resignation. The abject desolation of the scene cracked Lauren a little.

"Lauren?" Drew hovered in the doorway, holding out an iced tea in a gloved hand. She was still focused on the child, and she took it distractedly. "They didn't have lemon, so I got you peach."

It devastated her that someone so small already knew what it was to be trapped.

"Laur? Hello."

"It's terrible, isn't it?" Drew followed her gaze, his light eyes settling on the little girl crying into her carseat.

"Her parent is probably just inside."

“That’s crazy dangerous, Drew!” He threw the car into drive.
“Wait, wait—”

Drew was pulling out already, so Lauren contorted in her seat, keeping an eye on the other car. As Drew’s car hit the street, the mother raced out of the mini mart, a small jug of milk clutched between her mittens. Lauren’s body loosened, reflexively relieved for the child’s safety.

“What do you think?” Drew asked.

“Hmm?” she hadn’t heard him.

“What do you want for dinner?”

Food was a far away thought, something ill suited for anxiety of the moment. Even her bottle of iced tea was beginning to numb her fingertips. She released it into the cup holder. Condensation was coagulating along the bottle’s spine. It seemed suddenly repulsive.

“Is this the brand that’s made with that carcinogenic additive?”

“What? No,” Drew spat, bringing the talk radio back to life, allowing it to impregnate the space between them.

“I mean—” Crazy Carl, Drew’s radio personality of choice, cajoled, “I wasn’t happy with my career when I was twenty-four or twenty-six. Cathy, I didn’t get to sit here and make fun of you until I was almost thirty.”

“Honestly,” Drew muttered.

* * *

Skipper was floating in a green ring of algae when she got to the office the next morning. He was orange belly-up in the tank, eyes permanently fixed on the other fish sniffing at his expiring scales. He made the third to die that month. Dr. Zabat would be pissed. She liked her aquarium to appear tropical and well-populated.

The office was in the process of a few light renovations. Dr. Zabat had, at Lauren’s suggestion, the walls painted “millennial pink.” Now that millennials were the generation having children, Dr. Zabat felt that the decor should be catered to their aesthetic taste. Lauren wasn’t sure that it mattered, but she had kept herself busy in a sort of nesting process, preparing the waiting room for its new arrivals. The tank, however, was timeless, in Dr. Zabat’s words and would be removed the day that she retired, which, she assured Lauren, would be the day she died. Lauren, however, had been nauseous all morning and wasn’t sure she could stomach conducting Skipper’s funeral first thing. She turned to the messages

blinking on the landline.

It was nearly noon before Dr. Zabat appeared over her shoulder. Lauren was stuck on phone with another confused customer — there was a man two towns over named Zabat who sold gyros — and smelled Dr. Zabat's jasmine dabbed wrists before she saw her.

"Sir, this is a doctor's office," Lauren intoned. "For women. A gynecologist."

Dr. Zabat reached over and snatched the phone with diminutive, weathered hands. "No meat here. Call your urologist or order online like everyone else," she snapped, jamming the phone into its charging bay. She glared at Lauren, her wrinkles winking in disbelief behind her designer spectacles. "You killed another fish."

"Maybe they're cold. Tropical fish aren't built for Illinois winter."

"The tank is heated." She crossed her arms over her self-referential coat: Dr. Elena Zabat, OB/GYN. She had a rotation of three, all of which Lauren had scrubbed in the staff bathroom more than once. There was a level of intensity trapped in Dr. Zabat's eyes that demanded respect. Lauren gave it willingly because, despite all else, Dr. Zabat was decent and fair. She never made her clean the toilets and offered a generous benefits package. No level of respect however could keep her actively engaged in her in the repetition of the reception desk. "You forgot to cancel my two o'clock. Do you remember, she lost the baby last week? And order me some lunch. No gyros. And flush Skipper."

Dr. Zabat turned away and Lauren's pulse quickened with anticipation. The previous week she'd promised herself that today was the day she'd ask for more responsibility and successfully grab hold of an opportunity for greater intellectual stimulation. Of course, she hadn't expected an accusation of murder to precede her plea. Skipper had unwittingly put her in a precarious position by crapping out on her watch.

"Dr. Zabat?" she paused. Blood rushed to her temples. Inadequacy bobbed in her throat. "Would it be possible for me to do some additional work? Maybe helping Greta with some research?"

"You want to be a PA?" she said with a lilt, as if the image of Lauren in a set of scrubs amused her.

"Maybe."

"So I should reward your incompetence with important work?"

Lauren's cheeks blushed with heat. Skipper's death had screwed her, emphasizing a sleepy will and an inattentive mind. She reached into the future and began leafing through the years to come. She could be sitting in

this very chair three years from now, eight years from now, sending appointment reminders and ordering Dr. Zabat's salmon salad from the shop across the street. Immobility was her fate; she would be the same today as she would be in infinite tomorrows.

"No," she demurred, daring herself to look Dr. Zabat in the eye, "of course not."

* * *

Lauren had loved geography as a kid. She'd won the bee in seventh grade over Anders Pedersen, the class genius, after he mistakenly identified Cape Horn as a part of Argentina, and she'd correctly listed Somalia, Djibouti, and Yemen as the countries bordering the Gulf of Aden. She enjoyed maps, the contour of the mountains and plains, the vastness of the oceans, the unrefined borders between far away nations. What she really loved was the feeling of potential between her hands. The manifestation of anywhere-but-here that made it feel as if anywhere might be a possible destination. Her mother still had the award pinned to a bulletin board in the mudroom. Very little had changed in the house over the last thirteen years. Her mother liked it that way.

In the kitchen, the oven hummed with a homemade meal, beef and potatoes nestling into a stew. Beneath her, the furnace rocked the house, bouncing it to sleep like a baby. Lauren listened to the rattle of the ice maker as cubes fell into the rectangle in the freezer. She used to be fond of quiet, the absence of noise allowing room for her imagination to grow in different directions. Now the stagnation of silence frightened her, it's inability to generate anything convincing her once again that nothing was to come.

Her interaction with Dr. Zabat came up again and again her mind like a hiccup. She didn't necessarily want to be a physician's assistant. She just wanted to be something. Unfortunately today she'd still been the receptionist and done her duties, slipping files into sheet metal cabinets and digging dead fish out of scuzzy tank. After she'd laid Skipper to rest in the toilet, her body lurched unexpectedly, and she vomited straight onto his still body.

Cringing a bit still over her stammered request, she pulled a pint of cookie dough ice cream from the overstuffed freezer. She hopped up onto the faux granite counter beside the oven, allowing it to warm her and her pre-dinner treat. The dough chunks seemed most necessary in her quest for

solace, so she unearthed them from the cream.

“Lauren!” Her mother was upstairs, in the linen closet, by Lauren’s estimate. She yelled again, muffled by the cotton and terry cloth surrounding her.

“I can’t understand you!” Lauren shouted back. She returned to her hunt for the pieces. Near the bottom there was a clump, four tiny dough balls stuck together. She shoved the whole thing in her mouth, storing it in her cheek like a squirrel.

“Lauren, honey, did you take out the stew?” her mother Maureen, who had recently legally changed her last name back to Mahoney after twenty-eight years of being King, carried a small stack of dish towels as she made her way to Lauren. Like Dr. Zabat, her mother was small and fierce, her dark, greying hair pulled into a regal plait. Her style itself was sensible and homely, but to Lauren it was familiar and safe. Despite the pain she must have felt after Lauren’s father relocated to Champaign to live with a marketing professor named Trina, Maureen never cried. At least not in front of her children. She slapped Lauren on the leg. Lauren obeyed and hopped off the counter. “You’re eating ice cream? Are you PMS-ing?”

“No I had my—” she paused, a piece cookie dough stuck over a molar. She dropped the pint on the counter, turned from her mother, and took the stairs two at a time.

Her bedroom was likewise a shrine to her childhood. Her walls were filled with dance competition ribbons, school diplomas, maps of other continents. A basket of stuffed animals in one corner faced her bed like a disappointed jury. She ripped open her desk drawer and pulled out her planner. It was a neurotic collection of daily habits — what she ate, how long she exercised, when she got her period. Her record keeping itself was intermittent; she’d keep highly detailed notes for several weeks, then would stop using it altogether for months.

“Lauren come down for dinner!” her mom bellowed.

There was a gap in note taking where she wished there wouldn’t have been one.

“I’m going out!”

She bought two and did them both. To be sure. She balanced the sticks on the edge of the tub and watched them from her perch on the toilet as she waited. The bathroom had settled into a similar collection of Lauren’s past, accented by her present — a hairbrush with a nest of hair in its bristles, a flurry of hair ties, and untouched, expiring prescription bottles.

The walls were painted a fading daisy yellow. Their sunny promise used to brighten her as a little girl at bath time. She would imagine herself on a pale beach somewhere on the Atlantic or in a creek alongside a meadow, watching chickadees hop over mossy logs. Perhaps one day she'd be putting her own little girl into a bath. She'd let the bubbles overflow onto the mat as she listened to her hum a toon to rubber animals diving beneath the surface.

Lauren knelt down over the tub and flipped both sticks at once.

"What?" The tests didn't match — one for, the other against.

"Lauren?!" Her mother's footsteps padded down the hallway, approaching the bathroom. She shoved the sticks into the back pocket of her jeans as her mother forced open the door.

"Can I have a moment of privacy?"

"You can have privacy when you start paying rent," she spat. "Did you eat?"

"No."

Her mother studied her face, her limning blue eyes evaluating Lauren's pallor.

"Are you depressed again?"

"Jeez, Mom, no—"

"I don't want to you back on that medication again, it does terrible things—"

Lauren glided past her, squeezing her way through the narrow hall to her room.

"I'm not depressed!" she called, collapsing on the edge of her bed, the tangerine walls of the room mocking her with their clarity and optimism. Her mother lingered in the doorway. Lauren said nothing more.

Her mother nodded. "Leave the door open."

* * *

Lauren spent the night navigating her emotions. On one hand there was the guilt of becoming pregnant before marriage, before a commitment, before too she had the opportunity to make something of herself. Drew was the only man she'd ever really been with in that way (not that her mostly Catholic heart was at peace with it) but everything about their relationship had begun to lose its shine. She knew that was in a way to be expected, but she'd recently realized that she might not love him enough without it. Initially, Drew's steadiness, his resilience and pragmatism had felt like

coming back to reality after four isolating years on the east coast, studying pre-law and art history with people far more casually informed and worldly than herself. She'd gone there with the dream of becoming a curator, cultivating exhibits in the Natural History Museum, creating a globe of artifacts for anyone who longed for anywhere-but-here. If that didn't work out, she'd thought maybe she'd go to law school and secure a fancy job, something that might fund flights to Thimphu and Asuncion; then, she could retire early and spend her later years on a sail boat or living in Europe.

When her mother found Trina's blouse in the backseat of her father's car, Lauren's world became unsteady, warping into the funhouse version of itself. But it wasn't simply her parents' contentious relationship: it was the heartbreak she suffered after discovering the boy she loved with another man, the string of failures and retests in her courses, her roommate being arrested in their living room for dealing drugs. She leaned on her circle of friends, only to be struck by the youthful realization that there wasn't much compassion beneath their pretense and hedonism. Depression burrowed into her vacant body; either pessimism or exhaustion forced its hand and the opportunities afforded to her peers seemed to evade her until graduation. Lauren clawed her way out of college with a lackluster grade point average and collection of unrealized dreams, collapsing into the comfort of her childhood home just as her father left it.

Meeting Drew reminded her that she could connect with another human being, gave her new space to breathe. She didn't have to pretend to know something or be anyone other than herself; before she knew it, she'd rather remain mentally ill than lose his presence in her life. Recently, things had begun to shift. She couldn't stop noticing his ordinariness. His button-down shirts and creaseless pants. His obsession with music festivals and Heineken. His ability to talk about the Bears and the weather with just about anyone as if they were actually interesting points of conversation. His obsessive but passionless interest in computer software.

Now she was going to be a mother. Potentially. It filled her with strange relief. As if she had finally found for what she so long had been searching. God had given her the gift of purpose, but not without the price of shame. She wasn't sure how she might tell her mother, who had closed herself to much of her social circle after the scandal of her father's affair. Her mother was traditional in that way; indiscretions were still imbued with unforgivable dishonor, and she knew hers would be no exception. Still, excitement superseded dread, and she was eager to share it with Drew,

regardless of their connection or lack there of.

She sat at the reception desk that morning vibrating with anticipation. Her phone was resting in her lap, a message blinking on the screen. She didn't know how to phrase it that she maybe, most likely, had life growing inside of her. Adrenaline took over and began typing for her: *Meet me at Starbucks? 12:30?*

Relaying the news in person would make it feel more real. Drew would be able to see how this new life had restored her own. The dormant suburban dad in him would stir. His opinions on the groundwork for a stable home could finally become practices, rules to live by. Together they would awaken their sleeping souls and start living in service of something bigger than themselves.

"Are you texting?" Dr. Zabat was leaning against the cabinet with a small stack of files. Lauren threw her phone beneath the desk. Dr. Zabat spun the folders over Lauren's keyboard as a command. Lauren's throat was raw and ill equip to voice her desperate request.

"You have an opening. At three."

"So?"

"Are you covered on my insurance?"

Dr. Zabat paused, tilting her head, examining. Her gaze fell to Lauren's flat abdomen. "You mean the insurance that I provide to you? Don't be stupid."

She turned away, her eyes not losing their focus on Lauren's mid section. She hesitated in the eve of the doorway and gave Lauren a sharp nod before returning to her patients.

The banality of having Starbucks as a usual meeting place wasn't lost on her. It was more or less half way between her office and Drew's, and because the only other adjacent food service establishments were an IHOP and a Long John Silvers, they would meet over grande non-dairy lattes. Drew actually almost always ordered a regular coffee with extra cream.

She's considered saving the tests to show to him, as a sort of evidence of her own befuddlement. The physical presence of the sticks would be proof that something was, for the first time, actually going to happen to them. Perhaps, she hoped, she would look different to Drew, hung with purpose, glowing with maternity. So too she wanted Drew to be changed — more capable, dynamic, full of adventure and possibility.

There was a small rickety table in a corner a bit away from curious minds that she chose specifically for the reveal. Customers poured in for the

lunch rush, eager to fuel themselves with caffeine in place of nutrients. There was something about the ease of mass consumerism that Lauren found unsettling. Perhaps it was the comfort of it, the way it used the human need for security to encourage thoughtless consumption. What made her truly nauseous was how readily she herself gave into the familiarity of predetermined choices and nostalgic flavors. Perhaps she might now start making different choices, pushing past the usual into the unknown. Everything could be different now that she felt suddenly alive.

She hadn't, however, brought the tests. When Drew walked in thirteen minutes later, she knew she'd gambled by presenting such a claim without facts to her data-driven boyfriend. Drew didn't apologize for his tardiness or order a familiar beverage for the sake of routine. He simply sat across from her, hands shoved in the tattered pockets of his old coat, perhaps as an alternate comfort. Lauren had once romanticized his clear blue eyes; they were too small to ever look sad. She'd only seen him cry twice — once after his grandfather passed away and once when his three year-old nephew took an aluminum bat to his crotch — and it seemed unlikely that fatherhood would change him. Hope, however, had found a new face in her life.

"Drew," she began softly, as not to express too much of her own excitement, "I need to tell you something."

There was a chilling silence between. Lauren wanted him to invite her speak, to anticipate her joyful news without knowing that it was hers to give away. When Drew finally indulged her, it wasn't with expectancy so much as resignation. He didn't take his eyes off the table as he addressed her.

"I have something to say. I need to say it before you voice whatever ridiculous anxiety you need reassured." His lips were chapped and raw, dry as if used as a chew toy for unaddressed insecurities. "I think we should break up—"

"I might be pregnant," she interrupted without reservation. She pushed aside the sting of his declaration, knowing it might become irrelevant in light of her news. She studied his face for a shift in desire.

"Why would you say that?" Drew's voice was flat, devoid of every emotion that she could have anticipated. Reflexively she reached out to him, to join them together, anew.

"I... I took two tests. One positive and one negative. I don't know what it means."

He flinched, retracting his hand. "So you also might not be

pregnant.”

“I was going to bring the tests to show you but I was afraid it might be gross since this is an eating establishment.”

“Did you even hear what I said? Do you understand what I want? We aren’t connecting. Not anymore.”

It was true — they were islands separated by a strait. Although it shouldn’t have, it surprised her that Drew had noticed. Yet, somehow a world where they were broken up wasn’t conceivable. Not because she hadn’t thought about it — desired it even — but it’s possibility didn’t seem to coincide with her accepted reality.

“But—”

Drew stood, his eyes glossing over the menu above the counter so that she couldn’t meet them. He pretended to be interested in the merchandise for a moment. His fingers trembled through his sandy hair, his cowlick bobbing side to side. He blinked furiously. She was wrong — his eyes could look sad.

“Paranoia doesn’t suit you, Lauren.”

Without Drew, she anticipated that her excitement would dissipate. As three o’clock approached however, her cheeks began to glow with a blush, her stomach alive with a speck life and a swarm of nerves. The clip of the keyboard beneath her fingertips grew rapid with impatience. At a quarter-to-three, she stopped exercising her fingers and sat on them instead. When Dr. Zabat came up behind her and laid a chilly hand on her shoulder, she jumped.

“Are you ready?”

Dr. Zabat had decided to secure her into the stirrups. Lauren, though it embarrassed her some, was still squeamish about having her blood drawn and insisted on a pelvic exam instead. *Impossible*, Dr. Zabat had called her. Impossible was how the day seemed to be going.

As soon as she scooted off her underpants, Lauren knew something was wrong. Dr. Zabat had given her a moment of privacy to prepare. Her thighs were hot and bound together with a thick fluid she decided to let Dr. Zabat evaluate. She situated herself on the exam table, releasing a low cough to let Dr. Zabat know that she was ready.

With gloved hands, Dr. Zabat approached her lower half. She wasn’t a foot away from Lauren’s genitals when she intoned, “You’re bleeding.”

She was wearing a super-absorbent menstrual pad between her legs when she left for the day, an hour early. She was surprised that Dr. Zabat had believed her, even let her take out the tests and lay them side by side, fossils from a brief period of hope.

“Chemical pregnancy,” Dr. Zabat had declared, like Lauren wasn’t the slightest bit delusional, just rather unlucky.

As she washed herself in the employee bathroom, a cave of disappointment opened in her chest. She’d foolishly believed that things were going to be different. Despite the periods of desolation in her past, she had never felt a hollowness so heavy. She wanted to gut herself, to free herself of the weight, but she was afraid there was already nothing left. Her desperation gave way to a deep, low anger at God — at the universe — for robbing her of possibility, for extending this barren season. She’d spent so long walking through the desert and at site of the oasis, had forgotten the deceiving ways of a mirage. There had to be someone she could blame besides herself.

On her way out, she stopped by the fish tank. She wondered if the fish knew that there was more than five cubic feet of water in the world, if they yearned for their natural home, expanses beyond reasonable measure. At least here there was security without the threats of predators and disasters.

“Shit.” She noticed a fourth fish, Finn, static at the surface. He was the most glamorous of Dr. Zabat’s collection, his multi-colored scales glinted a rainbow of chrome hues beneath the lights. He too would need to be flushed. She considered hurrying him away before Dr. Zabat noticed, realizing that she could use her condition to spend an extra moment in the bathroom. But Finn’s death pulled at that heaviness, as if her own failings were revealed to no longer be a pattern but something innate and unavoidable. She left him in the tank to be dealt with by the other fish.

The pad weighed her down as she waddled into the burgeoning night. The lot was empty, save a tall woman running through the slush in dirty boots and a pink parka. She smacked into Lauren and continued into the building without apology. A cry of annoyance leapt from Lauren’s mouth, but the woman was already inside. The silver Honda she’d owned since she’d been old enough to drive was alone in the lot next to a glossy, idling hybrid.

In the backseat, a baby — a real, tiny newborn baby — was cocooned in a plush, mint snowsuit. Lauren rubbed her fraying lips together and, without hesitation, tugged at the handle. The door opened into her, the

baby still soundly asleep in his nest. With a click of a button, he was free.

She didn't really know where she was taking him. To anywhere, she thought, anywhere-but-here. Looking back, she made sure he wasn't jostling as the car serpentine through rush hour traffic. He was snug, safe and sound. Indulging the ache inside her, she gave his teeny foot a squeeze.

She braked, the car lurching to a stop. It was either the suddenness of motion or her own desperation for intimacy that woke him. His blue eyes fluttered alive cautiously. His lips formed into a hollow as the car settled into the driveway.

As she hurried to the backseat, freeing her little snowsuit angel from his carseat, she noticed Drew still standing in the driveway, perhaps just arriving home. She pulled the baby — Henry, maybe Henry was a good name — to her breast and bounced him lightly.

Drew dropped his keys in the slush at the sight of her. "Whose baby is that?"

She nuzzled the baby closer to her face and let his tears fall against her chin. His head smelled sweet like spring. When she didn't answer Drew became more insistent.

"Whose *baby* is that?"

Mine. Even caught in her mouth it felt wrong. *Mine.* Henry was someone else's son, likely with a different name. Drew stared at her as she clambered back to the car, buckling the child in his seat with fluttering fingers. She pulled on her seatbelt as Drew started toward them. Lauren threw the car into reverse.

"Remember me, Henry," she whispered.

The parking lot was alive with light. As she pulled in, a cop car began tailing her in a way that made it seem unnecessary to park legally. Henry had fallen asleep again in the backseat. She exhaled, trying to catch her breath, hoping to generate any sort of explanation that might exonerate her. Nothing came to her. Perhaps she didn't deserve for anything to come.

Obeying her nerves, she was fast out of the car. The police officer who had rolled in behind her was quicker than she was. He pulled Henry's carrier from the backseat as Lauren lunged for it, if only to touch his foot one last time. Another police officer stood with the tall woman in the pink coat, his imposing frame the very picture of enforcement. The woman sprinted toward the first officer with unconstrained relief. The imposing officer pulled a walkie-talkie to his lips, "We have an update on the 207 on 95th. Suspect has returned the child."

“Lauren!” Drew ran toward her, fuzzy in the barrage of red and blue.

She opened her mouth, which she found garbled with desperation.

“I just wanted—” she began.

Kayla Aldrich

The Best Medicine

There's a joke and it goes like this:

A woman called Astrid takes a visit to her doctor and says that she's depressed. She explains that life seems to be one hundred and ten percent harsher than it does on the typical Tuesday. *It's been a year*, she says, but does not admit *it's been a year since I lost someone*.

The doctor smiles, buffing his hands together. Something like pity stirs the harsh lines of his face.

"Oftentimes, when I feel sad, I laugh at the clown Pagliacci. She's this quiet creature that lives alone with her dog, works in a field she loathes, and is generally the saddest sack of a person I've ever laid eyes on."

Though Astrid was too tired to be properly offended, she still says: "Doctor, don't you know that I'm Pagliacci?"

And the doctor replies: "Did I stutter?"

*

It was hotter than hell, and it couldn't even be the dry type of heat, either. Astrid was caught in a vice by a wet, oppressive band of humidity that made every breath labored; it caused her to think of the cigarette smoke that corroded Pops' lungs and how it had warped his laugh into a rasp.

The cigarettes hadn't killed him. The heat made her think of that, too.

Still, Astrid would let herself be broiled alive if it meant getting away from the dull interior of her office, her nosy coworkers, and her boss that always stood a little too close despite every cell in Astrid's body blatantly protesting his presence. Why no one had stopped her from becoming a business major, she couldn't say, and the fact she had a steady job at a risk assessment firm still boggled her. It was a fairly low-level position, the pay was good as were the benefits. All the perks in the world didn't make it any less mind-numbing. Being free to sit up shop at a flea market and idly count out the crumpled bills she'd collected in the last few hours was the highlight of her week; it was a testament to Astrid's living standard that she didn't wish to examine too closely.

"How're we doing, buddy?"

Lenus, her stubborn-willed Australian Shepherd, harrumphed from

where she'd raised her car's back hatch. He perched in the shade, the silver of his fur catching the afternoon light.

"I know," she murmured, rubbing a hand down his back. The nub of Lenus's tail wobbled briefly before he settled and sighed, as if aware Astrid had strategically arranged him to draw in potential customers. It worked relatively well, this light dose of exploitation.

The majority of the items she'd arranged on a folding table had been snatched up already. The rest, if they weren't sold, would end up back at home. Astrid didn't entertain the thought of dropping anything off at GoodWill and was adamant nothing would see the inside of a Salvation Army. There was a certain intimacy of seeing the face of whoever gave Pops' things a new home. She could scarcely stomach imagining strangers walking through fluorescent-lit aisles and roughly handling objects that once mattered to Pops in some capacity.

One man, who looked to be in his mid-forties, bought the majority of the fishing lures Pops had purchased and cluttered the garage with, never opening them. She'd been incapable of disturbing the multitude of tackle boxes— something Astrid equated to desecrating a gravesite— for fear of nosediving further into a pool of debilitating numbness.

It was her professional opinion that straightening up was practical. Necessary. It was like weeding a garden to usher in brighter, thicker foliage. She'd repeated this mantra more than once for the sake of her sanity.

"They're two for five or five for ten dollars, sir," Astrid had explained to Man Number One, upending another water bottle into Lenus's bowl. He lapped gratefully and she was glad to have laid out a towel to keep Lenus's sloppy slurping from ruining her upholstery.

"Oh!" Man Number One said, flashing a crooked grin. "What a steal!"

He scooped up a few lures into the wide breadth of his palm and jogged off a dozen steps as if robbing Astrid. Man Number One was quick to hurry back when her expression didn't change, when it became clear no smile was going to tip her mouth upright.

Another guy walked by her table and hummed. "You've got a whole lot of baits and not a rod in sight. You sell out already?"

This man had a bit of a pot-belly and his words were lopsided from the cigarette hanging out his thin mouth. If his legs were skinnier and his hair were more flaxen, Astrid might've found an echo of Pops in him.

"No, sir," she said. "I wasn't selling any rods today."

"A right shame," he sighed. Man Number Two flicked his cigarette

a safe distance from her table and she watched the ash flutter free like the head of a dandelion caught in a breeze. “A damn shame, if you ‘scuse my language, miss.”

Again, no smile, but she nodded amiably enough, and said: “I’ll allow it.”

And just because Pops had been gone a year didn’t mean it was time for her to gut their house. Astrid had scarcely made a dent in Pops’ plethora of possessions. That, she reasoned, was probably why it didn’t sting, was likely why Astrid didn’t feel like she was going to vomit when she’d loaded up the car, grabbed Lenus, and drove to the flea market thirty minutes outside the city that morning.

Just like those tackle boxes, she’d given away or sold the bare minimum. Astrid had taken nothing from Pops’ room, his boat remained covered by a tarp in the driveway, and she hadn’t dared to touch any of his DVDs that dominated a corner of the living room. His arrowhead displays still hung on the left wall of the entryway, his classic truck calendar stuck on the month of May even though it was no longer the same May. She had interspersed a few of his well-worn flannels into her wardrobe, but only the ones already scattered on the backs of chairs or draped haphazardly on the coat rack by the front door. Pops’ favorite mug was still sitting beside the coffee machine as if he was simply late in coming downstairs for breakfast; their house was practically untouched from the last time he’d been inside it.

Practical. It was all very practical. Her boss would be pleased with her thinking so.

A third man of note ambled by right when she was packing up.

“You alright?” he asked, catching her in the midst of an impressive thousand yard stare. “Come on, honey, would a smile kill you?”

“Probably,” Astrid said, waspish, giving the collapsed table a shove into the middle row of seats. Lenus waited for her up front, leaving nose prints on the windshield as he tracked a bumblebee. “How ‘bout you smile for me, huh?”

Man Number Three blinked.

“Yeah,” she said. Her face folded further into a grimace. “That’s what I thought.”

*

Astrid wasn’t sure when she stopped laughing. Or smiling. Or feeling much of anything.

It might've come when she turned on her phone and the device vibrated out her hand with an influx of notifications. Surely it was when a neighbor called on a too-bright Monday to break the news that Pops was gone.

"All for a stupid rod," Sandra From Two Houses Down had wept, and Astrid, even in her state of shock, didn't have to strain to hear the trumpeting notes of a nose being blown. She would learn Pops thought he'd left a rod at the pond he'd fished earlier in the day. He hadn't clarified which rod, wouldn't have thought to when he had too many to specify. "I said I'd drive him over to look in the morning, but he... he wouldn't wait. He just wouldn't wait. I'm so, so sorry, Astrid."

Maybe it was in the stifling silence of her half-packed dorm room, where Astrid struggled to compute this new development and her eyes went glassy when they skimmed over the graduation regalia hanging on the back of her door. Could it have been somewhere on the drive from campus to home, once she'd had a breakdown in no less than four separate McDonald's parking lots. Or was it before the trip to the medical examiner given she was listed as Pops' next of kin. It may have been after, when the sight of Pops' body had brought forth the crippling observation that *he looks like wax*.

Maybe it was when Sandra had come out on the front steps to greet Astrid and had Lenus trailing after her, and Lenus had peered up at Astrid with those eyes— one and a half brown, the rest a sliver of ice-blue— and she'd seen something like disappointment in him. She wondered if it was when Lenus, who Pops had found the same week Astrid first went off to school, seemed to realize that Pops wasn't coming home and Astrid would be the one taking care of him. Or when Lenus spent a week lying in front of Pops' room, barking or whining or both, until Astrid climbed out of bed to let the damn dog see that Pops wasn't inside.

Maybe it was when she'd gone online and searched *how to give a eulogy*, and Astrid read that eulogies weren't supposed to be sad. According to the internet, they ought to be uplifting, usually consisting of some kind of story that would elicit chuckles rather than cries. Possibly, it was the funeral, itself, and being obligated to hold the emerald urn with blocky meander around the rim that impossibly contained all of Pops. She couldn't count on both hands how many people said something like *he would hate to see you so upset*, but Astrid's face was dry and she'd been all cried out by then, and Pops wasn't even there to see her in such a state, anyway.

From where he was buckled in the passenger seat, Lenus whined.

Astrid reached out blindly, her hand landing on the soft dome of his skull. He was warm and quick to lean into her palm. She hushed him when he let out another pathetic sound.

“We’re almost there,” Astrid said, nodding to the glass and steel buildings huddled like sardines on either side of the street. Her blinker clicked to preface their upcoming left turn. “Another couple of miles, buddy.”

*

It’s possible there’s no joke at all. It could be a bit of mistranslated text with the potential to carry an air of mirth if Astrid wasn’t so goddamn sad. If her guilt hadn’t sank into her joints with the bite of meathooks. If such a comedic anecdote existed, it would go like this:

“Bartender,” the poor drunk would slur. “My Pops died. He died and I was far away, and I had promised that I’d give him a call the night it happened, but I didn’t. I’d been studying for an exam I ended up failing and it just... slipped my mind. For three hundred and sixty-five days, I’ve wondered if I’d only remembered— if I’d only remembered to call, would he still be alive?”

The faceless bartender would nod, wrist rolling in methodical motions as he swiped a rag around the belly of a beer glass. “Is that why you’ve got such a long face?”

“No, asshole,” the drunk would snarl. “*That’s* because I’m a horse.”

*

The park had entrances marked by gates in the cardinal directions, all of which were bracketed by maps, vending machines, and water fountains. It was a popular spot for families, for spreading out a blanket and reading on a sunny afternoon. She and Pops once killed an entire summer coming to fish the river that cut a jagged scar through the landscape. And how times had changed, because Astrid couldn’t stomach any body of water larger than her shower stall, not after it was presumed Pops thought he’d seen his missing rod floating on the surface of that damnable pond. He thought he saw it, and he leaned in, squinting, trying to make sense of the shape in the dark, only to fall.

A blessed cloud cover dumped a pack of slow-moving cotton balls

across the sky and helped in dulling the sun's glare. Astrid entered through the western gate which put her furthest from the hissing current, her hand tightening reflexively on Lenus's leash.

The park was within walking distance of their neighborhood and thanks to such close proximity, Pops had dedicated an hour a day to taking Lenus on the numerous dirt trails at the public's disposal. Astrid had been so glad he had a companion, that Pops wouldn't be alone while she was working toward her degree.

Lenus had become her closest friend over the past year, and sure she'd liked him well enough when Pops was still alive, but she'd grown to love Lenus as if he was her four-legged sibling. Some days he felt more like her child. Astrid appreciated that she didn't have to make an effort to carry a conversation if there were long, awkward silences between them. There was no need for any kind of extended performance with a dog and even when she wasn't alright, Lenus's schedule kept her moving, kept her mental health from deteriorating more than it already had. It was another facet of her life she didn't care to stare in the face, though it was something she was confronted with once or twice a week when the various gossips in her department wanted to shoulder their way into the details of Astrid's nonexistent private life.

"I know what you're trying to do," she muttered, distaste soaking every letter that left her mouth. Astrid gave Lenus a pointed tug when he stilled at the sight of a squirrel across the grass. "Don't try it."

The bit of blue in one of his eyes gave Lenus the ability to look at her with the canine approximation of being unimpressed. If Lenus could speak, he'd probably say something like: "Well maybe if you let me get closer to that chew toy, woman, I wouldn't have to give you *the eyes*."

"Don't try it," Astrid repeated, increasing the speed of her stride. "Your tricks don't work on me."

Lenus huffed and she couldn't pretend there wasn't a dismissal behind the noise.

The wail of an ambulance sent a dozen birds fleeing their perches in the trees and Lenus's ears twitched like a pair of grey satellites. She wondered if it was from the three car pile-up they'd passed on their way over or if someone had been hurt, elsewhere.

Could be a heart attack, her mind piped up unhelpfully. That was what was listed on Pop's death certificate, but it only narrowed the lens of truth down to a pinhole. And her mind fuzzled out at the thought, at the weight of a year pressing down on the line of her shoulders like she was

some hollowed echo of Atlas. Pops had told her, once, that the stars above were holes poked in the lid of a jar; that everyone on earth was very small on the grand scale of things, that each living thing was just wriggling underneath the microscope of the universe. Her parents were out of the picture, and her Nan had died when she was seven, and it took losing Pops for Astrid to realize how tiny her world was without him in it.

What she wouldn't give for a phone with an extension to the afterlife. For thirty seconds of extra time to say, *I'm sorry. I love you, and I'm trying my best. I'm so exhausted and all I want to do is make you proud, Pops, and I'm sorry, I'm—*

Astrid hadn't realized how long their excursion had lapsed until she glanced to her right and found her feet had carried them to the steep hill leading down to the river of her youth. She spotted the second bundle of nut-brown right when Lenus *pulled*.

The leash burned as it ripped through her fingers. Such abrupt momentum sent Astrid thudding face-first into the grass and her head snapped up, spitting out the mouthful of earth that met her teeth in time for the squirrel to zip down the incline. And her dog, *Pops*' bullheaded little asshole of a dog, was right on its heel

"Lenus!" she screamed, lurching up onto her hands and knees. "Lenus, stop!"

The squirrel never lost speed, even when Lenus slipped and skidded, snapping at the speedy creature and ultimately failed at latching his teeth around anything but open air. She couldn't move. She was caught in a vice, because Astrid knew the river was deceptively deep, just as it was at the pond where Pops was lost.

At the last moment, the squirrel turned, bolting away from the snarling water.

Lenus's momentum was too great, and— and he just— Pops' foot had caught on a gnarled root. No one was around to help him, to see his struggle, to hear him when he went still among the lily pads and cattails. Lenus disappeared with an erratic jerk of limbs, the initial sound lost over the crash of the current, over the pounding of Astrid's heartbeat trying to hammer through the base of her ears.

With a biting clarity, she was back in that coroner's office. The world blurred and Astrid was looking down at Pops where a snapping turtle or some particularly flesh-hungry fish had claimed a chunk of his ear. He was entirely drained of color, was too-still. He held absolutely no resemblance to a being that had ever been alive and Lenus wouldn't look

like that. He'd be like one of those poor, stuffed creatures in a natural history museum. Her boy would be lifeless, stiff, sad-faced—

Astrid took a running start down the incline, scrambling, trying to keep from falling and breaking the skin of her shins, and plunged into the water without an ounce of grace. She was submerged instantly. It could've been seconds or years since Lenus vanished from sight, and she had no idea such brutal, liquified force was possible. Had the water been so unkind when she was a child?

"L-Lenus!" Astrid gasped, clawing her way to the surface. Her hair obscured half her vision and the rest blurred from whatever runoff tainted the river. "*Lenus!*"

She wasn't quick enough to dodge the thick-bellied log that broke the skin of her cheek and if she bled, any rush of heat was lost on her. Lenus had never cared for the water, had been prone to lounging by the shore if he accompanied Pops on his fishing trips. But Australian Shepherds were water dogs, weren't they? Could they be? If she was struggling, fighting tooth and nail to remain buoyant, then how was— no. She didn't let the train of thought leave the station, because Astrid could not lose him. Not Lenus. And she willed her brain to keep up, to think of a plan, to keep it minimal. Find, grab, go, and promptly find another place to take him for—

There.

Astrid spotted a trashing form in the water just out of arm's reach and she felt *Lenus* scrape out her throat. A raw, pleading thing. She was near enough to hear whining and even a bit of panting, and she refused to lose him, this last precious piece of Pops that made the rest of the world seem a little less cruel.

She cursed her body and her aching limbs, willing her muscles to stretch farther, to propel her the needed distance as Astrid got a hand in Lenus's fur. If he yelped at her white-knuckled grip, she didn't hear it over the all-encompassing roar of the river, and Astrid sucked in a harsh breath in case her head was forced below the surface again. Her free arm flapped erratically about, making to remain afloat, blinking hard to try and find a shape that vaguely resembled the shore.

Astrid willed any kind of cosmic scale to tip in her favor. So much had been claimed by the water, and if something else had to be taken, she hoped it was her. She willed Lenus to make it out even if she ended up washing into the ocean; if she sank and was never recovered, it would be alright so long as Lenus lived. Astrid never stilled. Never let herself rest even as her sight was going and three-quarters of her exhales were wet,

stinging splutters.

One particularly vicious kick of her legs sent Astrid's sneakers scraping the bottom of the riverbed. She could've wept at her toes finding purchase, could've wailed when she lost that divot and had to fight for another. Lenus hadn't stopped kicking, either, and when her foot made firm contact with loam, Astrid dug in her heels and jerked him toward the blurry streak of beige and black pebbles.

The river never stopped working against them, not even when she successfully heaved Lenus onto the grit. Astrid flopped down beside him, spent and beaten, and no matter how sharp her relief, rage cut through her bloodstream no better than a comet burning across the vacuum of space.

"Fuck you," Astrid wheezed, fisting his collar with a trembling hand. Lenus shook himself, his tags clinking like the notes on the upper end of a piano scale. She would have to beat at her chest to knock the water from her lungs if she wished to breathe properly in the near-future. "If you'd just listened to—"

He licked a stripe up the side of her face, letting Astrid bundle him close. She kissed his soaked head once, twice, thrice. It was a testament to how shaken Lenus was that he made no move to wriggle out of her grasp. Astrid's hand flattened over his ribs and his heart, capable of producing a mere single thought with any iota of clarity:

At least I saved one of them.

"Hey!" came a call from up the hill. "Hey, are you okay?"

It was a jogger still running in place even as he peered concernedly down the incline at her and Lenus. She couldn't be sure if it was being intimately aware of how close her life had come to ending or if the sight of such a towering man in absurdly tiny shorts was enough to break her, but the dam she'd painstakingly constructed splintered and brought forth a great flood. Astrid was overcome with laughter, the face-splitting, chest-heaving sort that was loaded with rust; that made her cheeks sting, that made her cough and hiccup and wheeze until any and all snorting dissolved into sobs.

After everything, there was no punchline.



Erin Kathleen Bahl

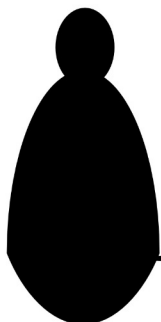
Nightingale and Rose

Nightingale and Rose

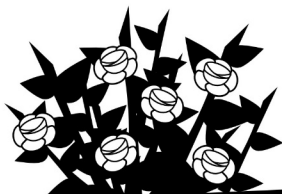


Erin Kathleen Bahl

inspired by Oscar Wilde's literary fairy tale



The man
needed a
red rose



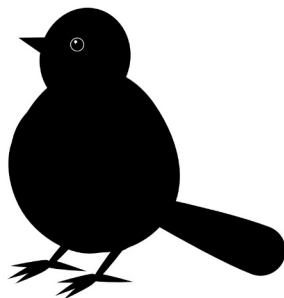
to court

his beloved.



But all he could find

were roses of
white.



The
nightingale
believed in
love



with all
her heart.

And so she
offered her
heart



for the beauty of
a single rose.

But just before her
strength gave out...



the rose withdrew
its thorns

and
wrapped
her in soft petals.



The rose
was the
reddest

the man
had ever
seen.

But its
beauty

was not for him.

Contributors

Kayla Aldrich

Kayla Aldrich is a staff reader at Feels Blind Literary and works at Read to Them, a non-profit dedicated to family literacy. Currently a senior at VCU in pursuit of an English BA, Kayla has work forthcoming in the '42 Stories Anthology'.

Joshua Allen

Joshua Allen is an American reject from Indiana, though you may know him as the guy your friend's cousin knows. His work has been published in Angry Old Man Magazine, River and South Review, and Tributaries, among others.

Suzan Andrist

Suzan Andrist is an Oregon Coast native. She works at the local community college library where she enjoys being able to connect with students and the public. Her love of nature inspires her to write stories that shine a light on how our lives are interwoven with our surroundings.

Erin Kathleen Bahl

Erin Kathleen Bahl teaches, researches, and practices digital writing in Atlanta, Georgia. She creates vector comics featuring birds, fairy tales, and the magic of everyday life. Her comics have been published by The Nashville Review, Into the Twisted Woods, and The Vermont Folklife Center, with forthcoming work in The Art of Mouseflower and Tales of the Unknown: Cryptid Anthology. She runs the ongoing webcomic Little Yellow Bird (@lybcomic).

Erin Brody

Erin Brody is a writer from the Pittsburgh area who attends Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School for their Writing and Publishing program. She has been published in pulp. for creative nonfiction, Hot Dish Magazine for fiction, and Dime Show Review for poetry. Outside of writing, she also enjoys participating in theatre.

Melissa Feinman

Originally from New York City, Melissa Feinman is a writer of short

stories, essays, and novellas. She graduated from Macalester College in 2017 studying creative writing and psychology. She now attends the University of Pennsylvania's graduate School of Social Policy and Practice, studying social work and nonprofit leadership. She hopes one day to start her own nonprofit that offers creative writing therapy classes and creative writing programming for adolescents and young adults. She is currently published in Literally Stories, for her short story "Seeing Music".

Callan Foster

Callan Foster is a lesbian poet who received her BA in English from Western Washington University. She currently works as a high school librarian, and is passionate about queer lit, education, and the color orange. She lives on an island near Seattle with her cat.

Mickie Kennedy

Mickie Kennedy is an American poet who resides in Baltimore County, Maryland with his wife, husband, son, daughter, and two feuding cats. He enjoys British science fiction and the idea of long hikes in nature. He earned an MFA from George Mason University.

D.S. Maolalai

DS Maolalai has been nominated four times for Best of the Net and three times for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections, "Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden" (Encircle Press, 2016) and "Sad Havoc Among the Birds" (Turas Press, 2019)

Aura Martin

Aura Martin graduated from Truman State University with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. She is the author of the micro-chapbook "Thumbprint Lizards" (Maverick Duck Press). Her recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in Capulet Mag, Radical: A Lit Zine, and Tule Review, among others. In Aura's free time, she likes to run and take road trips.

Mackenzie Moore

Mackenzie is a television and podcast writer in Los Angeles. She's been published on Man Repeller, Lunch Ticket, and in the forthcoming issue of the Northridge Review. She believes bagels heal most wounds.

Anthony Afairo Nze

Jay Parr

Jay Parr lives with his partner and their child in North Carolina, where he is a lecturer at UNCG.

Bailey Pitzer

Bailey Pitzer is a mixed media artist and educator located in Portland, Oregon. Through creating large scale drawings alongside sculptural ceramics of great blue herons, she is able to explore the relationship between self-reliance and change and how it affects her everyday life. Bailey has been working with 2D mediums for several years, but has only recently transitioned into working with ceramics in 2017. Bailey is currently a trustee on the board for K-12 Clay after being voted on in March 2019.

She has had the honor of putting the *Self-Reliance Battles Change Series* on permanent display at Midwestern State University as well as trading her piece *Choked Up and Changing* for a vessel crafted by Noe Quezada, an artist out of Mata Ortiz, Mexico. She has had her work displayed by the Wichita Falls Art Alliance out of Wichita Falls, Texas in the summer of 2019 as well as her undergraduate exhibition hosted by the Juanita Harvey Gallery at MSU Texas in May 2019.

Radoslav Rochallyi

Rochallyi was born in Bardejov, Slovak Republic. The author finished his studies in Philosophy at the UNIPO (1999–2005) and completed postgraduate PhD studies. Rochallyi has a close relationship to mathematics. In the philosophical essay *Mythra Invictus* he wrote: "Mathematics requires an active principle, and it is in the mathematical understanding of the world that you can approach perfection."

Sally Runions

Sally Jo is a technical writer by trade, but enjoys all kinds of writing. She publishes her shorter works on Instagram, under @sallyjopoetry. Her first collection of poetry, 'Droplets: Of Four Sisters,' was inspired by her younger sisters. You can find two of her poems in the 2019 NCW anthology, 'Rise! An anthology of change'.

Kristina Stocks

Krissi Stocks is a researcher and writer living in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. She grew up on a flower farm and moonlights as a public servant when she isn't writing.

Ron Tobey


Ron Tobey grew up in north New Hampshire, USA, and attended the University of New Hampshire, Durham. After professional careers in Southern California, he and his wife moved to West Virginia, where they raise cattle and keep goats and horses. Ron has written poetry for personal pleasure since he was 16, but only with retirement has he written poetry for publication.

Anne Marie Wells

Anne Marie's poems 'Shell' and 'Prayers' appeared in the Winter 2020 edition of In Parentheses literary magazine; her poem 'Cha-Ching' is slated for the 'Exposed' edition of Lucky Jefferson literary journal. Anne Marie navigates the world as a queer woman with a chronic illness.

Claire Zajdel

As a playwright my writing has been produced at theatres such as 59E59, Dixon Place, Theater for a New City, The Tank, The Kraine and others. My writing has been published in Breadcrumbs Magazine, FringeBiscuit Magazine, and more. I am a New York based writer.



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Radoslav Rochallyl; Sally
Runions; Kristina Stocks; Ron
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