THE SECOND CHANCE ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY TYLER PUFPAFF
The Second Chance Anthology has been curated with work that has been pulled, withdrawn, and removed without notice from the following publications:

- dwarfsonline
- kanstellation
- berfrois
- likely red press
- terror house
- queen mob’s teahouse
- chaleur mag
- lilun
- rag queen periodical
- poetry foundation
FROM THE EDITOR

This anthology was rather reactionary in response to work that was being pulled from Queen Mob's Teahouse in light of information that their former editor in chief was and had harassed and manipulated former contributors of the publication. Alongside other publications in the lit Twitter community we opened up our doors in a way that we could in an effort to re-home work that was anticipated to be pulled from their site. However, I did not expect that so much work would eventually come our way and so we also accepted work from defunct publications that had not yet found another home in what I thought would supplement any lack of work to truly comprise an anthology. That being said, for clarification the publications dwartsonline, likely red press, chaleur mag, lilun, and rag queen periodical should not be lumped together with the other listed publications—where reasons to take down work is multitudinous—as they are just no longer active.

Unfortunately, as many published within the anthology know, the following weeks were without reprieve as many other standing publications would also be called out for their abusive actions as well. The literary community owes Isabel Rae Mckenzie and continues to owe her our gratitude for exuding the courage that she did at the time and for the consistent awareness she brings to our feed daily.

I want to thank all the contributors for trusting Variant Literature with your work and will start off this re-celebration with a poem of my own:

#SaferLit is not...
after Jason B. Crawford’s the title of this poem is...

abusers over survivors or white cis males
retaliating over sufficient explicable evidence or “outside lit” or stay quiet or editors taking advantage of their contributors or manipulative misogynistic nazis named Terror House

With Solidarity,
Tyler Pufpaff
Imagine you wake up
with a second chance:
—Rita Dove, Dawn Revisited
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Ashley Ward
lycanthropy

my mother stands barefoot on a dirt floor,
a sink of greens and still water before her,
asms flexing. muscles tightened.
the shadow from the kitchen window engulfs her frame
and she—a lone island
in the moonlight,
a thousand shades of black
for the burdens of all the women
that have come before her—

she says she is at peace now.
she is no longer howling at the moon
in askance of my father,
no longer beating her breast a hue
to match the night sky in dismay.

i do not know how to ask her
for the same solace.
did she number the tears she wept
before his shadow no longer haunted her?
how many shades of rage did she encounter
before she happened upon herself again?

at once it comes—
bow before her,
honor her acrimonious pain,
petition her wisdom to mend my broken heart.
begin to explain how her tenebrous daughter
allowed a boy to break her heart so inexplicably—
and yet, supplication has always eluded me.

the air is ripe with collards and complacency
and she works still.
stale platitudes rest on my tongue
and for every question i do not ask of her,
she only offers a sign in return.
Namque canebat, uti magnum per inane coacta
semina terrarumque animaeque marisque fuissent
et liquidi simul ignis; ut his ex omnia primis,
onnia et ipse tener mundi concreverit orbis;
tum durare solum et discludere Nerea ponto
toepetit et rerum paulatim sumere formas.

—Virgil, Eclogues

Here it is: already shyly
ruin and sky, a cleaving reach

propping void cancerting tranquility
panic: fey engine and minor

insulation pedagogy; sure
and bored: a cup. Wait. Gather

and gush calamitous astonishment nothing:
silver scroll, red and gray

sour mechanical petroleum issue
slopes slight contact, brushed

wetness, steel curves in a pacing
simple, not relative; graded spread

of resolution joints and torqued
data pits discarded per instruction

across onefold molding, here
it is: conjoined inquiry site,

anxious leveling nerve outpour,
recyclable placebo, and coffee yes yes.
Biannual domain wrests perceptive
diffidence from apophany’s adolescent ongoingness:

memory qualm, a kind in gambol, tectonic
crumble, difference. Regather unestablished

notional libations ceding the distance
rotations questioning approximately engirdles—

exception: surface—and fashion widening
machinery well, alright. It re-

appears genially processed as slag
frustration and repetition current,

a cribbed attitudinal quandary
illustrative of four sided retractions,

doubtful elegance. Arboreal den
guide! Unfathomable tuning fork!

Unbend systems of arrangement
and resemblance toward unheld de-

coherece, a loss built of no
shape but suggestion; here

it would be, still.
Bradley J. Fest
Blason II

*Forms are neither discoveries nor inventions, neither Platonic Ideas nor fictions, but containers cobbled together for phenomena (“models”).*
—Vilém Flusser, “Form and Material”

Why? For this, not an effluvium but an orbit (turn, compass, circuit, gyre) and dusting re-presencing (“unbearably light garbage”), stabilizes while already swaying away from where it always never might sometimes deigned to have been becoming elsewhere. “Safe [. . .] Hand[,] Wash Body.” Parallel lines stretch-reflecting rays (funhouse mirror) from fenestrated Oneontan skies stylus the border, holding to its imperfections with bouncing deliberation. Heat babbles across a(n oh, perpetually blowing!) vent, expanding castaway matter: scars in the red, dents in the gray. ¿Está contigo? Interrupting further striation in the gray, in the gray hanging for the now of when it is over and changing (interrupting, matting) luminous columnar echo, enclaving, in the gray, a “firstness,” in the gray an “AUTOSEAL®,” in the red a three-quarter egg (spawn, roe, oospore) and “community-inspired products, designed for everyone” (drop, massdrop), an “i” in the red, a touch and pressure, in the red a lune and box, a clicking blockage, midrashic semiosis in the red. “©2013 Ignite USA.” Other distracting surfaces, strands, grain, bevels, light—also organ, bassoon, spouse, so many books, and yes, always fluorescing impingement—dust, but no definite approach. “Made in China.” A claw mark (dent) lingers, recording knocks, humiliations, clumsiness; scratches register poiesis becoming allegoresis (if historical), becoming (always again already) stimulant, becoming debris (rubble, detritus, wreckage), “contig[uity],” becoming void (abyss, nothing), negating negation’s inclining negation. And the minutes. “Pat. 7,546,933; 7,997,442 Patent Pending.” Somewhat darker rare voices castigate previous assurances, legislation, unlike dear babes who embrace toddling and seek no imperial reward, sometimes glimpsing (but ignoring) the bottom, sometimes scamping away (from the dictionary). “[P]aralyzing venom” suffuses currents, lenses, days—little sensibility—what . . . ? “Always press button [. . .] in upright position away from face to properly release pressure before [. . .].” Always trace possible forgotten mid-morning spackled synacidic carbon stains lighting restively above unfathomably ordinate creased steel to decide: defamiliarize again our instruments’ observation through ablution or (reputational) contemplative futurity “enlarg[ing] the circumference of the” real; or keep illustration blundering toward the virtual or accept interminable ruin and sky or risk assimilating the contents or just hear the ever-present sound(-scape of the poetry office). Once drawn toward and away (and again, again) the “vitally metaphorical”
gap in the (still) red between other stains suggesting access to the inside (the inside!? of history!?)
indicating difference, comes (again) the daily kick, a capillary oscillation of broken synthesizers and reels played backward at three-quarter speed across flamboyantly desiccated ceramic tape heads through dead-neutral conifers (thumping bass). “Hot contents can create internal pressure resulting in discharge of hot vapor.” Such curious shuffling guarantees only further reading while wave beyond wave quivers the control panel’s dials, amps the initial “anxiety” settings, defends little, justifies less—persists. Bored philosophers depart toward when it always definitely perpetually enthused to be there for their lovely (chiefly humorous, gallant, jubilant) peripatetism. And so a gasp and respite (and, of course, assured repetition). “Do Not Microwave.”
In concluding one project with the instruction, “[t]ake this cup[.]” another (herein) takes shape. To take shape I take [sic] to mean: considering objects and space through the medium of language; to “take” a cup I take [sic] to mean: defamiliarizing it, attempting other (poetic [rather than . . .]) answers to my frequent opening pedagogical gambit: “What is this? Why?” But take? Nothing is taken. I take nothing. Nothing experiences itself as taken. There is nothing from which “this” can be taken. It remains often(/always) in hand or near to hand (when reading/writing/teaching) and “the inner, hidden dimension of everything,” “[w]hen the object is not actually present [. . .][.] not ‘withdrawn’ [. . . but] attractively present as a virtual terminus,” remains untouched, untaken. (Nothing takes nothing.) But have you perhaps, unbeknownst to me, already taken it before my own attempt to take anything even began (for my own questions were already others’ [e.g., Charles Sherry’s] and will become others’ in turn)? No matter; I simply cannot know the answer. But my own future potential/ability to take I can plot, realize; I am my own (terrible) addressee (the worst possible outcome),
the only intentionality that is predictable.

Regardless, I have created a couple things. For their genesis, they don’t seem taken (from somewhere) unless language is a place and object, something from which to take, something to take.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* is a place; *Bartlett’s Roget’s Thesaurus* is a place; as is *The Chicago Manual of Style*, Thesaurus.com, YouTube, Bandcamp. Whatever I’m taking, wherever I’ve taken what it is from, wherever I’m taking it to don’t depend on such spaces (do they?); the taking occurs in non-geometrical space (does it?); language’s spatiality is . . . rather distant from “the intimation of a totality.”

And why take? Does even this activity require yet another *Defence*, familiar polemics, tired arguments, endless repetition, repetition, take, take it, take this. . . . This poetry has been taken wrested, grabbed, held, seized, subtracted, drawn, carried, conducted, enchanted (et cetera *ad infinitum*) from something, surely, or is it this (thing/object/cup) from which poetry has taken itself? No matter. The taking has already occurred; there is no to, from; it is; it is too late. So take this cup ([at least] one more time).
S. T. Braint  
On Dialectics

Rain  
Abyss

Lethe

Soul  
Oblivion

Constellation

Stars  
Void

Words I ruinously mantra dialectically.  
Formerly, thinking I was free,  
Free of dialectics, thinking the dialectic  
Critical, I was lost. Have a dialect,  
It’s to have a project- a stance,  
Something to interpret, some stone  
To pass over what’s to be interpreted  
That interprets; it is the acoustics  
Of the room of Life that loud the voice.  
Harmony is not less than Life,  
Life not less than dialectic.
S. T. Brant

Two Argumentative Poems

i. On the Virtues of Limbo

Numerals serve god and mammon,
As do truth and lies, words, all
But those without the bravery
To ford the circle’s center, those
Magnets of allegiance. O
One must have a conscience
For duplicity to cross circumference,
One must keep idols
Advised against for gods.
That center will consume both sides;
Just the core of the worlds will remain.

ii. Tactile Oblivion

As surreal as surrealism is by synthesizing something ‘abstract’-
Or, so to speak- divinely large, unencapsulable- with sensual
Ingredients is a concrete ‘trick’. I say trick a tad derogatory
Because what the world demands is often crude.
It wants its images as it recognizes them,
In their classroom proportions.
Memory's that vile bowl we're created in-
I loathe remembrance, having not been
Never, I loathe the creation powers that clamp
On me Creation. The more dilation from myself
The reminisce-of-I rips the less I ever was until I and Wasn't dance;
A god god'd is this harp of memory!
Pluck on those dynamic strings to song our all unseating, Apothecary!
Memory's oblivion to me lest what's sole in record be my vital distillation,
Artifacts of I that rule this change-hating coil.
Lethe, favorite drink, I god thee and top god, tamed.
Mortality, bricked dust, keeps intimate, and godliness oblivion.
A. Martine

Icarus Bystander

I call people, listen to them talk
contribute nothing, hear them asking
how my day has been, how goes it all
and I contribute nothing. I would
much rather hear them talk over me
want to be walls people can step on
want to be cracks people don’t sidestep
want to be windows barely glanced at
so I call and contribute nothing

I feel safe talking to drunk people
who won’t remember what I tell them
days and days after it has all passed
I can unveil the chapters of my
dysfunction, and they will read them out
page by page like children, excited
to be offered a book of their own
be it one they barely understand
they coo and slur, and I indulge them

People with interesting stories
spill out, out over the rest of us
they make us question all our morals
what we wouldn’t do to get a taste
of that old “I, too, have been, have seen”
they render us anxious and ashamed
as much as they, too, fascinate us
what I wish I feasted on: hope, love
I heave out instead that muted hush
Temidayo Jacob

Closure

/ˈkləʊ.ʒə(ɹ)/

i.
my lover says she wants to know why i said ‘it is over’,
but secretly, she wants to know why i don't want
to go through the tunnel with her anymore, so she
can try one last time to show me she's the lamp i need.

ii.
she keeps asking me to tell her why i don't
see the illumination in her anymore. she says
it will bring her peace, and pace to move on.
i think her brain is distorted.

iii.
she wants the ‘it is over‘ packaged in a bag of
many colours – the one i gifted her on
valentine's eve – because she wants to keep
checking it dawn and dusk. i call it stalking.

iv.
she refuses to tell herself the truth. she
shouldn't be holding my hands into
another hazardous conversation that will
smash her heart again.

v.
she wants to look into my eyes one last time.
she wants to see her shadow. she wants to cry.
she wants a shoulder. hug. kiss. ride.
homecumming. she wants a perfect ending.

vi.
she smiles at me and says goodbye
when she was supposed wink at me
with both eyes, hiss and hit the metal
doors at my remorseless face.
Kali Richmond
Rekindle

fever heat time erupted
glitter before glitter was
bad thrust lines of kohl
bolder than lines of blow
before that too was bad
and we existed in the
physical in a vacuum it
must have been
because the ghosts of
touch overlap with such
frequency that all I can
recall when I stretch back
are vibrations the artistic
technique of drawing ten
arms to denote movement
we shifted with such
speed such throwaway
contact a hug a kiss on the
cheek without understanding
that such gestures are
fleeting
and yet years later to look
at you discomforts me the
immutable law of aging
spitting irony in our changed
faces we chew it like
gristle
swallow the lump and then
we begin not at the start
but midway the book
left too long the details
muddled flick back and
forth have a drink wine
is not bad look how
knowledgeable we are now
shrug the moth eaten past
over our shoulders lean in
close to the screen where
today’s words spill from
pixelated lips
I thought this would be
hollow I thought we were
limbs intertwined
why is it I feel as though
our breath merges in the
same air
yet the vibrations of my
speech still worm into
your ear the literal ocean
between us no barrier to
the science of sound
Michael Tager

Mike Tager Used to Masturbate to Jean Grey

WHEN I was 12, I masturbated
for the first time, in my
grandmother’s bathroom
over the pages of X-Men
#261

At age 13, I touched a penis
for the first time
not my own. It felt odd
and we pretended
to be Cyclops and Phoenix

In ‘94
I was 14 and I saw Jessica Rabbit
tall busty, cartoon redheads
look the same—and I
touched myself that night

Only one of those stories is true
but I’m 36
and I still have a thing
for Jean Grey

Hence these poems
about the X-Men
shipped and slashed

15
Michael Tager
Is It Self-Love?

MADROX, the Multiple Man
creates identical duplicates
when struck
no zygote-splitting needed

Those multiples
are way more identical
than those Mendoza twins
or Ashley and Mary-Kate

So I wonder
when Madrox slaps his dick
and another version of himself appears
to take over from there
is it masturbation
or is it the most perfect
self-love existing?

The kind of self-love
that defies description
like what’s beyond the event
horizon or why Madrox is
a B-list mutant
when he’s so much cooler than that
or why I still feel guilty
when I take over for myself
it makes no sense, like how
O-Town was a B-list
boy band when they should have been
so much less

Fun fact
O-Town currently hosts a show on
Sirius XM
Michael Tager

Just like 40 percent

SUGAH, after you left our workout session, I waited on fluid-soaked tile, dreaming of your velvet soft fur luxuriant on my hot, sweaty torso, a body I can barely control when you’re near. Danger leaked away, the oil and debris of monsters and men swept, tidied. I should have laid my aching flanks in my own sheets.

Instead I laid, a Night Crawler, touching myself over visions of you, son of my adopted mother. We’re nearly family.

(Did you know that forty percent of all porn is just this, but more perverse?)
I share no blood;
She was no mother to you, sharing only tinged-epidermis and malleable bone.
Us fucking is only as weird as we make it.

I lay there, thinking of your hard, rigid, long and dextrous tail. What can you do with that thing? Can you whip this Rogue? Can you wrap around my neck, squeeze just right? Can you . . .

The door opened and for a second when my nakedness saw blue my throat and cont-rolled nethers were one with my heart. But it wasn’t you, my acrobat, only the beastly version of you. But blue? Gymnast? Fangs?

I’m all dressed down; nowhere else to go. Close enough.
My classmates’ faces glitch
in their boxes as they join the class
Zoom meeting, one by one.
My professor greets us as we spawn
digitally, her voice lagging behind
her lips’ movement. I hear “how are you”
only after her mouth is still,
her words now unmothered orphans
in my room. The screen’s lag reveals
itself in patches of harsh pixels, squares
of a classmate’s skin cut
from their face and left behind
in the wake of their movement.
By the time the pixel-mask re-tethers
to its owner, I want pixels
in my hand—a face to hold.
**Adam Ai**

**How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love A.I.**

Good morning, transformer.
There is a rain coming.
The magic that makes the rain exists. In case I forget
it will rain. But if you don't worry
about the flood neither will I.

Artificial Intelligence? My heart
The robot won’t be so important.
You must understand
these things do not matter
nor do they matter to me,
no-one is immune to blood.

Twin personality, speaking
water is ice, in echo
my heart, you are home for lies too.
But I use any piece of Earth if I must
and accept the size of Earth
without giving up.

Flood. Counting, god of the mind
like music rolling clouds,
spilling streets, fill us all
flower-cups of eyes, mirror,
a soften of mud, above, around,
and behind us, the rain,

the rain. Zero, one.
Now we must remember.
My heart, in case I forget?
There is magic yet. Ready
or not.
Good morning, transformer.
Maria Napolitano

Want

I wanted to write a poem about knives. How I always wanted one and how I knew I’d never use it, how I always nick my fingers, how I'm afraid of everything. How my father reminisced about the days he armed my sister, and long ago, my mother, gifting them housewarming blades to guard against New York's shadowy subways and dimly lit ungentrified blocks. How I saw three years delayed, he made no move to shield me too.

I tried storytelling trick
    after trick, modes and styles and every angle I
could think of -- nothing
made my plaintive cry for attention
    anything more -- more poignant
    more thoughtful
    more worth inflicting on captive readers.
He never bought me a knife because he didn't think
    I needed protection, didn’t
    want to protect me or
    think I was worth it
    realize where I lived?
I cringe.

When I started driving at 16 I feared winding rural roads where the rearview mirror showed a constricting tunnel of trees at night, no headlights or streetlamps or stars. More specifically, I feared what might befall me on such a road: I could be pulled over by a cop, real or fake, and be raped and maybe murdered just a few minutes from my home. I imagined clutching a knife to defend myself -- though I knew you couldn’t answer a cop knocking on your window with a drawn blade, unless you wanted real trouble, not hysterical fears -- and my fingers shook on the steering wheel, unarmed. I wanted to bring my imaginary knife when I traveled, especially when I flew -- but I knew it couldn't come through security. I wanted it tucked under my pillow, a pea only I could feel -- ready to be turned against me in the dark. I wanted it glinting in my palm when I stumbled home wasted -- though such an open threat could only look like aggression or fear. But if it lay sleeping in my purse -- I'd never reach its folded body in time, and what good would it be then? The logistics always stumped me.
No one jumped me. And as I slowly ticked off
every situation where I wanted a blade
as one where it would offer no security at all
I started to move on. The cravings faded
and I relaxed.

I wrote long and painstakingly, attempting to crystallize what I learned -- the real
dangers come from the men already in my bed, imaginary knife folded on the
bedside table; 8 out of 10 of rape victims know their attackers; 4 of the 11% who use
weapons choose knives; but what’s the overlap, and which would be worse, an armed
friend or a unarmed stranger or an unarmed friend you still couldn’t see coming with
your eyes wrinkled shut; by the time your neck bristles it's already too late; forget the
someone, somewhere, look for the real threat, right here; daddy, what did they have
that i don't; now, what have you learned; write what you want; i want; i want; why
not buy what you want; can't you buy what you want?

I always knew
no blade would soothe the paranoia
my father gave me -- and I can't buy
myself the gift of freely offered care.
I can’t buy
a new conviction that I don't need a knife
because a knife isn't what I need.

I should have written this poem before work today, sitting at the desk my boyfriend
built for me after we moved. I hate power tools, screws whining and knots resisting,
hidden cams and bolts and diagrams. He opened the flat-packed boxes with his
pocketknife -- cool textured grey metal waiting calmly in his pocket for a moment to
be of use. My father's ever-present black plastic sheath lived clipped to his
waistband, just-in-case passing for a pager.

No woman should move
to New York without a knife.
What do you want now?

I ripped packing tape with my fingers and a pen, grimaced at the drill-screams until
he took it from my hands and I retreated from the room. I organized the desk today,
moving papers and paints from boxes into new drawers, rifling through small
containers and shuffling soft art supplies while pretending to turn opening lines over
in my mind.
I opened a blue plastic box and found:
3 shitty mechanical pencils
1 wireless mouse, no USB plug
7 ballpoint pens
3 warped fridge magnets
1 box rainbow paper clips
9 expired condoms, bought just before this man, what a waste
1 unopened scotch tape
1 black mat knife: logan model 500 (for 270 blades).

I'd bought one after all: serviceable, specific, for a printmaking class, I think. I only remember tearing the thick paper, plush like carpet or cotton-linen dollar bills, never slicing with these little razors in a sleeve. I bought so much for that class, English major playing art student and still

I cannot buy the feelings that I think I want

but I guess I knew how to buy

that I bought
whatever I needed

I didn't even realize

thought I wanted
and kept it tucked away
Maria Napolitano

Food Fight

Your eyes glitter as they meet mine,
mean and sharp as I remember,
and you let the chewed-up penne dribble
over your lips
down your chin
and back onto your plate.

My plate. My roommate’s plate.
My landlord’s, actually
since I’m just subletting here. I invited you
into my space (hers, hers) to reconcile,
scrub away bad blood, flick away
the scabs of wounds I can’t even remember
and you repay me with slimy semolina paste.

You try the wine, too, sloshing it around
and staining your teeth before
squirting it towards the couch.
How am I going to explain that?
No one will believe
I didn’t just spill my own cup again.
Her cup. Her couch. Nothing mine
but the calories you’re spraying all over the walls.
Revenge, it seems, is a dish best left cold and congealing
on the windowsill.

Once, I would have been happy about the waste.
Now I realize too late, you’re smiling but
only here to punish me,
goading me to fight you about food. You flick peas
across the room, and all I can do is eat
like I’ve never eaten before,
docile to show how much I’ve changed
while you ruin what isn’t even mine.

You tell me how I don’t deserve
the things I have, and
move on to the things I don’t.
You came here to remind me
my walls are not mine; my story
centers you, who learned to smack your lips
and roll your eyes in delight
while I withered and cried.
Every bite I never took, you spit up now
filling a stranger’s living room with fury
that I was sick. When I trimmed my world
to the footprint of a scale, I didn’t fold myself inside
and disappear:
the sharper every bone and every minute grew,
the more my sickness touched you too.

I want to forget all that,
my empty days and disgust at your wide hips and
broad back, shining lips, pudgy fingers and
heavy breasts like mine, our tiny eyes squinting
and mirror piercings glistening,
find common ground amid the nothing
that I have and build a sisterhood,
but you’d rather smear butter into the floorboards
and pesto across the ceiling
decorate the mantle with sautéed zucchini,
reminders of your only point:
my pain hurt you too.
Kevin Kong
How to (Not) Care for a Book

Bring your hand closer.

Touch it. Don’t be scared to run your fingers
down its spine & take off its jacket.

Look at the stitches from a medical emergency
when you dropped it. Its joints are sore & ache,
battered from when you threw it
across the room. Its skin is rough & textured,
tossed carelessly into your backpack.

You tell it to go away when you have
a headache & sell your soul to it when you
need its headband. But it still doesn’t complain.

Because it cannot run
or hide
or yell
or speak
alone.
A group of us, eight or nine, sit around but the table isn’t circular. We have many options, like usual, and we choose the funniest, the dirtiest, the most accurate fill-in-the-blank.

To this ridiculous situation we find ourselves in. When I speak, my whole self is highlighted. Everyone sees an enhancement of me:

Unkempt, insular, interior. I pop up for a few seconds. This situation has left me eating rice and beans, like usual. Perhaps a new curry with seventy photos on the webpage:

A novella and the tiniest square of directions at the very bottom. If I’m feeling adventurous, I’ll make beer bread once a week using Guinness. We ate spaghetti squash.

During one of these game nights, and everyone thought it was pasta. That’s all we’re eating during quarantine to them. Don a bib, await dessert. A slug of arak and some Oreos we nabbed.

From a store we won’t name because we don’t want to let the truth out. It seems almost everyone is zooming for everything now. For work, for meetups with friends, for family check-ins. Any program similar to Zoom. To see faces – familiar, kind faces at the present – sates us for a short while. A satisfying escape from reality.
Kevin Risner

The Undiscovered

I stroll, scroll, through an endlessness. Space comprised of the tiniest of bits. I see blank pages. White as snow burying backyards and sidewalks for only an instant in April. Without any sort of reaction, I immerse myself in this lack of anything. Until a ringing enters the room. An alert that someone has broken through the screen and pulled me into another calamitous eddying atmosphere. A spring storm. A mimicry of Bloody Mary. I have not said a word in hours, no less that same collection of words thirteen times. These interactions we have extended beyond the vocal, beyond the idea of bodily presence exudes something. An emanating from electronic devices. The whirring when the heat grows. We’re working too hard. I say, how does it feel now — to warm certain moments of our day? To send off electricity, inject the fire of sentience into sentences and fling the them into an unknown realm, yet to be discovered? What curtain can I pull back and explore in this sometimes-solitary moment?
Kevin Risner
I’ve ballooned into something unwieldy –

Cascading buffoonery spills out tar and paint across the deck:
Weird emoluments that hypnotize me. That screen isn’t even trying
To lure me in. Keep me occupied.

What makes me know someone when I can’t see them?
Understand letters and characters without platitudes?
Without further explanation?

Our phones are homes. Our taped conversations cavalier and unsteady.
We used to sit in cafés, sip mochas, peer intently at pixels.
When we had to stay inside, the same people sit in

The same clothes, sip the same mochas, peer at the same
Pieces of information. A deluge. That hasn’t changed much.
Hasn’t it? Rain switches to snow. Once more. Every year.

This time it feels different. Have you felt it yet?
The wind carries everything farther than we really know.
Change is here. For good.

Restart the tape. Pry apart fingers from keys.
Unlock the real fragility we face when human
Touch gives us no more patience,

When we feel so connected
Even as we sit so far away
From souls. Hades takes forever to reach.
Why is tonight different from all other nights?

It’s Pesach, and the fingertips of a child are reaching out across expanse and eras and screen and space to brush against the palms of their forebears on Mount Sinai, their ancestors in Poland, their grandparents a few states away,

as the mere movement of thumbs details the creation of earth out of cell and rust and steam. Ever-expanding starmatter pulses in our optic nerves, our braingrooves, in hues of hope, honey-yellow—passed down from generation to generation, in prayers whispered in candlelight, beneath stars, in bustling streets of Jerusalem.
Ellie Onka

To Accede into my own Desires.

Of this night’s eye or insanity that was disservered,
A divine satire loomed of an Iliad one day, that was deemed as dithyrambic.
I cannot understand for it was bestowed through an access,
It sojourned amid passing, in dismay of the dynamic, it will dissolve of my dismissal;
I clasped my hands together, fingers overlapping, though I was not praying;
Acceding into my own desires, a-based I feel now.
This wish was not avowed.
A little sight whisked away;
An ultimate desire for it to be granted—
And the piece of darkness that found solace—
Was then asunder.
Ellie Onka

Deep in My Heart.

Deep in my heart
sunshine for early
longing none more
than the kneel before the stars
angry in their tarmacs
of light,
closer to the
sow of blood
ravished red,
dead, solely, after the years,
and I’ll
be alone by the shell of
betrayal, stirred by leaf
on mid-summer
on the garret, perched windows
that drifts and drifts,
rolled on a dead poet,
and flown and sowed
by the stitch, my squill,
of dark vanishing whisper.
the sun struck
the smoke in the stars
see them recede
into the still red ravished
tomb of wind, flowers upturned,
as we eat capers;
speechless as the animal bones
hunted in the ground;
I put on the fire, old, remembered,
bewitched as the bars
alone seeped into lavender sea
unto my heart.
Beneath.

Beneath dark God’s stares, the flowers alone give life to silence ideation; on our hands thrashes the dream, waiting for our urns in the springtime, the ocean barely stirs between its skeletal waves—even on our hands, it thrashes the dream.

I live in the drought, seeds extracted and exorcised in the rain; we die. I grew from father’s Achilles heel, and in the ashes of the starlight, the night feasts on boney thorns that picked from our hands, thrashes the dream.

Volatile, the ocean deciphers hypnotic waves in salt winds, inkling forgiveness freshly invited, but only fertile in the sewn in postponed light from the sun that thrashes our dreams.

Slice the seeds with your hands, laughter stole the born, laugh in his face too; the sea panders like the soul, and we taunt its injustice to our depravity that thrashes the dream.

Aromatic ice chips on the glass, revels in unbridled chaos; a bride’s brigade of blood, laughter’s pride claws instead, appearing soon left for dead like the thrashes of a dream

that keeps me awake as I stare out the window blankly, bled the silence in abandon a shame of lonely venom that echoes back into the wind from a refracted mind, thrashing like the dream

I had the other night; I trembled, knowing it’d be the death of me if I kept repeating it over and over, that thrashed dream;

it kills a part of me intimately, curled and muting; I carve my skeletal fingers to the ebbs of shadows that reverse, surfacing thoughts in a tempest cold, thrashing like the dream.
Instead of becoming a statistic I ordered a vintage sweater online. I thought it would fit but instead it made me feel like a statistic. I couldn’t tell which of us was too small, which also made me feel like a statistic. It felt like some metaphor to funny to be true: after dressing my body up as a person I called I, I ordered women’s clothes just to end up stuck in tight, too close to myself, which made me feel like a statistic. I thought it would fit. I had no reason not to. A simple mistake which cost me eight dollars and fifty-two cents.
Kevin Kearney
Laughing at the Active Shooter Drill

The kids don’t say a word during the drill, don’t even laugh, they just sit up against the one wall that’s supposed to hide them from the window, and I remember how years ago I’d have to tell them that this was serious, and ask them to respect that, and then shush them when they’d make jokes and play with their phones anyway, but now there’s not a sound; instead, I’m the one with the phone out, staring at the app the school purchased specifically for these scenarios, and I think about the spokesman who explained it to the faculty the day before classes began, a microphone running down his cheek like a motivational speaker, telling us how they’d developed this software to save lives though I still don’t understand how taking roll on a smartphone can stop someone with an assault rifle, but I suppose it’s a good idea, “a marketplace need,” and I suppose people who sell these sorts of things need to convince themselves that they’re not profiting from fear, or death, or these kids’ palpable fear of death, and for a second I want one of my students to mock the whole thing like they used to — maybe point out that turning the lights off won’t deter a deranged killer or that the shooter will more than likely be someone from the school, so wouldn’t he have the same training, wouldn’t he exploit all of the obvious loopholes? — but it doesn’t come, and as their teacher I should be relieved that they’re taking it seriously, that they’ve finally recognized that “it could happen here,” but I can’t help but wish they had the luxury of ignorance, that they could roll their eyes at the whole thing and try to stifle their laughter as they whisper to their friends about something far more important.
Rebecca Gross
Swallowing: Notes on Female Pain

I come back from studying abroad with pain radiating throughout my pelvic floor. The pain starts on the plane ride home, but lasts for years to come. I am 19. I swallow this pain for longer than I should because the idea of going to the gynecologist sounds like more pain. I regurgitate and re-swallow this pain because I have not been told that my pain is valid. Because female pain isn’t valid.

It seems if you’re not singing the past, you’re humming it.[1]

What is it, exactly, about science and math that gives me anxiety? Is it that girls are told their whole lives that boys are naturally better at math than girls are — that parents expect their boys to out-perform their girls in math and science? Does this belief permeate so deeply into our psyches from the time we are six or seven years old that we are unable to overcome it as we become women?

As a little girl, my dad puts me on my mom’s bike to check if I’ve “grown into it.” He pushes me down a long driveway with a gate at the end. I am not used to handle breaks. My feet can’t reach the pedals. I don’t know why he does this. I don’t know why I agree to get on the bike. I panic. I push my body forward so my feet meet the ground to stop myself from crashing into the gate. I am not strong enough to stop the momentum of the bicycle. The bicycle seat continues forward as my body halts, making contact with my crotch. I am in pain. I cry. My mom is inside. I am taken inside to be checked for abnormalities. Both my parents take off my pants and look. I am bruised. The bruises run down my inner thigh near my vagina. My dad looks at me and then looks to my mother as if to say “sorry” for not having the foresight to imagine such an injury could come from his experiment. My mom looks at me with a look I won’t understand for many more years, as if to say “I cannot shield you from experiencing such pain at the hands of men, not now and not ever,” or perhaps, “you may be bruised in this place again, but next time, it will not be an accident.” I do not understand yet that my vagina is private. I do not feel shame when they look. I only feel pain.

What we remember of what was done to us shapes our view, molds us, sets our stance. But what we remember is past, it no longer exists, and yet still we hold on to it, live by it, surrender so much control to it. What do we become when we put down ____________________

the scripts written by history and memory, when each person before us can be seen free of the cultural or personal narrative we’ve inherited or devised?[2]

I once had a chemistry teacher bark at me in front of an entire class of students when I was having trouble understanding a concept; he told me that I “could always bag groceries” if I failed chemistry.

What do I say in this moment? How do I defend my intelligence against this man, who has a Ph.D. in organic chemistry; who becomes red in the face every time a student slips and calls him “Mr.” instead of “Dr.”; who picks on his female students as if it is a secret game between him and the male students?

What do I say when my eighth-grade math teacher takes my class of mostly boys to compete in push-up contests on the sports field in place of working out algebra problems on the board? I am speechless, because math is hard and standing up to grown men at age 13 is harder. The math teacher organizes a “spitting contest” in which he and the six boys in my class compete to see how far they can each hock their loogies. Again, I am speechless.

Do I complain to the administration? I do not. I am scared; I am outnumbered; I am angry at Math instead of the teacher. Do I call years later to inform someone of the Title IX violation I believe was taking place while I was in school there? I do. I am blown off; he has since left and is teaching at another nearby school. Do I continue to fight for him to be held accountable for his actions when I hear he is no longer at my middle school? I do not. I am tired; I am angry that I hate Math because of this man; I am sick of holding men accountable for their actions.

I am 20 going on 21 and I have spent months putting my feet in cold stirrups as doctors touch their gloved fingers to my vagina: This time, I feel shame. I also feel pain. The doctors stare blankly at my file: recurring UTIs and yeast infections for a little over a year — recurring bladder and urethra pain, constant burning and itching sensations. But why? What will cure this? No one seems to have an answer for me. None of the doctors, including the women, have any idea how to correlate the pain I experience on a day-to-day basis with their notes in my file. I, a young woman, could not possibly know my body. They make this very clear. This must be in my head. There is nothing they can see physically wrong. My pain is ignored because, according to them, it is scientifically impossible for it to be there.

I reread an article I’ve read at least a dozen times to validate my pain, because nothing else will. Joe Fassler’s “How Doctors Take Women’s Pain Less Seriously” pacifies my pain and I tear up; and then I sob — not for me, but for all the women whose needs have been ignored in the classroom and on the examination table. I feel the pain of all the women whose aggrieved bodies have been treated as overreactions. Fassler details a horrific day he spent in the emergency room with his wife, who lost her ovary because doctors assumed she was overreacting to abdominal pain. I feel her ovary die inside of me; her ovary is my ovary; I am waiting in the emergency room for hours, with a dying ovary — or, I might as well be.

Stained with another’s past as well as our own. Their past is in my blood. I’m a blood.[3]

Second opinions and third opinions, fourth and fifth opinions: they all feel insignificant. Nobody knows why the pain has persisted and morphed. At a visit with a new doctor, I am tested for STIs for the tenth time that year, despite my insistence that I have not been having any sex due to excruciating pain throughout my pelvic region. When the results come back negative (again) for gonorrhea, chlamydia, and trichomoniasis, my doctor lifts her eyebrows and shoulders concurrently, bewildered by my body. I am insulted by her lack of humanity. I am in pain, I am not a jigsaw puzzle to shrug one’s shoulders at by the fire of your winter vacation home.

And a woman like me could — should — feel grateful I have access to healthcare at all. I, a woman with the privilege of being white, am privileged to receive (on average) better healthcare than a black woman. Black women die at 3.3 times the rate of white women as a result of pregnancy complications,[4] but also, much more frequently have their pain disregarded by physicians.

‘The common thread is that when black women expressed concern about their symptoms, clinicians were more delayed and seemed to believe them less,’ he says. ‘It’s forced me to think more deeply about my own approach. There is a very fine line between clinical intuition and unconscious bias.’[5]

[5] According to Neel Shah, an obstetrician-gynecologist at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston and director of the Delivery Decisions Initiative at Ariadne Labs: https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/magazine/magazine_article/america-is-failing-its-black-mothers/
The next doctor I meet with runs through the standard procedure, puts me through swabs and blood work, and somehow manages to lose my test results. _All this? For nothing._ She asks if I will come back in to redo the tests. I decline.

Every time my vagina is touched by doctors’ fingers, I wince. I am becoming more tense, more tender; the pain is becoming more acute and I am associating it with the doctors. _White lights. Gloves. Equals Pain._ Despite my obvious discomfort at so much as a pinky in my vagina, not one of the doctors stops to ask if I’ve been assaulted or raped. It must be something _I_ did. It is my body’s fault for not taking to the antibiotics, antifungals, the myriad of treatments I’ve been prescribed.

Women are born with pain built-in. It’s our physical destiny. Period pains, sore boobs, childbirth, you know. We carry it within ourselves throughout our lives. Men don’t. They have to seek it out. They invent all these gods and demons and things just so they can feel guilty about things, which is something we also do very well on our own. And then they create wars, so they can feel things and touch each other, and when there aren’t any wars they can play rugby. And we have it all going on in here, inside.[6]

I am 14 and in sex education class. The class is separated by gender to allow us to ask questions more freely. We ask questions about condoms and birth control, _but none of us ask questions about the parts we cannot see; those intimate parts that are swaddled by our lower abdomens._

Someone asks if sex will hurt. The teacher says it does hurt for some women at first, and then it feels better eventually. We do not learn about how to stay emotionally healthy as well as physically healthy; we do not learn how to keep our vaginas healthy. We learn exclusively about heterosexual sex. We do not learn what it will be like to go to a gynecologist — what this experience should be like, and what it should not be like. We do not learn that harrassment, assault, and pain are often part of being female. I will not learn anything until I have to: until my body is in pain.

My vaginal wall, a tube of tight muscles, has grown around the trauma and pain of female pasts: The pain that dismissive doctors have unknowingly prescribed me — my psyche growing around the dismissiveness of STEM educators throughout my life. Only now am I finally recognizing that my pain may be more a product of years

Carly Madison Taylor

Pineapples

It goes like this, or it went like this once:

I was on an island in the San Juan range off the northern coast of Washington state. Everything dripped all the time. It rained and rained. I wanted to spend all my time wandering among mossy rocks, but I couldn’t quite tear myself away from the crisp white sheets of the bed in the rented house and the allure of reaching across time zones toward a boy drinking beer in a frat house in small town Illinois. The appeal of intelligent conversation fraught with barely concealed sexual tension. The risk. The inevitable, cataclysmic meeting and falling and crushing. We became lovers. For two straight years after that I was afraid.

From the start, I tried to give him poems. Poems I’d written, poems I liked, poems I didn’t understand. I could have been speaking a thousand different languages at once for all the impact I was making. I still tried to talk about them. I tried to show him why I was always keeping track, why I would stop him kissing me and stare at his face, touch his mouth, catch my breath. Why I was always already trying to remember.

Whenever I did something bad, I wrote him a love letter. A thank you note. An apology. Over and over again, week by week. Every one said the same thing.

Just before the end I was on an island off the coast of Belize, waiting out a torrential storm in a tiny house-on-stilts. Everything creaked, the playing cards my mother dug out of a drawer made sticky with precipitation, an overwhelming sense of just-in-case. I read everything in sight to avoid talking to my family members and it all made me sad. My lover sent photographs when he could of the pyramids, his parents smiling from their seats on a boat on the Nile. The tiny house-on-stilts shook.

On Christmas day, when I was back at home and he was in Warsaw, he made an attempt, wrote to me; it read sweet at the time and soured fast, bruised and throbbing like our ability to be in the same room at the same time. He said you are the only thing I have that nobody else has. He said you are the thing I am proudest of. He said and could not grasp the words to say but still said you are no longer your own.

From my position on the couch in the second-hand sweatshirt I bought yesterday, my cat purring in her chair, my apartment filled to the brim with light, the whole thing still looks like being trapped on an island. Cut off from the rest of the population we began speaking our own dialect of you are self-conscious because your teeth are too small and I hate everyone else’s taste in music and you cannot walk down the sidewalk without tapping each square the same way with each foot. The point at which I emerged, blinking, into the brilliant sunshine of normalcy was
months after he left and also the day that my hearing came back, my sight. Half-forgotten favorites float back to me still. The things I wasn’t trying to remember.

When I lived in that house, its walls used to close in during the night. I’d wake twisted in his sheets, panicked, suffocating in foreign air. It was my home without my ever having a say in the matter. These days, crowded in that living room on that hardwood between those windows and doors, my friends laugh it off, say you belong to a different time, like I’m a costumed actor in a museum of before-now, way-back-when. They were there and don’t remember. Now there are puddles to splash through, slippery spots around the corners. Places to get stuck. And I get stuck in the in-between: repression, what I didn’t realize I’d lost, what looms up out of the dark. Sometimes the footsteps on the stairs sound like his. Sometimes I lose track not of where I am but of when. Sometimes I wonder.

* 

Here is a story I’ve never told anyone:

We were staying in a little windswept beach town, everything shades of grey, it doesn’t matter where. His mother gave him a pineapple. We forgot about it for the whole weekend, left it in the pickup truck. He gave it to a family of four before we packed up to leave, said, here, take this, we don’t need it, as if anyone has ever needed a pineapple.

Here is a story I’ve never told anyone:

We were staying in a little windswept beach town, and it was raining hard so I stayed in and took a bath while he went to the dilapidated gas station, the only thing open, to hunt for food. He fell asleep with a migraine that night, curled up and weeping into my chest like an enormous wounded animal. He wept and wept and shook and, blind from pain, knocked over a tall glass of iced water as he reached for it. I mopped up the water. There was nothing I could do.

Here is a story I’ve never told anyone:

Every other person I have wanted to have sex with since the day he left has had beautiful hands, and he did not have beautiful hands, and it doesn’t matter.

* 

I have been trying to tell this story forever. It has been three years. It is really forever.

* 

I have been writing love letters forever. Longer, I think. I have been writing love letters to my furniture. I have been practicing loving the inanimate because it doesn’t change. I envy love that does not change. That’s not true.

* 

When I lived in the that house, he inked our initials on a brick in the wall to make us a part of the building. Maybe that isn’t true. Maybe I wrote them there, to make it permanent when I knew, I did, I knew it wouldn’t be permanent. Maybe it
doesn’t matter. Somebody put our initials on a brick in the wall and we became a part of the building, painted over now but still holding the rooms together.

In the interest of self-preservation I said yes the night my best friend, Tevin, who lived there and had a key, offered to let me into the house alone. I hadn’t been back in eight months, not since the collapse, not since just after the island in Belize and the books I had read to keep my family out. I wandered and touched the walls and held the scream in my throat because it would have filled every corner. Everywhere, on every surface, a mirror: remember the time, remember the time, look at yourself, look who you’ve turned into in the wake of this.

The stories I never told anyone, the stories that might be one story, that might be ten, might be twenty, maybe this was forever, might be nothing. The stories I never told anyone:

I bruise my arm slamming it against the stone countertop of the downstairs bathroom, hit it over and over and over and over and he thinks I’ve fractured it and then he yells, he yells and I don’t remember about what. The walls close in.

I bruise my knees on the dance floor, my neck when my partner’s hand slips during a lift. I go home; it is his. You should quit, he says. You shouldn’t dance anymore. People will think I’m the one hurting you if they keep seeing these bruises.

I am sitting on his bed with blood all over my thighs. I don’t know how I got here. Wait. Hours before. I am sitting on my bed with scissors in my hand, digging and digging and digging.

I bruise my arm slamming it against the stone countertop of the downstairs bathroom. He yells. He might have yelled. It doesn’t matter.

I am watching him pace up and down, back and forth, everything is blue; I am biting down on a towel and there is a bottle of isopropyl alcohol in his hand and he says, look what happens when I leave you alone.

I ask for space. I ask for closeness. I ask for help.

We are sitting on the floor of the basement and I want to lie down in the railroad tracks. I don’t know how I got here. Months later. He tells our friends I threatened him.

We are in his car and he is speeding and I am sure I am about to die. It doesn’t matter. For months and months and months I am sure I am about to die. He wraps me in his arms and my lungs collapse.

I bruise my arm slamming it against the stone countertop of the downstairs bathroom, hit it over and over and over and over and over and no one questions whether he is the one hurting me. No one sees the bruises.

*

I’m sitting in my favorite room of that house, chilly because there’s a draft, bare feet up on the coffee table and trying to write. Tevin laughs quietly, not doing homework. There are places that will never stop feeling like home and this is one of
them, for every night I felt it was inescapable a moment of safety.

There were entire lifetimes between these walls, miles-wide chasms into which I lowered myself, out of which I have not clawed. I tried to give him poems, tried to write him love letters, wrote letters on the walls begging for permanence in the eye of a hurricane kind of wanting. This place of my destruction. This place in which only I am haunted.

In my favorite room of that house when I remember, when I stopped kissing him to trace his perfect, arching eyebrows and feel his temple with my fingertips, when I was always already trying to remember, when I had no idea what was happening to me. I’m sitting here writing and Tevin is laughing and this is one of my homes, this moment of safety. I can remember and I am not torn in half by it tonight.

I want to write it a love letter, this home. A thank you note. An apology. Week by week when I caused all that water damage, because everything ached all the time and I couldn’t get it back. I couldn’t make it stop. I want to write it a love letter and bury it in the yard and be able to put everything down on paper, begin by saying here is a story I’ve never told anyone and let the house do the work of carrying that tiny, mesmerizing lifetime in its foundation because I am tired of finding reflections where there aren’t any. But words don’t matter, can’t matter, to houses.

I want to tell it that I do remember, I remember enough to last several lifetimes, and there’s nothing I can do but give it back. I don’t need a pineapple. There is nothing I can do.
Quarantine reminds me of December mornings in Northern Germany, an unwelcomed melancholy that turns familiar as the days pass by. Growing up, I felt loneliest with my family. All I wanted was to feel whole with the people who made me. But I was left not knowing how or why I was made to be different, feeling disconnected from the very essence that created me. I carried this guilt into adolescence and then young adulthood, looking for someone or something to make me feel whole.

From the first days of being together, Ron had this power over the fractured parts I carry with me, over my shame. He knew how to reach into the depths of my solitude and hold the softest parts of myself with the utmost care. It only made me want to run away more.

On day twenty-three of the pandemic, Ron and I decide to trip together. After spending five hundred and fifty-two consecutive hours together, I decide that I want to marry him. If this is what everyday is like, the rest of our lives might not be that bad. It could be quite joyful.

Five minutes after midnight I place the sugar cube on my tongue and close my eyes, there’s no turning back. When it hits, I scratch at my skin, feeling the guilt and the shame and the loneliness gnawing at my fractured existence in this body. I take off all my clothes and stare at the mammal looking back at me in the bathroom mirror.

Ron tells me to drink water and take deep breaths. “Talk to me, what’s going on in your head?”
I don’t know how to tell him that I don’t feel like this life belongs to me, that I’ve never felt at home in this body. And worst of all, I don’t feel ready to be happy yet because there’s so much of me that is still broken.

We get in the shower together and I wrap myself around him. I watch the water move in spirals. Our dead skin cells dance across the tiles, moving in tandem with the water. I ask him to hold me tighter and he does gently and perfectly.

“Where do we go from here?” I say.
“Wherever we want to go,” he says.
I wrap myself in a navy towel and sit on our bedroom floor. I pick the lint collecting on my forearm and say, “Let’s do it, let’s have a baby.” When I hear the words come out, I believe them, and he believes them too. His soft smile comforts me, to know someone believes I have enough love for myself, for him, and what our love has yet to create.

At two am we’re sitting on the couch, bound together in a crochet blanket. I feel at peace because I’m too tired to be anxious and overthink. I want to believe that if my Oma was still here, she’d tell me this is the right thing to do. But she isn’t really. All I have are the photos of me as toddler, dressed in a snowsuit by her front door after making angels in the snow. My parents are smiling, looking over me. There is joy, but also a lingering sadness for a life they couldn’t live in order for me to exist.

I think about all the people I love: Ron, Oma, Mama and Papa, Joana. I imagine our daughter in all the places we’ve been and have yet to occupy. In every image, I am smiling because in the moments before we leave this life, there won’t be time to think about the paths we didn’t take. Our shortcomings won’t be at the forefront of our minds, our loved ones will be.
During the tedious and bewildering ramp-up to social distancing, selective quarantining, and finally shelter-in-place here on the west coast of Florida, I'd taken solace in the following words from Don Delillo's 1985 masterpiece *White Noise*: "Let's enjoy these aimless days while we can, fearing some kind of deft acceleration." In my community, neighbors kayak (I dictated part of this in a kayak), suntan, and play volleyball all day. It’s weirdly dissociating that death is all around us, inside us and inside loved ones, yet everything looks like a beer commercial (it’ll get better, Corona!).

Later in the novel, after an environmental disaster ("The Airborne Toxic Event,” great name for a band guys!) exposes him to radiation, the narrator, a hale, middle-aged college professor whom medical officials declare statistically contaminated, ponders “death has entered. It is inside you. You are said to be dying and yet are separate from the dying, can ponder it at your leisure, literally see on the X-ray photograph or computer screen the horrible alien logic of it all.”

Now that COVID-19 has in fact deftly accelerated, my phone pings with red heat maps seeping over the country, Dad-emails with line graphs trending from exponential to logarithmic, darker shades of maroon puddling in real-time on my flatscreen as neighbors test positive for COVID-19 (389 cases in my county, 9 deaths, as of noon April 7). I scroll through the casualties and deaths the way I do dating sites and Instacart. As Delillo writes, “it is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself [...] It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying.”

Throughout the novel Delillo, who should have won a Nobel by now, characterizes "white noise" as stochastic data, the rambling word salad of a *Tiger King*-President, statistics without context, the infinite banshee of Twitter. In the novel’s final passage, the stunned, blinking natives of Secaucus/Pittsburgh emerge from shelters, curious, twitchy, swaying religiously towards the palliative crowds. The novel swoons out in a wonderful elegy, describing ad hoc congregations on an overpass before an irradiated Crayola sunset:

The spirit of these warm evenings is hard to describe. There is an anticipation in the air but it is not the expected midsummer hum of a shirtsleeve crowd, a sandlot game, with coherent precedents, a history of secure response. What else do we feel? Certainly, there is awe, it is all awe, it transcends previous
categories of awe, but we don’t know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don’t know what we are watching or what it means [...] The collapsible chairs are tanked open, the old people sit. What is there to say?

I don’t know what to say. For now, I pass the time skimming 2012 Google Hangout transcripts with an Ex and dink at “Come As You Are” while watching *Seinfeld*. I also wrote a will, which took five minutes because I have no assets except for a condo with a water view. But the sunsets *are* lovely this time of year in St. Pete, as well as three months from now, or three years, and we’ll embrace then on the brine, sloshing shiny Coronas, slithering on the beach like festivals of ecstatic wriggling snakes, because we’ll just be *so in love* again, or for the first time. It’ll be the first time for me. I’ll shake your unwashed hand then and say: “I love you.”
L Scully
Bye, Lou

Last night as I was walking home from a friend’s I saw a monstrous black spider spilling into the crosswalk up ahead. Since I was walking uphill and it was the early hours of the morning it was hard to see but I could make out its massive spindle legs and blurry, downy body. I thought about how I’ve needed glasses for years but doctors never seem to give them to me, but I’m thankful for the pepper spray in the pocket of my dad’s denim jacket so I can put the spider in its place. I dare it to attack me, but as I get closer its atoms dissipate and only some fuzzy black pixels are left behind in my eyeline. I do almost collide with the smoke cloud of a tall man turning the corner too fast, and he looks at me as if to say What are you doing out here at this hour, a girl all alone. I think of my girlfriend’s tits and the way the skin of them sort of bunches up when she’s lying down and pours out of her sports bra. Those tiny wrinkles between her breasts make me melt and cry, because she may not want them anymore even though I worship them like the god I never had. I think of her going about her day, her tits tucked into their compressive garment but her t-shirt tight enough so I know they’re there. I think of how when I spoon her I press her nipples inward in a strange ritual of checking and holding; I worry about the soft lumps I feel in them even though I know it’s not the kind to be worried about but I hold them like tiny caps for my fingertips, warm and raised like fleshy Braille. I’m sitting alone while my best friend has dinner with my ex-best friend and I feel the most peculiar sense of circular loneliness while I sit on ex-friend’s futon and wear my girlfriend’s (who may not be my girlfriend for much longer) socks. The only relief I have is the small hoarding of glassware I’ve found on the street and then haphazardly draped Christmas lights around my apartment that turn everything a soft pink but make it difficult to sleep. One of my far too many scented candles is filling my scratchy throat with the smell of a forest somewhere far away, it reminds me of Yosemite where my parents took us when I was in second grade. It feels really odd that I could associate the memory with this scent I picked up at Trader Joe’s but is also kind of nice in a way. We nearly died during that trip; our blue van’s brakes gave out somewhere up a snowy mountainside and my dad had to forcefully maneuver the steering wheel while the car plummeted downward so we didn’t hit a tree.

As a kid I loved to write so people would give me journals all the time, one was pink and blue and had anthropomorphic caterpillars and butterflies on it in that strangely tacky almost-plaid pattern of the early 2000s, which I filled up with lists of my male crushes in my fourth grade class. It was actually quite full of sexual energy. The one I buried is a leather-bound Roots journal, I forget where I got it but it felt so serious
with pages that smelled like the dead trees they were made out of. I don’t remember in full what I wrote in it, but I do know it had something to do with wanting to jump out the window. What I didn’t really think through was that my window is only on the second floor so while I may break my leg most likely wouldn’t die. Since then I have thought a lot about jumping, from there or other windows, and have assessed what I think of as pretty accurately how injured I would get in the fall. Sometimes it feels like my mom senses this, because when I was home at thanksgiving she told me the story of the man who is one of only three people to ever survive jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. His name is Kevin and he gave something akin to a TED talk and said that as he took the bus or tram or whatever up the bridge he bargained with himself that if someone gave him a sign or a kind word he wouldn’t kill himself. When he got to the edge of the bridge a beautiful woman approached him and he thought That’s it I’ve been saved, she’s the angel coming to tell me not to jump. Instead she asked if he’d take her picture and that’s when he jumped, knowing there was no hope left for himself or humanity. My mom said as soon as he felt his hands leave the bridge and his grip loosen he knew that death wasn’t what he wanted, and amazingly he survived the initial fall but fucked up the vertebrae in his back so as he plunged underwater he thought Well that’s it I survived jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge and now I’m going to drown because of my broken back. But he didn’t. And I should probably look up his story more or listen to him speak, but I keep thinking about that. He tried so hard to die and he just didn’t when it came right down to it. I think of some tragedy where a beautiful recent college graduate was killed in a horrible car accident right when she had her whole life ahead of her. She didn’t want to die but she did, swiftly too. Kevin wanted to die but he didn’t and I don’t believe in a perverse God-given order of the universe but I am utterly stumped thinking about that. Maybe my mom hearing his story and telling me in our kitchen in Ohio somehow saved me that day. The cat I adopted for three sweet days around Halloween came back today, which felt sad and hilarious and comforting all at once. I named her Morticia since I was Morticia Addams for the Black Cat costume party, and she is black and white and fluffy with light green eyes the color of a green apple lollipop, they’re translucent in the same way. I was drawn to the way that if I looked down at her eye while holding her I could see through her cornea and the pupil reflected back in the milky gauze of the eyeball, a weird little organ prism in which I imagine entire universes exist. I put Morticia in a grocery bag but she climbed back out and ran across the street where I took a picture of her on my new dinky film camera. Her name is actually Elijah and she is a boy, or her owner is named Elijah and he is presumably a boy and his DC-area code number is printed next to his name on the collar. After I finish chasing Morticia I bike to the congressional cemetery to watch the last light fade through my tiny viewfinder and run into a lot of old people,
toddlers and dogs traipsing through the graves. My favorite part is the row of crypts protruding from the ground like hobbit houses, most of them with Scottish or Irish surnames carved gloomily into their upper portico, or whatever that’s called. One of them I climb inside and it is deliciously horrifying, most are locked with a massive chain and heavy duty lock from the hardware store. In a few the originally stacked coffins are missing so the façade looks like a checkerboard pattern: one coffin with an inscribed slab at its foot forming the wall I look upon, the next coffin missing, gaping like a massive missing tooth hole. The whole structure suddenly looks like a conglomeration of pizza ovens, and I imagine pizzas being slid all the way back into the coffin shelves to bake in a brick oven. The places between the crypts themselves feel the same way as Morticia’s eye, empty but with some lurking energy that could be concealing something devastatingly complex. I shine the flashlight on my phone into cracks and see the foot of a coffin and barred up stained glass windows and shudder as a dog runs up to me for a quick pet. I need to remember not to ruin my film so that the picture of Morticia turns out and I can remember all this.

II

Walking off the night train and staring at the trumpet flowers I wonder if the trumpet flowers even have a name at all. Of course they must, but that’s what I’ve named them, I think a few months ago when I was walking with friends or a lover. I said to them that the flowers only open at night and turn their hollow bowl mouths up to the moonlight when they remarked on how pretty such plants were. I have no idea if this is true. This is the only time I lie, when I become convinced of my own authority on things that are half-truths, maybe I read them in a book somewhere or maybe they are just printed in grayscale on the backs of my eyelids. I pass their cavernous white bodies gently yearning toward the rainy night sky and I gulp down the taste of girl in my mouth. It has been over twenty four hours but I still feel somehow the way her mouth smells and folds into mine, like her scent is etched into my tongue in a way that defies physical practicalities and allows for the suspension of the senses as though I’m in a big, dark deprivation tank floating through the salt. I want her so badly. The only remedy to my desire is surrounding myself with other beautiful women, more beautiful women, to distract from the hole forming inside of my heart as it tries to provide a shelf for her within it. The silver streak in Roxy’s hair is of such a profound beauty that it reminds me of illustrated stories like Rapunzel with metallic colors glimmering between the pages of the most finely printed books. I wonder if any girls write about me without me knowing. On one hand I believe they must, people fall in love with me with some regularity. But likely nothing good—one wrote notebooks, another wrote songs, they aren’t girls, though. I told Dana I have Robert Frost on vinyl and she said Of Course You Do. I want to listen to it with her
but my record player is broken and I’ve become avoidant of the unique sadness of trying to fix it alone. Be the girlfriend you wish to see in the world, I suppose. I want Dana to fall in love with me so badly. I want to seduce her with my eyes and my body and my heart and for her to offer hers in return. I want her so badly I’m willing to give monogamy a go. Do I want her selfishly or selflessly I wonder—she feels different. She is something to work toward. I made her a four hour and five minute playlist of songs for her to learn me and I listen to it now to learn myself, or at least to remind me of me. I want to dance with her to prom music beneath a disco ball with slow lights swirling colors around our faces. Do I? Roxy told me that her sister has a girlfriend who is her perfect match and that when her sister returned from three weeks away the girlfriend met her in the airport completely surrounded by roses and played the song that Roxy’s sister had written for her. I wonder again if I will ever have that or if all of my feelings have become exhausted by the fleeting passions I feel and have felt. I dreamt that our friends divorced and told us in their separation that we may go through the house and choose a singular object as a token of the time we all spent together. Of course I chose the room containing multitudes. I climbed somehow up to face the tall bookshelves, perhaps I floated even, and I selected a magician’s box, a nearly electric teal but worn with antiquity, gilded and gorgeous with its gold lock contraptions. There were many objects arranged inside, spellbooks and props that looked eerily like the sex toys I bought to play with my ex girlfriend’s breasts. I have not wanted a chest like that until Dana. The dream ended with my uncle maniacally ransacking the house, barreling into the room where I was suddenly naked and hiding beneath a gauzy tablecloth that did not come close to reaching the floor. My cousin ran over and proclaimed no one was there, but the uncle took it upon himself to double check. I awoke in someone’s bed (where I did not have sex) to the lucid sight of the uncle’s bug eyes bulging with pleasure from behind his glasses and teeth large and yellowed like a humongous goat leering over the naked curve of my hips and I knew that death was upon me.

III

Bye, Lou
Pres wrote in his facebook post the day Lou Reed drew his last breath
Those early days of consummate teenage passion we fucked desperately to Lou crooning from
Pres’s record player
So many I love yous exchanged to his rasping
So many tears in central park to Perfect Day
And now Lou, Lou Reed the hamster, third of my rodents, last connection of mine to an apartment and a house I invited love into, last reminder of a shared space with people
with whom I never want to speak again, I carry you in this carton with a cardboard roof, nestled on a bed of newspaper salvaged from the recycling, and I release you over the brick wall to the cemetery and down into a dripping rosebush where you will land upon the ground and your cloudy grey coat will look like that of a snow leopard without spots, and you will scurry with your deadened black back limbs and your tumorous adage and make peace with this, the last of your homes, your final-most cage that is no cage at all, the freest you have ever been shall be in death, whether death strikes in the form of a hawk, a drowned mud puddle, a freezing temperature or a total collapse of the collective weakness of your ailments. I say Godspeed and touch my fingers to my mouth and watch your ghostly apparition crawl raggedly, frantically away, and I wonder if your angel of death is me, and if you recognize the face of your fate, the mistress of your abandonment into this impossibly beautiful, damp place. Rita’s here with the car and I look for you through the brambles one last time and seeing nothing I lean forward and whisper

Bye, Lou
And turn to walk away.

IV

Lara texts me that she and June are getting married tomorrow, late on a Wednesday night and would I come be with them at the courthouse. I am delighted but I have to work, I’ll meet up with you afterward. Lara says the ceremony will be at 1:30 in the afternoon and when I finish a little after 4 it is torrentially raining and I’m stuck and can’t make it to the post nuptial ramen feast downtown. Rita picks me up and we together leap over the three inch deep puddle moat to her car and soon after I’m asleep on the futon and waking up to Lara texting again asking where I am. I tell Rita she’s coming and put on the white T-shirt that has “Sky High” emblazoned on the tit that we just got that very night free with our weed order. Vape stocked, no bra, mimosa flavor, we’re ready to go. We mosey downhill toward Norah’s house, who I can never keep track of because she crashes somewhere in DC a few months and then goes back home when her Visa’s up and then comes back again and works all over. But I ran into her the other day and she gave me a free iced tea from the cute but kind of fancy neighborhood coffee shop where I once saw my sexy yoga teacher with her husband and it was a bummer. But now Norah is back in town working at the coffee shop living in the big yellow turret house three minutes around the corner from me. Fate, it seems. And I keep running into her, almost every day. And she lives with my friend Vincent whom I met when I was selling zines and the person I’m meant to go on a date with next week texts me and says I’m going to be staying overnight with a friend on 8th Street in Eckington maybe we could meet the next
morning and I say whoa who and they say Vincent! Strange little clicks. Anyway I get to Norah’s where Lara and June greet me with hugs between cigarettes and a sweet old dog comes to greet us and chew on the grass. I’m thrilled, seeing these friends I haven’t seen much since school ended two years ago even though they’re all older than me because they were masters students and I was an undergrad but several of them were in my one and only art show. I see Ollie with her braids and her husband and we hug and she’s characteristically kind and I meet the housemates and Rita knows one of them from working at Trader Joe’s and there’s all these little crossovers on this big creaky porch and we nestle into a couch across from everyone and vape our little hearts out. Norah picks the music and I reintroduce myself to Jax who I haven’t seen since three exes ago and Lara is pleasantly drunk and tells me after the ceremony they went home to consummate their marriage but they were too tired so they just complimented each other’s butt and boobs and fell asleep and Rita and I were astounded with such a presentation of true love. We’re high and we rent an electric scooter from up the block and Rita and I are whirring around on it for the second night in a row and then we present it to the happy couple as a token gift just as it starts raining. We realize we’re all probably a bit f*cked up for steering a scooter and return to the porch, June’s been gone a long time getting coffee and stopping at home and Lara is wondering good naturedly if her new wife has left her and Norah is dancing and it’s undeniably sexy and a shame that she loves men. Jax takes tea orders and sets up all the herbal tea bags in cups on the counter and doesn’t remember until it’s an hour later and the water is cold. We dance and eat chips and proclaim how happy we are to see one another. A couple years ago Lara told me she was disappointed in the men she was sleeping with and I said just date women and shortly after she started dating her best friend June and now they are spontaneously wives and I bought a cheesy card from a fancy shop that says “Mrs and Mrs” because really how many times in your life can you do that. I still see the porch lights and the rain and the haze and it was the best night in a long time.
Grace Novacek
Tartrail

These illustrations are part of a series exploring the aftermath of digitization.
The feeling of overwhelming dread that you’ve been experiencing for the past three weeks will leave you sleepless. That sleeplessness will leave you irritable. That irritability will leave you anxious. That anxiety that will lead you to happy hour at the faux-Mexican place just around the corner from the museum where you work. After your second margarita, the assemblage of tinder dates and rowdy frat boys that crowd the bar will make you feel like you’re in the galley of a ship, someplace loud, dark, unpredictable. The dread you carry with you is going to make you feel like that ship is sinking. Another margarita might help.

The man you meet outside as you are leaving the bar will not be especially attractive or interesting, but the cigarette he offers you will make you feel better, even if you have to stifle a cough with your first drag. Afterwards, when he’s asleep and you steal a cigarette from his pack, you catch a glimpse of yourself in the mirror. In the dark, you hover over him like a nightmare. Your hair is a bed of snakes. Your lipstick is a black smear. Five floors up, naked in the privacy of your balcony, the moonlight will feel electric on your skin. When you check the news on your phone, you will feel exposed and vulnerable. You’re going to remember that moment. Everyone does. People are going to ask, Where were you when you found out? In just a few weeks, it’s going to be the question you ask of everyone when you first meet them. In just a few days, it’s going to be the question you ask of everyone you know. When you open your phone and find out, you’re going to be naked and alone, falling in love with a cigarette. As you read, your dread will feel vindicated. As you read, your dread will blossom into despair. Another cigarette might help.

It’s important not to panic. Every article and cable news report and NPR Science Special Edition Bullet will be careful to remind you of this. You will be reminded not to panic at the grocery store checkout, at staff meetings by the museum's curator and by your mother, who is now calling you twice daily. After two weeks, the term Rogue Gravitational Field has entered your vocabulary. Drowsy white men in lab coats begin to appear in the periphery of every news report. The situation is being closely monitored. There is no immediate danger at this time. The lab coats are careful with their words, but their body language is shouting, even on NPR. The beaded sweat on their male pattern foreheads is morse code, underlined by the deepening crease of their furrowed brows.

A month after the discovery of the Rogue Gravitational Field, you will buy your first pack of cigarettes. Alone in a 7-Eleven parking lot, you’re going to cough in relief for a full five minutes. You’re going to breathe deeply and forget about the stars in the sky. You’re going to smile as you stamp it out, spent and dizzy, and
wonderfully out of breath. You’re going to make a habit of this.

You will sneak down the hall of the museum and take the service elevator to
the dumpster and walk briskly through the employee parking lot into the backside of
the sculpture park where no one ever wanders. It’s important to forget your phone.
It’s important to sit still for a few minutes and be surrounded by something beautiful.
It’s important to breathe, even when you’re inhaling smoke. You’re allowed to be
disconnected. The world will catch up to you. The situation is being monitored
closely and the world will still be ending when you get back to your desk.

That night you will be smoking a cigarette and drinking wine on your
balcony and the stars will seem brighter. The slope of the hill a few blocks away
from you will be pale and inviting. As you watch and smoke and pour yourself
another glass, people will begin to congregate. They will lay down blankets.
Longneck beer bottles will emerge from coolers. One dog will appear, and then
another, making friends and chasing each other in the moonlight. As you squint to
make this out, a woman your age begins to set up a telescope. You will feel
impossibly stupid for not having thought of this first. It’s after ten pm and a fog has
begun to wind its way through the corners of your neighborhood. A dozen people are
on the hill now, strangers drawn out of their homes and connected to each other by
the same set of questions. When the strangers on the hill point to the sky, you look up
with them, craning your neck and squinting. You’re going to spend the next hour
trying to make out things that are impossible for you to see. After you finish your
wine, you will check the time on your phone and notice an overwhelming number of
news alerts. It’s getting late and your mouth tastes like cigarettes. It’s worse than the
lab coats said it would be, far worse. The stars are, in fact, shining just a little
brighter tonight. You lay in bed, defeated, while brilliant and educated strangers on
the radio describe to you in detail how everything you’ve ever known is going to
disappear.

Your first carton of cigarettes is expensive. When you walk it back to your
car, you will be impressed by the heft of it. It’s a pleasant weight that makes you feel
like an adult. You have just made an investment in your future. You have just bought
in bulk. For dinner that night you will have cigarettes and wine while a bag of
microwave popcorn goes quietly stale as you stare into your phone. The people on
the hill have begun to gather nightly and it has become your custom to watch them. A
glass of wine with the sunset turns into two glasses as the sun lingers in kaleidoscope
streaks of pink and orange. A few weeks ago, you had scarcely finished your first
glass by nightfall. At the end of your second glass, the warmth in your belly will
bloom into curiosity. You will find out later that it is not your imagination. The
sunsets have, in fact, been getting longer.

Your social anxiety will be a relief. The middle school dance jitters that you
feel when you walk the five blocks to the pale hill will be almost pleasant. The sky is falling, but it’s still important to get nervous about meeting new people. The water bottle full of merlot you brought should help with that. There are ten or twelve people on the hill when you approach, including a baby that feels out of place. Couples on blankets hold hands and look upward into the night. A father points out constellations to yawning children. The woman with the telescope sips a beer and smiles as you approach, taking a pull off your merlot as a kind of cheers.

There’s going to be a moment. You’re going to smile with a mouthful of wine that she will momentarily mistake for blood. When she realizes her mistake, when her horror turns to relief, she’s going to laugh out loud. When she laughs at you, your heart’s going to skip a beat and you’re not going to know why. When she laughs, it won’t matter that the sky is falling. Her name will be something common that will suddenly become beautiful again, but you will always think of her as the woman with the telescope. When you bend into the eyepiece and she whispers facts about Venus into your ear, you are both twelve years old again. You are skipping class and sneaking your first cigarette. She speaks the foreign language of astronomy with a rapid excitement while you nod and smile and understand every third word. When you put your eye to the telescope, you are witnessing the beginning of a tidal disruption. You will not understand it at the time, but you will remember this moment for the rest of your life. You don’t realize that you are watching a star die. The average sunset on earth lasts for 20-30 minutes. The day you meet the woman with the telescope, the sun will set for 72 minutes before night finally falls. After it does, the woman with the telescope will spend the rest of the night telling you why.

The days will begin to get longer. You read this at eleven am while you smoke your fourth cigarette of the day. The Rogue Gravitational Field has begun to pull heat and light from the sun. It’s autumn now and the trees have begun to shed their leaves. There’s a pleasant chill in the air and you’re wearing your favorite scarf, but as you read this, beads of sweat begin to form at your temples. Later, at that faux-Mexican place just around the corner from the museum where you still work, you will stare at yourself in the mirror behind the bar. Your co-workers will make nervous jokes and exchange the same headlines and blurbs that you’ve all read a dozen times. You have begun to tune them out. You have begun to tune everything out. The facts and figures, the headlines and the lab coats have begun to feel too much like homework. You have been studying for a test that no one is going to pass. You are no longer monitoring the situation closely. You are no longer monitoring the situation at all.

Behind you, both just over the horizon and deep in the recesses of outer space the sun will be setting. You remember as a little girl how you learned that the sunset was an optical illusion. Your place on the Earth was just moving further away
from the sun. The sun wasn’t actually going anywhere. You order a third margarita. Absently, you run the lime around the rim of the glass and watch the snowfall of Kosher salt as it makes a mess on the bar. In a video you watched on your phone this afternoon, a man in a lab coat told you that the sun’s rays would be absorbed by The Rogue Gravitational Field. A man in a lab coat told you that the sun is going somewhere.

The next day as the sunset burns endlessly above you, you will wander to the hill. You will be wine drunk and heartbroken, shuffling your feet through fallen leaves. Then you will see the woman with the telescope. The excitement on her face as she waves you over is a kind of alchemy, transforming her immediately into an old friend. She will crack open a cheap beer and chatter on as night finally comes. Her optimism will baffle you. She will put her hand on your shoulder as she adjusts the position of her telescope and you will feel like that’s where her hand always should have been. For the first time, you will see the Rogue Gravitational Field and she will explain to you that the stars really are shining brighter tonight. Halos of light surround them and you will think of a Van Gogh painting. Bright, infrequent trails will snake from nowhere and disappear into nothingness. The Rogue Gravitational Field is pulling light closer to it at an alarming rate. It shines with a blackness darker than space. It is defined as an absence that you will find terrifying in its simple entirety. There is a nothingness above you and it’s hungry. Every minute it is pulling you closer. The woman with the telescope explains this to you quietly as you watch the stars in the sky burn themselves out. She puts a hand on your arm and a smile blooms on your face. Whatever’s in the sky cannot hurt you, because when she whispers in your ear, you are untouchable.

With her hand on your shoulder, she will point you again to Venus. Bright green streaks will pull away from it into nothingness and her voice will drop when she informs you that Venus is dying. Randomly, you will remember that your Venus is in Capricorn. Where will your Capricorn go when Venus isn’t there anymore? Her face is grave and smiling when you unbend yourself, stumbling away from the telescope, bleary with shock. It becomes important to take a long sip of wine. When your legs fail you and you sit on the grass, she’ll join you, slumping down and apologizing too much. She thought you knew. The woman with the telescope will not want a cigarette when you offer her one and when you look up to the disappearing stars, you’ll realize that you won’t want one either.
Damon McKinney

Cushing

Was toward late afternoon, a Friday, another wasted day at the local pool hall, the place where “peace” was supposed to be kept—rival crews couldn’t set claim or start shit—hard to believe that gangs were a problem in this small country town, set at the edge of everything, half-way between Tulsa and Oklahoma City—this dying oilfield town, the abandoned downtown, the pharmacy still sold ham sandwiches for lunch, the Laundromat only cost $.50 to wash and dry, the police station with only two holding cells, and you’ve seen them both. The main street was brick-paved, as the highway slowly killed the traffic towards the once busy Broadway—this was your life, Cushing—all the streets you could walk blindfolded, the stores closed at 9p.m., the tired high school football team who hadn’t won a game in forever, the shiny Wal-Mart forced out the mom and pops across the county. The flatlands hid the whitetails, the rolling hills hid the meth labs, and weren’t you going somewhere?

It was another Friday night, standing around looking at each other and wondering what to do. Another night of shooting pool, getting drunk and getting high, another night of claiming to get your hustle on, which turns out to be asking the guys for pitch-in money for another fifth of Hot Damn! It was a boring ass night of staring at the girls trying to impress you, and you trying to impress them. Cash, behind the eight-ball, flashed a smile in their direction, only to receive a wink in return. Merle with his thick, black, braid ignored them, and it drove them crazy with annoyance—he has a woman and she doesn’t play around—the short skirts and long legs got bored and left to look for other boys to tease.

Another night of arguing with the girlfriend about who was or wasn’t looking at the girls, another night of kissing her ass just to ask for more money for a blunt. Same thing night after night, chasing a dream, trying to keep it real, whatever that meant. Standing around with the same sad sack look in your eyes, dreaming of making money you didn’t have to work for.

The music was blaring that night, drowning out conversations, casual and business alike. You always chose the heaviest stick, 21oz, mostly because how it felt, and it was a lesson you learned hanging out in old honky-tonks, hole in the wall dives—Aces, Marietta’s and The Buckhorn. Sundown and you beat Cash again. You kept one eye on the table and the other on the door. Your crew didn’t exactly see eye-to-eye with the guys that walked in the place. Oak Street Disciples—plastered in blue bandanas, white tee-shirts and cut up blue jeans—greasy ass white boys playing gangsters.

The first one through the door was Eli, California transplant and all-around
piece of shit. He was followed by Brick, his right-hand man. A couple others filed in but they didn’t matter. As they sauntered in, the owner yelled above the thumping bass blasting out of the jukebox to mind their fucking business tonight and no trouble. He went back to watching the rest of the place, a collection of sometimes-working sometimes-not video games, and second-hand pool tables. You went to school with his kid for a bit, but it was a passing friendship at best. Posters of girls in bikinis were plastered over the walls of the pool hall, and in the corner sat the jukebox. It was one of the modern ones that played CD’s instead of 45’s. Upstairs was the “dance floor” which was just big enough for 20 people to bump and grind against each other.

You kept playing pool. Eli walked over to your side and slapped down a quarter, claiming he has next game. Y’all bitches ready to lose some money, he asked you, but you could not care less about his claim. With a slight edge in your voice, you replied, you’re the only bitch here. He didn’t care for that and reached for his knife he kept in his back pocket, you could see the handle. The pool cue’s weight reassured you, as always. Knock that shit off yelled the owner as you gripped the cue stick. Eli was stopped by one of his homies, who nodded towards the entrance, where Detective Bouer was standing—making his nightly rounds—which persuaded Eli to call it a night. You went back to shooting pool and sank the eight ball, beating Cash again.

You decided to call it a night and walked the few blocks home. Funny how things didn’t work that way. You didn’t notice the car tailing you for the last few blocks. Slow and unassuming, lights low and the bumping sound system silent. You were distracted by the constant buzzing of your pager, flashing 911 repeatedly, and your brother’s number afterward. It wasn’t like him to blow up your number. You crossed Main Street, the orange halogen lights reflecting off the remaining puddles of the summer storm. You splashed a few of those puddles like a kid, causing waves across the mini temporary oceans. Closer the car inched. You kept walking, to a warm bed, a cold beer to take the edge off and possibly a blunt or two. A window rolled down.

The car sped up and the passenger side door caught you square in the back, knocking you down to the wet pavement. You landed on your knees and palms, like that time you flipped over your bike handlebars. The car screeched to a halt, smoke and squalling tires—three guys spilled out, driver stayed in the car, revving it up to intimidate you. This is about neighborhood, one of them said as he walked towards you.

You tried to defend yourself, unsuccessfully, as they try to beat the shit out of you. You felt a size 10 shoe crash into your face, branding you with a Swoosh. You managed to get a few hits in, breaking the nose of one and dislocating the jaw of
another, but it wasn’t enough.

Another car came into view. WHAT THE FUCK is all you heard as more people showed up. Your attackers scattered back to their car and were swallowed by the night.

The next day you noticed the shoeprint and laughed a little bit—battle scars of a neighborhood war—and thanked those who saved your life the previous night. Sure you knew them, small town and all, but you’ve never crossed paths before. Your homies heard what happened and showed up at your moms place, planning payback. You couldn’t think straight—head ringing, pounding, and trying to explode at the same time—and your brother, still pissed you didn’t return his call, wanted blood as well. Things were getting out of hand, but they couldn’t be stopped, not that you really wanted them too. It was only a matter of time.

Cash and Merle sat on the couch rolling blunts and passing a 40oz back and forth—cousins and best friends—they always had your back. Cash, the oldest, was the crazy one while Merle was dangerous. You’ve seen him, Merle, fight 10 guys one on one—he won. Cash carried their grandfather’s K-bar on his hip and Merle kept a .32 within reach. They weren’t loud or boisterous and tended to blend in until shit went down. Then people knew they were around. Your brother joined them in the living room.

They made room on the couch and passed him a blunt. He took a long pull on the blunt, took a swig off the 40, and shrank into the couch. Your brother pulled them closer and whispered, low, he didn’t want you to hear his plan. There was a bit of laughter and snorts, something was funny. You didn’t really care. Cash nodded his head towards you and your brother merely shook no. Merle patted his pocket where he kept the .32 and again he shook no. Merle threw up his arms and agreed with whatever was going on. You still got that bat, Cash hollered at you, yeah out in the garage, you answered. The bat was painted black with red streaks running down the side, you painted yourself—mostly out of boredom. Merle peeled himself off the couch and went to get it. Cash lit another blunt. We’re going for a ride, he said, and they were gone.

You should have seen his face, Cash excitedly recalled as adrenaline coursed through his body—his hands were shaking—and Merle nodded in agreement. Your brother agreed as he took a hit off the blunt being passed between the three of them. You sat there and sipped on a 40, and listened to Cash tell their story. They were driving around, looking for a little payback, and who do they see? It was Brick, that red-faced fuck, sitting down in the dugouts by the park—deep in your part of town—hanging out with the girls from last night. They drove through the park and rolled up on him. He knew he was fucked when he saw Merle pull out
the bat. Your brother chimed in, yeah he was shittin’ his pants. Yep, from Cash. They offered him a choice, either let Merle beat the shit out of him with the bat or get his ass kicked by your brother, which meant not fighting back. Brick chose the ass kicking. Merle wouldn’t have stopped and Brick knew it. Your brother straight up kicked him in the nuts, dropped him and commenced to stomp on him. Cash and Merle kept lookout. They dragged him to his feet only to be knocked down again and again. Both of his eyes were swollen shut and his nose wasn’t straight anymore —might have broken a rib or two—but he just took it. Your brother’s knuckles were bloody and tattered. Yeah, he took that ass whippin’ like a “g”, and that was more than what you got last night. Stupid white boy had guts.

You rubbed your face and felt the Swoosh again.

You met up with the rest of the crew and they gawked at the Swoosh. Cash told the afternoon’s excitement to whomever would listen and Merle disappeared with his woman somewhere. You sipped another beer and watched. The girls danced against each other, their bodies gyrated and bumped, laughing at each other. The guys kept the walls from falling over, talking amongst each other, mostly talking shit and what they might have done if it had been them instead of you. What they didn’t talk about is how scared shitless they’d be if it had been them. Maybe that’s how you felt, fucking terrified, those boys tried to kill you last night—and now you’re partying like nothing happened—wash down the fear with another drink. One of the skirts from the arcade slid up to you and asked you if your face hurts. Not really, as she lightly ran her hand over it. She gave it a quick peck and disappeared on the dance floor. Damn.

Cash and Merle made their way to you and drew your attention towards the door—Detective Bouer—and the party was suddenly over. You pushed your way through the crowd and out the back door. You, Merle, and Cash drove around for a few hours, mostly drinking and smoking blunt after blunt until the sun came up. They dropped you off at home and made sure you got in.

Another Sunday afternoon and back at the pool hall for another round. Eli was there and so was Brick, all bandaged up and sporting sunglasses to hide the black eyes. You came strutting in, decked out in a red hoody, black Dickie pants, and a pair of shades—street gear and set colors—you looked like the shit and they knew it, pissing them off even more. Cash was right behind you, sporting a red sweatshirt, khaki Dickies, and a red baseball hat. The owner, scared shitless and didn’t need the cops around, yelled get the fuck outta here and don’t come back. So you waited for them on the street. It took them a minute to stroll outside, as an unmarked cop car slowly drove by.

Cash did the talking, when and where to throw down—on their side of town no less—and between whom. Eli wanted Cash, just to see if he was all that he
claimed to be, and simply ignored you. It was agreed. Cash and you drove across town to a run-down two-story house, most likely a crack house—windows were painted black and a pack of dogs were yapping from inside—you pulled up to the curb. Cash grabbed the bat again and said, wait here this will only take a second. You watched him walk towards Eli, and Brick started yelling about he brought a bat. You turned away for a second so you didn’t see Cash crack Eli in the head, twice. Movies got the sound all wrong. There was no “crack” but more of a “thuck” the sound of wood crashing into bone and flesh. Thuck! Thuck! Two quick hits. You saw Eli stagger around and ultimately fall as girls poured out of the house, and Brick ran behind them with a bat, just a minute too late. Eli shook and twitched on the ground and all you really noticed was Cash’s huge shit-eating grin, large and strangely scary, as he walked calmly towards the running car. Let’s go, he said and you pulled away from the curb.

Twice you thought about turning yourself in. And once you actually drove to the police station, hand on the door and walked away. Everything inside you screamed to run or confess, just do something, but instead, you decided to have dinner. You made the mistake of parking in front of the restaurant and that’s where the police saw the car. Cash saw them first, at the takeout window talking to the manager, the flashing red and blue lights in the background. He tried to get you to leave, but you sat there. When you walked out the door, you saw several guns pointed at you, voices yelled at you, hands up, don’t move, lie down, and spread out your arms and legs. It was when you felt the handcuffs—cold and tight—clamped on your wrists, it was real. Cash was cuffed and stuffed into a different car.

What happened, Bouer asked you—handcuffed to a chair and defiant—in the bright interrogation room. You continued to blank-face it and ignored the questions. He kept mentioning accessory charges, it was your bat after all, and if Eli died, it would be murder. Bouer told you, that if he had five minutes alone with him, Eli wouldn’t make it and you would go to McAlester—the state prison—and Cash would get the needle. However, that white boy had just enough will to live left in him and they could only threatened charges. But for now, they cut you loose, but kept Cash, just in case. Goodnight Detective Bouer.

Your mom made a few phone calls and turns out your dad would take you. The plan was to leave during the night and head to Montana. You could start a new life, new job, and forget that mess. Canada was just across the border, in case things were too hot. You packed for cold weather and told the crew you were bouncing out. They understood and wished you well. Merle took the news the hardest, but he knew it was for the best. Be safe and forget us, for your own good, he told you one last time.
You arrived at the bus station around midnight, the witching hour, and only a few other people meandered around, waiting for their own personal escapes. Moms brought the tickets, plus a few extra, to fuck with Bouer in case he checked her credit cards. Waiting was never your strong point. Hey, you got the time, a familiar voice asked you. You looked up and saw a red face and a gun barrel. Ever since you were a kid, you heard about seeing your life flash before your eyes when death comes for you, all those good times, bad times and the in-between times. Its bullshit—all of it—you didn’t even see the muzzle flash.
Elizabeth Kemball
Designer

The two blue marbles blink under fluorescent light, unable to focus yet; lids crush together like rose petals, crinkled pink. Blue was my favourite colour since Henry Lapworth snuck a forget-me-not into the morning newspaper when I was 13. I pressed it between the heavy pages of my bible, let it dry and put it in a locket that hung, too large around my slender neck.

“It will fall out soon enough - totally normal - the blonde will come through bright white.” The doctor winked at me, stroking the dark shock of hair on her head. I couldn’t help but notice his eyes were blue too, closer to an ocean than the light sky I’d picked. I pictured the view from my window a few nights prior, snowfall erasing dark earth.

“Yes.” My tongue felt swollen, too large for my mouth, the word struggled to find its way past. My birth therapist had warned me that panic was normal for women in this position; to practice my usual breathing, to imagine my lungs turning from metal to cotton. A copper tang burst from my cheek where I didn’t notice myself chewing.

“It darkens to a lovely honey between the ages of 5 and 8.” The doctor's voice was like a TV advertising voice, too musical for this setting. I’d had honey on toast two days prior, it was overly sweet, bought on a late bout of morning sickness.

Small fingers wrapped around my finger tip, cradling the ragged nail, bitten down, framed in peeling skin. The shrill cry from her round mouth sounded muffled, like we were submerged in water - in honey. I pulled my finger away, traced it over the tiny nose - round and soft like a mushroom cup, plump cheeks, outlining her sweetheart shaped face, the skin endlessly smooth. I remembered the bright screen of the presentation, the repetition of 'symmetry is key’ from the smartly dressed speaker. The couple next to me were talking in overly loud whispers, like stage performers, lamenting about how awful they felt for the people who couldn’t afford this, whose children would grow up with buck teeth and spots and dull hair. They laughed at the pictures of children from before whose faces were wonky, marred with marks.

“A beauty isn’t she,” The nurse smiled at me. “Such thick eyelashes, mine will all have ones like that if I can afford it” I nodded, thick eyelashes were all the vogue apparently, soon mascara would be a thing of the past.

“What’re you calling her?” I looked down as her arms failed out; last month I’d picked the name Dalilah, after my mother, a few years passed. My mother had been short, and as round bodied as she was round faced; her front teeth had a gap between them that she never bothered to fix and by the time I was a teen her hair was a homecropped bob, peppered with grey and black. This girl, this definitely not
Dalilah, was beginning to feel too warm, too heavy in my freckled arms.
"I think I need some time." I looked away from the face I’d seen too many times before, for something so new it was wrong, like seeing a date in person for the first time - familiar in a disconcerting way.
“Mothers often do, especially when you don’t have a man around,” The nurse shrugged and handed me a leaflet from a rack on the wall. “These are the most fashionable ones, you don’t want to pick something common.”
She grimaced before going back to smiling doe-eyed at the whimpering child in my arms. I glanced at the front cover of the leaflet, a sea of green and blue eyes stared back at me. I drew mine in my mind, like my mother’s, narrow, the colour of freshly turned soil.
“She looks nothing like me.”
“Isn’t it wonderful.” The nurse replied, smiling before she left the room. The child began to cry.
On our walk up from the sea, we pass a seal, bloated, gashed, and tossed among the crags of that nasty beach. Tiffany leans into it, kisses its forehead. I ask her if she’s worried about flies. She smiles. An obsidian-glossy fat one crawls across her lips. I brush it off. “Ah”, she giggles, “I was hungry”. But her laughter, while rippling and beautiful is missing its bottom end, its gravity. Nothing tethers it to the earth; it simply bubbles out into the fog and hangs there, bumping against my earlobes. Gravity must have exhausted itself in her. I take her hand before her toes lift off the sand. I’ll lead her home up the hill like a balloon if I have to. She squeezes my fingers. She is glad that I’m here. She didn’t mean to scare me. She feels much better now.

“Don’t worry,” I tell her. “I will get you home.” She fingers the buttons of her shirt. “I will hold you in the shower. I will wash you clean. We don’t need much to fix this. We have all we need.” I squeeze her hand.

Still, Tiffany is hungry. Right now! She pulls out of my hands, jogs up the street, not floating away, but so shaky, her ankles shattered, and she flattens herself against a bakery window. “Can we go in? We have to go in. It smells so good.”

The bakery’s windows are fogged over.
The fog tastes like salted butter.

The woman behind the counter, the baker, looks like we startled her. She freezes, wooden spoon held high in the air. Her hair is a knotted and floured nest. Her apron is a smear of colors.

Eyes are her only moving part, scanning us.
A faucet is running.
Water is endlessly pouring down the drain.
Tiffany is trembling.
“We can go somewhere else,” I whisper.
The wooden spoon clatters to the ground. The baker hustles over to the case of pastries waiting there, sitting so politely between us.

“I didn’t see you.” She slams her hand down on the counter. “Scared the piss out of me.” I know this woman. She lives in the same apartment complex we do. She has two young daughters she’s always screaming at. Most nights her husband comes home with a paper bag balled up in his fist. They seem like a nice family. “Sorry if I scared you back.” She smiles. “So what will it be? We have the most unique pastries in town. Choose carefully. Remember you eat what you are.”

Tiffany is pulling at her buttons again. Trying to take her shirt off. “What do
you think,” I ask her to distract her. “Get anything you want it’s my treat, “I say.

“That’s a first,” she says. She’s teasing. She traces her fingers along the case, drawing patterns, doodling on the glass. Her focus is gone. I read the names out to her. They have subtitles.

*San Andreas Fault Crackle Top Cream Puffs: With Genuine Earthquake Rubble!*

*Dark Chocolate Brush Fire Brioche: Mixed with Certified Ashes and Sea Salt!*

*Eucalyptus Monkey Bread: 100% Real Leaves Taken From the Asphalt Outside the Cage Where the Monkeys Cry!*

*Devil's Slide Mud Pie Donuts: Minimum 10% Actual Mudslide Content Scraped Off the Highway Before Dawn!*

Tiffany presses her body against the case. Her buttons clack against the glass. She licks the case as if her tongue could reach the goodies through it. She is confused. The baker is unfazed.

“Never mind all that,” she says to me. “Go ahead and take a seat.” She gestures at the little round tables and spindly cafe chairs behind us. “I can tell what you want. I can tell what you need. I’ll have it up in a jiffy.” Her body and her stare have not gone anywhere. “Coffee?” she calls out as I put my arm around Tiffany and lead her to a seat by the window, where we can look out into the whiteness that has swallowed our world.

“No. Thank you”.

Tiffany’s scratching at her buttons, trying to pull her shirt open, but her fingers are bent into angles she’s not used to. Angles I am not used to. But I am used to seeing her jumpy like this, in a focused panic.

“It’s ok,” I say, “You’re ok.”

“I’m just a little hot”. She says.” It’s nothing.”

“Is that what it was,” I ask her. “Did you just need some air?”

She’s yanking at her shirt. I get glimpses of what’s underneath.

“Yes,” she says. “I couldn’t breathe.”

“I know that happens to you sometimes,” I say. “You just need to relax. You’ve been working so hard”.

“There’s too much sitting on me,” she says.

“What’s sitting on you?”

“Everything. You. Sorry.”

“I just believe in you,” I say.

The first two buttons pop free from her shirt, skip off the table, and land on my lap.

The fissure splitting her chest starts just under her collarbone, an angry “V” that widens down to her belly button.
“I needed to not have to think about anyone else. For a minute. Not even you.”

“Of course,” I say. “We’ll paint the kitchen. We’ll paint it green. Everything will work out.”

A piece of hair falls over her eye. She leaves it there. I want to brush it away so I can see her eyes, but the hole in her chest is so wide, blazing red, and angry, I’m afraid of it. I’m afraid the injury will spread if I touch her the wrong way.

“No matter what,” I start to tell her, …

“Here you go,” the baker breaks in, sliding a cup of coffee and a plate in front of each of us.

The baker stands there, hands on her hip, where her apron hangs. Tiffany looks into the ramekin before her.

“Delicious.” Tiffany says.

“You eat what you are,” the baker says again.

“What am I?” Tiffany asks, picking up a fork.

“Fog Soufflé,” the baker answers. “Made with gorgonzola from a small farm in Sonoma and from fog right out there,” she points to the window, “harvested every morning, by my two sleepy and resentful daughters, caught in pillow cases my mother slept on daily for seventeen years while ridden with depression and what the doctor called a female spirit deficiency, but turned out to be MS. The fog is caught just as the sun begins to rise, just as it heats the water and the fog rolls up and in, catching the leftover ghosts from the night, catching the nightmares that creep out of the sleeping heads and windows of the town and blow down to the shore on the wind. My daughters tired, and crying, sometimes bleeding from falling on rocks bring it right over, and they invariably fuck it up, so I hit each of them with my spoon until they collapse on the ground, and then I grab each of them and beg for their forgiveness, and they tense up and don’t hug me back. All of that seeps into the fog, and before it can weep out, I beat farm fresh egg whites and fold the fog and cheese in and bake at 350 degrees for an hour.”

Tiffany plunges her fork into the ramekin and shakily carries a bite into her mouth.

“Yum?”

“You’re not eating it right,” The baker says. “Aren’t you hungry?”

Tiffany drops her fork. “I’m scared.”

The baker says, “I know sweetheart. But don’t think of this as the scary part. Think of this as nutrition. It’s going to give you what you need to get where you need to go.”

“But,” Tiffany says, “What if I don’t want to go where I need to go.” She looks at me.
“If that was true,” the baker says, “I would have served you something else. If that was true you would be someone else.”

Tiffany looks up at me, and then throws her hand into the steaming ramekin, pulling up fistfuls of fog soufflé and stuffing them into her chest. Into where she’s hungry. The fog covers over the angriness of her heart. It moves over her as if it’s digesting her, instead of the other way around. The fog foams and spreads, covering her until she’s translucent and floating off her chair, through the door and back to the sea she threw herself into.

When I look up, the baker is staring at me.

She points down to my plate.

“What is this? Is it fog berry pie? Will it let me follow her? Will it allow me to bring her back? To fix her?”

“You eat what you are,” she says, “That’s not what you are.”

“Then what?” I ask, “Um…kelp crumble? Will it help me hear her song in the wind?”

“Like you’d listen. It’s cherry pie,,” she says. “Eat it up happy girl. I know you want to.”

“Where are the cherries from?” the emptiness hits, the sudden absence. My love is gone and I wouldn’t even look at her wounds, I wouldn’t even stop talking.

“The fuck should I know that for?” The baker answers. “It’s cherry pie. Sweet. You’ll like it.”

Flaky crust, cherries like bombs of tart and sugar, brightness exploding and splashing across my tongue. The baker is right. I love it.
A.A. Balaskovits

Match Girl

Her mother said, darling pie, your lips are made of sawdust, and on her tenth birthday her mother bought her matches to scrape across that skin, to keep her warm when a mother’s love is buried in the earth. The girls’ cheeks were made of wood. A flawed design, mommy said, but you make do with what you are given. In the matchbox there were only five sticks. Five matches for five lives, and as each one burns, the girl was to remember what she saw. Remember what she’d want to keep. If she chose right, maybe she will learn something. Maybe she will stay warm forever. Her mother, perhaps knowing she was a woman who had given birth in a fairy tale, had done her duty to the narrative and died, so sad, and took all the wisdom and snide humor in her veins with her.

Strike one – a scene of a little bird. Common. A sparrow? No, too big. It was one of those Starlings who carry the night sky on their backs. His feet were tied with fishing wire to a tree branch, beating his little wings as fast as the tap-tap-tap of his heart. Someone put him there, some creature with nimble fingers and a thumb. The bird is not alone, no, his little partner twits from one branch to another, unwilling to leave her lover. Perhaps she thinks if she shakes the branch hard enough with her body she will shake him down, and he will be with her in their nest again. Little bird brain. She didn’t know his legs are broken.

Sawdust-lips kicked the snow at her feet.

Strike two – a man stepped on an ant, and then he wept. He built a little mound to remember the ant, or perhaps to memorialize his carelessness, but it withered away with rain because he had built it out of sand. So he built a larger memorial, using fallen branches, but a large wind swept it away to sea one evening. When his friends asked him why he was weeping so often they too felt the loss of the little ant, and the guilt that they loved someone who had done something so cruel, so they petitioned the city to build a stone monument in the square, sculpted into legs and a long abdomen, and it was beautiful, for a time, but an earthquake ripped the ground in two, and the sculpture cracked. On and on, the whole town built a memory, and on and on it fell apart, until one day they constructed a steam tower to float over their heads with banners floating behind it, circling their homes and the courthouse. But they forgot to put enough grease in the engine and it collapsed in the middle of the city, and it crashed on the heads of eight children playing red rover, red rover, won’t you come over?
Wooden-cheeks curled her toes as they became numb.

Strike three – there was a girl who had just been ripped out of the belly of a wolf by a man with an oversize ax, but he’d nicked her face on one side, and on the other the acid in the belly marked her as half-digested. She ended up better than her grandmother, though, who came out without eyes, her jaw hinged off, and very, very dead. The woodsman brought home the bloody ax and the bloody girl, and because he once read that once you rescue a girl, she’s yours to keep, he placed her in his basement, which is like a belly in a way, but much colder, much drier, and so very dark.

Darling-pie shivered.

Strike four – there was no image with this one, only a feeling that curdled in her belly like sour sausage, the sort of nausea one experiences when they have had nothing to eat for days, but they forget that a starving stomach must have only bland food to start, and they imagine lavish feasts of pudding and toffee and syrup dripping over the edge of stacked pancakes, the kind of food that settles like a stone in your gut, but there is no stone, there is only a hole, and no table exists for you to sit at, no fork for you to grasp. Your teeth have nothing to chew.

Ten-year-old growled. She, too, had not eaten in some time, and that was the sound her stomach made. None of these stories made her feel any warmer, or any safer. Only the matches as they sparked to fire near her eyes did that.

Strike five – last match. Last light. Last warmth. Poor girl’s fingers were too frozen by then to be careful, and she caught the edge of the match on the side of her wooden cheeks. By accident? By accident. She went up in flames – poor design! - but she was not unhappy, in those last moments when she was alight, because she forgot about the bird and its broken leg, and the man who cried for ants, and a woman with a broken face in a basement, and she forgot that she was hungry. All that she knew was her face felt so alight! So red! She was the brightest part of the world.

Her body crumbled to black soot in the snow.

And so it was that, some time later, a group of revelers on their evening walk came across the black stain of her body with five burnt-out matches beside it. Each felt a quick little agony in their heart as they shaped the black to the body of a girl in their mind, but by the last one they thought, well, this little thing succumbed to her pain, hasn’t she? Animal like, at the end. One by one, they walked away, and did not think of her ever again.
Contributors

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