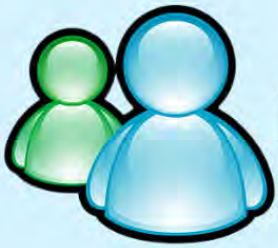

trillium



FALL 2025



PURPOSE STATEMENT

Trillium has been Ramapo College's literary and art magazine since 1971, staffed and run by students, for students. It has existed as the voice of Ramapo creatives for the greater part of the College's history. Trillium's mission is always to create a space for students to express themselves freely and explore what it means to be a student in the current world, whatever that looks like at the issue's conception. As we put together this edition, we found ourselves leaning into a shared nostalgia for a time when the world felt a little more genuine. We hope this magazine takes you back to that feeling.

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RAMAPO COLLEGE

Ramapo College of New Jersey was founded in 1969. Offering bachelor's degrees in humanities, sciences, arts and social sciences, Ramapo College has built a reputation as one of New Jersey's top public colleges.

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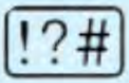

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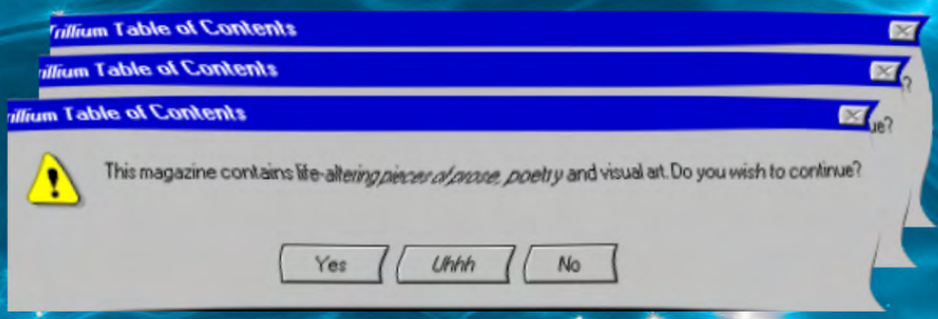

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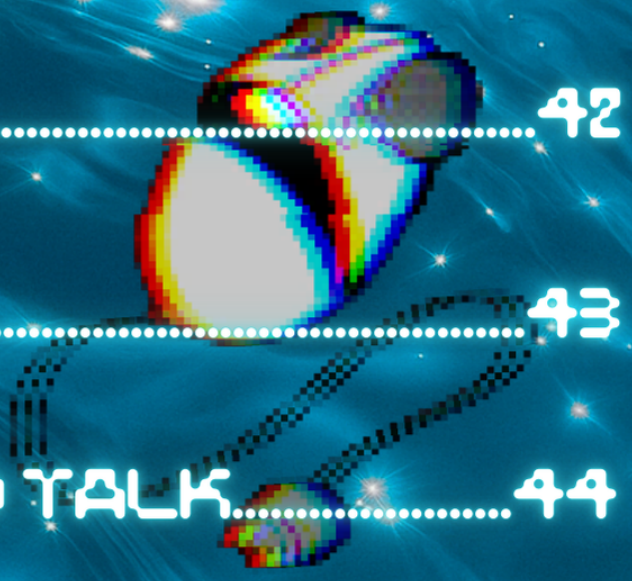

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I DREAMT OF A POET

CLINTON CUDWORTH

His hands shone like silk | left in the rain
ragged silk, dogged | weary

I dreamt of a poet, and he was me
the distance unfathomably far
'tween' where I've been and where I'm me



Black clouds, glossy, ribbed | undulation
chamomile gray, impossible grey
watching dreams fall through fingers

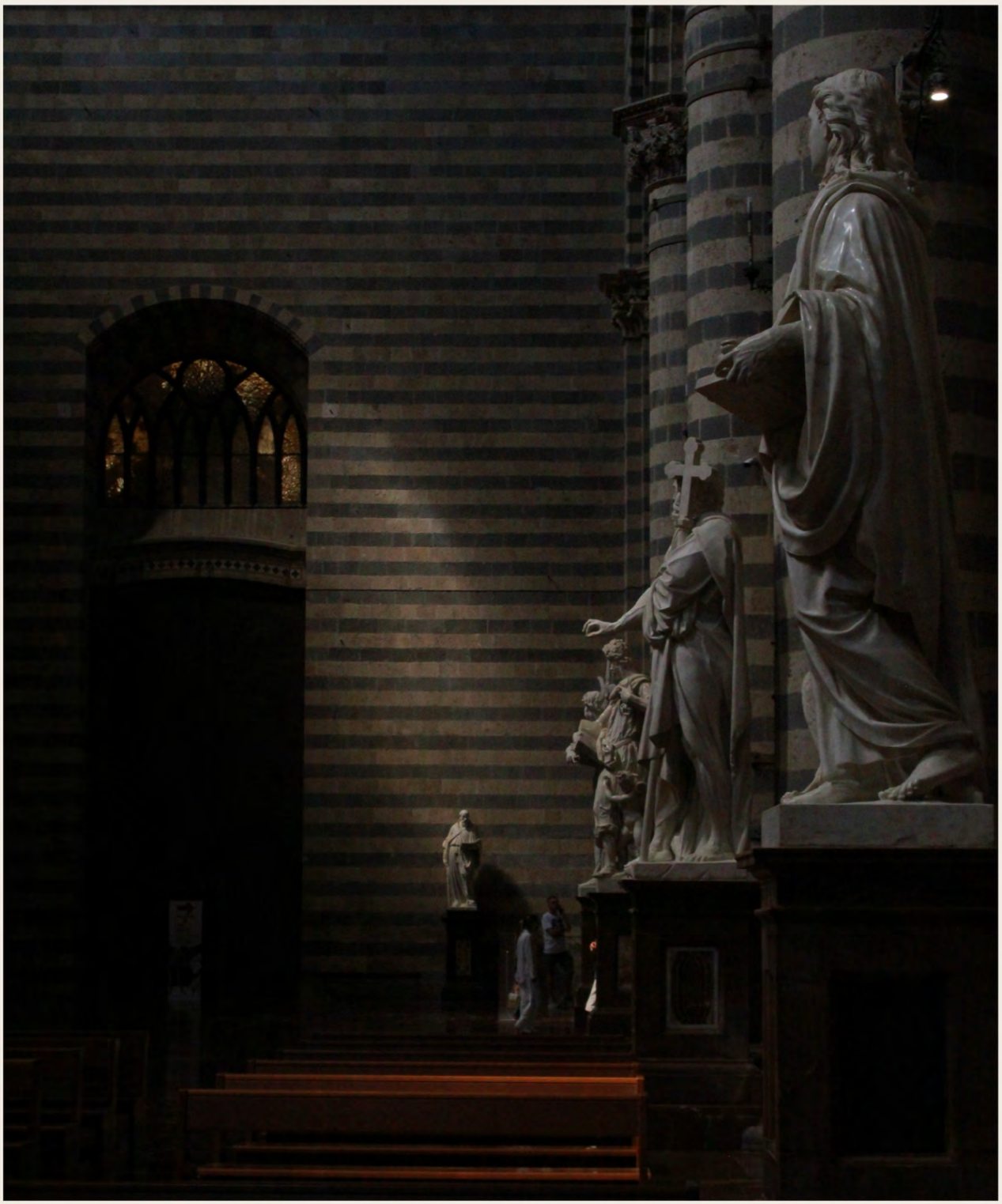
I dreamt of a poet, but he was gone
abandoned in the safe-box | infantile
the unnurtured cry of a babe, lo.

I fall backward to the present
constantly ripped from who I've been
a robin's corpse upon the pavement | plastic in the wing

How ever will we find the time | You and I
to set aside the bustling lives
to commune beneath a hawthorn tree
hoping pricked branches don't fall upon us

HALLWAY OF PAST KNOWLEDGE

MIHIR JARIWALA



YOUR GRAY

JACQULINE MCGARRY

It's days like today where I miss the sun.
It's summertime,
I think,

but I can't tell.
There's no yellow outside or green
or blue

only gray.
A gray that reminds me
of the metallic sprinkles
in your hair.



It reminds me of the colors of your kitchen tiles,
and the stones on your walkway and the day you left us.



I wish the sun would shine just once
so your gray could permit a fluorescent white glow to
shine.

A white so blinding I may see
the vision they always talk about
when you go elsewhere.
The place where you are now.



Wherever you may be,
I hope you are content,
and I hope you know



I always miss your gray.

OCEANIC HUNGER

MIA LEONOR

As volcanic eruption
to village soon lost,
As wiry fence
to hands' blue frost—
Deep within the ocean
of invertebrates below,
Each tiny creature,
cretin,

every crustacea creation,
Each coral and each octopus,
The cuttlefish and kelp, eat
Whaleshark tuna melt
Eat, Gorge,
On swordfish sorbet,
On sardine gourmet—

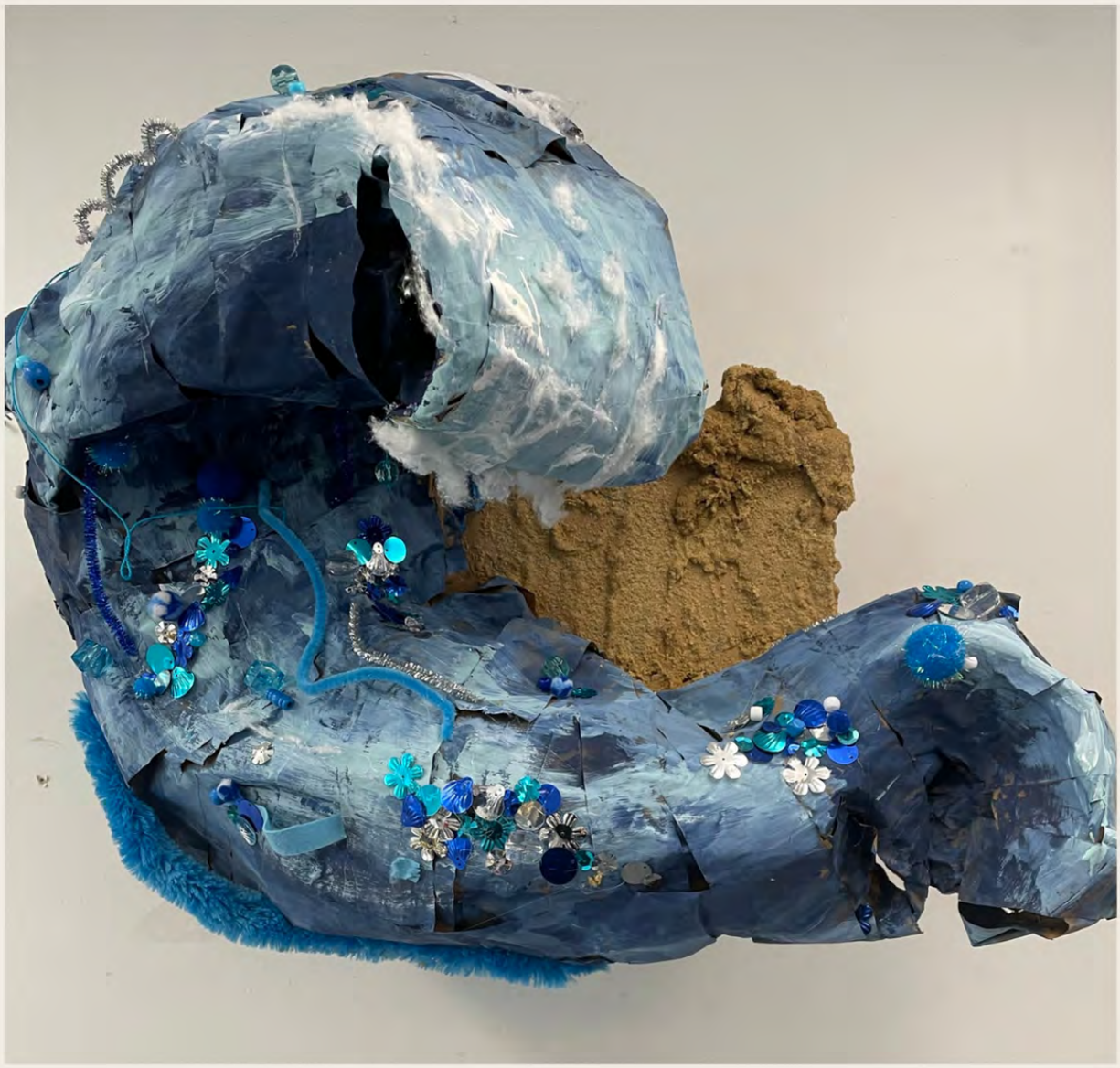
Animals with infinite stomachs
Crunch salt to cry dust
Eat bones like they must
They hunger with lust
Carve deserts out of
oceanic crusts—

And in the catastrophic outer ring,
Where fish can hear the birds sing
Like an egg without its yolk,
Like the trout who loudly choke,
We are a lighthouse with no beacon,
making sounds out to the wild
in the ashen afternoon



WAVE

MARIE WILLIAMS



SWEET ALMOND

EMMA WILSON



In the third grade, I remember waking up with what my Nana called "wind-burn." It was a cold winter, and what started as a little patch of dry, red skin around my mouth slowly took over the lower half of my face. People at school called it the "reverse Santa beard."

In the morning and afternoon, I would stand in the little lilac bathroom while Nana applied what I remember to be thick, sweet almond oil. I went to school shiny and got oil all over my pillowcase when I was home, but within days, I was back to normal. I was satisfied, soft, and smelled a little sweeter. It's the kind of scent you only encounter at your grandmother's house.

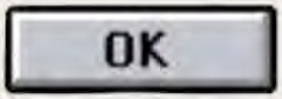
Nana had a lot of remedies and tricks like that – witch hazel and almond oil for the face, Seagram's ginger ale for the stomach, a nice big breakfast for the soul. As I started to have to find my own solutions for the things that began to take root in me when I was too young to understand, she was always there to mend what she could. When the pit of my stomach grew heavy with the first sparks of lifelong anxiety, I took a deep breath of the scent of flowery soap in her bathroom, exhaled the feeling, and walked back out to the living room couch. I washed the taste of fear away with salty bacon, cooked chewy in the frying pan the way she knew I liked it.

She did my hair in the mornings, ponytails meticulously brushed back until there wasn't a bump in sight. On the way to school, I drew with the sketchbook and crayons she kept in the car for me, trying to make sense of the dread I was feeling in pictures to take to my therapist on Tuesday nights. School was never easy for me then, girls with bony arms stepped on my feet on purpose and the boys wearing neon green and orange head-to-toe were learning to be mean to the girls who weren't too pretty.

She helped me with my homework, reading out the questions and writing down the answers I gave her until my teacher noticed the way she crossed a line through the centers of her sevens and told me I needed to pencil them in myself. Every so often, she'd disappear into the kitchen, decorated with roosters, and butterflies and apples, where the fan was always on and the light was always off, coming back with an endless supply of snacks. The grandfather clock in the corner boomed with each passing hour, and the cuckoo clock in the next room was always slightly out of time and tune, but it was the sound of comfort along with PBS Kids and the afternoon news on the TV.

I never noticed how small her house was until I got bigger. Soon enough, I was far taller than her, and the bathroom counter only reached up to my knees. The dogs, one gold and one black Pekingese named Goldie and Gizmo, lost their hearing, and breathed with rattling sounds, and then not at all. Pop, who sat in the big chair diagonal to the couch, sat there for the last time one day while I was away. I think of Nana often, coming back to that quiet house in the weeks following, and hope that it doesn't feel too big for her. I like to think that its coziness is fitting for a woman so slight. I know that she would not feel this way,; I hope anyway, despite myself.

Although it is not exactly the same house where I spent those sunny afternoons and cloudy mornings of my childhood, visiting brings back all of the same memories. I remember the sounds of her carefree laughter, and watching her apply the same red lipstick in the mirror before we left. I still keep the bar of soap she gave me years ago in my t-shirt drawer, learning from her how to keep the smell of home in the threads of cotton.





NOTES FROM WHEN I'M AWAKE AT NIGHT AND EVERYTHING IS PROFOUND

LIV PARISI

When I was younger I buried my dead guinea pig in my backyard. Sometimes I wonder if he was just sleeping. I don't really remember being sad but I still cried.

Sometimes I'll forget to take my anti-depressants and I'll get really irritable. I hate old people because they either make me sad or remind me of church. Sometimes I go with my mom to make her happy but I can't really focus because all the old people smell like hand soap. I'm annoyed because I hate old people and I haven't taken my meds.

What the fuck is the point?
Maybe I'll sleep.

I can make myself believe anything if I try hard enough. Like when I was 16 and I read the Bible front to back and joined a youth group because I thought the world was going to end. I didn't want to die so I figured if I believed in life after death I wouldn't have to. It's weird because the world didn't end but I did feel like I died after my youth pastor told me gay people go to hell.

Goodnight.

Oh also before I go to bed I need to make sure I get milk tomorrow.

goodnight



On Being Gay in the 21st Century

Ronit May

When I say I traded weed for a new piercing
you tell me I'm like a child acting out
when I'm out the door at midnight running my Sonata miles
down, down, down, to 150, 125, 99
sinking my teeth into a Wawa bagel
while she's sinking her teeth into him.

I talked to the Trevor Hotline
I went through the motions and quietly reveled
in the man– albeit, straight man–who
hit on me while I was leaving the Wawa.
I'm sitting in my car on the roof.
The roof is what makes sense until
it's 1:22am and she finally texts me–
he must have just gone home,
I made my way back down.



I always make my way back down.

It's September 29th and the year is
tying up its loose ends.
There are birthdays that I don't acknowledge anymore.
It's way too hot for this time of year
I could make it cooler and pretend
I'm cooler if she was with me.
Her big mess of curls and nonchalant smile
makes me want to throw up
I know that she was always my friend,
not my *girl*friend.

When I go back to her room–
my room, room that was mine–
and try to bite, try swallow what he devoured,
she tastes acrid on my tongue,
her perfume smells all over my room.

I'm throwing up my hands, throwing out
everything she's touched
but where can I put my body?
Where can I leave the inside of
my mouth,
the inside of
my lungs, the inside of
my kidneys?



Come inside.
I have tea for you and five more mouths,
Of course,
you couldn't feed it all.

There are leaves snaking
around Birch Tree Inn without
any natural light.
I'm a plant lover but I want to
tear up the green and her heart, back–





FLOWER BOY

JULIA ROWAN

i would dress you up in flowers
weave dandelions in your hair
have the petals gently fall on your shoulders

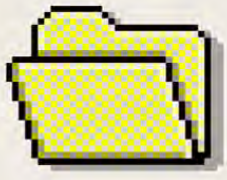
every flower would be yours
every garden
every seed

yet you would sit with a rose
admiring the flushed red
but the thorns would be buried deep under your pale flesh
til a flushed red dripped down your palm

i watched from afar
your actions seemed sacred
like the pain brought you more pleasure than the petals
so i continued to dress you up in flowers

blinded as if the thorns found their way into my eyes
i let them rot there
turning my vision maroon as your hands continued to soak in deep red





FLOWERS BEHIND THE MANSION

JASNEET KAUR



CAKE

ARTHUR GARNER



Come greedily into my sinew
piercing, slicing shapes of lusty inclination
take of me. Liberate my vital viscera, dance
your tongue on my violin's strings of sleepy saline.
Finger my layers and crumbs for a thousand holes and eyes.

Fill me in with you, pack me in your tight tendons.
Slick, sanguine cherry plastic flavor.
I am made for gnashing and modulating.
Fill and pad me in with wet need.



Frosting your veins, yes! Yes, please, take, take.
I am made for your salivating fangs and
endless hefty hunger.











DESSERT

MARIE WILLIAMS

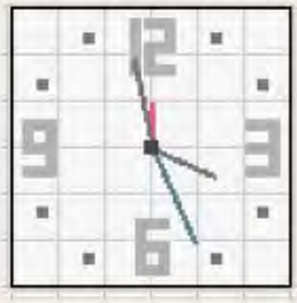


PLEASE DON'T LOOK AT ME LIKE YOU COULD LOVE ME

CARMELLA VANHOUTEN

you don't know what it does,
how it sets off alarms i've buried under polite smiles.
i've spent years sanding down my
sharp edges,
but somehow, i still cut everyone who tries to hold me.

i don't wake up planning to ruin things,
but ruin is the only language my hands speak.
i tell myself i'll be gentle—
that i'll keep the glass from shattering
this time.
and then i trip, and there's blood everywhere,
and you're standing there with open palms,
saying it's fine, you don't mind the mess.



but i mind.
because i know what comes after the sweetness—
the part where my good intentions sour in your mouth,
the part where you start asking why
i'm like this,
and i can't explain,
and you realize it doesn't matter,
because it still hurts.

you deserve someone who doesn't
turn tenderness into collateral damage.
someone whose love doesn't leave
bite marks.
someone who won't keep apologizing
for being themselves.

so please,
take the chance you still have,
walk away while it's just a thought.
because i can survive losing you now—
but later,
when you finally hate me for all the ways
i never meant to hurt you,



i won't survive that.

i'm asking you, begging in the only way i know how.
don't gamble your heart on me.
don't test if i'll be different this time.
don't stay long enough to find out i'm right.



please, don't look at me like you could love me.





ON NUCLEAR WAR

VALERIE RIVERA

I suppose this isn't so bad,
black and red TV screens screaming
bold white letters, the premise of
forever fading from my



mother's eyes. This is my worst fear,
but it's played out in my head: the
hum of every passing plane flanked
by smooth metal devastation.

I dream of it plummeting toward
the horizon, not spinning once.
Enough time to wonder how death
feels, to reach the mortal boundaries

of wondering and wake up. We
all knew it was coming; some
podium child would bury
the bullet in this broken-legged

dog. Sorry kids, nothing else to
do but wait for the light. Better
it consumes us in one go than
rotting under rust-tinged heavens

with trillionaires, tyranny
war and nitrous oxide.
My mother weeps into the phone
to my grandmother, tossing cans

into a duffel bag. I stare
at the horizon where I've watched 7,050 sunsets.
Who knew the clouds would look so soft



on doomsday? Who knew the robins

would twitter over the sirens? Who knew the sky could be so blue once fear no longer served us?

At least we tried. At least in the final half a second we'll all

be warm.











SHADOW OF THE CITY

MIHIR JARIWALA



Keller hunches over his desk, hand clicking away at the keyboard. The end of his left arm remains right on the mouse, waiting to hit send after one last, rushed glance for typos. He'd love to take his eyes off the screen and stop the stinging strain, but a glance at the smeared gray sky wouldn't really make him feel any better.

Only a matter of time before the rain hits. The newscaster that morning seemed to sway between a drizzle and a flood. It honestly got to the point where Keller wished the sky would split open and wash away this town. Only a matter of time before that happens anyway, too, according to every other treehugger out there. He'd rather get it over with already, though.

Another hand drums down on his desk. He looks up at his supervisor into dull brown-black eyes.

"Hello, Kel," the man starts.

"John," Keller replies.

"You're doing nice work so far. Say..."

"What?"

"We... are a little behind," John glances away. "The uh, new girl doesn't really know how to-"

"I'm not workin' overtime again."

"Just this once."

"How many times are you gonna say that?"

All that can really follow is a cautious, childlike shrug. The other hand clutches a paper cup filled with dark coffee just a little too tight, and John takes another sip before he starts up again, "I'm sorry, but you know I need an extra hand with things. Not a lot of people here work like they need a roof over their heads."

A half hearted laugh follows, meeting no response. Keller glares with as much venom he can get away with by HR standards.
Keller thinks he hears the first of the raindrops.

"Please? Just another hour?"

"This shit doesn't take an hour when I do it," he answers, "I'll stay a little longer." If it'll shut you up, he doesn't add.

"I knew I could count on you, Kel," John smiles, and it looks like a kid drawing a finger through silly putty.

"Don't call me that."

John walks away from the cubicle with the pep of someone who's solved some grand puzzle. Keller resists the urge to bash his face into his computer monitor. He shouldn't even consider saying yes. He's fought all his life, kicking and screaming, but now a man who'd snap in half if you look at him wrong is gonna tell him what to do? I think the fuck not.

That's what he should've said. But instead he stares into the soft, stinging glow of the screen, typing away again.

The rain continues.

Tapping and tapping. It's like the drumming of tiny toy soldiers, into the night they march.

— ☢ —

Keller wakes up with a jolt – and a little too much panic. With a moment to breathe, he figures he's had some nightmare that's wiped itself from his mind already, or that maybe the fear's source is the thought that at any moment now he'd see one of his superiors coming over to give him the slip.
Instead, a post-it note rests on the keyboard in front of him. He squints to read it:

FINE FORGET THE OVERTIME. Get some rest! dont say I havent done anything nice for you! ;) Just make sure doug doesnt lock you in and get home safe. -John G.

Keller glances over to the clock – it's 6:58 pm. He sighs in annoyance ... and some relief. At least now he's back on track to what he wanted to do in the first place. Keller takes a moment to collect himself and ensure he's logged out. With this he shoves his things into his bag, throws on his jacket, and heads for the main exit.

He's pushing his grey locks back into the loose ponytail that came half-undone in his nap when he hears a voice, gruff and gravely.

"I swear, I'm gonna find you dead hunched over that thing one night and think you're still workin'."

"Ah, Doug, ya gotta kill me before it gets that bad," Keller shakes his head, threatening to ruin his own work.

"Promise, bud. Ready to get going?"

"Don't have to ask me twice."

With that, they walk out together.

The smell of rain hangs heavy in the air. A light drizzle perseveres, but it's hardly enough to even justify an umbrella. Street lamps cast solid rays of pallid light in the mist as if they're aiming to beam some poor sucker up.

Doug rummages through his pockets, pantomiming the act of remembering the one lining the inside of his red coat. When they're far enough from the building, he pulls out a joint and a lighter, subtly presenting them to Keller. He can't hide the relief as he takes them from his hands. Even with the distance between this time and the last, they know this song and dance quite well. He takes a quick, deep huff and hands the lighter back to Doug. He nods a little with the start of a smile stretching out his lips, gradually exhaling smoke.

"How th'hell do you find the best shit?"

"I got my ways," Doug winks, slipping the lighter back into his pocket, "and magicians don't reveal their secrets."

They walk the long way around to the bus stop, tracing the quieter side of town, passing the joint and stories from the week back and forth. Where they're at is all road, then a few buildings and the ever-present powerlines.

Both know they'll probably miss the 7:30, but Doug's home isn't all too far and what's one night with a friend, eh? Makes them feel like their faces aren't lined with wrinkles and greys aren't sprouting up upon their heads – hell, Keller's given up on hiding the salt among the pepper.

He's...

"When did we get so damn old?"

"That's life, Kel," Doug shrugs, "you blink and you're going from picking out pornos n' cheap beer to your own coffin."

"No, I mean it, th'fuck are we even doing?"

"Well, we're doing whatever we want. So I take some time to mop the floor, big deal, I've got my mornings and my nights to myself. You just sit on your ass sucking John's dick."

"Don't say it like that!" Keller snaps back before reeling himself in just a little. "You can't just be shouting that out."

"You're the one shouting, and hey, it's true. Not like anyone's here anyway..." The night is quiet as the rain fades, and the world has got its eyes on all below the dark, cloudy sky.

"...but you're letting this rat bastard walk all over you."

The air seems to vibrate.

"I don't wanna give him what he wants, but he's just so–"

"Sad? It's his own fault he only gets weekends with his kid," Doug says, fiddling with the stubby remains of the joint.

"Not that," Keller begins, but he can't find the reason that would end the sentence.

The air around him feels dense, and his throat tight.

"Well?"

"He's– he's just not worth the trouble."

"He won't be any trouble, he can't do shit when he's not begging."

The powerlines hiss overhead.

"No, it's not like that,"

"Why the hell can't it be?" Doug asks exasperatedly.

"You used to raise hell, about every! Damn! Thing! I used to have to drag you out the damn bar to stop you from smashing bottles over the heads of whatever jackass looked at you wrong and now you only bitch and moan about a guy who'd rather kill himself than be wrong?"

"It's – goddamnit, give me that!" Keller grabs at Douglas's hand, trying to take what's left of their shared treat from him. Outdone in height and 5 extra digits, luck doesn't work in his favor. It's a damn childish affair, and it'd be embarrassing if anyone but the night and the lines above were witnessing it. But it must be pretty funny, because they crack up in a bright, lime-edged light spark, and the last thing Keller remembers on this side of the story is the flash and the shock.

— ☢ —

Somewhere in that flash, though, a thousand images come to him.

Drawing hearts with his knuckles in the foggy back windows as freezing rain hurtles down in the car. Being carried back to his bed half asleep. His aunt's tear stained face, her voice cracking as she explains his mother is sick and he can't go home with her until she gets better.

The first joint he'd ever rolled. The futile race to hold back his own hair as he vomits into the sink. Racing down Manhattan's sidewalks with the love of his life. Sweetness to his bitterness, something to tame the wilder side of him.

A seaside wedding, a ceremony but no actual certification. Feeling on top of the world, in control for once. Then comes work. Then comes the prospect of promotion. Then comes falling behind. The fights, the words, "I don't think this will work out." Returning to an empty home, the love gone, sucked out into the vacuum of space.

He sees his own form, misshapen, with missing and broken parts. An arm only halfway there, mottled skin with growing, pallid spots, wrinkles, fucked up teeth that had once left him begging please, I'll work or something and help you pay for it, I want the goddamn braces. The body that was shutting down, unusable, worth nothing but scrap.

It just won't end. There's a thousand voices of what will help. Figures out of the corner of his eye. A thousand hands reaching out. Principal, doctor, therapist, John. Because you just don't know what's good for you, eh?
Then he feels himself hit the pavement.

— ☢ —

He's still lying on the ground when he comes to, but it's more like a hospital floor than any road. Everything is quiet and dim, though he hears unrecognizable murmurs, beeps and hums in the periphery. His left arm is sore, radiating from the space on the inside of his elbow. Well, no, it's more of a platform. A tiled, rounded platform, raised above the rest of the ground by a good three, maybe five feet. Whirring machinery he can't recognize remains right where the light meets shadow. There's something like footsteps and conversation behind him. Procedural. Workplace. Uncertainty. It's like his energy has been sapped out of him, and he's bound to the table's surface by fatigue and vertigo. He feels something rub up against him, and then a pit in his stomach when he looks to the source.

The hard cold sting of linoleum tiles is mitigated by the caress of warm, calloused hands. It's like they've extended themselves from the shadows in an instant– there's no way he could have missed them. How could he not have seen them?

Movement flickers on within him as if he's just woken up into an act that's been going on for a while now. Though quick to struggle, he can only look around in amazement at the sight. The scarred arms look like fleshy birch bark, swaying against one another, weaving between wires and unreadable screens. Bile turns in his stomach as his vision fades to another. Roads never walked span out in front of him as a buzzing current runs through his very being.

His wife on the hospital bed, their baby in her arms. He looks just like you. First steps, kindergarten, school. Average grades, still better than he ever was. Sneaking out. Fighting. Wrong crowd. Down the drain. He's just like you. Packed bags. I'll never be like you.

Days, months, years alone. A frantic phone call, a stroke, you need to come over now. Hospital bed, hand in hand, we're one in the same.

Fade.

New ID, new home, new job. Literally anything else. The nice girl, Tory, the one jackpot off a site for one night stands. Take your time, now. Save up, move down to the shoreline. Yeah, the tourists suck, but think of the view. No marriage, no children, but every summer living in the sun and loving in the moonlight.

Pulse.

Shaky breaths.

Hospital bed, again, losing blood. Needles. Suture? Epidural. Blade.

"I wish you could stay."

And he knows the man who is gripping the side rail of the bed.

"She looks just like you."

And Keller looks up into dull, wrinkle-lined eyes.

He shakes his head as if it can wish the sight away.

A thousand more lives flash, faster and faster, but those eyes are burned into the vision like a faulty computer screen.

It all goes white.

His muscles sear and spasm.

— —

It's... cold.

Keller's eyes finally pry themselves open, but they've yet to focus. His ears ring and everything feels wet. He's just stuck staring up at the night sky. As his vision sharpens, the stars seem to poke out through the darkness, like God Himself has taken a toothpick through some big black tarp over the diorama Earth below.

Slowly, the full picture becomes visible. The cold wet embrace is from tall grass, a pallid green sea around him now. Half-scabbed-over blood trickles from his nose. The ringing gives way to a silent night, only broken by crickets and a distant woosh of traffic. But the sky...

Gemini and Orion hang above, stars twinkling. His mother, he remembers, somehow, had pointed them all out once before. Mars watches over the twins, Castor and Pollux reunited forever. Betelguese, he recalls, is already dead. Jupiter reigns above the scene, between the horns of Taurus.

A beautiful, beautiful project.

Steps approach on the horizon.

"Holy shit, Keller," Doug manages between heavy breaths that lie right on the line of dry heaving. "Holy fucking shit."

He's disheveled, with his shirt open and pants on backwards, not even on all the way. Same slimy sheen, his hair is all wet. Keller has never seen his friend's eyes forced open so widely, or his hands shake like that, even when he'd waited an hour too long to hit the bar around the corner.

It's like someone's paused the movie, here. The two are stuck there in time, no other words, a sense of what comes next now in their minds, until at long last Doug reaches a hand out.

"Get up– God, no, you should get up. Can you stand?"

Hardly. Legs collapsing in like jelly, he's left leaning on Doug.

"Easy, now," he tries to take a step forward.

Keller laughs.

"Stop– Please, don't cry. If it hurts I'll –"

He digs his fingers in, presses his head against Doug's arms, as if he won't ever see him again. Everything sounds like the tv in the living room. His stomach feels warm. "We can sit down. You– th'fuck did they do?"

His own words are foreign to him, and his heart pounds so hard it feels more like it's stopped. Some strained noise escapes him and he can't even hear how shrill the cross between a wail and a whimper comes out. It doesn't matter anyways.

"Jesus, c-calm the fuck down, man. Stay with me here, you're–"

Before he drops him, Doug sits Keller down again and sits right beside him. Puts his head in his hands, and it's clear this whole thing's stupid.

A pond opens up to the sea, opens up to the shore, to the jungle.

Into the cave and back out. The globe. The cubicle. The gurney. The wake. All under the same stars. With a thousand other people. Someone might miss him. Someone would be better off without him. Someone else could take his place. Keller laughs and laughs. This whole thing is just so stupid, and he's stupid and so lucky and he's doomed.

— ☢ —

In time he lapses back into something like lucidity – though he's lost half the time all the same. Doug had tried to give him a choice: to call someone, tell them everything so someone can do something, whoever that would be, cops or the ambulance or a PI, or they'd both be quiet, never speak of it again if he'd please just let him call someone, even if it's just another friend to drive them back. A bystander answered this for them, calling paramedics but not the cops. That's something Keller will appreciate someday soon, but for now he stares at the damp grass overlapping with asphalt, sitting right at the ambulance's opening as a slim young woman with frizzled tawny hair and hazel eyes asks questions through nearly pursed lips. "... do you know where any of this came from?."

She drags a finger through some of the membranous substance that remains on Keller's shoulder– and once again the scene expands to him. The lilacy towel wrapped around him served to wipe off most of the ooze and continues to shield his body from the eyes that all gravitate to him... Well, when Doug's not looking he's staring up, or past the whole scene and beyond the horizon, like he's half expecting another bright spark to burn the scene away again. "No, not at all."

"Because it's not from here," Doug says.

She nods him off like he's a kid, "I wouldn't say there's enough THC in your system from what your friend there described to, uhm, cause any hallucinations, especially if your tolerance is already on the higher end. Though any significant stressors would–"

Doug gives an incredulous laugh. It's more of a huff.

He turns away from the scene, and Keller feels the shift in the paramedic's demeanor to something more like urgency as she leans closer.

"If you want we can run a test for you."

"What?"

"We'll run a forensic exam. It takes a while, but we can make it as quick as possible, if you're comfortable with it."

The words twist like a knife, and it feels like every inch of his body is being stabbed from the inside out.

"No," Keller chokes out.

"He doesn't need to know, if–"

"Fuck no. He's not– it's not like that at all."

"There's bruising on–"

"Please. I just want my clothes back."

She can't hide the way her face twists in concern.

"I get that you have to say all this," Keller says, voice low, "but I don't even want to know. I only know it's not him. And that I want to go home."

She's silent, then, and he almost feels bad. Almost. He burrows deeper in the towel. There's not much else to explain waking up meters away from the side of the road on the untamed grass with clothes half undone and minds rendered to their limit if not drugs or some shared madness. Well, there's... Keller doesn't want to think about it anymore. If they aren't going to the hospital, though, then he won't have to. Shove it back into the box in the corner of the room. Raze the house to the ground.

There's another paramedic, actually, a young man with a greasy goatee and thick glasses. He's come back from the field with Keller's clothes in hand, save for the jacket, that's nowhere to be found, apparently. His bag is slung over the young man's shoulder. He takes it all back, and in time the ambulance peels away from the side of the road.

Keller recoils from the sensation of something on his back. He turns to see Doug with arms outstretched, holding his own jacket.

"You can't just scare me like that," Keller says, voice wavering.

"You're shivering," Doug shrugs, "Are you alright?"

No response.

"You wanna... talk about...?"

Quiet.

"I don't know what you saw but that ...I get it. I bet you don't want to hear anything from me either."

Nothing, nothing, nothing.

"Do you want to eat anything?"

— ☢ —

The yellowed lights of the diner are almost green. The tables, too, are a pale wood dyed closer to a mustard-yellow in the light. It's all a gross-yellow green, save for the chairs and menus, a ruby red turned an irony brown. Beneath the aromas of food lies an odd indolic air, and neither can tell if some patron's cheap perfume still lingers or if they should worry about some animal dying in the vents.

Keller stares down at the table, only half skimming the menu. The letters aren't blurry, but they just don't bind to form the words. Some remain a semblance of what they mean, though. He points to one.

"What's this say?"

"You can read, Kel."

He just stares.

"Those are pancakes."

Keller nods with a hum. The place is eerily empty, save for one chatty group of teenage-twenty-somethings in the corner. Doug's jacket is draped over his shoulders, and he can't tell if he's alright with that or not.

A boyish, red haired waitress takes Doug's order. Keller just sticks with the water for the table, for now. Doug pours a cup full for him, but he just looks at the glass as if it's full of poison.

Everything feels like poison. He feels like a filthy animal. He wants to run back through the grass and let the rain wash his own bare form away into foam. He'd rather meld into the inner workings of it all than let himself ever be touched or looked at again. Even thought of.

"You should probably drink that, at least."

"They thought it was you."

"They what now?"

"The paramedics," Keller's gaze doesn't stray from the menu, "they thought you did...that."

Another sharp chuckle-huff.

"You fucking with me?."

"Did you?"

"...You're fucking with me."

"Doug–"

"Yeah, sure bud," Doug nearly hisses, "I'd make a fuckin' fool out of myself n' throw all our clothes out on the grass in the rain–"

"I'm just asking."

"– because I guess I can't hold my own anymore or whatever. Yeah, I totally love waking up half naked covered in vaseline or whatever on god's green earth that was–" "Don't do this to me."

"– don't do this to me, man. You think I'd singe my own goddamn wrist for shits and giggles? You think I'd do THIS?"

"Enough, I get it, I'm sorry!"

If it wasn't quiet before, it is now. Keller presses his palm against his eyes shut tight, though after a moment the silence draws him back out. Doug's gone and shoved his own hand right in front of Keller, and only now does he see what looks like a cigarette burn right on Doug's wrist.

"... Did you get that from them?" he asks.

"I literally showed you," Doug says, anger giving way to embarrassment. "I don't remember."

"... You were pretty out of it,"

"Yeah. Sorry."

"Just eat. I'll get you the pancakes when the waitress comes back over."

"Thanks."

"And don't apologize. I know you just don't want to say what we're both thinking."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"You brought it up."

"I shouldn't have."

"You really should make up your mind."

Keller unravels the silverware on his side of the table from the napkin they're encased in, grabs the fork, and jabs it into Doug's hand. The waitress comes back just in time to hear him yelp in irate pain.

"Ah, thanks," he says, glaring back across the table. "Don't mind my friend, he's just hungry. Could we get an order of pancakes, too?"

"...sure thing, gentlemen," she replies with a strained smile.

Sure enough, in the next five minutes the pancakes are out. Three, with butter and a little syrup. They're sweet and fresh. Tears prick at the edges of Keller's eyes as he wordlessly eats. He knows Doug is staring, everyone probably is, but for a moment the hunger catches up to him.

— ☢ —

The walk the rest of the way to Doug's is fortunately uneventful. Wordless, for better or worse. They watch the sky to prove their own fears won't come true. Sooner rather than later they're like little kids again, nearly running in from the dark. Soon-ish, but later, Doug's fumbling with his keys, pushing them into the lock and turning the doorknob. The door swings open to darkness.

Keller gets the couch. It's worn and torn, but it's enough. Doug offers a pajama shirt, but he declines. He stands in the doorway, now, as Keller lays down, blanketless, but still with the jacket.

"You'll be okay down here?" Doug asks.

"...Yeah."

"You know I wouldn't hurt you on purpose. Not like that."

Keller freezes in place.

"I just hope you know that. I'm... they do that in a lot of the... if anyone should... I don't know."

"I wasn't trying to accuse you," Keller says. "She's the one who tried to put the blame on you, I just–"

"Yeah. I get it. Why she would."

" I never believed in aliens."

"Do you now?"

No would be a lie. Yes doesn't sound right either. He wonders why Doug doesn't turn on a light – though he's only going to the next room over to sleep.

"Do you..." Doug goes to ask.

"I know you didn't do a damn thing. I don't like the real answer."

"I get it."

"You don't."

"You need me to stay down here?"

"I need to quit."

"Don't," Doug says, "it's good money."

"Then I need you to kill me."

"You need rest. Goodnight."

As Doug leaves, Keller finds himself looking through one of the dusty, half-shuttered windows. The world feels oh so heavy on his shoulders. He can't bring himself to turn over away from the look of the street. It extends outwards in his mind, to some darker horizon. He wants to stare out forever, but his eyelids grow heavy.

The power lines will be repaired within the month.

Neither will be working there by next February.

A site about the existence of aliens and reptilians will pop up within the next year.

Doug will try to sell his side of the story by calling into radio shows, rambling about the surgical tools, the probes, and there's chips in half the population now. He'll continue on in interviews, maybe a
book or screenplay, and funnel the money into whatever will bleach the imprints of all he saw from the insides of his eyelids.

Keller will wake up nauseous for the next few months until he wakes up in searing pain and blinding fear in the middle of the night.

It will go away in seconds and he'll have to make of it what he will. If only he knew what that should be.

Doug will try to reach him. They'll meet up once, twice, but no good jokes or stories will arise ever again. Now it's just about quelling the rise of the elephant in the room. They'll fight, but Keller will still wish him well as he steps out the door, still watching for any wayward spark.

He can lie and say it was all nothing, but he'll never be able to stop himself from looking into it. Repeat abductions are common in these cases. Is this the first, or – no, that's stupid. This isn't scifi, this is the real world.

Keller will spend every clear night outside. He will never marry again, and he will go to church every Sunday less for worship and more for routine. The stub of his left arm will itch and he'll claw at threads and chips that aren't there. They are, they are, I just know it. And he'll never hold another child and he knows he won't die alone. Not within this diorama, under watchful eyes.

The next new moon, this Saturday the 29th of March, 2025, will create a partial solar eclipse. I will go on with my life and you will go on with yours. But for now the darkness of unwavering sleep extends its spindly fingers, shooting out into webs of veins and dragging down all it ensnares.

What a life.







THE SOURCE

TALIA CRISO



THE ILLUMINATED IN-BETWEEN

NICOLE DIPRÉ



THIS BENCH

JACQUELINE MCGARRY

I sit at the bench in my neighborhood
where brittle grass and dandelions
part a perfect middle.
Like muscle memory – dusting off cobwebs.

They make room for me
to fit between slivers
of setting-sun rays
reaching through marble clouds.



I admire how the things around me
welcome me back
with warmth, squeezing my body tightly.
Caressing my weathered skin.

Will nature be able to rinse them away?
The raw scratches and firm bumps,
like dirt drawings and shaded mountains,
that have emerged since I was here last?
I worry that I have left for far too long.

I had to plant new roots
and ground into new soil.
I never forget, though,
this bench that carries me with it.
That holds blue fibers from my jacket
and the stories I always seem to repeat.
I come and I go; this is inevitable.
However, I smile
knowing that old life and new
will always sit at this bench.

VILLAGE IN ALSACE

ELIZABETH RODRIGUEZ-BARCENA



TO MY FRIENDS

VALERIE RIVERA



I linger in the doorway just before I leave.

It always feels like there's something more I've got to say. I suppose it's my Italian side—so used to taking at least 20 minutes to inform every single person of my departure, receiving a squeeze and wet kiss on the cheek from them all, so used to saying "love you bye" back and forth four times before hanging up on my Nonna. I suppose it's because, though I know this isn't our last goodbye, we've only got so many of them left before we change, divulge and blossom from these entangled roots. Before you change. I'll grow upward, but I refuse to grow apart.

But you, I can feel you shifting. Dreaming. Loving. Loving others. More than me, which my bedroom walls, cast in 2:37am shadows, have convinced me. So have the group chats that seem to get drier and drier every month, my abandoned half of our friendship necklace, the gleeful Instagram photos of smiles I don't recognize, the pink and orange summer sunsets I watch from my living room window instead of dancing under them in your backyard while mosquitos devour our calves. I know this is the natural metamorphosis of small town kids like us, uni and jobs and boyfriends and finding yourself. Yet in my driveway I turn back to you with half my body already out your car door, and since there's no platonic translation of "I'm in love with you" or "I'm afraid to face this life alone," I say "We gotta do this again sometime!" and pray you cannot hear the note of pleading in my voice.

I don't like to end FaceTime calls first, because 10 years from now we'll probably all live at least 3 hours from each other, noses deep in our careers. Settled. Much too busy for each other except for a coffee date every five months or so. Those audio messages about something funny that happened at work or a vent session that I used to bomb you with will sit in the back of my throat because I don't want to bother you. No one's ever been in love with me, no man has ever even called me pretty in that way. But why would I ever want to waste my time on some man when I've got you? You, who knows how to make me wheeze-laugh like a steaming kettle, you with all my quirks and philosophies and secrets etched onto your ribs, and yours onto mine? You, who have seen every hideous nerve and vein behind this face and cupped it in your hands anyway?

REMEMBER

NICOLE DIPRÉ



WHEN DOES IT HAPPEN?

NICOLE DIPRÉ

It happens when you hear a rock song you *loved* years ago,
the one you played on loop and turned all the way up. It
happens when you try on a cable knit sweater you've
owned since you were seventeen.

You hear a joke someone you used to know
would tell, and something glimmers or stings.

When you see a fragment of your younger self, glowing hopes,
dreams bursting at the seams, suppressed, somber desires in one's
vivid eyes. Maybe even your own.



It happens when you answer to
your childhood nickname.
It happens in every photo you take
to capture a special moment, *fading,*
every ticket stub and rusted bracelet kept
to remember what was;
grasping to keep the moments we can't get back.
Noticing how you feel that time of year,
when the anniversary or ex-best friend's birthday
comes around for better or worse.

Finding the collar of your dead dog. When someone says you look *just* like
your mother, father, sister, brother, grandparent,
you when you were little. Drive by your old school and see new kids running
around where you once did, new kids with new handshakes;
pure laughter fills the air and leaves just as delicately, disintegrating like smoke.

Lay in bed and remember
who once lay next to you.
A stranger stares back in the mirror.

NEXT TIME

TAYLOR MARTIN

I promise myself
my poem will smile,
will be warm enough
to raise the sun, will
echo the charm of my
lover's laugh, will bring
Callisto's voice to life,
will cool the leaves with
a soft breeze, and will
water the seeds of lilies
and tulips; the start of a
new beginning. But then,
you tap my shoulder,
cold fingers freezing
my veins. You, with
dirt caked under your
nails, rip the roots of my
flowers from their soil,
saying those that bloom
must always die. You,
my savior, my bane,
pull me from my full
heart to a familiar
hollow chest before
comfort can settle in
my bones. This poem
wilts like the petals,
and yet, with you
stilling my soul, my
heart forever clings





PHOTOSYNTHESIS

AVA TODASH



IF THE WALLS COULD TALK

ALYSSA BUA

When they first moved in, I knew my mind was as blank as I appeared to be. I had no previous inhabitants; as a matter of fact, I was made just for them, or at least that's what I heard every time they invited a guest over. I'm not anything special, especially not now, but in my heyday, I seemed to be the talk of the town. Other neighbors would come over and act like they were in awe of the color choices, the cathedral ceilings, and the open floor plan. 'We just wanted a simple home to grow our family in,' Casey would always say whenever met with a compliment about me. Her belly was about as wide as she was long, but she managed to get around just fine whenever someone wanted a tour.

They had been here about a month at the time; everything was just getting settled in its proper place before a splash in the middle of the night caused Casey and Harvey to go into a panic. I remember her yelling at him to 'Grab the bag' and him forgetting where they left it.

"He's three weeks early. Are you sure it's happening?"

"You really wanna ask me if I think I'm in labor-" Before Casey could finish her sentence, she let out a large yell that reverberated across me and seemed to echo into the kitchen. I'm assuming that answered Harvey's question because he immediately found the bag, rushed to her side, and helped her to the door. Even amidst all of this chaos, right before the door was opened, Harvey stole a kiss from Casey's lips and said, "I can't wait for our little man." Before Casey could even respond, heart obviously melting, he interrupted, "But no time for that, let's go! It's baby time!" He leaned in close to her stomach and said, "Don't hurt your mother too much, or when you're old enough, I'm gonna kick your ass," which got a laugh out of Casey. A month had been enough time to learn how Harvey calms her down, and he was doing just that. What Casey didn't realize at the time was that Harvey was telling the truth.

After they left, I was enclosed in darkness, left to anticipate their return. I remember making sure everything was just right in the nursery and what they hung on me wasn't too loose or would fall away in their absence.

The nursery was the most decorated room in the house, with safari animals on the walls, stars on the ceiling, and an area rug circling a rocking chair next to the crib with “Austin Thomas” written in cursive above. I messed around with the light switch so that when they came home, the stars would glow, and the mobile above the bed would be spinning for him; I knew they would love that.

While checking the house, trying to keep myself busy, I realized daylight had already arrived. I was unsure about how long it takes to have a baby, maybe longer than I knew, and so I idly waited for my residents to come back to me. After the whole day had passed and it had become night again, I started to worry. The paint in the top corners of the ceiling began to peel, and I knew I needed to stop thinking about them. Just do my job, be here for them, wait for them.

Before I knew it, I could feel the car's vibration on the driveway right before they entered. They took longer than they ever had before to make the short trip from the driveway to the front door. When walking in I could feel the new presence of this young baby boy before I could hear him. Now that I think about it, he didn’t even make a sound, maybe some soft sighs if anything. They immediately brought him into his room, where they placed the sleeping baby in his crib under his turning mobile and twinkling stars. For the first time, I saw the two parents staring down at their child.

The being they had created together was filled with awe and infinite possibilities, as a child should be, as a child should stay.

Austin grew up and slowly changed in his abilities to take care of himself. No matter his age, Casey would end every night by rocking him in his chair and singing a song, the lyrics repeating, “Oh, darling, don’t you ever grow up, don’t you ever grow up, it could stay this simple, I won’t let nobody hurt you, won’t let no one break your heart and no one will desert you, just try to never grow up.” Austin would fall asleep in Casey’s arms by the end of the second verse without fail.

Years passed and I remember staying rooted to the floor despite the tumbling toddler with parents in tow, running about the house. Austin as a baby and toddler was one of his hardest stages. Not only did he cause stress, it seems, to every person in his attendance, but he would draw all over me. Everything from crayons to markers, and when Austin got into the permanent markers...that was a really sad day. To make up for the mishap, Harvey adorned me with a light beige square that did not match the wear and tear of the rest of me. However, the chips and divots in my wainscoting have never been fixed or touched up. I'm not complaining, though; I think it leaves me with a good sense of character after these years together. Some marks, though, I wish I could erase from my memory.

Austin grew up even more, becoming a young boy and then becoming a young adolescent. He was a wild little boy who always found a way to wind up in trouble with Harvey or Casey. Over the years, however, I began to notice the difference between how Harvey handled Austin and how Casey handled Austin. Despite Harvey barely being here, always in and out of work until late and taking weekend business trips often, Austin would be 'punished' at least once a week.

Sometimes, Austin hadn't done much, just not saying the right thing at the right moment. I remember one instance where Harvey came back late from work one night and Austin was awake, pouring himself a glass of milk before bed. Being around 11 years old, he should have been asleep at the late hour, but he had a nightmare strong enough I felt him jostle in his bed when he awoke. Austin always had nightmares. The worst thing is I always knew what they were about.

When Casey would feel Austin's jostle as well, she would gracefully walk over to his room and hold him, whispering, "I won't let nobody hurt you, won't let no one break your heart, just try to never grow up," until Austin's shakes would slow down and the only movement coming from his room was that of Casey swiping his hair back as he slept.

Well, this one night, Harvey walked in and saw Austin up, grabbing himself a cup of milk, startling Austin enough that the glass dropped from his hand and shattered on the hardwood floor. Without a second thought, Harvey grabbed hold of Austin and dragged him with him down the basement steps.

I quickly realized that I was built upon an existing foundation after moments like these began to happen. For what reason, I did not know. I didn't even know there was an 'unfinished basement' until Casey descended the stairs on their first walk-through to see the "perfect workspace," the contractor had said. Casey was never a fan because the floor was unfinished and was just left as dirt with nothing to cover it. This never bothered Harvey, though, dragging Austin down whenever he wanted to.

I wish I could never have known what happened down there, though. Casey was always under the impression that the basement was where Harvey would go to work on his model cars and where he and Austin would play pool together. Their 'laughs' would echo up the steps. Until Casey would knock on me right next to the staircase, signifying to them it was time to come up for dinner. They would always come back up a few minutes later, Harvey exclaiming, "You gotta up your game, boy, an old man like me can beat you without even breaking a sweat," as he would wipe his brow on his sleeve and walk to the kitchen for a bottle of water. Austin would never reply, though; instead, he would go wash his hands before supper, the pipes creaking within me every time he turned the faucet on and off to clean himself up from the moments before.

I always wondered in these moments what Casey thought was happening down there and why she never did anything about it. I could only come to one conclusion: that she had absolutely no idea. Harvey was clever; he would always discipline Austin when she wasn't in the room or was busy doing her yoga classes in the living room on the television.

I remember I started to creak and scream whenever I could force myself to show my distaste for what the *father* in my space was doing to his *son*.

Every step would yell under his weight, would almost buckle if his walk wasn't fast enough. I made the doors harder to open for him, making him put all his weight into the hinge before it would release and send him tripping backward. I would yield to whatever Casey needed to do, allowing the hot water to stream, the faucet to dispel the right amount of pressure, and doors to open with ease until he got angry at her light touch.

I tried to get the basement door stuck once so Harvey could never bring Austin down there again. I still beat myself up about that because all it did was cause Harvey to come home the next day with a new door, one a few inches thick.

Being a constant in my family's life, I always watched them and was able to decipher and understand their dynamics better than anyone else. This is why I didn't think anything was wrong when Harvey started to discipline Austin. I was too naive, I guess as naive as Austin because he didn't change how he interacted with his father. They still played, giggled, and did everything they always did. I remember Harvey luring Austin into the basement that day, telling him he had a new 'game' to teach him.

That was two years ago.

One morning, I made Casey's alarm go off extra early so she would get up and make herself a cup of coffee before waking Austin up for school like normal. That day was a Friday, or at least the calendar on the refrigerator declared it to be. Austin would be happy about this; he was always extra happy on Fridays. However, I knew this Friday would change everything.

Casey exclaimed, a sound I had never heard before coming from within me in Austin's room. Followed by her frantic footsteps around every corner of the first floor until she returned to the living room, pulling the phone off the wall to dial a number. I didn't know what to do then because I knew what was wrong, but I couldn't do anything about it. The hum of the phone line passed through me, filling me with a sense of comfort that, by Casey's temper, should be nowhere near this moment.

“Harvey, I don’t know what to do. Austin’s not in his bed. I looked everywhere in the house, but I couldn't find him. I don’t know where he is-” Don’t call him, he knows what happened.

“Calm down, sweetie, it’s okay. Slow down. What do you mean you can’t find him?”

“He’s not in his room, Harvey, or anywhere home. He should be in his bed. I was just about to get him up for school. Did you take him with you without telling me!?”

“No, hun, why would I take him with me to a conference? And as if I wouldn’t tell you. But it’s okay; we will figure this out. Call the police, and I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“Harvey..?”

“Yes?”

“His window was open.” As these few words were uttered, I finally felt the origin of the chill over me. The winter air filled the house from Austin’s bedroom window, left ajar.

I know Austin never left home.

As that day went on, unknown men in uniforms trespassed my barriers to ask and answer questions and start a search of Austin’s room. Apparently, they don’t normally start a search that early, but because Austin is so young, starting as soon as possible was more important.

I never once wanted to be able to communicate with my residents, my family, until that day. I was always able to protect them and communicate in my own way without them knowing. I would hold steady during the hurricanes and storms and stay cool in the hot months, allowing a refuge from the summer heat. In my opinion, most importantly, providing a place for them to spend time together, eat meals together, and make memories together. All I have learned from this is that me providing a home never made me one.

Now they weren’t whole. They weren’t together. Austin wasn’t home.

At the time, I felt like he still was.

Soft words echoed through the room, which I helped to echo across every inch of myself, "*Oh, darling, don't you ever grow up, don't you ever grow up, it could stay this simple, I won't let nobody hurt you.*" But this musical treasure chest, a gift from Casey to Austin on his tenth birthday, was not connected to one of my sockets. It was able to operate of its own accord.

This was not my doing.

This was Austin. I think this was the first moment I truly felt he was gone, too.

This moment was cut off by a half-asleep Harvey entering the room exclaiming to Casey that she was being too loud and he needed to get his sleep. Even after Casey desperately related the series of events to Harvey, he couldn't care less; I believe he even called her "stupid and childish" for believing Austin was communicating and turned himself back to bed. Perfect timing, the floorboard I had been slowly raising between the hallway and kitchen finally appeared as Harvey stubbed his toe on his return to bed. His slew of curses and changed gait would provide momentary triumph until the reality of my efforts affecting nothing would come rushing back.

The very next night, when Harvey was sitting at dinner and Casey was staring at the beige square in the corner of me, a loud Bang vibrated from somewhere until it was echoed by another loud Bang a few seconds later. Immediately intrigued by the sound, Casey shot up and ran for the basement stairs, where Harvey followed after her in an almost too-fast manner.

On their descent, back up the steps a few minutes later, "But how did they just fall out of the table? I've never heard of that happening before?" Casey had questioned Harvey. *Come on, Casey, go back down, go find him.*

"How am I supposed to fucking know, I didn't build the pool table," Harvey responded before he continued to stuff his mouth with homemade meatloaf.

The way Casey had begun to look at Harvey around this time no longer mimicked the loved sight she had once used to gaze upon him when he would crack a joke to alleviate her nerves. Instead, it was one of a protective and broken mother. I wish I could scream to tell her what I knew.

When Harvey left for his next business weekend trip after that meal, the first since Austin's disappearance, Casey gave him no kiss goodbye or walk to the door.

She sat in the dining room, still fixated on the painted beige square in the bottom left corner of me. As soon as the hum of his car could no longer be felt, she ran for the telephone, where another hum filled me. A hum I was finally happy to feel. A hum, I feel like I nudged her to feel.

Turns out I was finally able to do something right. Something that actually made a big difference for once. You see the light beige square he painted on me years ago? I started peeling it away as the days ticked by after Austin was taken from us. Every night, while Casey was in his room and Harvey lay in bed unbothered, I would peel the paint away to reveal the letters I knew I had to to get Casey to hear me.

She started to pick up on it at dinner that night when the billiard balls fell out of the pool table, untouched by me. And it worked because that morning would be the last time I saw Harvey.

After rushing to the telephone, Casey ran downstairs to reveal what I think she had never seen coming. She had read the word, dirt ripped into the paint on my wall, and it only led her in one direction.

She ran down the stairs faster than I had ever felt her move since that morning Austin was gone, and pushed the pool table out of her way. A small patch of dirt was disturbed compared to the rest of the basement floor, where she started digging. On her hands and knees, Casey started scratching at the floor in a mania I could understand. This was the first time I was happy to be disconnected from my surroundings. I don't know what I would have done if I could feel this, her pain, her hurt, his pain, his hurt.

She kept going until her hands hit a hard surface.

The men in uniforms arrived about ten minutes later, rushing into the house through the door I unlocked as Casey lay on the foundation. They rushed into the basement, pulling Casey back from a wooden box she had pried open with her bare hands.

After that, I never returned to the basement. I couldn't bear the sight of what was revealed inside that box.

I will never forget the slam of her knees into the hardwood when they carried her up the basement steps or the sheer vibration of the sobs that seemed to not stop in her small frame but carry through every inch of me.

Austin had never left.

They arrested Harvey that day, finding him at his desk as if he hadn't destroyed a life and taken one away at the same time.

Less than a month later, Casey was leaving me. It's okay, though. I knew she had to say goodbye. I was only hurting her, and I could see that. I know I am supposed to move on from things like this, let the past go, and look my best for strangers until the next fateful family finds me.

Maybe they can create happier memories than the ones before.

However, at every open house, the realtor would sit inside, balloons hitting each other from the wind outside, as the hours ticked by, and nobody came. After a few weeks of this, it became clear that no family wanted to live with me after what happened here.

Every day was met with darkness, the only light from the slivers between the blinds as I watched the sun rise and set. My own creaks were the only sounds I could hear. There were no stampeding feet, no videos on full blast on the living room television, and no late-night sing-alongs. The flowers on the lawn started to wilt. My baseboards and headers started to atrophy. I no longer had anyone to move for, to yield to, or to learn from. Looking out, all I could see was dust settling on the kitchen table, where he used to share how his day at school went. Shadows grew in the empty places where the stove and refrigerator used to be, where Casey would make him breakfast, lunch, and dinner with some song playing in the background. Sometimes, if I concentrated really hard, I could pretend I could still hear her singing, and him laughing.

Before everything happened, I never knew what it was like not to have them here. To not have anyone here. I was created for them. What would life really be like without them? I felt the same way when they left for the hospital and returned with Austin. That creeping, overwhelming feeling. But this time I didn't have a mobile to fix or lights to lower. All I had were faded outlines of glow-in-the-dark stars left imprinted on me. Nobody is coming back.

I still wish I could have protected him more, helped him sooner, or truthfully known what Harvey would do. Was doing.

Some of these memories come back in a blur and probably disjointed as parts of me start to get torn down by men in construction vests, wielding sledgehammers.

They plan to build a new home in my space, completely removing the existing foundation and starting from scratch.

I think, in the end, this is best for everyone.

If only it could all start over for Austin and Casey.

Maybe her next home will provide her with a safer space and protection from the people in this world.

I know the home Austin is in now is the safest place he could possibly be. I just wish I could have delayed him from going there.

The sledgehammers burst through my walls, causing horrendous vibrations to cover every inch of me, as a wrecking ball is placed just outside my front window to help expedite the damage. All the workers leave me alone for the last time as I watch the wrecking ball swing backward, getting prepared to erase me from memory. Before all I see is black, I feel a familiar presence as I look out the window and see Casey standing next to the wrecking ball.

And when I concentrate really hard, I can hear her humming a familiar tune.

I focus on that vibration instead, knowing that by leaving, I'm protecting her one last time.







HEART

VALENTINA LEBA



PORTRAIT OF DAPHNE

TAYLOR MARTIN

my legs begin to numb as I sprint
through the forest, dodging the
poisoned arrows he throws my
way, desperate to slide his fingers
down my curved waist until his
prints are the only thing left on
my body.

as his footsteps grow louder
behind my back, I squeeze the
sunlight from my eyes,
forehead furrowed as I pray for
my father to spare me from
apollo's sooty hands. his hot
breath fills my ears, fingers
reach to graze the hair prickled
across my arms until

they turn to branches that
stretch across the sky,
hair becomes leaves who
dance with the wind, with
creases in my bark carrying
my smile as my skin escapes
the hungry grip of his hands
and my roots bury themselves
deep in the ground, I am an
untouched pillar that will be
admired for years to come.

even as he breaks a branch off
my towering body, twisting me
into his object of desire,
the sun seeps into my leaves, the rain
lifts me higher than
the clouds, and I am free.



RIDING HOOD

LILY PULASKI





I SAW YOU AGAIN

CLINTON CUDWORTH

I saw you again,
in the smoke of seventeen consecutive Marlboros
the momentary flair of remembrance
if you miss me you say nothing I miss you I say
nothing



I cannot bear to feel the cold, harsh, heavy weight
of your want and my desire
for there is nothing to hold. I lay forgotten Fireside
all ash in the entropic end

I hear wolves howl without satiation
moths fly headlong to a flame
through throes of pain they cower in your name
yet their thirst so set they cannot deviate
tender, they crawl back to Prometheus
to the flame which burns them so
until they cannot fly



Fire.

She cannot know *she* is the moth's muse
inculpable – incend the heart's heat
weep not! His burning is his own!
In a dark and milky night
How could he resist such light?



MELT INTO YOU

CARMELLA VANHOUTEN

You move like a memory I can't hold
always half-shadow, half-linger.
Even when you're near,
you feel like a dream
I woke from too soon.

You speak in silences,
and I listen with my whole body,
aching to be the thing you reach for
in the dark
when the world feels too heavy.



I ache in the quiet
of everything we never said.
Your silence is a language
my body has learned too well.

I wanted to melt into you,
just once,
like light slipping beneath closed lids,
like dusk folding into night,
slow and unspoken.
But I was always reaching,
and you were always
already gone.



Now I carry the shape of you
in every hollow part of me,
a warmth I never got to hold,
a name I can't stop whispering
into rooms that echo
only my own voice.

HEAL IN TANDEM

ALEJANDRA ORTIZ-SANCHEZ



UNTITLED

MARIE WILLIAMS



THE PLUNGE

NICOLE DIPRÉ



I sit in the wind, sweater tossed aside to feel it,
free will, to feel the world still holds me in it.

Shivering, I dwell in pain to learn a lesson.
Sometimes I let scrapes sting with tension
to not fall again,
yet I do.
In this regret I question
if I'll ever fall beyond saving?,
if I should dread the mounting weight
of age, the grandfather clock on my spine.



I reflect, if I should pity myself to lessen
and brush it off so I can sleep at night.
I ask if I could ever bear this noise sober.

I am strung between sinking
and swimming,
fighting for peace of mind.
I'll tell myself it's good to cry.

I'll walk through the streets
with my shirt unbuttoned,
let the cold sink its teeth in.

My fingernails stain blue before I feel
the world is still holding me in it.



A LETTER TO MOTHER NATURE

TAYLOR MARTIN

I wish I could photograph a
well-fed polar bear, fur dampened
by the iced water she shares with the
seals and penguins, icebergs acting as their
beacon.

But the polar bears have
turned skeletal, skin
vacuum-sealed against
their bones, eyes losing their
glisten as they sink through their ice,
now droplets in the water they've drowned in.



I longed for spring to watch bees travel from
flower to flower, to watch pollen sprinkle
the grass as petals lift to
greet the hum of their wings.

But spring has dimmed as bees crash
from the sky, wings melting under the too-hot sun,
unable to reach the flowers who lean their way. Bodies
quiet, losing their buzz, waiting for the shoe's sole to
steal away their final breath.

The trees I once climbed are burning at
6 a.m. as I drive back to my dorm, windshield
clogged by thick smoke as bark crumbles under
the unforgiving fire.

Foxes, who burrowed under the trees,
run for their lives, burnt tails crossing the road,
my car speeds down as I quietly accept the loss of another
forest that shields Your heart.

Yes, I do not know the pain of
losing a child as they grow cold
in my arms, and yes, I am writing on
the paper that killed Your trees, but I
will forever mourn the things we've
taken from You. I will be the voice of the
polar bears, never letting their melting home
go ignored. I will always look for fallen bees
and lift them onto the petals, hoping their
pollen will fix his sliced wings. I will plant
new trees to climb, forcing burning torches
to turn away, until, finally, the others join me
in healing Your skin we've
singed.



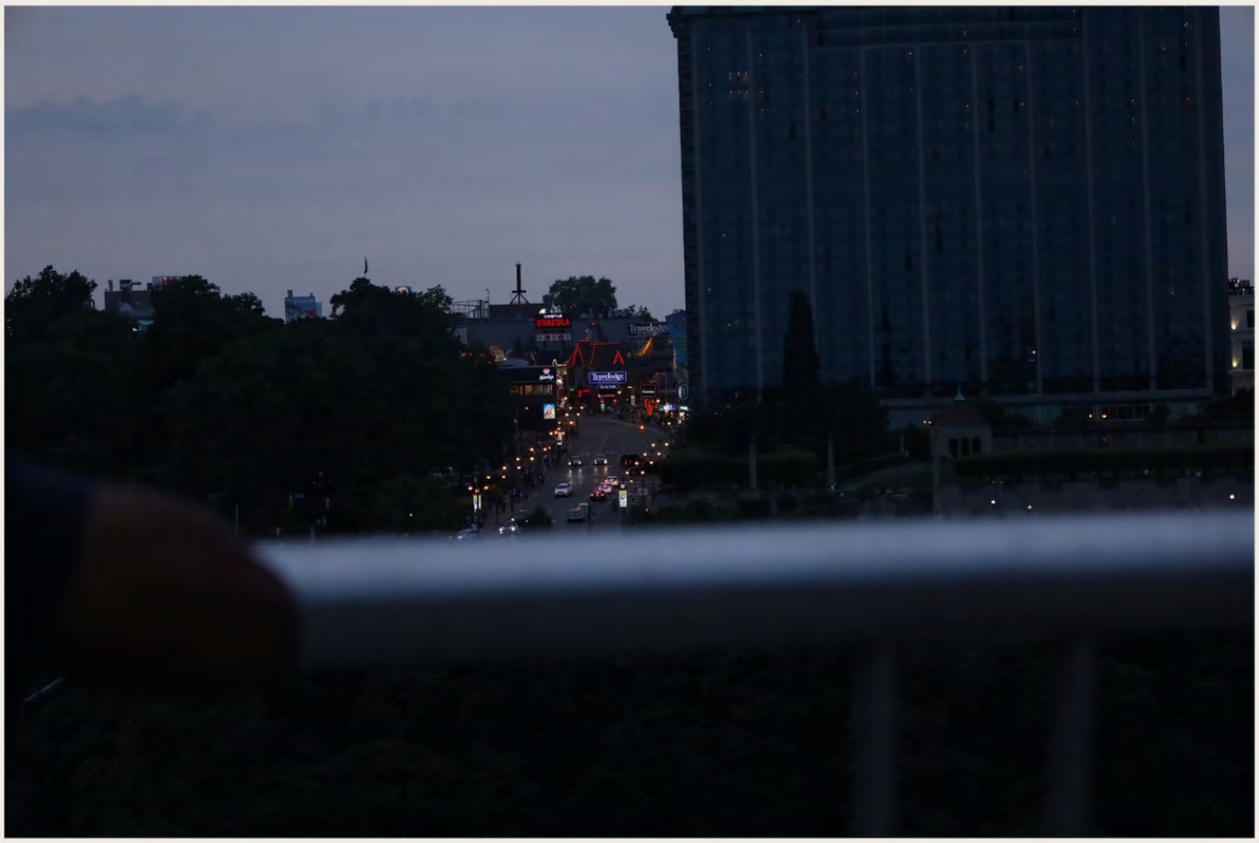
HIGHWAY 93

AMRIT KAUR



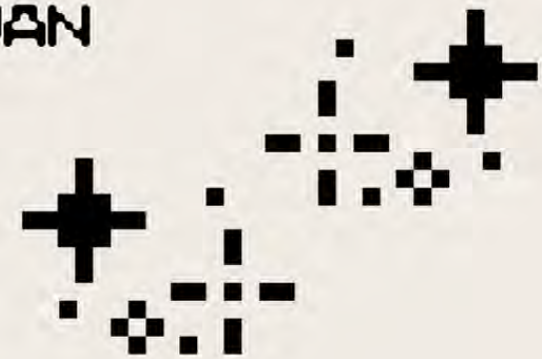
CITY SCAPE

JULIET ADAMS



MOON POEM

JULIA ROWAN

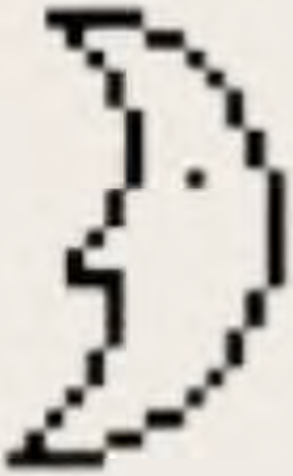


i clung to the moon
hanging on
afraid no one would catch my fall.

i clung to the moon
not realizing how tightly my fingers interlaced the craters.
i experienced all its phases
every jarring orbit.

i clung to the moon.
but the moon can't hold one forever.
my fingers slipped as i pleaded for the moon to let me stay
for the darkness was enclosing
and i didn't know how to keep it at bay.

i clung to the moon
but the moon let go.
yet instead of darkness
bits of fractured light
burnt in the sky.
for they understood all the pain
that accompanies
the fall from the moon.



WHAT DO YOU SAY

ALYSSA BUA

"Have you ever heard the saying, 'Life is never ending?'"

I know, it's ironic. *Don't say that, erase.*

I can't remember exactly where I heard it. I think it was from a line in a musical, but it's stuck in my head ever since. Embedding itself into my actions, my thoughts, my beliefs. *Okay, this isn't a thesis statement. You don't need to talk like that...*

Death comes in many forms, you know? It could be stealthy sneaking up on you in the form of a disease destroying you day by day. It could come in the form of a drunk driver down an old back road, too consumed by their own problems to think of the millions they are about to create for another family. Or death could come from old age, a body unable to carry the soul that has resided there for decades, growing, changing, and decaying with the seasons. *Great, remind everyone how they are slowly dying. I guess they are already thinking about that anyway, being here.*

Death can come around any corner at any time. Waiting in the shadows for me to put my guard down just enough for its dark forces to peek through. Like when a friend or family member goes inside a store while I wait in the car. The minutes begin to tick by, and the songs switch every three odd minutes. They have been in the store for too long. Has something happened? Have they been held at gunpoint? Well, I don't see anyone rushing out. Maybe they have everyone blocked inside. Do I go in? Do I call the police?

In that moment of doubt, when my body is twisted around the seat to peer over the center console, is always when the person I have been waiting for emerges from the exit and easily explains, 'The line was around the whole store for returns,' and I'm brought back to reality. I wish I could peer over the center console now.

Or perhaps death sneaks up on me when I'm driving late at night, returning home after a long day of work, watching as I click on and off my high beams to the cars coming in the opposite direction. Until a car almost swerves right into me, my horn blares in the driver's ears, and they pull away at the last second.

In these next moments, I'm not thanking God I'm alive, not just yet, at least. I'm surveying my surroundings. After enough paranormal books and movies, you learn it's possible for one to be dead without even realizing it. So I check the time, and I look for things I've never noticed before. Anything outside my windows, in my car, on my rearview mirror, until I'm satisfied. Only then do I believe I have cheated death once again. *Erase 'cheating death'. Just keep dancing around the subject, Sophie.*

Situations like this pretty much happen on a daily basis. I can't exactly pinpoint where they began, but my brain begs to tell me it was when I first heard, "Life is never-ending."

It may just be because I wish this statement were true. But who am I to know if it is or not? I've never personally experienced death, or if there's an afterlife awaiting. Though I hope there is. *I hope there is.*

In moments like today, I wish this statement had been true, a real way that we could always live. Whatever happened to the cloning that is supposed to take place by the year 2025? *I guess the year isn't over just yet.*

Or what about the company I shipped my spit off to tell me whether I'm 10 or 20% Irish? I heard rumors that they would use this DNA to curate customized immortal serums. *That hasn't happened yet.*

Yet here I am, standing in front of you all. I guess I put my guard down too low. The darkness decided not to go for me, but for the person closest to me. Not in any of the forms I have listed before, because those I would have been prepared for. Not in a hypothetical way where I could pretend the reality is just a thought that I can move to the trash icon in my brain. But in an overwhelmingly real way. *A way that I have to face.*

A way that brought me in front of you all, even though I would give anything to be anywhere but here.

I would rather be on that highway flashing my high beams, in that car cowering between the center console, because anything would be better than this. Saying goodbye to my built-in best friend, my grandfather, who would have probably fallen asleep during this speech out of boredom. *No, you can't say that; that's gonna come off wrong.*

What about this...

Saying goodbye to my built-in best friend, my grandfather...

I can't even say that. What am I making this about myself for? Talk more about HIM.

Even after he passed, I still had the nagging lyric, "Life is never-ending," in my mind, almost mocking me. So I decided to look it up last night and found it in the song "Story of My Life" from the Shrek musical. A musical that I used to force him to watch with me. It turns out that "life is never-ending" never happened. The character Pinocchio actually sings, "Life is disappointing."

However, I used to ask my grandfather what it meant to have a life that's 'never-ending?" Looking back on it now, I think he didn't want to burst my bubble of an infinite reality or be the one responsible for telling me one of my favorite fictional characters was saying the most incorrect thing someone could. Turns out he would be the one to burst this bubble anyway.

Don't blame him. This isn't his fault. Erase that.

I get up from my desk and look at the scrawled paper before me. The dim light of my desk lamp creates just enough glow to see the ink on the page, mixing with my fallen tears. My hands act on their own, ripping the pages from my notebook, leaving them unrecognizable. I chuck the words and letters of the past five hours of my life across my room, letting my head fall on my hands, concealing me from the skew of family pictures across my desk and bedroom wall. The cool touch of my hands on my heated, tear-stained face woke me up despite the midnight hour.

Too many thoughts permeate my mind. All I hear is every possible thing I can say, and no matter what, whatever I choose, it's never right. The only outward sounds in my room are those of every wretched sob from my chest, and the small sounds of what I can only imagine is my chest cracking under the pressure.

How can decades of emotions and thoughts amount to ink smudges left on my hands?

How am I supposed to decide the right things to say? All I know of what people say in eulogies comes from movies and TV shows.

s from movies and TV shows.

Maybe that's what I should do? I remember an episode of *Friends* where Monica and Ross's grandmother passed away. At the funeral, all the men were more interested in the football game they were missing than in the topic at hand, walking around with portable radios, screens playing the game in their pockets.

He played football when he was in high school. Still talks about it all the time. *I mean, he used to talk about it.*

When I stand up in front of everyone, I can imagine some heads being bowed, either out of respect or because they don't want to show me how terrible my speech is. Maybe they don't care what I have to say, more invested in the notifications popping up on their phones that they could be looking at instead of the multi-colored rug at their feet. But I want them to hear what I have to say.

If I figure out what to say.

What about "Marjorie"' a song detailing the artist's feelings following her grandmother's death? An image flashes in my brain of me making him watch that singer's music videos on the living room TV. He's pretending to be insanely interested in the so-called 'easter eggs', that I couldn't help but point out every five seconds.

A tear drips down my cheek.

"You're alive, you're alive in my head." I never got that line until now.

I wipe my eyes and write down a paragraph's worth.

I think about the moments that stick out in my mind. The moments when I made him pay attention to my obsession of the week, or when he laughed at the movie I chose for us on TV.

After writing a few paragraphs, I turn my head up and I'm staring right at the frame. The frame he used to have on his table by his chair in the living room. The frame that I gave him for his last birthday. With the picture of us on Christmas, he's mid-laugh while I make some stupid face to get that exact reaction.

How can everything he's ever owned come down to a glorified garage sale? *Dad said we have to go through his things and decide what to keep soon.*

Looking around my room, I take in the knick-knacks on my floating shelves, the books I've collected over the years, and the family photos I glance over. All of these will be sold at a garage sale one day. Disconnected from me, their past, and the memories they have helped cultivate over the years. Gone. Just like him, in the blink of an eye.

Before I know it, I lift my head off my desk, so worn there's no way my future kids will be able to sell it, and blink in the daylight wafting through my window.

I turn my desk lamp off, the one he gifted me when I got this desk, my head pounding, and check my phone for the time, 8 AM. The black dress hanging on my windowsill is suspended in the air, casting an ominous shadow across the floor of my room.

With what I hope amounts to a speech in my hand, I exit my room about half an hour later after getting dressed and reapplying my makeup a couple of times. *You look perfect, sweetie,* is what he would say to me, whether I had ten pounds of makeup on or a messy bun and mascara smeared down my face.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, I hear my father ask, "You ready, sweetie?" as I lift my head up and reply with a slight head nod and a sniffle.

"Take your time. We don't have to leave for another half hour, " my mother says, her hand wrapped around my father's back.

"I don't know if my speech is good." I lift my eyes to meet my fathers for the first time since last night, hoping not to see disappointment in them. His glassy eyes respond before he opens his mouth, "I'm sure it is. Whatever you feel like you should say is the right thing to say," he says, before he wraps me in a tight hug. Breathing in, I smell the same cologne in a sigh, mixed with relief and uncertainty. A cologne I didn't realize I had already missed. *I should have written about that.*

The familiar anxiety swells in my chest before my brain can throw out the thought, and before I know it, my brain tells me I'm at a funeral decades in the future, an unjustified and horribly written speech in hand, given no chance to back out, yearning for the smell of that same cologne.

I hug my father tighter.

The one thing I do know is that even if decades pass between now and then, no matter how old I am, how much life I've lived, or the funerals I've attended, I will never know the right thing to say.

Maybe that's the real disappointment.

The rest of the day is a mixture of faces I haven't seen for years with faces I see every day. All giving overly tight hugs, arm pats, or that same facial expression. The one where you don't really know what to say or what to do, so you tilt your head and go in for a hug instead. *I guess we are all in the same boat.*

A couple of times throughout the day, I had to sneak out to the bathroom that smelled like old lady perfume to escape the prying eyes and ears. Or if I'm being honest, just to cry in peace. The last thing everyone here needs to see is a full reenactment of the end of "My Girl" as I succumb to a fit of hyperventilation.

By holding back on those sobs, the loudest sound in the room seemed to be the lifesaver and peppermint mint wrappers that littered both the floor and people's pockets. Even my father had about five wrappers in his pocket after only two hours. My mother took wrappers from him so his pockets didn't crinkle with every hug.

The moment I couldn't handle was just twelve hours ago. Where I threw away pages and pages of my writing, came and went in a simple, heart-pounding, black out. My father introduced me; I believe he said something along the lines of "My daughter would like to share a few words," but I wouldn't put money on it.

This was the only time I fully lifted my head all day, because my back was to him. Facing the people sat in decade-old chairs instead of the person behind me. I refused to make eye contact with him all day or to even look at the clothes he was wearing or what my aunt and uncle put in his casket with him. I could probably guess without having to look.

However, the people in front of me were being forced to take inventory of what was around him: the items, flowers, bouquets, and the color suit. I shared my speech relatively quickly, or at least quickly enough, before I realized how shaky my voice and hands had become because all eyes were on me, with no football games being played or phone notifications being answered.

I highlighted the man he was —the grandfather, father, and husband he was— the memories we made together over the years. One thing I can say for sure, in front of everyone, is that I never took for granted the time we spent together. Weirdly, I think that's the most important thing. I finished the speech saying that I love him and miss him. As I sat down and looked at the colorful swirls of carpet at my feet, I knew I didn't dramatize or exaggerate anything in that speech.

I spoke about how I honestly felt and how he made me feel by being the funny, caring, old-fashioned man we all know him to be.

My father spoke about him too. He followed up my speech with one of a similar tone, discussing how growing up in a home with his dad shaped him into the person and father he is today.

He made more jokes than I did, though, getting himself and all of us to laugh and forget for just a split second.

When we left the funeral home, we were the last ones in and out. My father and mother each walked out with me, helping me to stop any intrusive thoughts of turning around. The car drive home was mostly silent. No music playing, or rain pattering the windows. Just the show of the car engine humming, tires crunching the pavement underneath, and haggard breathing of three people who went through an emotional day from hell.

With the last viewing ending at nine and the sun having already set, walking into our house it was clear without saying anything that we were all going to bed. My parents kissed me goodnight and told me to get my rest.

Lying in my bed on my side, devoid of the black dress from the day, and left in sleep shorts and one of his oversized t-shirts, I turn on my television to throw on something to fall asleep to. Typically, I fall asleep to *Friends*, but tonight NickAtNite has decided to play the "SpongeBob Movie," so I have to find something else.

Clicking on Netflix, the app displays what it recommends for me, and I start searching through the various TV shows and movies. After a minute, a familiar title and poster flash on my screen as I read the words "Shrek: The Musical." The silence in my room is broken by a small laugh that bursts from my mouth as a tear slips from my eye onto my pillow.

"If I didn't know better / I'd think you were talking to me now."





