

# OCCASUS



**Volume 13**





Department of English and Writing Studies  
Undergraduate  
Literary Journal

Volume 13

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## What We're About

*Occasus* is a literary journal published annually by The Department of English and Writing Studies. Founded in 2012 by Aaron Schneider and Kathryn Mockler, the journal showcases the work of undergraduate students enrolled in Department of English and Writing Studies courses. *Occasus* is student-written, -edited and -designed. It contains works in a range of genres, including poetry, creative nonfiction, fiction, plays, and experimental pieces. Students enrolled in Department of English and Writing Studies at the University of Western Ontario can submit their pieces to be considered for the journal. Visit <https://www.occasusliteraryjournal.com/> or The Department of English and Writing Studies website for more information.

## Letter from the Editors

*Occasus* publishes the work of students enrolled in Department of English and Writing Studies courses. As a student-written, -edited, and -designed journal, it is a testament to the talents of the department's students.

This inaugural print edition of *Occasus* marks a significant milestone as it transitions both to print and to being student-designed and -edited. As we worked through the student submissions, we were drawn to each one of the pieces chosen for this issue. We wanted to showcase the wide variety of student talent, so every selection is unique, and the issue has no specific theme. However, a pattern emerged of works that involved themselves with the corporeal—or subject-matter related to the body—and the physical. Although many pieces have a brighter tone, the majority of the writing selected for this issue deals with content that is weighty, serious, and occasionally odd.

As you embark on this literary journey with us, we encourage you to engage deeply with the works presented here, to ponder their meanings, and to reflect on the myriad ways in which literature enriches our lives. Whether you're a seasoned bibliophile or a casual reader, we hope that *Occasus* will inspire you to embrace the transformative power of words and to embark on your own creative odyssey. Welcome to the world of *Occasus*, where every page holds the promise of discovery and delight.

Special thanks to Dr. Aaron Schneider for his guidance and for overseeing the publishing process.

Sincerely,

Alex D'Entremont-Smith,  
Victoria Domazet,  
Kiersten Fay,  
Asher Gris,  
and Tiana Lee

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## “Man’s World” by Gabriella McKenna

I stand in front of the class to present my idea for my final piece of the semester. The faces watching me are soft, with full cheeks and rounded lips. They have shiny rings in their ears and noses, or grey oblong shadows drawn onto their eyelids. They are women’s faces—uncritical, listening, not judging. *So*, my brain asks my body, *why am I shaking?*

\*\*\*

I was a tomboyish kid, but I started to fill out when I was thirteen. ‘Filling out’ is what prudish older women call growing hips and tits. Before I filled out, I was fat and greasy, trimmed with a mop of dirty dirty-blond hair on top. I appeared perpetually rained on until, one day, I glanced in the mirror and saw a pretty lady glancing back.

Intellectually, I knew the girl in the mirror was me. Somatically, it was hard to feel it. My brain had grown and developed and adapted to life in a different vessel and was now untethered from my body. The incongruence between my thoughts and looks meant I had become approachable, if only until I opened my mouth. In a room full of my peers, I was an interloper—a leggy, blonde space alien walking around trying to evade attention. So, I mostly kept quiet. When I did speak, the faucet on my head got stuck in the ‘on’ position. Words kept pouring out while the hapless victim, some other little girl, did everything they could to stem the flow. Rarely were they successful, and even less often did I care about bothering them.

I told myself that other little girls didn’t like me for the simple reason that I was better than them. Smarter, wittier, and equipped with a seemingly in-born taste for the arts that was unparalleled by anyone else in the ninth grade. It was easy for me to be different from others because I spent my formative years alone, raising myself on gems of wisdom I picked up from my father. That being said, my dad doesn’t speak too much, so the gems mostly came second-hand. They filtered down to me indirectly from all his favorite media. I started with Stephen King and worked up to Cormac McCarthy. If you can believe it, I laughed at the Opie and Anthony Show and Louis C.K. I adopted a new demeanor—the reserved, sardonic persona that is cool on men and frigid on women. It’s still unclear what I was so smug about.

There was one cultural touchstone I happened upon by myself. I discovered Toni Morrison that year; I don’t know how. I suspect that I saw *Beloved* on the shelf at Chapters with its glossy red cover gleaming as though illuminated by a searchlight from heaven.

I promise I love you, Toni, I still love you to this day. But the first time I cracked *Beloved's* spine, I didn't get it. I loved it, but I didn't understand a word. I liked that it was violent and scary and that I could frighten the other girls in my class by reading paragraphs ripped from the pages verbatim. It is undeniable that Toni can write words that turn your nerves into millipedes. Short phrases from the novel still stick in my head, and they send my skin crawling when I consider them for too long. When I remember the “kootchy-kootchy-koo” place under *Beloved's* chin, I feel my chin quiver.

I kept my *Beloved* in pristine condition. I guess I never understood it well enough to dogear any particular passage or write an annotation. One day, after the bell had rung and everyone began to pack up and leave, I grabbed it from a table in my English class and found it beaten to death, scribbled on, with sticky notes tabbed in the pages. I was confused as to how this came to be until I looked down at the table and saw my copy still resting there. When I moved my gaze back up, I saw my teacher standing on the other side of the table, watching me expectantly. He gestured towards the table.

“Is that *your* book?”

He always seemed to be half-asleep and the serious, quiet tone men adopt when tired sometimes reads as introspective and intelligent, but something in his demeanor felt unsteady. He was watching me through semi-lidded eyes which betrayed no easily discernable expression, except for maybe a vague spark of intrigue. I took a fraction of a second too long to reply, so he began to speak for me. His moustache was greying and flecked with crumbs.

“That’s interesting. I guess you picked up my copy, then. Funny, I was reading that before the period started, too. I never expected that someone in our class would be reading at that level.”

A warm buzzing type of pride inflated my chest. It felt good to have someone acknowledge my eccentricities and deem them to be interesting rather than bizarre. Moreover—this was coming from someone I looked up to. It was incredibly life-affirming to have an adult man look at me and see an equal. I was sent home with his annotated copy that day, and he kept mine, saying we could switch back after we discussed the novel one day after class, on whichever day he had somewhere between five and thirty minutes of spare time.

A dream that I had long held on to was finally coming true. I'd been singled out from my classmates as the brightest and most special; I was different from the others. Now, I had to prove myself. I poured over the annotations and developed a cursory understanding of themes that had previously been lost on me. In the logical, calculated way men usually go about doing things, he had laid out the significance of the themes of motherhood, sexual assault, and feminine trauma in ways even I could understand. Beyond eager to impress, I was obsequious.

During an incident that occurred on a date that I can't recall, on a day which is sheltered from time and perpetually stays amongst my most recent and urgent memories, I was called out of my French class because

my teacher needed to meet me in the English office. My French teacher wore a strange expression on her face while announcing this. I believed I was smart, but I was not smart enough to read her expression and understand something was amiss.

I walked into the office clutching the book to my chest and looking small. There was a piece of black construction paper on the window, the type you put up for safety during a lockdown. We were not discussing the novel for long before he paused abruptly. His empty eyes opened wider than I'd ever known them to be.

“You are an incredibly bright young lady, Gabriella. I think an amazing future is ahead of you.”

He placed a sweaty finger on the kootchy-kootchy-koo place under my chin.

The fascia in my neck was buzzing with wicked electricity. I felt a mortal, animal fear that I had not encountered before or since. If you have encountered real lethal danger before, you will recall the way your neurotransmitters prompted your muscles to move away from whatever was endangering you without requiring input from your conscious mind. This sensation pushed me out of my seat and made sounds spill out of my mouth. I tried to form them into the shape of an excuse, but they came out as a grunt. I ran out of the office and into the bathroom. When I looked in the mirror, my brain turned back on. It wondered why my body was rejecting the ultimate marker of success: praise from a superior.

The fear cooled to a simmer but never went away. I'd run out of class before the other students started to leave if I went at all. No one asked me why my grade dropped from a 98 to a 64. My teacher stopped calling on me for popcorn reading. When he looked at me, his gaze was stoney and filled with contempt that it was hard to imagine an adult feeling towards a child.

Years later, on a scorching summer morning, my father read aloud the debrief his secretary at the police station had sent him. It detailed all the major crimes that occurred in our region during the previous night. He was mildly surprised to note that a man who taught at my school was wrenched from his home a short eight hours earlier and brought to a holding cell after being charged with multiple counts of statutory rape. My father asked if I knew who he was, and I told him I had never heard of that man in my life. Satisfied with this, he kept rattling off the crimes. I felt myself shivering and dripping cold drops of sweat through the fabric of my tank top.

I spent my whole adolescence up to that point holding onto the idea that men were the gatekeepers of good culture and intelligent discussion. I fooled myself into thinking that, for some reason, approval from a man would fill whatever hole being rejected by my peers had bored in me. Because of that, I forgot a fundamental truth. First and foremost, I was a girl, and to a sick man I could be a sex toy, but I could never be a friend or an equal. Our culture had never been designed to facilitate such a relationship. He didn't pick me to converse with because I was sharp-witted, but because he saw an opportunity.

In many ways, this realization flipped my worldview on its head. I no longer sought out admiration

from men, in fact, it usually unsettled me. I felt uneasy holding onto their compliments when I could never quite discern what the motivation behind them was. One thing stayed the same, though. Sometimes, I'll catch myself rolling my eyes, whether it be at a pop song on the radio, a chick-lit romance novel or a Taylor Swift concert. I'll tease my friends for their girly interests, the interests our whole culture and I deign to respect. No matter how much distance I put between the present and my thirteen-year-old self, I am forever tied to that mindset. It always lingers somewhere in the hazy, unclear part of my consciousness, spitting vitriol for no apparent reason. It occurred to me that, maybe, I had spent so long immersed in a culture organized by men, for men, that I had simply forgotten I was supposed to be indignant about being a second-class citizen. I shifted all of the energy that I did not exhaust trying to protect myself from this culture into doing what I could to integrate into its structure.

Look at all I've earned from my efforts—certainly not respect, friendship or power. The only thing I know I gained for sure is a penchant for checking over my shoulder when I walk alone at night.

\*\*\*

I'm looking at all of you, and a tear is coming down my cheek. I lived this story and told variations of it so many times that I became allergic, the same way you become intolerant to liquor if you poison yourself with it too often. I'm shooting off at the mouth about my project while my conscious brain wrestles with my nervous system, doing what it can to keep my breathing level and my eyes dry. My presentation doesn't really end, it more so trails off, but when I finally stop speaking you all start applauding. It's nice, and I'm slightly flattered, but it's not *your* applause that I've been begging for. At least you guys didn't boo.



## “Sometimes I Think of It Like Ikea Furniture”

by DeeDee El-Hage

Mandatory parts for assembly:

- 22 titanium screws
- Two titanium rods
- One 13-year-old girl
- Two bags of her dad’s donated blood
- One procedure room
- One anesthesiologist
- One surgeon
- Three other people (doctors or nurses, or something of the like)
- One stretcher
- One very crooked spine
- Three family members waiting outside
- One medical student to ask questions the girl doesn’t care to answer
- A scalpel, or something similar to slice open the girl’s back
- A way to contain all the blood that comes from doing that

Optional but not mandatory:

Something to brace her fall from innocence to knowledge

**“Funny Story”**  
**by DeeDee El-Hage**

What nobody tells you about getting a new spine is that you can lie about the scar that runs down the back of your warped body

Once you’ve become distorted you can tell any story about how the distortion occurred

Brave strangers at the beach ask me what happened

“Funny story,” I start, “I survived a shark attack!”

The girl sitting behind me the day I wear an open-back shirt to school asks me how I got this scar

“Funny story,” I tell her, “I got into a bad boating accident that split my back open!”

Kids with no filter ask me what’s on my back

“Funny story,” I answer, “I was stitched into a human by Victor Frankenstein!”

‘Funny story’ is for them, not me, because those who ask don’t want to hear ‘true story’

‘True story’ is boring, it only gets told to medical professionals

‘True story’ is what I push to the back of my mind when I’m trying to sleep

‘True story’ is my most horrific one

## “A Peculiar Sort of Haunting”

by Ella Mann

There is a gravel strip along Dyers Bay Road where the metal art used to be.

There were birdhouses too, once, and cavernous stones, but mostly it was the metal art; a silver garden to your left just beyond the bend in the road that stood suspended in time with hummingbirds eternally at their lilies, and butterflies aloft on thin spires. My grandfather was a firefighter and a police officer before, but at heart he was an artist. His metal work slowed neighbours as they passed and drew strangers to our door.

It’s funny to think that the body can recognize a bend in the road by your momentum alone, but as child, when we came upon that bend and the metal garden beyond it, I knew our journey north had come to a close.

It has been years, now. Eight years have passed since the garden was sold. Still, I know the bend. I know the gravel strip that signals home. I knew it before I knew myself at less than a week old—I was born in the summertime. After my mother brought me home, she spirited me to the Bruce, to the bay, to be brought up among cedar, raised on the rocky shore.

At nineteen I walk the beach barefoot.

Before you come upon the empty garden, you’ll find my grandfather’s workshop to your left where the seeds once were sown. Our family’s garage sits tucked against the northern escarpment as you round the bend, meters from the road. Just beyond it is the gravel strip, but directly opposite it and the road is the driveway that boards the property and our home, lined with wooden beams.

Our driveway was sheltered for years by a row of thin cedars, enclosed at the back by the rusted wood-pile. The trees died long before we cut them down, and with the wood stacked aside, the driveway could be extended up the property line.

The pebbles we stole from our shoreline, the flat rocks from the beach up the road in the continuation of a process that began three decades ago: The precise interlaying of gravel and stone that sprawls across the property from the road to the gardens and the decks terraced across the waterfront slope.

We began by hauling buckets and select stepping stones but of course there were other projects: The upper deck that year was to be reinforced, the railing set, the steps repoured—in the two years that have passed since, the driveway was never finished.

In the thirty-five years since the property was purchased, still the work is not finished.

I awoke, late this past summer, to tradesmen in the home, and when I returned in the evening, it was to a new fireplace in the stone. It was then that I thought of Theseus, his ship moored in Athens harbour a mil-

lennium ago.

Before the fireplace it was the cedar trees and the old wood stove. The leaning birch, the carpet floor, the metal art by the road. Soon it will be the windows that overlook the terraced slope.

And what, what when it comes time for the floors, for the walls, when the shingled roof no longer holds? What, when the foundation is all that stands, a memory of the old embodied in the new, what then? Is it still a home? Is it still the same ship that sailed to the shores of Crete and returned after seasons of monsters and mazes and hardship at sea? Is it enough to preserve the memory?

The old fireplace had been well over forty years old, and before it was ours it was someone else's.

It was strange to think that anyone else had ever called this place home.

My grandmother confessed to me that we once lived with a ghost in our walls.

A ghost who closed our cupboards, and rattled doors. A ghost, it seemed, who no longer lived here, not anymore, and I realized that I had never much thought of the woman who came before.

I had never much thought there was anything to think of before.

Did home not begin with us?

Her name was Florance, I'm told, and yet the only thing I know about her is that she died.

She died, far from home, her family too busy, I assume, building legacies of their own to inherit this place.

I do not blame them. There was not much here to inherit before we came.

I do wonder whether she mourned, whether she tossed in her grave. I imagine she bound herself to the soil, her soul tethered in place when the land was sold, the gardens raised. I wonder whether she haunted this place, whether she opened our doors and rattled our cupboards to scare us away.

I read once that ghosts sometimes do not know how to be ghosts, and so they settle back into the mundane routines of their former lives. I like to think of her this way. Our ghost would make her rounds, each morning, through the kitchen, and settle, each night, by the fire. In life, she scoured the cupboards for her coffee, and locked, in the evenings, all her doors.

I do not know what she was expecting—perhaps that the new owners would come along and demolish the property. She would watch as her old wooden cabin with its leaky roof and mustard walls was pummeled from existence, leaving her with nothing to haunt but wildflowers on the wind.

The peonies, mind you, are ever persistent. Had we torn it all down they would have surely sprung up again.

Instead, we patched the roof; the walls we repainted. Where the foundation gave way, we stepped in and maintained it—far from the shores of Athens, we remodeled the storm-tossed ship, board by board, brick by brick.

Whatever she was expecting, I sure hope she stuck around for it.

I like to think she watched the land change, little by little, day after day and realized that love, against all odds, had taken root in this place.

Did she lay herself to rest, then? Curled on a bed of ivy with looming birch overhead.

Or perhaps she wandered down the escarpment, ambled along the shore and waded into the cold and eternal embrace of the bay. Maybe she found a new home on the breeze or tucked herself away between the roots of towering cedar trees.

Maybe she stayed.

I like to think she watches over me.

I suppose there is one other thing I know about Florence, for I know that she laughed, and she laughed quite often. You see, when Florence died she left a small cardboard box titled *Password* in the kitchen. It may be played at the dinner table or at dusk by the fire—it came with the cottage in 1988 and left, for the first time, this past summer. I took it with me when I left for university. I play it with my friends, and when we laugh, I feel her haunting me.

You may ask me who I am when I'm apart from the Bruce, but the Bruce is never apart from me. When I look up at night beneath a cold, barren sky I know in my heart where the stars should be. When it rains, when it snows, when leaves catch on the breeze, when I venture near riverbeds, among forests beneath trees, it lingers on the borders of my soul, haunting me.

My grandfather, too, is still haunting the bay. He used to say that this was God's country. To think, for a place to be so beautiful, it must surely be touched by God.

The bay had never felt emptier than it did the summer after he died.

Eight years later, when I meet strangers in the street, I offer them his name. I know what each of them are asking, they look at me, as if to say: *We know who you are, but who do you come from?*

It's a funny thing, to be known in legacy. To be recognized, not by my own—not yet—but by my mother's face, by our family name, to be stopped in the street, called to by that name and to hear in response: "Ah... we thought it might be so."

We thought you might be their girl.

To be recognized, not by own—not yet—but by a lifelong labour of love; eternally unfinished.

And what, what when the seasons shifts, and shifts, and shifts again? What, when the work slows, when the age shows, when like Florence, like my grandfather I am dead and gone, what then?

Take my bones, then, and bury me on the Bruce. Give me to the moss, to the Earth, to the sturdy white pine and know in your heart I will stay awhile.

You may find me in the gardens, or along the wave-tossed shore. My ghost will occupy the hammock,

she'll spend each night beneath the stars. At dawn she'll watch the sunrise, she'll haunt the cracks beneath the floor. You may bury me with lady slippers or lilies of any sort but do not bury me apart from the Bruce.

I would sooner be forgotten than lie in foreign soil.

And what, then?

I was staring at the driveway this past summer when it occurred to me that the work would never be finished. The ship would always require someone to tend to it.

There are remnants of my grandfather's metal garden scattered across the Bay.

I find his herons in neighbours' gardens alongside lilies and metal snails. His bird houses adorn fence posts and house songbirds and red squirrels.

There will a come a day when we are but the gravel strip, and yet someone will always come along. We'll live on, through them, in the metal garden, scattered remnants of love, of the work unfinished.

## “Cure For The Night”

by Fiona (Yuan)

A thousand stars have fallen, the second  
We breathe, they burst like fireworks  
And light up the way to the end,  
The end of their final concert.  
How can we mortals, then,  
Abide the freezing dew, the night wind  
From the murky, foggy glen,  
When there is no light and everything dims?  
The only remedy hangs high up the moon,  
Deeper than despair, more fervent than hope,  
Long before record, people had swooned  
Over that emotion which makes lovers elope.  
I will no longer feel cold,  
If I have your hand to hold.

## The Sanguine Mirror

There is a messy mop of ebony threads  
lying atop my chest that moves slowly in pace with my  
laboured breaths. Up and down his head rises and falls synchronously  
aside the aching inhales and scorch— ing exhales.  
He is my brother. A stark facsimile of myself in  
bijou who takes comfort in my presence.  
No sun drools through my  
windows while the moon  
reigns high and I presume  
that the depth of his sighs  
signify his rest. He stays  
with me on nights like  
these, where the blunt  
force of fisted fury leaves  
us weary. There is crim—  
son copper on my tongue  
while I watch him, metallic  
and hot in my throat. Be it guilt  
or blood I have no clue but I will choke it  
down all the same, for when we are alone like this I  
am his protector; The strength aside his terror while  
I relegate my own. His unconsciously whimpered cacophony bangs against  
the rungs of my ribs as a reminder. I should have been a better  
shield. I should have been a better brother.

By Andromeda Adler

## “Gently Open the Ribcage”

by Jaya Sinha

The coffin’s lid was flat, black, and glossy, like it might’ve lifted to reveal the strings of a grand piano instead of Professor Clark Bishop’s rigid corpse. It hadn’t opened that day. Even if anybody had wanted to look into his glassy eyes one last time, he was already buried. Not in soil, not yet, but in the thick blanket of daffodils, yellow as egg-yolks, sitting on that shiny black lid.

The daffodils, like most of the funeral’s charming touches, were Diana’s idea. I remember her hysterically reciting Wordsworth to a confused florist over the phone last week: “A poet could not but be gay in such a jocund company!” It was a calculated move, masking the abject with something so beautiful. These people were terrified of death, I’d learned, disgusted by it.

Once, a gust of wind blew a bird into the closed window of an empty classroom Diana and I had been studying in. She had shrieked at the thud of the glass, the crack of the hollow bones. I opened the window, as Father would have done, scooping the dead thing off the ledge. I’d barely grabbed my hunting knife when she was shrieking again, telling me to *get that fucking thing out!* In response to her panic, I’d done what she asked, letting it fall from our window into the flowerbed three floors below. We never spoke of it again.

Later, I wished that I’d finished the ritual. But the fear I’d seen in Diana that day wasn’t the kind you could explain away—it was etched into the folds of her brain, right next to Wordsworth’s verses.

Death was one thing. The death of Professor Bishop was another. He’d been found in his office, slumped over a stack of our essays: analyses of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. I remembered him reciting the poem for the class, the low thrum of his voice—“he prayeth well, who loveth well. Both man and bird and beast.” It had seemed to pull Diana forward in her chair, like a sailor careening towards sharp rocks.

The entire English Department was there, grieving for their patron god. We stained the cemetery like an inkblot, a dark splotch marring an otherwise perfect day. When the Earth had heard that Clark Bishop had died, it had sent its gentlest breezes and warmest rays of sun as its condolences.

Bishop’s study group stood front and center of the crowd—another triumph of Diana’s lethal competence. We’d piled into her minivan together an hour early, balancing boxes of funeral programs on our laps for the twenty-minute ride to the cemetery.

The drive had been quiet: one of few normal things about the day. As usual, the only sound permitted to break the sacred silence of Diana’s car was the soft hum of John Coltrane.

*A Love Supreme* was the only CD Diana owned. It had been playing at our first dinner at Bishop’s house. He’d told us Coltrane was a genius, a real *master of his craft*. The next day, she wordlessly slid it into the car’s

CD player. Since then, wherever we drove, Coltrane's saxophone accompanied us, the sound unspooling behind us like soft ribbon. I'd closed my eyes as Coltrane's mantra began, his voice wrapping around us like a shroud:

*A love supreme*

*A love supreme*

*A love supreme*

I could have said something, said that everything was going to be okay. But it wasn't, so nobody spoke. The study group's penchant for silence worked well for me. They didn't care where I came from, or even who I was. I folded into the group with the ease of a card shuffled into a deck. This meant that I didn't have to discuss the details of my past, which I'd come to learn were quite unusual. Nothing about my upbringing was *usual* at all.

Most children did not spend their mornings washing the blood of livestock off of Father's hands, anointing him with floral oils, drinking in his gentle caress as he pushed back their hair, muttering ancient hymns. Most children did not have a Father at all. At least, not one like mine.

My Father had taught me to braid flowers and herbs into my hair, to see the sky in the liver of a ram, to believe in his power to save me. And I believed. I prayed until my knees bled, warmed my hands in the slick innards of sheep, made ritual as natural as breathing. I had been the very best.

Father had told me that Abe was cursed. He said that our gods had decided to cut his time on this plane short, that my little brother did not *deserve* to pray and dance and laugh as long as the rest of us. I remember him in his final days, only ten, grasping at Father's feet as he begged for his life, staining white robes with the deep red sludge that he couldn't seem to stop coughing up. Abe had pleaded for forgiveness. He'd been denied.

I remember the night after he died. I remember kneeling over him, trying to steady my hands so I could slice into his tiny abdomen. But one glance at his face, those wide brown eyes that were also mine, stripped me of every trace of expertise. I remember needing to do the ritual right for him, needing to send him off properly. For the darling pile of meat that was once my brother, I performed exactly as I was taught.

*Peel back the pectorals. Gently open the ribcage.*

His chest had been small, so small, as I'd cracked it apart. I'd left that night, stealing away with nothing but my stained hunting knife.

I'd told the study group I was from a small town, and nothing else. They knew I was strange, I could tell, but they'd been content to leave it there. I could read and write as well as the rest of the group, so what did it matter? Bishop took me in like one of his own, and before long, I was.

Suddenly, Diana stepped forward, breaking our ranks. She'd elected herself to speak for us, and even if we wanted to, none of us had the strength to argue. I watched her steel herself before walking to the front of the crowd, holding a dog-eared paperback: *Leaves of Grass*.

The night before, she'd agonized to me over a third cup of green tea: *Adonais* or *O Captain, My Captain*? I'd told her either one would be beautiful. "Beautiful" wasn't enough, she said. It needed to be more. *Divine*—that was the word she'd used.

*O Captain, My Captain* had won out in the end. That's what Bishop was, after all: our Captain. As she read, I wanted to curl into the ground, let it swallow me whole.

"But O heart! heart! heart! O the bleeding drops of red."

Bishop's office had been big enough for the seven of us, curled like cats around his desk, perched on the windowsill, sprawled on the shaggy rug. It had been a sanctuary. Bishop let us keep our mugs in his cupboard for night study sessions—green tea was essential for the working mind, he'd said. In a sense, that was our greatest achievement: seven little reminders of our existence, sitting in the temple of our God.

"Where on the deck my Captain lies, Fallen cold and dead."

We'd talked for hours in that office, pouring out our souls like the warm tea for Bishop to drink. And drink he did—he *listened* to us, leaning forward on one elbow, eyebrows furrowed, one lock of silver hair perpetually tumbling out of place.

Once, I'd tried to explain Bishop's influence to him. In my gushing enthusiasm, I'd used the word 'superhuman'. He'd just smiled wryly:

"If you think that I'm superior because I'm *inhuman*, if you think that humanity is something to be surpassed, then I've failed you."

The perfect answer.

And with that, he retained this sense of divinity. Bishop had been eternal.

*Well, not eternal anymore.*

The bitter thought crawled up my throat like a cockroach as I stared at the coffin, picturing his body lying inside it.

*Not even Bishop can live forever.*

The roach was in my mouth, under my tongue, between my teeth, until I caught it there, crunching it to a twitching death.

Diana finished the poem, there were tears and hugs and more daffodils balanced atop the pile. Bishop

permeated our quiet drive home, as real as John Coltrane's saxophone.

Even now, sitting on my bed, I can't shake him from my mind. His voice, his handwriting, his stray lock of hair. I think of him, rigid in that box, never again to sit in that overstuffed armchair with his fountain pen. Forever trapped under that piano lid, sent off *wrong*. I can't let it happen.

My car is much smaller than Diana's, and much older, so the study group doesn't travel in it. Sometimes, I forget I have it. But as the engine kicks to life in the dark, I'm grateful I didn't sell it when Diana urged me to: *when are you going to use that thing, anyway?* For twenty minutes, I drive in complete silence.

An hour after I arrive at the cemetery, I'm covered in dirt and sweat, standing over a glossy black coffin. I throw handfuls of daffodils off the lid, soil nestled between their petals. The lid creaks in protest, catches a little, but I pull hard, and then I see that face again. One lock of silver hair rests on his forehead.

*Don't worry, Professor. I'm here.*

I clamber down to straddle his torso, one knee on either side of his surprisingly frail waist. It strikes me that this is the closest I've ever been to him. He smells like mothballs and Earth. I want to burrow into his chest, to beg him to come back, to lead us, to tell me what to do, but I know I can't. I pull my hunting knife out of my pocket.

It slices through his shirt, and I push it to the slide to reveal his chest. His skin is cold to the touch.

I brace a hand on his shoulder, beginning to cut through the gristle of muscle and cartilage. The teeth of my knife bite into the bone of his sternum. This is how I save him.

*I'm saving Professor Bishop.*

Though I'm giddy with the thought, I don't let it break my focus. I wiggle the knife to loosen flesh, it yields to the pressure. I continue as I was taught.

*Peel back the pectorals. Gently open the ribcage.*

# “The Language of Trauma–A Lexicon”

by Ananya Balike

Search for a word



## A·PO·LO·GY

/əˈpɒləʒi/

*noun*

1. A regretful acknowledgment of an offense or failure.
2. A very poor or inadequate example of.

“Hey I've been hesitant on whether I should contact you or not and I've decided I should. This is merely an extended apology for what happened a few years ago, nothing more. I thought I should speak to you directly instead of just thinking in my head. I haven't forgotten what I did to you, I never will. It was never my intention to hurt you like that and I'm sorry I did that to you. Although I do think there should have been clearer communication, it was still my fault. I was being extremely dumb and immature, I'm really sorry about that. I'll end it here, but I'm sorry for what I did. You don't need to reply to this, I just wanted you to know that I'm still sorry for what I did, and I'll never forget what I did to you.”

That was it. Well...

*“your sorry was quite an apology for apologies.”*

Similar:

sorry

regret

inadequate

## 🔊 CHANGE

/CHānj/

*verb*

1. Make (someone or something) different; alter or modify.

Your unprompted “apology” message made me question the fundamental nature of change.

If we were to take on a scientific lens, the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) outlines the five stages of change: pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and finally, *maintenance* ("Understanding the Process of Change," 2021). Isn't that quite funny?

Instead of asking whether people *can* change, we should be asking if they ever stop doing it.

You changed me that day. No question to it. But so does everyone I interact with. What makes you so special?

We are all scattered around infinite spectrums and we move along each and every one of those axes on a second-by-second basis. Although the human brain is said to be fully developed at around age 25, it never ceases to change, to “grow:”: *remains malleable* and *elastic*. Oh, another funny one there.

*“what makes you so special?”*

Similar:

maintain

malleable

constant

## 🔊) DIS·GUST

*/dis'gʌst/*

*verb*

Did you know “disgust” originally meant “destroy the flavor or relish for”?

I bet you still think about that day as a conquest. And every time, it's *me* that gets embarrassed. For some absurd reason, *I'm* the one that feels dirty. *I'm* the one who gets nauseated by the lingering brushing of your fingers against my skin.

For some unknown reason, choosing to rest my leg on the slightly-raised concrete base of a lamppost, was an invitation for your hand to nestle in between my thighs.

And me repeatedly refusing to touch your dick was somehow a request for you to stick your index into my top.

Still, what perseveres most is the disgust I feel towards myself. And the shame. A painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior. But what was my wrong or foolish behavior? Perhaps it is foolish to let it consume me.

*“destroy the flavor and relish for”*

Similar:

dirty

shame

blame

## 🔊 HELP·LESS

/ 'helpləs/

*Adjective*

1. Unable to defend oneself or to act without help.

We were at Celebration Square. Hundreds (if not thousands) were there. We were not alone. Ever. My friends were there too. Although I kept straying away from you and closer to the only other female friend, none of them noticed. Well, except for my crush at the time.

He saw your hand cupped on my ass—and he laughed. But I guess that’s not his fault. He must have thought it was consensual. He probably also thought I was a slut.

Although there were so many people who could’ve helped me that day, I was unable to defend myself. **I was helpless.** I wasn’t one of the popular kids in middle school. And that didn’t bode well since I had a crush on the “hottest guy in IBT.” I always felt unnoticed. But then, you “noticed” me. So I thought I had to enjoy it. It may not have been the way I wanted it, but it was attention nonetheless, right?

Earlier that day, I had asked my dad to pick me up at midnight (because I wanted to spend more time with my crush). And my dad is not much of a night-owl, so this was a big ask (one I felt guilty for even before asking). But then, *you* happened. And I called my dad 3 times to come pick me up as soon as he could. I don’t think I enjoyed “attention”.

But it’s been 7 years now, and I made it this far without any of those people’s help. I *acted* without help. **I was helpless.**

*“i acted without help”*

Similar:

alone

power

resilience

## 🔊) KISS

/kɪs/

*verb*

1. Touch with the lips as a sign of love, sexual desire, reverence, or greeting.

“Kiss my hand,” you said. I was so relieved to find out that statements that imply a lack of choice (imperative sentences) can increase compliance. It undermines one’s sense of autonomy and agency. Imperatives frame the request as a demand we have no real choice over.

Although I did not seek to make you feel respected and admired, that is what your twisted mind desired. To feel **reversed**. To kiss your highness’s hand. That is what you got off on.

*“kiss your highness’s hand”*

Similar:

control

royalty

loyalty

## 🔊 KNOW

/nō/

*verb*

“I know you like it.” How would you “know”? How could you have *known*? Saying “I know” leaves no room for debate—the speaker is declaring their interpretation as fact, controlling the narrative and undermining the listener’s autonomy. Saying “I know” implies a level of mind-reading or intimacy that in our case did not exist.

Grammatically, the phrase follows a subject-verb-object structure:

- ⇒ Subject: I
- ⇒ Verb: know
- ⇒ Direct object: you
- ⇒ Object complement: like it

So, no wonder you saw me as an object, even grammar seems to dictate that’s my role. And what would complement me, a girl in today’s society, is knowing how to shut up and “like it”.

*“i know you like it”*

Similar:

assumption

expression

ability

🔊 **NO**  
/nō/

*exclamation*

1. A word expressing negation, disapproval, or refusal.
2. Indicates that permission, approval, or agreement is not given for something suggested or requested.

It's been 2579 days (and counting). 2579 days since the day you couldn't understand the meaning of the word "no." Even though it is quite simple: children typically start saying "no" and understanding its meaning between 18-24 months of age, though there is some variation.

"I'm sorry, **when you said no, you were giggling**, and I took it the wrong way. It's all my fault. I'm sorry. I really didn't mean any of it."

A study by Richards et al. of 150 participants aged 14-24 found that of the sexually active participants, females were "significantly more likely than males to use verbal cues to communicate (94.7% vs. 77.3%) and interpret (96% vs. 54.4%) consent." Females were also "significantly more likely to use verbal cues to communicate (98.7% vs. 56.8%) and interpret (90.7% vs. 59.1%) refusal." Research also shows that nervous laughter helps maintain cognitive functioning in the face of a perturbing situation and can replace negative emotions with a less negative one. So yes, I giggled. But what mattered here is my "no."

Compared to women, men are more prone to engaging in sexually harassing behavior when they seek to establish their power over others or achieve their goal (Kennedy et al., 2023). But "no" does not mean "keep going. I'm enjoying this." And "no" is not a challenge, it is a boundary.

*"no is a sentence on its own"*

Similar:

fuck off

go away

leave-me-alone

## PAIN

/pān/

*noun*

1. Careful effort; great care or trouble.

I take great pain in taking away the pain you still somehow inflict.

A study of 628 U.S. participants found that male raters generally described women as being less agentic than men and as less agentic than female raters described them. (Hentschel et al., 2019).

“I’m sorry for what I did. I **truly never meant to degrade you like that, I promise you that.** You don’t need to reply to this (...)”

I had never thought of that night as degrading. I never lost self-respect. I only lost respect for you. And I know (now) that the one who should *actually* feel humiliated by the events and actions of that day, is you, and you alone.

*“i take great pain in taking away the pain you still somehow inflict.”*

Similar:

care

tend

nurture

## 🔊 PAST

/pɑst/

### *adjective*

1. Gone by in time and no longer existing.

### *noun*

1. The time or a period of time before the moment of speaking or writing.
2. A past tense of form of a verb.

### *preposition*

1. Beyond in time; later than.

Although people may claim trauma is always something from the past, I assure you, this is not true.

Yes, sure, I may be talking about that day in the past tense, and sure, I may be referring to a period of time before the moment of writing these words.

But if what you did had truly gone by in time and therefore, no longer exists, then why am I still writing about you?

When I refer to the “past,” I really mean: what happens past the so-called past. What happens *after* the fact? *That* is trauma.

*“because it’s not just what you did, but what you manage to still do”*

Similar:

after

present

future

## 🔊 PLEAS·URE

/ˈpleɪzHər/

*noun*

1. A feeling of happy satisfaction or enjoyment.

Masturbation is apparently a common form of “claiming back control” for individuals who have been sexually assaulted, as evidenced by countless stories like (ABC Everyday, 2020), (Browne, 2019), (Psychology Today, 2015), etc.

I hadn’t researched this information at the time, but around 473 days after the incident (a couple weeks after I wrote the raw 6-page poem about you), I felt this itchy desire to take back what you stole from me. You robbed me of my chance to decide some of my firsts.

You asked if anyone had ever touched me before, to which I said no. You were just curious I guess.

A line from that poem kept ringing in my ears (quite cliché, but it’s the truth):

“I still feel your hands grazing my skin,  
Grabbing me in places even I’ve never been”

And when you found out you were the first to feel my body, you *bugged* me.

So, I *had* to explore for myself the places you touched first. But ironically, instead of only feeling pleasure from the stimulation, it was the tears after each orgasm that stayed seared.

*“i had to explore for myself the places you touched first”*

Similar:

masturbate

touch

power

## 🔊 SHIFT

/SHɪft/

*noun*

1. A slight change in position, direction, or tendency.

*“I just wanted you to know that I'm still sorry for what I did, and I'll never forget what I did to you.”*

Your apology was never sufficient. But I think I was always meant to forgive you (not forget, but forgive):

Within just 6 days of the Stanford Prison Experiment, those given the role of “guard” tormented those given the role of “prisoner”—even forcing them to strip down. This was all in a controlled, experimental setting. Now imagine the impact assigning societal roles can have on an individual.

If I choose to not forgive, I am labeling you a “predator.” I do not want you to hold that kind of power.

*“i don't know about change, but a shift (or an infinite set of shifts) is possible”*

Similar:

evolution

fluid

minute

## 🔊 STO·RY

/ 'stôre/

*noun*

1. An account of past events in someone's life or in the evolution of something.

“This is merely an extended apology for what happened a few years ago. As I'm seeing more **stories** about sexual assault, I thought I should speak to you directly instead of just thinking in my head.”

The #MeToo Instagram stories finally put things into perspective for you. Although I had confronted you TWO years prior, the person (whose life you *directly* impacted) telling you how you *altered* her life, was not enough to convince you your actions were even close to wrong. But I'm glad that something (kind of) good came out of people sharing their stories. And my hope is to do the same.

*“I'm glad that something (kind of) good came out of people sharing their stories.”*

Similar:

power

share

shift

“Psalm 119:105”  
by Thomas Soliman

Job 14

That incessant orb peaks again above the white, satin horizon.  
Greet the millions of translucent, arenose dancers, their *endless* joggling revealed within the sun’s rays.

Its brilliant light beckons rain from the begrudging eye,  
Its cordial caress kisses the body.  
Yet its warmth and glow pass  
inconspicuously  
unremarkably  
invisibly.  
Like a dreamer’s monotonous breath.

A nipping zephyr licks the skin and whispers faint secrets in the ears,  
its touch a fugitive scurrying through the night.  
Too quick to catch.

A million passing gazes watch without notice  
that ceaseless concert blaring vulgarly on the asphalt stage.

Beaked angels soar as *always*,  
hidden like the *infinite* stars  
waltzing on the sea floor.

The servant, distraught, lets the lamp drip its last breath.

The master returns to drunken stupor and thieves steal the night’s placid lull.

A single tsunami betrays the certainty of a trillion innocent waves.

The great walls of Jericho

once invincible

crumble.



## Ecclesiastes 12: 1-13

Thick brown pillars reach for the sky, soldiers adorned magnificently in brown and green.

Each one a lone krill in the forest vast.

It falls face down in worship like Goliath at the feet of David.

The earth shudders in repentant prostration and drips prayerful tears from the sky.

And yet the army marches on like before, motionless as the sea's deceptive ebb and flow.

A wave tossed in the ocean; a gust caught in the wind.

A dandelion hidden in a field,  
shedding,  
graying,  
balding,  
dying.

Unseen, the roots clutch the earth's heart, unyielding and unwilling.

Powerless like a seashell vomited onto the seashore.

And yet, one will sink and one hundred will rise.

So stands the army, silent and unchanged.

Now with its creator, forever in silent vigil.

The breath it gave was life for all.

Each *inhale* sings an *ode*.

Each *exhale* chants an *elegy*.

And yet, forgotten.

Did it ever exist at all?

### John 3:19-21

A metallic, coagulated pool of red paints the pure white snow.

A thorny rose bloom sears under the sun's scorching glare.

Lone wings lie still, abandoned sails on a forsaken ship.

Forcefully divorced from their partners.

Lifeless feathers, aimless voyagers, taken by the mourning gale.

A tower of light slices the heavy darkness unceasingly, paving the narrow gate.

Bloodied hands beat against the resounding wood. Cold wails rival the night's algid grip.

But the door, pertinacious, renders its damming ultimatum.

The light, judging, galls.

Driving the maddened to death.

## Proverbs 16:31

Witness them unfurl.  
Their roots slowly unwind and decompose.

Insects feasting on woody tissue rotten.

Musty and earthen, its embrace of *kareishu*.

Who is this shadow? Once immortal.

Ensuing its waning drifts my soul in woe.

Held tightly, bare shoulder blades pierce my palms.

The steps which once could not misstep,  
wobble uncertainly.

That mind which taught us to think,  
lags painfully.

Mucus-coated eyes,  
The Eyes which I inherited,  
burdened and stained,  
pierce my soul.

Growth rings decorate his sun-stained skin,  
adorned in due glory.

## Revelations 21:5

Silence.

Deafening

It blares garishly and without reproach.

A violent monsoon ravishing the fertile plains.

A season's hopes violated and potential depraved.

Swept helplessly in nature's formidable wake.

Lungs torn apart and lit aflame; an ocean defiles the orifices in a salty blaze.

Silence.

Deafening.

Yet, beneath the wreckage, a timid pulse persists.

Languidly, the aquifers fill.

A seedling tenderly bears a panicle crowned in a cream tiara,

It harbors the coveted golden starch to come.

Paralyzed under limitless weight, the ocean leaks.

A hesitant drip defiles the coma.

Again and again, the drip echoes in the mind's cavern.

Each drip a beatitude, carving a way in the wilderness, hydrating a river in the desert.

Languorously, a pointed skull breaks through.

Shrivelled and scrunched, guarded by *vernix*.

Ahead, blinding, lies The Throne.

## “Viva Las Vegas”

by Maureen Anne Tucker

“Do you want Fat Elvis or Skinny Elvis?”

He is standing in a hotel bathrobe, looking out a 26<sup>th</sup> story window, down onto the humid July Las Vegas strip. He is on the phone with the coordinator guy from the Graceland Wedding Chapel.

She pauses in the steamy bathroom mirror for a moment and shouts “Fat Elvis! Obviously. Who renews their wedding vows and picks Skinny Elvis?” He shrugs. She’s right.

The entire point of renewing wedding vows on their 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary is to be ridiculous. To be anti-wedding. The whole thing is supposed to be a fix-all, to mend her broken heart over the Worst Wedding Ever. The special day was not so special. The day when the nuclear war between their mothers came to a screaming weepy climax in front of ninety people.

“We’ll take Fat Elvis. Thanks. See you at 2:00”

This anniversary trip started on a whim. Someone at the BBQ asked, “You guys have a big one coming up, eh? That ten years went quick.” That led to a major discussion on the way home. All the old resentments and disappointments resurfaced, and he just let her vent. He learned long ago to never say “It was just one day, nobody has a perfect wedding.” Before they were home, she thought of something that might make it right.

So, flights were booked, an over-the-top Vegas suite was reserved and here they are. Today’s wedding will be the perfect antidote to the bitching mothers, church turf war, complicated guest list and seating chart nightmares of their first wedding. Just them and the King of Rock n’ Roll at 2:00pm. It will be perfect.

They have chosen (she has chosen, he agrees) the perfect anti-wedding outfits—the bride is wearing a full-length red sequined dress and a towering black Priscilla Presley beehive wig, and he is attempting to zip himself into a white spangled jumpsuit with a glittery Aztec firebird on the front. The massive faux gold belt has Velcro, that’s no problem. He is leaving the itchy black pompadour wig for the last moment.

The guy at the BBQ was right about one thing, that ten years did go fast. He laughs at how unprepared they were. Fourteen weeks is not much time from “you wanna dance?” to “will you marry me?” Especially at twenty. In that way, they’ve been lucky. Not every impetuous young couple makes it this far, especially with people who are so different in nature. Proposing seemed like the right thing to do at the time. He was ready for an adventure. Being twenty bored her, and she liked the sound of a new last name with a Mrs. in front of it. There would be a diamond ring to flash around and a wedding. Her perfect wedding.

Then their crazy, controlling mothers met. One of them had lots of money but no filter, and the other

had no money and even less taste. The only thing, truly the only thing, they agreed on was that the two “kids” in question had no damn business getting married in the first place. The Dads wisely stayed out of it. During the brief engagement, the traditions, hidden (and not so hidden) agendas, and religious beliefs of their two families crashed into each other, leaving everyone miserable on the big day. So much tension, zero joy. Everyone was relieved it was over.

That was ten years ago, and he knows how disappointed she was. And still is. He doesn’t really understand the disappointment, but he wishes he could fix it. Give her back that day. So, that is why he bailed on work, flew to Nevada, and is prepared to marry her again dressed as Elvis Presley. He wants her to be happy.

She calls out from the sumptuous bathroom “Do you care what songs he sings...do you care if I just pick?”

He says, “You chose. Doesn’t matter.” Silence. He senses that he just gave the wrong answer. So, he volunteers “What about Burning Love?” Silence. “Jailhouse Rock?” More silence. “Suspicious Minds?” He hears a lipstick tube capped and set down on the marble vanity.

She swings into the doorway and says “You’re not taking this very seriously. You do not have Elvis Fucking Presley sing “Suspicious Minds” at a vow renewal.” She is using her Take This Seriously voice. She returns to the bathroom and calls over her shoulder “Get dressed, limo in twenty.”

Honk! Honk! Honk! The long white convertible hits every red light as they make their progression down the sunny Strip to the chapel. Vegas loves weddings, and everyone on the sidewalk calls out their congratulations as they cruise by. They arrive at the Graceland 24 Hour Chapel of Love as the clock strikes 2:00pm. Inside reeks of sweat, old flowers, and bad cologne. She chooses a posy of white roses from the massive fridge of readymade bouquets. The coordinator maneuvers them to a large X marked on the carpet, smooths their windblown wigs, and tells them how fabulous they look. “OK happy lovebirds...magic time now! Smile!”

Somewhere from above, the sounds of an invisible organ swell. The huge carved chapel doors swing open, and standing in a white spotlight on the red shag steps is an enormous, sparkling, sweaty, resplendent Elvis with a microphone. He is singing “Can’t Help Falling in Love” (her favourite song, from “Blue Hawaii”) and beckoning them forward to the heart-shaped altar with bejeweled sausage finger hands.

She loses it. This is so beautiful, and she is moved by it. She agrees to never, ever, step on his blue suede shoes, and he promises to never leave her at Heartbreak Hotel. She vows to be his little teddy bear and he will forever remain her hunka-hunka burning love. Hot tears roll down her face and she suddenly realizes that this gaudy spectacle is perfect. Absolutely perfect. Any man who will do this absurd thing must genuinely love her and was worth marrying the first time. And this time. That is what matters. That is what always mattered. That is far more important than those two cranky, unpleasable old hens and a “perfect dream day” any

day.

Screw the mothers. Viva Las Vegas!

## “Emily”

by Andromeda Adler

I fell in love. With a sunlit smile, an unforgettably loud laugh, the crinkle of a nose perfectly upturned, and the feel of a hand that fit so well in mine. I hated the smell of cigarettes once, but after meeting her they became a comfort of mine.

Beneath her beauty was something I would one day learn to be anguish. I could tell from the moment we met that the shine in her irises did not come from joy, but rather its antonym. I asked her about it once and her face had set into such a serious expression that I learned to keep my mouth shut.

For a long time, it was just her and me, using one another to clear our minds of the things that ailed us. It began with a few hours together on the weekends, hidden beneath the bridge near her house and smoking the weed her brother grew in the crisp September air. It became more, in a way I didn't mind at all. Sneaking out and skipping class just to lay in her arms for a little while was all I needed. It was all *we* needed. Until it wasn't.

It was March when her mask cracked. I saw it for just a second, the demons she buried beneath it and hid behind her chest. I wasn't scared, then, because she had me. She had my love, and I would help her make everything alright.

I think she couldn't accept that I'd seen her woe. I tried so hard to tell her I was there, that I would always *be* there. But she could not accept that either. She wouldn't let me see her weak, nor would she let herself break. She was already broken, though, and so she was only holding herself back from healing.

I had only blinked, a split second of darkness, and she was gone. I hadn't felt pain like that before. I didn't know how to deal with it, and I certainly didn't know how I'd move on from it. I loved her; I *love* her. Part of me thinks I always will. I don't want to anymore.

I did my best to stop myself from chasing her and following the unlit path she disappeared down. The others held me back, gripping both of my arms so strongly that I couldn't run. I suppose I should be thankful for them.

I really do try to stop loving her. I tried to forget about her and the pain she left behind in my chest by burying myself into meaningless distractions. Ema, Peyton, Valerie, Erica . . . I thought they'd help; the rosi-ness of their lips would sweep my mind clean of anything Emily had left behind.

They didn't. As I turn my head to look back at them, I realize how much like Emily they all were. That was my mistake, and it was a fatal one. It's taken me a long time to realize that seeking Emily in someone else won't stop me from hurting; so, I stop myself.

I'll forget in any way that I can, whether it be the bitterness of vodka or the burn of tobacco she used to love so much. My heart will stop aching for her, I'll command it to do that. I'll love someone else; I promise. I promise to myself, to my friends, and I promise to Emily.

For now, I will forget in Phoebe. She is no Emily, she is small and shy, with a laugh that you can only hear if you try. She cries when she needs to, and she lets me hold her when she does. Phoebe does not pretend with me, there isn't a need to. She is no Emily, and maybe that is a good thing.

Maybe that is the best thing.

**“Hangnail”**  
**by Felicity Moziar**

I pull hangnails

It’s stupid,  
I know  
It’s the same outcome every time

For a moment,  
I feel pleasure, perhaps  
bliss

Sharp stings follow

The burn lingers,  
You apply pressure

You make it worse,  
I throb  
Am I healing?

I know the consequences  
I gorge myself

Isn’t it obvious  
That a second of pleasure is not worth a lifetime of pain?  
I choose oblivion.

Again, I peel the skin  
I reach for love  
I am grounded with pain

Why do I allow you  
To hurt me

Over  
And  
Over

When I have the power to clip you free?

## “The Dollmaker”

by Sydney Joselyn

“Look who decided to join us! Good morning, sleepyhead!”

It took you a moment to realize that the sounds filling your ears were words. Real words, ones that your brain could hear and take in and understand. Words in a voice you weren't quite familiar with.

That was odd, you thought. Still shaking off the haze of sleep, though, it was difficult to pay any mind to. Was that normal? You weren't quite sure.

“...Oh, dear, I do hope I haven't given you too much.”

Curiosity got the better of you. With some effort, your leaden eyelids began to lift, letting the light in and cutting through into your clouded mind enough for you to take in your surroundings.

You were in a room you'd never seen before. Desks and tables, drawers overstuffed with fabric, surfaces laid neatly with metal tools all lined up in size. It was nice of...whoever lived here...to have tidied up for you. Good courtesy.

You managed to turn your sleepy head over to the stranger gazing at you with a smile. You weren't quite sure why you were still feeling so sluggish; typically, it only took a minute or two to wake up and hop out of bed. But that was okay. You were comfortable. Why move?

“Oh, excellent. I was beginning to worry that I had accidentally miscalculated your dose! I'm so happy to see you're finally awake!” The excitement in their voice filled made you feel warm inside. It was nice that someone was so enthusiastic about your presence. You fought to focus your bleary eyes on the stranger's face...after all, it would be rude not to give them your full attention.

Finally, your mind and eyes decided to connect. They were very pretty, you thought. Their features were delicate and fine. Sea green eyes gazed back at you, crinkled at the corners from their smile. Long waves of golden hair framed their lovely face and cascaded down their back. You tried to get a compliment out, but your mouth didn't want to move. That was alright. At this very moment, *everything* seemed alright. No stress, no worries...a content, dozy sigh rumbled up from your chest.

“Don't fret, dear. What you're experiencing is completely normal. I've given you some medication to help keep you calm during the procedure.” The pretty stranger wiped their hands on their worn brown apron and gently cupped your cheek, gazing down at you with those piercing eyes. “You can call me The Dollmaker. It's a pleasure to meet you properly!”

A procedure. That sounded nice. The Dollmaker was very nice, you thought. You let your head fall against their hand. You couldn't feel their touch, but their presence was comforting. You managed a great big

dopey smile. They smiled right back.

“I see someone is still a little sleepy...perhaps I *did* use too much.”

You had no idea what they were talking about, but you tried to shake your head. Of course they hadn’t! Whatever they were referring to, they had been nothing but kind to you since you’d woken up here. They seemed to get the message.

“Hush...Don’t hurt yourself, dear. You’re still very lethargic, after all. And the euphoria has set in...am I correct?”

Woah. Those were funny words...you pondered just how funny they were. Letharg...hm. Suddenly, you couldn’t quite remember what they’d said.

The Dollmaker chuckled softly. “That’s alright. Now, can you tell me if you feel this?” They lifted your arm by the wrist, resting your elbow on the arm of your chair.

Your mind struggled to catch up through your blissful reverie. That was odd. You couldn’t. Not their rough hands supporting your arm, not the upholstery against your elbow. In fact, you realized, you couldn’t even feel the seat beneath you or at your back. You hadn’t even noticed...you smiled again. Now you felt even more free. It was almost like you were floating on clouds...

“Oh, excellent. I was not looking forward to waiting for another dose to kick in...” You heard them mumble to themselves. You weren’t quite sure what it meant. After all, you were barely hanging on to your *own* thoughts.

Singing softly to themselves, they plucked a marker from behind your ear and began to mark your skin. You watched them, whenever your eyes felt like opening. They used a funny little ribbon with lines on it to measure between each mark.

*Measure once, measure twice, mark.*

*Measure once, measure twice, mark.*

It almost felt like a game. A game between you—the guest—and your gracious host. *Measure once, measure twice, mark.* Sitting there, you noticed your body didn’t really want to move. Not that you’d actually given it enough effort to know for sure; you simply didn’t care enough. *Measure once, measure twice, mark.*

You’d nearly fallen back to sleep by the time the stranger had finished. But just as you were ready to sink back into unconsciousness once more, your heavy lids were gently pinched open.

“I’m afraid you can’t sleep, dear. Not until the procedure is over...I have the drilling and the stringing to finish. Can you do your best to stay awake?” Their voice still sounded sweet as sugar.

*Procedure?* It took you a minute to bring your thoughts back to the present. *Ab, right. The whole reason you were here.* Your head bobbed a little as you tried to nod, getting a soft laugh from the pretty stranger as they helped you lean back against the chair. That was sweet of them. You felt a pang of guilt for your own foolish

misconduct.

They didn't seem to mind, though. They just patted your head and returned to their work. You watched in drowsy awe as the stranger sliced the skin open along each line they'd made. That was your skin. And you couldn't feel a thing...that was cool. A cool thought. A cool...damn. You'd lost your train of thought.

Clearly, your host had done this before. Their touch was sure and unwavering as they drilled into the bones and put in pretty metal screws. Screws. Into your *bones*. Was that even possible? You were impressed with just how little blood was getting everywhere...you were truly watching an expert work.

Suddenly you found yourself fighting off your drowsiness again. That numb weightlessness and the pretty stranger's soft humming was taking over your senses like some powerful drug...

"One more step, dear. Eyes open, for me, okay?" The Dollmaker's voice almost sounded like an echo, now. You just wanted to sink into the blissful feeling...but no. That was bad manners.

You gathered yourself and forced your eyes open. How long had it been?

You looked down at your body for an answer, and you found it. For, sticking out of your arms, in perfect symmetry, were metal hooks. They looked nice, you thought. But the stitches, as neatly sewn as they were—

"The stitches will disappear in time, darling. Don't you worry your little head." The stranger's voice cut through your thoughts, sending a new wave of euphoria over you. They were so nice. Following the sound with your eyes, you caught sight of them over by the fireplace, rooting through the drawers of a particularly handsome wooden desk.

"Aha! I knew it was around here somewhere! Come to think of it, I really must order some more..." still mumbling to themselves, they walked back over to you.

"Ooh, you just look so *cute* with your new hooks!" They squealed, nearly dropping the colorful rolls of ribbon they were holding in their excitement. They seemed so happy. You felt another silly smile spreading across your face.

You weren't quite sure what to make of it at first when they plopped their hoard down on the table in front of you. But thankfully, The Dollmaker was kind enough to elaborate.

"Now, I have red, purple, this light blue color here...this pretty lace ribbon...what would you like to be stringed with? Blink once for red or purple, and twice for blue or lace."

They were letting you choose.

This was the best day of your life.

You hurriedly blinked twice, and they chuckled, putting the fetching scarlet and silken purple aside.

"One blink for the light blue, and two for the lace!" They smiled at you with such sweetness, it was difficult to even focus on their words. Lace. That was your choice. Just like the lace necklace they were wear-

ing...you could match. That was a fun idea.

“That’s all I need, dear. You can rest now.” Those words washed over you like a cool breeze in summer. *Finally*. You happily closed your eyes and let slumber overtake you once more.

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That day had been one of the best of your life. Your *new* life. Your new purpose. Your new home. All graciously provided to you by your wonderful Dollmaker.

\*\*\*

When you finally awoke once more, it was in another place you didn’t recognize. Tables stacked high with toys and games; little wooden models hanging from the ceiling. Along the walls were beautiful glass displays—each inhabited by a person. A real person, just like you, happy, sleepy, blissful.

“Good morning, dear. How do you feel?”

And there they were. The Dollmaker, standing there with a smile. That sweet, intoxicating smile.

“I believe that numbness should be gone by now...nothing hurts, does it?” They reached out to you and stroked your cheek.

It was like everything came rushing in at you at once. You could *feel* again. You could feel the lace tugging your arms by their hooks. You could smell the Dollmaker’s perfume. Sense the warmth of their hand on your cheek.

Your joy was suddenly overwhelming. Your chest tightened, forcing a small gasp past your lips as tears came to your eyes.

“Oh, honey...hush now, no need to cry...” The Dollmaker had said, tenderly drying your tears. They gently pressed a kiss to your forehead. “I promise I will take good care of you, dear. You will never even have to lift a finger...and you will never hurt anyone again.”

You weren’t sure what that meant...hurt people? You had no memories of anything so atrocious! But your concerns melted when you looked back at them...back into those gorgeous eyes. You smiled, resting your head against their palm. The Dollmaker smiled back. They were so kind...so perfect.

“...Don’t you worry about a thing, dear...I promise you; you’ll never have to leave again.”

## “More Beautiful Now”

by Maeve Lang

The flowers in the windowsill  
Were brilliant blue, purple and white  
White like the snow  
On the day we met  
When fat soft flakes drifted from the sky  
Like slivers of cloud  
Freezing freckles to your skin.  
The icing-sugar dusting on your hair.  
Your purple hair like violets blooming in the sun  
You had dyed it yourself  
Leaving lilac stained palms  
A surprise, you said. So you could see my smile  
I saw the smile too  
Reflecting off the bluebells  
In your eyes

On that day  
That month  
That life  
When the whites and blues and purples  
Blended together  
Petals fluttering  
in the winter air

Summer came then.  
With grass-stained knees  
And rusty bike wheels  
Sand that creeps, slowly, under the skin  
The heat that sticks to the roof of your mouth  
Wakes you up at night  
With cricket's legs pressing inside your ribs.  
In the back of your throat  
That summer fog that fills your throat  
Chokes you  
Sends boiling tears down your face

Now  
The flowers on the windowsill  
are dead  
You were always the one  
to remind me to water them.  
But you know what?  
I like them better dead anyway

## “Me And My Mother”

by Julia P.

I still remember the first time I met my mother. About three years ago now, during that weird time that no one wants to think about anymore, when we wore our masks and ordered our groceries and talked to our neighbors from far over the fence. That was a selfish time for me. I had a safe home to live in, had food on the table, and owned a healthy body. I think that’s where the problems started—from not really having any problems at all. It was a gradual beginning. One I don’t really think I can pinpoint. It almost seems it has no origin. Maybe it’s just something inherently inside me that is birthed, and then dies with my body. Like the egg that sits in my stale ovaries, waiting for its turn to become my child. A piece of me.

I remember thinking to myself, *Now is the time to really improve yourself. To become the new you, the one you’ve always wanted to be.* So I started running. I wanted to be the type of girl who wakes up at 6:00 am and runs for no other reason than just because she loves it; I would wake up and go before breakfast, *You can’t run on a full stomach,* I would tell myself. My mother (the dietitian turned office manager) applauded me for my efforts in improving my health. “Good for you to be doing that,” she would tell me, “I should be getting active instead of being lazy here on the couch. You know I used to run when I was your age.” I never asked why she’d stopped.

\*\*\*

I became obsessed with my stomach.

Let’s be honest, I’d been obsessed with my stomach since the ripe age of 12. Its rectangularness was just so... regular.

I remember visiting my father once, after the divorce, when we would sit on the couch and watch movies to pretend we had common interests. I had just finished making dinner for the two of us (like my mother would have done were she there), and all I could think about was the pile of dishes waiting for me after we’d finished eating. I’d plated up my father’s dinner and served it to him as he started the movie of his choice—something with Audrey Hepburn. “Look at her waist!” my father had exclaimed obnoxiously, “It’s so tiny! Do you see that? I’ve never seen a woman with a waist that small.” Unsure of how to respond, I stayed quiet in my small corner of the couch.

So there I was, on my mother’s back patio, watching “How to Get an Hourglass Waist FAST” workout videos on YouTube and praying my bones would rearrange themselves in such a way that I could convince

myself said shape was possible. When I think of my stomach, I sometimes wish I was a turkey dinner. I want the women to snap my bones and rearrange my dead, featherless body in such a presentable way. To paint me in butter and stuff my innards with bread and garlic and all the things people like, so I may be enjoyed as the best dish on the table. The centerpiece.

At some point during my stomach obsession I got a job, but only because my mother pushed me into applying for it. It was at her office; a clinic where I absentmindedly filed data into Excel, stared at a computer screen, and generally pretended to be busy. This job had nothing to offer me at the time except for the one thing that I was so desperately craving: a scale. We had never owned a scale at home, which only amplified my curiosity about them. My grandma had a scale, and a lot of my friends did too, so I always wondered why we never had one. I learned quickly that scales are not for weighing yourself, they're for measuring yourself. Your worth. Their preciseness, and the ability to quantify a body *just so*, measures feminine worth.

Every year around Christmas time, the office held a holiday party to which I was always invited. They were of the adult type with fancy appetizers and cookie exchanges and pre-planned games; we started off with “Two Truths and a Lie,” a classic. As we sat by the tree and went around the circle, one of the women shared her three options. They went something like:

- “1. I gave my dad coal for Christmas one year.
2. I like olives.
3. My husband bought me a scale for our first Christmas together.”

Turns out she hates olives.

In the office, I would weigh myself any chance I got, and would even take off my shoes if I was confident that no one would walk in on me (just to get that extra half a pound down). The scale's rusted metal would creak as I snuck onto its platform—a natural alarm system like the sound of the fridge opening late at night after everyone else has gone to bed. The red arrow would twitch up through the numbers, dancing around in its plastic casing until it rested on my fate. I don't know if I was ever satisfied with the number that stared back at me—this turkey has too much stuffing.

I could tell that my mother was sensing something off about me. In retrospect, I realize she knew exactly what was happening. She wasn't the type to say anything about it though; we don't have those types of conversations with each other. Too vulnerable. My mom is not that type of mother. She listens to my rants and shows me how to cook soup, but we often don't go any further than that. While we cook, we talk about how our days went, and our opinions on how small to cut the vegetables, just to fill the silence. My mother always adds a few bay leaves to her soups: they float just under the surface but remain hidden by the murky broth of avoidance. We say, “I love you,” and hug each other before bedtime, but you stir and scoop and search until the two bay leaves you dropped in the pot are never found.

But one day after work my mother said to me, “You need to stop losing weight,” and I’ve never heard a sentence with such clarity. The words still burn into my ear. “I’m not trying to, I’m just less hungry from sitting at a desk all day,” I told her. And with that, I silently walked to my room, closing the door behind me as I choked on the bay leaf that was stuck in my helping.

I don’t remember much else from that summer. I do remember the day everything ended though. I had failed that day—ate “too much” again. I couldn’t even remember what food had gone down, just that it did, and that I wasn’t even full. I could have continued. That insatiable hole in my stomach lingered: a deep grave where my girlhood rested, oxygen deprived and waiting for a hand to grab her from the soil to raise her from the dead. My butterfingers were too slippery to do it myself, though; only a mother can revive her daughter from the grave she helped dig.

I think of the bay leaf again, and I emerge from my room with tears streaming down my face, unable to get the words out.

“What’s wrong sweetie?” My mother asks me.

“I have a problem with food... and stuff,” I tell her, cringing at the words as they escape from my lips. My mother’s eyes reach mine and I can feel the weight of the food in my belly getting heavier. She already knows. She knows me before myself. Before herself.

“Let’s go out onto the patio and chat,” she says softly.

I met my mother for the first time on that patio. I had defiled my body for myself, and I came to know she has done the same. She served her story up to me, like leftovers heated up after the rest of the family has already eaten. Half cold and soggy on the stained plate, but food nonetheless. I finally understood the words “I am my mother’s daughter.” I am her and she is her stomach. I eat for her and she for me. We share the same plate: two forks, but one meal. Like the pie slice cut in half because a whole one is “too rich.”

I am the egg from my mother’s ovaries, and I am passed down from her mother, and hers before that. My mother’s birthing gift to me was my body, for my physical self is a piece of hers.

Someone asked me one time what my hobbies were, and I struggled to answer. I still do. My hobbies are my mother’s only—taught to me by my only teacher.

To serve.

And to eat.

My only two lessons in this life (in that order).

Now, when I visit home, I cook dinner with my mother like I did in my girlhood. We fill up our plates, and have seconds, for all the times we shared the same meal. We try to eat two pieces of pie. And when its bedtime, we brush our teeth together in the bathroom. We steal glances of ourselves in the mirror, or glances of each other I’m not sure, as I think those might be the same thing. I notice the delicate traces of grey hair

along her temples, the hair that she continuously dyes back to brown (I wish she wouldn't). I see the faint beginning of her wrinkles, and the dark eye bags of a woman who has served and eaten since the day her girlhood died. I see her as the girl she once was—the same girl whose hand I struggle to hold onto now. The sound of her electric toothbrush and the TV drown out the silence, and our thoughts, as we sneak another peek in the mirror.

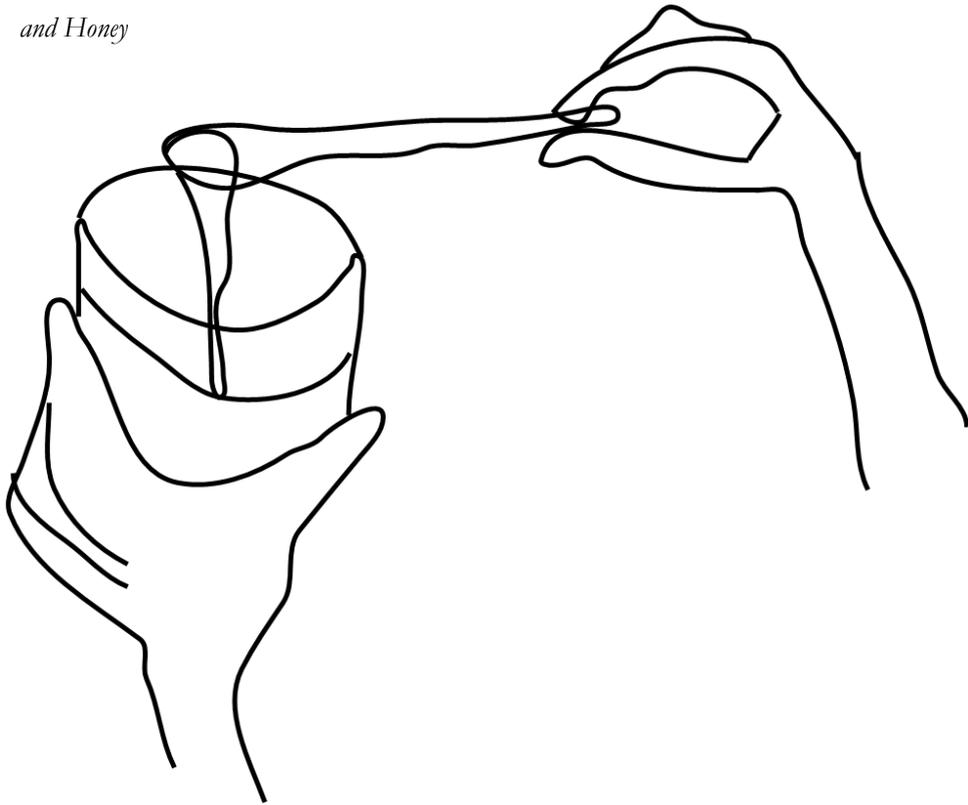
*Am I enough for her?*

“Genesis One”

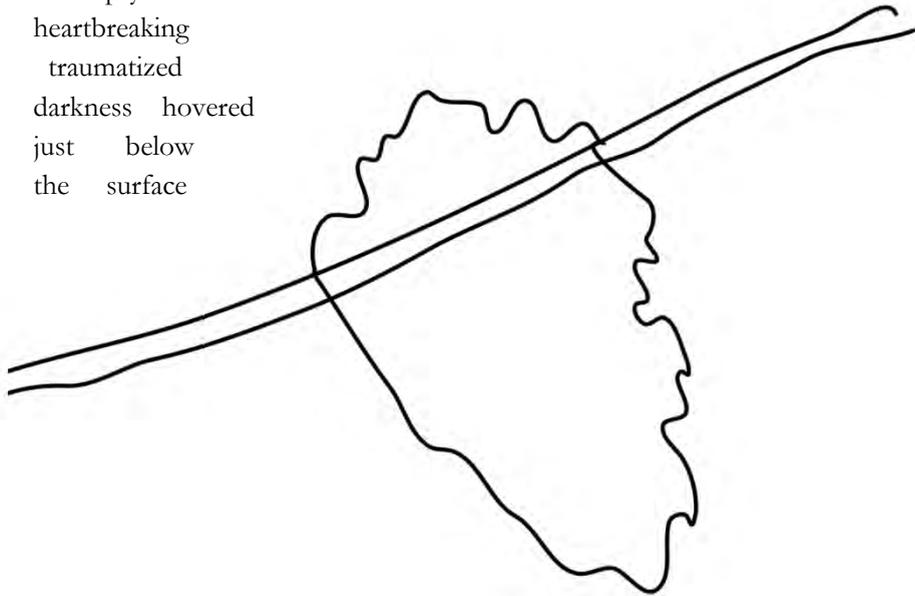
by Amy Rich



at the beginning  
of the world  
rupi made  
the heavens  
*Milk*  
and earth  
*and Honey*



the earth was  
empty  
heartbreaking  
traumatized  
darkness hovered  
just below  
the surface



the spirit of  
rupi  
watched us  
saw us  
held us like a  
mothers first babe  
and saw  
our brokenness like  
a mother  
when her babe grows up



rupi said

They need light

rupi said

Let there be light

rupi said

The light is day

rupi said

The darkness is night

rupi didn't say

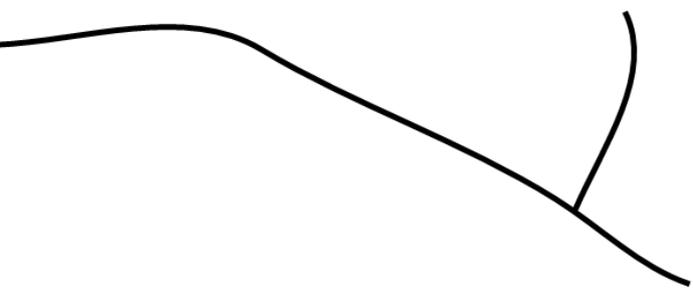
Let there be

l o v e

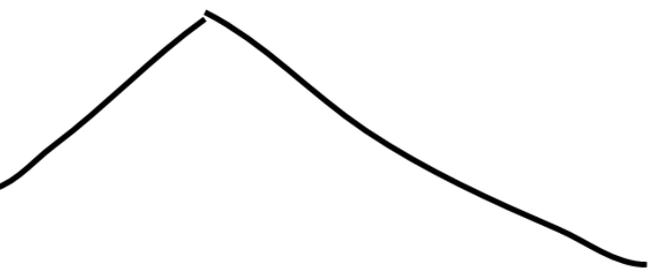
—why war exists

in the evening  
    there was moonlight  
    that bathed the nude form  
before we began  
to call nudity  
    bad  
and named women  
    whore  
    and slut  
    and bitch  
and in the morning  
    there was mourning  
before we began  
to kill men  
    who we called  
    different

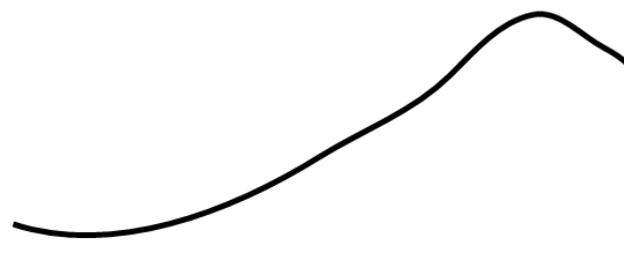
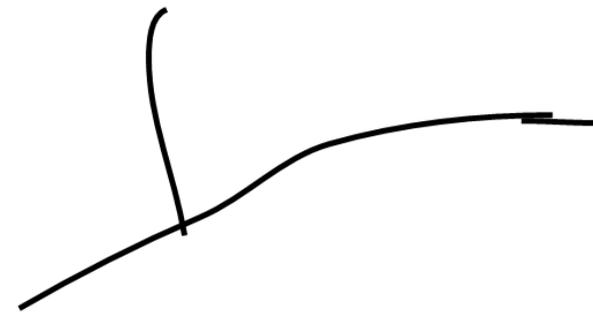




rupi made  
a vault  
to remind man  
he can never  
touch the



& put it  
between  
the legs  
of women

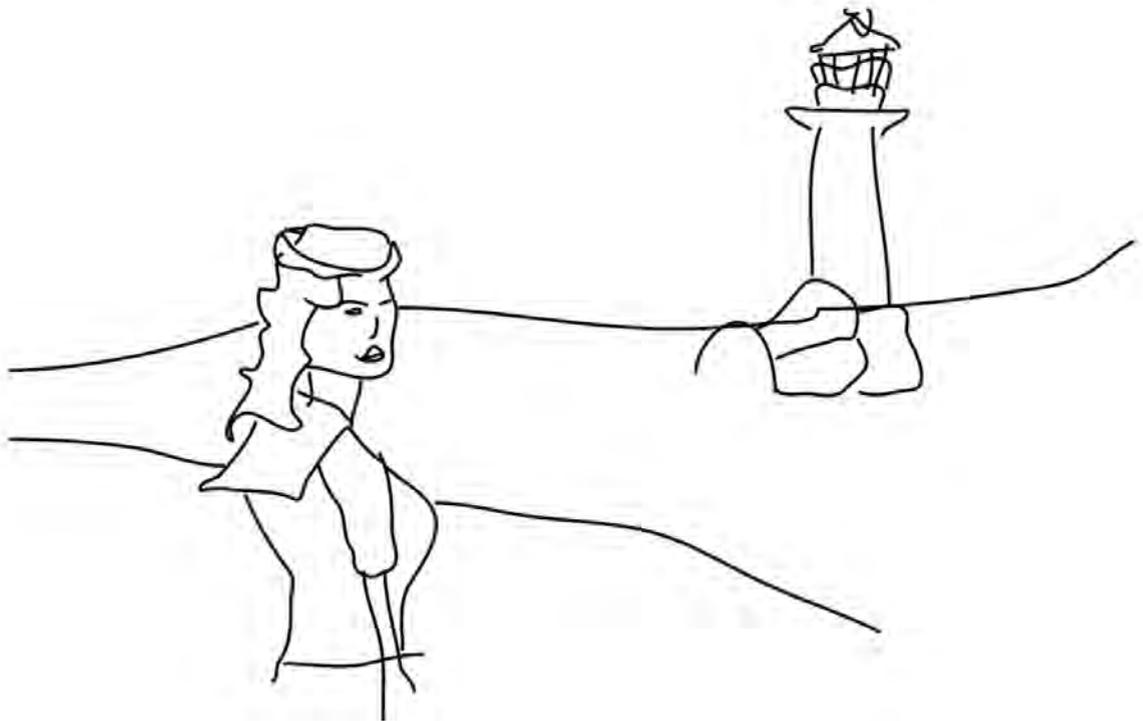


there was a vault  
between the waters  
to separate water  
from water

—sexism

rupi made me  
on dry ground  
and called me land

but you were a sailor  
and preferred  
the seas



rupi made

plants bearing seed  
and trees bearing fruit  
with seed

and man saw  
and devoured  
and named them  
below them

and rupi said  
look again  
the plants  
and trees  
and seeds  
arent  
plants  
and trees  
and seeds

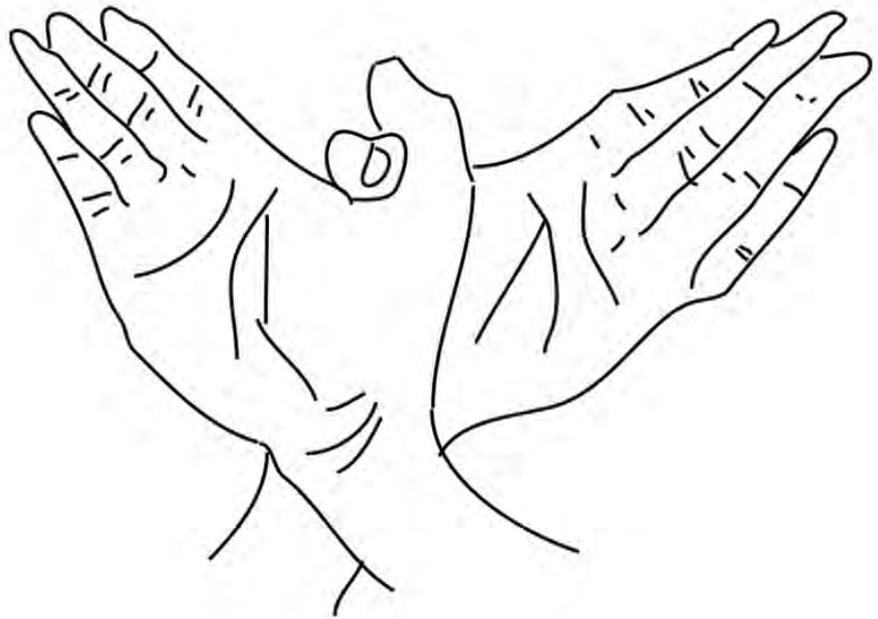
and rupi made capitalism  
in the form of stars

to separate  
day (poor)  
from  
night (rich)

and she made  
two great lights  
to govern the  
day (poor)  
and night  
(rich)

and rupi saw  
that it was good

and i was a bird  
but you were the earth  
i needed to fly  
above



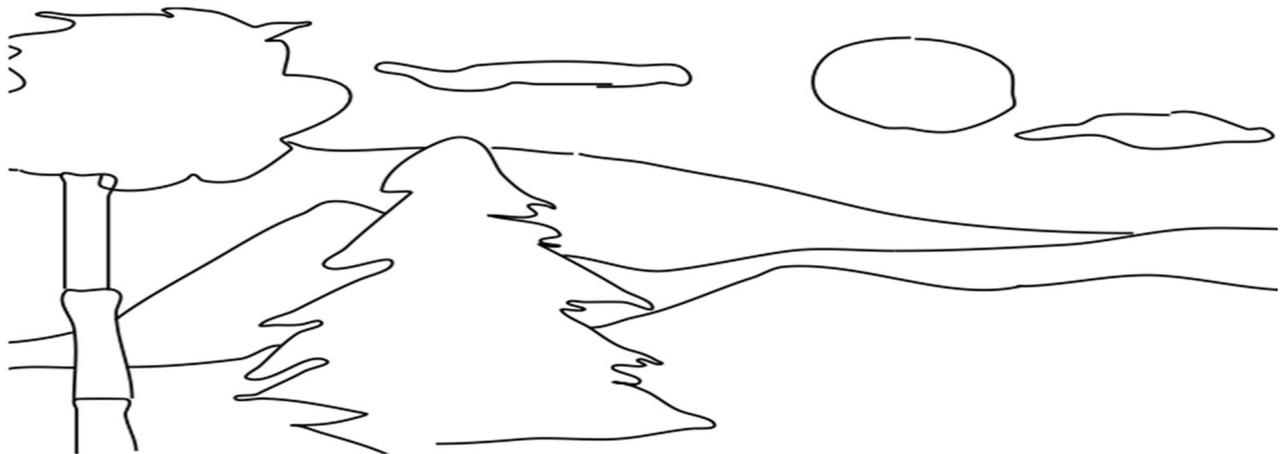
and so mother  
    was borne to be fruitful  
to increase  
the number of men  
and fill the seas  
    with water of  
    truth  
that never  
got drunk



there was evening  
and morning

a new day was born

and the earth was blessed  
with sacred birth  
and made animals  
according to their kinds  
Livestock, meant to be eaten  
creatures that moved along the ground  
the wild animals, made to devour any man who shied away from rupis light  
each according to its kind  
and it was so  
rupi made wild animals according to their kinds  
livestock according to their kinds  
creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds  
but none of them got made  
according to their  
k i n d n e s s



mankind was made  
in the likeness  
of rupi's father  
so womankind  
will always be chasing after  
love we will never  
get

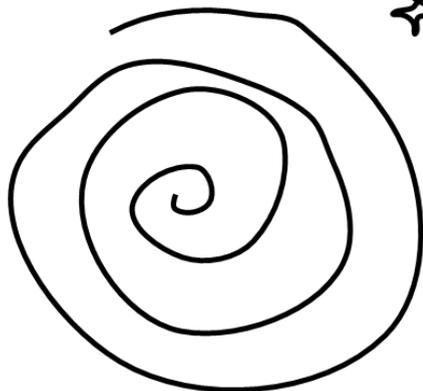
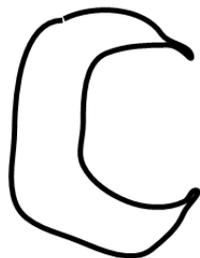


and man was made  
to rule over fish and birds  
to rule over livestock and all the other animals  
to rule over all creatures that move along the ground

they were never intended to rule over  
women

my Father gave my brother  
the seed of a flower  
a fish named spot  
every tree in our backyard  
and said it is all yours  
but he gave me only  
trauma

—God or my Father?



## “Body For Sale”

by Kati Rawn

Please take it off my hands. I don't want it anymore. This wide world is too big for little ol' me, and I need someone else to puppeteer. I tried to sell it on eBay but to no avail. The buyers are perverted and keep inquiring about the feet attached to my product. I print out flyers and hang them on bulletin boards in the supermarket. I send out emails, offering free trials and even a sample. I save up all my cash from birthdays and Christmas. I use my pocket money and put it towards renting a giant billboard. That's sure to catch people's attention! With my commodity plastered in blinking lights, people will surely desire it. The sign reads:

*Body for sale!*

*Body for sale!*

I need to advertise my body to a broader audience. It belongs in a made-for-TV commercial. A man with a chiseled jaw and shiny face holds it up, his solid hand gripping its narrow calves.

“The Body comes with so many features,” the cheery announcer booms, “You can play with it, dress it up, dress it down, fuck it, feed it, starve it, pinch it, stuff it in a pair of size 2 Abercrombie jeans, slather it in makeup, moisturizer, hyaluronic acid, glycolic acid, pore-refining treatment, anti-aging hydrator, youth-extending fluid. You can turn its washed-out complexion golden with vitamin C, vitamin D, vitamin L-M-N-O-P.” My posed figure rotates on the product spinner, displaying my manufactured meat for every leering eye to see.

“You can distort it into any size! If it's too skinny, don't worry,” the man continues, “Thousand-calorie protein drinks will do just the trick. Don't forget to take it to the gym and make it do squats so the excess calories go to its ass and don't balloon its stomach or thighs.” The announcer picks up my body and props it closer to the camera lens to give the audience a better view. The announcer bops my button nose and flicks my lower lip.

“You can fix its nose, plump its lips, tighten its tummy and wax the entire thing!” He exclaims, “Basic human rights are sold separately.” They stuff my body into a cardboard box and shove it onto a shelf. They place add-ons next to me so buyers know exactly what accessories to get for their new plaything. Doll-size mascaras and little pink razors litter the racks. The female body is very lucrative to capitalize upon!

*Body for sale!*

*Body for sale!*

Nobody wants to buy an unseemly body, so I recommend constantly scrutinizing it in the mirror for any developing inadequacies. Superfluous flab, blemishes on the skin and even a strand of greasy hair are unacceptable. I would do just about anything to improve upon *my* greatest asset. I never feed it, starving it senselessly until it is nothing more than a bag of brittle bones in a congealed pulpy casing. The talons inside its writhing stomach claw and bite, but I tune them out with nicotine and sugar-free gum. I count every morsel that touches my lips, emaciating myself into saccharine perfection. When the cravings become too overbearing, and I can no longer restrain myself, I gorge, stuffing repugnant caloric waste down my throat. I immediately regurgitate, of course, for the female body is not made for eating, sleeping or pleasing. It was made to be admired!

In my fantasies, a luscious thigh gap, tiny stomach, buoyant breasts and an hourglass figure dance in my head. I dream the face-tuned version of myself that my Instagram followers see becomes my tangible reality. I stand before you and allow you to outline every rancid flaw with a scarlet sharpie and lay blissfully on the operating table as your jagged knife removes unwelcome flesh. You carve into me until my body parts are no longer my own. Loathsome limbs and retched fat lay splattered on the floor, and I am finally Frankenstein's glorious patchwork creation of feminine worth. My youth and beauty are my only strengths, and I fear aging out of my only value. But I try not to fret, for I know I can combat every foul wrinkle with a syringe full of lovely chemicals to keep me dainty and desirable. Withered, decrepit rot may mould beneath my shiny plastic exterior, but when have my insides ever mattered? I need to make a buck and know all too well that a buyer truly cares about how the object looks displayed in his home.

*Body for sale!*

*Body for sale!*

If you are not already sold on my product, could I tempt you with a free trial period? If there is not 100% customer satisfaction, a refund is guaranteed! Returns are painless with just a click of a button. After all, how could I ask you to commit to the purchase before giving you the chance to sample your product? Luckily, with only a quick scroll, you can access hundreds of thousands of how-to videos conveying how to use your item! You can scroll endlessly through tapes of men just like you using products of their own. Your new pur-

chase should suck and squeeze and tease and lay themselves bare before you. If you desire to tie them up, wrap their bones against a bedpost. If you want them to tie you up, they can do that, too! If a plethora of choices suits your fancy, you're in the right place: you can scroll endlessly through product demonstrations filled with glorious bondage, orgies, lesbians, milfs, school girls, and even teenagers. They show you a clear image of how your item should come: clean-shaven, mouth gaping. Ready and willing to please you in whatever way you want.

The ideal product should be promiscuous and sultry. It is unfeeling, unthinking, stupid, shallow, void, a seething hole for you to fill. With each *click*, your mindless computerized plaything will writhe under your touch. She is pure, unadulterated entertainment for you to tune into whenever you please. For a bit of extra cash, you can have unlimited, ad-free access to premium content of your virtual pocket pussy. So many options make you wonder if you even need the real thing! In the real world these commodities tend to be complex and convoluted, which is a highly disappointing downgrade. *Your* product should be the perfect porn star, moaning and grinding just for you. She is an object for you to click upon, just as usable as a listing on Amazon for a discounted blender or Swiffer Sweeper™.

*Body for sale!*

*Body for sale!*

Take this anecdote as a customer review for your new item: Cheap vodka churns in my empty stomach, my vision hazy. My head pounds under the harsh fluorescence that skitters around my skull in frenzied colour. I stumble towards the screen door, allowing the frigid nighttime air to trickle into my lungs. Then I see you. I know you, but not well. Not well enough for you to walk towards me, steadying my wobbling stance with a firm hand on my waist. Not well enough for your hand to grip mine and lead me upstairs, my mind utterly vacant. You lay me on the bed, my bones congealed mush. I cannot sit, stand, or speak; all I feel is you. Your heavy body crushes against my feeble frame, and your breath is hot on my neck. Your fingers trace over me—your lovely conquest. Bile rises in my constricted throat, but there's no use in begging you to stop—please—stop because you cannot hear my shrill cries trapped within the hollow echo chamber of my mind. I cannot even writhe weakly against your forceful grip, for I am numb. You have taken me, and I am yours.

The alcohol has rendered me limp and mute and powerless to you, and yet it is this version of me that leaves you burning with fervent desire. It is a lifeless silicone doll you want, not the person behind my empty gaze. All I am is inflated rubber for you to grab and pound against. With my synthetic sultry lips trapped in a permanent grin and buoyant perky plastic tits, I have finally transcended. To refuse you of me would be a

crime when my glossy manufactured allure is designed *for* you. I am your belonging now and know better than to question your sensibilities. I am no longer in charge of this body. For it is only a body. A body for sale. A body up for grabs. It is a body for you to touch, squeeze, and possess. My body is yours, for it has never been mine. The thudding ends, your hands detach. You exit the room, and I am alone. After you have used me, I lay discarded, my silicone deflating without you to fill me—make me whole.

## “In My Dreams, I am a Scientist”

by Gray Brogden

An astrophysicist to be precise.  
I spend my days calculating gravitational waves  
and meteor flights; my nights  
next to telescopes, drawing new constellations.

There are Millennium Problems to solve  
and superfluids to contain. Beakers to fill,  
atoms to smash, the climate to save.  
Fruit Loops to pour, briefcases to stuff  
elevators to ride, and teeth to brush.

When I wake, I reach for my pen.  
How incredibly human of me,  
to dream of the things I am not  
and forget all of the things I am.

## “Maybe We Peaked in High-School”

by Gray Brogden

maybe we peaked in high school / maybe I miss movie dates / maybe we  
used to swim in the lakes / maybe you brought me flowers when I was sad /  
maybe all lost things go to the same place / maybe that place is tagged  
in a mutual friend's Instagram / maybe for a minute I wanted to go back  
to that last day / maybe I don't know when we lost touch / maybe 4 years  
should have been enough / maybe we were always built to fall apart / maybe  
it's 2AM

**“Love is Blue”**  
**by Gabriella Ramirez**

Paint me in Picasso blue.  
Pluck my heartstrings baby like the old guitarist and  
Sing me to sleep with rhythm and  
Blue’s my new name.

*whisper it*  
*slowly baby*  
*in cerulean*

Douse me in oil—paint over the blisters baby and  
The bruises that have turned green with time  
Baby please, I’m bored and I’m bare and  
I’m waiting to be bathed in azul—waiting for you  
To turn me into art baby, to love me in blue.

# “The Job Interview”

by Jay Leblond

## ACT I

### Scene 1

*Lights up on the exterior of a simple, bright and colorful well-loved home. The numbers 413 are printed as house numbers in bold lettering. DEATH, dressed smartly in a fine black suit, walks on stage holding a briefcase. He crosses the stage, stopping in front of the door.*

DEATH: Ah, four thirteen. Perfect.

*He walks up to the door, pauses, and pulls out a pocket watch. In silence, he watches it closely for the right time. He lifts his hand up to the door, waiting and watching his watch. The moment comes, and he knocks on the door. No answer. He knocks again. From inside you can hear the sound of a dish shattering.*

MAISIE: (Muffled) Come in!

*DEATH lets himself in. As he steps into the house the exterior is wheeled off revealing the interior of the home: a busy and cluttered kitchen. On the far side of the room lies the dead body of an elderly woman splayed faced down unmoving. In the center of the room, there is a dining table with two chairs, set with a plate of cookies and two teacups. MAISIE WILLIAMS, an elderly old woman, is bent down facing away from DEATH picking up the shards of a broken plate.*

Oh, pardon me, I'll be with you in just a moment. Just had a bit of ah- slip up! Please, sit anywhere you like; make yourself at home—I've been expecting you all day.

*Without looking up, MAISIE picks up the pieces. DEATH stares at MASIE long and hard, then places his briefcase on the table and sits himself down.*

DEATH: This is rather... unusual. I am rarely welcomed so warmly.

MAISIE: That must make your job so very dreary, dear. Do you prefer Earl Grey, or Orange Pekoe?

DEATH: Pardon?

MAISIE: Tea, dear, Earl Grey, or Orange Pekoe? Usually I have more options, but I haven't been able to go out because... well, you know how it is!

DEATH: Earl Grey.

MAISIE: Perfect! This blend is simply delightful, I bought it from this tiny little shop down in Cancun.

*MAISIE fills a teapot with boiling water and drops in two teabags.*

You'd never expect such delicious English tea to come from Mexico, no sir! But I've never had a cup of Grey that was better than this blend here, swear on my... ah... life.

*Slow and careful, she brings it over and sets it on the table, then quickly retreats back to the kitchen. Erratically, she goes from cupboard to cupboard, opening and closing them, pulling random disjointed items from the shelves.*

How do you take your tea? Would you like any sugar, or honey? Or I have milk and cream if you prefer? Cinnamon? Whitener?

DEATH: No, thank you. Black is fine. Please, let us get started.

*He gestures for her to sit down. She wrings her hands nervously, looking away.*

I have another 107,566 appointments today after yours.

*Reluctantly, she sits down across from him, eyes glued to her lap. DEATH unlocks and opens his briefcase, pulling out a thick file and a fancy fountain pen. He flips through it, pausing to read it for a long quiet moment punctuated by the sound of papers being turned. He sets it down with a sigh.*

Alright, Ms. Maisie Williams, is it? I have gone over your file, but there are some points I'd like to discuss with you personally. But first, why don't you tell me about yourself.

MAISIE: About myself? What do you want to know?

DEATH: Life achievements, outstanding accomplishments, awards won; anything you think I should know that would make you a better candidate for this opportunity.

MAISIE: Oh my, I feel like that is quite a tall order!

*She pauses for a moment, thinking.*

I won my 3rd grade spelling bee, if that's what you mean? I was never one for competitions.

*An uncomfortable silence. She gets up again, scurrying over to a display case.*

Oh! I'm the proud owner of the entire original set of 21 of the Precious Moments figures. No one else I've ever met had the entire collection.

*She looks back to DEATH. He does not look impressed. MAISIE sits back down at the table, looking anywhere but at him.*

I'm not sure what you want me to say, doesn't that file have everything about my whole life in it?

DEATH: It does.

*He sighs.*

Let's move on. Your file says you've worked the same job for most of your life. Silversmith's Rainy-Day Banking, 52 years as a bank teller. Never promoted?

MAISIE: No, they never offered, and I never asked. But I loved that position dearly! Every day a chance to talk to a new person, with their own story and troubles, and being able to help them was all the reward I felt I needed. And the money wasn't bad! The pension plan set me up nicely, and I didn't want the increased responsibility that a better position would give me. I truly couldn't imagine doing anything else. And I would still be doing it today too if I could, but they forced me to retire because I'm "too old".

*It is unclear if she is being sarcastic or serious for a beat. Then she begins laughing, as if the joke was obvious.*

DEATH: I see. Not ambitious it seems.

*He writes. MAISIE cringes in her seat.*

You never married, nor had any long-lasting romantic relationships. Care to explain why?

MAISIE: To be frank, I never saw the need. I'm what the kids call, spades? Wait no, that's not right. Aces? I think that's it. One of my young'un coworkers explained it to me before I got canned, says that it means I don't want to get married and all that jazz. Funny how the kids got a word for everything these days, isn't it? Back in my day we'd just call them a queer and move on!

*MAISIE slaps her knee and laughs. DEATH does not.*

Ahem. Relationships seemed like such a hassle. Anything I needed socially I got from my friends and I was never motivated by sex. But ya' know, I tried once, with a boy down my street, Terrance Walker. Now, he was a looker, like a young Frank Sinatra, and a real gentleman too! Not that it means anything to me, but he had a hu-

DEATH: I've heard enough, thank you. It's too bad, I'm sure you would've made a man very happy.

*He writes.*

During all 77 years of your life, despite being in good health and fertile, you never had children. Even without a partner, you could have adopted, fostered, or gotten a sperm donor. Could you walk me through the thought process behind deciding to be barren?

MAISIE:

*She gets up, walks over to a shelf and picks up a framed picture. She brings it to show DEATH.*

When I was 21 my best friend Marie had her first baby, little Charlie. Isn't he just the cutest? So adorable, round faced and chubby, with the sweetest laugh you've ever heard. I loved babysitting him whenever she needed alone time, and sometimes even for fun!

*She sighs wistfully.*

He's all grown now, off and married with a family of his own, with two daughters. Such a sweet family, I was worried about him for so long after he started drinking—Oh! I remember how Marie used to cry about him, she didn't know where she went wrong with him-

*Death clears his throat.*

Oh! Yes, shit, sorry.

*She sits back down at the table, setting the photo next to the teapot.*

I saw the way a baby changed Marie's life. Every waking moment of Marie's day dedicated to being a mother. She never went out dancing, or even for dinner or coffee. She was like a prisoner! Trapped in her house.

Oh, and Frank! Frank never helped, poor Marie, raising a baby all alone! The bags under her eyes were like horrible bruises. I was so worried I almost called a doctor, or the police to get Frank to do what he should've been doing, deadbeat... I never saw what Marie saw in him. Unkind little man. And then she had three more with him after that! I can't imagine what possessed her to do such a thing when one kid was already so much work!

But! Simply put, I never had it in me to be someone's mother. I like coming home to a quiet, clean house, and being able to relax and watch my shows. No diapers to clean. No one biting my ankles. Being able to go out whenever I want, wherever I want.

DEATH: That's rather selfish, don't you think? Do you not think your parents were disappointed they never got grandchildren?

MAISIE: Sure, yes, of course, I feel guilty sometimes that they never got the experience of being grandparents. But I also feel guilty for feeding duck's bread or seeing the mail man get rained on while delivering my weekly newspaper. It's not healthy to live life regretting everything! I have to let things go, ya' know? And having a child to please someone else or because I was guilty would be a horrible reason to bring someone into this world.

DEATH: I suppose that's true.

*DEATH takes notes. MAISIE takes a sip of her tea.*

One final question. Why do you think you deserve to be reincarnated? Take your time answering, if you need.

MAISIE:

*MAISIE chokes on her sip. She takes a moment to cough and get control of herself again.*

That's quite the big question! It's like you're asking me, why I think I deserved to be alive?

DEATH: Essentially, yes, that is what I'm asking.

MAISIE: I'm not sure, even if I had unlimited time on earth, I would be able to answer that question. Is there even a right answer? All I've known is being alive, how could I possibly want anything else?

*DEATH hums in response. Long pause punctuated by the sound of DEATH's pen scribbling notes.*

DEATH: That's all the questions I have for you. Thank you for your time, Ms. Williams.

*DEATH gets his papers in order, hitting them on the table to straighten them together. He puts them away.*

I'm afraid to tell you that, based on the evidence given, your life does not meet our standards and, as such, you will not be given a chance at reincarnation. You will have approximately 30 minutes before your soul is destroyed, and your existence erased. You are free to spend this time as you will.

*DEATH gets up and straightens his suit. MAISIE looks at him speechless.*

Thank you for the tea, I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to try it. It was a pleasure.

*He goes to walk out. MAISIE jumps from the table, sending her chair flying backwards.*

MAISIE: Wait, please!

*DEATH pauses. He turns back to look at her.*

DEATH: I'm sorry Ms. Williams, my decision is final.

MAISIE: You said I had the right to spend my final moments however I like, right?

*DEATH nods. MAISIE fetches an old box, bringing it over to the table. She opens it to reveal an ornate antique chess set. She rights her chair and sits back down at the table and begins setting it up.*

I want to play a game of chess. I can't do that by myself.

DEATH: Ms. Williams, you will not win your life if you beat me in a game. That is an illogical old wives' tale.

MAISIE: Doesn't matter! I love this game and want it to be the last thing I do. Please, one round. Can you deny someone their final wishes?

*DEATH sighs. He pulls out his pocket watch.*

DEATH: I suppose I have time for a single game, if it is your final wish.

*DEATH sits back down at the table. MAISIE pours them both a cup of tea.*

Thank you. Since it's your set, you can be white.

MAISIE: Thank you.

*MAISIE moves her pawn to E4. DEATH moves a pawn to E5. He takes a sip of his tea.*

DEATH: Ah, you were right. This tea is lovely.

MAISIE: If there's anything I learned from my long life, it's a good cup of tea.

*MAISIE moves her knight to F3. DEATH moves his knight to C6. MAISIE moves her other knight to C3.*

DEATH: Interesting, the three knights opening? Clever, but it will take a lot more to win against me, I have eons of experience in strategy games.

*DEATH moves his pawn to G6. MAISIE pauses. She takes a sip of her tea, relishing it. Then, moves her pawn to D4.*

MAISIE: Please, help yourself to the cookies. I baked them myself, an old secret family recipe.

*DEATH takes MAISIE's D4 pawn with his E5 pawn. He selects a cookie and takes a bite. He makes an appreciated hum.*

Wow, I didn't know you were capable of smiling.

DEATH: I have facial muscles just like you.

MAISIE: Huh. I guess that is true. What do you do when you aren't interviewing people?

DEATH: Read.

*MAISIE laughs. She moves her knight from C3 to D5.*

Is that funny?

MAISIE: No, no, not funny. Just... unexpected, I guess. Very human.

DEATH:

*DEATH hums noncommittedly. DEATH scratches his chin, then moves his bishop to G7. MAISIE moves her bishop to G5.*

Interesting, are you sure you want to move that there?

*DEATH moves his knight to E7. MAISIE's hand hovers over her pieces, then she moves her knight from F3 to D4. DEATH moves his bishop from G7 to D4, taking MAISIE's knight.*

MAISIE: You weren't lying when you said you were good.

DEATH: I have never lied. I do not see the point in it.

MAISIE: What kind of literature do you enjoy reading? Wait, wait, let me guess—nonfiction?

DEATH: I have lived for more time than you could comprehend and have thus learned a great many things. Most non-fiction does not teach me anything I do not already know.

*MAISIE moves her queen to D4, taking his bishop. DEATH whistles and takes her queen by moving his knight from C6 to D4.*

If you must know, I enjoy reading horror.

MAISIE: Horror!?

DEATH: Yes.

MAISIE: Horror? Really? Wow, ironic, or maybe a better word is narcissistic? What the hell do you enjoy about horror?

*DEATH chuckles.*

DEATH: It's interesting to see what humans come up with to defy me. You are all very creative when faced with your own morality. It is a pointless struggle against the inevitable, and yet it is incredibly endearing. It's your move.

MAISIE: Huh.

*MAISIE pauses, staring at DEATH. Then, moves her knight from D5 to F6.*

Check.

DEATH: You are not terrible at this game yourself.

*DEATH moves his king to F8. MAISIE then retaliates by moving her bishop from G5 to H6.*

MASIE: Thank you. Checkmate.

*A long silent pause, where the two stare at each other wordlessly. DEATH looks taken aback. Then, he laughs and puts his hand out.*

DEATH: I suppose my skills are rather rusty. Good game.

*They shake hands. Silence falls upon them again. DEATH looks towards the door, then checks his watch.*

MAISIE: How much time do I have left?

DEATH: Less than 5 minutes. I have to ask, Ms. Williams, if it was not to win your life back, what was the point of our game?

*MASIE picks up her discarded queen.*

MAISIE: The point of the game? Is there a point to any game?

*DEATH frowns, dissatisfied with this answer.*

DEATH: We both know there was. Humans are not as complex creatures as you may think they are.

*MAISIE laughs.*

MAISIE: Alright, alright, maybe you're right, maybe I had ulterior motives in asking you to play...

*She gets up and walks over to her shelf. She sets the queen down next to her nicknacks and photos of her life and people she loves. Another memory added. She walks back to the table.*

Look at the pile of discarded pieces. Each and every one of them were played how they were supposed to, moved how they are meant to and fit all the roles expected of them. They followed all of the rules.

*Pause.*

And yet, in the end, they all still lost.

*MAISIE flips the table over, sending everything on the crashing to the floor in a mess of shattered china, tea and chess pieces.*

Or, maybe, the point of the game simply that I enjoy playing chess. Why is that not enough for you, you fucking hypocrite?

*Abruptly, the lights go down. Darkness envelops the stage in a silent, sickening pause. Then, within the darkness a baby's cry rings out. After a moment, another baby cry joins in, then another, and another until it is a jumbled overwhelming chorus of baby wailing. It stops. Silence. A voice and be heard saying "It's a girl."*

The END.

## “Leftovers”

by Amy Rich

2009 brought us the hottest summer anyone could remember. None of us had moved out yet, and everyone’s parents were shitty so we spent three sweltering months with no air conditioning. I had become so accustomed to sweat sliding down my legs that I spent an entire afternoon with period blood drip drip dripping its way down my thigh.

James had been the one to finally spot it and she screamed, which I can’t blame her for because it did kind of look like I had miscarried. James knew what that looked like because this past winter she thought her kidney had fallen into the toilet and had made me run to grab her camera from the living room so she could take a picture. She showed it to her doctor as proof, but it turned out to just be a miscarriage and we were all very relieved.

At the end of August, Rachel decided to host a Thing and even though the weather was miserable, everyone we knew was going and James insisted we both get laid because it had been too long and even though I reminded her it had only been like three weeks for me she still said we had to go.

Rachel lived in one of those ugly McMansions that always had a million people in the foyer and walking through it was basically wading through a kiddie pool except there were no kids and everything smelled like smoke. There was a girl sitting on the stairs who once fingered me in a bathroom stall when we were on E, which was really weird. Not because of the sex thing but because she was really hot and I didn’t realize she wanted me until her tongue was like fully down my throat and even then I wasn’t one hundred percent sure.

I raise my hand to wave because I think once someone’s been inside you it’s just polite to say hi. James grabs my arm, and I can feel her warm breath against my shoulder as she laughs. I stare at her because what the fuck and she just grins back at me.

“You look good tonight,” She says and touches my bra strap. It reminds me that I’m wearing one with thick straps because those are the only ones they make for girls with huge tits that aren’t also Jennifer Lopez. I make a face at her, and she just grins, snapping it back just far enough so that it stings a bit when she lets go.

She stares at me and I can see her pupils are so, so blown that I almost want to laugh. She turns to go talk to the girl on the stairs—Megan or something—and I know what kind of game we’re playing.

I don’t really think it’s fair when James and I do this. She’s small and blonde and has curves in a way where everything is perky but not overbearing. I am funny, I guess, and kind of have a thing with girls. I didn’t really get it, but then I watched Snooki take home a kind of ugly guy who she said was really funny and nice and got upset when he wouldn’t sleep with her. She didn’t get hung up on him though.

I go to grab a beer and a man is staring at me in the kitchen. I look back at him and meet his eye for just long enough to seem interested. He walks over to me and stands beside me, and there it is. I can feel his hand on my ass, and I wait for him to say something or even kiss me but eventually, he just walks away.

I don’t go after him. I can’t, not really. A fat girl can’t exist and also be into sex, it doesn’t really work that way. She has to seem like a virgin, but she also has to be really good at it because what’s the point if she’s

fat and bad at sex. She can't be too into it though because her body takes up so much more space, her sexual appetite just has to compensate.

He leaves and I just stare into the space he left and I feel his handprint burning a hole through the pocket of my jeans.

There's always this point at every party I've ever been to where the scent of sweat begins to drown out anything else and settles in each mildewed corner of the house. Every breath becomes the smell of someone's armpit and that is right when I realize that Rachel's house is literally the armpit of the world and I needed to get the fuck outside.

The summer night promised swarms of mosquitoes that greedily feasted on my flesh the minute I stepped outside. I had more than enough to go around, and maybe they'd even take some of me back.

There are groups of people out here, but I'm basically a greyhound for pretty girls and an eyebrow piercing's just enough to catch my eye. That's always the giveaway.

I stare and smile at her, and she walks over because of course, she does. Girls like it when someone else makes the first move, and someone like me doesn't have the luxury of waiting. She grins and now that she's closer I can see that her lipstick has rubbed off, and all that is left is a deep pink lip liner.

I touch her hand and compliment her rings, and she looks at my tits and there it is. Hook, line, and sinker. It's almost too predictable, and I feel like I am just in tune enough with the universe to see exactly how this is going to play out.

The girl starts leaning in, but then James is there and I smell her before I see her because she is wearing my VivaLaJuicy perfume. James touches my arm but she is looking at the girl, so I make up some excuse to walk away because there's no way in hell I could beat James in a pissing contest.

I sit down by some stairs leading into the garden, because of course Rachel has a massive backyard, and James joins me. She does this when she knows I'm done, it's like she knows she's won so she doesn't even bother grabbing the prize.

I'm too tired to be pitied today so I mumble to her; "That girl was cute."

James hums in response, leaning into my arm and I can remember what it was like when we first met because when I am just drunk enough I can look at James anew.

She is sitting next to me and she is the most beautiful girl at the party. She is sitting next to me and she is shining and I stare into the dark side of the moon and I just want more. She is sitting next to me; so here, and so present and alive, and what the fuck am I supposed to do next to this diamond built from pressure and a promise.

"I think I love you," James says, and I laugh. I wonder sometimes what it's like to be James. To slip into her skin, and be someone who could love so freely, with no fear.

"You know I love you too," I laugh, and I don't know what to do as the silence hardens and settles around us and then James is sitting up and touching my wrist and whispering sweet things into my ear and it is too real and too raw and I pull back and oh my god she's looking at me and it's so wicked and so James that I don't know what to do with myself.

I am selfish, I know it. I take up room and space and get people to sleep with me by pretending I'm someone completely different but this is James and I don't know what to do because she deserves better and I

wish the roles were reversed because I can't love her. I am not built to love someone like James. I am not meant to have her. She is the sun and I cannot fly too close. I am not just a girl but a mountain and one I don't want to make her climb.

James is touching my knee and she is looking up at me and there is heat pooling in my palms and a shiver through my spine and it's like when people get frostbite and they don't know how dangerous it is because they start to go crazy and take off all their clothes and I am about to do that and I can't ruin James I just can't.

I am waiting for the laugh track to go off I am looking for someone holding up an applause sign for the audience so the tension can finally break I am waiting for credits to roll and James is offering me an apple and for once in my life I won't take a bite.

# Authors

**Andromeda Adler** is a student studying creative writing and English literature at Western University. They are very passionate about exploring writing styles and techniques but favour the short story and poem formats. Andromeda has always been writing something, whether it was good or not, and has grown so much through their years of writing experience. They are extremely grateful to have worked with *Occasus* and look forward to future endeavours in their writing career.

**Ananya Balike** is a fourth-year psychology student at Western University, with a double minor in biology and creative writing, along with a French certificate. Ananya's love for unraveling the complexities of human stories and life experiences extends to her passion for creative writing. She finds joy in exploring how language and literature are shaped through writing and art. By incorporating her psycholinguistic knowledge, Ananya experiments with the power of words, delving into the motivations behind individuals' choices and their impact on communication in different contexts. In her leisure time, she finds solace in crafting poetry and composing songs, further expressing her deep connection with the art of language and storytelling.

The 2023/24 Student Writer-in-Residence at Western University, **Gray Brogden** is a passionate writer, poet, and performer currently studying in SASAH, English and Creative Writing. Her work has been published in a wide variety of publications, including local, provincial, and national anthologies, and she was the 2023 recipient of both the Lillian Kroll Prize in Creative Writing and the Marguerite R. Dow Canadian Heritage Writing Award. You can find her on Instagram @graybrogden16.

**DeeDee El-Hage** is a Palestinian student in the Honours Specialization in English Literature and Creative Writing program. She hopes to get her PhD and become an English professor in a different country. Her work consists mostly of free-verse poetry, and creative non-fiction prose about her personal life experiences. In her free time, you can find her playing Animal Crossing, or lying in bed with her cat Sirius.

**Fiona (Yuan)** is a first-year international student from China. She particularly enjoyed reading, writing, music and history from a young age. Fiona likes composing music, although she did not learn systematically. She also organized a public subtitle group on a Chinese platform, doing translation with friends for cultural exchanges, and introducing some translated videos to China. Writing is a way to observe the world and express herself, and one of her short stories was published in Xi'an Daily Newspaper. She is passionate about creative writing, either in Chinese or English, although the latter is more difficult. Poetry is a challenge for her, but also an exciting discovery and creation. The sonnet “Cure for the Night” is an attempt to capture the warmth in the darkness of the night.

**Sydney Joselyn** is a first-year BFA Studio Art student at Western. Writing is both a creative activity and personal outlet for them, and they favour fantastical elements and the somewhat macabre in their works. Sydney seeks to put a small piece of themselves into every story they write, and both their fiction and nonfiction stories tend to be influenced by their own past experiences. Writing is a hobby for them, but it is one that they indulge in frequently; they enjoy spending much of their spare time experimenting with story elements in their own head when they are alone. Most of all, Sydney uses their works to share the things that make them happiest with the world.

**Maeve Lang** is completing a degree in Genetics through the Integrated Science Program at Western University, with a minor in Writing. She enjoys reading, writing, and crocheting stuffed animals with her cats. “More Beautiful Now” is her first published piece, and she hopes you enjoy it.

**Jay Leblond** (She/They) has just graduated with a B.A. Honours Specialization in English Language Literature and Creative Writing with a minor in Theatre Studies at Western University. They aren't tied down to one type of writing, but enjoy utilizing surrealism and absurdism to explore intersectional understandings of selfhood and society, but also have a soft spot for writing fantasy, romance and tragic fiction. Travelling to the UK this summer to study theatre, she has plans to one day work with the Stratford Festival and hopes to make a positive impact on the world, even if it's small!

**Ella Mann** is a first-year student pursuing an Honours Double Major in English Language and Literature and Anthropology at King's University College. She enjoys reading, writing, and photography and hopes to pursue Creative Writing throughout her university career.

**Gabriella McKenna** is a writer originally from Mississauga, Ontario. She has no house, wife, husband, kids, or dog, and is usually cranky.

**Felicity Moziar** is a second-year Creative Writing student at the University of Western Ontario. In her free time, she loves to write short fiction and poetry.

**Julia P.** is in her final year of studies at Western University, graduating with an Honours Specialization in Chemistry in Spring 2024. Between her hours spent studying or in the lab, she enjoys writing poetry and creative non-fiction.

**Gabriella Ramirez** is a first-year student with Ivey AEO status who is hoping to complete an Honours Specialization in English Literature and Creative Writing at Western University. Gabriella lives in Nobleton, Ontario, and hopes to publish a collection of poetry in the future.

**Kati Rawn** is entering her third year at Western University, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature with an Honours Specialization in Creative Writing. Writing has always been her passion, and she's hugely grateful for the opportunity to hone her skills through various writing clubs at Western. "Body for Sale" is a piece Kati wrote as a final assignment for Professor David Barrick's Fundamentals of Creative Writing (Writing 2211f) course this past fall. "Body for Sale" is Kati's first published piece, and she's extremely excited to continue pursuing her love for storytelling!

**Amy Rich** is a third year Anthropology student and is basically Rupi Kaur 2.0

**Jaya Sinha** is entering her third year at Western University, double majoring in the School for Advanced Studies in the Arts and Humanities and English. She hopes you like her work.

**Thomas Soliman** is a first-year science student at Western University. He is a Christian and passionate about his faith.

**Maureen Anne Tucker** enjoys writing humour, fiction and short stories, and telling everyone she meets how excited she is to be a Western student after 40 years of dreaming about it. She can't wait to continue her Writing Studies work in September.



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