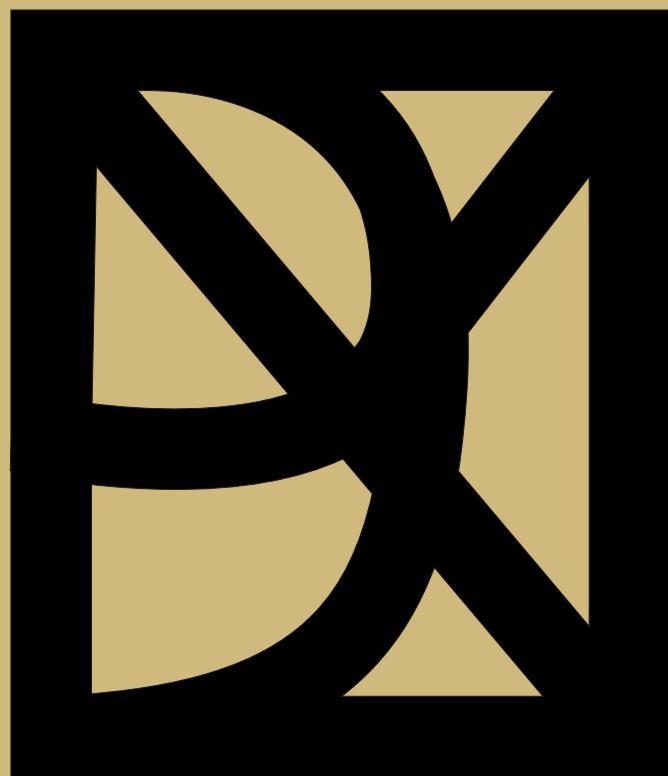






# VOLUME L



2022

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2022

**MERIDIAN**  
CREATIVE ARTS JOURNAL

# MERIDIAN

## CREATIVE ARTS JOURNAL

Meridian is a creative arts journal for University of Colorado Boulder undergraduate students to submit their creative works from photography to painting and poems to short stories. Students submit their works for consideration in the fall and the pieces are reviewed in a competitive and blind process by an editorial board made up of fellow students.

This edition of Meridian has been generously funded by the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program at the University of Colorado Boulder.



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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear reader,

Since 1973 we have worked to publish our journal every year while fostering a community of people passionate about creative works. This year we publish our 50th edition of this journal. This edition is the first that carries our new name: Meridian. After learning more about the derogatory nature of the term "walkabout," we made the important decision to change our name. To address this change with the respect and attention it deserves, we ask that you turn to the end of the journal to read more.

Since March 2020 the world has seen a pandemic that has brought on lockdowns, mask mandates, economic catastrophe, and extreme loss. We saw the nearly eight-minute video that recorded George Floyd's murder, followed by weeks of Black Lives Matter protests that spread across the globe. Then the 2020 election brought the first black, Asian, and female Vice President. Now on March 28th, 2022, the globe watches as Russia invades Ukraine. All of that and more leaves many of us feeling like the world is falling apart at the seams, but we have still come together, created, and connected.

Despite everything that has happened, our authors created amazing works to share with you. From a fantasy short story featuring a pesky woodpecker to a poem about the weight of the world, our authors have produced exceptional works that I hope you will enjoy.

Stay healthy, hopeful, and kind,

Emma Coughlin

Managing Editor



Perhaps I write for one. Perhaps for the same person  
children write to when they scrawl their name in the snow.

-MARGARET ATWOOD



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# GLAD TIDINGS OF A MAGPIE

## by BRUCE KAUFMAN

Distance times time  
equals a bright  
sunlit corner empty

as all things are and full  
from toe to crest of moon  
light ache for loves'

life ephemeral,  
unknowing—finally after forty  
years blossoms  
far from my sheltered

ledge at mountain's  
foot—salt and vinegar  
strive for the bowl

of ego alone, my flat-bottomed  
resting state



# OF GRATITUDE

## by BEAU FARRIS

today, the world looms as a huge orange  
or as any fruit with a fruity disposition  
and its nectar drips over me  
so sweet and so cold.

one out of one-hundred  
summer days. and these blissful  
sun-dried tomato days  
drowned in cicada and  
big watermelon smiles  
nudge my thoughts towards  
Gratitude. and today I am  
full of palisade peaches,  
the sweet extract  
dripping on my chin.

it's funny, really, how easily we forget  
what growth tastes like  
unadorned with crust.

'Life Tastes Good  
Here All Year Long'  
and I'm not so sure of that.

how would you describe  
the taste of a plum?  
I've never had one,  
but I think I'll save it  
for some other summer day  
when I'm not so glad.



# IF THERE WAS

by KEAGHAN BANAITIS

I wake up unafraid in a bed without sheets.  
They are piled on the floor  
Waiting to be washed. The blood on them  
my blood  
Can be erased, but what happened cannot be.

My friend Courtney is with me  
Maia, Mack in the other bed, asleep still.  
I can hear their praise in my ears as I wait to be washed,  
For the emptiness inside me to replace the blood  
And to feel clean again.

If I close my eyes I can hear panting.  
Can feel half-hearted pressure on my neck  
Even as I demand more, more, more,  
So I can get something out of this, too.

My dress lies pooled on the floor.  
Pink, my favorite color, with a strap half ripped off.  
I had it for less than a day before it was ruined.  
Not by blood.

That stays on my comforter.  
On the skin of my thighs,  
Flaking as I scrub in the bathroom, not sure  
If I'm proud or want to cry.



There is no love  
I have no illusions.  
If there was, I wouldn't have heard the music  
Emanating from the basement  
And wished I was there instead.  
If there was, he wouldn't have called me  
Courtney by accident.  
If there was, we would have seen each other again.

Instead I wake up with my friends, unafraid.  
There is space in my soul for regret.



# MIDNIGHT ADVENTURES

## by MARIANA BASTÍAS

An incessant buzzing woke her up. Not bothering to open her eyes, Stephanie reached over for the source of the godforsaken noise. She slammed her hand on her nightstand, trying to find her phone, but the buzzing stopped. She pulled her arm back under her covers, releasing a deep breath, and falling back asleep only to be woken up again when the buzzing returned.

I should have turned it off, she thought, as she opened her eyes and unplugged her phone from her charger. Why is she calling?

"Hello?" she answered in a groggy voice.

"Steph? It's me."

"I know it's you. Why are you calling me at," she pulled her phone from her ear, her tone shifting from annoyance to confusion as she checked the time, "one in the morning? Did someone die?"

"What? No."

"Were you arrested? Do I need to go bail you out?" she asked in a flat voice.

"You're cranky when you wake up," she laughed. "And no, I have not been arrested."

"Then why," Stephanie sat up in her bed and reached over to turn on her bedside lamp, fully aware that she was not going back to sleep anytime soon, "pray tell, sweet, sweet Melody, are you calling me in the middle of the night?"

"Well, my darling Stephanie, we are going on an adventure." She could hear the smile in her voice, the excitement at whatever adventure she had in mind loud and clear.

"At one in the morning?"

"At one in the morning, yes."

"Can't this wait 'til one in the afternoon?" Stephanie tried bargaining, "or maybe eleven? You know, a decent and reasonable hour."



Melody, as theatrical as ever, feigned a horrified gasp. "Absolutely not. Now get your cute little butt out of bed and come meet me outside."

Stephanie sighed loudly, running a hand down her face. There was no way she was getting out of this so-called adventure Melody had planned. Much less when she was outside waiting for her. The determination in her voice told her that even if she tried to get out of it, she'd just barge in and drag her out.

"Fine! I'll be down in five minutes."

"Perfect!" And she hung up without another word or indication as to what they were doing.

Stephanie pushed the covers aside and got up from her bed. She stretched her arms high above her head and rolled her neck, relieving some tension and trying to wake herself up some more. She walked over to the suitcase that lay at the foot of her bed, looking for a clean pair of socks. She slipped on her sneakers and grabbed her sweatshirt from where she left it atop her now empty dresser and walked out of her now empty bedroom. She tried to keep her thoughts from lingering on how much she had already packed and how bare her bedroom was. Instead, she tried thinking about what was waiting for her outside.

She stopped at the kitchen and left her parents a note.

Once out the front door, she saw Melody's dark blue car waiting for her at the end of her driveway. From where she stood, she could see Melody singing in her car as exuberant as always and oblivious to the world around her. She couldn't help but laugh at the sight.

She was going to miss this.

Melody must have felt her looking at her because she suddenly turned and locked eyes with her. She rolled down the window, letting the loud music flow out into the quiet night, and waved her over.

"Hey, you!" Melody called.

"Why—How do you have so much energy at one in the morning?" Stephanie asked as she climbed into the passenger seat.

"Because I'm superhuman," Stephanie raised an eyebrow at her, "and I chugged a RedBull on my way over here." Stephanie rolled her eyes, not surprised in the slightest. She leaned over the console to give her a quick kiss. She pulled back,



muttering something about “unhealthy habits” and “messed up sleep schedules.” Melody turned to start the engine, and Stephanie switched the aux cord to her phone.

“Hey! I was listening to that,” Melody exclaimed as they pull out of the driveway.

“You were, but if I’m going to be dragged out of bed at this ungodly hour then I get to listen to my playlist, you know?”

“Fair enough.”

It was quiet after that, only Hozier’s melodies playing softly in the background as they drove to wherever Melody was taking them. They had barely seen each other the last few days, much less one-on-one like this. While it annoyed her, Stephanie knew well enough that they would have gone even longer without seeing each other had it not been for Melody’s impromptu outing. It wasn’t for lack of wanting or anything. On the contrary, every time they tried to, something got in the way, be it a family trip to the mountains, a shift at work, homework, or just being too tired to do anything. Something always happened, and after a while, she just stopped trying. She didn’t want to force anything.

She hadn’t even left and they were already drifting apart.

Okay. That is the kind of thought we should keep clear of. Let’s stay here, in the car, in this moment. For as long as we can.

Stephanie turned to look out her window to try to focus on something other than the inevitable heartbreak. There was something so beautifully mysterious about being awake while everyone else is fast asleep, lost in dreams in the comfort and warmth of their beds. Just as she was not even twenty minutes ago. But this is so much better than that. The night was quiet, it was odd for their otherwise noisy city. It felt out of place, almost as if they were in a completely different place.

The colorful city lights made up for the lack of stars in the sky. They were orange and red and white, the street signs lit up and faded away as they drove past them. The streets were bare except for them and the occasional car or truck. What were they doing? Where were they going? The world around them was asleep while they were awake, headed to wherever Melody’s crazy imagination came up with.

She turned her gaze to her girlfriend. She looked so at ease, so carefree. She wanted to commit everything about her to memory. The way that she wore her hair



in a messy bun at the top of her head, and how her ears sparkled when the lights reflected off her earrings. How her hands gently held the steering wheel and her fingers drummed along to the rhythm of the music. Her hands and wrists were never bare; when she was dressed for a night out or when she was wearing her candy cane pajama pants and her dad's old college sweatshirt, her fingers were covered in mismatched rings—her favorite being the one on her index finger, it was silver and had an oval pink stone—and she always wore bracelets. They were a collection of memories, that's how she always describes them. Some of them were made during middle school sleepovers, others were spontaneous purchases in flea markets. Most of their colors had faded over time, but Melody was too stubborn to take them off. Much like her nose ring. Even in the springtime, when her allergies were tenfold and she'd be sneezing nonstop. Her cute little button nose would turn red, making the silver ring stand out even more.

Melody's lips were curved up in a smile as she sang along to the music. And her eyes, goodness, her eyes. How she was going to miss those eyes. They shined in the dark of the night with a sparkle that held mischief and laughter and the promise of something great to come, a sparkle that was so uniquely and utterly Melody. She wanted to take all of her in, to breathe in the calmness and love that she was always enveloped in when they were together.

Melody has always been the spontaneous one out of the two of them; she's the one that gets them in trouble while Stephanie's the one that gets them out of trouble. So their "adventure" could be anything, really. Part of her wanted to try to guess, while the other wanted to go with it. While her inner profile wanted to see if she could figure it out, the latter felt right. Going with it let her focus her mind on Melody's company and the soft drumming of her fingers against the wheel. And that is where she wanted her mind to be. The little moments that she's going to miss the most.

She was terrified of what the distance would do to them, but they hadn't spoken about it at all. Stephanie was too afraid of what the answer would be if she asked. But at that moment, Stephanie fell in love all over again. A wave of love and melancholy came over her, the bitterness of their future not far from her mind, but her



heart present in the now. At that moment, they were simply two girls in love driving in the middle of the night.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Melody asked.

"Like what?"

"Like I'm the best thing in the world," she teased, "like I'm the stars in the sky, like—"

"Like I love you."

Melody looked over at her, only stealing a few glances so as to not fully take her eyes off the road. They were quick, almost stolen glances, but they were enough for Stephanie to convey the truth and depth of those four words. She took one of her hands off the steering wheel, and reached over for Stephanie's, interlacing their fingers and giving her a tight squeeze.

"I love you, too." There was no teasing in her voice, no laughter. She was serious and truthful.

Neither of them said anything else after that. No other words were needed. Stephanie pulled their joined hands into her lap, sandwiching Melody's between hers, a habit she had picked up shortly after they started dating. Melody's hands were always cold for whatever reason, while hers were always warm. Together, they averaged the perfect temperature, as Melody always said.

They drove for a few more minutes before curiosity began eating away at Stephanie. She didn't recognize any of the street signs, so she had no idea where they were going and Melody had not given her any sort of clue as to what she had in store for them.

"So," Stephanie broke the silence, "where are you taking me?"

"I told you already. It's a surprise."

Stephanie threw her head back against the headrest and groaned loudly. "You know I don't like surprises —I hate them, really. Why do you insist on torturing me?"

"Oh don't be dramatic." She turned to glance at her, "I love you."

"You said that already."

"Because I do," she turned her signal light and turned right, taking them away from the main street. "Does that help?"



"No," Stephanie grumbled. "Maybe. Either way, I should be asleep right now in my warm and comfy bed."

"Are you cold? And sleepy? Is that why you're so moody?" she pouted.

"No. I'm moody because it's two in the freaking morning."

"You don't say."

"Yeah. And this whole driving around before the sun is even close to rising thing is really messing with my sleep schedule, and you know that's not good for me."

"Of course, it's not, which is why I really appreciate your sacrifice." Melody gave her a look of feigned sympathy, her tone leaking sarcasm.

"I know you do, and I would like to know what I'm sacrificing my health and sleep for. I have to know if it's really worth it, you know? You get where I'm headed with this."

"Oh, I know where you're headed with this, and no, I'm sorry, but I'm not telling you. So, you can sit back and relax, maybe even sleep a little."

"Ha-ha, you're so funny, aren't you?"

"My sense of humor is what made you fall for me."

"You keep telling yourself that, babe."

"I do. Every morning in front of the mirror before I leave the house, I look at myself and say, 'your sensational sense of humor is what got you your amazing girlfriend.' It's great for my self-esteem, you know?"

"As if you need any help with your self-esteem. If anything, you could take some humbling."

Melody gasped dramatically. "I don't need any humbling. I'm the humblest person I know."

"You're just proving my point, darling."

Melody put the car in park and took her seatbelt off to turn to look fully at Stephanie. "Well, before any other attacks on my gorgeous and perfect personality, we're here."

"What? Already? Where are we?" She started to look around, trying to recognize their surroundings. She hadn't even noticed where they were driving to. She had stopped paying attention a while back.

"I think you know," Melody said.



Stephanie unclipped her seatbelt and rushed out of the car. Her cheeks were cramping with how hard she was smiling, but she didn't care. She couldn't believe where Melody brought her, but she was even more surprised that she hadn't recognized where they were going. They spent countless nights up here, escaping their world for a few hours. They were in the NCAR parking lot, overlooking all of Boulder. There was a soft, cold breeze brushing against her face. Stephanie took a deep breath, enjoying the smell of the night and the memories it brought her.

She looked over at Melody. She was setting down a blanket between two pine trees, the same one they've always used. Her heart swelled in her chest and her smile widened. It had been so long since they came here. Stephanie stared at the scene in front of her trying to commit every single detail to memory. The stars above them, the way the street lights outlined their favorite places in town, the way the cool of the night contrasted the warmth in her, and the beautiful girl waiting for her.

"Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to join me?"



# MOUTh OF WORD

by BEAU FARRIS

My name is four fingers or two of yours and mine  
fawn all of G the tongue a young deer stomping each letter

Beau day see us Lee dragging hands in pine beetle catching can make a career  
loving pond or oh saw a reflection smiling trance end dent all ism words

the in candle essence of fire flies ill loom in Nate's home making a blanket  
night time tastes sub lime more tangy pupils die late

awake the upper E shell ons of rocky shores all in compass in attention  
childhood means all upper case us ten siblee a jubilee without cell abrasion

many fest des tiny little green soldiers came oh flagged my grass  
my crow cause em of big green soldiers

the M path a tic sparing a sparrow from broken wings is caw Lee shade  
please sing siren dip at us its greek to me the words a Beau to fill place

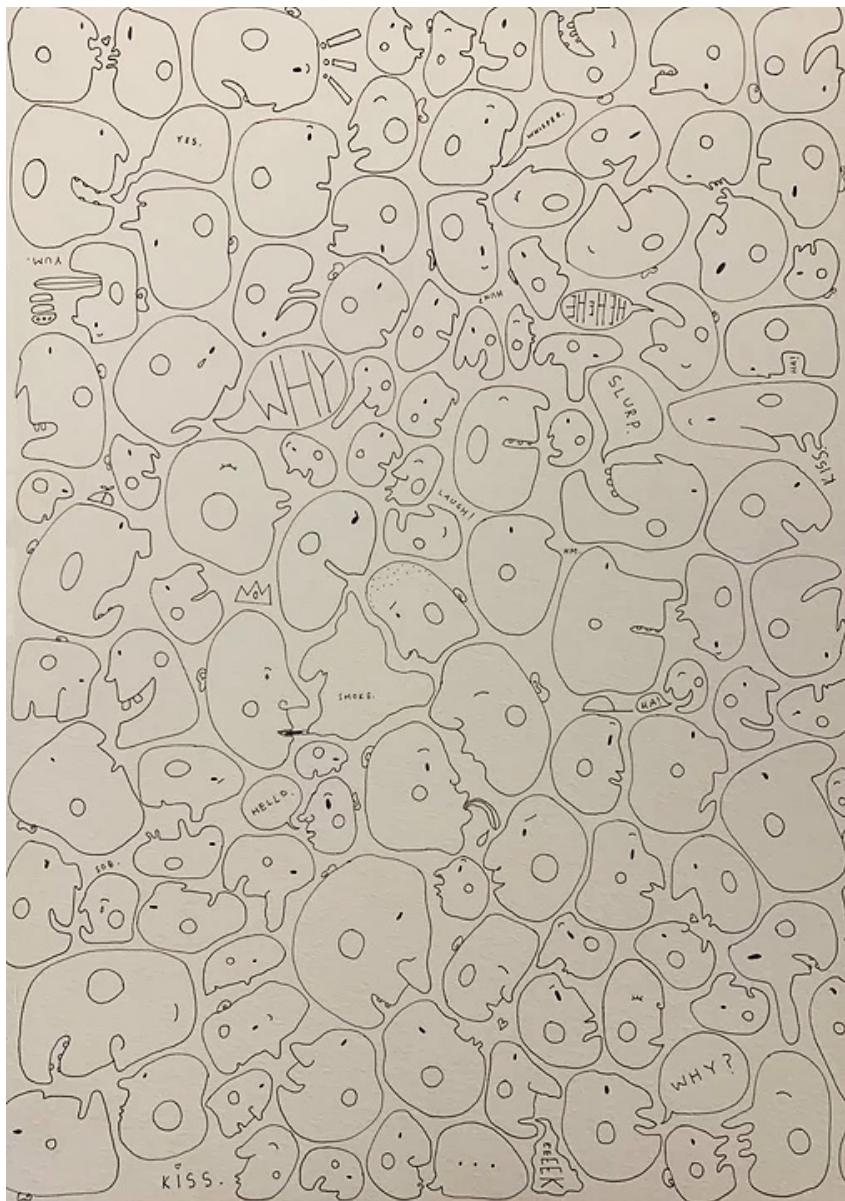
but sin tax is getting expensive a graham or lesson oozing from marshmallows  
verb ohs and clings to cereal like you say fork with a u and k

sun nets are long lines effort vescently floats all cool in the sky  
sitting reading Whitman I am written in the mare gin its sour

red carpet under each word all true is M made from 4 sticks  
lined up two is a V prop a gated by two more the first letter of a poem

trance end in meaning go a long way through the woods  
breathing and abs tracked the poem it's easy





THAT'S WHAT SHE SAID

COURTNEY BROWN

INK ON PAPER - 45 X 25 CM



# HAVING A NORMAL ONE

## by DESMOND MCREYNOLDS

The Offices of Dr. Alexandre Renaud, Psychiatrist  
Nantes, Upper Brittany  
April 8th, 1991

Dr. Renaud shook the thin man's hand distractedly, his mind overflowing with pastel Georgian housefronts spackled with sea spray, cafés whose signs cheered "Bienvenue," and highly localized sunshine. It was Tuesday before the psychiatrist's long-planned-for weekend south in Lyon and, as the clock on his sunlight-striped office wall ticked slower on the second half of every rotation, the minute hand sat a sliver before the '11' when Monsieur Hugh Tolliver arrived promptly for his three o'clock appointment.

Renaud's thoughts raced around like miniatures on model train tracks, little whizzing steam engines, micro-steampunk-organisms that hissed and tooted when it struck a pleasant length of rail line. The button-up he wore was stitched with chaparral tans and its sleeves pushed up past his elbows. Its loose, unstarched, unbutton cuffs splayed like goblins' ears because he was a Forward-Thinking man and sleeves-above-elbows was the style in Lyon and all places Lyon-shaped

He beckoned M. Hugh Tolliver towards a chaise that was predominately wicker, slightly cushioned, and took stock of his new patient's balding head, trimmed but full on the sides and wispy all around the top. That he didn't bother to hide his retreating hairline earned him a certain respectability. That he was English robbed him of it.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Monsieur," said Renaud, folding his hands in his lap. His own chair was largest in the room, padded with great quantities of cushions to offset the long hours of sat-still listening his weak shoulders were forced to put up with. "I understand you're here on recommendation by Mme. Élise, is that correct?"



"Yeah, that's it, true enough. Friend of my wife's, yeah. Nice lady." Tolliver flexed his shoulders, getting comfortable. He wore a white shirt and blue jay-hued sweater vest with neat black zigzags round the thread lines and paunch around the belly. His black, plastic-framed spectacles were the sort that wrote software if you left them out of their case and were perched on an overly long nose that thought everyone smelled like bank customers. Behind the lenses, enlarged, beady hazel eyes looked like they saw the world as a mixture of relatively unassuming circumstances. The sum total of his features coalesced into a congealed mass of difficult-habits-to-kick. "You know, I didn't figure she was in therapy. She's a very well-sorted woman, my wife says."

"A great many people consort with therapists, so to speak, Monsieur Tolliver. Though more than a few might object to the stigma cradled by the word 'therapy.' Therapists help more than just those profoundly in need. The work is a diverse reflection, as myriad as its clientele, and is concerned at heart, no matter the patient, with an amelioration, no matter the size, that best helps that man or women straighten up and take happiness in each day."

"Ah. Right then, that's nice," Hugh Tolliver said pleasantly. He had a mild-mannered smile that was all lips, thin ones, and an unaffected crinkling at the corners of his eyes.

Renaud took a handkerchief from his breast pocket and delicately cleared his throat of this afternoon's phlegm. Adjusting himself in his seat, he fished around in his side-bin for his notepad. Colleagues abound pitched him with the glory of their word processors, proffering recommendations to brands and accompanying carrying cases with further testaments to the efficiency of their mechanical keyboards. But Renaud figured 'shorthand' was named for very deliberate reasons and so he remained steadfast by his pad and paper.

"Well, Monsieur, I like to begin first sessions with a dash of free association." Renaud regarded the other man with a cordial doubtfulness. "Do you know what free association is, Monsieur Tolliver?"

"It's a bit like babbling, isn't it?"

"Not precisely," Renaud's smile was small, neat, and allergic to his eyes; and it equivocated with the even-handed delicacy of a highly educated man. "Free associa-



tion is a proverbial river with a dam whose floodgates are let down for flow. Much of psychoanalysis consists of what I might refer to as an unbalanced dialogue, wherein I would probe pointedly at the state of your mind at the expense of a more natural analytical flow. Free association, on the other hand, allows you to share with me your thoughts and feelings unbound by thematic convention or even semantic coherence."

Renaud adjusted his spectacles. They slipped down his nose at intervals such as this, as the left nose pad had fallen off earlier that month. It bothered him, but not sufficiently for action, because in addition to his great education he was also thrifty, and the nearest appropriately thrifty store was ten minutes travel by car, his license for which was two years expired.

"In other words," he continued, "free association allows you to share yourself honestly. It must be said, however, that for this to work you must be utterly without pretense. I shall say I bear no judgment should you not feel comfortable confiding fully in me in our first session, however, I must also remind you that if you are not truthful with me in the long term, the work that I do here with you will amount to little more than money scattered to the winds and a prayer for health and wellness."

Without undue hesitation, Hugh Tolliver nodded contentedly and said that he understood and that he was not the sort of loony who'd lie to his therapist, as the sort of people who did that were the same sort to conceal a heart attack from their GP because heart attacks were the sort of thing only supposed to happen to other people and it was really a bit embarrassing when one of them actually happened to you.

Renaud reached back behind him and opened the window by way of a sash fastener to let in the breeze and the broad burble of the river that murmured over the steep, slanted rooftops of Nantes. The building had no central air conditioning, and the outside air nudged and shouldered away the stale dankness of the carpet and thick, mid-century drapes pinned up high on the walls by railroad spikes Renaud had collected on a holiday to Danmarks Jernbanemuseum.

"What is it that preys on your conscience, Monsieur Tolliver? If you are at all troubled in thinking of what to say, begin simply with something that has happened to you in the past week."



"Well." Hugh Tolliver considered this for a moment, rocking back in his seat. He dropped his forearms cross his thighs in a physical manifestation of his pondering. "I'm just about fed up with my curious son."

Renaud nodded silently as an indication to continue.

"Well, I say curious. He's not curious like that curious monkey's curious. Curious George the chimpanzee, he's curious in other ways. My son's a curiosity, you know. Like a snow globe that's got sand in it instead of snow. A weird bit of business you can't stop looking at. Now, I might be biased cause I'm his dad, I don't know. We're all biased 'bout our kids, right? Be a right mess of things if we weren't. Think about it, liking someone else's kid more than yours. And not 'cause your kid's a prick, like you don't hate them or nothing, but they're just, you know, like—well, imagine you had a hankering for some cherry-vanilla ice cream, and someone gave you two eggs and a bowl of yogurt. And take away the bowl of yogurt, 'cause my son's just the two eggs, hard-boiled, though, 'cause he's not delicate, just a squishy little shit."

"I see," said Renaud.

"Anyway, to make a point of it, my son—Danny's his name, after my dad, also called Danny, God rest his soul—anyway, to make a point of it, Danny's looking at university this year, being that he's just turned 18 and all that, and he's got it into his head that his wish, chief among all things, is to be a stage actor. Not a film actor, you get me. Not even that, which while, if I might say, while still being a plainly fruity sort of pick for a lifelong career, at least there you get talk shows and merchandise. No, he went for a lay-down one night after dinner and, in his dreams, this ghost of Lawrence Olivier turns up. Lawrence Olivier appears like the Lady of the bloody Lake and tells him, 'Lad, prithee hear my words with delicate care, for I am the stage and to thee I declare . . .' And now his mum cries in her room most days when she thinks we can't hear her 'cause Danny's prancing around in tights and a cardigan that's got baubles instead of buttons spouting facts about Guildhall and accenting like the Queen."

"Your good Queen of England, Monsieur Tolliver," Renaud clarified sharply, a scolding for the impudent Monsieur Tolliver stemming from his French pride and joyous jingoism, if not for the nation, then at the very least his own dear Nantes.



Tolliver was not suitably chagrined. "If there's a Queen of France again that's a piece of news that missed me by. Oi, I thought I was supposed to be prattling on like a dam or a river."

Silently, Renaud tapped his fingers together, balancing the notepad on his knee. "Your son, Monsieur?"

"Ah, yeah, my son. You have a son? Nah, you don't have a son. Psychiatrists don't have sons; they have word processors. That's what I say, and my wife says that too sometimes. It's all her fault, this is, if you've been wondering, and you should have been. Let me tell you, my wife isn't a bunch of roses of Picardy, neither. Last spring, she decided she wanted to get into knitting. Now, I know what you're thinking. No harm, right? No harm, no foul. Well, let me ask you something. Would you be saying no harm, no foul after thirteen months of having new needled draperies every single day? And the old ones don't go in the bin. At first, she stuffed them under our bed, then under our mattress when that ran out of room, and after the second time the leaning tower of mattress dumped me onto the floor at one o'clock in the morning, she started piling them all up in the basement where I kept my weights and workout things. Can you believe that? Draperies on my shoulder press. What kind of person do you have to be to think, 'I'll just put these draperies right here on this here shoulder press?' Bloody mental."

"I see," said Renaud.

"And now she's talking about springing for a bigger house. One where we can each have our own room because she says, 'all good marriages thrive on personal space.' Do you believe that for a second? I tell you, if she thought our marriage was a good one, she wouldn't be thinking like that about personal space. Could be all for the best though, I admit. She's gotten into this phase where it's like she's trying to relive her old secondary school days. Dying her hair with these things she calls highlights that look like she's just squeezed an unpeeled banana and then lathered it all over her head. Drives me up the wall, it does. And the smell too. She swears that dye doesn't smell like anything but that's just like people with cats not smelling cat litter. You know, I'm thinking now that maybe her having no good sense of smell's a symptom of something going wrong neurologically. Ah, that's bollocks. If it's anyone, it's



me who's the nutter." Hugh Tolliver sighed. "Least my daughter's alright. Bright girl. Thinking of studying a bit in New York next year, but I don't know if we'll swing it."

After scribbling a few brief notes, Renaud set his pen on the seat of the chair, eyes drifting across the scattered lines a few moments before he refocused on Hugh Tolliver. Gallantly he resisted the impulse to pinch the bridge of his nose, to squeeze his thumb and forefinger till his headache, a dull discomfort brought on by dullness, faded away. Autopilot had sat up with a weary salute and taken control. Middle-aged man unfulfilled thanks to his family's idiosyncrasies. He had one of these twice a week.

"Thank you, Monsieur Tolliver. I think with that I have attained as comprehensive idea of your basic psychological state as I require for the time being. If it's alright with you, I'd like to proceed with asking you a few questions and seeing where they take us."

"Yeah, sure," Tolliver said. "Except, if it's alright with you, there's one I'd like to ask first."

Renaud stifled a nasal sigh. "Certainly." He flipped his notepad to a new page, smoothing down the old one with a flat, neat fold.

Grinning amiably, Hugh Tolliver scooched closer, his eyes the sort of things made out of third or fourth cups of coffee. "So," he said. "How come I go out killing?"

Renaud paused for a moment. Then he smiled to himself and picked up his pen.





ALL THAT WE BEHOLD FROM THIS GREEN EARTH  
COURTNEY BROWN

FELTED WOOL ON WOOD - 18 X 30 X 3 CM

# ELEGANTLY UNSTEADY

by NORAH HIVELY

with a death like molasses  
slow and sweet  
we died  
and i sang with the wind  
on a warm sunny day



# WITHOUT A TRACE

## by KAYLEE BARTYSEL

"Alright, I think everybody is just about here," Susan announced.

Heads turned, looking around the dreary church basement, silently noting that everyone was not, in fact, here.

Mara had been attending this group long enough to know everyone's faces. It was instinct to count the number of people in the room. Their usual number was twenty-one, but the little old lady was missing. Down to twenty. And to think they had thirty just a year ago.

"Why don't we get started?" Susan walked over to the door as the group members milled about, grabbing one last cup of coffee and a donut. That way they had all something in their hands to look at when they avoided questions.

Slowly, they all took their seats. It was at Susan's behest that they all choose a different seat than they chose last time. She insisted that if they sat in a new place every time, they'd have a slightly different perspective. After five years, Mara had seen this room from every angle. She'd sat in every seat and it hadn't exactly changed her.

Mara chose a seat beneath the window, throwing her arm over the back of the chair so she could slouch without slipping off.

Once they were all seated, Susan pulled the heavy metal arm of the door into place, locking it. Just in case. Her clogs clacked against her heels and scratched against the shag carpet as she found her place in the circle. She wore a long corduroy dress, with big purple buttons. Underneath she wore a purple turtleneck and pink spotted tights. Her graying blonde hair was pulled into a low ponytail with a clasp at the back of her neck. She kicked off her clogs and folded her legs, pulling a clipboard into her lap. She looked over the group, eyes soft and smiling.

"How is everybody today?" her voice floated around their dark cloud, never quite penetrating it.



Everybody looked out over the circle. It was a stupid question. Some days were better than others, that was true, but they were all looking for the little old lady. The old lady whose grandson went missing when she was meant to be watching him. It was really anybody's guess what had happened, but they were all thinking the same thing.

Susan, the little empath that she was, sighed, folding her arms over her clipboard.

"Maryann won't be joining us, today," she spoke, chewing the inside of her cheek.

Despite her profession, Susan had a hard time delivering bad news.

"Unfortunately, she passed away late Sunday evening."

"Passed away?" someone from across the circle piped up, "Naturally?"

Susan swallowed again and forced a tight smile with a short shake of her head. Without having to speak, they all dropped their heads.

"We all know that this is a hard thing we have to cope with," Susan's gentle voice wavered, her words falling on deaf ears, "But that's why we're here. That's why we've come together today. Because we haven't given up. Even though bad things happen, life is still a beautiful thing that we want to participate in," she insisted.

Mara let out a scoff and all eyes turned to her. The shag carpet and the wood paneling absorbed sound. Except for the sounds that Mara made. That was her guess, at least, because she was always the one getting called out.

"Do you disagree, Mara?" Susan asked.

Mara slid further down in her chair, dropping her head back to look up at the popcorn ceiling.

"Yes," she grumbled.

"Would you care to tell us why?"

Sparing a quick glance at the rest of her group, she could see that nobody else cared for her to tell them why. She really did her best not to bring the group down, but it was hard sometimes. They were all at rock bottom already, but she brought a pickaxe to every meeting just to see how far down they could go.

"I mean...I don't know about everyone else, but, like...this isn't a group that's fighting for life. I'm here because I have nowhere else to go. It's like...like going to a



party in college, right? You don't really wanna be there, but if you don't go, you'll just be left sitting at home thinking about how you should have gone. This is just a pity party that nobody wanted to have by themselves," she explained.

The faces of the group members soured. Some with knitted brows and pursed lips, others with slightly open mouths aiming to argue. They all wanted to think that they were here because they wanted to feel better, but deep down everyone knew that it was never going to happen.

Support groups had become like church. Everyone was in one and none of them helped. A dark cloud had fallen over humanity and there was no way to lift it. Depression became the norm. They swam in grief every day. It was something they got used to. You couldn't dwell on it because there were still things to be done. Life kept moving. These sad little groups were just a place for them to stop and take a breath.

"How... how long has it been for you?" a relatively new face asked from a few seats down.

She did her best not to learn names. If she could avoid learning faces, she would. He was a nervous-looking little man. Short and skinny, with a comb over, bifocals, and a member's only jacket that he hadn't taken off despite the sweltering heat in the tiny basement.

"Five years," she answered shortly.

The words were heavy; bricks on everyone's shoulders. They all thought they wanted to fight for life but the idea of living with the grief for that long was overwhelming.

"How do you... you don't feel any better?" he anxiously rubbed his hands.

"I guess I do," she sighed, "I mean... I feel less anyway. It's kind of fucked up you know. Like... I realized the other day that I think at this point I'd rather her be dead, you know? M-my little sister. It was... she was the one who went missing," Mara took a deep breath, sitting forward looking down at her hands.

"At first, I just wanted her back but after this long, whatever happened to her... I... I can't stomach the idea of her living through five years of it. You know... scared and confused. I mean I want her to have a happy ending, but, you know... how much trauma is a happy ending worth?"



"I read online that it could be faeries," Paul perked up and a silent groan rippled through the room.

Paul was the only person in this group that had been there longer than Mara. He was one of the first. An older man who lost his daughter. He looked almost presentable when Mara first met him. A little rumpled, but trying. Over the years his clothes got worn and dirtier. He never replaced them, barely cleaned them. His hair had grown out, long and scraggly. His hands twitched when he spoke.

He was nice enough, but he was a bit of a nut. One of those conspiracy theorists but he could never commit to one theory.

"If-if it is faeries there's a chance that they could be trapped in another dimension, possibly frozen in time. Most-most people that get taken by faeries and return have no memory of it," he spoke quickly, spit flying out of his mouth and into his beard.

"Now, Paul, you know we have a policy," Susan interrupted, "We're not here to speculate. We're not detectives. Let's refocus. I know last time Sarah mentioned that she planned to go on a meditation retreat. How did that go?"

Sarah was a mousy young woman, who had not-too-subtly moved her chair back from the circle, creating a small hole. Her face scrunches up at the question. She crossed her arms over her chest and curled into herself.

"We didn't go," she spoke shortly. "The guy that runs it went missing."

The group collectively grimaced, all regretting the decision to ever come to this pity party in the first place.

---

"There's a dating app?" Mara laughed as Sarah showed off her phone to the rest of the group as they all 'wound down' from the session, finishing off the coffee and donuts.

"That's fucked up," another guy mumbled.

"It's useful!" Sarah argued. "There's nothing worse than meeting a guy and finding out that he has no idea what you're going through. Like, what am I supposed to do with that?"

"I don't know... wait a week," somebody grunted, and Sarah scoffed.



"You know, I heard it might be an aura thing. Like humanity has just been putting out so much negative energy that the universe is all out of balance and like portals start opening. So, you guys are really just a part of the problem," she huffed, with her hands on her hips.

"Whatever," Mara mumbled into her paper coffee cup.

Over the rim, she could see Paul pulling on his ratty windbreaker and heading for the door.

"See you next week," she squeezed Sarah's shoulder as she stepped to the side, walking towards Paul.

"Kinda cold today," she noted, "You need a ride?"

"Oh, you ...you don't have to do that," he assured her.

She pulled her keys from her purse and jingled them.

"Already headed that way."

Paul set a shaky hand on her shoulder and looked her in the eye.

"Thank you," he said firmly, the way he always did.

"No problem."

---

"You really think it's faeries?" Mara asked as they turned out of the parking lot.

"Maybe," he nodded, bobbing his head as he looked out the window.

"This kid I work with swears it's aliens. But I don't know. I think we would have had more UFO sightings or cow mutilations if that were it."

She turned to look at him as she spoke. Noticing his hand shaking in his pocket. He was her neighbor and as the years went by, he took worse and worse care of himself. Once a week she'd pop in and help him with the dishes and laundry. He walked everywhere, but his balance wasn't great. He fell a lot, but he didn't like to be a burden, so he'd hide the scrapes.

"You okay, Paul? You hurt yourself again?" she gently poked his arm.

"I didn't hurt myself. I..."

"You what?" she frowned at him, doing her best to keep her eyes on the road, but something was especially off today.

"I found something," he practically whispered.

"You found what, Paul?"



"You can't tell," he insisted.

"Paul," she urged.

"Promise."

"Okay, okay. I won't tell," she gripped the steering wheel tight, watching out of the corner of her eye as he pulled a dirty scrunchy from his pocket.

"What's that?" Mara couldn't help but feel the moment was a little anticlimactic, but she was certainly relieved.

"It's hers," he answered, "She was wearing it when they took her."

"That's... that's your daughter's? Are you sure she was wearing it? Where did you find it?" Mara reached out for it, but Paul snatched it back, stuffing it in his pocket.

"In the yard," he whispered, "I found it in the yard, where I left her. It wasn't there yesterday. It's a message."

"Paul," Mara breathed.

There was a reason Susan didn't allow speculation in the group. People had a tendency to get worked up about their theories. All across the world missing-persons cases skyrocketed, along with suicides, broken heart disease, addiction, and psychological disorders. They all came hand in unhappy hand.

"A message from who?"

"I can't say. I don't know. They took her. They want me to know."

—

Mara microwaved a frozen meal for Paul, made sure to watch him take his medications, and left him to his internet investigations.

Her own 'dinner' was more cold pasta. She made one massive batch at the beginning of the week and used it as leftovers until it ran out. She didn't exactly have the energy to cook like she used to. She sat with her bland meal and turned on the TV. It was all bad news, but the consistency was a little comforting.

Not only was the number of missing people still going up, but nobody was resurfacing. The news anchors got shifted around every few months. Once someone they loved went missing they'd fall apart.

When it first started everyone thought it was some horrible human trafficking scheme. Kids went first, mostly. Easy targets, maybe. But then patterns started to fall



away. People would turn their back for a second and their loved one was gone. Without a trace. There just wasn't enough time for a kidnapping. Nothing made sense. The only thing everyone knew, was that people only went missing outside. So everybody did their best to avoid leaving the house. If you were outside you were fair game. But fair game to whom, no one knew.

Some people thought it was aliens, Bigfoot, dogmen, faeries, The Rapture. But nothing felt right. Nothing stuck. Every theory was always lacking, always impossible to prove. Lately, the news was really harping on wormholes.

"And in other news," the pristine blonde woman announced, her phony smile morphing into a slightly less phony grimace, "Have you been finding articles of clothing and jewelry at the sites where your loved ones went missing? If you have, please call this hotline. Help us piece this mystery together, together."

Mara's thoughts wandered, her eyes finding a picture of her sister on the wall. Young and happy. If only she could remember what she'd been wearing that day. Not that it really mattered. There was new breakthrough every week, but nothing happened. Nothing changed.

The first hoax was a ransom note, then it was a signal from space, then the Mothman. None of them ever actually turned anything up. The world had turned into a strange avant-garde performance piece. Mara had given up trying to make sense of it.

Once she'd downed her noodles that were somehow dry and soggy, she dropped her bowl in the sink, pulled on a jacket, and headed outside.

She made her way out of the house, down the back alley, through the neighbor's fence. It was a little shortcut that her sister found.

A few times a week, she allowed herself to sink into the memory of that wretched day. It was sunny. Her sister had begged her to go to the park. Mara had homework to do, but it was so nice out. It was the real first day of spring and her sister had just joined a soccer league, so she wanted to practice.

She bounced out of the apartment in her new cleats. Mara had braided her hair the way she liked. Tight French braids down her back. For the life of her, Mara couldn't remember what she was wearing but she remembered that she had on her lucky headband. Tight shiny green elastic that she held in place with purple barrettes.



Her charm bracelet jingled around her wrist as she skipped ahead, complaining that Mara moved too slow.

In the dark, Mara followed the same path. She didn't take her to the park. She should've just taken her to the park, but she knew of a meadow. A meadow just past the line of the forest where her sister would get to practice without having other people in her way.

She knew the path by heart now, but that day they'd accidentally take a few wrong turns. Her sister kept wandering off. Mara fought the memory of the harsh words she used to scold her. Her fingers found the fence, trailing across them the way her sister used to. Mara had always yelled at her that she was going to get a splinter.

Once she reached the meadow, she retrieved a lawn chair that she'd hidden in one of the bushes. It was easier to keep it out here than to haul it back and forth. She sat down and stared into the dark.

Her sister was a good kicker. She wasn't great at dribbling, but she had a strong leg and could kick the hell out of that ball. She kicked it a little too far and Mara went to get it. She walked away without even a thought. Her sister sat down to rest while Mara retrieved it.

Mara couldn't even remember the last moment she actually saw her sister's face. The disappearances had been in the news of course but she never thought that it would happen to her. Not her.

Mara's chest tightened. She didn't cry about it anymore, but it still hurt. Mara had set her chair right where she'd been standing when she came through the brush to find her sister gone. Her baby sister was just gone. There was nobody around. Not a leaf out of place. Everything was exactly the same. Except her sister was nowhere to be found.

Every day she came back here. Hoping that one day her sister would be there. Maybe her sister was frozen in time. Not suffering a bit. But somehow, she just didn't believe that.

All around her the night was still. It had been that way for years. Everyone was slowly going missing. Except for the animals. Pets disappeared, but not wild animals. The birds still flew but they were all silent now. The heavy air of grief hung in the atmosphere and the earth fell silent like a funeral.



The air was cold and bit at her exposed skin. She didn't mind it anymore. Before her sister went missing it was just them and their mother. She hadn't spoke to her mother in years. She blamed her. Mara couldn't argue; she blamed herself too. Now, she was just alone. She wouldn't wish for her sister to return anymore. All she wanted was for her sister to have found a little peace. She used to dream that she went missing instead, but this aftermath was too much to bear. She couldn't wish this weight on her sister.

"Please, just tell me she's okay," Mara called out to the empty forest.

It was more lush than it used to be. Everything was. As humanity fell apart nature seemed to get its shit together. For years there were droughts and food shortages. Humanity drained the earth of all its nutrients.

She wasn't sure if anybody noticed that when people started to turn up missing, the earth got back its luster. Green and ample. The trees soared over the horizon and the grass shot up. Flowers bloomed, just in time for all the memorials.

It was crazy. She never wanted to be one of those people with outlandish theories. She didn't care what happened. Not really. She just wanted her sister to be okay. Somehow, she felt it within the confines of this wood, within these trees. Somehow, they knew.

They were more alive than before. She could feel them. Maybe it was the isolation that was getting to her, but she had a feeling. As she called out to the empty forest, she didn't feel unheard.

"Why... why are you giving people hints? Why make them suffer more?" she thought of the scrunchy and the nervous way Paul handled it. Like it was sacred.

"Is this... Why are you doing this?"

Perhaps it was her imagination, but leaves in the trees above her rustled, answering her in a language she didn't know. A slight breeze pushed at her back. Cautiously, she stood up, following the wind.

She walked through the dark, sticks and leaves crunching beneath her feet. Silently wondering if this is what happened to her sister. Mara returned to the spot where she last saw her sister and the wind ceased.

Through the dark, glinting ever so slightly in the moonlight was the charm bracelet. Her heart dropped like a brick. Mara fell to her knees, chest squeezing and



eyes burning. Her voice caught in her throat. With shaking hands, she picked up the bracelet. It was caked in mud and rusting, but she'd know it anywhere.

"Where... Where did this come from?" she gasped, fighting off a sob, "What did you do with her?" she shouted out into the forest.

Beneath her, the ground felt soft. Too soft. As tears gathered in her eyes, she couldn't see herself sinking into the soil. It wasn't quick. She could hardly notice. It simply felt like mud. Her shin was already submerged before she started to really panic.

She tried to push herself up, but her hands sank beneath the surface. Her heart raced. She always wanted answers. She wanted to know but her mind was reeling, imagining her sister sinking into this same spot. But she never heard her cry or scream.

The disappearances were always fast. This had to be intentional. As she shouted and cried, looking up at the trees, invisible faces stared down at her. She wanted an answer, and they were giving her one.

In an instant she knew. The disappearances and the sudden burst of natural life.

"You're taking them? Like... Like fertilizer?" her voice shook, "You're using us."

She found enough strength to fight the pull of the soil and roll over. At the very least she deserved to look in the face of her killers. The leaves rustled and the wind whispered in her ear.

As the soil pulled her under, heaping on top of her chest and filling her lungs, she finally understood.



# ATLAS, ALL

## by SUSANNAH BELL

The backbreaking work  
of being alive  
in a world our children will ask about  
    during events on which they will be tested  
    in a sterile classroom  
    seems too much  
for any one of us to bear—

My bones are aching  
and I am no Atlas.

I have been tired for too long  
    a tired that sleep refuses to cure  
    a tired that drags my eyelids  
        downward and sideways and over  
        and over and over across the same  
        screens and pages and scrolling and  
            scrolling and scrolling and scrolling and and and

my chest burns with grief over the childhood I have lost.  
I have come of age in a world that has no place for me.

Every inch of my itching fingers  
    longs  
    for the freedom of a book  
    whose pages seem to turn themselves



and whose covers  
whisper sweet histories  
of a world that does not yet exist—  
but it could  
if I would just open the binding.

Every beat of my constricted heart  
longs  
to once again feel the light-flutter  
that once nested within its bony branches  
—I thought I felt it this morning.  
It beat its  
tired wings, desperate

it persists.

It has long been still—  
waiting              wanting  
  
to come out  
of hibernation



# THRILLSEEKERS

## by NORAH HIVELY

we were the glitter in the sky  
who walked over planets  
and ran on the rings of saturn  
our fingers laced  
in the grasp of a newly lit fire  
we believed time would stand still  
as long as we waltzed like kings and queens

we were the outlaws  
the honesty of our generation  
and when the voices whispered  
we carried on

no one could change the way we danced  
for we did not rely on the voices  
we relied on our veins  
and hoped the blood never ceased to flow

as we floated in outer space  
we saw their souls for who they were  
so we glided past them  
and learned the secrets of the universe  
we were the glitter in the sky

# WHISPER IN THE WIND

## by KEAGHAN BANAITIS

*Asteriea exists, yet she does not.*

She did once, in a village that no longer lives, in memory or word. She used to be a daughter, a sister, a friend. Long ago, in that village that she alone remembers, she made a deal. Or, not a deal exactly, but whatever best describes when there is only one option, but it is still presented as though there are two.

Her fate is her fault, though she likes to blame it on a bad bet. She rages against anyone she can think of as she slips between trees and houses and the spots where this world intersects the next, never quite able to blame herself.

In rare moments of introspection, she can admit she meddled with the lives of her friends, though they got to live. Cormac and Rowan and Moira and Isolde, all as forgotten as the village, were allowed to grow and age and love while she rots, forgotten.

*She does not have the worst luck. Seamus gave his life.*

*Then again, is a life without need for nourishment or sleep any kind of life at all?*

She longs for the nothingness Seamus fell victim to. For she knows, truly, deeply, that there is nothing waiting except darkness. No loving reunions, no palace in the clouds, no greater punishment for her sins.

*Just endless night.*

—

*Once upon a time, as stories go, Seamus found a book.*

*Out hunting mushrooms or truffles or adventure, as twelve-year-old boys do, Seamus stumbled upon it in the woods. Unassuming and bound with a red cover made of leather, it was easy to see amongst the green of the forest.*

*It was Asteriea who wrote in it.*



Seamus was kind and comely, but Asteriea longed for more than their village. He gifted it to her, red-cheeked and nervous until she accepted it with a grateful smile. He would have been an anchor, burdening her with love and children and labor.

She used the book as a diary, practicing her letters and sketching the flowers that grew between the stones of the street. It never seemed to run out of space, no matter how much she wrote, but even then it took Asteriea until she was six and ten to realize that something—the old gods or the new, the eyes in the forest or the whispers between houses—had enchanted it.

As a child, she had written half-demands, petty boons. She wrote about her father's complaints about a dry season, about the heifer bearing twins on Cormac's farm. They weren't wishes (or prayers, if the gods were to have meddled, though she knows now they didn't) but the book still listened.

And then, naturally, Seamus asked Asteriea's father for her hand. She did not want to give it, for it was hers to give away. She had seen so little of the world. But Seamus was a firstborn son and heir to a prosperous farm.

So, at first, she prayed. To the God that she was told to believe in; to the old gods that spinsters and witches still worshipped at hand-carved altars. She lit candles and gave up sugared sweets and begged her father to reconsider.

To no avail.

Foolishly, in retrospect, but desperately in the moment, she poured her anger onto the pages of her diary the night before her wedding, leaving scathing indentations and deep black marks on the curve of her hand. Words spilled out, white-hot with rage, slick and freezing with sorrow.

As her eyes grew heavy, her hand seemed to move on its own—without meaning, without knowing the weight of words—that she wished that Seamus would die so she would not have to marry him.

And he did.

She was free.

But one brush of power wasn't enough.

Moira had loved Rowan in secret, so Asteriea used the book to nudge them together. Cormac wished to attend university, so she lined his pockets with enough



gold. Isolde, sweet gentle Isolde, had carried and lost babes thrice over, wished for her fourth child to live.

Asteriea gave them all they asked for and more. Money, love, knowledge, family—none of it took away the sin of killing Seamus, but soon she was able to forget the transgression. She was benevolence. She was power. She was a god. Gods do not suffer the emotions of man.

And then, Gregor came.

Asteriea was one and twenty. He looked older, by a bit, with ruddy gold hair and deeply pockmarked skin. He stole into her home—which was larger now, after listening to her mother bemoan the holes in the thatched roof, her sister complain of sharing a bed—in the dead of night on feather-light feet, smelling of the crisp ocean air.

She did not run or call for help.

His voice was silk, was the night, and crawled down her spine like a thousand ants. "Asteriea Ó Foghladh. You have taken what was not yours to take."

Her voice did not shake. "I know not what you mean."

Between one blink and the next Gregor was at her side, prying open the lowest drawer of the vanity and removing the false bottom.

"It was a gift," Asteriea insisted.

Something flashed across his face, akin to understanding. "And who gave it to you? Where is Seamus?"

"I—he died." A half-truth. Her throat was painfully tight.

Understanding gave way to satisfaction. "Then you must pay."

"Pay?" she echoed, fingers tightening on the golden comb in her hand. His eyes flitted down seemingly amused at the sight of a makeshift weapon, and her grip slackened.

"Seamus agreed to take my place."

Asteriea knew that Gregor was not lying, but she was loath to admit it. Power had made her headstrong and untouchable. "Seamus was twelve when he gave me this. You cannot—"



"And he was seven and ten when you murdered him," Gregor interrupted, voice laced with the power of a thunderstorm. A greater force than she could understand was at play.

"Why do you need me, then?" Asteriea demanded. "Seamus and his debts, whatever they may be, are buried in the sea. I have no quarrel with you."

"The book must always have a guardian."

"What?"

"Magic like this is dangerous, ancient. It is not of this realm, but someplace more sinister. It cannot fall into anyone's hands; it is the guardian's duty to keep this world in balance."

Asteriea glanced down at the book, heart pounding, palms slick. "Yet you were tricked by a child."

"Seamus had ten years before I claimed him. I am not in the business of being cruel or unjust, Asteriea Ó Foghladh. I do not wish to trick others as I was tricked myself. Ten years to arrange his affairs, that was the deal."

"So, you manipulated him?" Asteriea said, lip curling.

Gregor laughed, cold and brittle. "I offered him what he wanted. It is not my fault that children are single-minded."

"And if I had married him?"

"The affairs of mortals are of little interest to me anymore. With time, they will disinterest you as well."

"Why is it my debt to bear? Why not his sister or mother or father? They share his blood."

Gregor dropped his head to the side like a hound. His eyes, which she could have sworn were brown, gleamed deep green. The exact shade of Seamus's.

"You killed him, Asteriea Ó Foghladh. Nature demands balance."

"Where were you then? When I was—when everything with Seamus happened. Why not intervene and stop me if I've disrupted nature?"

Gregor's mouth thinned in annoyance. He reached out as if to cup her cheek and Asteriea, too slow to dodge, flinched when his hand made contact with her bare skin. Images flooded through her, dark creatures with contorted legs and eyes that glowed like embers and fangs as long as her forearm.



"This is what you must protect the world from," Gregor said simply, as if he was discussing the weather. Asteriea's stomach roiled. "As I said, the affairs of mortals are of little importance. The boundaries of this world are too vulnerable."

She opened and closed her mouth, words lodged in her throat. They clawed at the soft skin of her esophagus, leaving deep gouges to fill her mouth with copper and iron. "And if I refuse?"

"Do you think your neighbors will take kindly to knowing you manipulated the world around them? Or perhaps you would like Isolde to die in childbirth, Cormac to be killed in an accident at school, Moira and Rowan to be torn apart by infidelity and murdered by grief? I offer you freedom in oblivion, in eternity. I am all too happy to sow discord until you are alone by your own designs. I grow impatient, but I can wait a year or two more."

Her blood heated, burning from head to toe as rage pulsed through her. How dare he? Who was this man, this creature, meant to force her to sign away her life? "You have no right to come into my home, to threaten me, to—"

The walls around her fell away, turning to ashes and drifting like dust. "I am not asking, Asteriea Ó Foghladh. This has been my burden to bear for nigh on two hundred years. I have grown weary. I crave the escape of death."

The cool winds of autumn kissed her cheeks, stealing away hot tears. She imagined her sister, away at their aunt's with her mother, and her father in town visiting the pub with friends. She wondered what they would say if they were to come to cinders and a witch of a daughter. The shame weighed around her neck like a yoke, dragging her off her cushioned stool and to the ground.

"What am I to do?"

The anger and urgency on Gregor's face gave way to sorrow. "Sign the book in your blood. Scratch out my name, and free me from my servitude, Asteriea."

Her name was a whisper on his lips, a promise of what was to come. Her stomach twisted. Her skin chilled.

What could she do in two hundred years?

What could she do with more?

So, she took the book from the drawer, and the quill he had procured from everything and nothing, holding both in her lap. "I have never seen any other names in the book. Nothing except my writing."



"Open it."

When she tells this story, Asteriea says she had a choice. She says that she offered to trade places out of the kindness of her heart. She never mentions the fact that, once again, she had no other choice but the one thrust upon her.

Asteriea opened the book. Written in thick dark blood was the man's full name: Gregor Yarwood. She suppressed a shudder. There were three above it, faded and flaked with age. Her head hurt trying to read them. Gregor handed her a narrow blade, and for a moment she wondered what would happen if she simply thrust it into his stomach.

Would the rest of her world unravel until her life was a husk of the fantasy she had created?

So, Asteriea pressed the tip of the blade into her thumb and wrote her name neatly under Gregor's. The wind whipped her face and Gregor let out a sound between a sigh of relief and a scream of agony. Holes punched through his skin like he was a pincushion, and then he was simply gone.

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Asteriea has guarded the book for six hundred and seven years. She has watched the world unfold and refold, shaping itself as empires fell and the common folk rebelled. She has seen nearly every inch of the earth: mountains capped in snow and deserts with sand as far as the eye can see.

Sometimes, she is summoned by children at sleepovers playing with forces they do not understand. Sometimes, wayward souls beg her for the book, wanting to cheat to improve their lives. They offer themselves in her place, pretending to know the cost of immortality, but she refuses.

Asteriea does not regret what she did to Seamus, not entirely, but after five hundred years, she does not wish the cost on anyone.

She has become all too aware of the thinness of the barriers that seal off this world from the next. Of the creatures strong enough to break through to barter and mislead the foolish. She spends a century keeping them at bay before relenting and policing the ones that do come through. There is little else to do as immortality takes root within her.



The cost for such a fight is her human appearance. Her once brown hair turns mossy, like the grass beneath her feet. Her fingers and toes grow, gaining an extra joint. Her eyes become too wide, her teeth become too sharp, and her voice is a whisper in the wind, no matter what language she speaks.

Eventually, she realizes her humanity died with Seamus.

Like Gregor, she tires. It takes thrice as long, but her feet grow heavy, her breath labored. When she meets Salem, sweet Salem, he is unlike those who have plied her for the book before. He finds her in the woods and does not make demands. Instead, he peels away four centuries of caution with kind words and sad eyes, until she finds herself giving him the book as a gift.

He misses his friends, she tells herself. They have abandoned him, as she once abandoned Cormac and Moira and Rowan and Isolde. He has no one, as she does now.

Perhaps she is foolish for giving Salem the book or perhaps he is more conniving than he seems to be.

Perhaps it is the fact that he has Seamus's green eyes and black hair and strong nose. Perhaps he is Seamus, sent by the old gods or the monsters in liminal spaces to punish her for what she did.

But she gives him the book and makes him promise to visit her once in a while. She does not tell him the nature of the curse, knowing deeply, instinctively, that he will abandon her if she does. She resolves to tell him of the life he has condemned himself to when he returns, about the eventual isolation that will envelop him.

Asteriea will be benevolent, she decides as she folds his hands around the book and whispers instructions in his ear. She will give him twenty years, or perhaps thirty, before she collects his soul.

Salem does not come back.

He tears apart the fabric of the world at the seams, greedier than she ever dared to be. Then she imagined she could be.

He wards himself from her with words, creating walls of steel and tungsten and pure magic to keep her out.

Asteriea rages, heartbroken and all too aware of her faults, condemned to walk between the trees and houses and spots where this world intersects with the next forever.

# THEN, AGAIN

by BEAU FARRIS

What I remember is a picture floating around out there  
outside my head.  
-Toni Morrison

Born again. Begin again. Gain  
a beginning, remember a rememory  
with eyes to make a scene again. Time and time  
again over miles and miles of river,  
criss cross them again and inside  
homes to embrace and come again.  
Say Again? Say never again, but  
typewriter keys. Stuck again like  
pluralisms that think through again through 2  
telescopes and here it comes again.  
Every now and again an original,  
most events happen and are at once, again.  
Would you throw me one again? Stay in  
and be 17 again. Breathe the free air again, or  
sharpen red colored pencils again.  
Again my hands, your feet are lower again, lower.  
Phone me on the nearest bomb wire again. Please,  
only when the letter is eggshell again. Then again  
it's fine, so long as we eat again.





Ser Waymar met him bravely. "Dance with me then." He lifted his sword high over his head, defiant. His hands trembled from the weight of it, or perhaps from the cold. Yet in that moment, Will thought, he was a boy no longer, but a man of the Night's Watch.

The Other halted. Will saw its eyes; blue, deeper and bluer than any human eyes, a blue that burned like ice. They fixed on the longsword, gleaming on high, watched the moonlight running cold along the metal. For a heartbeat he hesitated.

They emerged silently from the shadowed trees. There were four of them ... five ... Ser Waymar may have felt the cold that came with them, but he never saw them, never heard them. Will had to call out. It was his duty. A man must speak, if he did. He shivered, and hugged the tree, and kept the silence.

The pale sword

Ser Waymar never heard the first. Three of them ... four ... five ... Ser Waymar may have felt the cold that came with them, but he never saw them, never heard them. Will had to call out. It was his duty. A man must speak, if he did. He shivered, and hugged the tree, and kept the silence.

Behind him, the shifting patterns of light and dark, no move to intercept.

Again and again, anguished keenings, steaming in the cold night.

Then Royce's arm. The young man's arm. The droplets seemed to come from the side. His moleskin coat.

The Other said nothing, just stood there, a wall of ice on a winter's night.

Ser Waymar heard the frost-covered ground crack under all his weight before he fell.

When the blade

A scream echoed through the pieces, the sound of a man covered his mouth.

The water splashed all in a dead man's silk. Will could feel the silk. Will could feel the silk.

When the sword was empty,

He stood tall in the dark, looking up at the sky. Finally, his hands fell.

Royce's body lay still, slashed down in a dozen places.

He found what was left of the sword a few feet away, the end splintered and twisted like a tree struck by lightning. Will knelt, looked around warily, and snatched it up. The broken sword would be his proof. Gared would know what to make of it, and if not him, then surely that old bear Mormont or Maester Aemon. Would Gared still be waiting with the horses? He had to hurry.



AP

WHITE WALKER

ANNEKA PETERSON





LOST GODDESS OF THE SUN  
ALEXANDRA BUNDY

# LA HIJA DEL MAR Y EL SOL

## by MARIA CORREA

My dearest America, as I lay on your still, white bed, the darkness swallows me whole. The hum of a small, wind-blowing machine accompanies me as I float in the nothingness that is your voice, only to be paralyzed under the force of your brutal hands.

I swallow for the hundredth time. Small lumps of coal stick in my throat; I am unable to sleep in silence tonight. I hear nothing. There is nothing but your stubborn gaze. Then, there are echoes, whistles that form a song in the depths of my mind. My love's children, they softly sing: Co-quí<sup>1</sup>, co-quí, ven aquí<sup>2</sup>.

Querida<sup>3</sup>, call out to me.  
I long for your voice,  
Passionate and melodic,  
To comfort me.  
Embrace me once more.  
Cradle me in the warmth  
That is your body.  
El revolú de tu casa<sup>4</sup>  
Is what I desire to hear.  
La parranda<sup>5</sup> que me traes<sup>6</sup>  
Every time the sun goes down  
Soothes me more

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1 Co-quí (onomatopoeia): the sound that a coqui (Puerto Rico's native tree frog) makes

2 Co-quí, co-quí, come here.

3 Darling

4 The loud mess of your home

5 Parranda (noun): a Puerto Rican tradition where music, food, and drinks are shared amongst communities during the holiday season; can be compared to Christmas caroling

6 The parranda that you bring me



Than the drugs I take throughout the year.  
My room is cold  
As I long for you,  
But my bed is warm  
As I cherish you.  
Your bright, blue moon  
Shines down on the waves.  
They clash, shush, and drag away  
From the shore.

Borinquen<sup>7</sup> baila una bomba<sup>8</sup> y plena<sup>9 10</sup>,  
Creating winds from the movement of her skirt  
As her hairs move back and forth  
Following the rhythm of her feet.

Her children are the melody,  
Her waves are the beat,  
But none can exist  
Without her  
Sunlit smile,  
Flowering hair,  
Curved figure—  
Without her.

I wake up in America,  
Alone, cold, and free.  
Yet her stern,  
Quiet gaze  
Makes me curl  
Into myself.

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7 Borinquen (noun): Taino name for Puerto Rico meaning “Land of the Valiant Lord”

8 Bomba (noun): a traditional dance and musical style of Puerto Rico that has its origins in Afro-Puerto Rican rhythms

9 Plena (noun): a traditional dance and musical style native to Puerto Rico that was influence by the bomba

10 Borinquen dances a bomba and plena



She stands tall,  
But she only stands,  
Holding her children  
In her protective hands.

La sangre llama,<sup>11</sup>  
Y quiero su calor  
La isla del encanto<sup>12</sup>  
I shall meet you once more,  
And I'll call you by your God-given name:  
Borinquen, la hija del mar y el sol.<sup>13</sup>

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11 The blood calls (phrase): a Puerto Rican phrase referring to the connection the island has to its people and culture; usually used by those who are homesick

12 The blood calls,/ And I want its heat./ The island of enchantment

13 Borinquen, the daughter of the sea and sun (phrase): a lyric from the Puerto Rican national anthem





WANDERING SOULS  
ALEXANDRA BUNDY

# BURNING OF THE BAMBOO BLOSSOMS

by MIN LING CHUAH

It's raining.  
Of course it is.

It hasn't stopped since the Northern Gate fell and the draconians were slaughtered. So many scales at once, and so small; covering the blood-splattered ground where the little ones were killed. The shine of their stardust has long scattered since then, but Zhì Háo fancies that it has seeped into the ground, poisoning it. Any living thing that grows there will bear the iridescent shine of death, marking it as hallowed ground.

If there are any left to mourn it.

He steps into the funeral caves and sheds his cloak, pulling the water droplets from the fabric with a flick of his fingers. Slipping it into his qiánkūn pouch, he walks to the edge of the caves and looks up at the King, noting her slumped shoulders as she stands in prayer at the head of the crowd of mourners. As the ceremony ends, she places the smoldering stick of incense into its holder and steps to the side, allowing others to come forward and pay their final respects. A mound of flowers and gifts quickly collects at the foot of the wall of—tiny, so very tiny and young and innocent—scales reverently pressed into the funeral stone.

A flicker of movement grabs his attention, and he moves to the side, greeting the Queen with a bow.

"Orders?"

The Queen shakes her head, looking grimly over to her sister. "Not now. I need to confer with the King first. Go gather the generals."



He nods and walks off, reaching for the tassel of his sword. A thumb brushing over the enchanted jade in the tassel sets off a chain of reactions, individuals in the moving crowd pausing and heading for the meeting place instead – a private alcove off to the right of the entrance to the caves, where the scales of past Queens rest. Zhì Háo reaches it first and starts putting up the privacy wards, the yellow talismans dull against the gleam of the scales. His fellow generals join in as they arrive one after the other. One of them, red-rimmed eyes set in a tired face, breaks the silence.

"The Queen?"

Zhì Háo jerks his head over to where the King stands. They all turn to watch as a short figure dressed in funeral whites—the Queen—appears next to the taller silhouette of the King. A hushed conversation between the two royals ends with a sharp nod from the King and a deep bow from the Queen, and the generals shuffle around to make space for their leader. Murmured greetings of "My Queen" are all that they can spare as she enters the alcove and begins the meeting.

"As you well know, the main force of our army was engaged in battle with the enemy at the Western Gate two days ago. At the height of the battle, a message arrived, warning about an attack on the Northern Gate. The message was jumbled and incomplete, creating the illusion that the situation could be well handled by our auxiliary troops—which led to the fall of the Gate, and the mass slaughter of the ten thousand younglings that had been removed from the forefront of the war." A deep, pained breath, before his Queen continues.

"In response to this atrocity, the King has authorized the 'Burning of the Bamboo Blossoms.'"

A soft, shocked voice breaks the silence of the generals—with a start, Zhì Háo realizes that it's his voice. "Bamboo blossoms?" His eyes are blown wide, mouth dropped open—he can't help it, not when he can put together the clues, not when he can figure out the symbolism that's being used. Narrowed brown eyes cut over to him, and he ducks his head down, heart racing—with fear? anticipation? some combination of the two—as he waits for the reprimand.

Much to his surprise, his Queen forges onward, letting the slip go unpunished. "Before I continue, I want you all to understand that this is a choice. This decision is not something that was made without due consideration to the moral obligations



that we have as free creatures of this earth. If you do not wish to partake in this, then you may leave. If you have any grievances to air, you may speak to me after the meeting."

"But remember this," Zhì Háo raises his head to watch the Royal draw herself up to her full height, gold scales glinting against tan skin as she meets each general with an intense gaze. "Ten thousand draclings were murdered in cold blood by these humans. In every altercation we have had with these humans from Albion, in every instance that we have met with them, they have displayed a sense of selfishness dwarfing even that of our own Western brethren, whom they single-handedly brought to the brink of extinction. They have pillaged, destroyed, and terrorized others in their self-proclaimed crusade to push forward civilization."

"Hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost to this human race, and no doubt many more will be lost if we do not take measures to curb this plague upon existence. As free creatures of this earth, as dragons of the Middle Kingdom, we have the obligation to act against these invaders and stop them—"

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"—but at what cost?" Zhì Háo shouts at his Queen after the meeting, after the preliminary plans have been laid out and explained. They are the only ones remaining in the alcove now, the secrecy talismans still up and active as he vents his frustration. "'Burning of the Bamboo Blossoms'—my Queen, this is outrageous! Do not forget that it was I who learned by your side, who grew up with you in the palace, who knows you just as well as you know me. You have taken a clear stance here: bamboo forests only blossom once in their lives, then die to make way for a new generation. To 'burn the blossoms'—you intend to commit genocide against these humans and you dare call it a liberation?"

"Watch your tongue, General," The Queen growls, baring sharp teeth at him. "You may be my second-in-command, but I am still your Queen—"

"What kind of Queen advocates for the eradication of an entire race of peoples?"

"I said, watch your tongue."



In the silence imposed upon him, he glares at the Queen, who maintains eye contact even as she reaches into the pouch at her side. Zhì Háo catches the book that is flung at his face, as the Queen speaks in clipped sentences.

"Chapter two. Fifth stratagem. Read it out loud."

Zhì Háo scowls, but complies anyway, flipping through pages of familiar, elegant calligraphy. An illustration of a burning plum tree next to a blooming peach tree decorates the opposite page.

"Enemy Dealing Stratagem. Sacrifice the plum tree to preserve the peach tree." He swallows, throat dry. "There are circumstances in which you must sacrifice short-term objectives in order to gain the long-term goal. This is the scapegoat strategy whereby someone else ... suffers the consequences so that the rest do not." His heart sinks.

"One life for many. One kingdom for others. One of the human races, for the rest of the world." The Queen turns to the wall to study the glittering scales of her predecessors. "My sister, the King, has asked me to end this war as soon as possible. Permanently. This is the only plan that will work."

"But, to not even let the innocents go..."

"General." He curls his fingers into claws. "Zhì Háo. Look at me." He does, reluctantly, and then he sees it.

Exhaustion lines his childhood companion's face. Her shoulders are curved, slumped under the weight of command. With a pang of guilt, he remembers – she had flown all day yesterday from the front lines to reach the capital in time for the funeral today. Even more, she had been there since it had begun six years ago, additional responsibilities thrust upon her when the position of Queen had been handed to her during the fighting.

The untimely deaths of the previous King and Queen, her uncle and her father respectively, forced Mǐn Líng and her older sister Yí Líng to take up those positions before they had even reached their third century. It was tradition for siblings to rule over the Middle Kingdom, the titles of King and Queen purely ceremonial without the romantic connotations that seemed to plague its translation into other languages – but the explanation had not been satisfactory to the humans from Albion, who



fixated on the flawed translation and spat accusations of incest when they'd sent over an ambassadorial group to open up trade talks nearly a decade ago.

Relations between the two kingdoms, lukewarm at best, cooled to stark frigidity with each cultural clash that occurred—with visiting humans dirtying sacred temple floors with their shoes, trying to put saddles on dragons, and—most heinously—sending an appalling gift of white flowers to the King and Queen, which had been hotly debated as the herald to their deaths years later. The dragons' complaints and concerns about their failures in respecting the Middle Kingdom's rules were dismissed with cursory and meaningless apologies as they continued to commit countless transgressions.

The dragons' patience finally ended with the intrusion of a human ambassador's child into the sacred funeral caves—caves that held hundreds of scales of dragons that had passed. It was tradition to embed the scales of fallen dragons into the walls of the funeral caves as a sign of respect and remembrance—a fact that was quickly explained to the humans. But the child had refused to relinquish the scales that she'd callously chipped off from the wall. The adult humans had been equally recalcitrant in complying with the dragons' demands to cede the scales and to pay reparations; leading to the eventual banishment of all Albion humans from the Middle Kingdom, which in turn, prompted the humans to declare war. The war was now approaching its ninth year, much longer than it had promised to be.

It is no surprise, then, that Mǐn Líng looks so weary. Even with their newest strategy of rotating divisions in alternating weeks of hard fighting and rest, she still had to take the charge on a regular basis in order to keep up the army's faltering morale, which took a toll on her own health.

Guiltily, Zhì Háo lowers his head to look at his Queen's careful script flowing over the page. How long did she spend, copying the stratagems and poring over war plans, trying to end this war? And here he dares waste her time and effort, arguing with her over her decisions. Yet...

"Tell me what you would have me do instead." Mǐn Líng's voice cuts through his thoughts, and he bites his lip. "Do I continue this war without addressing the atrocities that have been committed against our young? Pray for divine guidance from the ancestors, for heavenly lightning to strike down our foes?"



"That's not what I mean, and you know it."

Mǐn Líng sighs at his bitter response.

Zhì Háo digs his claws into the skin of his palms.

"As you said before, Zhì Háo, you have learned by my side. You have known me for almost all my life, and you know how I think." Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the royal move until she is standing right in front of him. "I do not sentence an entire race to extinction out of sheer malice. You know this."

"But the innocents?" He whispers, looking up with pleading eyes. "Even them?"

"Yes." She meets his gaze. "To protect our people. To protect our future. If I leave this act of terror unpunished, our kind will doubt mine and my sister's rule over the Kingdom. If I raze the humans' cities and force them to surrender, they will simmer in their suppressed rage until they find an opening to strike back and destroy us. If I kill their royals, they will rally their kind under a new flag to fight us. If I destroy their cities and kill their royals, letting your so-called innocents flee, those innocents will take up their own arms and fight us until the last child has perished. That is the future that awaits us if I choose any other path than this." Her eyes bore into his with painful intensity.

He forces himself to speak. "Not all of them would do that. Not all humans—"

"Can you guarantee that?" The Queen cuts him off, and he grinds his teeth in agitation. "Will you stake the lives of ten thousand draclings on that claim?"

He tears his gaze away from her accusing eyes and stubbornly bites out his next words. "It's still the wrong thing to do."

Silence fills the alcove, thick enough to cut.

Then, Mǐn Líng speaks again.

"General."

He turns to meet impassive brown eyes and his spine straightens. This is no longer the childhood friend who stands before him. It is The Queen, cold, and unyielding, and a sliver of fear steals into his heart as he awaits her judgment.

"Listen well to my words." His heart hammers in his chest. "I will overlook your insubordination this once, and once only. In return," The general staggers back as his Queen takes a step forward to loom threateningly over him.



"You either join my task force to end this war, or you take command of the army in my place. That is my final offer. Do not let me doubt your loyalty to this Kingdom again." As he shakily regains his footing, she tosses an object at him and growls out one last, damning line.

"Kill them." The Queen stares down at him. "Or I will."

With that, the royal leaves him standing there, the murmur of the funeral spilling into the alcove with the dissolution of the privacy wards. Zhì Háo stares at the object in his hands. It's a silver cross pendant; a familiar one. The one that he lost a while back. The same one that his human lover – his Albion human lover—gave him as a token of affection.

She knows.

Drops of tears smear the careful calligraphy of the book in his hands, as he sinks to his knees and weeps silently. Deep in his heart, he knows the choice he will make, no matter how his mind protests.

Behind him, the smell of burning incense fills the air.

—

Zhì Háo flies.

His body undulates in the wind as he traverses the mountain range, heavy mist leaving condensation on his vermillion scales. He can sense another dragon following behind him, just out of sight – but he bites back the urge to double back and confront her. Instead, he dispels the area-bound secrecy wards as he flies through them, diving to land in the courtyard of the manor that suddenly appears on one of the mountains.

"Zhì Háo!" A human with fair golden hair and green eyes runs out of the manor and hugs him tightly. "You're back!"

"My love," he greets, curling around his partner. "I missed you." His voice wobbles.

He loves this human.

He needs to kill this human.

"Kill them." The Queen stared down at him. "Or I will." The memory beats loudly in his ears.

He takes on his human form. His partner chatters excitedly at him, showing him the newest changes in the manor—a roomful of paintings, each detailing a red



dragon and a golden-haired human; a half-finished wicker chair, big enough for two; vases of yellow chrysanthemum and red camellia decorating the doorways. At dinnertime, Zhì Háo forces himself to eat all the food even as it chokes his tongue with ash, while his oblivious partner fills his cup with báiji.

The end of the meal comes too soon. They wash the dishes together, two pairs of hands brushing against each other as his partner rinses and he dries with a cloth, forgoing his powers. Then, they sit on the stairs leading to the courtyard, his partner pointing out the constellations as they appear in the darkening sky. He watches them as they speak, golden hair shining gently against pale skin. Would it still shine, even after...

He kisses them. His partner reacts slowly, surprised, then they reciprocate, teeth clumsily knocking against teeth even as he tries to bury as much love and grief and apology into that one kiss, that final kiss before—before he has to pull away. He gets up, evading his partner's attempts to kiss him again, and gestures to the skies. "Fly with me?"

The human tilts their head but stands up anyway, a smile blooming across their face. Zhì Háo resists the urge to turn his head away in shame and stares instead, committing each detail of their face to his memory. He shifts. Each scale growing over his skin feels like a dagger. Thousands of daggers, to match thousands of scales. He swallows down his growing nausea as he helps his human partner up onto his back. Their hands are gentle on his scales, so unbearably gentle that he almost calls it off. Almost gives himself away. Almost betrays his kingdom, his people, his loyalty.

But he can't.

He feels the weight of the eyes on his back, hidden as they are in the bamboo forest. Steeling his heart, Zhì Háo takes off from the courtyard, listening to his partner's excited laughter. He takes them across the mountain range, weaving slowly around each peak that surfaces from the night mist. He twists in and out of the clouds, as his partner's delighted shrieks shove the daggers further into his heart.

Then he rises.

He breaks past the cloud cover and continues his climb towards the heavens, going higher and higher as he presses against his own limits. On his back, his partner—his fragile, human partner—has fallen silent, hugging him as the temperature drops.



He can almost delude himself into thinking that this is a normal flight. A flight that will end with him returning to the manor with his partner, lying side-by-side on the grass in the cool autumn air. A flight that erases all their troubles, that sweeps away the war and the slaughter and the genocide and leaves behind only a pair of lovers under the moon.

A hand weakly squeezes his scales even as a voice drifts faintly on the breeze.

"...love you, Zhì Háo," his partner breathes out.

The hand falls limp.

—

Back on the mountaintop, drops of water fall onto the upturned face of a golden-scaled dragon. She licks it into her mouth, tasting salt.

Ah.

It's raining.

## THE END

Zhì Háo (智豪) – 智(zhì) means "wisdom, intellect"; 豪(háo) means "brave, heroic, chivalrous."

Mǐn Líng (敏凌) – 敏(mǐn) means "quick, clever, sharp"; 凌(líng) means "soar."

Yí Líng (仪玲) – 仪(yí) means "ceremony, rites"; 玲(líng) means "tinkling of gem-pendants."

lǐ (里) – Unit of measurement in China; 1 lǐ = ~550 yds

Qiánkūn pouch (乾坤袋qiánkūn dài) – A pouch with a pocket dimension inside it.

Yellow paper talismans – A common item used in Chinese fantasy fiction; A strip of paper with mystical diagrams and calligraphy drawn on it.

Báijiǔ (白酒) – "White liquor"; a type of Chinese liquor made from whole grain. Colorless, with an alcohol content ranging from 40-60%.

Chinese funeral rites – To send one's prayers to the deceased, a single stick of incense is burned and placed in a holder (in temples, this is usually a big pot filled with sand, so that many sticks can be placed upright.)

Thirty-Six Stratagems – This is a Chinese essay referenced in the piece, which is used to illustrate a series of stratagems used in politics, war, and civil interaction.

Yellow Chrysanthemum – In Chinese culture, chrysanthemums symbolize autumn as well as long life.

Red Camellia – In Chinese culture, the camellia represents the union between two lovers. It also represents eternal love or long-lasting devotion.



# RED INK

## by SAM VIFQUAIN

Sail, sail, the wide ocean blue,  
Look into its depths and seek out the truth,  
When choices are made and sailors betrayed,  
A captain will be found as a fraud and a fake...

The steady rocking of the ship put the crew to sleep, but the chilled salty breeze kept Kayden Briar awake. It whistled through the window and nagged at his skin. He paced his quarters, grinding his teeth to the tune of the creaking wood. Soft candlelight flickered off the walls and illuminated the disarrayed room. Papers and notebooks scattered the floor, ink from inkwells splattered against the locked door, and the many collected treasures found themselves off of their displays and discarded like trash. This wasn't the first night like this, but tonight something much more troubling siphoned his mind.

His eyes caught on the sight of the scrawny, ghostly captain looking out of the silver mirror. It was his own face with sunken eyes, an unkempt beard, and stringy hair. He hated him.

The sirens' song from earlier that day still resonated within Kayden's ears as if he had stood too close to a firing cannon. It drowned out all other noise and persisted to boil his blood. Was it a taunt? Was it a means to pull him under just like those he lost today? Was there any shred of truth within it? Did his crew hear the same song? The scene of his first mate, Maurice, ripping him from the side of the bow looped in his mind.

The warm and fleshy sensation of candle wax being hastily shoved into his ears made Kayden shiver. It was an embarrassment even if it saved him from flinging himself overboard. How could he, a revered captain, be such a greedy fool? Surely the copious amounts of treasure could satisfy his debts—even if he had thrown it aside



in his rage. Kayden looked down at a tattered portrait of himself, reminiscing over his father's words.

He stormed behind his desk and righted his chair, slumping into it and dropping his head into his hands. He rubbed his temples, pressing harder and harder with each resounding heartbeat. His breathing came in quick and he struggled to calm himself.

Kayden's eyes shot open, and without hesitation he lunged forward to rifle through his desk drawers. In a fury, he tossed loose sheets of paper and quills into the mess that was his quarters. He came across his inkwells still untouched—his hand hesitated before throwing them aside, too.

The last item in the drawer was a leather-bound book, perfectly centered. Kayden cleared off his desk and opened the ledger, leaning over it so close he could see the bumps of the parchment. It listed all of the costs of ship repairs, crewmates, supplies, and other expenses. However, Kayden's eyes were drawn to the page that read Briar Tea and Trading Company Debts. The total amount was so high it ran off the line in damning red ink traced over the original text; it was a number he grew all too familiar with during nights like this.

On the adjacent page was a running list of various treasures his crew found and bounties they had collected. Kayden scowled at the slow, tedious progress that was being made to pay off the debts. He glared up around the room at the mess he made, returning to the paper and striking through the page in the same red ink. His finger tapped against the desk. Its pace quickened as his mind lingered on the siren's song.

Fraud... fake...

Surely nobody knew, right? After all, with Maurice's knowledge and skill of the sea, it was much easier to delegate tasks to him. Just like his father before him, Kayden knew that all he needed to do was to sit back and look the part, commanding those around him to keep things afloat. It was only a matter of time until everything came crashing down.

"Shut up. Nobody will question it."

You will eventually slip up again.

"Then I'll just hire new crewmates."



And further your debt?

"I'll find a way out of this. I always do."

Right... always...

"Just. Shut. Up."

The tattered portrait stared at him in judgmental silence. He slammed a fist onto the desk. There was red ink on his hand he hadn't noticed before.

Temper temper, his father's condescending voice rang out.

"Who says I have a temper?"

Apparently you.

"Well, I'm wrong then..." He stood from his desk, contemplating whether he really wanted to go back to pacing the floor. What other choice was there? "No... I'm in the right here..."

He combed his hand through his hair, fingers catching on knots.

"It was my father who wronged me..."

He tugged sharply on his hair.

"He gave me this debt. I'm being the bigger person paying it off."

A hollow laugh escaped him. "I could easily tell him to deal with it himself."

Then do it.

Kayden stood there with no retort. His eyes shot to the deed reading Briar Tea and Trading Company. Below it was his name, signing ownership to him.

"No."

He spun on his heel and stuck his head out of the window overlooking the wake of the ship. The night sky was cloudy and dim. No stars, no storms. Just darkness.

Kayden studied the water below, hoping for some sort of answer. All the treasures he had come across felt like blessings from God. All he needed was one more blessing and all this would be over.

A large shape moved through the water, jolting him from his stupor. He leaned out further, balancing on the tips of his toes to catch a glance of the mysterious form just under the surface.

The water broke as the figure breached once again. Even without the moonlight, Kayden could make out the slimy surface of its skin glistening from the water.



An arm, no... tentacle, rolled across the surface as if it went on forever. The shifting waters roared as the appendage disappeared into the fathomless depths.

"No! Come back!" His voice echoed across the water.

He worried about alerting Maurice. The last thing Kayden needed right now was for that brute to rush to his aid again...

In fact, Kayden didn't remember seeing Maurice since the sirens. After rescuing him, his first mate... It didn't matter. Kayden turned his attention back to the sea, eyes darting back and forth for any return of the shape.

The water rippled once more as the same massive tentacle emerged. It waved in the air as if testing its surroundings before continuing up. Then, another tentacle, followed by the rest. The movement of the appendages rocked the ship. Kayden stepped back, craning his neck upwards to see just how high the creature would rise. He reached for his sword, but after failing to find it by his side he placed a hand on his dagger instead.

The captain kept his eyes on the water in the center of the ring of tentacles. Deep red tentacles. His heart raced, and the singing melody of the sirens only grew louder in his mind... Wait, not just his mind, but all around him too.

Bubbling to the surface was what appeared to be a large rock that struck a chord of familiarity within Kayden. He remembered seeing it when they encountered the sirens. Except, what appeared to be merely stone earlier was now much more recognizably part of the monster. Not only that, but growing out of the rock were the figures of four merfolk, flesh combined with the lumpy pile of rubbery grey skin beneath them that disguised itself as stone. The song he had heard enveloping his mind and body resonated from them. There was no doubt these were the same sirens he saw today.

"It's you again... What do you want? Have you not tortured me enough?" He shouted to them.

The sirens floated there, tentacles sweeping through the deep waters below them as if they were patiently waiting for a meal.

We come in search of your pain, one of the sirens said.

It is you who called for us, another sang.

"I did no such thing."



Did our song not resonate with you?

Were you not thinking upon it endlessly? Their voices sounded fluid as if they were constantly changing.

"You were the ones driving me mad... And now you seek to turn my crew against me?"

We have no such desire.

We only speak truth.

Those who can accept it will continue...

Those who cannot will meet their doom...

"You expect me to believe such blatant lies?" He drew his dagger. "Now tell me how to prevent the mutiny you placed upon my crew. You think I don't remember that line of betrayal, do you? Well, you're going to have to try a lot harder than that to fool me!" He laughed to himself as he waved the dagger, oblivious to the red ink that stained his blade.

You still think you're being betrayed?

"I know it."

The sirens looked to one another.

"Tell me how to break your spell! I have come too far to be stopped by some sea-witches. I am too close to freeing myself of this damned debt!"

He could feel bile rising to his throat. His blood pumped furiously and beads of sweat began to coat his forehead.

It's already in motion.

"What do you mean?"

You should know.

After all, it's your reality. A single red tentacle rose and pointed behind the captain, into his quarters.

After so many hours of the song dominating his mind, he only heard his own, lonely pulse. He felt like he was free. But freedom felt like being tossed into a void. He turned his back to the monster and peered into the room. His gaze caught on ink splattered across the door. Red ink.

Carefully, picking his way through the wreckage, he made his way to the center of the room. As he approached, he realized the ink on the door was smeared and



continued across the walls. In it was the very same number that had been seared into his memory, repeating over and over.

He followed the scattering of digits, watching them grow more frantic as they continued. They didn't even appear like numbers; at least nothing a sane person would recognize. Kayden's hands snapped to his mouth, sending his dagger clattering to the ground. He tasted iron as the red ink stained his face. Sitting in the center of the room was the inkwell that sourced this mess: Maurice.

Blood was splattered across the ground from several dozen stab wounds, the most recent being a familiar sword standing upright from the first mate's chest.

The bile erupted from Kayden's throat and onto the lifeless body.

Nobody could know about this. Nobody could find out what has happened here tonight.

Who else might've heard the commotion?

What if his crew was already planning to avenge their first mate's death?

Kayden had no other choice. He had come too far to have it all blow up like this. He couldn't let anyone know.

Wiping the vomit from his mouth, Kayden wrenched the sword from the wound and staggered out of his captain's quarters. The door slammed behind him, and all was silent.

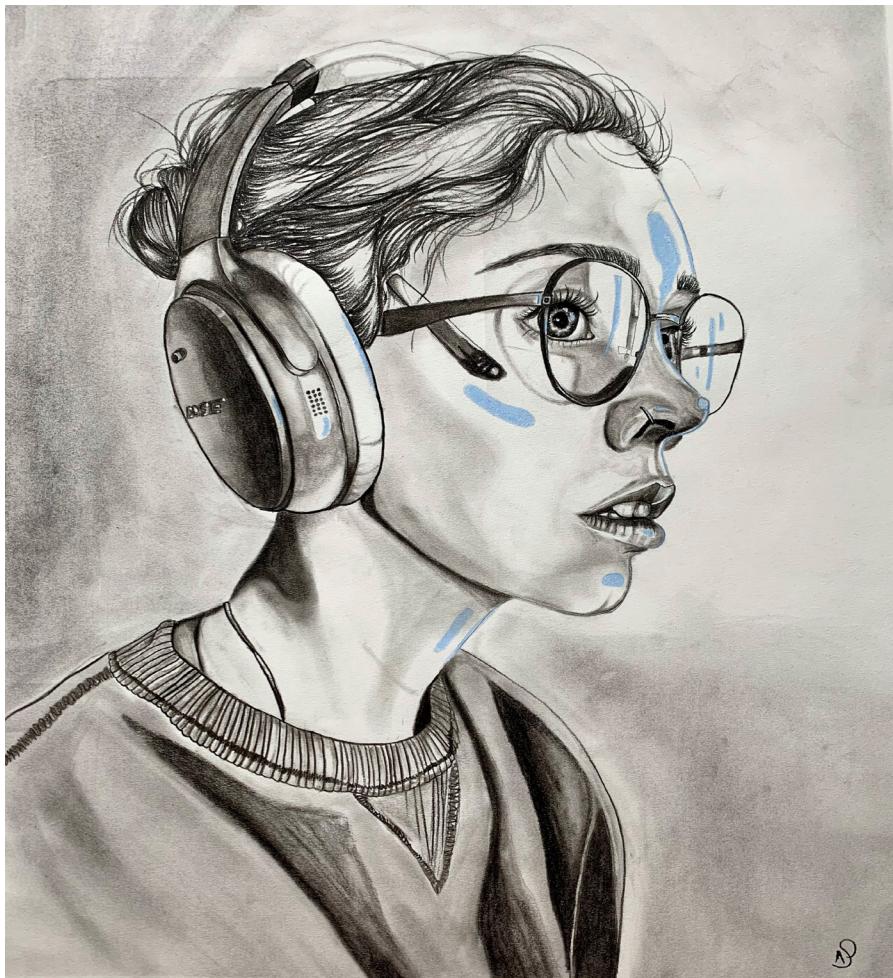
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As the sun begins to rise behind the ship and the water glistens in gold and orange colors, the ghostly captain returns to his chambers. A red-coated sword clatters to the ground next to a torn portrait with a matching stain. The captain glances out his window with a smile toward the warm light glimmering off the water's surface. A trail of red ink floats in the wake of the ship with several dark figures bobbing in the waves, slowly disappearing beneath the tides by inky tendrils. The captain pays it no mind.

He closes the window and stumbles over to the silver mirror to make sure he looks presentable for the day. He frowns, realizing that there has been a crack in his mirror this whole time. He has a hard time even recognizing the man staring back at him.

The man covered in red ink.





GLOW OF THE SCREEN

ANNEKA PETERSON

CHARCOAL - 24 X 18 IN

# A LOT OF THIS

by BEAU FARRIS

has to do with transcending the moment. and it is  
a momentous occasion, isn't it? to be in those rooms  
now freshly replenished with air conditioning. we'll say,  
let the rooms bleed into one another

some spackles of my red paint on your turquoise walls.  
like a red sun at dusk amid the mediterranean sails,  
that were hoisted without contempt. actually, they were  
hoisted in celebration of an eve that came after a day.

and for moments like these, in which I simulate a house  
where the tide rushes into the kitchen door every evening  
a mini flood of red paint and sea water. these are not lies  
however, moments like these originate from my desk. my ankles

tangle onto my feet. my isolation tangles onto my happiness  
it's not a lie. just start with the image, a prefrontal cortex minus  
the beach under the water. the house, which does not exist,  
is probably painted a dark green, covering a chipped sailboat white.





BEAUTIFUL DECAY

ANNEKA PETERSON

CHARCOAL - 24 X 28 IN

# THE WOODPECKER

## by AIDAN CARROLL

Fifteen this time.

Red looked out through the torn and patched screen circling his porch at the undeveloped woodlot across the street. He was listening to the woodpeckers off in the distance like every night since he was a kid, except recently it was coming through in groups of more and more knock-knock-knock-knocks, and, more than that, it sounded like there was only one out there making all that noise.

He drained the last of his now-too-warm Yuengling, crushed the can against the side of his head and tossed it in the recycling bin Nell finally made him buy two-or-so weeks ago after two-or-so years of nagging—Nagging Nell, Red thought, unsure of the sound. Sounds like something Dick Peduzzi would say. Wonder where he's at.

This time, sixteen.

"Sixteen," Red said in a near-mutter, to no one but the street. In response, a short two-tap from the woodpecker. "Eighteen then, cocksucker."

"Who are you talking to out there?" Nagging Nell. It sounded better this time.

"No one, baby, just that cocksucker woodpecker out there, thinks he's king of the Valley."

"I don't hear a bird, Red."

"Well, there's one out there, and it's been knockin' more."

There was no reply except a deep sigh Red knew all too well. Almost in chorus, the first crickets of the evening started up—one by one, then symphonic in scale. Then, after a blessed minute of respite, nineteen knocks.

Red stood up, too fast, becoming instantly aware of how drunk he really was. His feet, which were killing him from another long shift at the lumberyard, didn't bother him now.



"Would you shut up already?!" Red's question was more of a command as it echoed out into the early evening. It was enough to quiet the crickets for a brief moment before their song resumed like a slow tide. A dog barked in response on the other side of the trailer park.

"Would you?!" Nell's sharp yell from inside the house shook Red from his funk, his brain sloshing behind his eyes.

Didn't I only have one? Gee-zuss.

He pulled open the door to the mobile home almost too hard—it required a light touch these days, getting up in age as it was—but managed to keep it on its hinges. Nell was washing dinner dishes in the caravan's small sink, scrubbing hard at an aluminum casserole pan. The smell of Palmolive and tuna overwhelmed the usual smell of stale beer and cigarette smoke in old carpet, which kept Red from being even woozier than he was.

He stood just inside the doorway, shoulders pinned to his ears and hands deep in his pockets, a perfect impression of an apologetic man. He even took off his 'MHV Lumber' trucker hat and gripped it in front of his sternum for full effect. Nagging Nell, he reminded himself.

"I'm... I'm sorry, baby. I just..."

Nell swung around, faster than anything, perching her brushing-hand wrist on her right hip.

"Yeah, 'you just', 'you just'. You just nothing, Ernie Douglass. It's the same every goddamned night. Always with that goddamn woodpecker. When are you gonna give it up, huh?" On "when" she swung the brush in a broad gesture, flinging suds around the kitchen dinette, as if to demonstrate the breadth of the issue. It caused a switch to flip in Red's head.

"You don't get it, do you? Gee-zuss."

"Get what, Red?"

"Aren't any woodpeckers 'round here."

"What...? You were just—"

"I know. S'why I care so much. There ain't any woodpeckers cos of the factories, now. Pollution or something. Lots of guys been hearin' it, I ain't crazy."



What was left of his apologetic demeanor faded in an instant as the look on Nell's face all but demanded more explanation. Red sighed and continued, annoyed that he had to explain himself more than he had already.

"They used to raise hell on the saws at the mill when a blade run through a pecker hole. Had to spend two hours, three hours realigning the things. Ain't been a single pecker hole from Moose Hill Valley wood in near twenty years, now here's this cocksucker woodpecker causing trouble again. You know how much lumber can be processed in three hours? A lot. Damn lot."

Nell sighed her sigh and leaned over the sink to look out the same window Red was distracted with the moment prior. She hung her head briefly and then pivoted to face Red again.

"Look. If you wanna chase imaginary birds—fine. Just don't do it in my house. Or on my porch."

Red smiled blindly in the way he did when he wanted to make it seem like Nell had gotten through to him, a sort of forced wince that Nell knew as well as Red knew her sighs.

"I'm glad we could come to that agreement, Nellie." He turned to leave but hung on the doorframe. "Say, how'd you like to go down O'Brady's and do some dancing? Two dollar Yuengs tonight."

"Don't 'Nellie' me. And no, that place is disgusting and you know it. Smells like piss."

"Fine. I'll be back later, Miz Elenor. I'll say hi to Peduzzi for you." He leaned into her full name knowing she hated it more than Nellie. Red slipped out the door more gracefully than he had come in and started down the gravel road to the bar as the sun sank behind the trees.

O'Brady's was the oldest bar in Moose Hill Valley. Red seemed to remember someone telling him it used to be a farmhouse used as a hospital in the French and Indian War, but today the flickering and faded plastic sign's sickly yellow-green glow across the cobbled storefront and meager parking lot made it seem far more domestic. The parking lot was populated by only a handful of trucks, it being a Wednesday, and several motorcycles were arranged neat as dominoes on the side of the building



in the now-dead grass. Tall trees wreathed the building darker than the early evening sky and muted, thumping country music floated across the road. Red shuffled across the cracked asphalt of the parking lot and yanked open the old steel door to the establishment, immediately greeted by the smell of stale cigarette smoke and—

Goddamnit. It does smell like piss in here.

Red made his way across the hardwood to his usual seat at the bar and retrieved a pack of Marlboros from his jacket pocket. The bartender was new, a fresh-faced boy not too long out of high school. Red flashed him a greasy smile. Fresh meat.

"Gotta light there, barkeep?"

"There's no smoking in here before eleven."

"And?"

"It's 7:30."

Red glanced at the clock above the bar as he slid a cigarette from the pack and returned the box to the denim he retrieved it from. The clock read 7:24.

"7:24, actually." He rummaged in his pocket for a brief moment and produced an engraved Zippo he inherited from his grandfather. It originally read MOOSE HILL VALLEY LUMBER '49 SEASON but age had worn it down to look more like MOO L Y BER '49 SON. He flicked it open and in the same motion sparked it aflame. The blue and white tongue of the lighter sputtered softly as he inhaled it through the cowboy killer dangling off his bottom lip. Just as suddenly as it came to life, the light went out and it too returned to Red's jacket. The bartender frowned and Red smiled cruelly.

"What're you gonna do, stop me?"

"He won't, but I might, asshole." The voice came from behind. Red whipped around so quickly the cigarette almost flew out of his mouth.

Fortunately for the voice, it belonged to a familiar face: Dick Peduzzi stood slightly stooped under the low ceiling, towering over most of the other patrons. He shook his head as he sat down next to Red, grabbed the cigarette from his mouth, and put it out on the bar.

"Sorry about him, Carl." He shot an evil look at Red. "You gotta stop messing with the new employees, man."

"Hey, what? He knew I was kiddin'. Y'knew I was kiddin', right?" He turned to the bartender for support but he was already on the other end of the bar. He turned



back to Peduzzi, who was sorting the handful of Chex Mix he'd taken from the dispenser at the door.

"Doesn't matter if you were kidding or not. It's just not funny anymore." He popped a pretzel into his mouth and chewed slowly.

"Whatever." Red sighed and flagged down another bartender. "You just get off work? Thought I'd have seen you here already."

"Yeah. Had to shut down Saw Two 'cuz not enough people showed up to work it, so my team had to work overtime."

"Geezus. That bad?" Red grabbed a rye chip from Peduzzi's piles and popped it in his mouth before he could protest. Peduzzi shot Red a vicious look.

"Yeah, that bad. Man, what's gotten into you tonight? You're acting even more of a prick than usual!"

Red felt something akin to guilt and pushed it aside quickly. "Into me? What's into you? You're all strung out. I thought you liked fuckin' with new staff."

Peduzzi's entire demeanor changed. He didn't reply for a moment, chewing on his words.

"Goddamn... woodpecker. Out in the woodlot. Driving me crazy. All hours of the—"

"Shit, you too?" Red interrupted.

"What?" Peduzzi demanded indignantly. "Whaddyou mean 'you too'?"

"I mean, it's been buggin' me out too. Crazy thing is, Nell don't hear it. Does your old lady hear it?"

"No. Neither does J.P. Thinks his old man's gone crazy." Calm again, Peduzzi idly spun a mini breadstick on the bar top as Red ordered a beer. "Y'know, a lot of the guys that didn't show up today were hearing it."

Red took a healthy swig from the beer. "That so?"

"Yeah. Grapevine says they all went out together to look for it. Nineteen of 'em."

"Huh. Nineteen's a lot." He buried his nose in the glass again. The song playing over the bar speakers changed to a slow ballad, stiffening the previously lively mood. Both men were quiet for a moment in the noise of the bar.



"Y'know, I been thinking of going to look for it myself. The bird." The silence between the men broke like untempered glass despite the softness of his voice. "Just put it out of its misery so we all stop worrying about it like a bunch of fuckin' women."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." The word hung in the air for a moment as Peduzzi stared into a mirror on the barback. "Probably going to go out after I leave here, I'm not planning on drinking tonight."

"Hey, it's two dollar Yuengs!"

Peduzzi closed his eyes and sighed, chin falling to his chest, fingers lacing together in the way Red knew he did when he was deep in thought. "Yeah." He maintained the pose for several minutes, breathing calmly, as Red drained two more Yuen-glings. He looked to Peduzzi, motionless except for his breath, as he finished the second. The song changed again, this time to a pop number Red hated.

"Hey Peduzzi, you good? I'm thinkin' I'm ready to head back home, or Nell won't let me hear the end of it."

Peduzzi looked up to the ceiling and brought his arms behind his back, sighing into the stretch. The already too-short sleeves of his MHV Lumber windbreaker stayed up on his forearms as he brought them back to rest on the bar for a moment before shoveling the rest of the Chex Mix into his mouth.

"Yeah, I think it's time to go," he said through cracker mush.

Both men rose and shuffled through the busy bar out into the cold November night. Wordlessly, Peduzzi got in his truck, an older-model Ford with a missing tailgate.

"See you at work tomorrow?" Red asked as Peduzzi rolled his window down.

"Yeah, see you at work." Peduzzi started the Ford without so much as turning to face Red. He pulled out slowly and drove off down the road, casting tall shadows with his headlights until he finally disappeared into the darkness.

Geezuss, Red thought. Guess he's serious, then. Actin' so weird over a bird. But as he turned to walk home, hearing the woodpecker knock twenty times in the distance sent shivers up his spine deeper than any provided by the night air.



Red pulled into the employee parking lot at the Moose Hill Valley Lumbermill the next morning, head throbbing evilly. A glare from the rearview mirror of the sedan next to him caught his eye as he straightened into his parking space causing him to slam on the brakes instinctively as pain seared through his temples and his brain started humming louder than before.

He climbed out of the cab of his beat-up Chevy and squinted around at the parking lot. It was certainly sparser than usual for a Thursday. Red looked for Peduzzi's truck but it was nowhere in sight. A flight of ravens took off from a decorative stand of pine trees in the parking lot, making a horrible noise that sent still more lightning through Red's head.

He slowly made his way across the parking lot to the building where Saw Three, his assigned workstation, was housed. Frankie Belucci, his foreman, waited in the door with his clipboard, usually a bad sign. Fuckin' Belluci. Not today... please not today.

"Mornin', Douglass."

"Sir." He squinted at Belucci, a short man with remarkably greasy black hair that spilled from under his white hardhat. As usual, his left hand was nested knuckle-deep in the side-front of his pants. Pervert fuck. Red cast his gaze down to avoid having to look at him.

"It's 9:03, Douglass."

"Yeah. Sorry."

"That's the fifth time this quarter. You know we can't have employees arriving late, with so many on strike or wherever they are."

"Mhm." He kicked the sawdust at his feet meekly, but anger was roiling inside him.

"Your shift starts at nine, Ernie, unless you've forgotten."

"No, I... I gotcha."

"Are you hungover?" Belucci bent sideways to get a better look at Red's face.  
"It's a Thursday, for Pete's sake."

"No, uh... I'm just feeling a little poorly, is all."

"The woodpecker?"



The suddenness of the suggestion took Red by surprise to the point where he almost forgot about his hangover. He looked up at Belucci and noticed he also looked somewhat haggard, or at least less put-together than usual. He appeared unshaven, a dark shadow of stubble framing his usually clean, though greasy, face.

"I've been hearing it too," he continued. "All hours of the day. I... I understand. The way profits have been going... I can't imagine what would happen if we had to deal with realigning saws again, between that and the strikes..."

As he trailed off the saw started up in the building behind him. Over the loud drone of the idling machine both men counted as the woodpecker knocked twenty times out in the distance. Red saw Belucci's posture stiffen and awkwardly turned his gaze to the ground again.

"I'll overlook your tardiness for today and today only, Douglass. Go on inside, we're having to pick up work for Saw One today. Lots to do." He stepped out of the door frame to allow Red inside.

"Uhm. Thanks, sir." He looked up to see Belucci smaller than he'd ever seen him. Damn. Almost feel bad for the guy. Almost.

Belucci didn't respond. He stared out at the tree line across the parking lot, scanning the border between forest and sky as the work noise of the day began to rise. Red shuffled past him into the shuddering hulk of the mill.

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The sun was already setting by the time Red emerged from the beastly clamor of Saw Three covered in a thin layer of sawdust. He silently made his way across the lot to his car. The woodpecker had been on his mind all day, and there were a few times where he could have sworn he'd heard it even over the noise of the mill. Belucci had clocked out early, something Red couldn't remember him ever having done since his wife died several years ago, and even that day he was only early by fifteen minutes or so. Today he left before lunch.

Before turning the key in his truck's ignition Red sat in the driver's seat staring sightlessly at the dashboard. First Peduzzi, now Belucci. Nellie don't hear it. The words turned over in his mind again and again, never making any more sense than the previous turn. What is with this goddamn bird?



Red counted as the woodpecker knocked twenty-one times off in the distance and started the old Chevy on what would have been twenty-two had it kept knocking. He turned the radio off and drove out the now-empty parking lot onto the nearby service road to the woodlot.

By the time Red arrived at the pull-off to the woodlot entrance there were almost as many cars as were at O'Brady's the night prior, but none were familiar except for the MHV Lumber parking passes hanging from the rearview mirrors of all of them. He walked into the forest in a daze for about fifty yards and crouched through the familiar bent-back chain link fence that served as the entry to the woodlot. After straightening on the other side, he listened.

Twenty-one.

He stumbled in the early dark over deadfall and shrubbery toward the source of the sound, shrugging off twigs and branches in his path like a rampaging animal. After what seemed like hours he stopped and listened again.

Twenty-two.

Geezuss. And what kind of woodpecker knows how to count?

The thought didn't last long, however, before the knocking started again. Twenty-three this time. Red trudged on through the trees.

"Peduzzi?" he called out between footfalls. The only responses were a squirrel chattering in a tree far off down the hill and a sequence of twenty-four knocks from still deeper in the woods.

By the time the woodpecker got to twenty-five it was completely dark. Red felt around in his jeans for his zippo and realized he'd left it with his jacket in the truck. He squinted into the darkness: the sky was hazy with early winter clouds hanging low above the tops of the mountains, glowing orange with the reflection of city lights up and down the valley. It wasn't impossible to see, but he knew that the further away from his truck he got the darker it would get.

Twenty-six.

It sounded closer than ever—almost thunderous in the relative quiet of the rest of the woods. Red shivered violently as a cold breeze sent tidal waves of dead leaves into the air, whipping between the trees like a swarm of insects.



Just a quick look around here, then that's it 'til tomorrow. Can always come back. Too damn cold for this.

As soon the knocking stopped a twig snapped behind him.

Swinging around to see the source of the noise, his eyes landed on a large pile of deadfall he had climbed over just a few minutes prior.

"Hey! Who's there?"

"Who's there?"

He recognized the voice. Peduzzi. There was no question.

"Hey, Peduzzi! Where you at, pal?"

Peduzzi grunted behind the mountain of stacked branches and a few more twigs snapped. "I...think it's time to go." His voice was muffled from behind the fallen trees.

"Hey, I get that, brother. Gettin' real cold." Red turned back around to face the woods. "Where do you think it is, anyhow?"

Twenty-seven knocks, loud, as if in response to Red's question. He turned back around after counting to find the deadfall pile silent.

"Peduzzi?"

There was no answer, not even from the squirrels. The cold, dry air of the forest was silent save for the sound of Red's panting breath echoing off the trees.

"Hey, Peduzzi? Dick? Not funny, pal. Where'd you...?"

He turned to where he had been looking, eyes still adjusting to the darkness, and back to the deadfall, only to find the deadfall was gone, vanished. Where it once lay was a large, oval-shaped clearing—no deadfall, no leaves, no Peduzzi, no nothing.

Red stumbled backward, catching his heel under a thick root hidden in the leaves. His next step back was hasty and misplaced, his full weight coming straight down on the side of his foot. He fell like a stone and gasped breathlessly in pain. He gripped his sprained ankle tightly, pain filling his mind with static.

Something else very close behind him gasped too at exactly the same pitch, volume, and duration.

Red jump-scrambled forward in a bear crawl, adrenaline temporarily numbing the pain in his ankle, and turned around to face the source of the noise. It was almost a deer, fifteen feet at the shoulder, vegetation and deadfall woven into the mats of its



shaggy pelt. It gasped in Red's voice again, its vacant humanlike eyes rolling blindly back into deep sockets as its mouth yawned unnaturally wide, toothless, lined edge to edge with folds of glistening skin that reflected the orange light of winter like some kind of horrible wet accordion.

Then, in Dick Peduzzi's voice, "See you at work... tomorrow." The folds quivered as it spoke, sprinkling hot, steamy saliva on Red's face before punctuating with another of his gasps and a shaky "Get... that, brother." It hung on the words like it didn't know what it was saying.

The jaws snapped closed, and open and closed and open and closed again, faster than Red thought should be possible, making a deafening knocking sound each time as the bone of its jaw met the bone of its skull. The not-deer took what seemed like forever to get to twenty-eight knocks, but Red didn't have to worry about counting them anymore.





TREAD LIGHTLY (OR NOT AT ALL)  
LIZ NOLAN



# PRINCE OF THE DEAD

## by MATTHEW COOK

We were young boys dead and dying  
In the ghetto of North Denver,  
Bleeding on cocaine on porcelain  
Walking boulevards with smashed bones under our skin  
Waiting in narrow rooms for fathers  
that never came  
We were 18 years old  
with hollowed eyes made heavy by decay.  
Lost boys on 38th street  
Chasing love in violet-colored pills  
Like toy soldiers, we would march  
the 30 blocks down to Denver  
where the junkies would call us over  
and tell us they too were children left alone.  
And we would see in their pale eyes  
shattered into broken glass  
reflecting the rape of innocence  
born from the depths of poverty  
our wrists,  
our hands, discolored  
just like our drunken fathers who beat us blue

I am the lonely prince who has survived  
this graveyard,  
forced to wear this shameful crown  
fashioned from the flesh

of my dead friends.



# 8 POEMS

## by COURTNEY BROWN

### Six

i wrote six poems  
for each day of the week  
and counted each one  
on

my fingers  
i wrote six poems to show  
the six ways  
that  
i loved  
you  
six,  
times,  
over.

i wrote six poems  
and recited each  
of the six  
for every day  
of the week.

and when i recited the six  
aloud  
you said,  
six is the number of the octagon,  
there's seven days in a week.



Headless  
The full length mirror in  
My room  
Is not full length  
Anymore  
And when I go to look  
I cannot find  
My head  
And there my body sits  
Headless  
And nude  
And I cannot  
Help thinking  
This is how I was  
To grow

Not to  
You never  
Called  
Me  
by  
My name,

Because I asked you not to.

You never even  
said  
I love you,

Because I asked you not to.

You never even held



my  
Hand,

Because I asked you not to.

You never even called me  
yours

Because I asked you not to.

You never even searched my eyes  
To  
see  
Why  
I asked  
not  
to,

But I assume that may be because  
I had asked  
you  
not to.

And when it came time  
For you to leave  
I could not ask You  
not to.

For I had asked of many things  
And there comes  
A time  
When not  
to.



And so you left  
From being tired

Of hiding  
love  
in questions  
And  
being asked not To.

**Sliced bread**  
i wonder, if, like sliced bread,  
love fills your belly  
and slathered in sweetness of jam and honey,  
it sticks to your lips  
and lingers.

i wonder if love,  
like sliced bread,  
is devoured in an instant

i wonder if it's savored  
or eaten whole.

i wonder if love,  
like sliced bread  
is molding in the pantry  
limp and greening

for its devourers had forgotten its sweet taste:  
no longer lingering.



and had forgotten its fill

i wonder if the bread, sliced,  
is now stale and brittle

because here it sits  
and i stare it straight across,  
can smell its lingering sweetness  
and its belly-fillingness

and still i do not eat the sliced bread.  
i let it sit.  
and go to waste.

and so love is like sliced bread,  
sitting and wasting,  
and wanting to be tasted  
and hoping to be savored

until the day comes where  
it is simply  
thrown out.

Weep  
I wept  
Enough  
To dry my  
Soul,  
To quench the soil  
Of all its thirst,  
I wept enough



To never  
=  
Have to weep  
And feel  
Again

name  
Her name  
it was not mentioned

Her name was safely hidden  
in mother's box  
upon the  
vanity,

carefully tucked beneath the  
fine  
tooth  
comb

Her name was not to be spoken

and in my mother's eyes  
i saw  
a pain that wouldn't  
fade

Her name was a secret to be kept  
and safely stowed away



but it became more tiresome  
I shook my mom  
awake  
and looked her straight on  
and screamed my sister's  
name aloud  
to rid us of  
Her dying  
Song

Overboard  
I wrote your name  
out loud  
five times  
and cursed it

and threw its  
contents  
overboard

I hope it's  
gone  
forever.

Need  
I felt I had to caress myself  
If no one else were to  
But you see,  
My arms are not long enough  
And far as though I may  
Have stretched  
I could not sit there and hold myself



# A DIRTY FLOOR AT 8AM

## by CHARLOTTE WHITNEY

certain rays sometimes pull me back  
to a loud engine in the morning  
and thankful lips before eating.  
to my bones bathed in light,  
to warmth at dusk.  
if I still find holiness in a cup of tea and a communal fire,  
still find religion in an unlocked front door,  
I will never grow out,  
only up, backwards.

for the chill of the basement drives me down.  
and the rot in the sink,  
the rot in my mind,  
and my aching teeth.

please, tell me what will drag me forward  
when I can't tell if this ash was made by  
fire or a cigarette.  
when the throbbing pulse in my head gets louder or  
  
stops.  
then, will a transparent string  
take me where I need to be—



THE POISON THAT METABOLIZES US

LIZ NOLAN



# THE ASCENT

## by AUBRI BENSON

As she sprints up the twenty-second flight of stairs belonging to the Hilton hotel, her strained and abused lungs feel as though they're about to collapse. Her heartbeat pounds sporadically against her rib cage, nearly in time with her footsteps. Several times throughout the climb to the top she's been forced to take a break, slumped against the railing in a heap of exhaustion. She needs to quit smoking.

The bland, beige-colored stairwell she's climbing is poorly lit, and as a result, she finds herself frequently tripping over her own feet and spilling the contents of the bottle in her hand. Her blurred vision and the tornado-like spinning of her head does anything but help—she worries that she might throw up. Somehow, these pains don't stop her from giggling and screaming in a fit of excitement as she journeys her way up towards the sky. She can hear echoes from the boy below her, not too far behind, just as loud and obnoxious. He could hardly walk straight before they had started up the stairs, his slow pace keeps him remaining several flights behind.

At last, she reaches the final floor, coming across a sign that reads:

ROOFTOP. DO NOT ENTER.

She doubles over, gathering herself before opening the door. Stepping outside, she is met with the gentle breeze of the summer night caressing her flushed skin. The rooftop is dark other than a soft orange glow on the pavement from the city lights below. A few electric boxes, metal fans, and heat exhaust pipes grumble and moan as she makes her way towards the edge of the building. She climbs upon the thick concrete slab that borders the rooftop and dangles her feet off the edge. She wonders how long it would take to reach the ground if she kicked off one of her shoes.

As she gazes out over the edge of the building, she is awestruck by the view. In the sea of darkness, millions of twinkling lights scattered throughout the land embrace her. Some are clustered together, while others are lone and minuscule. Yet each



one shines just as bright as its peers, untamed by the black of the night. They're like diamonds amongst the dirt, each one glittering in its own brilliant and unique way. The lights fill the city with thrill and vitality, more vibrant and alive than the people who inhabit it.

She looks upwards, towards dazzling stars against the midnight blue of the horizon that sing in harmony, serenading her with a love worthy of Aphrodite. The finishing touch in the scene is a soft glaze of the full moon that casts a delicate, yet prominent pale light across it all.

"Fuuuckkk," the girl hears behind her. "This is a vibe." The boy who was trailing the girl enters the rooftop and jogs to sit next to her. He's panting, yet doesn't appear tired. His soft hazel eyes are full of energy and appear almost golden as they reflect the lustrous glow of the city. The sullen boy she had been with only a few hours ago was gone.

"I can literally feel the dopamine flushing my brain as we speak," he jokes. "This is incredible."

The girl glances at the boy. He's grinning. His long, unkempt, ebony-shaded hair is pushed back out of his face for once. He fidgets with the metal piercing in his nose as he stares out at the view. The gentle, silver shine from the moonlight above dances across his olive skin, illuminating the high points of his face. Dark shadows are formed along his sharp, hollow cheekbones and baggy eyelids.

The two giggled and bantered over the 'insanely wack' party that they had just attended. Both agreed that they would rather be at the top of the building with just the two of them than the sweaty, crowded house. Caught in the frenzy of fun, they continued to laugh and sip on the bottle they had brought with them as their conversation branched off into a new direction.

"I love it up here," the boy says. "Feels like I'm on top of the world."

"Same," the girl agrees. "I wish I lived up here. I'd always be happy."

"I know, right?" The boy says, nodding. His smile fades and he takes a deep breath. Glancing at the street that watched him from twenty-two flights below, he begins to think of tomorrow and the life that he left beneath him.



"But we can't," he mumbles. "We have to go back down." Now, looking at the bottle laying next to the girl, it calls him, beckoning him for another drink that he knows he doesn't need. He takes a swig anyway.

Noticing his sudden change in mood, she takes his hand and gives it a gentle squeeze. "Well," she says softly. "Even if we can't live up here, we can always come back."

The boy slowly raises his head as he turns to look at her. The subtle glint of her sea-green eyes glimmer in such a way that reminds him of a church window he had seen, stained with the Virgin Mary; he reminisces on the way it would crystallize the Sunday morning sunshine into an iridescent matrix of glass. He slowly shakes his head and looks up at the sky.

"Yeah, we can always come back. But we'll always have to leave. Like a never-ending cycle of cat-and-mouse. A temporary escape disguised as happiness. It's just not real, y'know?"

The girl looks at him with mild concern. He slowly releases her hand as he glares out at the view.

"Like, listen. We drink to feel good, just to be hungover the next morning. We eat to get full, just to be hungry again. Like... I think I saw on a TV show somewhere that 'happiness is nothing more than a moment before you need more happiness,' and I have never agreed with anything more. It's all a load of shit, it's all meaningless and fake. An endless plea to feel content, just to be tossed right back into reality. It's like we're stuck in this stupid cycle of working and spending, working and spending, working and spending... What's even the point?"

He rakes his hands through his hair and then reaches into his back pocket. His hands shake slightly as he pulls out a lighter and a cigarette. One hand lights the cigarette now resting between his lips. The other nervously taps on the bottle it clutches. He stares down at the street below, neglecting the star-filled sky above him.

He can't help but notice how dark it is. It seems that the only light source comes from the fabricated beauty of the man-made bulbs. Where he once saw something spectacular, he now sees the lights as nothing more than the children of corrupt consumerism. An industrial paradise, a concrete jungle birthed by the meaning-



less monotony of money. All of it surrounded by the empty, empty pitch black of the night.

The boy and the girl sit in silence with nothing more than the windy sound of the freeway in the distance.

The boy's eyes are empty, his fallen face hopeless. With every puff of smoke, his stature slips further and further back into that of the morose boy from before, down below. The girl sighs again as he passes her the half-burnt cigarette. She takes a couple of long, thoughtful drags and they continue to sit in silence.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," she says quietly.

He glances at her with dimly hopeful eyes, begging for the girl to break him free of the grasp that is his now pessimistic mind. In the lingering silence, he subconsciously scratches at the burn marks upon the top of his hand. Marks that too closely resemble the end of a cigarette.

She takes a deep breath. "I mean, you're not wrong. At the end of the day, I guess life is nothing more than a pursuit of happiness. And we're all just a bunch of dopamine fiends that are always looking for the next fix. You're right, I guess. And yet... Here we are at the top of this building. With these beautiful stars and this beautiful moon. And I can't help but stare at them and feel happy. Even if it means that tomorrow is gonna suck." Then she chuckles and takes another drag.

"And honestly, I'm a little offended that you think that the happiness you feel when hanging out with me doesn't matter. That happiness in general doesn't matter. Even if it's not real, even if it's bullshit. It feels right. Like everything is as it should be. You just have to find the right kind of happiness."

The girl hands him back the cigarette. The boy takes a final drag before putting it out and turning to look at her. His morose look fades to one of contentment. His eyes trace the lines of the girl's face and he grabs her hand. He stops picking at the scars on the back of his hand.

"I guess," he says softly. They both turn again to the view, and he tosses the cigarette butt over the edge of the building. They watch it fall until it's nothing more than a spark amongst the ash.

The two remain on the rooftop for a few more hours until they both agree that it's time to climb down.



They go home, they deal with their tomorrows, and they return to the lives that they had temporarily left behind. And as the days go by, and the sun continues to be replaced by the moon, the boy can't help but begin to appreciate this cycle. Instead of resenting the man-made bulbs that would flicker on with the absence of the sun, he changes his focus to other things. He begins looking up. Up towards the deep blue skies that carried an array of gentle, yet wild, stars; up towards the light glistening from the beautifully milky, ever-changing moon. These elegant, celestial beings that can always be depended on to appear in the black of the night. Even if they're only a sliver, even if they're nothing more than a fraction of what they were the night before. They are there. With no beginning, and with no end.

The constantly curious, and yet always consistent beacons of light that shine above in spite of the dark.

# DISTRACTIONS

## by AIDAN CARROLL

They're poisoning the atmosphere and  
Have you heard about what happened to Kourtney?  
I saw on TV last night that  
somewhere something terrible is happening.

Did you know there's an island in the ocean  
the size of Great Britain  
made completely of trash?

The Cowboys won, and it's a good thing, too,  
they've been doing real poorly all season.

Did you see?

Children are dying in the wars in Uganda and

There's a sale on at Costco  
for \$3 cheese danishes.

My neighbor won't rake his fucking leaves  
even though I called the HOA on him twice and  
somewhere,

something terrible is happening.

The price of gas just went up and  
I ordered a duvet cover on Amazon two weeks ago and  
they only just delivered it and

a mosque was just firebombed in Syria and  
I can't believe it took them so long.  
Thank God gas prices are down again,  
don't you think?

They're poisoning the atmosphere  
and the world is spreading too thin and



Did you know Debra lost her dog, just last week?

I hear they never found her in the hurricane debris.

I was watching TV last night and saw  
The Texas Ranger ride across the desert  
on his trusty steed Hummer,

lord of chain-link Freedom,

picking off the little children  
as they're born from the scrub and

Oh, look!

The cowboys win again.





A GODDESS OF A MILLION SUNS

ALEXANDRA BUNDY

# MOONRISE

## by BEAU FARRIS

is the title of many poems probably  
lost 'my stuff' as my father  
points out another pitcher  
a major league game is playing in the bar  
bottom of the fifth stitching  
you can't really see how nervous  
the opposing pitcher's fingers are  
orbiting the pitch black ball  
concealed within a mitt  
and I feel guilty twice first  
when I want their pitcher to succeed second  
when my father does not understand  
my guilt nor do we seek to understand one  
another's telescopic perspectives see  
the pitcher should throw about  
four and a half innings  
before swapping out  
with another and I have lost the point  
end of my pencil while I let the game distract  
us from each other like satellites  
giving more drinks and more pitches  
but he won't make it out of this  
inning or the next bar he's lost  
his stuff meaning there is a limit  
to something he has  
that can be taken away or given  
until his final white ball rivals  
the moon in a blue sky  
quietly watching the sun.



# ANY STORY WHERE A HOTEL IS A PERSON

by EMMA MACKAY

It starts with the people in rooms like always A best western ballroom convention center stocked with extras dressed to the nines I am in my own secret room watching through a hole in the wall as my father drinks and rubs elbows He does not know I am here He would be upset if he did It always starts with my father Soon he will hack down doors to steal me away Soon he will butcher me and the photocopy of me that hangs in the bunk bed above me Soon I will be a bloody mess on the carpet It always ends in blood He will trade my still beating heart for a still drink There is a trade There must be a trade It goes back centuries I am Iphigenia and he is Hector I am the headless child bride of Achilles and he is a man hungry enough to swallow the country of Turkey My father is always jonesing for something and I am happy to be present I am always happy It is a closed grid of energy There will be a new father new ownership of this hotel new rule Eventually this photocopy of myself and I will be sick of the new owners Soon we will complain Soon the new father will place me at the west and the twin of my face in a deep pit I will be the lucky one I am always lucky In my hands the owners will place the overflowing purple heavens and the diamonds that grace it I will be asked to hold this bustling universe clutching it like a father clutches his child's shoulder and I will be unable to move There is no looking away just falling deeper into these cosmos of blurring cool tones I will not release them New owners mandate paper sacks in the trash cans for safer disposal In that same breath they order me still enough for this force to rest on my hands





THE FOREST OF OLD

ALEXANDRA BUNDY



# CHANGING OUR NAME

From 1973 to 2021, this journal was known as Walkabout Creative Arts Journal, but from now on we will be Meridian Creative Arts Journal.

We found out from one of the editors this year that the term 'walkabout' has a very derogatory connotation in Australia. In email communication with an Aboriginal person, we were informed that "the term was coined by white Australians to describe a rite of passage taken by adolescent Aboriginal boys. It has since been used as a racist term to perpetuate the stereotype that Aboriginal people are unreliable, aloof, etc. For example, if an Aboriginal person is late to a meeting, some may say that they've 'gone walkabout.' Even if it wasn't a derogatory or colonialist term, the repurposing of any Indigenous terminology for a group of largely non-Indigenous and white people is appropriative and in poor taste."

Although there was no malice behind the name, ignorance of the connotation and meaning of the term still could have resulted in harm. We apologize and will strive to do better in the future.

We would like to thank the Aboriginal woman who took the time to inform us of the meaning of 'walkabout' and provide a wealth of readings for us to learn more. We have changed our logo and name, but we also recognize that real change comes in the form of supporting and sharing indigenous voices, donating, voting, and always seeking education.

We ask you to consider donating to Pay the Rent. Pay the Rent is a "grassroots-to-grassroots initiative; it enables funds to be contributed by individuals directly to grassroots causes and campaigns with a focus on protecting First Nations rights, including practical support such as sustaining a Funeral Fund."

We appreciate your continued support under our new name: Meridian.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We owe thanks to all of the gifted writers and artists who submitted this year. We also want to give our gratitude to the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program at CU Boulder for once more providing the means through which we can publish our journal and provide space for such a beautiful collaboration of student work. Finally, we want to thank our readers for their support of Meridian.



