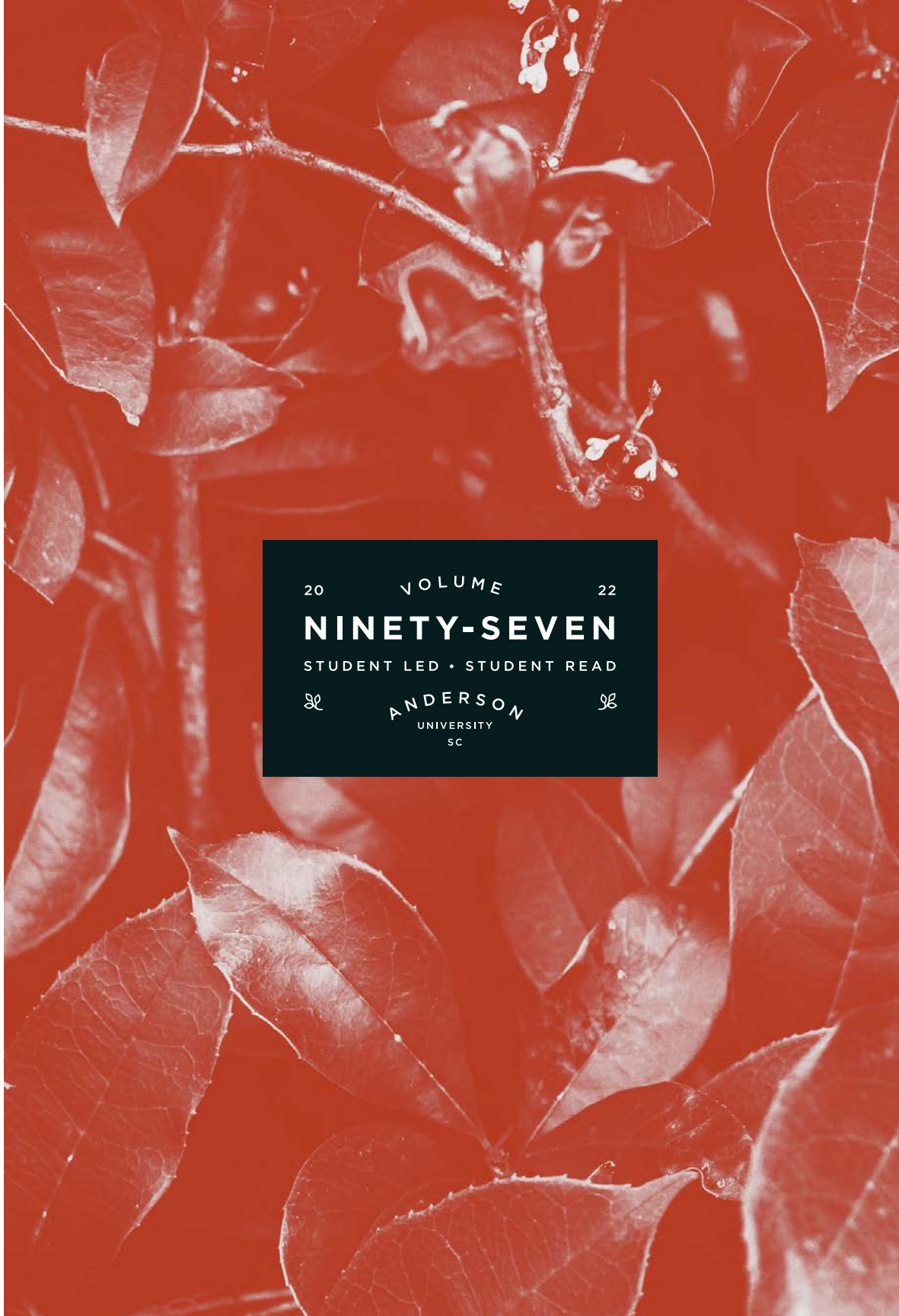


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FOREWORD

We are haunted by the stories we keep locked away—stories of childhood wonder and broken homes, rest and violence, healing and tragedy. These are the stories we tell ourselves and no one else when questions whispered into much-lined Bibles or sobbed into toilet bowls are left unanswered. In an effort to cope with our present circumstances—when we feel less than human, when we hide mirrors beneath quilts, or when childhood memories turn blue—we recite these stories over and over again until they become the truth. As Virginia Woolf once said, we tell ourselves these stories in an attempt to “bring the whole universe to order.” Yet, it is when we write these personal, hidden stories, we reveal what it means to be human. To be human is to struggle.

We struggle against society and its standards of beauty and against simple understandings of faith in which we are told to “let go and let God.” We shove cotton balls into our ears or escape into imagined worlds, yet still, while strolling down the chip aisle or sitting in the back corner of a Zaxby’s parking lot, we fight against our own minds that feed us lies. And sometimes, we wrap collars of bells around our necks and dance and shout, “How crazy!” because it is easier to exist as performance art than as a person who is ashamed that she can’t control her big feelings.

It is this shame of struggling that tempts us to cherry-pick the details when sharing our stories with one another, choosing to make it funny or prettier than the truth. Yet it is only when we tell these stories honestly—letting them take up room on a previously blank page—that we begin to heal. Having the courage to tell the truth is not easy, but as Sylvia Plath once said, “everything is writable if you have the outgoing guts to do it.”

In this 97th edition of *Ivy Leaves*, we are grasping for a sense of belonging, what it means to be human, to be beautiful, to be broken. As we tell our stories honestly, we invite other storytellers to lay down the burden of carrying their stories alone. Together, we are letting go of our shame and beginning to heal.

FOR THE STORIES LOCKED AWAY

SHARICE SOMERO

“What happens when you go into your head?” my dad asked. My dad was sitting on the couch on the other side of the living room, waiting for my mom to finish getting ready. They were about to go on a date or run some errands.

I hadn’t expected this question. I was sixteen at the time and my dad had never reached out about this before; my mom was always the one to ask about it. She would ask me if I was okay when I would make faces while doing laundry, but I would only tell her that I had “gone into my head.” My parents had probably talked about it without me knowing.

I blinked at him for a moment, looking up from the TV show I was watching on my phone or the book I was reading. Reading a book sounds better. He sat there waiting patiently for me to answer.

“What do you want to know?” I asked, trying to temper the defensiveness in my voice. Despite him being my dad, I was tentative to share the worlds in my head. There were too many to count. There were some where I was married; in one I had three kids whom I loved so dearly. The five-year-old boy had my curiosity, while his sister got my temper. The eldest was a flirt like his father. In other worlds, I was a warrior who was just trying to survive. While the stories were cliché, they helped me figure out my morals in many gray areas. In one of them, I adopted a kid who was left to die on the battlefield as a child-soldier. I protected him the best I could. I couldn’t stop my daydreams, but I didn’t want anyone to know about the worlds in my head.

“Just . . . what do you daydream about?” He leaned forward with his hands clasped together. His eyes watched me like I was a cat. One wrong move and my hackles would change into a flash of fur running away.

“Ummmm . . . it depends on what I watched or read recently. I often just insert myself or a character into that,” I said, a half-truth. He asked me why, careful not to move but listening intently. “Because it’s easier than creating an entire world from scratch. I can focus on a specific aspect of the story then.” I felt justified by my answer. If I could explain myself, I would seem less weird. It was less likely that my worlds and I would be rejected. Slowly, I looked up at him, waiting for him to draw back; however, he just nodded. Then, he pushed a little more.

“Could you tell me one?” he asked. His voice was matter-of-fact, as if this were the normal progression of events. It’s the only thing that kept the panic in my stomach from rising into my throat.

I looked down at the ground. He wanted to know. I wanted to tell him, but I couldn’t look him in the eye. Then, for the first time since I was ten years old, I told someone the stories that I valued more than my real life. Clumsy and quiet . . . but told.



SEE NO EVIL, SPEAK NO EVIL
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS BY LILY MCNAMARA

WITH BELLS ON LILY MCNAMARA

If I stopped being funny, would you still
like me? I paint my face,
wear a colorful coat trimmed in bells, I dance, laugh, shout.
A frantic stream of clever words,
a circus that begs you to keep looking.
All eyes on me. Are you looking?
Louder, louder, you're losing interest.
Say something funny. Quick!
Say something
funny. If you turn away, you'll never look back again.
My mind shrieks for witness.
Eyes on me mean I exist.

I smile wider, cheery, frenzied.
Words tumble out, thoughtless, witless, mildly amusing.
You laugh.
I watch you.
That's good.
Laughter eases the difficulty of my presence.
Your gaze bends my back, too heavy; my knees wobble.
Please stop looking at me.
Someone else speaks. You smile and turn away.
You're not looking.
I don't exist.

PUBLIC FIGURE #1 REBEKAH MCCALLUM

You guys, my life is like so hard.

My photographer got into a car accident today, and I get like why she couldn't come in to work, but it's like hella inconsiderate that she didn't make it a priority to be here. But like, I'm so thankful for you guys because it's such a supportive community. I'm literally sobbing right now.

One sec. I'm so sorry, I have to put in AirPods so that my Karen mom won't judge me for listening to Doja Cat, like GOSH, I'm just sponsoring a strong female artist with queen energy. I can't wait to move out next year when I'm thirty-two. I just feel so emotionally abused. I'm basically like a Martyn or saint or whatever.

Everyone is always like, "OMG! It must be so easy to be a digital content creator," and I'm like, "UGH! You don't even understand the amount of anxiety and criticism I experience daily, like, it's so much pressure." Sometimes I can't even read through the comments because of all the hatred and gaslighting. But thank goodness, Kiara Sky reflective glitter nails always look stunning (link in my bio and use my code for 20% off!!!).

It's not easy to look this good all the time and wear crop tops in the snow. Even my underwear is sponsored right now, but no one appreciates my career. My mom was literally in the waiting room for her chemotherapy and never even thought to get a candid of me reading the magazine while we waited. The lighting was snatched, and I literally had the caption picked out and everything. "We're both Cancers LOL" would have absolutely popped off. So insensitive! I cannot.

Fineeee! I'm turning it off. You're so rude.

Thanks for coming to my grandma's funeral vlog!! Like and follow for Part Two!!



SUNSET AT VILLA BELLA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BAILEY BROWN

MURDERED UNDER CAMBRIDGE SAMANTHA BROOKS

My first experience in the Boston subway system, called “the T” because saying “the T” is way cooler than “the train” or “the subway,” went as my mother expected: I nearly died. At Central station under Cambridge, I stood in line waiting to buy a T pass amongst a million other people who were all somehow supposed to fit in the subway cars when a woman with wide eyes came out of nowhere and shoved hard into my back. When I flinched, she turned and snarled at me before turning back toward the thin platform.

I assumed she was on drugs or that she had had a rough life and had trust issues or that she was just having a really off day, and I tried to shrug it off as “a real city-life experience” that I could tell my friends and family when I got home as one of those “You won’t believe this!” type of stories.

I stepped onto the platform and scanned the crowd when I saw her staring at my face with eyes that wouldn’t focus. She began weaving through herds of people, her body lopsided from the weight of her backpack slung over one arm, her feet moving as if consuming the ground. I kept walking and told myself that I am a paranoid narcissist for assuming that this woman was walking specifically toward me. As the gap between us closed, I noticed her hands: one gripped her backpack strap, the other was hidden in her pocket. She was still staring, but I continued to move forward. I was on the side nearest the tracks.

I could hear the train wheels squealing on the rails as she made her way right to me and plunged her finger into my side. Neither of us stopped moving. Then, she was past me, behind me, and I kept going as the train screeched to a stop. I didn’t think much about it until later that night when I saw the bruise on my ribs.

I chalked up the whole experience to “I was poked at the subway station” because then I could tell the story as if the whole experience was actually funny.

“How crazy!” I would say. “I got poked, POKED, waiting for the subway.”

ONE SIZE FITS ALL GABRIELLE MORGAN

“Want to lose that pesky fat in just two weeks?”

The yellow-clad bird woman squawks from my television.

Black lava pools in my tear ducts.
The wing paints my lash line,
burning with every blink.
Fake lash loosens, stabbing my eyelid.

Spandex too tight constricts
my breath, compressing my stomach,
smoothing and shaping me into
the woman I am told to be.

My chest fights against its own weight.
The straps threaten to snap,
pulling against the pressure,
refusing to comply with the laws of gravity.

The balls of my feet are tender.
My heels: raw, blistered.
Toes tightly packed,
a claustrophobic cluster of flesh.

BURNING WITCHES CARSON CAWTHON

We teach young girls to scream “Fire!” instead of “Rape!”

People are more likely to help if they feel that they, too, are in imminent danger.

The building is burning, and our sisters walk its halls.

We turn our heads to the sky and wonder why the air smells of smoke.

FICTION

STRA RELI

I pushed my cherry-red grocery buggy into the cereal aisle, and as that Target cart swerved, the soft glide was delicious. Those four wheels must not have been touching the spotless tile because it hovered. Man, it hovered. I pushed the cart further down the aisle, the twenty-four pack of Dasani water bottles already loaded, not even daring to make a squeak on this milk-smooth red carriage, and I got right beside my cereal. The same Special K cereal, beautiful in its purple box, which had composed my breakfast ever since I graduated college, moved out of my grandmother's house, and got my own apartment: all two years ago. I prided myself in being a man of tradition.

Just a few feet down from the cereal, a younger guy was looking at the oatmeal, humming to himself a song I'd heard earlier that day on the radio. I'd quickly turned the station.

Pastor Thulk of my congregation at the First Den of Bucktown had preached a sermon on the dangers and perversion of modern religious music. "This new age of music has taken words that are meant to glorify our great Reptusalome and have adulterated them with a theme of this fleshly and emotional world. My dear congregation, I implore you, don't give place to the world's melody. It does not please Reptusalome." All the men had agreed with a loud "yes!" I did too.

My presence in that cereal aisle seemed to inspire the young guy to transition from humming to softly singing. I caught a few of the words, whispered in a deep, passionate melody, "You are, we are, I am Your only. Oh, Reptus, Reptus, Reptus, I praise You now." He picked up one, two cylindrical containers of oats as he sang to himself, just loud enough for me to hear.

I rolled my eyes, apparently louder than I meant, because my ridicule seemed to have caught his attention.

"Hello, my brother," he said. He had short black hair, kind eyes, was just an inch taller than me. I assumed he was a college student by the university lanyard he fiddled with in his hands. "My name is Zemir." He held up his hands instantly and wagged his head laughing, as if it was standard for him to do so when introducing himself. "I know, I know, why did my parents have to name me after the Last Scaled Prophet of the scriptures? I'm still figuring that one out. But that aside, what's your name, my brother? Have you prayed to Reptus today?"

Reptus. There was a scripture which spoke of being careless in referencing the Almighty Reptusalome. I never could understand how people could say the name so irreverently, could compress Its name as if for their own arrogant convenience.

"Ethaniel," I answered first, with a courteous smile. Then, in that eager way of affirming that you're indeed very religious to someone who's just asked if you're religious, I said, "Oh, I pray to the High Reptusalome every day. Every morning. It is quite good to me, Zemir. Thank you for asking."

I turned around with my Target buggy, two boxes of Special K neatly set by the Dasanis, ready to depart when Zemir continued, more relaxed than before, "Right on, brother Ethaniel." He reached out his hand to shake mine; I noticed along his forearm was tattooed a Reptusile verse in serpentine script, speaking of Reptusalome's using Its earthen disciples. I didn't think it was righteous for one to mark one's skin with religious texts. I didn't condemn him for it, but I knew it was wrong. I knew because the men of the First Den

of Bucktown, many of the older generation now passed on, disapproved of it, and if anyone was close to Reptusalome, if there was anyone who lived a life pleasing to the Creator, it was them. If I had to choose anyone to agree with, it'd be them.

Zemir continued with the excitement of an extrovert recently saved from a desert island, "What a coincidence! My parents named me after the Last Scaled Prophet, yours named you after the Forty-Fourth Scaled Prophet! Oh my Reptus, it's like we were meant to meet today. You congregate with any other Reptusiles anywhere around here?"

I was shocked he knew Ethaniel was the Forty-Fourth Scaled Prophet, but then I became aggravated by his using Reptusalome's name in a manner so brazenly casual. Of course, I didn't say anything—what could I have said, without hurting his feelings? I'm sure he meant well, but it wasn't right.

"Yeah, I go to the First Den of Bucktown every Saturday. Well, anytime the doors are open really."

That last comment made Zemir laugh, but his mouth had been prone to a great smile since he approached me by the cereals.

"You mean that old place is still going?" Zemir asked earnestly, which offended something deep inside of me. If only he knew the great people who lived and were buried there. If only he knew the many times Reptusalome gave a blessing to that congregation. "Man, brother, you gotta come down to Wet Rocks with me, down on Main Street. Speaker Stroven—he's the speaker for the den's youth—is having a great service today. Oh my! How perfect it is that I've run into you today, as if Reptus Itself orchestrated it. You have anything happenin' today, my brother?"

I looked down the other side of the aisle, saw how much tile was left for me to pass over until I could get out of the cereals. I looked at my watch, not to read it, just out of an instinctual habit whenever someone brings up something temporally relevant in conversation. I could have said no, would have if I truly was busy, but there was an instantaneous sprouting of opportunity. A chance for me to witness the evil I'd always been warned of. Experience is the best teacher, and in that aisle I resolved that this was a chance Reptusalome was giving me to be more assured in my own beliefs, to be more discerning of others' deception.

I shook my head, answered, "I don't believe I'm doing anything. I'd love to join you."

Zemir clapped twice in celebration, stomped once, and pointed upward. He explained, "that's what we at Wet Rocks do when we're happy! When our wondrous Reptus does something good for us miniscule creatures."

I left the aisle after Zemir promised to meet me up front at the self-checkout, confidently finished my grocery list, then saw him at the front, waiting at the last automatic register where he said he'd be. After checking out, he accompanied me to my car, helped load my groceries, then put the address for Wet Rocks Worship Temple into my phone as well as my cell number into his.

"I'll send you a text now so that I know everything worked all right," Zemir said, as if doubting I'd give him my actual number. My phone vibrated. I looked down, read, "Tonight will be IT!!! PRAISE REPTUS!!!! (raised hands emoji)(praying hands emoji)(lizard emoji)"

I tried to crack a smile to appease him, to keep him from thinking that I was despising this interaction and was having second thoughts about indulging in this opportunity to experience "the dark deceptions of this world" for myself. If there was anything I hated, it would've been the lizard emoji. An evil way this generation chose to symbolize Reptusalome. Irreverence to Reptusalome is more absurd than a waterless planet whose main population consists of fish; if Reptusalome wouldn't condone others being irreverent to It, why should I?

"I could have said no, would have if I truly was busy, but there was an instantaneous sprouting of opportunity. A chance for me to witness the evil I'd always been warned of."

"Right on, brother Ethaniel." Zemir laughed, shaking my hand and pulling me into a hug. I felt something in my palm as he walked away, looked down to find a one hundred dollar bill. By the time I processed his gift and made an effort to refuse it, he was singing aloud and driving away.

As I got in my car and drove away, my hands had a slight quiver in them: the kind of sensation that happens when you agree to do something entirely out of your comfort zone, but you know it's too late to not do it, so you're left with the necessity of fulfilling your own commitment, despite how desperately you might wish against it.

I closed my eyes when I got back to my house, thought about the people of my own congregation; my own den. My heart dropped when I considered what the men of the den—men I looked up to, men I aimed to be at least halfway like—would think if they saw me going to Wet Rocks. They'd think I had faltered, fallen to the temptations of a world more popular in its religiosity and false servitude to Reptusalome.

I would explain to them that this would merely be an experience, I thought to myself. I would convince them that I don't like Wet Rocks, never would. Then, like a sudden twitch, the thought arose: what if Wet Rocks isn't that bad? What if I like it, or maybe not like it, but it's not bad at all and it's simply, like how I've heard many people say, just another way of worship?

I looked to the passenger seat of my car where I had my Scaled Scriptures bound in a milky granite box. I opened it, looking at the pages but not reading them. They were distant from me. Yet being right there, I could not read them. But I heard the men's voices from my den: "It's in these pages, young Ethaniel," those men would encourage me week by week, meeting by meeting, "that you'll find the answers to life. There are many deceivers in this world: men and women who claim to be Reptusile, but their practice is folly. It does not honor the Almighty Reptusalome. Take heed of false doctrine, my dear brother."

I turned page after page, but I could not read what the Scaled Scriptures said; I began to weep, wondering why they were empty to me. But again,

the voices of the men of my den came, this time, it was that of my dear Pastor Thulk: “Ethaniel, as you go out into this world, you will find a version of these Scriptures portrayed, but it is not true to Reptusalome. Cast those away that speak the name of Reptusalome in that wrong way, and run in the other direction. Keep to the path your parents gave their lives for, and Reptusalome will bless you.”

I can't go to Wet Rocks, I barked in my mind. Then, *But I must*. Perhaps then I will be able to read the Scaled Scriptures, just like how the men of Bucktown can.

My phone's navigating voice—a British male I named Sal M. Ander—announced my arrival as I pulled into a large concrete slab of a parking lot, crowded as it was. There were at least one hundred vehicles filling the majority of the parking spaces, all facing the monolithic building of Wet Rocks Worship Temple, a sculpture twice the size of First Den. I knew of Wet Rocks before I met Zemir, knew of it being more of a modern, more subjective interpretation on Reptusile doctrine. A place more prone to religious deception. Wet Rocks was no place I was interested in; for all I knew, Reptusalome might have been displeased with my going there, or, It might have been pleased with my going to understand my convictions through personal experience rather than indoctrinated wisdom.

I found a free space beside Zemir's car. He reserved it for me with his body, standing there so no one could pull their vehicle in between those two yellow spray painted lines. When he saw me pull in, he jumped up, clapped twice, stomped once, pointed his finger to the heavens, and didn't stop laughing until I got out of my car.

“My brother—goodness—Ethaniel, I'm so glad you came. You look quite dapper tonight! Good enough to bury, my grandma would say!” He gave me a few pats on my back, leading me toward the front door. I didn't understand what he meant by his words until we got inside. Then I felt heavy with unfamiliarity, clad in an overbearing feeling of, *I don't belong here*.

I was the only one in a full-scaled suit. Before I left my house that evening, I had stood and stared in the mirror for five minutes. I thought I looked good, as I would on any Saturday morning at First Den of Bucktown. Dapper, like Zemir said. My full length body suit of forest green stretched with outlines of emerald green shapes resembling scales. My hair was held tight in place by a form-fitting hood with sharp, beautiful shapes on either side to resemble large reptilian eyes. This was what everyone wore at the First Den of Bucktown when meeting for the Saturday congregation. But I was the only one in the entire building dressed this nicely. Not even the evening's speaker wore the scaled suit. Most outfits were crude variations of what I wore. It was appalling, but I didn't mention anything about it. Some were in cut-off scaled legs; some had on lizard tooth jewelry in their ears and noses, on their foreheads and lips.

“This is epic, isn't it?” Zemir celebrated, looking back at me to make sure I was still following him to a seat in the main auditorium. It was like the whole den knew him as a celebrity; the other worshippers looked at me with a grin of appreciation, welcoming me as a first-time visitor to their humble

congregation. One girl we passed by, with a tattoo of a five-headed lizard going across her cheeks, had on a sleeveless T-shirt that read, “I'm cold-blooded. Are you?”

My heartbeat increased substantially. I don't know if it was the general bass-beat ambiance that was being thundered in the main assembly auditorium by three drums on stage—it wasn't right for drums to be in dens—or if it was all the bizarre outfits people were wearing to come and supposedly worship Reptusalome. I wasn't judging. Believe me, I wasn't. I had no right to, for Reptusalome is the Judge. But I did not at all feel right there. Much of me was ready to dash out of the building as quickly as possible, for surely, Reptusalome was preparing to destroy this place by a devouring acid as It did many times to those who falsely professed Its name in the Scaled Scriptures.

“I'm cold-blooded. Are you?”

Zemir gestured to our seat for the evening, allowed me to sit on the chair closest to the aisle walkway that led either farther up to the center stage or farther back to the exit door. I kept the latter in mind, just in case everyone decided to stand up and start hissing. I've heard of dens that do that.

“Get ready to have the time of your life, brother Ethaniel. It's like the prophet Zemir—” he winked “—said in the Scripture, ‘Ready yourselves for the coming of great things. All will be pleasant to those that step out from underneath the dry stones and choose to abide on the wet rocks.’”

I think I know what he was trying to get at: that I was about to be so infatuated with this coming experience that I'd be caused to change den memberships. But the men of Bucktown knew that verse too; they told me its true context, so whatever he had just said was wholly corrupt. That's what the men would say. I was taught that the context strictly regarded the last generations of Earth, the people who Reptusalome had chosen to represent the rainless days of approaching end.

I didn't question him about it though. I knew he was meaning well. He was sincere. Sincerely wrong.

“Good evening everyone,” said someone with a microphone on stage, their outfit having the resemblance of a thick, lime tail wrapping their body multiple times. “Please lie down to give honor to Reptus.”

Reptusalome, I corrected to myself. *The Mighty Creator's name is Reptusalome*.

“Oh, Reptus,” the emcee prayed, with a fervent passion. Everyone in the congregation repeated, “Oh, Reptus!”

As I prostrated myself, I shook my head, accidentally visibly disapproving. I don't think anyone saw it though. Zemir had his eyes closed and his tongue fountaining out as he aimed his head upward.

“Reptus, we are You. You are us. Let your hiss fall upon us as we direct every substance of ourselves to your scales. Oh, Reptus, grant us the patience and agility to be better Reptusiles. Amen.”

After the invocation, four musicians and two singers, all in bright neon green, took the stage, performed two songs, and attempted to summon a rapturous attitude from the assembly. I watched, moved a few inches away from Zemir as he frolicked in place to the music so that our elbows would quit bumping into each other, and thought to myself what the men of Bucktown would think. Reptusalome is not pleased with this. The Scaled Deity is not working here. This is wrong. Then I had a burst of fear akin to the one which hit me in my car after meeting Zemir: *what would the men of Bucktown think of me for coming to this place? Oh, Reptusalome, please forgive me!* But I wasn't thinking about Reptusalome.

“Ethaniel,” Zemir whispered to me, the musicians exiting the stage with their last song's conclusion, “isn't this the best thing ever?”

I smiled and nodded.

Once the service was over, a speaker having taught the congregation about Reptus's kindness toward those that share their allegorical scales with other Reptusiles, Zemir compelled me to meet the speaker, Stroven, by the stage up front.

“Ethaniel, please, he would *love* to meet you!” Zemir said, shaking my shoulder and pointing fiercely at Stroven.

Although I tried to resist, I finally relented, deciding it easier to accommodate Zemir's eagerness than to combat it. I thought of the one hundred dollar bill, understood that I was morally obligated to reciprocate some kindness to Zemir, at least for this evening.

We walked up front and waited for speaker Stroven to finish speaking with the last congregant, at which moment Zemir propelled me forward. I lost my balance at the unexpected shove and fell into Stroven, his arms stabilizing me. He was wearing long jade stoles on which the most recently conceived emblem of Reptusalome—an outstretched lizard hand—was sewn on the thick fabric.

“Wo-ho! My fellow brother, careful with your feet!” Stroven laughed as he set me back aright.

“Thank you,” I said. My insides were fuming. I was frustrated at the kindness of this man who just spoke words so distorted from Reptusalome's original texts, frustrated at Zemir for bringing me up here, frustrated at myself for having ever come to Wet Rocks and having assuredly displeased the great Deity.

“No gratitude necessary,” Stroven refuted. “I am but pleasing Reptus, serving and planting firm my brother when he slips.”

How could you speak so religiously yet take the name of Reptusalome so vilely? I wondered.

“Speaker Stroven,” Zemir put his hands tight on my shoulders, massaged them as he introduced me. “This is our brother, Ethaniel. I found him this morning at Target, just on Clear Avenue, and he came here with me tonight.”

Stroven smiled at Zemir's excitement, nodding his head soberly, like one preparing to serve a steaming cup of jasmine tea. “Reptus smiles on you often, Zemir. As for you, brother Ethaniel, named after the Scaled Prophet known

for Reptus's message of intolerance of the infidel, do you have a den you attend regularly? We would love to have you here at Wet Rocks.”

I opened my voice to answer, but Stroven continued with kind abruptness. I scratched the side of my head sheepishly as I looked for something to do with my hands and felt the rubber eyes that were designed on the form-fitting hood I forgot I was wearing.

“You know,” Stroven said, “I've always admired ones who could pull off a good traditional suit—though they're out of taste here with the younger members of the den. Maybe you'll make me bring mine out again someday.”

I laughed, twice. The contrast of emotions I felt with this man—how dreadfully I disagreed with his interpretation of Reptusalome and how sincerely I appreciated his geniality toward me—quarreled in my brain. I wondered what the people of First Den would have thought of Stroven. I wondered what Reptusalome, if it were here in physical scales, would say to this man who professes to declare the Reptusile doctrine. I bet Stroven would wish he had his body suit on then. At least I would be pleasing to Reptusalome's sight, me being the only one in this entire Worship Temple who doesn't compress the name of the High and Scaly Deity and make it a form of slang. The only one who knows how to rightly dress for worshipping Its Scaliness. I stood a little taller at the thought, almost felt inclined to get on the tips of my toes.

“Ethaniel goes to the First Den of Bucktown,” Zemir jumped to explain. I noticed more and more how young the college student seemed, how immature I must have appeared when I was his age. “I think after today though,” he winked, clicked his tongue, “he might be changing dens. There were some good stones in that message today, Speaker Stroven.”

“I stood a little taller at the thought, almost felt inclined to get on the tips of my toes.”

“First Den?” Stroven questioned, and by how he said it, I felt like my feet needed to become roots, burrowing down to the ground, preparing for a sudden storm. His mannerism, while keeping that same smile which was present on the stage, changed somehow. An unseen shift from sufferable conversation to burrowed animosity. “That explains the full suit,” he scanned me head to heel, as if he hadn't just complimented the outfit moments ago. He had a pious look in his eyes as his last smile spoke silent pity. “Well, I'm glad you found yourself here. *Please*, come again. We welcome members from all walks of life.”

Stroven bowed his head, wished us all the peace of Reptus, and exited the auditorium.

Zemir stared after him in awe, as if a legend was departing from us, then continued to challenge me to come back next week, encouraged me to pray more fervently to the loving and caring Reptus, and that, if I ever needed anything, he'd be at my doorstep within two claps and a stomp.

When I returned to my car, I stared in the rear view mirror, looking at myself in my lizard-scaled hood. I pulled it on more tightly, smiled, then shook my head, laughed, and shook my head again. I deleted Zemir's contact from my phone, blocked the number, then grabbed the milky granite box from my passenger seat. I opened the Scaled Scriptures and turned page to page, sure to find new wisdom.

I couldn't read a single word.



JULIANNA'S ANTICIPATION
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS BY COREY MANSFIELD

FAST FALLS THE EVENTIDE REBEKAH MCCALLUM

From nightly death I wake,
affronted with yesterday's shame.
Like watering the grass at noontide,
my best efforts will soon evaporate.

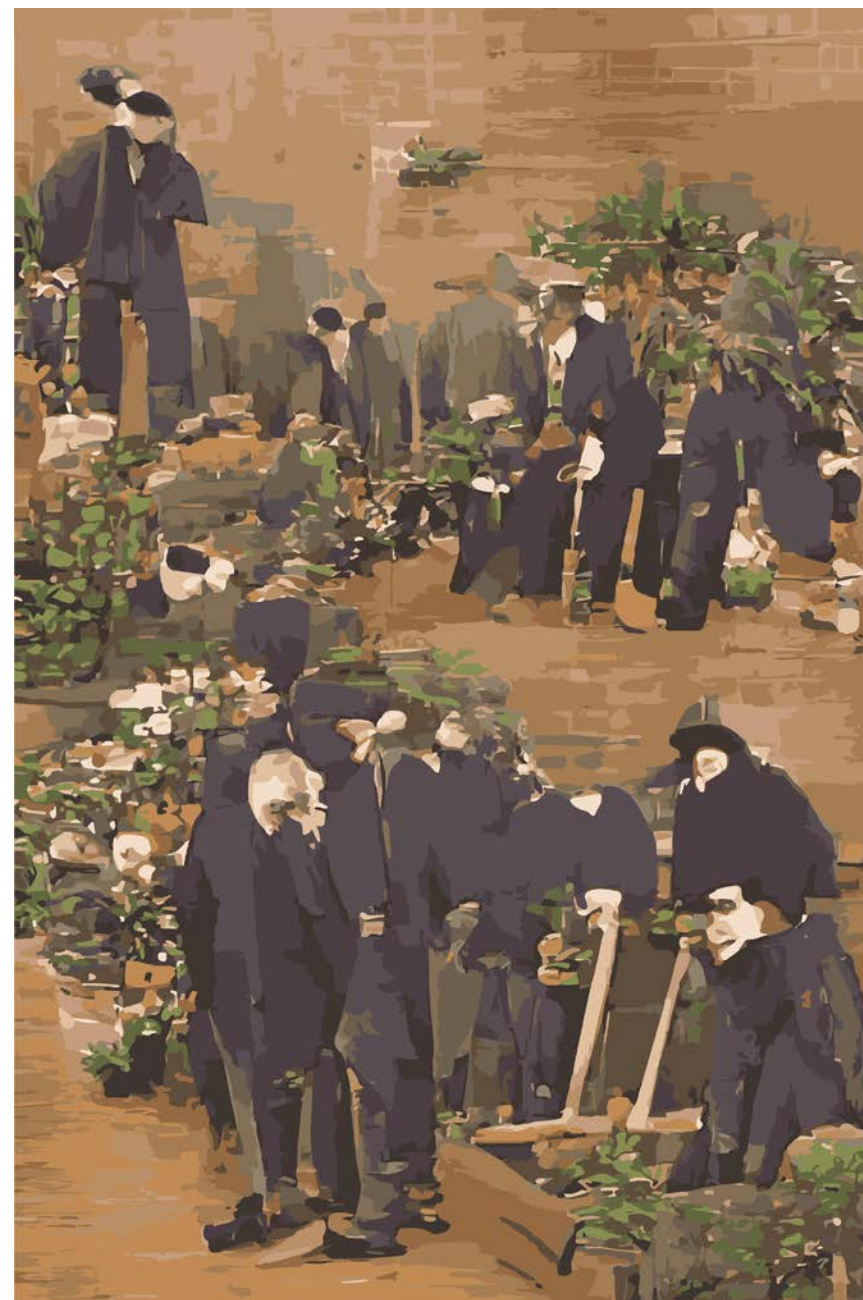
Week-old leftovers,
maggotting in the garbage pail.
The whole house feels like an unmade bed,
open cabinets, stacks of unread mail.

The much-lined Bible before me
seems but a dusty tome.
Hoping to find You in the pages,
knocking, but the abiding God is not home.

The hottest shower cannot purify this poor failure,
unclean, unclean, from without and within,
a tragic waste of time and space,
my pillow cannot smother the din.

The honeyed whispers of the enemy,
"Thy sins have hindered His hand."
The noose has been woven, Worry's gavel drops,
condemned, I dare not contend.

Baptized in a velvet darkness,
as the carpet burns my bent knees,
"Let go, let God," friends' refrain drones on,
mere Aspirin, while His scalpel slices me.



SEVERAL MEN ATTENDING THE FUNERAL OF A GARDENER
DIGITAL COLLAGE BY NOAH BARKER



TAN JIE
CHARCOAL ON PAPER WITH ACRYLIC PAINT BY CHARLIE CLASSE



BAI
CHARCOAL ON PAPER WITH ACRYLIC PAINT BY CHARLIE CLASSE

FICTION

S L O W

Seth was looking intently at his phone, GPS pulled up, as if the driver did not know where he was going.

“Right here is fine.”

The car stopped, a beeping metronome rang while Seth got out. The driver sighed in resignation.

The young man quickly walked away from the car and down a hill, with purpose, although he hardly knew where he was going. Number twenty-six, twenty-seven . . . Only a few hundred meters separated Seth from his destination.

“3.141592653589793238462 . . .”

To calm his shaking hands, Seth was reciting the digits of pi, a trick he had picked up from his father. Born in a family of scientists, he quickly showed an extraordinary ability to understand the world around him. Even the most advanced theories could not keep him seated at his chair for long, and after years of academic success, he got bored.

By then, however, most people had acquired at least some social skills. When he finally deemed people worthy of his interest, he had already been categorized by his peers. As most societies do, his had pushed him down the mountain of social classes—one that is particularly difficult to climb. He knew in intricate details a world that did not know him.

“ . . . 643383279502884197169 . . .”

Days before, Seth’s uncle Jason had given him the hope of meeting someone who could relate to him.

“You know, in med school, I had a friend, Hitori Nakamura. He was a lot like you,” Jason had said, interrupting a prolonged silence at the dinner table. “The guy literally could not comprehend social cues.”

“Jason!” the boy’s mom choked, “You can’t say those things!”

“Oh come on Maria, he knows exactly what I’m talking about. Anyway, after a couple of years, I don’t know what happened, but his personality changed completely. One day, he pissed his pants anytime a girl talked to him, the next, he could have gotten any one of them. He ended up with . . . what was her name? Salami? Something weird and French. Salomé. She was hot, I’m telling you. That girl could get it.”

“Oh please, do teach my son your misogynistic ways.”

“She was also smarter than any of us ever were. She was the only one who could entertain a conversation with Hitori for hours. During parties, they would stay in a corner, talking about the way we perceive time and how they could change that. You should talk to him, I’m sure he’d have enough things to tell you to shut you up for at least a couple of hours.”

Jason laughed. Maria did not.

The only valuable information Seth had found on Hitori Nakamura was his personal address. Both he and Jason thought it was odd, but Seth’s uncle assured him that Hitori and Salomé were likely just having too much fun to conform to the ways of the world. Seth fantasized about a mentor who could finally challenge him—one who could also show him the path to a woman’s heart.

“ . . . 399375105820974944592.”

There it was: number eighty-four, Waterman Street. The wooden house looked like it was falling apart. Seth let his hands fall to his sides and exhaled sharply;

there had to be a mistake. This could not be the house of a neurologist. He stood in front of the cracked pathway for minutes before a neighbor poked her head out of her window.

“Ya looking for something, hon?”

“No, ma’am. I just thought this was the house of my uncle’s friend. I suppose I was mistaken.”

“Well, who’s said friend?”

Rude of her to ask, Seth thought. After looking around, the old lady slammed the window shut and appeared moments later at her entrance. She swiftly walked to Seth, lifting her shoulders with every step in an almost caricatural way.

“Who’s your uncle’s friend?” she insisted. She looked at him with a raised eyebrow and a large grin.

“Dr. Nakamura. Not that it matters, he clearly does not live here.”

The lady’s smile vanished. Her breathing accelerated as she looked at Seth, this time with a worried look.

“Why do you want anything to do with him?”

She paused, eyelids shut, before whispering, “Hon, you don’t want no business with this man. None of us have seen him in years. Oh, his poor wife, she was so lovely, she . . .”

She stopped for a second, more agitated, then grabbed Seth’s arm and gently but firmly pushed him away.

“I’m telling you, this house has bad spirits trapped in them. I don’t know what he did to her, but something happened there, ten, twelve years ago. None of us have seen either of them since then. Go back to school, you really should not be poking around here. Please.”

“3.141592653589793238462. . .”

He had come too far to give up now, so, hesitantly, he crossed the front yard and knocked on the old door. Paint chipped off with every loud tap. On the fourth, the door opened a little. Seth waited in the doorframe.

“Hello?”

His voice was trembling. His heart started pounding louder in his chest. The thrill of potentially meeting Dr. Nakamura and the neighbor’s mysterious warning were pumping adrenaline into his bloodstream.

He took a step forward.

“ . . . 643383279502884197169 . . .”

“Dr. Nakamura? My name is Seth, I am Jason Houston’s nephew. Your friend from college?”

What in the world happened here? Seth was puzzled. The wallpaper was falling off the walls and a thick layer of dust was coating everything in the hallway. The place looked abandoned. Frames were hung, plant pots were neatly placed around them. Coats were hanging behind the door, keys were thrown on a small table next to them. Shoes were carefully put under a heater. Most blinds were closed, but they were old enough that light was passing through them.

Seth silently walked through the hallway, both anxious and astonished.

“ . . . 39937510582097494459 . . .”

He whispered the calming numbers, fidgeting with the buttons of his coat,

while entering what had to be the living room. Nothing made sense; a couple of glasses were on a coffee table in front of a couch stained by the sunlight. An old TV was set in front of it. Seth noticed that the room was tastefully decorated, but incredibly dirty. Clouds of dust were dancing in spirals with each breath he took. He coughed, pushing the particles away from himself in unpredictable twirls. Hundreds of books were organized by color on wooden shelves.

“Dr. Nakamura?”

Nothing. Seth was the only disturbance in this room frozen in time, a time that he assumed was twelve years ago, according to the old neighbor’s story.

“ . . . 23078164062862089986280 . . .”

He walked in the kitchen. No dishes in the sink, a couple of plates were placed in a drying rack. There was no trace of anyone living there for the past decade. Seth pushed the first door he saw and jumped at the loud cracking noise it let out. Instinctively, he reached for a light switch, found one, activated it; no light turned on. He realized this made sense, since there was most likely no one paying for electricity anymore. Some rays of light were poking through the old blinds. After a moment of adjustment, Seth could see, but not understand, what was in front of him.

“ . . . 3482534211706798214808.”

A pile of . . . machinery? Electronics? Was taking at least half of the room. In the middle of the pile were chairs, bricks, and a baseball bat. The one half was as tidy as the other was a mess. A large bed, made, was pushed in the corner. Next to it, on a bedside table carved in wood, sat the only picture that was not covered by dust—a man with perfectly dressed dark hair was lovingly looking into the blue eyes of a shorter woman with red curls. She looked smitten; they both did. They were quite handsome, Seth thought, and he recognized Hitori Nakamura from grad school pictures he had found online. The neurologist was holding Salome Noé; Seth had found a record, published fifteen years ago, of their marriage.

A couple of books, the only ones that were not color-coded, caught his attention. When he approached, he realized they were journals.

The two volumes had a leather cover bound to a thick set of brown pages. He opened the top one. The first page read in a messy handwriting: “*Property of Hitori Nakamura. Just because she made me do it!*” At the bottom of the page, a different hand wrote in a much clearer way: “*Love you H! Thank youuuuu,*” next to a heart.

Seth quickly flipped through the pages; entries of every day from July 5th, 2009 to May 16th of the following year were kept in them.

In the other journal, belonging to Salomé, records of every same day but the last one were also kept in the pages. This one also had drawings, doodles, and sketches next to the written memories.

July 5th, 2009, Hitori’s journal.

“*Well, I don’t know how to do this, but can I really refuse to do anything Sal asks me to do? She said we should have done this three years ago, after our wedding. I don’t know how we would have gotten the time, to be honest. Between the house renovation and the clinic, we were both very busy! She says it’s good for*

us to keep traces of our lives, just in case. I asked just in case what? And she just laughed and said 'just in case!' Alright, well, just in case, this is weird and I don't know how to keep a journal. I guess that's all I have to say.

Dr. HN”

Who signs their journal entries with “Dr.?” Seth suppressed a quiet laugh. It wasn't like Seth had any particular fluency in written emotional expression either. He and Hitori were in the same boat in that regard.

He sat on the edge of the bed. A puff of dust flew around him.

Salomé apparently had thought the same thing.

July 5th, 2009, Salomé's journal.

“Journal, I am so excited to finally have convinced H to do this! What a dork, he signed his writing, title and everything. No one is going to read this H! No one but us. I found a beautiful ivy plant I added to the shelf in the entryway, it looks perfect! I have my little routine in the morning, I go around the house watering all of our babies. H was such a good sport with the decoration. It's just so lovely now! It took us time, but I think we are finally actually settling in. Tonight, to thank him for journaling with me, I am making his favorite type of ramen; I got the recipe from the owner of the Mei Jin; he owed me one. I am so excited! He's going to love me! I hope he already does, at least as much as I love him.”

Seth felt a certain measure of shame. He probably should have put the journals down; this was a textbook invasion of privacy. Even he knew that. But what happened to the happy couple? As much as embarrassment urged him to leave, he also needed to know. He flipped through more pages in pursuit of further hints.

“This was a textbook invasion of privacy.”

August 8th, Hitori's journal.

“In retrospect, I am glad Sal made me do this. This is kind of fun. Some days, we let each other see what we wrote, others, we don't. Spending time with her is so much better than anything else I have ever done. Even research at the clinic feels a little . . . eh, when I have to leave her and spend the day away from her. She is absolutely excelling at work. She got a grant to conduct the research on stress inhibitors for stroke survivors. I have to say, I am a little jealous. Of what she is doing, what she is coming up with, and of her coworkers who get to spend the day working with her. She blesses me in ways I could not have imagined. She also got this new set of under . . .”

Seth turned pink and flipped a few more pages.

September 15th.

“When she's happy, she dances in front of the bow window. I could watch her for hours, the way she caresses the air with her fingertips, the way her hips move . . . it's hypnotizing. She has a grace I cannot even fully comprehend; it feels like it's so much it's overwhelming. When she sees me staring, she laughs and stops, but I'm pretty sure she knows I have been watching her the whole time. I don't think I deserve her.

HN”

November 3rd.

“That woman is a sorceress, and she has me so deep in her spell that I don't think I can do anything about it. I don't even want to. I was even expecting us to fight, at least a little bit. Even the way she prays is beautiful. It's funny, she still does not know I spent months working on myself, to get out of my shell, because I was so crazy about her. I just could not stop thinking about her, and at one point, I figured I would never get to be with her if I did not actually talk to her.

HN”

Seth smiled. The pages of Hitori's journal were filled with the most flattering descriptions of Salomé, so much so that, as he was reading, Seth was starting to feel warm inside picturing the researcher's wife. Her charming voice, enchanting curves, bewitching curls falling on her bare chest, her light touch, soft skin, voluptuous lips and marvelous smile, her fascinating theories, amusing jokes, exceptional understanding, and excellent taste; everything about her—her small and big attentions, her dreams and worries, were carefully written out. As time went on, Hitori apparently grew fonder of journaling, and his accounts became even longer and more detailed than his wife's. Some of them were more . . . descriptive than Seth was comfortable with, and he felt like he had gone too far. He put the first journal down and turned his attention back to the second one.

November 16th, Salomé's journal.

“Journal, we are getting so close to Christmas. I am freaking out!!! I still cannot figure out what to get H. Mom and Dad are going to come down to visit us for the Holidays. I could not be more excited. I also have not had the chance to tell Dad about work. He is going to be so proud! As always, Hitori is an angel. He helps me a lot every time I get one of those head-splitting migraines and terrible stomach aches. I am so, so lucky. I bought him a new shirt that really compliments him. I'm telling you, Journal, he looks HOT. Whew, mama! How does he keep that figure when we both work so much? Well, I guess I help him a little bit on that side. Last night, he . . .”

Were all adult couples like this? Seth turned pink again. He really should not have been doing this. When he started reading the next entry, his blood froze.

January 17th, 2010.

“Journal, I don’t even know how to write this down. This time, H was the one to encourage me to write. He said it would make me feel better.

This morning, the results came back in. They found two tumors in my pelvis. I don’t know what to do. I know I am going to get through this—we are—but, what if . . . I don’t? The thought of breaking Hitori’s heart is somehow even more painful than the thought of having to leave him. On the way home, in the car, he was telling me about some trials being conducted in the Netherlands. Do I even have time to go there? Should I stay here, spend some time with my parents and with H? In any case, I have to be strong for him. He has been almost completely silent since being home. I need to make it for him, I still have time to fight this.”

Seth felt his heart drop. He did not even know the couple, and yet was devastated. *Is that what happened? Salomé died? Where was Dr. Nakamura then, had he . . . killed himself?* Seth quickly grabbed the first journal.

January 17th, Hitori’s journal.

“My heart aches more than it ever had. I am so, so scared. The X-rays show two tumors, most likely cancerous, in Sal’s pelvis. I don’t know what to do. I need to find a way to stop this, I can’t lose her.”

No signature.

The following pages looked more like notes, locations of trials, times of appointments, quick updates like, “another tumor found in stomach. I need to find a solution before it spreads too fast,” or “I just need more time.” In Salomé’s journal, there was no other mention of cancer; she had gone back to describing her everyday life and occupations. However, there was no mention of work either. The further Seth went in her memoir, the more she talked about Dr. Nakamura, how much she loved him, how much she was worried for him. Then . . . Nothing. On May 15th, hers just stopped, with no explanation, no goodbyes even. Seth was holding both open journals in his lap, terrified to know the development of the situation.

March 5th.

“After a brief moment of visible despair, she went back to being her calm, loving, rational self. She ponders around the house as if she has all the time in the world, watering plants, reading, sitting in the evening light at the window of our living room, looking at the sun setting on her last days. I try to capture in my mind the golden streaks shining on her pale complexion, giving it a warmth she is slowly losing. She looks at me for hours at a time, sometimes crying, but always smiling. I simply cannot bear the idea of losing her. Should we travel somewhere? Are there any medications being tested across the Atlantic? Should we spend our precious seconds doing all the things everyone else has years to enjoy, or holding each other, tightly, as to get a better grip on the line running between our palms? I have every idea and every motivation, and then my head and my heart are empty.”

March 10th.

“I spent the days I should have spent with Salomé buried in books, papers, journals, anything that could help me help her. ‘You cannot cheat with God,’ she told me yesterday, as if I am not fully willing to test that theory to its limits. As her health is degrading, so is my mental state. I feel unstable and I hate it, I should be there for her. Throughout all my manic episodes though, she remains by my side. I can’t look at her. I want to, but I can’t, I can’t face both the leaving of my wife and my failure to keep her where she belongs, next to me.”

More erratic notes.

Then there was March 18th.

“Time is our poison.

It slowly spreads in her bloodstream, like the sand of the Machiavellian hourglass above our heads.

Time is all that we have, and all that is being taken away from us.

Time is completely out of our grasp, and the more we keep our eyes on it cascading away, the faster it goes.

Time is completely out of our control.

Time is all I need to fix this.

Salomé and I had talked about the way the brain interprets time. A relativity not in the way that Einstein meant it, but rather, in the way that I could look at her for hours and not feel minutes. What if we could change the way we felt time? What if, somehow, I could give us days, years, lifetimes?

I think I can do it Sal.”

“You cannot cheat with God.”

The next notes described a complicated machine, formulas, materials, molecules, interactions. These went on for dozens of pages.

May 16th, 2010, final entry in Hitori’s journal.

“Sal. Salomé. Why did you ever want me to write? This was meant to be for us, not just for me. I can’t do this without you here.

I did it.

She kept telling me it wasn’t natural. She kept telling me to stop and to come to her, ‘before it’s too late.’ Either way, I felt like I was giving up on her, so I kept trying.

When I hooked her up to the machine, I was shaking so much I had to rewire her electrodes at least three times. She was crying, telling me that she loved me, that she was forever thankful. She told me we would meet in Heaven, and there we would have all the time in the world. She did not understand that I was too

scared to lose her to trust God. I wired myself next, sat in front of her, set the machine up. Ten minutes, a hundred hours. I looked her in the eyes, told her the truth, that I loved her more than I ever could express. I told her I wish she had read what I wrote about her. And I flipped the switch.

The first hours were . . . pure bliss. We know each other so well that we don't need words to communicate. Looking at each other was enough. She looked as beautiful as ever, even without her red hair. I did it. We were finally able to take our time.

Some things were unexpected. As I slowed our perception of time, I started to feel things in my body differently. I could almost feel electrical signals traveling throughout my nervous system, my blood running through my veins. I could feel my heart beating slowly, so slowly, and yet, I could see her, feel her against me. I spent what felt to us like hours fixating on every detail of her face, to remember it as accurately as possible. I saw a tear grow in her eye, and travel down the valleys of her cheeks before slowly dropping, suspended in the air for hundreds of minutes.

Something went terribly wrong. I don't know what happened; I think she was just in pain from the medication. By making her perception of time so much longer, I forced her to live through that pain for . . . days. I could not do anything. I saw her smile change into a grimace in slow motion, her eyes imploring me to make it stop.

“I had to wait and witness my own invention slowly kill the person I would have died a hundred times for.”

I couldn't.

I had no way to.

I had to wait and witness my own invention slowly kill the person I would have died a hundred times for.

When it finally ended, she collapsed from exhaustion.

I tried reviving her in vain.

I tore the machine down, as if it was the creation's fault and not the creator's. Obliterated it.

I held on to her for actual hours. No matter how much I hugged her, she would not come back.

The emergencies draped her and took her away. I reached for the gun next to our beds and was ready.

Before I pull the trigger, I need to try one last thing. It's going to take days since I just broke the machine. I need to at least try.

I'm so sorry, Sal. I love you so much it hurts.”

Seth was shaking again.

“3.1415 . . .”

He shot up, blinded; his vision was tunneling, mind racing around in a spiral. Mouth half opened, he struggled to keep his composure, trying to understand the foreign emptiness he suddenly felt winding tight in his chest.

When he finally calmed down, it was with the realization that he needed to talk to Jason. He had to call him, explain everything he had just read. He felt lightheaded, suffocating. The room was spinning. He had a hard time breathing when he reached for his phone in his pocket, looking down.

He noticed it.

At the other side of the room, there was a door.

Under that door, a yellow light was projected for a couple of inches on the floor.

Undeniably artificial light.

Everything stopped spinning. His breath caught in too-close lungs, heart lurching to a false-stop.

He staggered to the door, placing his palm on the cold handle. After a moment of hesitation, he twisted the knob, and slowly, slowly pushed it open.

The humming roar of computer fans covered the sound of the hinges. Diodes on a giant server-looking machine were blinking furiously. Through the narrow opening, Seth saw him—hooked up to hundreds of electrodes, a network of cables running on the floor and the ceilings. In a chair was a drooling, skeletal Hitori Nakamura, barely breathing, his eyes rolled back in his skull.

In front of him was a display, what looked like a video playing.

Images of Salomé, through Hitori's eyes.



THE INTEGRATED YOU JO RANDLETT

Flesh and steel,
bones wrapped thick with inhuman viscera.
Mind over matter,
artificial malice infects the deepest layers.
Man vs. machine,
body protests invasive metallic tendrils.
Selfhood shutters,
the crushing weight of Other muffles ego.
New life forms,
synthesis begets the integrated You.



VILLAGE
GLAZED STONEWARE BY EMMA MCNAMARA



NON-OBJECTIVE PLATES
GLAZED STONEWARE BY REBECCA THOMPSON

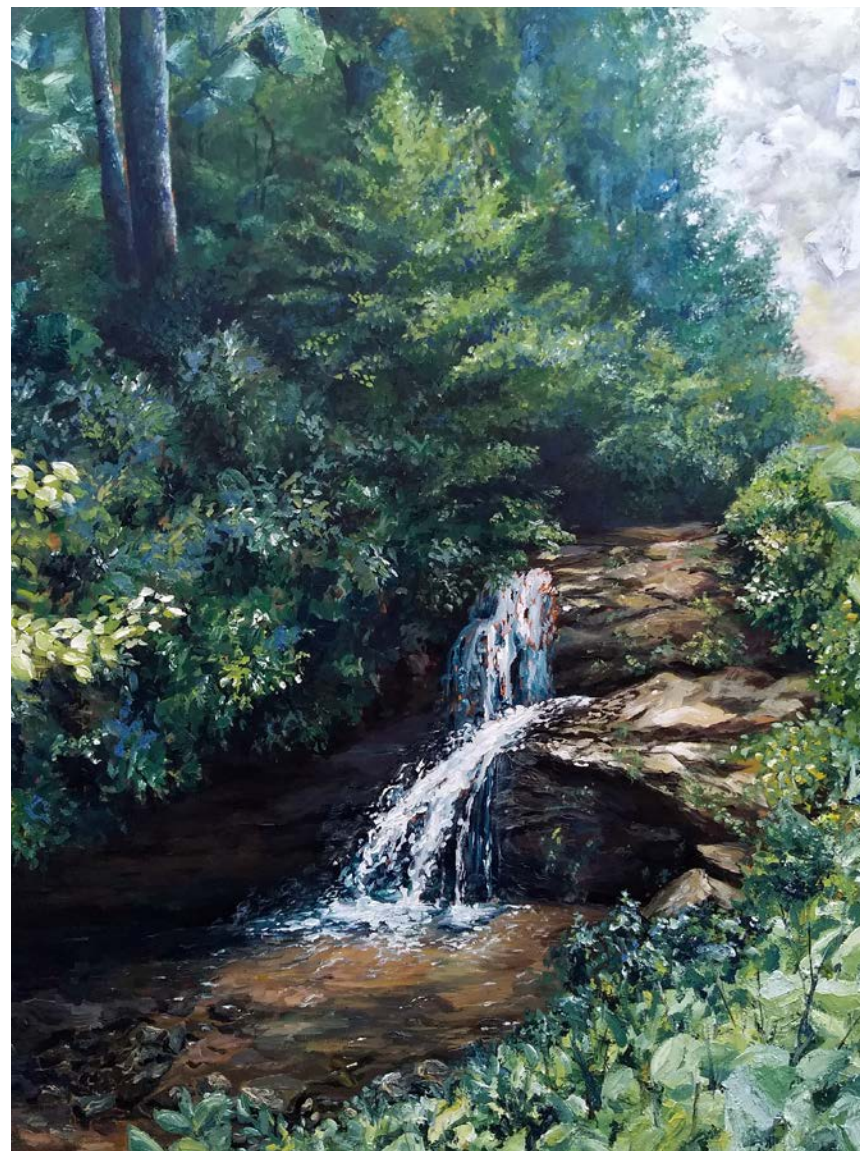
PUNCH A DOCTOR, IT'LL MAKE YOU FEEL BETTER

LILY MCNAMARA

I remember calling the doctor, my chest and belly wracked with pulsing, shrieking spasms. I described the symptoms through gritted teeth, my voice hoarse from howling in pain. *It's most likely cramps.* That's what she said. I wanted to scream the rest of my voice away, I wanted to shatter my phone and flush it down the toilet that I was hunched over. But emotion wasn't an option. I had to be calm, so that she'd take my pain seriously. The pain was too high up to be cramps. That's what I told her. *Ok, then that sounds like acid reflux. Get some probiotics next time you're out. Also, try working some Kefir into your diet. That should help.* I thanked her, hung up the phone, and sobbed into the toilet bowl.

I haven't been the same since I got sick. I feel nausea in the mornings, and stomach pains late at night, and hunger is only a vague suggestion. I can't recall how it feels to want food. But that's not why I'm visiting the doctor today. I'm telling my gynecologist about the gut-ripping agony that comes once a month. It can't be normal to shriek and sob into the carpet, for the pain to be so bad that my vision sparks white, shoving my fists against my stomach and begging and praying to God to make the pain go away, to be struck speechless after, limbs trembling with such violence that I cannot stand. She tells me I have "Dysmenorrhea" or, in layman's terms, "Painful Periods." She tells me to take ibuprofen.

The doctors didn't see my pain, they saw a woman complaining. Sometimes, when I'm really fuming, I picture punching a doctor right in their self-assured, well-educated face. *Oh yes, your nose hurts because I punched you. It's a classic case of Painful Nose Sensation. Take an ibuprofen and a probiotic and wash it down with some Kefir. It'll make you feel better.*



ROADSIDE WATERFALL
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS BY JOANNA LOTHERS

DATE NIGHTS SLOANE PEARCE

My pillow beckons to me.
I reply with a drawn-out yawn,
yet still refuse to let the temptress
of sleep drag me down into
my covers. I am aware of what
my body needs, but in truth
Insomnia is a better snuggler.

Admittedly, she can be rowdy
when I try to rest my head.
She gets rather jealous when I
confide in my warm bed.
So we sit by the window watching
the rain tap-dancing in puddles
of galaxies on the asphalt.

She isn't much of a talker, but reads
over my shoulder as I write poetic
observations about my day.
What feels like mere minutes
melts into hours, but neither of us
notice. Time shakes his head, but we
don't care—after all, three is a crowd.

Nothing is said until I pour out
another yawn. That's when she
leans in and whispers in my ear pleading,
“Don't go, you like it here with me.”

Although she knows my very desires,
I know her game just as well.
Before dawn she will leave
with her cruel kiss of exhaustion
staining my left cheek. Meanwhile,
the Rest she pocketed will hang
below my sunken eyes like
cheap Walmart bags.

With each new day I repent
and make amends with my pillow.
When evening comes, she sneaks
past the setting sun. Footprints
of solace follow her to my door
and with a peaceful embrace she
arrests me again, as if the break-up
never happened.

OF CHIPS AND CURSES

MARY KATHERINE MACKEY

If I buy the wrong bag of chips, my family will be cursed with one thousand years of bad luck. Not that I have much family, but my brain is not very specific with these curses, and I don't want my foolish mistake to impact my third cousin twice removed. Do I have a third cousin twice removed? Do I have any secret family members I don't know about? Has my father ever cheated on my mother, fathering a secret bastard child? Am *I* the secret bastard child? No, that's foolish—my parents have been happily married for twenty years. They are happy, right?

Focus on the chips.

Chips are the first item on my grocery list. I have not had a successful shopping trip in three weeks, and my pantry is beginning to go from scarce to empty. I try to keep myself calm by focusing on one item at a time, but now my brain is telling me that all of the bags of chips on this shelf are cursed except for one. It is not kind enough to inform me which one is curse free—that is a guessing game I must play.

Dozens of bags of Lays chips stare at me. They all boast the same large red logo, the bags fanned out in a rainbow spectrum of color. Each bag contains the same chip with different flavoring. They are practically the same. To others, their differences are minute, and yet only I know how great they are—only one of these bags is not cursed.

The bright fluorescent lights shine a spotlight on the shelf. There are so, so many chips. How will I ever choose? How will I choose the one bag of chips with no bad luck attached, when my brain will tell me nothing other than the imminent doom awaiting me if I make the wrong choice?

The sound of squeaking carts surrounds me. I am sure I have been standing here for hours. My feet have not moved. I am trapped here. This is the tenth circle of Hell, one Dante never experienced. I will die in this chip aisle. They will create a plaque in my honor. They will not even know what my favorite flavor was. *I* do not even know what my favorite flavor is.

The squeaking grows louder. People are beginning to crowd the aisle. I am surrounded. I am taking up too much space. I am taking up too much time. Everyone is becoming impatient. They are all staring at me.

Focus on the chips.

They're staring. They're *staring*.

My skin is on fire. If I stand here any longer, the ground will swallow me up. There will be no plaque in my honor, just shopping carts rolling over the place I once stood. I turn away from the shelf and rush out of the store.

As I walk toward the bus stop with none of the items on my list, I feel a sense of relief wash over me. My brain lied—*all* of the bags of chips were cursed.



NUNNALLY FARMS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KNOXIE LE ROUX

WRITER SPOTLIGHT

REFUSING TO HIDE

*By not shying away from difficult topics,
Gabrielle Morgan reveals how one can heal
by telling true stories authentically.*

WRITTEN BY JO RANDLETT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAKOTA RIEMER & CAROLINE REYNOLDS





GABRIELLE MORGAN SMILES, RESTING IN THE CORNER OF the bench as we sit and cropped curls waving in the wind. Sunlight reflects off her glasses—Gabrielle Morgan smiles, resting in the corner of the bench as we sit and laugh about our long weeks. As assistant editor for *Ivy Leaves*, long nights have made her very well-acquainted with the world of writing. Despite having now been on the *Ivy Leaves* team multiple years in a row, she admits that writing was not always her passion, saying, “The cliché that ‘I write because I need it to survive’ was never me.” This changed when she entered the college sphere.

Going to an art school starting in middle school, she says, was when she first started to find a home in the creative world, diverging from her older siblings who all were heavily in the athletic world. She tells me, “My family’s always been very supportive of my writing, [though] they were not necessarily always the creative type.” Though she’d start finding an interest in artistic expression here, it wouldn’t be until college that life would guide her toward the position she now finds herself in. Dr. Teresa Jones, she says, was a hugely influential figure in pushing her to write. Samantha Brooks, her friend and editor in chief for *Ivy Leaves*, also pushed her to actually put her work out where people could see. “They’re the two people who forced me to submit this year,” she explains, laughing, “because I was entirely too scared to submit last year.” Reflecting on specific classes that helped her writing, she laughs and tells me the fiction classes she took “taught me I didn’t want to write fiction.” Fiction, to her, only concealed the feelings of the person writing, and she couldn’t write without being authentically herself.

Authentic would certainly be an accurate way of describing her writing. Within the past year especially, she tells me, she’s depended more and more on writing as a means to handle difficult situations. “[Writing]’s been a thing to help me cope with things I didn’t know how to process before.” This source of inspiration, the emotions and events she’s trying to process, is transparent in every piece she’s written. As she writes, she leads the reader through the canvas of her emotions, leaving them with glimpses at experiences they may not have otherwise considered or even known existed. “The reason I write is so people can get a glimpse of what it’s like to live with something that not everyone understands or experiences.”

Two pieces in particular that she feels exemplify her personal, emotional writing style would be “Binge” and “Paper Cranes.”





“Binge” is a visceral description of an emotionally rife experience that she used to make readers intimately aware of the feelings tied to eating disorders. “Paper Cranes,” one of her nonfiction pieces, was written and submitted within two weeks of the event that inspired it. “That one was very emotionally taxing to write,” she says, wind brushing her hair as she stares toward the horizon, putting her thoughts together, “I’m very proud of where I could take it so soon and with not much time to process it.”

“The reason I write is so people can get a glimpse of what it’s like to live with something that not everyone understands or experiences.”

Despite her strength as a writer, she doesn’t plan to write professionally after college. “*Ivy Leaves* has made me realize just how much I want to be an editor.” She lights up, more animated than ever as her voice and body express her love for editing and desire to help writers express their ideas clearly. This doesn’t mean writing will have no impact for her in the future though, as she explains how her editing has been influenced by sitting on the other side of the process. When she started writing more of her own stories, she said she got better at making other people’s stories more publishable. She grew to understand more how to not just fix grammar mistakes but bring out the author’s ideas with more clarity.

Unlike some writers who can write wherever they are with whatever device they have, Gabrielle has to allot specific times to write, and she has to write in a place where she can feel emotionally vulnerable. Asked to give future writers advice based on her own experience, Gabrielle says, “The best advice I can give, which is also advice that has been given to me, is to tell true stories authentically and don’t shy away from difficult topics.” Looking back at everything she’s written, it’s clear that these are words she’s lived by.



GABRIELLE MORGAN



WRITTEN WORKS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

PAGE 14

poetry ONE SIZE FITS ALL

PAGE 58

poetry BINGE

PAGE 95

poetry SHRINK

PAGE 128

nonfiction PERMANENCE

PAGE 170

punch prose PAPER CRANES



BINGE

GABRIELLE MORGAN

Fry seasoning singses my nostrils as I take the first bite. Crinkled and soft. Slightly soggy and drowning in Zax Sauce: exactly as they should be. Each bite delivers me to the edge of ecstasy. In this moment, I have never known anxiety. My depression has vanished. The hatred I typically feel for my own reflection disappears with each bite. The sun beats down, reflecting off my windshield, cooking my fries for an extra minute. I am in the back corner of a Zaxby's parking lot. I look around me. My mother. My father. My sister and brother. Everyone I have ever been afraid to disappoint. Their faces pancaked against each window, watching to see what I do next. Exiled in an exhibit of endless torment. A cruel circus. The fries in my lap start to multiply. Double. Triple. The styrofoam screeches against the pressure. The Zax Sauce runs over the side of its plastic holding, pouring down my leg, creating a puddle of pleasure and pain all at once. I hear muffled voices in my ear. I turn to the left, my mother's mouth forming the word "BINGE." I turn to the right, "INDULGE," my father cries. Over and over and over again. Binge. Indulge. Binge. Indulge. My eyes close. Salt seeps into the chewed up skin around my fingernails. Burning. Stinging. My jaw stiffens under the weight of the calories. The seat belt tightens against my stomach. My thighs expand. My seat, constricting. My clothes, suffocating. I can't breathe. I open my eyes and stare into the rearview mirror, the debris of my internal destruction visible around my mouth. There is one fry left. My fingers grasp for it, bringing it toward my already open mouth. It trudges down my esophagus, getting caught at the bottom, hanging on. Before it has the chance to fall, settling into my stomach with the others, I crank my car and circle back around, falling into line behind the cars in the drive thru, praying the cashier doesn't remember me.



A VIEW SEEN WHEN DRIVING HOME
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SYDNEY WELCH



MOVEMENT IN ANTIGUA
FILM PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES GLYMPH

THE EARTH SPINS

CHRISTINE BRADY & ABIGAIL WOODARD

Saul was known for stealing sheep. Not that it was necessarily a heinous crime, but for the longest time in our tiny town of Newsland, it was the center of all idle gossip. Saul stole sheep. The sky is blue. The earth spins. Barbara Henley killed herself. These were just facts, and my entire town had to accept them.

I spoke to Barbara the morning she jumped, and she was acting strange. Barbara was strange. The sky is blue. Saul stole sheep.

That day in late October, the sun fought a losing battle against the chill, and the wind at the cliffs was particularly vicious. It was a gray, ugly day, the kind of day you'd rather spend under the sheets in bed.

When I met Barbara there, she was leaning against the fence. Her loose ponytail streamed out like a red sea bird, desperately trying to reach the ocean below.

"Hey, Danny," she said, and I had to strain my ears to hear her.

"What?" The wind rushed past my ears, and the sound was like trains storming through a tunnel. "Barb, I can't hear a single thing you're saying."

Barbara was weird and cryptic. She fancied herself different from other people, and she was. She would call you up in the wee hours of the morning to dispense some fanciful knowledge, or call a meeting at the cliffs. It was part of her charm, and part of the reason Saul fell in love with her.

"Saul's gone off," she said, raising her voice over the wind.

I stood there, shivering, absolutely furious. "So? This could've been a phone call, Barb."

She turned back to me and scowled. "This is important. We talk face-to-face when it's important."

I crossed my arms, partially in opposition and partially due to the freezing wind. "Why would it be important? He's always skipping work."

Saul and I worked at the local grocer, and it was his turn to close again. I knew what he got to when he skipped. Skipping is what led to his sheep theft in the first place, after all. There was abundant evidence. Saul stole sheep. Barbara killed herself.

Barbara waved a letter at me. "He left me this letter, apologized, and said he was leaving."

Now, *that* caught my attention. "What does it say? Where is he going?"

"I don't know. I haven't read it yet. I wanted to show you, too." She looked up at me with watery green eyes. "He was your friend, William."

She only used my full name when it was imperative.

I reached for the letter, feeling the thin paper crinkle under my fingers.

Feeling the weight of the answers inside. Then the letter was gone, snatched from my hand and into the cruel grip of the wind.

I made a grab for it, yelling as if my words alone would bring back the letter. Barbara turned, and I saw the sheer fear written across her face. She threw herself forward, her chest slamming into the fence, her fingers spread wide to snatch at the paper. The tips of her nails brushed against the letter.

She missed, and I saw the white slip of paper twirl away, out to sea so close yet so futilely far.

Then my attention was diverted by Barbara's shrill scream as she lost her balance.

I watched as she fell, her hair catching in that vicious wind. It is a moment frozen in my memory. The leaves, circling her in their fall, mimicking her flailing. The wind clawing at my neck, sending a chill down my spine. The expression of terror on her face.

The guilt threatening to pull me down with her.

But no, this had nothing to do with me. This was all Saul's fault.

I turned and walked home, carefully, to cover the tracks. No one could know I had been there.

The wind danced around me, whistling in my ear, howling in the hills. My thoughts rose to a howl, too, turning far more melancholy than I had hoped they would. It wasn't ecstasy, as I had imagined. It was a dark and looming feeling, but the wind whistled in my ear again and told me it was freedom.

Saul, my friend. Ha.

"It was a dark and looming feeling, but the wind whistled in my ear again and told me it was freedom."

It was strange Barbara would choose to support him when he had done so much to hurt me. It was strange she would fail to see how he had always tried to outdo me. It was strange, it was *funny* she would pick him over me.

I raked my fingers through my hair, laughing. The sound was lost in the wind.

Saul, Saul. If only the sheep-stealing had been enough. But no one could convict your infectious smile and rich dark curls, could they? They had evidence aplenty, and you couldn't escape the rumors, but still *no, Saul would never!* And *Saul was with me all night!*

I got tired of dumping sheep carcasses off the crag just for them to believe him over me. I got tired of him getting the highest score on every test in school, getting the best job opportunities in our small town, and garnering the interest of the prettiest girls. I got tired when it came to Barbara, because I always thought she would see right through him. After all, we had known each other since childhood.

Saul was shallow. All he cared about was looking good. He never stopped to care about me. He would skip work to spend time with Barbara, leaving me to fill in and adding insult to injury with the fact that the extra work was only so he could fall further in love with my best friend.

So Saul started stealing sheep. Every time he skipped work, he would steal them, whether people believed it or not.

Saul didn't repent, though. Oh, no. He came to me, yelling, angry. He saw a pattern. He didn't listen to my warning.

And then I watched him as he picked up the phone and called Barbara to tell her he would be leaving town forever.

Finally, I was done with him.

Finally, I dumped my last carcass over the crag. Dark curls disappeared into the roaring waves, human locks dissolving into the surf like the soaked wool of a black sheep. It was beautiful.

But then Barbara, my best friend Barbara, told me that he had left her a letter. He must have written it before he died, before I made him call her. He must have known that something was wrong. He *had* to have known.

If she had read the letter, she would have known, too.

I stopped. I was only halfway home. The sky wasn't blue; it was gray. It was dreary gray, stretched across the great open expanse just to taunt me.

The chilling wind joined in the taunt with a howl. It bit at my skin. The tears, rolling down my burning cheeks, threatened to freeze.

I sank to my knees in the tall grass.

Saul stole sheep. The sky is blue. Barbara Henley killed herself.

Saul stole sheep. The sky is blue.

Barbara Henley killed herself.



BLUE ON WHITE
ACRYLIC ON SKATEBOARD BY NOAH BARKER

CALM AFTER THE STORM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSIAH DUMAIS
(PAGES 64-65)



BIRDS FLY OVERHEAD
PERRY DIAMADUROS

Birds fly overhead—
a shotgun's war cry rings out—
silence in the vale.

THE PRODIGAL
OIL PAINTING BY KATHARINE LANDRY
(AT RIGHT)





FESTIVAL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HANNAH BROWN

RETREAT SALON EMMA MILLER

Gather up your sister's hair:
an autumn harvest,
golden and brown,
placed into a silver sink.

Lay a towel under her neck,
soak her locks in running water,
ask her questions, and
tell her she is beautiful.

Anointed with oil,
cleanse greasy scalps,
knots from tangled thoughts,
and laptop-fried minds.

Laughter bubbles,
sparkling eyes gaze up
as the world's gritty grip
washes down the drain.

NONFICTION

ONE'S LOT
IN LIFE:
THE WELLS
WE'RE
GIVEN

MARGUERITE DOZIER

I have been a few times before, with friends who are passionate about serving. Admittedly, I was hesitant, at first. A timid curiosity towards the homeless that I had felt as a child grew up with me into a type of shame—I still couldn't look possession-less people in the eyes. I was convinced to go along with my friends more by curiosity than by service.

Revisiting this year wasn't much different. Before going in, I went on their website for general information, and was impressed by what I saw. The LOT Project has recently revamped their website, and along with it, their mission statement. I read it in bold, italicized letters in all caps above the team's profiles and felt them speak to me in unison through the screen:

"WE ARE DREAMERS AND INNOVATORS, WORKING TO ELIMINATE SOCIAL MARGINS TO RESTORE KINSHIP. WE BELIEVE THAT EVERYONE IS WORTHY OF LOVE AND HAS LIFE-GIVING POTENTIAL TO OFFER OUR COMMUNITY. WE SEEK TO FOSTER RESTORATION. WE ARE WELL AWARE THAT WHOLENESS IS A LONG-TERM LEARNING PROCESS AND WE UNDERSTAND THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING. OUR SUCCESS AS AN ORGANIZATION IS NOT MEASURED BY THE NUMBER OF LIVES WE CHANGE, BUT BY OUR FIDELITY TOWARDS EVERY INDIVIDUAL WE ENCOUNTER."

I smiled at the intensity and the intention behind the words. I read it a few more times over the next few days between visits and the words became personified.

My first day at LOT was spent observing instead of serving. Out of shame for what I had and for what the homeless had not, I shed my new faux gold jewelry and my expensive corduroy button-up shirt—both Christmas gifts—and traded them for a long, black button-up skirt and a brown, baggy shirt. I wore plain white shoes, double knotted, and decided my pricey vintage bag was okay-enough to carry with me because of its meager size. I walked past an older man, lying on some steps beside the building and smiled timidly. He smiled back.

I averted my gaze.

I almost passed the glass front door among all the tall windows. Reaching for the handle, I walked into a large, open room with exposed brick walls and a ton of donated clothes in the back ("ton" as in it may have actually been 2,000 pounds). I apologized to the boy who was mopping the floor, for walking all over his finished product. He was well-mannered and kind. Walking towards the back, I saw hand-painted lettering on wooden signs assigning the left wall as women's clothing and the right as men's. Cardboard was strewn here and there in the form of giant boxes for sorting or small packages, containing hygiene products to be distributed amongst the guests who visit. When I looked up, I was met by Cody Wright's approaching smile stretched across his young face. You can always tell when someone is smiling earnestly, because their eyes squint up and wrinkle against their cheeks, and at the sight of Cody Wright's laughter lines, I was suddenly a little less insecure. He led me to a desk with a computer on it that was playing loud Christian worship music from its speakers and turned down the volume to explain LOT's process to me.

Cody is the program director at LOT, and he's the kind of guy who makes solid, continuous eye contact. This is impressive to Baby Boomers (aka most of the people he serves), but intimidating for Gen Z (aka me). He explained to me: "Mondays and Wednesdays are our donation days. We accept donations through this barn door, on the side. We also use these days as prep for Tuesdays and Thursdays. They're pretty casual! There's usually only a few volunteers, and we spend the day sticking tags in clothes, sorting clothes between giveaways and throwaways, cleaning house, and setting up our stations for the next day."

Watching all the various jobs, I was acquainted with a paradox up close and personal: organized chaos. Clothes and hangers were strewn everywhere, obviously in some sort of order with objective purpose to their organization, but the colors and textures made for a hodgepodge of materials to the eyes. The hangers were all the same shape, but also varied in color. Several extras were gathered and stacked in one corner, resembling a sculpture more than anything.

"Is your girlfriend excited about you getting the internship?" Cody asked a tall, young guy handling shoes.

"Kinda," he answered.

"Kinda? Ohhh, because you're moving." Cody said, "Is that hard?" he asked, pausing from his work, with eyebrows knitted together.

I couldn't make out the young guy's response over the loud worship music, but I was struck by the personal interaction occurring so casually right before me. It was suddenly clear that the volunteers working there were well acquainted with one another, and the environment was more of a productive hang-out than a day on the job. Mustering up courage from the eye contact and smile, I was met with by a volunteer with a long, dark braid. I walked over to start my own conversation. Sherry, a personable woman with an infectious giggle, explained that she had been introduced to LOT by her church the previous year. She came for orientation last summer and never left.

The young guy managing shoes was actually her son, Nicholas. Turning to him, I asked if I could call him Nick. Nick was extraordinarily tall, even sitting down (though I come in at a whopping 5'1), with long blond hair straighter than Cody's, and a gentle spirit. A sophomore at Clemson, he landed a summer internship in the aerospace industry, relocating him to Georgia for a few months.

"Aerospace engineering? That's impressive," I said, eyebrows raised. He smiled modestly and Sherry put her hands on her hips, proudly.

I walked down a few stairs, past a vivid mountain of blankets, a skyscraper of water bottle packs, and an abnormally tall minifridge. Jake had been sweeping and mopping the floor in the serving space of LOT (the main area) when I walked in, and was setting up tables by the time I made my way back over to introduce myself. Jake was a funny-guy freshman at Clemson who told me that he was serving at LOT during his spring break to cover the court-ordered community service he had earned for a speeding ticket. Thinking he was joking, I laughed out loud before I could stop myself.

"I'm just trying to be honest, is all," he said, unfolding a table and laughing at my embarrassed expression.

I waited until I had spoken to everyone but Cody to ask him to answer a

few of my questions. Although he made me feel the most comfortable out of everyone, I was the most nervous to interview him, considering all the prying questions I had. Yet again, he made me feel comfortable within a few seconds after sitting down.

Cody grew up in Piedmont, South Carolina, and knew that he wanted a job in ministry. However, after earning a certificate of completion from Newspring's two-year program, Bible Leadership College, Cody felt his life hit a big shift. He didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. He was hurting and in counseling and didn't know what his next step was.

"Towards the end of 2016, I had a radical experience on a mission trip to Uganda. God just wrecked my heart for those people—these kids need pants and parents. It was all I could think about. I had my heart set on moving over there and serving until I realized that the same poverty and brokenness exists here!" he said. His enthusiasm was contagious.

"I had my heart set on moving over there and serving until I realized that the same poverty and brokenness exists here."

Cody started volunteering at LOT when he was eighteen, working at Starbucks and Outback to pay the bills when he realized his passion for LOT. He was able to start working for LOT officially in 2017 and has been fundraising, organizing, and dreaming ever since. His concluding thoughts reminded me of The LOT Project's mission statement:

"We speak love and value to everyone we encounter. Until I, myself, could believe that about myself, I could never help someone know that about themselves. I heard Jesus ask me what I see. And I see prostitutes, people who smell and look different than me, I see drug addictions. They are given so many names outside of these doors. I learned that we are not defined by our lowest moments in life. We are not defined by anything besides what HE says about us," he said, pointing upwards.

I have seen evidence of this name-calling and poor social standing in real life, but I have also read about it in an article about what a once homeless man had to say about the main hardships he encountered; "I realize that there is little that can be done to change the opinions of Americans towards people who are homeless. There are many well-meaning people who offer moral and financial support to people who are homeless, especially women and children. However, by and large, men who are homeless are often seen as 'freeloaders,' 'shiftless,' 'entitlement-seekers,' 'drunks,' or 'drug addicts' by mainstream American society."

In reading this, I recalled my own parents' treatment of the homeless.

As a child, I always felt curious and timid towards the men and women with cardboard signs standing or slouching on medians in intersections.

The signs were and still are always such blatant statements:

“LOST JOB. LOOKING FOR WORK. NO FOOD. 4 KIDS.”

“HOMELESS. ANYTHING HELPS. GOD BLESS.”

“HUNGRY AND HOMELESS. PLEASE HELP.”

“Never give them your money,” Dad would say to me. “Most of them will spend it on drugs or liquor.” I never protested as he drove past them in our fancy white Ford Explorer without consideration, but I’d always watch from my tinted window as they faded into the distance.

“If you give, give food and water,” Mom would say. I often watched her give away our leftovers that I was excited to eat the next day to hungry hands through the years. She also handed out water bottles now and then that she kept in the car for this reason. As I’ve grown, I have wondered whether leftovers and water bottles are enough.

Cody seems to think they are not, and neither does his teammate, David.

David is a tall, broad-shouldered, bald-headed, bright red-bearded man with an infectious smile, a rather quiet voice, and a refreshingly dry sarcastic sense of humor. When defining the three leaders’ roles at LOT, David gave me a great picture: “Cody is the hugs and handshakes. Taylor is our heart and vision. I am the spreadsheets and quickbooks.” We laughed at his self-deprecating slight.

“I’m the numbers and strategy guy—I’m the pessimist of the crew. If I am anxious, it’s a normal day. If Cody and Taylor are anxious too, we are going down with the ship,” he joked.

I learned that David had previously gone to New Covenant, the church that I am a part of while attending Anderson University. He asked me about various members of the congregation, as well as about John Boyte, my campus ministry pastor. David was brought onto the LOT Project team last year, and he mentioned that LOT has shifted much of his life and what his connections look like. He explained that at his last job, as a director for the Humane Society in Anderson, he found it important to know the mayor and other city officials, just to wave at and have some conversation in passing.

“It’s a weird shift of knowing and being known by the haves and the have-nots. Getting to come to LOT to serve during the week is refreshing.”

“Now, I work in LOT’s office space downtown, and I wave at and talk to Biscuit, Turkey, and T-Bone. It’s a weird shift of knowing and being known by the haves and the have-nots. Getting to come to LOT to serve during the week is refreshing. I get to see people come in and pray for us, or see volunteers praying with guests,” David answered.

It was clear that for the team, being able to serve is like seeing the fruit of their labor. Cody, David, Sherry and other consistent volunteers come together and they create a space with high energy whilst jabbing clothes with tags and sorting shoes. I found myself often smiling involuntarily as I watched them all work together.

On Thursday, when they served guests, I was able to see all of this come together before my eyes. But even with all this inspiring work in front of me, I still held back and observed.

Despite growing up in public school my whole life among people of all different races, ethnicities, religions, paychecks, and social standings, I still manage to find myself delightfully comfortable inside the bubble that is Anderson University. AU is a private, Christian university. Predominantly Christian. Predominantly middle to upper-middle class. No one goes without a bed here, and meal plans are forced on students like baby food into our unsuspecting mouths. That blissful bubble popped my sophomore year.

As I walked the streets of Charlotte, North Carolina two summers ago with friends from my campus ministry, I grew increasingly unsettled. Sitting at every street corner, and walking in the shadows beneath high-rising buildings lingered the lost-looking faces of the homeless. Some wandered aimlessly. Some slept unashamedly on metal, ribbed benches in the midday sun. My friends and I were on a retreat; one in which we paid to sleep on the floor of a church, listen to the Word of God, dine together, and roam the streets of the nearest “big city” in our freetime. As we walked, I passed by countless gaunt men and women who slept on concrete or empty, cold metal benches every night. Paying to sleep on the carpet and carrying an expensive leather purse suddenly felt like offensive behaviors, and I found myself avoiding eye contact with these unimpressed homeless men and women.

My friends were mostly unaffected and did not notice my distracted expression. Eventually, I stopped walking. My boyfriend, hand in hand with me, paused and asked what was wrong. My eyes stung and my shoulders slouched beneath the weight of abrupt, inevitable knowledge. What was it? Loss of innocence? Loss of ignorance?

“I feel genuinely disturbed, right now. This is not okay,” I said. I tried to explain, but had little words other than “There are so many of them.”

He understood as well as he could, but we had to move on and catch up with everyone else. In that moment, abandoning that feeling felt like turning away a child that was left without a note on my doorstep. Abandoned responsibility. And yet, I returned to bliss on the safe, warm carpet that night as the conviction with hollowed cheeks walked aimlessly to the back of my mind. They were in front of my eyes, now.

A particularly talkative volunteer, Steve, and Cody prayed with a few guests as I talked with David. Steve became a Christian at 30, in 1990, and currently spends his retirement with a “boots on the ground” approach, as he called it: more hands-on ministry, where he is able to commune with the people he serves.

“There’s not that much difference between these people and me. In my early twenties, you might be able to fit all my belongings in a 2x2 box! At LOT, I get to meet with people I almost immediately resonate with.” He had lived

in his car for a part of his life, and understood the labels that homeless people often face from the community.

“The BEST DAY of my life was when I was asked to help,” he said. He explained to me that he had felt unworthy, unhelpful, and like a constant burden to others for a long time. When he was able to finally help others, he couldn’t stop. He worked as a teacher for a children’s ministry, as a Missions Director, and was involved in a discipleship program in his church. He lives by 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.

“That reserve I received was not to be hoarded, but given away,” he said.

That reserve I saw in Steve, in Cody, in David, and in the other volunteers is filled to the brim with selfless love and service. Speaking with these people, I often felt deeply the weight in their statements. They laughed with one another lightheartedly and yet held in-depth conversations in the midst of their silliness—running around doing errands and making fun of each other with knowing, hardy smiles. I observed these reserves in action, but felt a shift within myself that last day.

The sun was out when I walked out of the LOT Project, and I thought of the mural. “Hope.” I thought of the people. The posture of the volunteers and especially of the team leading LOT was so raw and open, and something so heavy suddenly felt a little lighter, because people like Cody and David and Sherry and Steve continuously come together with joy to do something about the suffering they see. I was reminded of my deep feelings in Charlotte—reminded of the weighty conviction—that abandoned infant that has so much growing to do.

I caught a glimpse of LOT’s purpose in just three days—to provide and to instill hope and worth in those who are marginalized and defeated. I saw the seeds being sown. And I had the honor of witnessing all the reckless joy that these walking wells of love carry with them in their back pockets as they work. It instilled in me a craving for action to be taken—to be on the front lines, myself. I still felt hemmed in with uncomfortable privilege—I had remained in my comfortable sidelines: observing, listening, note-taking. But something inside me had been stirred. The people at LOT stirred me. And I knew I would be going back.



NUNNALLY FARMS 6
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KNOXIE LE ROUX



MOSAIC
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TREY HASELDEN

FULL-FIGURED CARSON CAWTHON

Women carved, stuffed, and prepped
to be devoured like Thanksgiving turkeys.
How wild it would be for her to
rejoice in the way her thighs touch,
tucked close together as if hands
clasped in prayer.
How rebellious is her
delight.



DEVIL'S COURTHOUSE
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS BY HOLLY FERGUSON

BROWN-EYED GIRL
SALVATORE FONTANA

Van Morrison colored the air.
Hipster roasts boasted killer prices
and local dairy products
filled the fridges.
She hammered away
on her laptop keyboard,
softly singing along.

I gazed from where I sat
on the recycled-metal stool.
Her fingers paused.
Those coffee eyes turned,
a burst of caffeine
richer than any on the shelves.
Morrison faded out, jealous.

WATCHING A FLY TRAPPED IN FLUORESCENT
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS BY LILY MCNAMARA
(AT RIGHT)



ROCK IN A HARD PLACE

REBEKAH MCCALLUM

My father's story:

The stranger sitting opposite me held the most important gift I had ever considered purchasing.

Across the sticky McDonald's table littered with bits of french fries and mustard smears, Sharon slid a small Ziplock bag. With every ounce of caution that I could muster, I removed the diamond and held it to the fluorescent light.

"Since my husband left me, I don't really need it anymore," she said with surprising calm.

Amid the screams of toddlers demanding their Happy Meals, I counted through stacks of twenties and handed them to the woman. I found myself alone in the parking lot moments later with a diamond for my fiancée and the gnawing sensation that I had been cheated.

Duran Duran blasted from the stereo of my '81 Toyota Supra while I headed home, and I thought about how I would ask my girl to be my wife. She had beautiful saffron-colored hair, a smart mind, a steady paying job, and I was about to ask her to spend the rest of her life with me.

Despite the confidence which I endeavored to summon, my palms became clammy, and I thought about the diamond which I still clutched as I barreled down the highway.

I had discovered Sharon's advertisement while perusing the classified section of the newspaper, drinking a microwaved cup of yesterday's coffee as I read. She had turned out to be a nice, middle-ish class person who drove a baby blue minivan and seemed completely normal. I just knew something was up.

The sun began to sink lower in the afternoon sky, causing me to squint as I plucked the diamond from the bag for inspection.

What if the band doesn't fit her hand?

What if WE don't fit? Gosh, what if I'm not ready for this?

A lifetime is a long time, and I don't know if I'm ready for a future full of mowing the grass on Saturdays and wandering through the house turning off light switches and minivans and learning to hairspray a ballet bun and going to career day at school and hearing those boogery kids wiggle around in their desks and poke each other and whisper, "Her dad paints houses. I bet they can only afford a few toys per kid."

Heck, I don't even know how to tie a ponytail!

The sun made my eyes ache, and I wished I had sprung for window tinting. While I made sure that I had not been duped, I was certain that I would be able to make this distinction, a neighboring car horn shrieked, announcing that

I had veered from my lane. Out from my unsteady fingers, the diamond fell. Like a raindrop into a pond, my life savings and more had disappeared into a gap in my stick shift. An abundance of profanity may or may not have burst forth from my lips, but since I hope to include this in my memoirs, I can make no definitive comment.

"Like a raindrop into a pond, my life savings and more had disappeared into a gap in my stick shift."

Car horns blared as I swerved, but I heard nothing except the pounding of blood beneath my sweaty temples.

There I was failing the only person I had ever really loved. My hands shook, just like they had when I started quitting cigarettes. Her brown eyes had looked up at me proudly, unashamed of my pale form which had been unable to sleep during those days of craving. She had held these hands firmly and said, "We'll find a way," when I had gotten laid off and had to go back to painting houses. She deserved all the diamonds in the world.

I drew quick breaths and sped towards the nearest exit.

Bursting into a mechanic shop, I was attended by a bear-like man with pants that sagged beneath the crest of his rear, a five-o'clock shadow that reached his eye sockets, and nothing better to do than to make me wait until he was good and ready. I purchased a three-dollar screwdriver.

I removed the stick shift and its pleather cover as carefully as if I were playing a high stakes round of Operation. Within moments, I had located the diamond. I picked it up gently, knowing that I could knock it into the gearbox, and I would be in the market for another diamond. I'm not sure if the engine could have damaged the jewel, but I sure wasn't aiming to find out.

Gripping the steering wheel like the reins of a horse that had just bitten me, I swear I didn't blink the whole way home.

I still don't know how to tie a ponytail, and a minivan does cramp my style somewhat. But the band does fit her hand.

BEAGLE FISHING

SAMANTHA BROOKS

The biggest fish my dad ever caught was a ten-pound beagle. He was four years old and decided he was going fishing in the middle of the day while all six of his older siblings were in school and his parents at work. He asked his daytime caretaker, Miss Betty, if she'd take him down to the creek so he could snatch bread out of their beds, but she said she just didn't have time. But my dad was determined to catch something.

He broke into his dad's tacklebox and pulled out a few yards of fishing line and a large catfish hook. After triple-knotting the hook onto one end, my dad wrapped the clear line tight around his right hand. Sneaking back into the house with his hand twisted behind his back, he made it into the kitchen where Miss Betty had started chopping vegetables for dinner. She didn't look up when he came in, his hand hidden behind him. He walked sideways up to the table and grabbed a biscuit with his free hand and began side-stepping his way to the hall.

"Where you think you're going, David?" Miss Betty said without looking up.

He stopped at the threshold. "I was gonna take it outside."

"Well don't get any crumbs on the floor. I just finished sweeping."

He answered her, "Yes, ma'am," and took off running toward the front door.

Once on the porch, my dad shoved the biscuit onto the catfish hook and looked out over the yard. His brother's beagle was sniffing at the grass a little ways off. He pulled his arm back and threw the biscuit toward the dog, letting the line unravel in the air. That poor dog lunged at the biscuit before it even hit the ground. The moment the hook took hold of his lip, the beagle started yelping and spitting foamy slobber mixed with crumbs.

My dad laughed and pulled up on the line, setting the hook deeper into the dog's lip. Then, it took off running, and my dad, being tied to the other end, was yanked over the porch railing and into the grass. They each hollered in pain, and Miss Betty flew out the door still holding the kitchen knife, all the while screaming, "David, let go, let go!" But he couldn't. The tug-of-war had caused the line to go tight, my dad and the dog were both flopping around in the grass, each pulling the other and crying, neither one of them having control.

The school bus drove up and spit out all six of his siblings not two minutes after the battle had begun. His brothers tackled the beagle and pinned it to the ground; his sisters grabbed him and unwrapped the line from his hand, which had cut deep into his skin. He could have lost his hand if they hadn't have shown up when they did. Yet, he still boasts that this was the biggest fish he ever caught.



TRENDSETTERS
DIGITAL ARTWORK BY CHARLIE CLASSE

THE ASLAN GAME

EMMA MILLER

Among the four of us, our terrain stretched threefold, spilling between three houses and yards for our imagination to dwell—yet one spot contained us for hours on end: the trampoline in Allison’s backyard. We passed through its net like actors through stage curtains, not bound by its size, but free within it to travel wherever we pleased. Allison became Mother Nature, Savannah my caretaker, and Meghann our household pet Aslan, the lion of wisdom and strength from *The Chronicles of Narnia*. When we breached the bouncy woven screen, “the Aslan Game” began.

We cut our circular home into four quadrants, each slice of the trampoline pie a bedroom. At the start of a “new day,” we rose from imaginary beds in imaginary rooms in an imaginary stone tower. Mother Nature, Aslan, my sister Savannah, and I sat at the dining hall table to discuss a place in the universe in need of saving. When we were ready, we jumped in sync, the trampoline dipping and rising under four pairs of feet, and Aslan’s magic sent us off in a tunnel of light and color. As tiny toes touched the black canvas, it caught our thoughts and launched us into our own reality. Every *hitch*, *rick*, and *creak* was drowned out by high-pitched screams, the clanging of swords, and the *whoosh* of spells that echoed through Allison’s backyard. I watched them fly, bodies bent and legs kicking the air. Between battles, my sister and I sat cross-legged, the floor sinking under our weight, listening to Aslan as he paced back and forth, instructing us in combat. Mother Nature floated about, wrists loose and hands twisting, performing magic necessary for the house. She spoke to us, soft as the petals she conjured, tending to our wounds and rebuking us when we acted foolishly.

“As tiny toes touched the black canvas, it caught our thoughts and launched us into our own reality.”

Eventually, the sun set below the towering pines. Shadows summoned us home and the chilling air chased us back into our separate living rooms. Allison dropped her wrists and Meghann stood back on her two feet, speaking in her normal girlish voice again. We climbed back through the

wardrobe; huddled in our coats, we scootched off the metal springs and landed back in our shoes. Allison hopped up her wooden porch to join her mother for dinner—if it wasn’t time to stay at her father’s. Meghann and I dragged our heels along the pavement to meet our father and brother. Savannah slugged through the grass, crossing the yard to head inside and sit between her parents, tangled in the string that held them together.

I once heard Savannah’s dad yell at her behind her bedroom door. I recognized that same war drum vibrato from my own home, barging through my own doors (my brother’s cries about our mother, the pain of her becoming a memory, filtered through a decade-long war with my father). Meghann and I stood still, eyes wide and mouth taut, stomach churning and chest tight, like when bodies are held only by air, bracing for when you will hit the ground. She came out, face red and stained with tears. “You guys have to leave,” she stammered. My sister and I tip-toed to their front door and hurried across the road. I saw her red-faced again a few years later. It was the first time I heard “divorce” fresh, not in its aged and scarred state that Allison spoke of, but when the wound was just cut. Meghann was with Savannah when her parents told her. She was in the same state, huffing and sniffing, tears like rivers carving through red canyons. I wonder how their journey to my house was, holding one another as they hurried across the street and shuffled into our kitchen doorway. I watched my dad step towards them and gather the crumbling girls in his arms.

Not long after, we crossed the street to our backyard stage and resumed where we left off; Allison’s hands lifted, Meghann got back on all fours, and Savannah and I stood arm in arm as sisters. We soared back into our beloved crafted story. We soaked in every scene. We plunged into arguments over the plot because it had to be *just right*. We returned. Constantly. Because small legs only jump so high on solid ground.

LANDSCAPE
OIL PAINTING BY KATHARINE LANDRY
(PAGES 88–89)



HOMESICK

REBEKAH MCCALLUM

Mommy twists around. She hands me a stepped-on looking juice box and a stick of string cheese so melted it is see-through and wobbly as a noodle. Makes me feel even more sick to my tummy. She says it's cause I am rehydrated.

"Watch the road, just keep watching the road," says Mommy.

Ever since we left the beach house—and oh rats I left my Barbie's hat under my pillow to keep it safe—Daddy has been in such an awful hurry to get home. He goes around every turn like a Nascar racer guy.

We have been driving for years. We aren't there yet. I really really have to go. "Sides, my seatbelt is giving my sunburnt skin a headache. My legs are frozen, so I bounce them. My pink crocs hit the back of the seat, but they say, "STOP THAT," real loud. But I've heard louder.

After they had put me to sleep last night, my nightlight and Arf, my stuffed puppy, helped me sneak out. I saw Mommy shut the bedroom door with a bang. I looked through the stair rails and saw Daddy getting comfy on the downstairs sofa.

Once when the bathroom door was cracked open, I saw Mommy crying on the toilet.

Mommy has the most pretty hair, kind of like cinnamon sticks. She always puts on tight skirts and suit jackets. Like my Barbie dolls. She won't play with me very much. She has to put on those fancy clothes to go to work. She comes back when it's time for me to put on my Strawberry Shortcake pjs. But I always get to play in my blanket fort before sleep. I pretend the walls keep out bad noises and yells.

I saw Mommy put my special picture that I drew of our family in a drawer in her desk. It goes on the refrigerator. The desk is where the sad paper is. Maybe it's got bad magic. Every time Mommy talks about the paper, they start to fight. The paper showed up after they had screamed at each other with words I don't know. They kept shouting about *her*. I don't know who's *her*. Daddy promised to sign the paper but after we go to the beach.

Mostly I liked to swim and dive for shells. Sharks seemed nicer than Mommy and Daddy dragging their beach chairs farther and farther away from each other every couple of hours to get more sunshine, even though we had forgot the umbrella.

Sure wish I had an umbrella now. If I stuck it out the window, maybe the wind could pick me up. I could fly away into the puffy clouds that chase our car. Lucky birds that get to fly away.

Mommy lays her hand on my leg right as I yank on a wedgie. "We have something important to say:"

Daddy says, "I think it would be best if this were our last family vacation," but it's hard to hear him 'cause the sun is making my eyes go white and purple when I close them, and I still have a headache on my neck, and my car seat is squishing my bottom, and now I really have to go, and we should pull over so I can throw up, and now my socks itch.

**"The desk is where the sad paper is.
Maybe it's got bad magic."**

"But it will be all right," says Daddy. "In fact, it will be good for our family. This way you get two Christmases and two birthdays and two houses. Think of that! Besides, sweetie, sometimes married people find that they are much better off alone."

Boiling hot tears. Snot trickles down to my lips. For no reason.

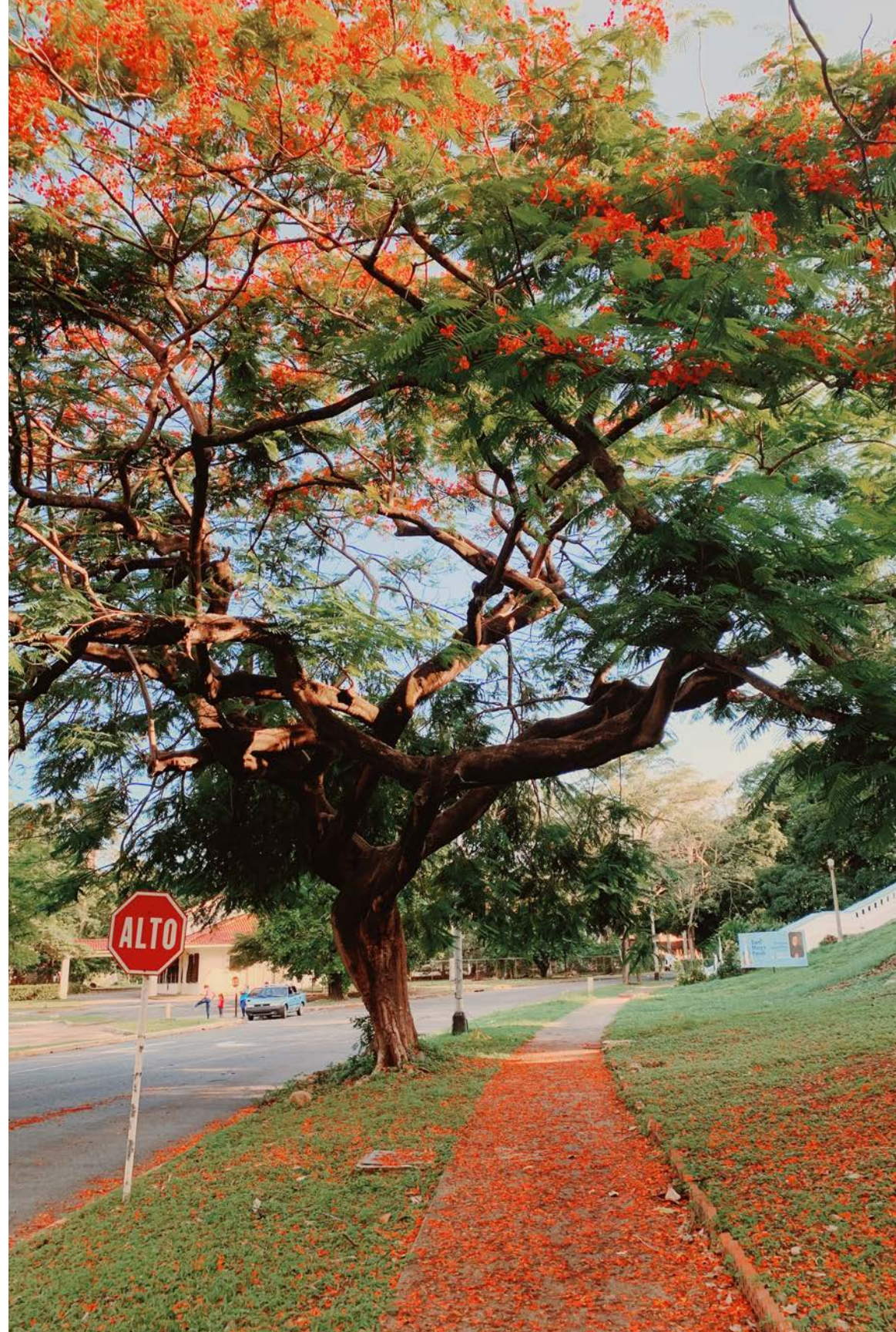
"But. . . but. . ." I began. "You guys said people got married cause they love each other."

Mommy turns to me, "Oh baby, we did."



GALLERY
ACRYLIC ON MIXED MEDIA PAPER BY SOFIA DEAMBROSI

CAMINO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARA PEPPER
(AT RIGHT)



DISSECTION

LILY MCNAMARA

Eddie prowled the backyard, wide-set blue eyes glancing from the gutter to the bushes by the fence, searching for the flash of fawn brown bumps and warty, green skin of the toads that populated his yard in late spring. He was fascinated by the little round amphibians. Out here with the croaking creatures, he almost couldn't hear his parents' voices pitching higher, grating and loud but there, as they seemed to be whenever he was gone. Eddie hated the awkward quietness, the peace they attempted to preserve whenever he was around, the one that rang so false. It took hardly speaking to him, barely looking at each other, to preserve that fragile calm. They were only really present when he wasn't. So, Eddie was once again outside with the noisy frogs, mimicking their squeaky song, and on the search for a particularly lazy one who wouldn't bolt at the sight of him. There, hanging from a leaf, sat a long, fat toad. Round face lighting up, his hand darted out, closing quickly around the creature. It struggled as Eddie slowly brought it close to his face, meeting its eyes for a moment as its legs kicked out. It looked so scared, caught with no way out. He tilted his head, watching it struggle.

"Don't be scared," he said, nasally voice softened to a whisper. "You're just a toad. It's not your fault you're so little." Eddie opened his mouth, hearing the creature squeak, shoving it past his lips. The first sensation was that of skin bending and stretching, before it burst, juice running down his chin. Then came the matchstick-snapping of bones between his teeth, fluid from its innards swilling around his gums, between his teeth. He articulated the intestines with his tongue, finding and identifying the little organs. It reminded him of the dissection videos from school, the first time he'd seen a frog's insides. Toads looked almost as funny as they tasted, as funny as they felt clamped between his jaws. Their eyes were set so far apart. He'd learned in class that was because they were prey animals. Bigger animals were after them, so they needed to see all avenues of escape. He liked being the bigger animal.

Eddie always spit out the bones. In fact, he usually spit out most of the toad. He didn't want to choke, and it wasn't like he particularly enjoyed the flavor. Besides, if he chewed too long, his mother would see the evidence stuck between his teeth. He was uncertain of what would happen if she saw. Maybe she'd never speak with him again, and the terrible silence would go on forever, never ending, till he forgot how to talk entirely.

SHRINK

GABRIELLE MORGAN

I used to sneak into my parents' room.
Our scale, my unseen obsession. Every
last mirror faced the wall; blankets
covered the stationary ones until I was
no longer visible to my own gaze.

My stomach burdening my every thought,
I used to pray to God to make it shrink.
Instead it swelled, weighing me down
against the icy bathroom tile. The distaste
almost enough to rid myself of food.



THROWN INTO AN UNKNOWN WORLD
DIGITAL ARTWORK BY ALEX TACKNEY

FICTION

HEAD WOUNDS

LILY MCNAMARA

The line between the admiration and jealousy that I had for my brother was wearing thin. It was mid-July, and Walter was home early, instead of doing student work for the second half of the summer as he'd intended. Mom was worried and asked him to come home. Not that she told me, but I gathered as much. Why else would Walt come back, when he already had a plan in place? Mom wanted him to check up on me after I'd taken such drastic action, dropping out of college freshman semester, instead working at a fast food place, Burger Barn, within just a few blocks of the home I'd grown up in. I wasn't talking to her about it. Too embarrassed. I didn't want her as worried as me, though I had little doubt that she already was.

We were perched on the old brick wall of Mom's backyard, stewing in mildly awkward silence. Well, I felt awkward. Walt seemed at ease with it, as usual. The wall was cracked with age, red powder already dusting the seat of my pants, my palms stinging with the grit. I stared down at the needle-sharp crabgrass that we'd spent our childhood playing on. Chunks of sun-dried dirt were visible in the patchy landscaping, and the ancient swing set that qualified as a safety hazard at this point creaked slightly in the warm evening breeze. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw my mom duck away from the kitchen window, watching us. I almost laughed. Swinging my legs like a little kid, heels bouncing off the wall and back up into the air, I looked back over at Walt. Growing up, he was this fearless, unattainable paragon to me. Always careless and cheerful, yet somehow perfectly poised, like it was all effortlessly intentional. I didn't have a dad to look up to; he'd left shortly after I was born. But I didn't need him. I had Walt. I always wanted to be like him, I did everything I could to emulate him, but the weight of my anxious, borderline neurotic personality held me back. Still does. I didn't have the confidence; I cared so much about every little thing that I thought my skull would crack from the pressure. Walt breezed through high school, never complaining, encouraging me to do the same. I lagged behind, failing where he succeeded, scared where he was brave, complaining where he laughed.

And then he left. Off to engineering school, funded by scholarships he'd gotten with that genius, functional brain of his. He went away, and it was just me and Mom. I got worse. Every step I took, I second guessed. I wasn't as good as him, so why even try? I started high school with low expectations and didn't even meet those. My grades plummeted, Mom worried, and I tried to take a page out of Walt's book. I was going to be carefree. It didn't matter if I didn't let it matter. I graduated, no scholarships offered, but I wanted to make him proud, make Mom proud, so I went to college anyway. Around midterms, I realized just how much money my failure was costing Mom, who was always working so hard just to keep a roof over our heads. I dropped out, and I didn't care, didn't worry about my future. It was a fruitless exercise to consider what could actually come. No way to control the outcome if you go hunting for possibilities, but if you stay right where you are, the power's all yours. So there I stayed. And Mom got worried. And now Walt was here.

Walt was watching me, I could feel it. I fiddled with the sleeve of my sweatshirt, nails digging at a loose thread. Walt snorted, handing me a rubber bracelet with his college's logo on it, procured from one of the many pockets

on his shaggy bomber jacket, or maybe his cargo pants, both of which looked far too warm for the weather.

“Settle down, Simon,” he said with an abrasive laugh. “If you need to fidget, take this, don’t scuff the hell out of a new pair of shoes. Mom can’t afford new ones right now, can she?” I flinched, tugging at the collar of my sweatshirt. Walt grimaced, regret clear on his face. “But it’s fine, right? Cause you’re working and all.” The way he said it didn’t make it sound fine. It made working sound like a terrible decision that only idiot little brothers make. I rolled the bracelet between my fingers, sighing so deeply that I’m certain it was yanked straight from my long-suffering soul.

Eying the sneakers, Walt added, “So, new shoes, no more school, new job. Lots of changes going on in your life, huh?”

“It’s not a big deal,” I said, in a tone so petulant that I winced.

“Yes, it is. Obviously,” he replied with a decisive wave of his hand. I leaned back, pulling the rubber bracelet taut between my fingers, worrying the edge with a nail.

“Whatever. School wasn’t for me. Maybe I’m just not as smart as you.”

Walt laughed again, but his eyes flickered to my hands, which were twitching with so much nervous energy that the bracelet was practically tied up in knots. My face colored red in indignance at his laughter.

“Hey! Aren’t you supposed to make me feel better or something?”

Walt leaned forward on his hands, elbows resting on his knees, an appraising look pinching his freckled features.

“I can’t do that for you, Simon. I’m here to say that I trust you, and if you think this is the right decision for you,” he emphasized the word, “then I just wanna say congratulations on finding your path at Burger Barn and leave it at that.” I frowned, unable to tell if he was messing with me or not. Rolling the bracelet around in my palm, my left foot started bouncing against the bricks again, red dust shaking loose and sliding down the wall. The wall beneath me creaked slightly at the motion.

“I don’t know if it is,” I admitted, glaring at my fidgeting hands.

“Mhm.” It was quiet, Walt leveling a patient, if somewhat bored, look my way. He always did this. The best way to get me talking about all those problems that got me so worked up all my life is to shut up for a while and wait for me to fill the silence. I huffed, already fighting back the need to fill the gap with what Walt delicately entitled “word vomit.”

“I cost too much money. College was just so much, I never really understood that until too late, and I wasn’t good enough for scholarships and Mom is paying all on her own and it’s too much. She can’t do it. She shouldn’t have to.” My eyes wandered over the cracked asphalt on the other side of the wall, over the somehow pristine faux leather of Walt’s boots. He didn’t say anything, but his eyebrows were pinched as he watched me. The sun was setting. We should have been basking in the honey-yellow light of golden hour, but clouds as heavy and grey as the pavement me and Walt’s feet were dangling above obscured the light. “She thinks I’m a burden. That I’m throwing away my chance for a good life. Whatever that means. But I’m trying to move out, just on my own money! Not hers. It doesn’t matter, though. Unless I go get some more education and get a real job, whatever that means, she thinks I’m going to be miserable and regret it for the rest of my life.”

Walt nodded sagely, before saying in a dry voice, “Has she said any of that to you, like, out loud?” His voice was lighthearted, but his expression was tight. Disappointed? Worried? I didn’t know. I grimaced, shrugging evasively in response. Walt continued to stare.

“We should have been basking in the honey-yellow light of golden hour, but clouds as heavy and grey as the pavement me and Walt’s feet were dangling above obscured the light.”

“Ugh, fine, not out loud! But she’s thinking it. And implying it. And she said I shouldn’t have dropped out. And I disagree.” Holding up a hand, Walt interrupted me.

“Two things. First, you’re assuming a whole lot of nasty things about our mother. I’ve never known her to be so judgmental, and I don’t believe you have either. Just because she’s worried that you may not be making the smartest decision, doesn’t mean that she thinks you’re a failure, burden, disappointment, etcetera.” It almost sounded like he was genuinely upset. His voice was tired. Parental. I frowned. “Second,” he gently poked my shoulder, “are you sure it’s Mom who’s thinking that stuff, Simon? Who’s actually having those doubts?” I crossed my arms defensively.

“It doesn’t matter! I was going to mess it up anyway.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t. I don’t care.”

“You’re the picture of nonchalance.”

“Yes, I am.” The silence stretched ‘till it pulled taut, and I had no choice but to break it. “I’m a burden on the woman who raised me, all by herself.”

Walt’s expression turned blank, and in a voice colder than I’ve ever heard from him, replied, “She didn’t do it alone. I was there. For both of you.” His voice was quiet.

“Yeah, and how am I supposed to live up to that? I’ll never be as, as good as you, so why bother trying anymore?”

“You already are.” His answer was so quick, certain.

I threw my hands in the air with exasperation, put off by his assurance in his answer’s simplicity. The motion was too sudden, it jerked me off balance and I pitched backwards over the wall. Flailing my arms as I fell the short five feet to the grass, I had only half a breath to panic, hooking my knees over the wall, body swinging directly into the bricks rather than landing headfirst on the sidewalk. The last thing I remember seeing was Walt’s dumbstruck expression, and I recall feeling a flash of illogical satisfaction that this time, I was the one catching him off guard. There was an awful, bone-jarring crack. An icy flash of pain rattled my skull and my mind went blank.

Light burned behind my eyes, and through the sensation of cotton-stuffed ears, I could hear muffled voices. I grimaced. My head ached. I could hear

my heartbeat in my ears, each pulse a pair of hands reaching behind my eyes and squeezing my brain. “Ugh,” I coughed out, reaching a hand for my head. The voices stopped and I heard someone shifting closer to me.

“Simon, are you awake?” My mother. Her voice sounded raspy with lack of sleep, heavy with worry. I pried open one eye for just a moment, but letting in more light felt like shoving a screwdriver between my eyes. I kept them closed.

“Probably,” I said, turning my head towards her voice. “Am I at the hospital?” I asked, wincing as I realized just how embarrassing this situation was. And how much all of this would likely end up costing my mom.

“Yes, you are,” she said, gently patting me on the shoulder. “Do you remember what happened?”

I groaned in embarrassment, throwing an arm over my eyes. “Mhm” was all I choked out in response, before adding a quiet, “I’m sorry.” Someone jabbed my shoulder, hard. “Ow! What the hell?”

“Don’t apologize.” It was Walt’s voice. To most, he would’ve sounded just as bored and careless as always. But I knew him, and there was a strain to it, a forced nonchalance. My brain buzzed with guilt, embarrassment, remembering what I’d said shortly before my accident.

“Fine,” I said, twining my fidgeting fingers together. “I’m fine, right?”

“The doctor needs to check you out now that you’re awake,” she sighed. “But she said that you’re most likely okay.”

“It looked more frightening than it was,” Walt added, and I felt his hand on mine, passing me another one of those rubber bracelets. I hesitated just a moment before taking it, tapping his hand with one of my fingers in silent thanks. “Head wounds bleed a lot,” he continued, “and you cheese-grated a pretty nice chunk off the top of your scalp with all that old brick.” He laughed, but his voice was tight. “Have fun with your early bald spot.”

I squawked indignantly and my hand flew to my head, feeling only tight-bound bandages. “This is so embarrassing,” I said, slowly easing myself up, eyes still shut.

“Yeah, it is.” I heard a smacking sound, and a laugh from Walt. “Sorry, Mom.”

I laughed, cracking open my eyes once again so I could witness his defeat. Walt was wearing the letterman jacket with his name on it, because of course he was, but something was . . . different.

“What’s wrong with your jacket?”

“Huh?” Walt looked down at the coat, then back up to me. “What do you mean?” I stared hard, squinting my eyes at it. It was supposed to be green. A bright, obnoxious green, but it wasn’t. It was just—there. It wasn’t a color. I squinted harder. It wasn’t not a color either.

“You good, Simon?” The calm indifference was fading from Walt’s voice, fast, as he looked on in confusion. “What’s wrong with my jacket?”

I shook my head, closing and opening my eyes. “Nothing. Sorry.” Opened them again. Walt’s hair was a gingery red. It was. So why weren’t my eyes reading it that way? It was just there. On his head. A color. Just not one I could identify. “It’s nothing.”

I was able to go home the next day, but under orders not to overdo anything, to take time to let my body heal. My mom was in and out of my room,

clearly worried but trying to give me my space. I was offered at least five cups of tea in about as many hours. Walt made his attempt too.

There was an insistent knock on my door, one far too abrasive to be my mom’s. Before I could say anything, Walt poked his head into the room.

“Hey, Simon.” He smiled awkwardly, as if looking for a way to start a conversation and coming up empty. That was rare for him.

“Hey, Walt.”

“How you holdin’ up?”

“I’m fine.” I rolled my eyes, stomach tightening. I hated questions like that. There was an awkward pause, and Walt rubbed the back of his neck with one hand, the other propping open the door to my room. His sleeve slid down his arm, and I could see three or four of those rubber bracelets around his wrist. I looked away, swallowing around the sudden tight pain in my throat.

Walt coughed and continued his attempt to get me to talk. “Listen, about how our conversation earlier—” He trailed off, dragging a hand down his face. “You said some pretty heavy stuff, Simon, and I don’t really—” another deep breath, “I don’t know what to tell you.” No way was this happening. Walt never admits to not knowing things. He always got great satisfaction from being the smartest person in the room. This just didn’t happen. I should be happy. For once, I wasn’t the one struggling for words, but damn, this just made me feel worse. It wasn’t right.

“You don’t need to tell me anything,” I snapped. “Because I’m fine.” Walt opened his mouth to reply, but I interrupted. “My head is hurting. Can you please leave?” The silence dragged on. I stared at the floor.

“Okay.” I heard Walt’s voice. Soft, hurt, almost. The door clicked shut and guilt, hard and mean, coiled in my gut.

I didn’t mention my problem, not to my mother or Walt. I had to understand it first. And what was I supposed to do? Get my mom all worried again over nothing, have her cart me to the doctor just so they could charge her more money because of me? Rack up an even larger medical bill? No way. I’d deal with it myself.

Sitting on my bed, in my room, which was painted a far-too-loud shade of green that my brain was now struggling to pinpoint, I held up one of my old school t-shirts, one I knew to be red. It looked like—nothing. It was a color. It wasn’t greyscale, or brown, as if I were somehow spontaneously colorblind. I was certain. It was a color. Just not any I could identify. But I knew; I remembered it was red. Didn’t look like red. I sighed in frustration, hurling the t-shirt across my room. It unrolled mid-trajectory, and fell an unsatisfyingly few feet from me, momentum lost. I reached for an item under my bed, feeling around the mess I’d shoved under there. Grasping a book, I dragged it out and held it in front of my face. Yup, that was a color. Certainly a different one than the T-shirt lying crumpled on the floor. But I didn’t know which one. I couldn’t describe it for the life of me. It looked muddled, wrong, and evoked absolutely no response in me. *What is going on?*

The rest of the week was just as confusing. I spent most of my time wandering the house, picking up and putting down items that I recognized, that I should know the color, just to become frustrated as they generated no response in my brain. I could feel two pairs of worried eyes following me.

Sometimes, as I entered the room, I'd hear conversation suddenly stop, the two of them shooting guilty looks in my direction as I wandered back out, picking up a pillow from the couch or a picture off the wall that I knew should be a certain color, and studying it intensely.

My mom color codes the dishes in our house. She always said it was the easiest way to make sure that everyone washed their fair share. She and I were squashed close to each other in front of the kitchen sink, washing that morning's breakfast dishes. I was staring blankly out the window above the sink and my mom gently elbowed me, hands buried in soapy water.

"C'mon, bud. Focus up. We're almost done with the dishes. Then you can do all the staring into the middle distance that your heart desires," she laughed, flicking some of the dishwater in my direction.

I ducked, crying, "Hey!" and flinging water back at her. With a long-suffering sigh to cover up the smile tugging at my lips, I reached for one of the stacked dishes and a sponge, starting to scrub some dried egg yolk from the edge. My mom looked on in confusion. It took a moment for it to register, and I glanced down at the dish, then back at her.

"What's wrong?"

"Honey, that's your brother's plate. It's yellow."

I dropped the plate back into the sudsy water like it had burned me. It was plastic, so it bobbed right back up to the surface. It didn't look yellow. But I guess it didn't look not yellow. My brows pinched in frustration, and my fists were clenched tight under the soapy water.

"Sorry. I guess I was just distracted."

"Don't apologize, honey. I just thought you were feeling especially generous. Feel like washing Walt's dishes today?"

"What? No way," I snorted, and Mom joined in, though it sounded a bit more forced than her natural laughter from before.

"Okay, then I guess I'll call Walt down to help. It's too bad, I was enjoying this, no better mother-son bonding than dishwashing, huh?"

I snorted. "Sure thing, Mom. This is my favorite." She laughed again, and hearing it felt like a sharp, guilty pain in my gut. It didn't last long, though, as she smeared a handful of dirty dish suds in my hair, and my own laughter turned genuine once again.

Mix-ups like that became more frequent, to the point where I came near to tears in frustrated embarrassment after ruining a load of laundry, mixing colors with whites and staining them, something I didn't notice until my mom pointed it out while I was wearing the shirt. But, after my second week of time off work for recovery, as the headaches faded, managing my new, hopefully temporary, situation became—well, easier isn't quite the right word, less upsetting—I learned how to live with it.

A third week passed, and after a final visit to the doctor, I was given a clean bill of health and the OK to go back to work. My physical fatigue from the slight concussion was gone, and I felt fully recovered. I thought that maybe I'd be able to see and understand color again, but as my body finished healing (with a bald spot, just as Walt predicted), my eyes remained the same. Seeing, but not comprehending. Some things were easier than others.

Of course, I knew grass was green. When I saw it, I'd repeat in my head, green green green. That's green. But even when I knew it, it didn't read as green. Navigating the world got harder. I didn't realize how many cues relied on color until my brain could not articulate the difference. I told no one about my sudden color deficiency. I'd looked up my symptoms just about a million times. This wasn't a thing that happened to people. Wasn't normal. A trip to the doctor wouldn't help. It'd just be another waste of Mom's money. I just shrugged it off. I wasn't hurt. I'm not an artist, so what do I care if I can't tell blue from orange? What does it matter if the world is confusing and muddled and sapped of nuance? Not caring was an effective way to deal with it. It didn't matter if I didn't let it matter. I could still live. I could still be fine.

"I learned how to live with it."

It was a difficult day at Burger Barn. The summer was over and early-morning cold weather had come early, which already put me in a bad mood. On top of that, they'd decided to manufacture new bottles for the sauce. Why, I have no clue. I couldn't tell the difference between mayo, mustard, and ketchup by the shape of the bottle anymore. They were, curse them, all the same cylinders with pointed tips. I got at least seven orders wrong that morning, my random guessing panning out far too infrequently. My shift ended with the manager yelling at me, and me yelling into a fistful of paper towels in the bathroom. But hey, I wasn't fired, so it was fine. I was dealing with it.

Walt didn't buy it. I could tell, because it was his fall break, and he'd decided to use his time off to corner me after my shift ended, sauntering into the place just as I was exiting the bathroom. He gestured to a booth with a thumb.

"Let's get something to eat," he said.

I groaned. "I work here every day, you think I wanna eat another burger?"

"Don't care. Sit down, I'll order."

I sat at the booth, tapping my nails against the plastic tabletop as I stared out the window, eyes fixed on cars whose paint jobs all looked the same. I didn't turn when Walt sat down, my eyes half-closed as I contemplated nothing. He waited, clearly expecting me to get uncomfortable with the silence and fill it with explanations and questions and worries as was usual. I didn't. There wasn't that need. I just didn't care. Fed up with my complacency, Walt spoke.

"Alright, Simon. Spill."

I shrugged. "Nothing's wrong."

"Liar," Walt said, almost sounding amused. I frowned at him. "Ever since you fell, you've been acting weird. Worse than before. I liked the whining better, at least you were there. Now you're all—" he waved his hand vaguely,

“removed. Something’s going on, and you’re gonna tell me what.” I sighed, leaning my head back against the booth and watching the ceiling. I remembered that it was yellow. It looked like dull nothing.

“You’re going to think I’m crazy or something.”

“I already do.”

I crossed my arms and glared at him. He stared right back, face impassive. “God, you’re nosy.” I shoved the heels of my hands into my eyes. I didn’t want to talk about it. I was fine. I’d come to terms. This was just how it was. Saying it out loud would just make it something real. An actual problem instead of just a state of being. Giving voice would give it power. Walt looked on, leaning his chin on his hands. “Since I fell—” I paused, running my hand across the healing scar on the back of my head. “Things have been. Ugh.” I shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know. Weird.” I paused again, letting the quiet inflate the distance between us. I didn’t have to say anything. He couldn’t make me.

“That’s it? Just weird,” Walt asked dryly, disbelief clear in his tone. “C’mon man, spill it. Best way to take the pill is making it a casualty of swallowing the water.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I squinted at him with confusion.

“Who cares? It means what I want, and right now, I want you to deal with whatever’s been bugging you. Best way to start is by telling me. You get so caught up in your own head, it’s not healthy.”

“Fine.” I stared down at the table. *It’s red. You know it’s red. Red red red.* “I can’t see right. Since I hit my head.” Walt’s jabbing, sarcastic expression fell away. He looked genuinely concerned.

“What? I thought the doctor checked your eyes?” I waved my hand dismissively.

“No, no, I’m fine. It’s not like that.” Walt relaxed a bit, watching me with curiosity.

“Then what is it like?” he asked, and I wrung my hands. Wordlessly, Walt handed me one of those rubber bracelets. I really don’t know where he gets so many.

“I can’t—I don’t know, understand what I’m seeing. Colors, mostly.” I stared at the rubber bracelet as I stretched it. It looked, I don’t know, darkish? “I can’t see them right. It’s not like I’m colorblind. I’m seeing proper. But it’s like my head—” I gestured helplessly. “I don’t get what I’m seeing. I know, from remembering, that my uniform is yellow.” I tugged on the sleeve of my shirt. “But it doesn’t read as yellow, in my head. It feels like colors are—” I paused, searching for some way to make it make sense. “Like they’re words in a language I can’t read. I know they’re words, and I can tell the difference between one and another, I can see the parts that make them up.” I paused again, voice heavy in my throat. “But they don’t mean anything to me. I can’t interpret them. I don’t know what they are.” I sighed, dragging my eyes up to meet Walt’s. The quiet stretched on.

“That sucks,” he said, watching me. I choked on a disbelieving laugh.

“Thanks for that. Real helpful.” I stared back down at the bracelet.

“No, I mean it. You know that sucks, right?” he pushed, and I shrugged, not making eye contact with him. “You’ve got a problem; you should take it seriously. No one would be upset with you if you did. It’s okay to ask for help.

You don’t need to be embarrassed.”

I snorted derisively. “Easy words for the guy who never needs help.” That awful, hurt expression was back on Walt’s face again.

“That’s not fair, Simon.”

“Yeah, it is. You’re perfect without even trying! Do you have any idea—”

Walt interrupted me, voice rising. “No, stop. Stop it. I’ve been trying so hard, my *whole life*, to be something good enough for you.” He glared at me with wet eyes, in one of the more open shows of emotion I’d ever seen from him. “So you’d have someone in your life to look out for you, to look up to, so Mom wouldn’t be doing it all by herself. Because you, Simon, deserve that.” Walt crushed a paper napkin into a tiny wad in his hands, finger scratching erratically at the bunched-up paper. “God, Simon, why can’t you get it through your thick skull that your stupid ass is a person who is worth every sacrifice, all the effort and care that you feel guilty about receiving?” I stared down at the table. I’d made him cry. I’d made my perfect, unflappable, carefree big brother cry. So why couldn’t I cry? I felt hollow. Deadened. I wanted to say something, apologize, but I doubted that’s what Walt wanted to hear. Instead, I reached for his hand, and gently unspooled the shredded paper napkin from his grip, tugging one of the rubber bracelets from his wrist and placing it on his palm. Walt sighed, and the intensity of the moment faded.

“I’d made my perfect, unflappable, carefree big brother cry.”

“So. Uh,” he said, after a few minutes of silence, interrupted only by the occasional sound of the Burger Barn door opening. “Can you tell me what color this is?” I looked up. Walt was brandishing a glass ketchup bottle in my direction.

“It’s ketchup, dumbass. Of course it’s red.”

“Aha! Trick question, the bottle is clear.”

I stared at him, unamused. “Who’s not taking this seriously now?” I said accusingly, tightening my grasp on the rubber bracelet.

“Are you yet?” I opened and closed my mouth, but before I could summon an answer, Walt continued. “Because just ten minutes ago you were telling me that you’re fine. That nothing’s wrong.”

“I am fine. It’s not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal?” Walt just sounded disappointed, tired. “Your eyes are jacked to hell and you’ve been dragging yourself around like a chronically depressed sack of rocks since the day I got home, and according to Mom, longer than that.”

“I *am* fine. You just like feeling like you’re all observant and intelligent,” I bit back, expression twisted into a scowl.

“Yes, I do,” Walt replied simply. “And I’m intelligently observing that you need help.” I stared at him. He was punctuating his sentence with a massive bite of his burger, and I couldn’t summon a response. “Anyways, has it affected any of your other senses?” He shoved my burger at me, and I looked incredulously down at it, before relenting and taking a begrudging bite. “What does it taste like?” I chewed the hocky-puck resembling slab of meat.

“Tastes like burger.”

“Perfect! Mine too.” Walt stood up, patting me on the shoulder. “C’mon. Let’s go.”

“Huh? Where are we going?” I asked, putting my food back on the table.

“To get your eyes sorted.” He paused, his expression almost pleading.

“Please, Simon. Let me help. I want to try.”

Walt took me hiking. I didn’t know what he thought an hour-and-a-half long drive to the nearest small mountain would do. I trudged up after him, avoiding roots and stones that littered the path. He was a few yards in front of me, looking over his shoulder every few minutes to ask why I was so slow. Hell, hiking was even more boring when all the tree’s foliage looked the same. I shivered, crossing my arms. The parka I’d borrowed from Walt wasn’t enough to totally shield me from the bite of autumn wind. At that thought, I looked back up at the trees, realizing that just about now, they should be alight with oranges, reds, and yellows. They just looked like leaves to me. I swallowed, then shrugged the thought off. Who cares?

It took another forty-five minutes to get to the top of the mountain. I was out of shape, so I took frequent breaks, which seemed to agitate Walt further. For once, he looked impatient. The sun was sinking down to meet the ground. He probably wanted to get up and back before it got dark. After a few more snipes were tossed between us, and I dragged myself back to my feet and made the last leg of the trek, we reached the top. There was a short shelf of rock. Walt climbed up first, then held a hand down for me, hauling me up the rest of the way. The peak of the mountain was a wide, roundish slab of stone, with larger peaks of rock and divots littered around it. The wind was stronger here, blowing my hair off of my face, tangling it behind my ears and around my eyes. Despite that, the rock had been soaking up the sun all day and was pleasantly warm. I pressed my bare hands against it, huffing short bouts of steam into the air as I caught my breath.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. Walt. “Simon, look.” I brought my gaze up from the ground. The rock shelf of the mountain was free of trees, leading out into a perfect view of the gradual slope we’d just climbed. Foliage for miles, dotted with little patches of farmland, clusters of suburban houses, and small, shining, coin-like bodies of water, reflecting the sunset. Walt’s face was also reflecting the sun and he sighed. It was rare to see him moved like this, and now it was happening twice in one day. I swallowed back that painful lump in my throat. I couldn’t break my eyes away from his face, from watching him feel what I could not.

He looked back at me. “The sunset. It’s backlighting the trees. With the light shining through, it looks like it’s all on fire.” He gently placed his hand on my head, turning my face to look back out at the view.

It was all muddled to me. Not brilliant, not ablaze. Heaps of beauty I

couldn’t understand. Walt could see it. He could feel it. It wasn’t fair. The sun was on my face and it felt *orange* and *yellow* and *warm* and I wanted to see it. I bit my lip, hard. It felt like someone was reaching down my throat, pulling out a stone that’d been forming in my gut for months. Placing it on my tongue. Making me taste it, acknowledge it. I choked, gritting my teeth to keep my chin from trembling. Walt was right. My head felt just about as dull as the language of colors that I couldn’t read, as lifeless as the vista before me that should make me feel *something*. I’d always wanted to be someone better, hoped for a future, but was too afraid to allow my want of that, too certain of failure. Now I felt nothing, desired nothing, saw no hue, no hope. I didn’t get to see the colors I had before, the ones I couldn’t feel.

“I can’t see it.” I coughed up the words, ones I’d said before but with no acknowledgment that it wasn’t right, wasn’t fair, wasn’t me.

“I know.”

**“It was all muddled to me.
Not brilliant, not ablaze.
Heaps of beauty I couldn’t
understand.”**

“I want to see it, Walt.” My voice broke.

“I know you do.” I reached a shaking hand to his arm, grasping the sleeve of his coat. The blanket of colorless trees blurred. I cried for what I lost, cried for the hope that I might see it again.



MOUNTAINS
PORTA 400, 6X7 120 MM FILM PHOTOGRAPHY BY AIDAN RECHIN

THE BUTTERFLY TATTOO

SHARICE SOMERO

In seventh grade, a girl ran up to me as I passed the nurse's office on my way to lunch. She stopped me as she shoved a letter into my hands and said, "Don't read it until I'm gone and never tell anyone about this." With that, she left me in the hallway. I went to the only private place in a middle school: the bathroom.

I read through the letter. It was overall a complaint about me. I was too much and made too many jokes, or something like that. The only line I remember from the entire thing is "you are all rainbows and butterflies."

The girl and I had been somewhat friends since elementary school. Although, it was more of we were friends with the same girl, Emma, a sweet girl with a heavy lisp. I did my best to get along with the girl, but we never seemed to understand each other. To try to stop us from fighting, I agreed to go along with all her wishes, hoping to stop forcing Emma to be the mediator. I walked the way she asked, spoke the way she asked. I even changed how I ate my sandwiches from bread, then cheese, then meat, then bread to eating the entire thing the "proper" way. It lasted a day before I gave up.

I never hated her though. Amused would be a better word for it. Her long blonde hair reminded me of the Amish, but her clothing avoided the stereotype. We fought constantly because of my loud and rambunctious ways clashing with her serious and studious ways. To be frank, she saw me as helpless. I saw her as controlling. Her complaints and scolding, however, always seemed to come more from a place of concern rather than hatred towards me. Then, this letter came.

At the end of my 7th grade year, I found her crying in the bathroom. She had made a "bad grade" on a test, or she didn't do as well at her karate practice. Whatever the cause was, she was terrified of disappointing her mom, a feeling I knew all too well. I hugged her tightly until she stopped crying. I told her that it would be okay and that she was smart. I tried to remind her that it wasn't the end of the world, something many others had to remind me of.

We didn't speak again after that. She probably still thought me as frivolous as a butterfly; I definitely still thought her as serious as a rock. To the girl who gave me that letter, my next tattoo is in your honor.

BIG FEELINGS

SAMANTHA BROOKS

At fourteen, I dyed my hair
in a pot of boiling blue raspberry
Kool-Aid and learned all the words
to My Chemical Romance's
"Welcome to the Black Parade."
My mom found my funeral plans
and hid my dad's sleeping pills.

At fifteen, I punched our pastor
in his gut for crowding me
in the fourth quarter of the church
league basketball game.
My deacon dad refused to drive
me home, so my mom picked
me up and preached at me
on my anger management.

Two years later, I snapped
some girl's leg at the State
Championship volleyball game.
She lost her scholarship to play
as a D1 starter for Clemson.
My dad brought home a scrapped
car, something better to beat up.

This same year, a boy confessed
his undying devotion to me,
promising me love if I let him
rape me. I thought it was my fault.
And my parents thought
nothing of my crying on bended knees
at the church altar because I have big feelings.

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

CREATING HOME

In creating artwork that is purposeful, functional, and beautiful, Becca Tepen captures the feeling of home.

WRITTEN BY SAMANTHA BROOKS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAKOTA RIEMER & CAROLINE REYNOLDS





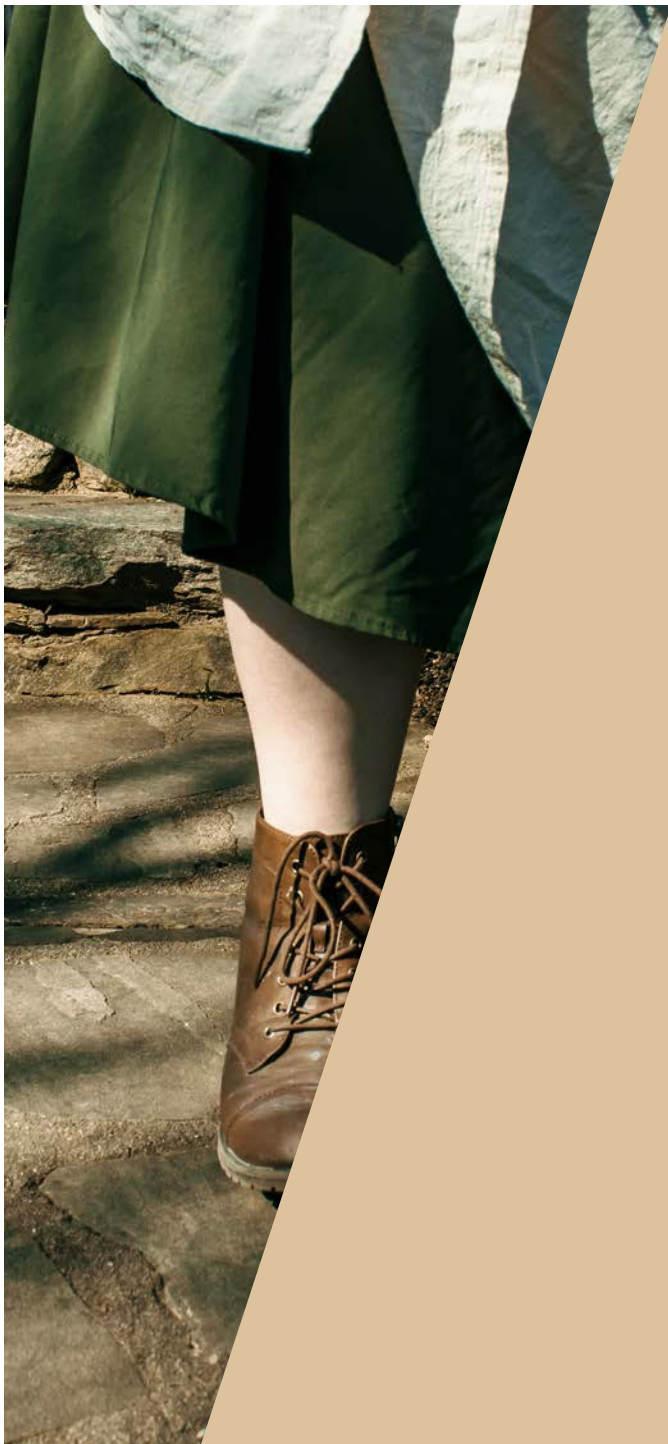
REBECCA TEPEN SITS BESIDE ME IN THE WARM, DIM LIGHT of a local coffee shop, takes in a deep breath, and exhales in a laugh that is both comforting and contagious. She sports an earthy-green shirt and cardigan with matching Keds that swing under her chair, making her long clay-red skirt dance. People bustle in and out of the lounge and carry on conversations—yet Becca seems undistracted. As we talk, she weaves her fingers together and pulls them back apart, leaving one hand on her lap while running her fingers along the pendants that hang around her neck. She later tells me that she doesn't often keep her hands still.

Becca is a senior Graphic Design and Ceramics double major and is the only undergraduate Ceramics major from the class of 2022. She grew up in Newark, Delaware, where she “basically lived on the University of Delaware’s campus.” Although Becca did not consider herself an artist before coming to Anderson University since she had “no prior experience until becoming an art major,” she has always been interested in creating stories because it allowed her to really “delve into who people are.” Stories allowed Becca to see and connect with people. This connection between two people, Becca says, is one reason she loves ceramics: “through the transfer of this functional piece of art, we have a connection.”

Functionality is a key part of Becca’s artwork, though never at the sacrifice of aesthetics. In creating ceramic pieces, Becca says that she wants every piece to be “useful, have purpose, and be beautiful.” She creates pieces that can be used daily, such as mugs or bud vases, decorated in quilting patterns, mushrooms, or anything warm and homey that she can think of. A favorite piece of hers, which she assures me she will never sell, is a mixing bowl. Laughing, she says, “I have made things more technically sound, but this [piece] was instrumental in [developing] my style.” Over the last two years, Becca has used her knowledge of graphic design to “reinforce and supplement” her ceramics by developing her own brand, allowing her to share her pieces with others.

Running her fingers along the pendants on her necklace one more, Becca tells me that all of her work is filtered through her identity as a Catholic woman. For her, creativity is a byproduct of her worldview as a Catholic. She says that everything she does—how she dresses, how she interacts with others, and how and what she creates—





“has to go through the filter.” Creating through this filter has influenced Becca most in the way in which she seeks to demonstrate the concept of “home” in her art. This concept of home as she sees demonstrated in Catholicism synthesizes Becca’s desire to create artwork that is beautiful and functional and that connects people.

“Through the transfer of this functional piece of art, we have a connection.”

As she shares her story with me, Becca seems to start each piece the same way: “It was a God thing.” In coming to Anderson University, a school she never saw until moving in, and in meeting her fiancé after swearing off dating to God Himself, and in taking her first ceramics class, which led to “something [she] didn’t realize [she] wanted to do with the rest of [her] life,” Becca is sure that God has directed it all. She begins swinging her legs again and smiles genuinely, looking completely at peace.



REBECCA TEPEN



CERAMIC PIECES IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

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glazed stoneware **BUTTON PLATE**
glazed stoneware **SOUP BOWL**

PAGES 122-123

glazed stoneware **MUSHROOM JAR**

PAGES 124-125

glazed stoneware **OVERGROWTH #1**
glazed stoneware **OVERGROWTH #2**

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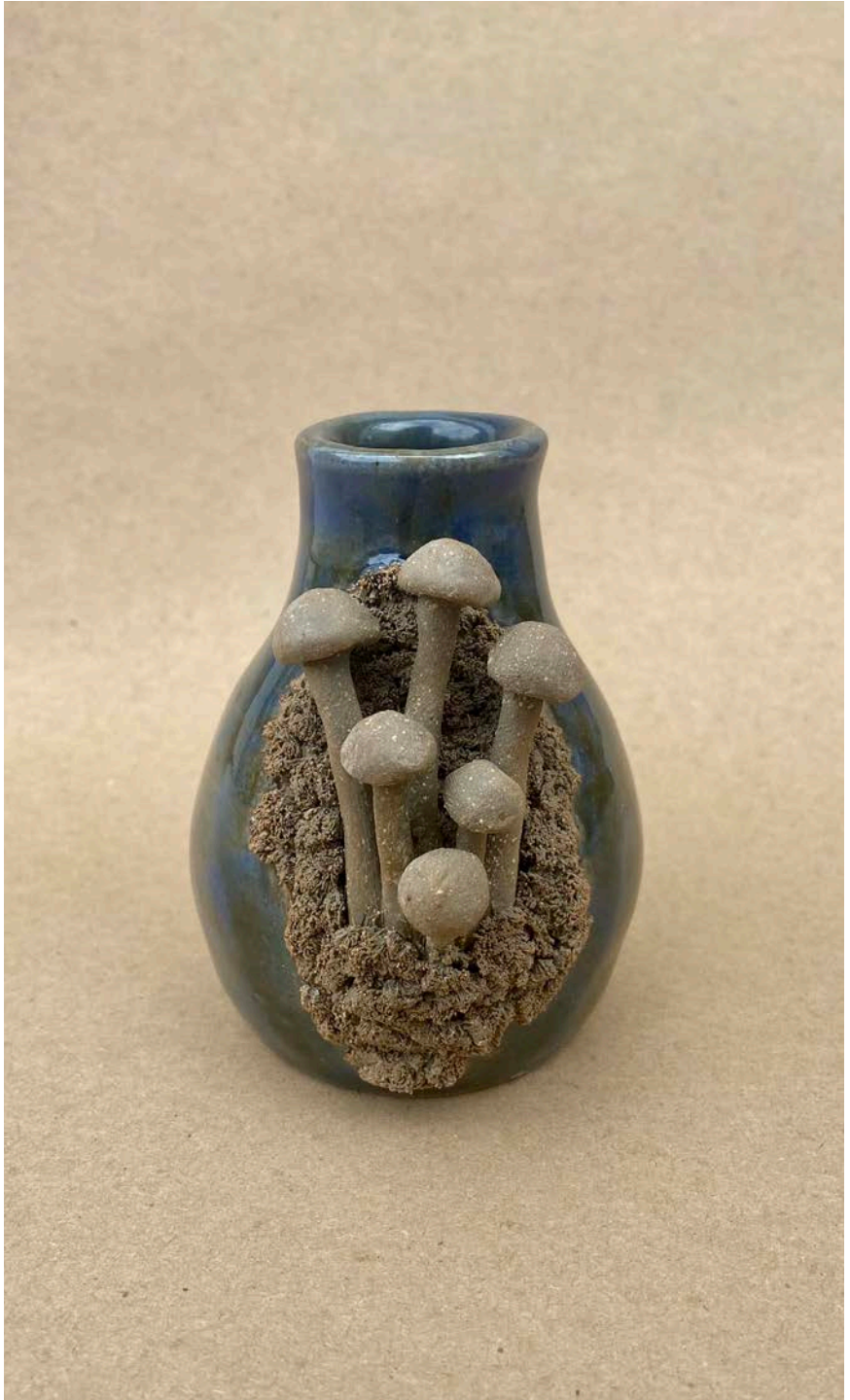
glazed stoneware **HOLLY POT**
glazed stoneware **PUMPKIN POT**

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glazed stoneware **MUSHROOM MUG**









PERMANENCE GABRIELLE MORGAN

My father's feet drag across the floor,
sandpaper skin scratching the hardwood.
Every step he takes audible
to the residents of the house.

The rich aroma of brewed coffee
circulates the kitchen. A full pot,
enough for all three of us,
even when we can't eat breakfast together.

His brown leather chair,
permanently sculpted to the shape of him,
waits for his arrival, just as he
waits for my mother and me.

His choking laugh, my favorite sound.
A constant reminder
that there can always be
joy found inside these walls.



MALICIOUS REFLECTING
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ABIGAIL ELLEDGE



EVENING 1
OIL ON CANVAS BY ISABELLE RIGSBY



EVENING 2
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS BY ISABELLE RIGSBY

FICTION

SPE
NO

Oh no. He's doing it again. Ellie chewed on a nail, blowing a tired breath across the top of her hand, watching William turn the distinct shade of olive-green he always did when getting bad news. After his grandfather, the Howland family patriarch, told him he wasn't inheriting the house, he looked like he was going to yak. This was the first Howland family reunion that Ellie had attended with her boyfriend, and she couldn't help but be entirely put off by the experience. It was just a pressing crowd of formerly-wealthy northerners with the attitudes of people who had far more money than they did. Ellie didn't understand why William looked so sick at the idea of losing a house that he'd never really had to begin with, especially considering the state of the place. Sure, it was situated on the beautiful, if very gloomy coast of Maine, but the building itself looked like it was held together by plywood, super glue, and spite.

None of Ellie's boyfriends had ever had as weak a constitution as William, but then again, none of them made her feel so capable, or important, or made her laugh so much as him. But even so, the guy always looked spaced out, or entirely too spaced in, his breath short and palms swampy. William was in that mode right now, his eyes skipping between his sour-faced grandfather, equally acidic sister Charlotte, and Ellie. His tight, anxious expression softened as it caught on his girlfriend's face, his gaze tracing across the pointed cupid's bow of her lips, then snagging back onto her eyes. William gave a pained smile, rolling his eyes as if to say, *These guys, am I right?* But the usual humor that painted his face was just not there, replaced with uncertainty and agitation. He was clearly begging Ellie to step in and make sense of the situation, to tell him what to do. Ellie carefully schooled her face into an expression of cool placidity. Throwing William a lifeline when he got like this was a fruitless exercise.

Ellie turned away from her floundering partner, skimming over the disappointed and perturbed faces of William's copious extended family members. She could practically see the slobber drying on their chins, excitement cooling, replaced with jilted outrage as William's grandfather announced just who was going to inherit the antiquated coastal home in which they all stood. Except for Charlotte. She looked quite content, though Ellie found her pinched face to be the most grotesque of all, a pleased smile stretching her cheeks, pink gums pale against plum-purple lips. Ellie had never liked Charlotte. In her opinion, Charlotte always had a stick so far up her butt, you could see it in her mouth when she opened it to tell you that you weren't good enough for her baby brother. That was William's problem, really. He was funny, charming, endlessly affectionate, but Ellie was beginning to find him gratingly infantile, his intense reliance on her chafing, making her skin feel too tight.

"Howl, I'm going to go say goodbye to your grandfather before we leave. You should too." Ellie pressed her fingers against William's back as she spoke. She always called him Howl (or Howland, when she needed to shut a conversation down). The name fit better on her tongue. Whenever she called him William, his face turned fragile, and he looked at her like she was the biggest person in the world, holding him in her cupped palms. Howl was better. William never said he minded the name. Ellie wouldn't have stopped

if he had. He was in the middle of a heated conversation with Charlotte about the ring she'd inherited from their grandmother about a decade ago. He started at the contact, then leaned back slightly against her open palm. Ellie pretended she hadn't heard what he was asking his sister for. It's not like he needed a ring. Ellie and William hadn't even begun to discuss a future that would require one yet, though she was certain he'd be more than pleased to talk about it if she initiated the conversation.

"I'll—" he started, shooting a nervous look her way. "I'll say goodbye in just a minute." William dropped the anxious expression, grinning as he added, "Hey, you're a counselor." Ellie raised a brow.

"Yes, Howl, I am."

"Then while you're over there, can you just, counsel Gramps to give us the house?" Ellie winced at the 'us,' but was struggling to stifle a laugh at his words.

"That's not how it works. I'm a marriage counselor, I'm not even a little bit qualified to help people make financial or legal decisions."

William laughed, pressing a kiss to Ellie's cheek and saying softly, "*Well I trust you to make all kinds of decisions. You're very smart, you know.*" She laughed again, turning him to face his sister.

"Yes, I do know. You tell me enough."

"Yeah, well, just wanted to make sure."

Ellie nodded, letting William return to his argument with his sister about the fate of the ring. Ellie hoped Charlotte would keep it, relieving William of the motivation owning the diamond might give him to talk about possible ring-related futures for the two of them.

"Okay, Howl. Meet me in the car when you're done." Ellie said, gently tapping her fingers against his shoulder three times, a little reminder of her presence. William always returned the gesture, saying it stood for the three syllables of *I love you*. That's not what Ellie meant by the gesture, but she didn't tell William that.

She edged her way around disappointed cousins and bickering aunts and uncles, over towards Benjamin Howland, the aforementioned "Gramps" (not that the formerly wealthy man allowed anyone to call him that to his face). He was seated by a window, looking tired and mildly bored.

"Thank you, Mr. Howland, for having William and I over for the weekend. It was great to meet you." Ellie extended a long-fingered hand towards him as she spoke. He glanced her way, at her offered hand, and back to the window.

"Right. Make sure William gets home safe, will you Ella? It's a long drive." Ellie didn't like William's family very much.

"I really wanted the house."

"I know you did, Howl."

Day one of the drive back home to Virginia was eating away the night, dragging into the early hours of the morning. The first few hours were silent, but now William seemed insistent on letting Ellie know just how awful he was feeling. Ellie understood, but she didn't want to. *You're an adult, you're healthy, you have a job, you have me.* Most of those things were only half-truths when applied to William. But Ellie still felt like shaking him. He was

dejected and reliant and happy enough to be driven home with Ellie's free hand resting on his knee. *How can you be happy like this? Don't you want to take care of yourself?* She'd think, but then he'd turn a contented, shining face to her, looking at Ellie as if she were an angel, his patron saint of protection, of healing, and she'd momentarily forget the weight of his vulnerability and melodrama. She'd help him, take care of him. He loved her; he made her feel strong. Wasn't that enough?

"I thought you'd want the house too," William added, his forehead pressed against the car window. He'd wanted it down, but Ellie insisted that it remain closed. It was too cold out.

"Not really. It's just a house. It's too big anyway."

"No, it isn't. It could've been our house."

Ellie's hands tightened on the steering wheel, knuckles turning white. She brought one hand to her mouth, teeth nipping at a hangnail.

"No. Even if your grandfather *had* given it to you." She hated it when William got fixated on the what-ifs, on futures that just weren't possible. Ellie didn't understand the point of thinking about what could have been. Better to focus on what *is*. "It wouldn't be our house. It would have been your house."

"It doesn't have to be that way."

"Yes it does, Howland."

William left the subject of their future alone for the first week after they got home from the family reunion to their apartment in downtown Norfolk. They both had busy work schedules, William as a bartender for a place that was just a few minutes down the road from them, and Ellie at a local private practice. The job suited William; he was friendly, social, and good at half-listening. The busyness kept serious conversation at bay, the two comfortable in casual, cheery words exchanged over the sounds of the TV or reheated leftovers. But the tenuous peace didn't last for as long as Ellie would have liked. Every once in a while, William would bring up the house again, attempting to use it as a segue to discussing their future, words about the two of them trembling, tentative, behind his closed mouth, before he would finally say something.

William brought up the missed opportunity of the house again, after one of his night shifts. The couple were standing over the kitchen table, William shoveling late-night cereal for dinner, Ellie awoken by his return.

"You know, me getting home so late wouldn't wake you if we had a proper place. We have enough shared income for a—"

Ellie held up her hand to stop him, eyes half-lidded and heavy with sleep. William laughed.

"You're barely awake enough to argue! I finally can state my case without your genius mind one-upping me." Ellie snorted, sinking her face into her hands with a tired smile. "It doesn't have to be my family's house, I know that's off the table. But what if we bought a place here, together? Aren't you tired of renting this place? We could really make things official like that, you know?"

Ellie walked over to William, wrapping her arms around him and pressing her face against his back, her cheek squished up against the thin blue cotton

of his T-shirt. She was too tired to do this. Ellie gently shut him down, her words firm but her hands on him soft, holding him like he was delicate. He was delicate. A pretty ice sculpture that required just the right temperature to remain upright.

"I'm too tired to talk about serious stuff like this, Howl. Can't we just go to bed?" Ellie felt his back tense up a moment. He was clearly surprised by this. It was rare that Ellie ever admitted to being unable to do anything, sleep or no sleep.

"Of course, Ellie. We'll talk about it later though, right?"

"Yes, Howl."

"A pretty ice sculpture that required just the right temperature to remain upright."

They were on the couch, Ellie running her fingers over his scalp. Every once in a while, her chewed-ragged fingernails would catch in his thick brown hair. This was their evening ritual, turning on the TV and watching something inconsequential. She would comb her fingers through his hair to keep herself from chewing on her nails. It was a habit, one which got worse the more work had worn her out that day.

William looked tired, bags under his eyes, head lolling against her shoulder. He always looked tired, when he wasn't laughing. Most days, that made Ellie an odd mixture of anxious and annoyed. Today, it didn't. She'd spent the day guiding couples through the lows of their relationships, telling them to be patient, to be understanding, but to participate in equal partnership. It had been a while since she'd attempted that with William, instead choosing the easier route of taking care of him. If he was fine, if he was content, he'd stop asking questions she didn't know the answer to, and she'd get the pleasant feeling of knowing that she'd made his life better. But the more she indulged her own people-pleasing, caretaking nature, lying that *yes, she was fine, no he wasn't bothering her*, the more she resented William for it. It wasn't fair to either of them. She never snapped at him, never lied to him. But she had stopped being honest with him. There was a difference.

"Am I doing something wrong?" Ellie flinched, her hand going still in his hair.

"What?"

Be honest about how you feel, she thought. You're tired. Taking care of him is too much. He needs to be self-sufficient. Help him understand. Better to rip off the Band-Aid than leave him in the dark.

"Am I doing something wrong?"

"What do you think you would be doing wrong?"

"I don't know." William laughed awkwardly, attempting to alleviate the tension.

"Then why are you asking?"

"I don't know. You seem—" He halted his words. "Hm. Maybe I shouldn't poke the bear." William smiled weakly up at Ellie.

"No, Howland, you're not doing anything wrong." Her voice came out a little more strained than she'd intended. Ellie tapped her fingers softly against his head, one, two, three times. A reassurance. William stopped talking.

It was nine-thirty in the morning on a Saturday. Sunlight filtered through the sheer curtains of Ellie and William's room. It diffused through her closed eyelids, her vision washed a gentle red. She woke up twenty minutes ago, but was lying still, eyes closed. Ellie could feel William's gaze on her. His cheek was resting on her hand, his breath whispering against her fingertips.

"You're so beautiful."

Ellie didn't answer.

"Even when you're ignoring me." William added in a teasing tone.

Ellie smiled at him, huffing a quiet laugh through her nose.

"I think we should buy a house. Somewhere more permanent we can live together. I think you'd like that, right?"

Her smile dried up, chewed fingernails digging into the sheets, bunching the fabric between her fingers.

"I think we should go out today. I want to take you out somewhere."

"Where?"

"I don't know. Somewhere nice."

"I'm not sure if that's—"

"I have something important to tell you." Ellie could feel his breath against her wrist, picking up slightly. Her free hand curled tightly against her side.

It was a forty-three-minute drive to the beach. Ellie had the window halfway open, the breeze blowing strands of hair into her eyes. William looked happy with the wind, though. She parked the car right next to the beach, and William grabbed her hand, tugging her along behind him. Ellie followed, apprehension and nostalgia in equal measure causing her gut to twist. This was where they had first met. On the beach. This beach. William had gotten sick, violently throwing up in a hollow between dunes. Ellie had seen him, on his hands and knees, sand sticking to his sweat-damp skin. She'd felt sorry for him, giving him her water, rubbing the back of his neck as he gagged. After he recovered, William introduced himself, calling her his 'guardian angel,' thanking her for the help, eyes fixed on her sunburn-blushed face. Ellie called him Howl. Ellie had offered to help him get home, he'd made a joke about her asking him to dinner first, and so she did. He was kind, endlessly friendly, and certainly pleasant to be around, making jokes about the awkwardness of their meeting, seeing humor rather than embarrassment in the encounter. But that was not all that drew Ellie to him. There was something about the way he looked at her, the way he spoke about her. Laughing, she'd saved him, looking at her with near-reverence. She wanted to go on saving him, every chance she got. She wanted to take care of him. Ellie hated herself for it. It was his reliance on her, which she'd fostered, that now felt so restricting, so exhausting.

They stood on the beach together. It was too windy, the gusts blowing sand in stinging needles against Ellie's bare legs. This was the wrong time to be at the beach. There was garbage littering the shore, a broken bottle a few feet away. It was ugly.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes."

Ellie didn't look at William, her eyes following the lacy-white tips of the churning waves.

"I want to ask you something, Ellie."

"No, you don't, Howl."

She turned to face him. The heirloom ring he'd somehow wheedled from Charlotte was grasped tightly between his fingers. William was halfway down on one knee, balanced awkwardly between kneeling and standing. He wobbled, brows pulled slightly together, mouth parted. Ellie caught him before he fell, helping him to his feet, her hands closed around his.

"You really don't want this, do you?" William asked, his voice terribly quiet.

"No, I don't."

"Why not?"

"I don't know." *Lie.* "I—" Ellie threw her hands up, searching for words she'd been too afraid to say for far too long, for fear of hurting him. "Because you're a child. You're lovely, you're sweet, but you are so fragile, so reliant. I'm afraid I'll make one wrong move and you'll break. It's exhausting."

Ellie gestured to the hollow between the dunes, picturing William curled up there, limbs trembling, alone, wanting to be saved. William looked much the same as he did then, clammy and shaking and vaguely green. He flinched at the rise in her voice.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I shouldn't've said that." Ellie tapped her finger against his hands, three times. William tapped three times back.

I don't know.

I love you.

Ellie released his hands, taking a step back. "I think we need some space."

"No, no wait. We don't need to get married, we don't need a house. We don't have to think about the future. I need you, Ellie. Just stay a little while longer." There was more intent in William's voice than Ellie had heard in a long time. She almost stayed. William took a step forward.

"Just tell me what I need to do, I'll do it."

"Watch out for the bottle, Howl. You'll hurt your foot." William looked down, his foot poised right above the shattered glass. When he looked up, Ellie's back was turned to him. "I'll drive."

It was quiet in the apartment. But a different sort of quiet than the gentle silence she spent with William. Ellie's bare feet were light on the cool tile of the little kitchen as she made herself dinner, balancing on her toes as she paced between the fridge and the counter. A salad, with crumble-up boiled egg and store-bought dressing. She used the big wooden bowl, the one she shared with William, the two of them racing to see who could inhale the most egg bits first, their favorite. There was plenty for her now. She'd come

home from work, turning on the TV just to hear the soothing drone in the background. She felt strange. Just the right size. Her skin wasn't pulled tight. Her hands weren't too big.

Carrying the overlarge salad bowl to the couch, Ellie sat down. When she did, her hips rolled to the side, and she tipped slightly, nearly losing the salad, a few leaves scattering to the floor. The couch was uneven. The place where William always sat had been worn in, a large dent in the cushion. Ellie had sat in her usual place, but without William's weight balancing her, she'd lost her own balance. Ellie scooted over into the hollowed space, turning up the TV. She hunted for the boiled eggs, reaching her hand across the couch. Her fingers found no hair to comb through. She withdrew her hand. She ate another bite. She chewed at her nails.

It was early Sunday morning. Ellie was awake, lying in her bed, sheets tangled around her torso and between her legs. She was sprawled out, taking up all the available space. It felt nice. Ellie's knuckles were pressed against her lips, her other hand tucked under her head. Humming tunelessly, she watched dappled light filtering through the trees and her curtain, waving on the far wall.

Ellie's phone buzzed on the windowsill. She let the call ring through, humming along with the sound. There was a beat of silence, and it buzzed again. Ellie chewed on her nails. It rang through. The third time it called, Ellie had already pushed herself from the bed, sheets still wrapped around her legs, and picked up the phone. The displayed caller ID said 'Howl,' with a little wolf and heart emoji next to it. Ellie answered.

"My grandfather died last night."

She flinched, picturing William alone in the quiet that he was not so comfortable in. How much did he like his grandfather? Ellie never really could tell.

"I'm so sorry, Howl."

"Charlotte already said she's selling the house. Not even keeping it in the family." "I'm . . . sorry, Howl."

"It's fine. It was too big anyway."

There was a moment of silence. Ellie could hear William breathing on the other end. It was stuffy, like he'd been crying.

"Do you—" She paused, pulling a hand through her hair. "Do you want me to come over?" William's breath picked up a bit, and Ellie's shoulders tightened, as if a wire was yanking them up towards her ears. This doesn't mean anything. He just needs some help. Anyone would do this. He would do this for you.

"I'd like that a lot, Ellie." There was another stretch where neither knew what to say. "It's very quiet here." William added, his voice hoarse.

She walked towards the door, feet shuffling over the carpeted floor, squinting as the early morning light shone directly in her eyes.

"Okay. Okay, I'll be over soon. You'll be all right 'til I'm there?"



FLOWER GIRL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TYSON GENTRY



COPPER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARA PEPPER

WILTING

REBEKAH MCCALLUM

After doing the dishes, she turns on the radio, always to the same classical station for fifty years now. She drinks her coffee with cream and honey while she reads. I come into the kitchen at 10:35, struggling to loop my troublesome tie into a knot. Autumn bought this tie for me as a bit of a joke, telling me that seaweed green was not particularly my color but that she liked the pattern. She has such a sense of humor, followed by a melodic, flute-like giggle.

She giggles as I shuffle into the kitchen, unable to make the tie submit to my arthritic fingers. Laying the book aside, she adjusts my tie and smooths the collar. I had never bothered to learn how to tie it for myself. I like having her close and the way that she smells, kind of summery like fresh-picked raspberries.

I gaze at my Autumn with all the wonder of a much younger man. She has long given up dying her whitening hair and her shoulders stoop when she walks. Lines have formed on her once-taut forehead and cheeks, impressions made by years full of sorrow and laughter. Her breasts droop like slightly deflated balloons, lower and looser than when I had first seen them. But age has only ripened her beauty, ever my best girl.

“I gaze at my Autumn with all the wonder of a much younger man.”

Inspired by the music and warm sunlight which fills the kitchen, I place my hands on her soft hips, and we sway slowly to the music. I would twirl her, but I fear injuring one of us. After a few moments of synchronized pacing, we chuckle at ourselves.

“Silly goose,” she gently chides with a hand on my cheek. “It’s time for you to get ready.”

“Do I have to go?” I plead.

“Of course you must. It’s for your own good. At least go for the children if not for yourself.”

“But there will be so many people, and I’d rather stay here with you.”

She takes my shriveled hands in her own and places a soft kiss on my forehead.

“It won’t be long, my dear. We’ll be together again quite soon.”

Sighing in agreement, I hold her against my chest and gaze out the window above the sink. The pale morning light streams in, as if hesitant to wake the house’s inhabitants too abruptly.

Odd. . . Autumn would never let the dishes pile so high, nor would she allow the marigolds in the window box to wither so.

The screen door screeches open, and Stephen enters.

“Hey, Dad,” he says, his voice raspy from crying. Stephen switches off the radio which powers off with a groan. He picks up a cold cup of half-drunk coffee from off the kitchen table and grabs a few dishes with stray bits of semi-buttered toast and crackers. He places them on top of the growing mound in the sink, tossing a few wads of tissues into the garbage.

“You gotta eat, Dad. Tonight, I need you to have a few bites of one of the casseroles that the neighbors sent over.”

Feebly, I nod and look at the clock as my lower lip trembles.

Stephen pauses to tie my tie and to smooth my collar.

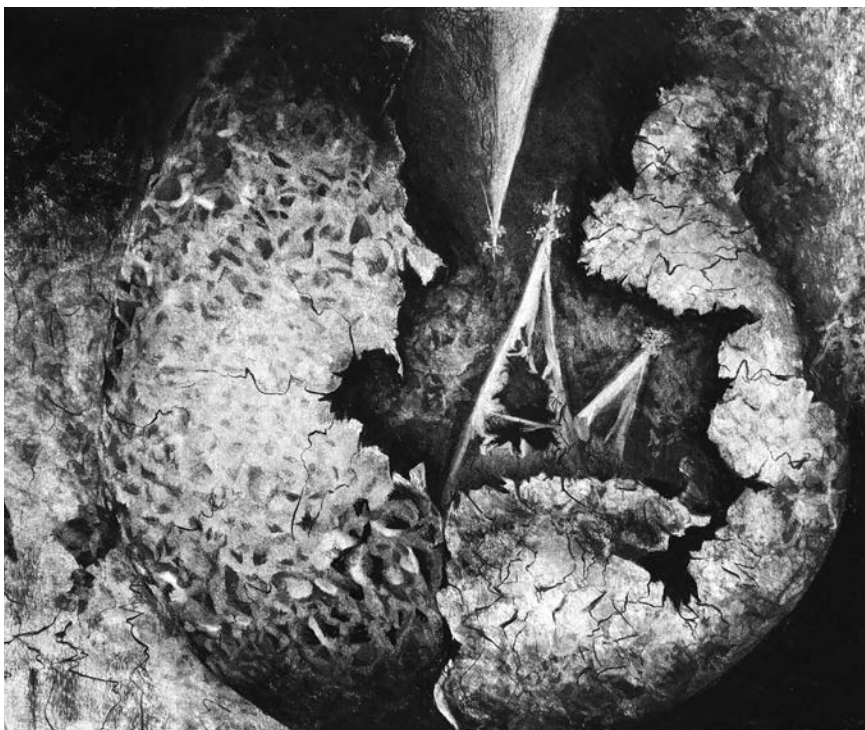
“Visitation is at 11:00 and the service is right after. You don’t have to come to the graveside if you don’t want. We will understand.”

“No. I have to go. She’s never gone anywhere alone. I have to see her off.”



OLD DREAMS CARSON CAWTHON

Thrift stores always manage to have that particular
Thrift Store Smell.
Eau de Deflated Soccer Ball,
musk of ex-boyfriend's jacket,
chipped mug tinted slightly brown,
memories of warm beverages not included.
Hand-knitted potholders that held many hands.
A painting of Jesus, pale face pulled tight in a grimace,
haunted by memories of his Father's house,
and just a whiff of a seance
with oddly quiet ghosts.



UTOPIA VS. DYSTOPIA
CHARCOAL ON PAPER BY HANNAH MILLER

LITTLE BLUE HANDS SLOANE PEARCE

Skin scorching down a metal slide—
bright, pinching heat on little white legs
accompanied by giddy screams.

Rusty chains squeaking with each
momentous thrust and fall, thrust and fall—
gravity tickling our bones.

Metal feet thudding the ground
as we rode the teeter-totter—
like asteroids pelting a rocket ship.

Blue, chalky dust caked upon
its worn, metal frame. Staining
little hands with blue, frosted memories.

Large green leaves gripping blue
powdered poles, like oven mitts—
playing in the shade of a leafy canopy.

My Nanna's wrinkled portrait,
stretched from years of smiling
from blue, stained-glass eyes.

Her watchful gaze never strays
lest she forgets these little, Blue
moments she prays will never wash away.

Her watchful gaze never strays
from her little grandbabies
growing up under the great Magnolia tree.

COMPOSURE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARA PEPPER
(AT RIGHT)





BEACH DAY POSTCARD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SYDNEY WELCH



FLEETING
OIL ON CANVAS BY ALEX TACKNEY

GRANDMAS ALWAYS DIE

HELEN SMITH

One thing I've learned over the past fourteen-and-a-half years: grandmas always die. Infallibly, the old birds almost always manage to kick the bucket at the most inopportune times. I suppose saying that implies that there's an opportune time to die, which I guess there's not, but it always feels like there is no worse time they could've possibly chosen. On July 8, 2008, I was six, and the main thing I remember about my first dying grandmother was going to stay in a motel with my cousins, and the motel had a pool. My cousin put cotton balls in her ears when she swam, and that didn't make sense to me. Because I was so young, that's what I remember about the cap at the end of my grandmother's entire life. I do remember other things about her, though. She was very pretty, and knew how to cook or sew anything. She traveled a lot, and had a long nose. I remember those things about her, but when I remember the grief, I remember three things: the cotton balls in my cousin's ears, eating corn at the church before the funeral started, and my aunt from the other side of the family coming to sing at the graveside service. She sang, "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder." I knew that my aunt must love me if she would travel all this way to the funeral of my grandmother whom she didn't know when I had a perfectly good grandmother at home whom she *did* know, and who was alive and well at the time. I never understood why those were the things that I chose to think about; I guess it's just what made sense.

I was lucky enough to be born into a world where not only did I have both of my grandmothers for a time, two of my great-grandmothers were still alive enough for me to know them. My first great-grandmother, my maternal grandfather's mother, died when I was twelve. She died the day after Christmas in an assisted-living facility after struggling with Parkinson's and dementia for several years. Her husband had died a year and a half prior on Memorial Day, 2012, and she had asked about him nearly every time anyone had visited her since. When Granny died, I remember trying to decide if this ruined Christmas or not. Christmas had already happened, but this was sad, and my grandpa had spent Christmas at our house. Did losing his mother make his Christmas bad? I also remember crying in my bathroom at home, and feeling my lip quiver. I got up to watch it quiver, because it reminded me of Granny. Looking back, it seems a bit strange that that's what I could look at to remind me of her, but her mouth shook often because of her Parkinson's, and watching my jaw shake similarly made the whole thing feel real. I hated that feeling: reality.

My paternal grandmother, Nonie, died when I was fifteen, on June 8, 2017. Her cause of death was a bingo card of ailments that had been chasing her for the past six years at least, and when she filled in the last blank with,

"pneumonia," she gave up the ghost. She had been in and out of the hospital and assisted living for the past six years, insisting that she was going to die on the Chappell's Hwy, where she and her husband—we called him Brucie—had lived for over fifty years. Nonie and Brucie were the dynamic duo of my life. Their names were Winona and Bruce. To their grandchildren and any other children who knew them well, "Nonie" and "Brucie" fit much better. Brucie watched the same struggles I had for those six years, when she would fall and not be able to get up, or when she would be unresponsive for a few minutes until the nurses and doctors shook and flipped her and gave her oxygen until she would wake up, practically seeming like she was coming back from the dead.

"When Granny died, I remember trying to decide if this ruined Christmas or not."

Even as I watched her seemingly sink into her dying moments, I felt as though I knew it wasn't the end yet. Brucie did, too, until May of 2017 when my dad told me that she was going to the hospital again. I didn't normally go with him when that happened; if she was there for a while, I would come and see her later, but that time I went with him. I didn't know for sure, but something told me that this time had to be different. I'm glad that I went. I think that was the last night she was able to sit up for herself, and I went to see her. Still, over the next few days I started to realize that she wasn't going to make it. On June 7th, I kissed her goodnight and promised her I'd come to see her again first thing in the morning. Instead, I woke up to my mother telling me the news that she had passed. I knew I needed to cry, and my face was as dry as ever. I covered my eyes with my arm and lay back in my bed, willing my tears to form. This was how I needed to grieve, wasn't it? When someone dies, you're supposed to cry. Especially when it's someone you love. I did end up crying, eventually, and a lot more after that, but those tears didn't feel like tears of grief—they felt like tears of confusion. It wasn't until our family gathered at the funeral home for an open casket and I saw her that I cried real tears of grief. The kind of tears that fall out of your eye,

and don't even sting. They feel more like warm raindrops than tears. All I could do was stare at the outfit that my dad and I had picked out for her and wish she would get back up and prove to us that this was just another one of those times when the doctors and nurses should've shook her, or flipped her, or given her oxygen. But I just felt like she wanted me to know she wasn't there anymore.

We spent the rest of the week at her house, where a stray goat from the nearby stockyard had escaped and made sanctuary. Sometimes when I grieve other people, I try to remember how I got through it when Nonie died. Nonie's death was the worst loss I had experienced for such a long time, and even though I've experienced rivaling loss, it might still be the worst. If I could look back into how I made it through that loss, I think I could use that to make it through any loss I have to survive forever. When I try to remember how I made it, I just remember the goat. The goat jumping on top of picnic tables to eat leaves off of the pecan tree. The goat jumping on top of car hoods and leaving a trail of poop pellets on the deck, angering every single visitor that stopped by my grandparents' house. The goat trying to eat my hair while I was on the phone with my cousin who was driving home from her cosmetology school for the funeral. Sometimes, when I reach back into my memory to try to remember what that grief felt like, I'm reminded of the sound of my grandfather's wailing sobs after he thought we left his house that night, but of the things that hurt far less to recall, all that comes back is that stupid stray goat.

It's been nearly five years now since she passed, and Brucie still swears up and down that he didn't know how sick she was. He always believed she'd come home. For a while, it hurt to hear that; it was like having to grieve all over again. He couldn't make sense of her death, and he was clinging to everything he had to try to explain it to himself. Now, I almost roll my eyes when he brings it up. It was one thing for him to be in denial for the six years that she was sick, but now she's been dead almost as long and he still is in denial over that. My mom says that was just his own little way of protecting his mind; I say it's been five years and she's just as gone now as she was then. What is there to protect from anymore?

After having lost both of my grandmothers, I naively assumed that was it for a while. Both of my grandfathers were significantly healthier than their wives, and I had no great-grandfathers left. I *did* have a great-grandmother, though, but I was somewhat convinced that she couldn't die. She was well into her nineties, and other than a pacemaker and dementia, there were no major health concerns for her. As the years went on a bit, that changed. She began to have "vasovagal episodes," where she would become unresponsive for a little while and scare the whole family to death, but wake up and believe nothing had happened. After a few of those episodes, and thousands of dollars spent on home-health workers, it was no longer medically or financially viable to keep her at home, so we moved her to the local nursing home. For a few months, she asked to go home every day, but after that she seemed to feel safe there. She wasn't as much of a conversationalist after she moved there, but before she moved, most of her conversation included randomly growling at my mother while driving, replying to the dialogue on *Touched by an Angel* or

The Waltons, or thanking everyone for celebrating her 68th birthday—on her 96th birthday.

After a few years in the nursing home, COVID hit. We couldn't visit her because window visits would only confuse her, and inside visits were prohibited except for emergencies. I suppose she took that for a challenge, and decided to create an emergency. One month into quarantine, she had another one of her episodes, but this one was much longer than the others. We were permitted to come inside if we wore masks and didn't touch anything on the way to see her. I had straightened my hair that day, and worried that she wouldn't recognize me without my signature unruly curls in addition to the mask I was wearing. My mother reminded me that she probably wouldn't recognize me anyways; because she had dementia, she rarely could call me by the correct name, despite the fact that it was the same as hers. Sometimes I like to think she just wanted to be the only Helen so she simply refused to refer to me as such out of pride, but I know that wasn't in character for her. When we did see her, she was unresponsive still, but after we sat with her for a while, she fluttered her eye and smiled at us.

Again, I started to believe that I had nothing to worry about when it came to my grief. She was ninety-six years old at the time, and if she was going to survive these episodes like they were merely naps, I was going to assume that they were just that. Unfortunately, a few months later, COVID cases started to spread inside the nursing home where she lived, and eventually they spread to her. When a woman in her nineties catches a virus that had sent the entire world into chaos, no one really expects her to survive it. Yet, in typical fashion for my sweet little Grandmama, she survived not only COVID, but the pneumonia that it caused. At this point, I was truly convinced that she was going to live forever. She had outlived her daughter, and I was starting to believe she would outlive me.

I knew six other Helens, including her; only two of them had not passed the age of ninety but—like myself—are waiting to see if the longevity of the Helens extends to them. One was Helen Keisler, who lived to be 101 years old and passed away while she was sleeping. Another is Helen Corley, who is 101 years old *now* and is probably healthier than most people my age. Then there's Helen Carpenter, who was a friend of Grandmama's who was old as the hills when I was little and only died in the past year or so. Then, there's Grandmama, who was born in September 1923 and had proven herself to be a survivalist. I've somewhat understood it as a given that all Helens last forever. After that emergency visit in April 2020, I hadn't been able to visit Grandmama again. By the time the nursing home reopened visitation, I was away at school. When I went home, I thought about visiting her, but fluttering her eyes and smiling as proof that she's alive but not fully coherent was more than I felt prepared to handle.

I should've sucked it up.

On January 8th, 2022, she fluttered her eyes and smiled, as she was known to do. She had stopped eating, and the only way to keep her nourished was to put her on a feeding tube. Ninety-seven-year-old women with expired pacemakers who never wanted to live to see ninety and believed for several

years that they were still avoiding their seventies aren't exactly the kind of people you want to force to keep living when they're ready to give up.

On January 9th, 2022, she did give up. In the imaginary concept of opportune times for grandmas to die, this was the *most* inopportune time she could've chosen for me. Some idealistic part of my mind wanted to believe I would get to come home from school one weekend in September to celebrate her 99th birthday party and she'd flutter her eyes and smile at me. I was supposed to start school the next morning. I was with my friends. I had moved into my dorm the day before. She didn't even wait a little while longer so that she didn't look like a Betty White copycat. I didn't know when the funeral would be and I didn't know if I should miss a class during the first week or if I should miss her funeral. I didn't want to miss her funeral, but my parents told me I shouldn't force myself to be there during the first week. This woman had given me my name, part of my genetics—basically my life—and even most of my personality, and I shouldn't feel pressured to give her my time once hers was all gone?

“In the imaginary concept of opportune times for grandmas to die, this was the most inopportune time she could've chosen for me.”

My older brother called me to tell me because my mom was calling other relatives to tell them, and I felt that weird feeling where I felt like I was supposed to cry again. I cried the tears of confusion, but I knew I needed to look at her before I could cry tears of grief. I opened up my phone to find pictures I had saved of her from when I was little, and I stared at her in those pictures and I cried my warm raindrop tears. Then, for some reason, I got in my car and drove for twenty minutes to historic Pendleton, South Carolina, to check if the Christmas tree was still up in the town square. I didn't think that it would still be there; it had been part of the town's Christmas decorations and I had been to see it with my friend one night the semester prior as part of our hunt for Christmas decorations in the area.

I felt confident, assuming that the Christmas tree and all of the other decorations in the town square that went with it would be taken down by that point. After all, it was over two weeks after Christmas. I drove the entire way there at whatever time it was at night, once all of my roommates were getting ready for bed. It was a twenty minute drive, and there was practically no one else on the road. As I drove, I played music. If it were silent, I would cry. I listened to music, and I ended up crying to the music. I changed the songs. I just wanted to know if the Christmas tree was there. I had no other way of knowing than to drive there. I suppose I could have waited to find out, but I felt in that moment that I *had* to know if that tree was still there, even if I thought it wasn't going to be. Much to my surprise, there it was in all its

glory, two weeks after Christmas. It was January 9th. Was anyone ever going to take down the giant Christmas tree? I drove back to my dorm, unsure of what to make of that.

I thought after fourteen and a half years, I'd be better at processing my grief. A six-year-old and an almost-twenty-year-old should process such major emotions differently, shouldn't they? I'd think that somewhere in the process of maturing, that I would learn that once I stare my grief in the face, I don't have to come up with a new question to focus on because I'm too afraid of the other questions I want to ask myself. It's a lot easier to ask myself why I'm not crying the way I'm supposed to, what the stray goat is doing, why my cousin has cotton balls in her ears, or why historic Pendleton has its Christmas tree up on January 9th than it is for me to ask if I did enough. Or, if I'll see every single one of them again in heaven. Or, if people will hurt as much when I'm gone as I do for them. I can start to answer each and every one of those questions, and maybe even produce some halfway-satisfactory answers, but I'll just come back to them again. I don't have to come back to the cotton balls.



ANTICIPATION
PASTEL ON PAPER BY HANNAH MILLER

FEVER DREAM: 50
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARA PEPPER
(AT LEFT)

IT BURNS, BURNS, BURNS

SAMANTHA BROOKS

The worst funeral that I ever attended was my Uncle Bill's in the summer of 2011. Bill had been sick for several years before his death—cirrhosis of the liver from drinking himself happy (like a fair percentage of my family)—so no one was actually surprised when he died, not even Bill. I swear, sometimes he made jokes that he circled random days on his and his wife Jill's calendar and wrote in "Happy Death Day," which he always found much funnier than Jill. In the days leading up to his funeral, Jill told the rest of our family that Bill made all of the arrangements for his funeral, down to the speakers, order of service, and music. As a ten-year-old, I did not realize how much prep work went into a funeral, but reflecting back as a grown-up who is older and wiser and has been to significantly more funerals than I would like, I am pretty impressed with my uncle's proactivity. That being said, he put everyone, especially Jill, through the most uncomfortable funeral service ever, but since enough time has passed that we can joke about it, the whole thing has made a great story.

So, we showed up at the funeral home, and the men in suits lined the family up in order of importance, and we stood there and shook hands or hugged people unfamiliar to me or my little sister. All that I remember of the people was that many of them talked loudly and walked around in thick clouds of cologne and perfume meant to cover the cigarette stench in their clothing, which caused my dad to quietly escort me out of the room several times to take a few hits off my inhaler. When it was time for the funeral to start and the audience (and I say audience because that is definitely how my sadistic, deceased Uncle Bill must have thought of them when planning it all out) had taken their seats, my family walked down the aisle of the chapel, procession style, as Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire" blared over the speakers. At the end of the aisle sat my uncle's ashes in a black urn on the communion table at the altar.

The rest of the service went as you would expect. There was a friend of Bill's whom he had asked to speak who spoke for five minutes about "what a badass" Bill O'Connell was. "The best dern pit-master in the county," he said. After he spoke, we had a time of reflection on Bill's life while The Police sang "Roxanne."

During this song, I remember staring at the back of Jill's head as her head dropped and she covered her face with her hands and her body fell forward as a sound grew out of her that still unsettles me now. At first, it seemed like a laugh, like maybe she was chuckling, until each staccato sound got louder and then longer, every bit of air in her body being sucked out into groans that

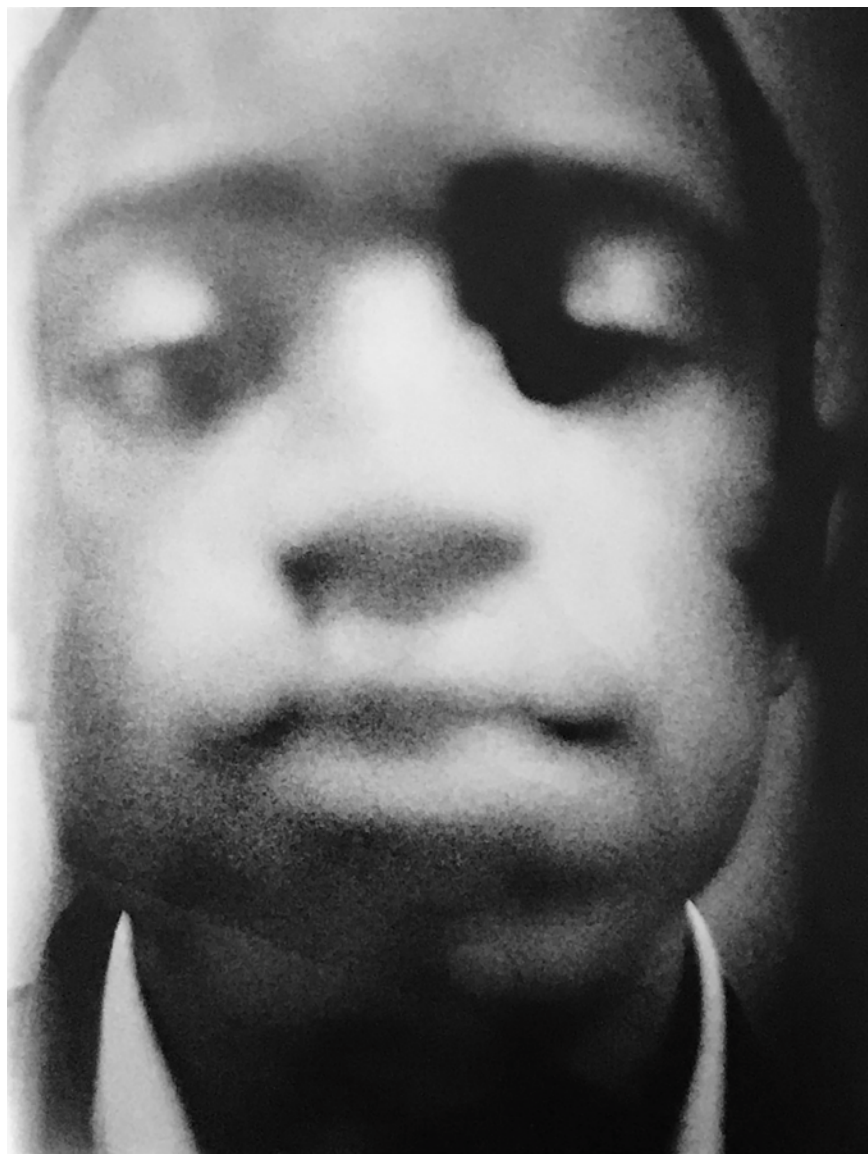
finally became weeping. The man controlling the volume of the speakers tried to drown her out, but when the song finally ended, all was silence except a long, exhausted moaning issuing through the gaps between Jill's fingers.

"My family walked down the aisle precision style as Johnny Cash's 'Ring of Fire' blared over the speakers."

After a minute or two of sitting and waiting, one of the men in the black suits walked to the altar and grabbed the microphone and said that it was time for the family to leave. The audience in the chapel stood first out of respect for the hell that we had just been put through, and then we stood, my Aunt Jill leading our procession as the Ohio Players sang "Fire."



SIERRA
FILM PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES GLYMPH



SINCERE
FILM PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES GLYMPH



HANNAH
FILM PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES GLYMPH



CORY
FILM PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES GLYMPH

PAPI RAOUF GOLVEN LEROY

My grandfather's first name, Raouf, is my second; it is an honor that I am not sure I deserve.

He was born in Egypt, in a powerful Muslim family. In his journals, which he kept in the sixteen different languages he fluently spoke throughout his life, he describes his childhood house as a palace so huge that he and his brother could play soccer in the hallway. A large mansion with more riches and servants than a family would (and should) ever need. The yellow pages of his accounts paint a picture of expensive ceramics displayed in glass cases, intricate designs carved in stone furniture, and mesmerizing art hanging on thick walls. He had access to toys accumulated over generations of wealth and the best education in the country. Two days before turning twenty-two, he became Christian, a crime so vile against the politicians of the time that his own father had him choose between public hanging and exile. And so, he fled away from his family and comfort across Africa, preached the Good News everywhere he walked, until the soles of his shoes were but the thickness of the torn fabric of his clothes. After traveling to Eastern Europe during a strongly anti-Christian movement, he was imprisoned. There, he was also vocal about his faith, and together with a few of his executioners, he went on to Belgium, where he spent the rest of his life. Only a few years after touching western European ground, he became a world-renowned chemist after developing a medication most of us use every day. He was an inspiration to most of the people who crossed his path, and a man so good it was almost a burden to be born under his name.

“His own father had him choose between public hanging and exile.”

Due to difficult family dynamics, and the distance between our homes, I rarely saw him. But I asked questions about him, read about him, talked about him many times. He was deeply kind, incredibly knowledgeable, astonishingly wise. On the few blessed occasions I did see him, he had stories that I could listen to for hours. Whether they were happy or sad,

fascinating or touching, he always smiled while telling them. His words were never out of place; his tone was never impudent. He had a way of teaching even a child profound life lessons, in a way that would resonate in their souls as well as their parents'. He was generous with meaningful advice but never spoke more than was necessary, as to leave space for others to talk.

Two years ago, he got sick, and I took the train to visit him. I had not seen him in six years. I was not able to see him instantly, so I mused through his incredible collection of books which filled several rooms from floor to ceiling. Some were written in Hebrew, others in Aramaic, Greek, Spanish, Japanese, and many languages I never knew the existence of. I retraced his steps across countries, dreams, ambitions, exalting and humbling experiences. For every handwritten memoir, there were hundreds more books that he had read and meticulously taken notes on. Subjects ranged from mathematics to geography, politics to religion, psychology to sports. After long hours of quiet waiting, I was finally able to see him.

He lay in a hospital bed brought home by my uncle. His face lit up when he realized who I was, how long it had been, how much I had grown. After a couple minutes of uncomfortable silence periodically disturbed by depthless questions, “how tall are you,” “what are you studying,” “do you have a girlfriend,” I noticed how tired he was and decided to give him some relief. This time, I recounted the beautiful tale of a young Egyptian man migrating from desert to mountains. I spoke for hours of the things I learned about him. This time, I was smiling at him, calmly, measuring my voice and intentionally pausing to emphasize the more extraordinary details. Even weak, the corners of his lips were still pulled far towards his ears. This time, I was telling him his stories. His eyes were fixed on something far into the distance, a blinding light reassuringly creeping towards him. The doctors said he was stable, and yet, without a word, it was like we both understood this conversation would be our last. What do you say to someone you love and have admired your entire life, when your words are counted? What can you say?

“You know, Papi Raouf,” I said while looking away, “I am trying to be like you.”

With visible effort, he looked at me for a long time, then laughed and said, “How can you be like someone you don't know?”

It was somehow both kind and brutally honest, and it shook me to the very roots of my being. I did not know what to say, so I smiled back, and went outside for air. For hours, I stayed in a cold, silent, dark garden. When I was ready to go back in, I felt that I could not, as it had happened. That night, he passed away.

His last words haunted me. My own grandfather called me a stranger on his deathbed. As much as I tried to forget, I could not. The words creeped around my soul like ivy on a porous wall, creating small fissures along the way. How could he have said such a thing?

The little control over the things my brain chooses to set in stone—and the ones it chooses to consign to oblivion—puzzles me. When I was eleven, I lost my older brother. Today, I am holding on to the last memories I have of him: his grimaces, terrible jokes, loud and warm laugh, big stature, reassuring smell. As I grow older, my ability to remember debilitates, and those happy memories fade away, as much as I fight against it. I have tried praying, crying, screaming, concentrating, but the effects of time are irreversible, and the only place where he is still alive is slowly evaporating. Try as I might, I cannot remember our last conversation. And yet, like a beating drum, like a shouting trumpet, Raouf's smile and earth-shattering words remain in front of me, in a dream so vivid I could almost touch it.

I knew that when he became Christian, he hid books of the New Testament in his socks. I knew the color of the tiles of his childhood room's ceiling. I knew that later, years later, he snuck back into Egypt and found his sister, and they wept for hours and held on to each other. I knew he refused an opportunity to work in Japan with world leaders because he was worried for my mom during her rebellious phase. I knew the only time he got angry, ever, was when he thought he could not provide for his family. I knew sometimes, late at night when everyone else was sound asleep, he would cry, crumbling under the weight of a heart of gold.

But that was not enough, was it? Should I have taken a train sooner? Should I have known that other things had to wait? I knew everything about him, but barely knew him.

So, to this day, perhaps to make my memories of him live a little longer, I work relentlessly to know people, not just know about them. Or perhaps to ease the guilt that grew tall in an instant, and that rarely goes down. I try to pull the thread that makes up the fabric of who we are, to reveal what is underneath the mask. I still try to be like him, but I now understand the futility of striving for a goal that is set on the horizon. As I tell his stories, I try to keep the same smile that inspired me to love, explore, understand, and know. I now understand the burden of carrying the name of a man so close to the image of Christ he made Christians jealous.

NOURISHMENT CARSON CAWTHON

Starving storm inside a girl
raving, begging for release.
I know for sure she'd change the world,
if only she would eat.

PAPER CRANES

GABRIELLE MORGAN

The once cherry-red swivel barstool creaked under my weight as I stood to greet the (what do I call him if not a customer?) man with a backpack. I don't know why I bothered. Wasted energy on a man who has never once made a purchase at my shop. He walked past me; my attempted signal that purchasing a coffee is customary at a coffee shop was completely ignored. Dragging his feet, his head low to avoid eye contact, he disappeared behind the wall that separated the consumers from the workers. I glanced through the minuscule window that has no purpose other than holding our WiFi router and allowing the baristas to spy on customers. He was sitting, as he does every day, with a to-go bag of food and a coke, Beats headphones resting on his dirty blonde hair that appeared much darker because of the pounds of grease that dripped down his forehead. Black-framed glasses slipped down the bridge of his nose.

I paced behind the counter. There were no other customers in the lounge, so I could avoid embarrassing him. But, he was a man and I was a woman, alone in a coffee shop at 8:00 in the morning, before any other businesses were open. There would be no witness. I could let it slide like I had for the last three weeks, or I could finally put a stop to his loitering. My feet were shuffling below me before I had even processed my decision. Slowly approaching, my heart lurched as I met his eyes. I politely explained to the intruder that purchasing something, even just a fifty cent cup of water, was expected for people who chose to sit in the lounge. His eyes that stared intently back at mine, rolled to the back of his head, a long sigh escaping his mouth.

"That was very unprofessional. I'm going to speak to your manager," he spit back at me.

The classic line. The script that every Karen has memorized from the moment they learn to speak. The opportunity for me to make them tremble with my favorite rebuttal.

"That would be me."

Watching him squirm and stumble over the rest of his words brought me an indescribable feeling of power. I earned the right to say that line. That one sentence makes it worth every complicated scheduling issue and unreliable employee. The right side of my mouth quirked without my consent. He peeled his body from the imprinted seat cushion, grabbed his still-open book bag, and stomped out the door, mumbling empty threats about "disrespect" and "unprofessional behavior." He was gone, the lounge was quiet, and I could not help the feeling of satisfaction that washed over me.

The crinkles by my eyes were ironed out and the upward curve of my mouth fell flat as the newest Google review came up on my screen. It felt

like a sewing needle pierced my bottom lip, the thread being tugged by some unknown weight. My lips forced themselves apart as I scanned the words.

would give zero stars if possible.

just had the fat double chin "manager" tell me I couldn't sit in the lounge without buying something, even though I've been buying coffee and doing so for almost 3 days now.

she was very rude and disrespectful.

Not to mention there was a very rank odor coming from the sitting area.

Would NOT recommend purchasing from this place.

I laughed, genuinely laughed, as I do every time I get called fat or obese or disgusting by strangers on the internet, which is more frequent than most people might think. I sent the screenshot to every group chat I was in. "NOT THE FATPHOBIA," I texted my family. "I will, from now on, only respond to fat, double-chinned manager. Thank you," I sent to my friends. It was funny.

It rolled off, just as it always did.

I wish I could formulate the words to explain what happened next, but all I can say is that, one moment, I was laughing, and the next, I was shaking, my body folding in half, unable to control the water that was pooling on my lash line, threatening to flood through the fortress that I had carefully constructed over the years. Naturally, two women walked in at that exact moment, almost on command.

"Are you okay?" one of them asked, already knowing the answer.

The dam broke. I spent the next two hours avoiding eye contact with customers, hoping no one else would ask me how I was doing. I would wipe my face, force my voice into a steady rhythm and take an order, only able to control it for those few seconds. When I would turn around to make their drink, I faltered every time. I know they saw me. I know they could see my shoulders shake; they could hear the quiet sobs and the sharp inhaled breath, but no one said a word. It was almost worse, knowing that they could see my pain, but not caring enough to ask.

Stumbling out of the door, the end of January air bit my skin. I could not feel my hands. I lifted myself into my car, the cool leather seat sending a chill throughout my body, my skin immediately prickling. I found myself driving,

my mind still a quarter mile behind, unable to escape the inside of the coffee shop. I could see his face, as if it was still right in front of me. His typed words invaded my brain: “fat, double-chinned manager,” repeating over and over again. I dug the tip of my finger into my eye socket, trying to make him disappear with the scratch of my nail. I would rather my eyes pour blood than ever have to see this man’s face again. My hand came back wet.

Why was I giving him this power over me? He doesn’t deserve this. I don’t deserve this. You should skip lunch today.

“It was almost worse, knowing that they could see my pain, but not caring enough to ask.”

My breath hitched, my heartbeat getting faster. I could feel it in my eyelid. You should skip lunch today. Go get lunch. You don’t deserve to eat. Please go get food. No, don’t. I kept driving straight, unsure where I would end up. With every turn of my tires, I inhaled sharply, audibly, only allowing a second to exhale, shallow breaths being pulled from my throat. My chest bobbed with every breath, my eyes getting blurrier and heavier. I turned left into the Burger King parking lot and got in line behind the other cars, only three between me and the worn down speaker box. I forced myself to take a deep breath, then another, and another, until I was greeted by the drive thru worker, “What can I get for you today?” She was completely oblivious to how difficult of a question she just asked me. She was just doing her job. She repeated her question. I hadn’t realized how long I had been sitting in silence. I ordered the same thing I always did, reciting the script. “Can I get an Impossible Whopper with only lettuce and pickles on it and a large fry?”

Parked outside of Watkins Hall, the grease-stained bag sat in my passenger seat, taunting me, daring me to devour its contents. As I opened the bag, the stench became overwhelming, infesting my nostrils until it felt like they would bleed. I carefully unwrapped the soggy green paper and laid it in my lap, setting the fries in my center cup holder to tackle later. Picking up the burger, my hands shook, lettuce coming loose and falling into the wrapper. I started crying again. I couldn’t eat it. No matter how much I wanted to, how much I knew I needed to, I couldn’t let myself bring the burger up to my mouth and take the first bite. I picked the stray piece of lettuce up and tried to eat that instead. I got it to my mouth, barely past my teeth, only allowing myself the tiniest bite, but not swallowing.

My friend, Jessi, called me then, just to check on me, to see if I was doing any better since the events of the morning. I was not. I told her exactly that. I relayed everything that had happened that day, the parts she knew and the moments she didn’t. She listened as I talked and encouraged me as I sobbed. Every time she spoke, I would force myself to take a bite, listening to her

instead of the voice telling me to stop eating. My body trembled and my face burned with every bite I took; my eyes never stopped producing water.

I almost drove away, the shame I felt almost enough to send me home, skipping my only class of the day. I felt like it was justified. No one would blame me after the hell I had been put through, but I forced my hand to open my car door. I stepped out of the car, my foot barely holding my weight. I went around to the other side, grabbed my bag and pushed my body towards the building. A stranger opened the door for me, forcing me to walk through in order to avoid an embarrassing encounter. I took the same steps I take every day, the back corner of the building pulling me towards it without my permission. I looked at the ground as I walked, not wanting anyone to see the guilt plastered across my face.

Sam smiled at me when I walked through the door.

“Hey buddy,” she greeted me, as she always did.

She sat in the green cloth chair, her laptop open on her lap, fingers diligently folding a piece of paper behind the screen. I couldn’t tell what she was doing.

“I made you this,” she smiled, bringing the folded piece of paper into my view.

It was a tiny origami paper crane made from a yellow Post-it note, like one from a story I had read a few years before, around the time I started to recognize that I was suffering from a binge eating disorder, a term I had never even heard until then. It was the first time I had read anything that displayed the process of recovery and healing from a toxic relationship with food. It was the first time I had heard about the paper crane and what it symbolized. I held the paper bird in my hands and smiled for the first time since that morning. Sam was completely unaware of just how horrible my day had been. She had no idea that right before I walked in the door, I had just forced myself into eating a meal that I desperately wanted to throw away.

“Why?” I asked her, my breath hitching in my throat, despite my best efforts to contain it.

She didn’t know why. She had just learned how they were made about ten minutes before, when I was sitting in my car, trying to convince myself that I was strong enough to walk into class and pretend that my day had been utterly average.

“I just thought,” she started, “oh, I’ll make one for Gabby.”

It was as simple and endearing as that. I thanked her, unable to fully communicate the value of what she had just given me.



THANK YOU

Compiling the 97th edition of *Ivy Leaves* was a demanding process, one that we cannot help but feel incredibly satisfied now that the journal is complete. It was an honor and a privilege to read every poem, story, and essay, dedicating our time and efforts to selecting and revising the ones we felt represented the University and the students within. To every writer and artist who submitted their work: thank you for trusting us, for being vulnerable, and allowing us the opportunity to create something as meaningful and essential as this volume of *Ivy Leaves*.

Ivy Leaves would not be possible without the constant support and encouragement of everyone involved. We thank the College of Arts and Sciences, and the faculty and staff who stood by us in an attempt to tell our stories honestly and beautifully. Our literature team would like to express our gratitude for Dr. Wayne Cox and Dr. Derek Updegraff for working alongside us, encouraging us to make this journal one of which we can all be proud. They pushed us to work independently, guiding us through the process of selections and revisions, allowing us to pour our hearts into this publication. We are so thankful for their continuous support in not only our work as an editorial team, but in our own writing as well.

The design team would like to express their appreciation to Prof. Luke Anspach, Prof. Zac Benson, Prof. Nathan Cox, Prof. Peter Kanaris, Dr. David Larson, Prof. Emily Lin, Dr. Candace Livingston, Prof. Michael Marks, Dr. Jo Carol Mitchell-Rogers, Prof. Jer Nelsen, Prof. Bethany Pipkin, Prof. Tim Speaker, Prof. Jan Walker, and Prof. Ashley Waller. We could not produce this publication without their encouragement and assistance.

We would like to thank the Student Government Association for providing additional funding to create this year's journal, and in turn giving us the opportunity to enhance the design and include more student submissions. Their generosity has allowed these young writers and artists to share their stories and showcase their passion and craft with the student body. We are proud of the students who had the courage to share their work with us. This journal is a collection of work that truly embodies Anderson University. Thank you for allowing us to share it with you.

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ART & LITERATURE SELECTION PROCESS

All published pieces are selected through a blind process by the Senior Design staff and the Literature team in which the works are presented without the names of the artists or writers. The Senior Design staff selects artwork based on image resolution and orientation, availability of pages, and production needs. Likewise, the Literature team selects works based on their originality, thoughtfulness, intelligence, and emotional honesty. Together, these pieces work together in collaboration with others to form a cohesive body of work.

CONGRATULATIONS

The 2021 edition of the journal was recently awarded three American Advertising Awards:

Gold Award in *Online/Interactive Website*
Silver Award in *Special Event Materials*
Silver Award in *Blogs & Digital Publications*

NOTES

The *Ivy Leaves Journal of Literature & Art* is a peer-reviewed publication by students, for students. The Department of Art & Design at the South Carolina School of the Arts is accredited by the National Association of Schools of Art & Design.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

DIGITAL ARCHIVE NOW AVAILABLE

Dive into the history of *Ivy Leaves* by visiting the digital archive of past editions on our website. For the first time, you can explore journals from as early as 1916 in an immersive digital experience complete with high-quality, turnable pages.

BEHIND THE VINE

Get a closer look at the inspiration and process of our selected writers and artists.

Canon Allen • Noah Barker • Carson Cawthon
James Glymph • Golven Leroy • Alex Tackney

THE PERISTYLE

Explore an exclusive gallery of student work.

Emma Brightman • Simon Comanda
Trey Haselden • Curtis Shirkey

WEBSITE

Please join us online to view the 2022 edition.

ivyleavesjournal.com

SOCIAL

Connect with us on Instagram and Spotify.

Instagram: @ivyleavesjournal

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THE LAWRENCE AND PANSY WEBB EXCELLENCE IN WRITING AWARD

Both Professor Emeritus Lawrence Webb and his wife Pansy spent decades encouraging students and others to strive for excellence in written communication. He taught journalism and some Bible classes at Anderson University 23 years in two separate tenures: 1963-1967 and 1981-2000. An ordained Baptist minister, he served churches in five states and wrote several books. He also wrote and edited for magazines, newspaper, and public relations. He earned a bachelor's degree from Hardin-Simmons University, a Master of Divinity from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a Master of Mass Communication from the University of South Carolina. He also studied at the University of Maine, the University of Georgia, and New York's Columbia University.

Pansy Webb taught English in high school and as an adjunct instructor at Anderson University, and she wrote for magazines along with being homemaker and mother for their two sons. She earned her bachelor of arts from Catawba College, a Master of Religious Education from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a Master of Education from Clemson University. She also studied at Emory University.

We are grateful for their support of our writers.

2022 AWARD WINNERS

Poetry Prize

1st place: Samantha Brooks for "Big Feelings"

2nd place: Carson Cawthon for "Old Dreams"

Fiction Prize

1st place: Canon Allen for "Strange Religion"

2nd place: Lily McNamara for "Head Wounds"

Nonfiction Prize

1st place: Gabrielle Morgan for "Paper Cranes"

2nd place: Golven Leroy for "Papi Raouf"

These awards were judged and chosen by AU faculty from the English and Communication departments.



IVY LEAVES

20 **JOURNAL** 22

VOLUME NINETY-SEVEN

IN THIS 97TH EDITION

*We are grasping
for a sense
of belonging,
what it means
to be human,
to be beautiful,
to be broken.*

READ MORE IN THE FOREWORD

