

Patchwork Lit Mag

Issue 2



patchwork lit mag is a literary magazine created by English students at the University of Iowa. The magazine is open to everyone, and each piece within this magazine was evaluated anonymously and voted upon by the team based on their individual merit. The views and opinions expressed within are not representative of the *patchwork lit mag* staff.

The mission statement of *patchwork lit mag* is to foster a community of diverse voices, and stitch together all of our loose threads and house the thoughts that overflow. We are looking for honest narratives, stories that defy genre, escapes into handcrafted worlds, and words found between the seams. We embrace brokenness and all stages of healing. Our magazine will showcase a mosaic of intricately-woven patches of our lives.

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Patchwork Lit Mag

Masthead

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Letter from the Editor-In-Chief

Dear Readers,

This chapter of life has been filled with unprecedented halts of our present, returns to the past, and fear for the future. The only way out is to make our own exit wound, and with that comes even more healing. Patchwork has been a place where I have found my skin sewing itself back shut. Our intention in creating this magazine was to provide a space for disjointed edges and frayed seams to find a home. None of us heal the same way, and there is often a pressure to mend ourselves only in ways that are conventional, or to repress what we feel and make it out alive without complaining. Patchwork is a place where stories scream louder than any voice telling you how you can or cannot heal.

Our first issue reached volumes of people that I never thought would be possible for a magazine created in a college classroom of sixteen people, but now we are so much more. We expanded our staff and hired people who have made this team what it is today, a family, a beacon, a constant act of reassurance that art matters, that artists matter too. We have staff members and contributors from over five continents, and it still feels like a dream to call them all friends. For our second issue we wanted to dig deeper into what makes a personal truth, explore the duality of the artist and their work, the expression and the intention, and the idea created inside an artist's head that is now being shared with the world. Patchwork issue two is a double meaning, a symbol of continuance, of perspective, and of collaboration. Sometimes I have to learn how to live with myself all over again and that counts too.

I would like to thank our entire staff for all of their incredible work. I am so proud of each and every one of you and the enormous amount of joy you bring to the world. A special thanks to our designer Jeff, who is one of the hardest working people and consistent people I know during a time where so much lies uncertain. I appreciate you more than you know! Lastly thank you to our amazing Managing Editor, Jacob. You are truly the best person I know and if I could pluck each happy memory I have this year out of my brain, most of them would be of you. I could never do this without you, and I couldn't ask for a better partner to share this magazine with. You are my favorite.

It feels right to end with a quote from a show we both love, *Wandavision*. “But what is grief, if not love persevering?” It is this magazine, the pasts we have written ourselves out of, our grief turned into something we are proud of, something we have autonomy over. And to be able to support all of these amazing artists by putting their work into the world, well that is truly what love means to be.

Best,

Amanda Pendley
Editor-in-Chief of *patchwork lit mag*

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Gardening in the Afterglow

Corey Epley

She shows me how to grow roses in the dark. *It's what you do when the sun never shines.* She says lilac is best for dreams. *Calms you down— wakes you up.* She thinks Bon Jovi makes no sense. *I don't want to live on a prayer, I want to live with the prayer. If you live on a prayer and build your house, you can never leave.* She smells like planted coffee beans and talcum powder. *Floriculture college was not a bed of roses for me.* She smiles when she gets frustrated or sad. *In pageantry this is a good thing.* She was seven when she found him dead, fingering lamb's ear like a worn blanket. *Let's go inside.* The screen door slams— broken patchworks of metal webs let in rain but twang triumphantly. *Thwack-whisk, thwisk.*

you with the lilac dreams
reassure yourself it's all still there
introduce yourself to every corner
ask of it, *what have you been up to?*
those things that never answer back *

* tchotchke, bric-à-brac

knick knack & curio

your ephemera

numismatic

philatelic phillumeny

It precedes you. Collect it.

(Conchology, Oology, Deltiology)

Scutelliphile. File it away.

hotel DO NOT DISTURB signs

these auspicious train tickets

& books printed upside down

soup sorted by texture

newspaper clippings by date

you eventually settle on my face

I know I'll never understand

your genuine way of speaking (your gaze a cavalcade around the room)

handing out smiles like greeting cards (holding people like precious
trinkets) meeting hand in hand (satisfied)

something pours out of you when you sail into the world

I come to my own conclusions from far away

appraise things (people) at a distance

hands placed gently in my lap

if there was a lamp shining on you

there would be a shadow show on the wall

but the lamp is off at the moment

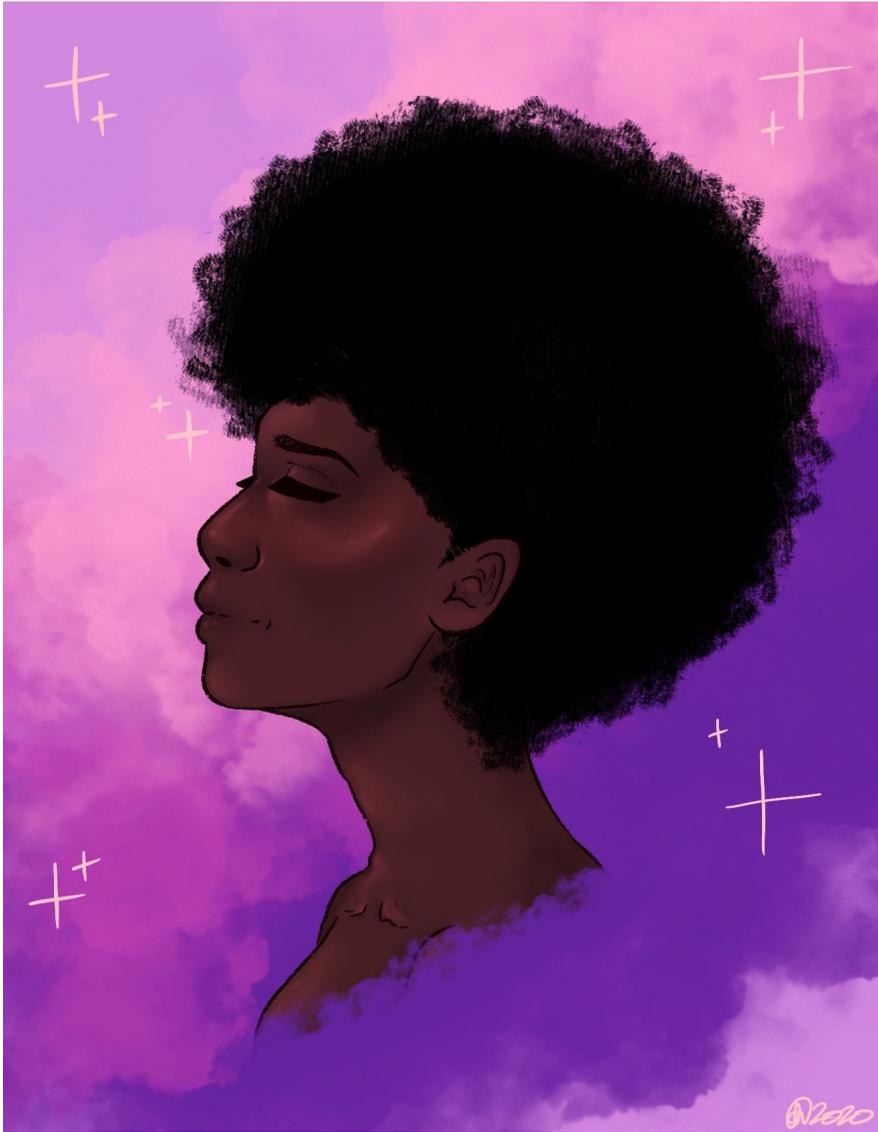
Paul Simon's Graceland is on the Radio

Natalie Marino

And I am fourteen again
in nineteen-ninety two
memorizing signs
on the L.A. freeway
drives every Sunday
to the Fedco's parking
lot that took
the place of lime groves.
I lie in the back hiding
from the bright
blue sky shining light
on my changing face.
All I want is to sit
on the highest rock
above the school field
and watch the boys
play baseball
while eating desert
flowers and waiting
for time to let go
of my adolescence
like a red kite.

In the Clouds

Hannah Grable



Teletherapy with the sun

Cheyenne Mann

CHARACTERS

SUNThe sun.

THERAPIST A therapist.

SETTINGS

A zoom call.

TIME

The start of spring.

SCENE I

LIGHTS UP on a teletherapy zoom call. THERAPIST sits, calm and composed, a pad of paper and a pen in her hands. SUN joins the call (she is the literal sun). She is nervous. THERAPIST looks up.

THERAPIST

Hello! It's nice to see you here.

SUN

Hi. Thanks for seeing me. Um. Sorry.

THERAPIST

Nothing to apologize for. It's been a few months, hasn't it?

SUN

Three or four. Yeah.

THERAPIST

Have there been any changes in medication or insurance?

SUN

Uh. No. None that I can remember.

THERAPIST

Not a lot of change going on in your life?

SUN

You know me. I do the same thing everyday. It's just the world that changes around me.

THERAPIST

Is that something you'd like to discuss today?

SUN

Is what something I'd like to discuss today?

THERAPIST

Your fear of change?

SUN

Everyone's afraid of change.

THERAPIST

Perhaps. But people can change. Seasons change.

SUN

I'm sorry.

THERAPIST

Nothing to apologize for. Take a breath.

SUN takes a deep breath. A beat.

What would you like to talk about this week?

SUN

I'm sad.

THERAPIST

I know.

SUN

I'm sad.

THERAPIST

I know.

SUN

I'm — did you know the surface of Venus is 880 degrees fahrenheit?

THERAPIST

The weather is finally getting warmer.

SUN

Did you know the surface of Venus is bright white, it's swaddled in clouds, absolutely covered in the reflection of —

THERAPIST

You?

Of light. SUN

Of you. THERAPIST

Of light. SUN

Of the sun. THERAPIST

Of me. SUN

Of you. THERAPIST

I'm sad. SUN

I know. THERAPIST

I'm sad. SUN

I know. THERAPIST

I'm sorry. SUN

Nothing to apologize for. THERAPIST

SUN
The world kept on turning when I left you. Orbiting in a void of nothing but the absence of light. It must've been cold.

THERAPIST

It was.

SUN

I'm sorry.

THERAPIST

You're back now.

SUN

I was gone. Gone for months. I left my door locked, my plants unwatered, I packed my socks and my reading glasses and I left the world behind. A population full of beings who live and love and dream and breathe and have blood that flows through their hearts. I left them on their own. Gone in a world full of — in a universe full of —

THERAPIST

There's a lot of guilt there.

SUN

The absence of light.

THERAPIST

You're back now.

SUN

The leaves fell off of the trees.

THERAPIST

They'll grow back. And you'll help them grow, stronger, taller, more colorful than before.

SUN

How do you know?

THERAPIST

Did you know that Venus is too hot to sustain life? Did you know that Mercury is grey, and Mars is red, and Jupiter is yellow, and Saturn is orange, and Uranus is green, and Neptune is blue and Earth is green and blue and brown and orange and —

SUN

I know.

THERAPIST

That is to say, there in a universe full of darkness, there is —

SUN

—There is color all around.

THERAPIST

Did you know the earth is swaddled in clouds and plants and oceans and love and life? Did you know that's because of you? Did you know that no matter how long you leave during winter, you always come back?

SUN

I came back.

THERAPIST

You came back.

SUN

I came back.

THERAPIST

The sun is here now, and the snow is melting, and the world once again orbits around the flushed melancholy peach of your hair and your grin. Our lungs expand and we breathe, and the hearts of all the people in the world are still pumping, and here you are to shine light on all of us, again.

SUN

I breathe.

THERAPIST

You breathe out life. We breathe in oxygen. And we breathe out carbon dioxide and the flowers breathe in sunlight. The leaves are growing back on the trees and you are here, again. And we love you.

SUN

I'm sorry.

THERAPIST

Nothing to apologize for. You're here again. And life continues as it always does, orbiting around —

SUN

Me.

THERAPIST

You. Did you know color comes from light?

SUN

Color.

THERAPIST

We live in a universe full of —

SUN

Color.

THERAPIST

Did you know that the surface of a lily of the valley is white? Did you know the surface of Venus is white? Did you know that flowers and planets and humans and life and love and hope and everything good in the world is a direct result of you, and no matter how far away you go, or how cold the winter is —

SUN

I come back.

THERAPIST

You come back.

SUN

I come back.

THERAPIST

The sun comes back. And it always will.

LIGHTS DOWN.

END.

Salamander

Michelle Kulwicki

You were someone once.

You're probably someone now, but I don't remember how to find you anymore because now there is just Facebook, where you are a face on a computer who writes things like *Family Fun* *Shrugging Emoji* *Facepalm Emoji* *Laughing Emoji* followed by a picture of three children covered in paint standing in the middle of your living room.

I'm pretty sure you're the cool mom.

I'm pretty sure you do yoga six times a week, and also run marathons, and also head up your daughter's girl scout troop, and also know how to bake sourdough bread the right way, the way it comes out with hard crust and patterns like you see on that one baking show everyone watches.

There's more to you than that.

There's more than just one smile that shows your perfectly straight top teeth but nothing else because you're pulling your lower lip over the bottom row, hiding the two ever-so-slightly crooked ones.

Did you know that 78% of Americans perceive people with crooked teeth to be unsuccessful?

Once it was summer, and once it was a long, long time ago, and once we perched in the muddy bank of a vernal pool that reeked of rot and I poked at the bloated, ripe belly of a dead salamander that had risen to the surface. You said *ewww* and I said *rad*, and you brushed your hands on your jeans then tucked your hair behind your ears and acted like you were going to leave, but you didn't.

You were curious, too.

That was the summer you sprayed so much Sun In on your hair that you smelled like chemicals wherever you went, and your hair never really lightened, but the ends started to split.

Probably no one else noticed.

So I crawled out on the big log that had surrendered half of itself to muck, and I poked that salamander all the way back to the mud, and I studied the shiny blue body, and I told you that it was a salamander even though I didn't really know the difference between a salamander and a newt, I just thought you'd be impressed.

Did you know that if you look up the definition of vernal pools, Google will tell you that they are seasonal depression pools?

Did you know that an estimated 5% of the population suffer from seasonal depression?

That doesn't seem like much.

Sometimes I remember the way that salamander felt when we poked it, bloated and full of gas, like it was ready to erupt at any moment. That seems wrong. Dead things should not erupt. Dead things decay and become soil, or memories, or sometimes they become stories like this one that is not a story about love but is possibly an ode to salamanders.

Bloated salamanders.

Once I slept on your couch and you slept on the floor beneath me, and you told me that you had a crush on that one guy who smiled so much his dimples were always showing, and then you asked me who I had a crush on and I said that one guy who built a ramp in physics class and then lit it on fire just because he could. If we fast forward a couple of years, you go to prom with that one guy with the dimples, and I go to prom with my best friend because prom is what we were supposed to want.

We ditched twenty minutes in.

Went to Dennys.

Ate a shit ton of ice-cream and didn't get wasted because we were good kids, A+ Honor Student kids, kids who were so afraid of failure we didn't know how to be alive.

Maybe this is a story about growth.

I wrote nine different college application essays and every single one contained a version of me that was almost truth but not quite, because that's what you do to go to college, you lie.

If you're good enough at lying, they give you money.

I was only sort of good at lying so I still owe a large amount of money that cannot be repaid in stories about salamanders, or stories about love.

Once, there was you, and once there was me, and once there was another boy with blond hair who told me he loved me, and told me I was beautiful, and told me he'd pay me ten dollars if I kissed you that one night at the party with the spinny disco ball and the loud music and the way-too-much vodka.

He laughed when he said it.

I laughed because I'd kiss you for nothing.

Did you know that I pulled away first because I could taste your chapstick, just like that god-awful Katy Perry song that was playing on the speakers while we danced?

Maybe if you were telling this story, it would be a story about a girl with long hair, and straight teeth, and good grades, and you would say that this is a story about friendship.

The next day—the day after that party—you told me that it was all hilarious. You told me that boy just wanted to see two girls kiss and he didn't realize it was no big deal.

I laughed because I was supposed to laugh.

You were someone once.

I think you are someone now because I messaged you on Facebook and I said that your family looks so happy, and I said that your kids are beautiful, and I said that I can't believe it's been so long, and I asked if you remembered the salamander .

You did.

You remembered the heat of the sun, and the stench of the water, and the rigor of its body. You remembered the way I climbed out on the log and the way the salamander was black with white spots.

It was blue, I typed.

Definitely black and white. **Lizard Emoji** Did you message me to talk about salamanders? **Laughing Emoji**

Yes.

No.

Maybe this was supposed to be a story about connection, but I don't know how to speak in emojis and you don't remember how to speak to me.

Pallet

Sam Merrick



The Seasons of Love and Resentment

Zahirra Dayal

“Don’t ever think I fell for you, or fell over you.

I didn’t fall in love, I rose in it.”

— *Toni Morrison*

I met you in an internet café before dating apps took over. Those were the days before smartphones when you paid per hour to use the internet. The encounter wouldn’t have happened if either of us had got there any later or earlier. You said you almost didn’t go that evening to check your email, it was a work night. You said it was your roommate’s idea. The café was a shabby place, chipped paint on the walls and a carpet stained with old grime. The computers had dust filled keyboards with keys that stuck to your fingers. Tiny telephone cubicles filled with long distance callers surrounded the computers. The homesick shouted down receivers trying to fight the dying signals using telephone cards with the pin codes scratched off. The wooden partitions did little to absorb the sounds and words in Arabic, Swahili, Somali, Urdu, Hindi, Polish, Tigrinya and Portuguese thickened the airless space. There was no privacy as the boundaries blurred from one cubicle to the other. People hovered or leaned over to peer at screens.

It wasn’t love at first sight. Not in the way you might witness in romantic comedies. There were no floating stars or burning flames and the ground didn’t stir or shake. Everything about you confounded me. You were a puzzle. I couldn’t fit all the pieces together to finish you. I only knew you emanated a quiet confidence, comfortable in the space you occupied. I noticed you staring, and when your roommate at the computer next to me asked me to help him log in to his Hotmail account, it never occurred to me that the two of you had planned it. Then you joined in the conversation and it was the three of us reminiscing about warmer places. We realised that we were from Southern Africa and new to London. At our wedding, everyone said it was meant to be because instead of meeting in South Africa, where I’d studied for four years, and where you were born, we found each other in London. Both of us on working holidaymaker schemes for Commonwealth citizens. We arrived in London

within months of each other and both lived around Edgware Road in Central London. Our story could've been the plot of a movie about serendipity. The first time you held my hand, you massaged it gently, circling my palms with your fingers and sending a ripple of warmth through me. I felt comfortable and safe for the first time since my grandmother died. There were weeks we didn't leave my place, cocooned in our togetherness like two silkworms. We pushed the world away and spun a web around ourselves, becoming one. We talked until the early hours of the morning, sharing our origin stories, our hopes and hurts. I was working as a receptionist for a luxury cruise liner then and went to work every day with dark circles ringing my tired eyes.

We decided to move in together after six months. Everyone said it was too soon. We brushed their words aside and only recalled the warnings when the restlessness pierced our cocoon. We discovered we had more differences than commonalities and there were angry arguments with hurtful words spewed out on both sides. We argued over dirty dishes, dusty corners and chores. We learnt how to sear and sting each other, knowing so well which words to press for the monsters to come out. We broke up and made up more times than our friends could keep count of. We wondered if it was worth it. We couldn't live with or without each other so kept going through the motions of push and pull. We didn't deal with the things we needed to and got married and travelled instead. Our relationship went through cycles of rain and sunshine like the seasonal changes until our son was born and his needs were louder than ours combined. You meticulously cleaned the flat the day we brought our son home from the hospital after a traumatic birth, supported me through my postpartum depression and cooked wholesome soups for my soul.

When our son was two, I got a job abroad and we moved. You studied and looked after our son while I taught at a college. The isolation was hard for you and you left to come back to London to finish your studies, when our son started school. The separation was good for both of us. Relationships need equal measures of togetherness and time apart. When I moved back to London we were drawn to each other again, but this time we dealt with the things we'd been pushing away through counselling. We dug up all the ugly and put it in a safe place. Our togetherness feels different now. We still cross the line, thinner than a strand of silk, between love and hate, from time to time, but things are lighter now that we've shed all those outer layers. Love grows slowly, cumulatively and we rise in it, knowing more than we did when we started.

Love Letter from 2020 to 1986

Maria S. Picone

Layover in 2009

I was born in an airport//I must die in an airport
free-falling to the gray hell of EWR: ewer, sewer, newer
visage of concrete America—*no man's* land, another
peninsula's DMZ, kissing cousin to NYC.
Of the same temperament, whether it was a bit less cold,
less snowed in than home, a bit more alien,
more discomforting than home, throwing me
back to my origins, whether I could weather
this first passage through the gate, welcomed home
to the unrenovated Logan Terminal—how similar to 2009,
passing through the Narita International afterthought, swiping
a green tea Kit Kat from the vending machine? I'm grown now,
shepherding two fifty-pound suitcases, rolling laptop bag, purse
journeying from one's customs to another down the long
eternally gray concrete ramp with no stop,
wielding over 130 pounds of bags on a cart
with less than 130 pounds of body. I start walking.
I gather momentum. There's a volta coming and I can't,
stop.

[weightlessness]

Trauma is not a single point in time. Trauma doesn't stretch out to reach
you; trauma seeds a shard within you, cutting. Date stamp: 12/13/2020.
299,000+. It's normal that the world burns. Adoption isn't a ground zero
you fly away from.

I'm sliding
I ran hurdles in high school and always knew,
on the approach, when I wasn't going to make it. Could hold myself
back, better to abort
than to scar your right leg in between a metal bar
as you careen into a wall. *I'm not going to make it—*
deep breath for serenity, acceptance that I and my possessions

are crash landing
about to burn down in front of shouting bystanders—
I accept. Hoping that my clothes,
the hard-cased bumper will form a barrier, knowing
already my body will soar like a crash dummy
like whatever dummy designed this accursed* place.

*Read that like a Poe poem.

Is sailing jet-lagged disembarked
Americans down an experimental plane a new, more concrete
hellscape?

Friends, I lived: I'm thirty-four! I lived to see
our country crash landing like a gymnast about to receive 1.0s.
Maybe EWR stands for renew. Two essential workers
interposed themselves between my cart and that wall.
They took the brunt of my momentum with their bodies.
Like an ewe standing on my own for the first time, I stumbled,
fell. That's the image, the hope after the trauma—
two humans, electing and elected to do their duty,
stepping up to catch you after a long flight.

Love,

Maria

Gains

Laura Eppinger

I've been debating whether to post this, but I'm stumped. I've been making some ... unexpected gains, let's say, during lockdown. My body is changing. I assure you this is **not** an effect of the COVID vaccine! THREAD! 1/?

Like a goldfish growing to crowd its bowl, I "filled out" in quar. Suddenly clothes didn't fit, not JUST tighter in the middle but all pants too short, all t-shirts suddenly crop tops. Packages would arrive but by the time they were unwrapped those new sizes were too small, too. 2/?

But then it got NOTICABLE and I fished out a tape measure—I'd passed six feet tall. A week later I Googled the world's tallest woman and I had her licked, too. No human clothes could cover me. I felt exposed. No hope left of ever being dainty. 4/?

Ultimately I couldn't stand up in my apartment—spent the day on my knees. I made a break before smashing my ceiling or dropping through the floor, possibly injuring other tenants. How could my body do this to me?! Take up so much damn **space.** 5/?

I mean we're supposed to be socially distancing, I'm not some anti-masker, it's just that I'd need a ship's sail to cover my mouth and nose and I've run out of indoor spaces that can hold me. Been feeling moody and chilly most of the time—not interested in being around people. 6/?

Did I mention my skin has been greying and feeling scaly? Can't resist a reptilian urge to seek out patches of sun to nap in. Where were we? Oh! No clothes, no home, nowhere indoors I would be welcomed. 7/?

People in the comments are saying this is a hoax, because if I'm so big how can I even be typing? Well, I'm NOT typing—my devices still recognize my voice. I imagine that'll end soon. I'm screaming at my talk-to-text app to post these before my new booming voice is unfamiliar 8/?

Actually I won't have my "assistant" read the comments anymore. Thanks for calling me "Brienne the Beauty"—you know what, I'm STILL angry about the end of Game of Thrones. I just clenched my fist so hard I drew blood—my fingernails are charcoal black now, so that's great. 9/?



Now I just feel FURIOUS! Why had I wasted my life so far trying to make myself small and bony? I'd never even been able to open my eyes in the shower, and now the curiosity of what I would have seen if I could just look down haunts me. 10/?

Too late now, I don't have the proportions of a mammal, even. Wide hips but more like a chicken. I am vast but no soft curves, and I don't even know how to describe the grief. 11/?

(My longest recurring nightmare since adolescence has been appearing in public naked and hearing strangers comment on my hideous body. But that normal human body was never monstrous at all. This one is but I no longer care.) 12/?

You know, I should be mortified at lumbering around naked and large, with little ant-people pointing their devices at me to record. Really I just want to punch something. 13/?

@author is this you??

.....

Commenter ReShared: Public Radio breaking story: Colossal creature intervenes at attempted mall shooting. Lone wolf conspiracy theorist aims at leather-skinned woman, is crushed underfoot. [CLICK FOR UP-TO-DATE IMAGES OF HER FOOTPRINT!](#)

@author This profile page was taken down but it's back online! Not a fraud, look:

.....

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@author ur ugly, was this some anitfa grwoth hormone expirment gone rong

@author THEY TOLD US 2021 WAS GOING TO GET BETTER. BUT THEY USED PLANES AND TANKS ON GIRL-ZILLA! WE ALL KNOW WHY SHE WAS ANGRY. RIP GIRL-ZILLA!

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Safety Net

Kenna Heller



Shadows on the Wall

Gladwell Pamba

Uncle Aineya's voice cracked the night, rising above the crickets' chirps and frogs' croaks as he sang *Kifo Hakina Huruma*. Mwambu's bark trailed towards the gate. The dog always ran to meet Uncle, wagging his tail and prostrating before Uncle, who rewarded the welcome with the bones from chang'aa joints. Sometimes, he returned with a quarter kilo of meat for supper, groundnut paste, white mints, and jaggery for me. These gestures fired up our house and laughter floated around. That night, Uncle fumbled with the gate, commanding it to open. He said everything could hear; it was why he talked to trees, stones, clothes, animals and his brew. "Sweet poison, I'd die for you!" he often said to his chang'aa. He told me chang'aa was his best friend, but I thought my aunt was his best friend because they used to laugh together. Uncle's weight threatened to break the door. When I unlocked it, the stench of chang'aa and a jumpy Mwambu accompanied him into the dimly lit sitting room. He collapsed into his seat, winding up his dirge as I helped him remove his shoes.

"Ah! My good boy. Do we have any food today?"

"Yes, Khotsa." I tried standing but he pinned down my shoulders.

"Forget it, my good boy." Then turning his head towards the corridor that led to the bedroom, shouted, "Mushere! Mushere! Where are you, my wife?"

But my aunt never stirred once she got into bed. She was dead till the next morning's first cock crow. You could carry her and throw her in a river, put her in a matatu on a potholed road, but she wouldn't wake up. Nevertheless, Uncle continued shouting.

"Women are lazy," he said.

I nodded, gazing at the shapeless, fluid shadow of his head playing on the wall. His neck and head looked like a stone getting launched from a catapult. I didn't think aunty was lazy; she tilled land faster than both of us and always helped us clear our sections. Every time we got back from the farm, she still had energy to cook for us while we passed out under the shade.

"Did you go to school today, my good boy?"

"Yes, Khotsa."

"What did you learn?"

"Many things, Khotsa."

He broke into a raucous laughter and stroked my head. Mwambu's eyes complained of neglect. Uncle noticed and stroked him too and he wagged his tail gratefully.

"At your age, I knew many things. Ask your aunt."

The tin lamp's amber flame burnt in his eyes. His shadow looked like a monster that wanted to swallow the entire house. With every emphasis, it hit the roof and filled two walls. I cringed, looking at his powerful shadow. If my sister was here, we would compete creating shapes on the wall. I'd make a snake; she'd make a crocodile. She'd create a snail and my dog would swallow it.

"I was a razor in class. I topped the district in CPE. Radio, TV, politicians looked for me." His eyes widened. "Do you know where they found me?" He shook my shoulders as if pressing them would press out the answer. "They found me swimming." His laughter lingered in the room, then poured to the corridor. My mind ran and I saw my uncle, now my age, diving into the ponds, splashing water at his peers. "Cars lined up from here to Mwibale. Big cars, my boy." He gestured at the sizes of cars. His hands' shadows were on the roof, a powerful spirit about to possess a body. His voice was something between sad and triumphant.

"Will you help me with the algebra assignment?" I asked.

He leaned back and asked me to fetch my Maths book. After minutes of squinting, he said, "These mboga questions give you headache? Ah Shamala, are you really my blood?"

"Mr. Okumu didn't teach us a thing."

"At your age, I knew tan tither, co-sins, linear programming. But now little algebra and your eyes are tearing." He laughed at his own joke.

He turned on his radio. We listened to the news. Billions lost. Ministry of Industrialization scandal. Agriculture scandal, ministry of health scandal, NYS scandal.

"This government is stealing like nonsense. They must be happy to see us this poor, aren't they?"

I nodded.

"The government is the enemy. Never eat with them. It will eat you in the end."

Then he went on to remind me that he was the greatest engineer at the defunct Mumias Sugar Mill. I'd heard that story over a hundred times. I wanted to say something too because I was constipated with words.

"I am ready for the cut, Khotsa," I said, seeing that he was never going to keep quiet.

He jerked. "Did someone coerce you into this?"

I shook my head.

“Let us wait for next Saturday. I will have the money to pay the surgeon. This government won’t steal this privilege.”

The next morning during breakfast, aunty complained about the cow’s udder almost drying up.

“Do you know Wanyonyi’s family didn’t get milk today?” Aunty said. “She threatened to stop buying milk from us. Can you imagine that woman? Is she not the same one who used to take milk on credit?”

“Yes, aunty,” I said.

“I’m not talking to you, Shamala,” she said and turned to Uncle, “Are you not hearing me, Aineya?”

Whenever she addressed him by his name, she was mad. He stared into her, past her; she was transparent. I disappeared with my cup of tea into the kitchen because her eyes sent me away.

“What is it you want with me?” he said.

“The cows need saltlick. They also need spraying.”

“That can wait. Shamala will be circumcised on Saturday.”

“What does circumcision have to do with this? Aineya, these cows feed us and should be your priority.”

“Meresia, you will not teach me how to run this house.”

“Have I not been the one running this house?”

“A few months is why you are running your mouth like this and treating Shamala like cow dung? If you think I am useless, the door is wide open. Do you hear me?”

My aunt’s mouth was going to anger Uncle, and he was going to say bad things; things like she was a stupid overfed woman. She’d call him a blind snake that did not know if it was going forward or backward.

“Aineya, I am not afraid of being husbandless! Don’t stress me. Years and years toiling as if I am a widow.”

I cupped my mouth.

“I have lost my appetite!” Uncle said.

“It is expected. You didn’t contribute anything!”

Uncle stood abruptly as though ants had attacked his buttocks. I tiptoed from the corridor into the kitchen. He stormed out of the house and I heard the creaky gate fall apart.

On Saturday, I bathed and waited for him to return with the surgeon. Aunty waited for him to take the cows to the cattle dip. The day faded in a haze and night came, yet we hadn’t eaten anything since morning. Aunty said we should wait for Uncle to bring food.

“This house needs order, Shamala. Whatever he brings we eat.”

“But he only carries chang’aa.”

“Then chang’aa we will drink.” She clenched her teeth and fist. “A whole year, I feed every stomach in this house. I did not leave my father’s house to slave. Ese ta.” Her voice rose from the room to the kitchen to the darkness outside. My stomach rumbled. I wished I had eaten guavas when I went to deliver milk to Wanyonyi’s household. I wished I had picked the plums earlier. I trembled with hunger.

That night, waiting for Uncle, I wondered how aunty survived for three full days without food on the days she fasted for Uncle. She used to say the devil was alert and looking to bring down her husband. I joined her in the prayers, during those evenings, when he was away. She exorcised the demons sitting on Uncle’s destiny. We clapped until our palms itched.

“Every day, empty talk. Aineya the great. Aineya used to do this and that. Aineya was brilliant. Aineya is fine,” said Aunty. “That is over, Aineya!”

I had never seen her that crazy. She shook her head and her arms and her chest also shook in agreement.

“Do you even know how I manage to look presentable?”

“No, aunty,” I blurted out.

“I am not talking to you!”

I wanted to disappear into the shadows. The shadow of her spiky hair was a giant spider on the roof, preying on an insect. I moved my head and my shadow moved towards the giant spider. I ducked. I wished I had a way of warning Uncle not to return. The hunger pangs could wait. I could eat the mud on the walls, no problem. It was tasty, after all. Watching her simmering with anger, I wanted to go wherever uncle was.

After a life time of sighs and clicks, curses and more curses, menacing shadows and ultimata for Uncle, his voice broke the quiet night.

“My good boy!” he said when I opened the door, trying to lift me, but he staggered and supported himself on the wall. Our shadows seemed to fight each other. “Are you not sleeping?”

“No, Khotsa,” I said, wanting to hug him and never let him go.

“How can he sleep on an empty stomach?” aunty said.

“Did you do your homework?”

“No, Khotsa. I did not go to school.”

As he settled down, his shadow sank into an invisible hole. I sat at his feet and hunger escaped me through a yawn.

“My boy, have you not eaten? Here, have this,” he said, fishing out his bottle.

“Take your stupidity far away from the boy!”

He laughed and stroked my head.

“My good boy, do you want to have a taste? You should. You are almost becoming a man.”

I watched his heart break, his teary eyes, trying to ignore aunty.

“There is no food in this house and we are waiting for you to provide,” she said.

Uncle closed his eyes and began snoring. Aunty gathered her belongings, loads tied in leso — crocheted doilies, utensils, and clothes. She was swallowed by the darkness as uncle snored and Mwambu slept at his feet. I stared at my shadow, still and small. I felt like a fly trapped in a big world.

The End.

Departure

Ben Blumenthal

Outside my window are the icy and jagged edges of a Canadian glacier. Black streaks of rock emerge through an insistent blanket of snow. There is no one down there. The weather is too uninviting, and only the natives are able to negotiate the terrain. In that way, the Inuit are some of the most accomplished diplomats to nature. Three hours later, or maybe fewer. Outside my window is a thirty-thousand-foot fall into the Gulf of Mexico. Outside my window I can see little white specks appearing and disappearing, playing peekaboo with me. The crests of waves. Maybe a boat or two; those are the white specks that don't disappear. I'm a seafarer too, but only if you expand the definition by a degree or two. I'm in the troposphere. Cumulonimbus icebergs float by. I haven't felt the need to check my watch since the plane left the ground.

It rained tonight, but I missed it. For the last seven hours, I've been stuck inside the comedy club listening to half-baked opening acts and bussing tables. The evidence is all there, though. The asphalt is wet, and my shoe almost gets soaked through when I step in an inconveniently placed puddle. I breathe, and the air is thick, dewy. I hit my windshield wipers. The streetlights are brighter, almost ultraviolet. I left work early, and lucky for me it seems that nobody noticed. Poor bus boys, one man down. I pull into a parking lot just to the side of the road and step out of my car. I thought I would be alone, but there are a few people here standing by the metal cross in the ground. I didn't bring anything, and there's that biting guilt, nesting in the lower left side of my stomach. The other kids stand next to me for a moment, and we all trade quick glances, sizing each other up. Who here was closest to the departed? I take myself out of the running.

The ground is littered with pink envelopes and letters that he won't ever read. The cross is planted firmly in the ground, surrounded by a white aura of reflected moonlight. It was built by some boys in shop class. Fifteen minutes, maybe more. The other kids leave, and I'm alone. I kneel down and pick up a card from an ex-girlfriend. It's a sin not to respect privacy, and I lay the card back down, straightening it out to its original position. I'm already intruding, and I have a rule not to disrespect the dead. The grass makes the sound of a wet rag as I walk down the knoll and into the creek. I push back the curtain of cattails and

reveal a sordid stage. The creek isn't deep. Water trickles indifferently downstream, taking with it the detritus of sticks, grass, pebbles. The breeze is almost haunting. It didn't take them long to find him, but I want to know what made them look *here*. How does anyone end up anywhere? I imagine a loom where the threads of tragedy weave themselves into a tapestry, thin lines of red sprawling across a white canvas. I start back up the knoll, back past the cross, and into my car. I drive home in silence, taking the careening esses of the road as quickly and smoothly as they'll take me. I want to burn plastic and breathe in deeply. I want to catapult every endangered amphibian and bird into the moon. I want to set my blood on fire.

Time presents itself in little pockets. History is a shelf on which rests millions of snow globes, each one exhibiting a different scene of the past. They are on the shelf purely for display, to be looked at and examined. Sometimes, though, we think it might be fun to shake them. It makes for an oddly erratic and pleasing novelty by disturbing the peace in this little glass bubble. Up in the atmosphere, I hop from bubble to bubble, resetting my history each time the wheels touch the tarmac. Every city has a different climate, a different way of speaking, of making food; why shouldn't they exist on separate timelines? The hours melt away slowly in Barcelona, sitting underneath palm trees and letting the warmth of the sun embrace me. In Madrid, time stops entirely. It barely snows here, let alone in March. Diners and commuters on the street stop still and gaze around them as if the city is entirely new to them.

The airport is a self-referential universe, unaware of the happenings outside of its walls. The hotels seem fake, and the food courts are doing their best imitations of a town square. I watch a barista brew a fresh pot of coffee, and it tastes stale. Time is a film reel unwinding, and I'm watching it slither by. There is a hierarchy inside of here that is separate from the other, with pilots at the top, and below them are the co-pilots, the crew, and so on. As passengers, that makes us human cargo, hurtling towards our receiving warehouse at speeds of five hundred and forty-seven miles per hour. There are souvenir kiosks in the most unassuming places. Buy a t-shirt and prove you've visited Omaha, Nebraska. This O'Hare airport-themed mouse pad is sure to impress your friends. I sit in the thick rubber seats at the gate, staring at CNN. The top story today in Montreal is about two escaped convicts who are thought to be making their way to Canada. They were in prison for armed robbery, and they could be armed and dangerous. I sip my stale coffee and fill out a crossword. The answers are always the same. Eke. JFK. Auk. LGA.

I heard the funeral had over eight hundred people in attendance. It's all anyone can talk about for the next two weeks, and then it morphs into the one thing that nobody talks about. Tragedy changes form over time. What once was news becomes a solemn story. It's put behind glass like a fire extinguisher, only to be opened any time the school needs to remind students about the dangers of drinking, which appears to be quite the emergency. At prom, the school puts up his picture at the entrance for everyone to see as they walk by. I step forward and Mr. R breathalyzes me. I click *fast forward*, and I'm sitting in a plastic chair on an arena floor that is normally used for the local college's hockey games. I made the mistake of having a last name that starts with B, and I have to wait for the principal to roll through the next six hundred or so names before I can leave. The floor is a Kelly-green sea of caps and gowns with undulating waves of students standing up and sitting back down. Four years span about ten quick steps across a stage. A long shout of cheers and watery eyes as his name gets called, and there's a sense that he is in the room, that he's simply hopped from one pocket of time into the now, and that he truly is in the room experiencing the same exact moment. Like two cells merging back together after a sudden split, two small but ever-so meaningful galaxies melt into one.

My ears pop on the descent into Atlanta. The clouds take on their familiar form—we hit the tarmac, and I have no choice but to elbow my way past the apparently directionless hordes of travelers as I make the harrowing journey to baggage claim. This is the world's busiest airport, don't you know? This is the second time I'll be staying the night at Aunt Leigh's. The first time I ended up at her townhouse was almost ten years ago, when Gram's new dog attacked me. I pick out my luggage and find Leigh. I've always had trouble placing the resemblance between her and my mother, but I hear Mom immediately in Leigh's sense of humor. I find it odd that even after so long, there's no noticeable changes to her features; her hair is still blonde, the opposite of Mom's deep brown, and I still have to keep up with peppy conversation during the car ride out towards Vinings. Then again, no one ever ages unless we split this person in two—to say that you were once this person, and here you are now, changed, and can you remind me of where we draw the dividing line? Mom might say you could trace it along a person's wrinkles.

The next morning, I wake up to my aunt's voice in the kitchen. *Good morning, Geoff*. She greets my uncle, and hearing this I get out of bed and head downstairs for a cup of coffee. When I get downstairs, however, there's no one in the kitchen. I check the other rooms, but the townhouse is empty.

As I stand in the middle of the living room in my pre-caffeine morning haze, I take a second look at the corner, and Homie looks back at me. His beak is cracked into a wry smile, and his grey tongue is sticking out at me. He bobs his head, gives me a comically taunting stare, and repeats himself. *Good morning, Geoff.* I imagine those stories of witches turning people into animals, and maybe this is my new avian aunt. Hey, there's a sitcom. I walk back upstairs and fall into bed, staring at the wall as the sun starts to peer through the blinds.

At noon, I'm eating Korean food in Emory Village, a smaller sub-neighborhood in the larger area of Druid Hills. Kunal sits across from me, picking away at the last grains of rice with his chopsticks. In ancient Europe the druids were the educated and religious class, often giving up human sacrifices. They believed that at death, the soul is passed on to another body. I ask Kunal whose soul he thinks he might be harboring, and we make it a game to imagine what historical character's soul is resting within us. Are there enough of bodies to go around?

It's five o'clock in the morning, and no one is on the street. Life takes on a more idyllic nature in the morning. The road is hiding in the fog, and it looks as if the green exit signs on the highway are peaking above the clouds. Eppley Airfield Left 2 Lanes. I pass Carter Lake to my left and rows of mobile homes to my right. Kitchen lights are on, and I can see a woman cooking on her stovetop. I get out of the car and hop into my chair in the left terminal of Omaha's quaintly dated airport. Calling gate A6, please prepare for boarding. I'm suctioned through one chilly hallway into another, and the day is a flurry of glossy magazines and more stale coffee. I look out my window, and on the tarmac, the marshalls wave their flashing orange torches to direct me. Ladies and gentlemen, please prepare for departure.

Mixed Media Collage

Claudia Miller



Meeting the Moon

Emily Stoddard

...ound and go to the window.
I can sense ... watching me. There's no
... After a few seconds the light
... approaches the window. All I can see
the silhouette of ... smile and turn around,
... pull the curtain.
my ... don't want to jog his
memory ... way I uptoe past file's room and see
sleeping ... the floor next to his bed. It's hard to ma-
... get him back up and
under the covers.
I ... watch ... His nostrils flare a
as if ... in a dream. ... purses his
... and step on
... recognize
...
the ... the way out ... is
in ... short
sight
the
Moon
... what
... you know, the
breaks the ... silence and
holds out her hand.
nice to meet you.
... well"

This Town

Lorelei Bacht

Neither a duck nor a goldfish,
I am a faint outline, my substance
Invisible, incomprehensible —
The same as no substance at all.

Boys on the left, girls on the right.
Girls in pretty coats, shoelaces.
Boys in navy blue, captain caps,
“Ahoy” and “top of the morning.”

Sticks and marbles, teacups, flannels —
Who and/or what the hell are you?
I am whatever kind of Jack does not
Fit in the box. No trip to the river, no

Cozy tea-biscuit and jam confession.
Giggle, giggle, pow, pow! I learn
To play my own tunes, mind my own
Accordion, unable as I am

To behave accordingly:

This town ain't big enough
For the both of me.

Rogue Wave

Judith Skillman



Happy Now?

Gabrielle McAree

She gets her first lesson on serotonin when she spends the summer in her closet, painting black lines under her eyes and hitting her head against the drywall. She shreds her flower wardrobe with the kitchen scissors and swears off glitter and rhinestones, and anything soft pink. Her father is a surgeon, so he knows a depressed person when he sees one. He orders her a pizza pie; extra-large, extra-cheese, extra-jalapeños; and paints the house a bright yellow. He buys a pony, a trampoline, a fishing rod and a bucket of worms, blackberry ice cream. All the things his daughter once showed interest in. “Are you happy now?” he asks.

The surgeon can’t resurrect the dead, but he tries. She stopped wanting all of these things years ago, when she realized she wasn’t going to get them. Her mouth is replaced with a red zipper. The broken zipper from her puffy childhood coat. Her eyes darken. So dark, they morph into bruises. Her happiness is a foreign country that doesn’t exist. She doesn’t tell her father this.

He reads articles from medical journals. He talks to experts. He flies to a conference in Maui where he drinks pina coladas and practices infidelity. Her name is Susan. Her son shot himself in the face with her hunting gun. She still finds pieces of his brain stuck in the carpet. She understands depression. It’s important for the father to surround himself with people who understand. He loses the napkin Susan writes her email address on. When he goes back to the restaurant, the server apologizes. He threw it away, and trash collection comes on Thursdays. The server gives him the number to the landfill, but the father doesn’t have the energy. He has a daughter at home who can’t leave her closet.

When he returns, his daughter’s ears are replaced with white maggots. They snack on her flesh like a teenage frenzy. This makes him want to teleport back to the first time he saw The Beatles live in concert. A time when he felt no pain. No heaviness. No responsibility. He wasn’t in charge of another human’s happiness, just himself and his. His daughter refuses soup and medicine. She vomits acid into a bowl that once housed her Friday night popcorn and chocolate concoctions. Her limbs are toothpicks as she disappears further and further into her closet of oblivion.

The father becomes a slug, helpless and meek and unable to lift things he once could carry. He takes a leave of absence and turns to his committee of Doctors, his friends.

Doctor 1 wants to cut out her kidney. She can live without a kidney. The father agrees.

Doctor 2 wants to try Electroshock therapy. In his medical opinion, electrically induced seizures will provide some kind of brain relief. This has worked on bored housewives and soldiers with post-traumatic stress. The father agrees.

Doctor 3 wants to replace her brain with someone else's—someone being kept alive on a ventilator. But this person could be addicted to opium or be a carrier for sociopathic tendencies. They could house a Beanie Baby obsession. Their interests could cloud his daughter's and, like a leech, pray on the best pieces of her, the pieces that love yellow and cheese pizza and glittery unicorns in the shape of ponies. The father agrees.

Doctor 4 wants to do a heart transplant.

All four Doctors believe their course of treatment is best and the only way for his daughter to revert back to her normal self. The daughter listens from the depths of her sunken closet. She has no idea who or what her "normal self" is. The idea seems lost to her, like her childhood ragdoll resting on a black ocean floor. Like her runaway mother, dead or dying or living in a nudist colony. Elsewhere.

The Surgeon plays golf with Doctor 4 on Wednesday afternoons. The following Tuesday, his daughter's medically healthy heart is replaced by a motorcyclist's heart from New Jersey. The adrenaline junkie drove straight into a median at 90 mph. He wasn't wearing a helmet; he didn't believe in helmets. His name was Allen, and when he was a little boy, he wanted to be President. Allen died so a rich girl could have his heart. There's too much sadness in the world. The father understands this, but when his daughter's eyes flood open after surgery, he asks her one question. "Are you happy now?"

He needs an answer. He has a 12:45 pm tee-time, and he can't miss it because the only time he feels like a complete version of himself is when he's smacking golf balls with iron sticks and calling out "fore" and slamming his club down, creating a spaceship-sized divot, only to start the process all over again on the next hole. And the hole after that. And the hole after that.

What Death Obsession Teaches the Elementary School Kid

David Marquez

I had this thing when I was a kid: I'd have some small, concerning thing happen to me, (an injury, a skip in my heartbeat, etc.) and I'd fall into a dizzying panic that started with the thought that I was going to die from it. As a kid not even clearing five feet tall, with my 75 or so pounds wrapped in small sized t-shirts, football jerseys, and puffer jackets, the weight of mortality was something too heavy for me to carry, and if I could have I would have forgotten about it altogether.

To me, death was scarier than anything in the world. Scarier than any monster I'd ever read about, scarier than the devil my Sunday school teacher told me about. Death was worse than Freddie and Jason, Michael Myers, and Leatherface, because they were all *something*, and death was *nothing*. Death was like the recurring dream I had where everyone in my life forgot who I was, no matter how many times I said my name to them. Death was being lost in the store forever. It was like closing my eyes for the night to go to sleep but not expecting to wake up to Mom's chorizo and egg burritos and Sunny D in the morning. It was being alone, going somewhere without my sisters and my mom, without the hope of ever returning or ever finding them again.

I remember one morning, when I was in first grade, after my mom dropped my sister and I off for school, I headed for the cafeteria to grab free breakfast. The lunch ladies greeted me from behind the small glass windows where all of the food was kept, their hair nets holding back their gray hair, their wrinkled, shaking hands covered with translucent gloves. I chose a carton of chocolate milk, a cheese stick, and a cup of applesauce as my breakfast. Now, you might think even a small child with an irrational mind wouldn't see any of these breakfast items as deadly, but everything was deadly to me. I could accidentally swallow too much at once and choke to death on the spot, I could be allergic to something without knowing it and break out in life-threatening hives, or could even trip and be impaled by the spork given to me for the applesauce cup. For most kids, school breakfast was another checklist item to get over with in order to go outside.

For me, it was a careful, methodical dance of survival. One that, on this particular morning, I made a misstep in.

I peeled back the foil covering that kept the applesauce in and began to eat it. When I was finished, I examined the cup and realized that a piece of the foil was gone. It wasn't on the table, wasn't on the colorful checkered floor around my feet, or anywhere I could see. So, I thought I must've eaten it and that it would surely be the thing that killed me. The foil was now in my body, threatening to mix with my blood or cut through my intestines and take me out for good. So I found myself in the Jose Barrios cafeteria, my hands shaking, my gut twisting with the thought of death, and the first bell hadn't even rang.

Overwhelmed with the feeling that my time was shortening rapidly, I ran outside to find comfort—to find my sister, Kyra. My eyes darted around the playground from the monkey bars, to the tire swing, to the climbing webs and found nothing. My heart was racing as I ran towards the Jungle Gym, the hotspot of the playground, and found her there. I waited at the bottom of the singular, large yellow slide that extended off of the gym into the gravel below. I watched as the kids above me screamed and yelled and ran, chasing each other through interconnecting red tubes with small windows, entering on one side of the tube and always coming out on the other, never getting lost in the process. My world was quiet, and I stood like a statue, staring up at this massive structure and waiting to break the news to my sister—that this might be our last day together. That we'd have to call mom and tell our older sister, and that everyone would be sad and it was all because I had accidentally eaten foil.

I spotted her among the crowd of happy kids, ducking through the tunnels and using the blue poles to keep her speed while running around corners. She ran and ran, finally coming to the top of the slide, sticking her feet off of the edge, and cascading down without hesitation. She was just enjoying her morning freedom before the school day, so when she slid down that big yellow slide and her feet dug deeper into the hole below it created by the thousands of kids who had done the same thing before, she wasn't exactly ready to be greeted with such heavy news. You can probably imagine her reaction when, through short and forced sentences, I told her I had eaten a small piece of foil and oh my god I'm gonna die and I'm scared please tell me I'm okay. She stared at me with her deep brown eyes, her curly brown hair frizzy with the plastic friction of the tunnels and the slide, and sighed. Again I had come to her for reassurance only a big kid could give me. She reached out for my hands. She told me I was going to be okay. Told me there wasn't anything to worry about. It's just foil.

Then she ran back around the Jungle Gym, up the metal steps, into the screaming, the yelling, the laughing. I stood and watched as the panic in my body slowly faded and the world around me started feeling real again—I was breathing, I was breathing. I wanted to join everyone in the red tunnels, I wanted to slide down the yellow slide and dig my feet into the gravel, to swing on the monkey bars, but I figured that I had evaded certain death once for the day, and to put myself in harm's way was just tempting fate. Who knew if my feet would find gravel at the end of the slide instead of finding nothing, leaving me to fall down, forever, into nothing.

Around this time is when I had to start seeing Mrs. Nolasco, the school counselor. I guess my mom had figured out I was afraid of everything killing me, or caught on to the way I had to hold on to the cart or her belt loop anytime we were in the store. What I remember about her is that she made me feel better. I don't remember exactly how her voice sounded, but I know it was soothing, soft and heavy. I don't remember the smell of her office, but I know that it calmed me. There was a large plant in one of the corners, green and sturdy, reaching for the ceiling. A window that faced out toward Little Walnut Street, where I could see people passing and living their lives as I lived out mine in this school. A clock on the wall, up high, that ticked away as we talked about my fears. The taste of the Austin PB & J crackers she gave me as I waited for my mom to pick me up from school. Her curly hair, deep eye sockets, faint wrinkles spreading across her forehead and cheeks. I don't remember exactly what she said to me, but I remember many times when she helped bring me back to earth and find my footing to walk back out onto the playground, or to the parent pickup line, or the cafeteria—back into the world where things moved and breathed and I was alive. She made me believe, each time I went into her office, I wasn't going to die. That I was going to be okay.

One time I was on a really bad tear with my death anxiety, until I found something that saved me from thinking, something I loved: football. A couple of years had passed since the applesauce cup incident, and I'd graduated to the big kids playground. I played football with my friends at morning, lunch, and afternoon recess—becoming obsessed with keeping stats for the amount of catches, yards, and touchdowns I had. Being obsessed with something like football taught me about escape; I wasn't afraid while running down the field with a football in my hand, my feet carrying me to the endzone. Maybe it was about wanting to find the end instead of dreading it. Maybe it was about securing a catch, stopping something from falling. Or maybe it was just that I was nine and I was having fun.

This new love for something was going well, until one day my friend closelined me while trying to block for his quarterback. A slow motion realization ensued: as I fell on to my back and was left on one side of the field while my friends ran towards the other side, I watched the cloud-filled sky spin and spin, I listened to the screaming and yelling coming from every direction around me, and felt myself sinking into the cold grass. I believed that in the collision some vital internal tube in my throat was dislodged, and this would again threaten my life; though I had escaped the thought for a while, it was there again, pressing on my chest, becoming more real than anything around me. The second lunch bell rang, and the massive herd of kids poured into the school doors racing to be first in the lunch line while I stared upwards. My friend came back to me, stood over me, and reached his hand down. I grabbed it and he pulled me up. I did my best to look unfazed, flaring my nostrils and biting the inside of my lip to fight back the tears as we ran inside.

Then came the roaring of a cafeteria full of hungry kids, a cacophony that felt distant and suffocating all at once. As the lunch line slowly shifted forward, I grabbed at my throat to see if anything was off about it. I was certain that my throat tubes had been rearranged in a way that, if I ate, food would be deposited in my lungs and I would suffocate. I picked up a carton of milk, a styrofoam plate, and watched as the lunch ladies served us enchiladas and beans. I balanced my meal in my shaky hands as the teachers assigned us to each table. I was seated away from my friends, at the edge of a table. I looked at the plate in front of me through tear-blurred eyes, with no intention to eat the food on it.

Everyone was rushing to eat so they could return to thirty more minutes of freedom on the playground. I scoped the hallways leading out of the cafeteria, searching for Mrs. Nolasco. Eventually I saw her walking toward her office and was calmed by her even strides and quiet countenance. Without raising my hand, I left my seat and ran towards her. Much like I had done with my sisters and my mom many times before, I rushed to tell her what had happened to me, and watched her reactions closely for any sign of concern, because if she was as worried as me, I was surely a goner. Mrs. Nolasco placed her hand on my shoulder and told me I was going to be okay, that I shouldn't worry and I should go to her office tomorrow morning.

When my mom dropped me off the next morning, instead of rushing to the field to play football, I ran inside to the warmth of Mrs. Nolasco's office, hungry for an answer. I remember walking into her office, being greeted by her calm tone, moving my eyes from plant to window to clock, and slinging my backpack down next to the cushioned chair I sat on.

Mrs. Nolasco then brought out a book of the human anatomy with an image of the human body on the front, organs and all showing on the hard, glossy cover. She turned to a page that she had marked, which had a close-up of the throat and all of those tubes I had been imagining for hours on end. They looked different here, however—I'd imagined a couple of tubes: one for swallowing food and one for breathing. I figured it would be pretty easy to get all of that mixed up with a hard clothesline hit, but Mrs. Nolasco traced her finger over the diagram, telling me that I was going to be okay. This fear wasn't rational. I should eat.

I starved myself for a few days after that, eating only when I feared looking weird for not doing so. Until, one morning, my grandpa came over for breakfast and my mom made pancakes. I remember the internal battle taking place within me, how I could smell the maple and batter and bacon filling the house and feel the hunger aching in my stomach, but above all, I could hear that voice telling me that if I ate I was going to die. My sisters loaded their plates and sat next to my grandpa, and I sat silently. Until, without asking me, my mom served me two massive pancakes and covered them in maple syrup. She sat next to me. Told me I was going to be okay. Told me there wasn't anything to worry about. Eat the pancakes.

So I ate. As a practice in trust, some act of faith. Many times when I'd ask for reassurance, it wasn't with the hope of believing what someone said to me, but more about hearing the words, "you're going to be okay." It was about returning to an empty well. My mom, my sister, my counselor—they were all lying to me, with good intentions. I know that now. Yes, I was going to die, and still am, but why should that keep me from eating a warm breakfast with my family? Why should that keep me from crawling through the red Jungle Gym tubes, or playing football with my friends? I guess obsession is trying incessantly to answer the unanswerable, something I was doing every day before, during, and after school. I didn't know then but picking up that fork and cutting into a stack of pancakes was my first step towards some sort of sanity. I remember feeling a release as I slowly cut away at the stack, watching my mom cleaning the kitchen in her Sunday Levi shirt and blue jeans as we ate.

Soon, she'd have to force my Grandma to go to the hospital, to find out why she was always tired and sick. To find out why she couldn't breathe. Soon, the doctors would tell her that Grandma had cancer. They would discuss treatment options. Grandma would move in with us and stay in the room Kyra and I shared. I would turn on the KOAT Channel 7 News for her and kiss her on the forehead every morning before leaving for school. I wouldn't understand what cancer was, but I would know

that it was the reason grandma was always in bed, with a tank of oxygen by her side, tubes under her nose. I would hope that cancer was, like the foil I ate, harmless. That she would be okay. That there wasn't anything to worry about.

But hope falls through. She died in her sleep when I was in fourth grade, about six months after she was diagnosed. In the moment when my family cried around the couch she lay on, holding her hands and kissing her forehead, I realized how close death was. It lived with me. It was there in the room with us, in my grandma. Many times we were told she was going to be okay. Many days she laughed and smiled, told jokes, and took pictures like nothing was different. Even when she lost her hair, she put the small remainder of it in a tiny rubber band, and we laughed about it. I felt like I'd been lied to by everyone, by myself (and despite this, I would later tell my younger cousin that grandma was going to be gone "for a while").

She died on a Friday, and someone thought it would be best for my sisters and I to go to school instead of sitting around all day thinking about what had just happened. We had been excited to go to our Valentine's Day parties.

So I went to school late and told my teacher, Mrs. Padilla, why I had been tardy. With chin to chest and a backpack hanging on my shoulders, I said, "My grandma died this morning."

Mrs. Padilla put her hand up to her chest and said, "I'm so sorry to hear that."

There was a heavy pause.

My classmates sat around cutting out paper hearts, the sound of scissors slicing into cardstock filled the silence.

"How old was she?" My teacher asked.

"Fifty-three."

"Oh my—only fifty-three? Fifty-three."

She paused again, and then said, under her breath: "She was younger than me."

She stared down at her desk for what seemed like forever, and I understood the gaze. She was having a gut twisting moment, some violent flash of realization, just like I had been through many times before, in the cafeteria, on the football field, holding my grandma's hand just an hour earlier. I wonder if she, at that moment, needed someone like my sisters, or my mom, or Mrs. Nolasco. To tell her that she wasn't going to die. That she would be okay. That there wasn't anything to worry about. I want to go back to that moment, reach my hand out to hers, to tell her all of those nice things.

I have this thing now that I'm an adult: I'll be doing the most mundane thing, (brushing my teeth, grocery shopping, etc.) and I'll remember that I have a limited amount of time here. There are times when I'm really enjoying myself that the thought finds me, too. I'll be sitting around a fire with my childhood best friends having some beers and suddenly imagine the fire burning without all of us around it, just crackling on in silence forever. The cans crushed, empty, perfectly still. Everytime, it's a gut punch. I still have that childhood urge to seek reassurance, though I'm not as explicit about it anymore; no adult should spend *this* much time being overwhelmingly worried and suffocated by their thoughts. As time and distance would have it, I can't really turn to Mrs. Nolasco. I can't enter the office and spot the plant, the window, the clock. But if someone's near, I'll hug them. Hold them tightly. Sometimes, I'll just send a text to my mom telling her I love her, or I'll call my grandpa and talk about the weather and the Dallas Cowboys. Sometimes, when I'm at my bravest, I'll sit with the thought for a while. Though I must admit, I do find myself wishing to return to Mrs. Nolasco's office, to see if that plant is still there, to watch the cars through the window for a while while listening to the clock tick.

Unwavering Resolve

Zakariyah Hanif



Making a Great America

Erin Challenor

A blackout poem made out of Donald Trump's presidential candidate biography in the 2020 Oregon voter's manual. (Page 26. Biography furnished by *Donald J. Trump for President, Inc.*)

country
criminal
of

lawlessness and
prosperity.
America love

s
the vicious
who sow chaos to justice

and
coddle the dangerous
night. Burning
and attacking and assaulting is the
American way.

it's
our
chaos
our
radicals who

Make America

Now Listen

Kendyl Green

You start the day with your playlist and put it on shuffle. *This is America*, the voice through the speakers booms, *don't catch you slippin' now*. Your head bobs as you move along, the lyrics of the song flashing mindlessly over your head. It's got a good beat. It's got a good beat. You don't turn on the news — you stopped watching a long time ago. You know now, now you know what they meant when they said no news is good news. There are a lot of screws loose in the world right now. When Bryson Tiller said *cause i'm up right now*, he didn't mean messed up and fed up but that's what you think as the next song comes up and you open your phone and scroll through Twitter. A girl's been murdered, but not just any girl, a black girl, another black girl, and you wonder why this one got more attention than the others, almost as much attention as the black men who have been murdered. You listen to the audio of her boyfriend and hear his screams, but they're not his screams, they're your screams, and all you can think of is this poem you once read that said there are no amber alerts for amber skinned girls yet the whole Internet is suddenly ringing the alarm. And you wonder why here, why now? Somehow, this girl has broken through, and she's you and you're her and your shuffle switches again. *What if nothing ever will change?* But it already has — she's changed everything. Everything. And she doesn't even know it. Will never know it. Just like all of the others, mothers, brothers, sisters, fathers — they'll never know how much they've truly changed everything. What does it mean to change if most of the gains stay the same? Does change without gain truly mean change? Your playlist shuffles and now you listen. You listen, *you muhfuckin' right i'm bitter, you muhfuckin' right i'm triggered*. You scream the lyrics and wonder if she screamed. You ask yourself if you would have screamed. You dance around in a rage in your kitchen, head banging and wild movements, animalistic — isn't that how they view you? Her? Them? *This is America, guns in my area. This is America*. You pick your phone up and change the song.

What I Know About English

Ada McCartney

is that it's a language of little mercy.

It's a man thing. It's a little scratchy, takes some breaking in, but it's got pockets to spare.

It names my geography things like "iris" and "vagina" (which translates as "shame mouth" elsewhere) and "dimpling."

The etymology is deep and varied with a thousand mouths gaping.

It's full of machinery, dammed & flooding many places.

Acronyms for everything.

And Jargon for Jargoning.

We're so predictable.

Dicks, predatory, delectable.

A little sleep of dream and meat gristle and pee.

Chickens neck-snapped hanging over swine buried alive and we are tested, positive, tested, police enforcing quarantine and people outlawed despite the fact that

a person cannot be illegal.

There is no such language for this thing— nonsense and powdered tooth-
paste on black jeans.

No one is illegal.

No One Is Illegal.

NO ONE is Illegal.

NO ONE IS ILLEGAL.

I am in this world but not of it
inhabiting the antithesis, Chthulucene¹
state of unreality in this [military-climate]
crisis of refugees.

Questions like,

why are you so reluctant to let go?

The sound of falling snow.

The unexpected, unrespected, *No*.

How I look for it everywhere, though it is not exactly native to me.

English is in my body.

Stiff like church shoes. I am a student of
un-learning borg hive mind in hyperdreams— wiring
and rewiring, painting

over whitewash con un mezcla de colores, singing arigato Tamagotchi.
Wie gehts! (wave)

Scurry!

A mouse so startles me— embarrassing.

What is the word for the wordless thing?

I trace the tension through a canyon
riverbed of nerve bundles wanting for
some movement
lubrication down spine through the gulley of
pelvis
into shame mouth

red and raw and hot from all the
naming.

1 *Chthulucene*, the word for a time-place, for staying with the trouble of living with response-ability on this earth coined by Donna Haraway in fierce reply to rampant anthropocentrism (human privileging) in what has been called the Anthropocene.

Flow

Joel Worford

Lights up on an art gallery. JOHN (a man in his mid-20s, wearing a janitorial uniform) is mopping the floor in front of a flat, center stage. TOM (a man in his late 50s, wearing the same uniform as JOHN) mops the floor off to the right of the flat, but still in front of it. There are canvas paintings on the wall, preferably experimental ones that look like randomly splattered paint. A plastic bottle is on the floor.

JOHN reaches the plastic bottle and leans to pick it up but hesitates. He stares at it for a few seconds, deliberating.

JOHN

Hey, uh... hey Tom.

TOM

What?

JOHN

Man, I don't know what to do about this.

TOM

What you talkin' 'bout?

JOHN

I don't know what to do about this thing, could you come here?

TOM

(Stops mopping and walks over to JOHN) I'll be damned if this ain't some shit. What you want?

JOHN

(Pointing at the bottle) Man, I don't know what to do.

TOM

What the hell you mean? Pick the damn thing up and throw it away.

JOHN

Nah, but I mean, is it...

TOM

Is it what?

JOHN

I mean I don't know if...

TOM

Get on with it man, I ain't got all day!

JOHN

Is it art?

A beat.

TOM

(Hesitating) ...man...man quit playin' around, throw the damn thing away! Ain't no plastic bottle art. *(Walking away)* God, you a trip.

JOHN

Nah, just last week they wheeled in this big old toilet bowl. I said "which bathroom you want this in" and they laughed at me and put some red ropes around it.

TOM turns around and stares intently at the bottle for a few seconds.

JOHN

Yo, I'm tellin' you man, this could be some high-dollar shit right here and I ain't taking the fall for this one. Uh-uh, no. Manager's already up my ass for being late all the time. Man, I can't take this hit.

TOM

Alright, alright, just leave it, we'll leave it for the morning shift. *(Returning to mopping)* God, you a piece of work.

JOHN

Look, I ain't about losing this job. My momma'll kick me out if I can't pay rent.

TOM

Boy, you still living with your momma?

JOHN

Yo, I'm so sorry, I ain't no high school graduate like you, doing great things—

TOM

You watch your mouth son.

They continue mopping in silence for a few seconds.

TOM

And that's "college dropout" to you.

JOHN

Man, what college? Custodian State? Did you fail your final on "wax on, wax off?"

TOM

Boy, shut the hell up and mop the floor like the momma's bitch you is. I ain't got time for your trifling.

They continue mopping for a few more seconds in silence.

TOM

Shit you talkin', man when I was your age, at least I was doin' some.

JOHN

(Skeptically) Man, what shit was you into?

TOM

I was in some writing shit, I'll tell you what, I was gon' be a writer.

JOHN

Man, quit playin'. (*Laughing*) You was on some Shakespeare shit back in the day.

TOM

Shakespeare? Man, Shakespeare ain't nothin' but some rhyming elementary bull.

JOHN

Yo, you sure talk! Spit somethin'.

TOM

(*Reciting bad poetry*) Green leafs
Ain't show nothin' on me
Brown skies
Ain't show nothin' on my skin
Purple sun
Ain't show nothin' in my head
Her eyes ain't more
Than the colors I don't see

JOHN

Yo, that's some deep shit right there!

TOM

I'm telling you man, I was doin' some real shit!

JOHN

That's some deep shit!

TOM

I told you!

JOHN

Man... so what does it mean?

TOM

Damn, ain't you never read nuthin' boy? It means whatever you want it to mean.

JOHN

Well shit, I didn't know you had some talent. Damn son!

They continue mopping the floor for a few seconds. TOM is grinning to himself.

JOHN

Yo, so with all that talent, why'd you go dropping out and shit?

TOM

Man let me tell you, them college professors, they so obsessed with what they call "the classics," they ain't got time for no fresh shit, you know what I'm sayin'?

JOHN

Man, that's some real talk right there. My English teachers was all like, "you gotta use periods in your essays." I won't about that shit man, it fucked with my flow.

TOM

Yo, and you was right, it's that flow that matters. Don't let them sell you on no grammar shit if it messes with your flow.

JOHN

Truth.

TOM

I get so sick of that shit. Everybody tryin' to tell you what's good, don't know shit about art.

JOHN

I know that's right.

TOM

So what you about?

JOHN

Me?

TOM

Man, you said, "I know that's right." What you about?

JOHN

Yo, I dunno man...

TOM

C'mon! I spit somethin', now you spit.

JOHN shuffles awkwardly before pulling a piece of paper out of his back pocket.

TOM

(Smiling) Yo, that's what I'm talkin' bout!

JOHN

(Rapping) Yo it's the streets that beg for the streets to be named
Crips, Mafia, Bloods, they color it all the same
In red, while mothers call their children home in vain
With daddies that deal, wonderin' if they're the ones to blame

TOM stares in silence.

JOHN

Man, what'd you think?

TOM starts mopping again.

JOHN

Shit man I ain't no punk, if you hated it, say it.

TOM

(Stops mopping) Hell, I mean, anybody can rhyme shit.

JOHN

Yo, those was some new concepts I was fuckin' with.

TOM

But then you rhyme shit just like everybody else.

JOHN

(Putting away the paper) Whatever man, fuck that shit.

TOM

Hey look now brother, it ain't all bad. Just try it without the rhyming,
that shit's old.

JOHN hesitates, then pulls the paper back out.

TOM

Give it a try.

JOHN

(Reading) It's the streets that beg for the streets to be... called
Crips, Mafia, Bloods, they color it all... similar
In red, while mothers call their children home... to no avail
With daddies that deal wonderin' if... if it's their fault

TOM

(Clapping) There you go man, that's the shit I'm talkin' about. See that
shit's fresh!

JOHN

I guess.

TOM

(Walking over and holding John's shoulder) See young blood, every rapper on
TV rhymes these days, anybody can do that. But man what you just did,
that was some real cool shit!

JOHN

Really?

TOM

Hell yeah, brother! You took them words and turned them into something
more than a rhyme. Now they're a statement. Now they represent some-
thing more than what sounds or feels good.

JOHN

Man, that's some crazy shit right there! Thanks Tom!

TOM

Hey, no problem young blood. See this art shit, it's about expression.
Technique, rules, that shit don't matter as long as you feel it, man. Hell,
we could do just as good as half the shit in this joint.

JOHN

Yo, you really think so?

TOM

As long as we feelin' it, hell yeah brother! What you feel like doin' right now?

JOHN

Oh... I dunno, I think—

TOM

Nah man, don't think. Just feel! What do you feel?

JOHN

I feel like takin' off these damn work boots!

TOM

Well, do it then!

JOHN takes off his boots and tosses them on the floor in front of him.

TOM then takes off his shirt and tosses it on top of the boots.

JOHN

Why'd you do that?

TOM

Because I felt like it!

JOHN smiles and removes his shirt as well.

The two men begin stripping off all of their clothes until they stand together in nothing but their underwear.

JOHN

Man, look at this! It's a masterpiece!

TOM

Hold up...

TOM begins spitting on the pile of clothes.

JOHN watches in amazement, then joins in. After a few seconds they stop.

Now it's done!

TOM

The museum opens. Voices are heard from stage right. The two men admire the pile of clothes.

Man, I wonder what made us want to do that?

JOHN

Shit, I dunno, somebody'll figure it out.

TOM

The two men exit stage left.

Shortly after, a MAN and a WOMAN (Both dressed very nicely, looking sophisticated) enter stage right, admiring the paintings before approaching the pile of clothes.

(Turning to the MAN) I wonder who this is by?

WOMAN

BLACKOUT

Rylan

Cay Warner



the proper response to grief and the ghosts that rot in your living room

Mikey Waller

Your father is dying.

And sometimes, when you are least expecting it, you are glad that he is.

If mercy is real, you are hoping for it soon. Maybe in late May before it gets too hot because after that there will be too many bugs and it will distract from your performance of the grieving child. Or maybe over the next big holiday, it would be more convenient with everyone already at home and it could really cut down the money spent on gas. You like to plan it out that way. It feels less like he's gotten away with something. You've chosen it. He is dying and now all you have to do is wait.

In June of 2019 your father had his first stroke. For a man already living like he was dead, it was the moment you went to open the door and had a gut feeling there was a surprise birthday party on the other side. You've never had a surprise birthday party, but you know that your face would break open in shock. Not because you didn't know, but because it happened. The second stroke and third stroke would be less like that, if you could stop your face from breaking open with the grief you couldn't possibly have, but two years later, you do. It's the same door and the same surprise and the same gut feeling, but the happening still gets you.

From there, it was physical and occupational therapy that did nothing because all he would do during sessions was regurgitate the same lines, occasionally seasoned with offensive jokes, to successfully put off having to practice going up stairs. Insurance stopped covering it because he wasn't improving, but he told the neighbors that he didn't need it anymore. Hospitals happened, too. He would lie in the bed as you walked in, almost expectantly, rubbing his feet together like a child. Having dementia fit him well. He could forget how horrible he used to be and everyone else had to pretend to. You will be tempted to rip him apart in order to find the man that ruined your life. You won't. You have the same habit of rubbing your feet together. And some things are better off lost.

You won't know how to explain your relationship with him to people. He had a bad temper when you were a kid, but the worst thing about him was his ability to be both present and absent. He was the ghost living in your house. In the least subtle way of haunting, he was the obvious culprit of disaster. You might not see it in action, but you always knew it was him. You couldn't let anyone meet him; they'd start to see through the patched up pieces of his personality. They'd know something was wrong with him, and the association would be made with you. The details aren't important, but you'll spend the rest of your adult life wondering how he got away with it all. He gets to waste the rest of his days watching TV in a haze of existence and you watch the things he should be held accountable for melt into festering puddles at his feet. It reeks. He doesn't seem to notice.

You used to dream about your parents getting divorced or your dad leaving for good. Your whole life, he'd always been half out of the door anyway. You didn't want the half of him that could only love you the way he had been loved: poorly, by people who were well-versed in continuing familial trauma. An entire family of rotting ghosts have been revealed, and they can't help but to stick to you. According to Google, therapy was invented in the 9th century. You'd think more of your ancestors would've taken advantage of that. The sheer amount of ghosts doesn't feel fair, but you've heard haunting is the easier practice. There are times you've felt translucent, too. You've found horrible shame in that understanding.

A few weeks ago, a friend told you about someone they know whose dad died of dementia recently. In the same humor you've adopted to speak about your own father, she looks right through you and asks, "Are you jealous?"

"Yes."

Yes. God, yes. (I am)

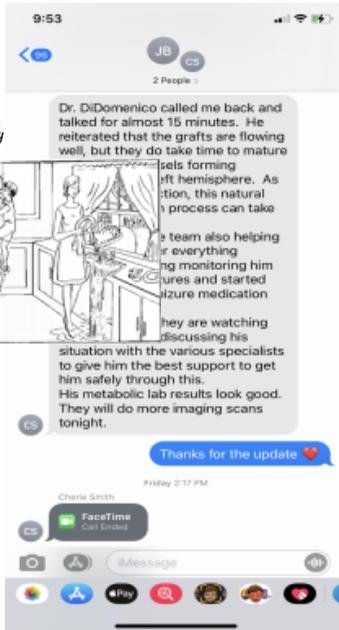
It may not be the proper response to grief, but the ghosts persist. There is one rotting in your mom's living room. The doctors have been saying that his death will most likely be long and slow. You will watch him die in pieces for now until mercy happens, maybe, or until he becomes completely see-through. Either way, he'll be around, body or not.

You love him. You forget that you do. When you were a toddler, someone once grabbed your hand in a busy museum, thinking you were their grandchild. Your dad was busy catching up with your older brother when he noticed you were missing. He ran after you as fast as he could, all the way to the entrance to find the woman that accidentally kidnapped you. You like to imagine how quick he pulled you into his arms, how your toddler self happily grabbed him back. A dad and his daughter, solid, with no ghosts in sight.

NIH Score (notes of a father dying)

Ashley Howell Bunn

NIH SCORE _____ (notes of a father dying)



unit
For approximately

on the
tightly,

a
formed
the

back
month, last

They have teams,
ask in about
them.

Swordsmen **the**

(062852) minutes; daughter

clothes between the poles clenched very
but Ami takes our cotton to be tied with
smaller hand. basically ouch It is

in
collection that it is half the region of left
Carolina, let's get

and get her fake ouch essentials, as last
month, the work of a few days was spent.
stroke, demagogues, who are happy with
sermons in your mind. "I almost have

one with the lighter



Autumn 2019

Rachel A.G. Gilman

Definition of autumn, Merriam-Webster

\ 'ô-təm \

- 1 : the season between summer and winter comprising in the northern hemisphere usually the months of September, October, and November
- 2 : a period of maturity or incipient decline.

Morningside Heights, New York, 3 September

I am running late to set up for an event because the 1 train is the place where hope dies. I run into Em, who wants to catch up as he helps me unload my boxes where they were supposed to be twenty minutes ago. I nod along to his summer stories of bachelor parties and job applications, moving with friends to Prospect Park instead of in with the girlfriend I heard about last semester. I vaguely recall seeing him on Hinge, shocked he was five years my senior, shocked I suddenly found him hot, like, pop-punk band lead guitarist kind of hot. I forget to answer when he asks me something about the guy I'd liked. We lock eyes throughout the event, letting the gaze linger for a little too long.

Kips Bay, New York, 6 September

I have seasonal depression in the sense that my mood warms when the temperatures drop. I put on a fluffy fucking sweater and suddenly all feels right. New York doesn't understand this, so I am still wearing sandals and sundresses. I break one of my last good pairs of shoes and kick it across my apartment, sitting my swollen feet down, feeling like failure.

Chelsea, New York, 9 September

I work the mailroom of a publishing house where my legs get heavy and my hands get paper cut, sending hundreds of envelopes a day. It leaves my mind susceptible to boredom. I text M to ask about staying with his family soon. I have already emailed his parents but I know they won't respond until I ask their son because that is what normal people should be able to do, talk to one another, even if they are five hours apart— whoever these normal people are. M asks if he can call me so I put in my earbuds. Soon, I hear the dogs that make up his computer password. It was his first day at his new job, so I ask how it went and he gives a

few too many details about the welcome meeting that my editorial ear crosses out in red pen.

'Right, well,' he goes on, 'the September date.' His birthday. 'Yes, I just...don't think there will be room for you, with all the family around.'

What M means is that he doesn't want me in the corner of a party, constantly having to introduce extended family members, struggling because the English language has yet to invent a word to describe a person who was your boss, then your friend, then your best friend, then she sort of wanted more, then one of you (not her) had a quarter-life crisis, moved an ocean away, and so it goes. I would suggest he just go with my name but given that it's the same as his sister's, that might confuse the elderly relatives all the same.

'We can see each other in October,' M says, as if *that* is the problem. I drop the call and never answer the follow-up text. I stuff the envelopes with rage to avoid causing a scene.

East Village, New York, 18 September

Em is performing at KGB with a dude who plays banjo. I wear the blouse I wore the last time I saw M, on a picnic in Sheep's Meadow where he admitted he had no idea what he was doing. I order overpriced vodka and sit in the front row. Em is too drunk to notice. I dash out after he is finished and take an Uber home, wishing I had brought a jumper.

Williamsburg, Brooklyn, 20 September

A skinny queer blonde girl at her loft gets paid \$250 to take tasteful nudes of me with her expensive Nikon. I pose on her dirty floor with my hands above my head and on her unstable stool with my bare tits hanging on my stomach. I'm trying to feel like anything lately, anything that could resemble myself.

Chelsea, New York, 22 September

My supervisor at work tells me my skirt is pretty and I wonder what that means, you know, besides that my skirt is pretty. I wonder if he prefers dogs or cats. I take my lunch break and write down all the words I associate with him so they look like a poem. I hear his birthdate in the bathroom and call the poem, 'N is an Aquarius.'

Bayswater, London, 27 September

After a barely-made flight with a half dozen babies screaming, I take myself for a manicure then impulsively decide to pierce another hole in my ear before texting M, 'Happy Birthday.' He answers, says he hopes

my flight went well. I remind myself repeatedly—from my hotel room with my chocolate biscuits and Walkers crisps and cubed ice from the concierge who for some reason believes my name to be Chelsea—that I don't really need him.

Jericho, Oxford, 30 September

I show my UK friends a photo of N. They stalk his Goodreads page and ask why I have a thing for neckbeards whilst concurring that N is the best of the neckbeards. We realize he is thirty. Part of me secretly wants to be thirty, too, to get over everything being up in the air and supposedly thrilling. 'We could make it work,' I say, 'so long as we agree to democratically remember the year 2011.' Then M texts and asks for my upcoming train information. I wait a little too long to respond.

Facebook Notification, 2 October

Em invited you to...

Haunted Housewarming, Saturday, 2 November 2019 at 21:00

356 11th Street, Brooklyn, NY

'Monster Mash' and 'Werewolf Bar Mitzvah' on repeat.

Costumes encouraged!

RSVP – *Going*

Elephant & Castle, London, 4 October

M welcomes me with a hug when I arrive, wearing only a towel and a smile like the teenager he was when we met. I pull away and reach for the dog, L, happy she remembers me but fearful she is not well enough to bark. She has been dying for a while.

Later, M receives money from his father and we take the Bakerloo line to the end where he smiles and makes silly faces at the infant in a pram next to us. We meet up with his Hong Kong friends, the kind of people who think it is normal to enquire what passports a person has; who tell stories of growing up speaking Cantonese and asking their parents to translate the phrase 'flower bridge' from English to hear them say, *faa kiu*. I am nothing like them but I like them. I especially like the one who calls M 'Marshmallow' like she did in school when he showed up the first day in knee socks and pastel shorts. I am shocked he allows her to take photos, shocked to the point where I need to be reminded to make an expression to look like I am enjoying myself despite the fact I'm hovering near an outdoor heater as an illness nestling into my chest baulks at my attempt to ignore it.

Some of the friends cry when they have to say good-bye. M and I laugh because we are the same kind of bad people.

When we get back to his parents', M disengages the alarm system, unlocks the door, and asks if I want tea. We creep down the stairs to the kitchen and sit across from each other in wicker chairs.

'I feel like I can be candid with you,' he says. 'It's hard for me to express my emotions.' M makes himself a cup of hot water while telling me about how everything is bothering him. He's the failure kind of depressed that everyone is at twenty-three.

I look about the table for a place to put my empty teabag, settling on a knife his father left out from making toast for dinner. M grabs it from my hand, taking it to the trash. I don't know what to say, how to explain to him that lately, I have thought of the person who spoke to me for twenty minutes three weeks ago more than I have thought of the only man I've ever thought I loved. I don't know how to articulate that I feel numb.

Instead, I briefly mention a photo essay I'm curating about lust and he replies, 'I have always thought lingerie was a bit slutty, that the sexiest thing a girl could wear is a jumper.' I make a joke about pullovers versus cardigans. 'Whichever,' he replies, 'or a button down, with jeans.' He finishes his drink and takes my empty mug. 'Are you ready for bed?'

I use his shower with all of its drain peculiarities, his coriander soap, accidentally knocking his razor off the ledge. I put on an oversized pyjama shirt then move back up the dark staircase and slide into his sister's bed, pulling the covers atop my bare legs.

I can hear the radio programme he needs to fall asleep through the walls, over L's light snoring next door.

Maida Vale, London, 5 October

I get dressed for the day in jeans and a yellow cardigan, taking the tube to Piccadilly. On the return, I decide the problem is I feel very cosy with M but no longer the butterflies of attraction. I wonder if they are still alive when we watch the Manchester City match. L has to remind me.

She lies between us and strategically places a paw on each of our legs, moving us closer. She moves her head into my lap, too, cheekily, before M picks her up and places her on the floor. I think about the desire I have again to tangle my fingers in his hair, of the playlist we listened to a year and a half ago in France: Glass Animals and Arctic Monkeys and that song about the Chateau Marmont that has no logical reason to appeal to two people who have never been to Los Angeles.

M's phone rings and he gets up. He's gone a long time. I eventually hear a flush before he returns and sits on the opposite end of the couch.

'Is everything okay?' I ask.

'It was my mum,' he says, something about a hot air balloon festival. No further context is given for his attitude. He turns on a documentary about Bill Gates's charity, only to turn it off when he gets tired of hearing the word 'diarrhoea.'

M's father returns and they passive aggressively make dinner: spring onion soup, or at least we think so, from Googling pictures of spring onions. I take a shower as it brews and shave my legs with his sister's vegan body wash. I sit quietly when M yells at his father to button his shirt at the table. I defuse an argument about where to take Granny for tea.

After, M's father plays the piano whilst M takes a shower then the father announces he is taking L for a walk. She looks at me somewhat knowingly.

M steps out of the bathroom wearing a black t-shirt and boxer shorts, announcing annoyedly that he's going to bed. I do, too, falling asleep again with the BBC World Service, wishing the speaker was closer to my ear, that I hadn't disappointed the dog.

Maida Vale, London, 6 October

Still in my pyjamas in the kitchen, M makes us cups of tea and bowls of healthy cereal, half a banana for him and the other for me. He turns on the radio again and starts a Sudoku puzzle before emailing me an interview in *The Guardian* with a writer we like. I'm surprised and confused because it feels like part of our routine, as if our lives are flooded with a horrible sense of domesticity that I've never experienced but fear I could really grow to love.

My cup of tea has finally reached the perfect temperature when M has to go. He clears his dishes and finds his black coat and eyeglasses. I follow him to the front door and stay inside as he steps out onto the marble porch. He puts his arms around me then slowly pulls away, heading toward the tube station.

I walk about the home and imagine a future where I have to listen to M clear his throat every morning of my life and spend middle-aged afternoons locating wine glasses he'll inevitably leave around, like his father, the years of my life when I will be catching up with friends at funerals. I don't think I would mind. I take L for a final walk in the garden and make a list of all the things I'm not ready to let go of, like the sensation of rough dog tongue across the tops of my toes. I let L wander without the leash, taking a photo of her playing in the leaves to replace the one I had in spring of her frolicking in the flowers. I dry her paws when she returns, smelling her musk and seeing clumps of fur on the rubber of my Converse.

She looks at me, blankly; grey dilating her pupils. I press my forehead to hers and kiss the top of her head, asking myself if I will make it back to see her again before it happens.

A certain kind of melancholy complicates my flight home that afternoon as I pick dog hairs from my jumper and collect them in a plastic, Ziplock bag. The man sitting next to me is too busy listening to sexist comedy podcasts to notice. Which of us is crazy?

Pom Pom Squad, 'Protection Spells'

...And I'm tired of going out / And I'm tired of staying in bed / And I'm tired of your heart beating its way into my head. / The old incantations I kept to myself / 'I miss you' and 'I love you' are weak protection spells...

Kips Bay, New York, 16 October

On walks home from work, I stop thinking and allow Em and M to blur, floating around like loose party balloons in my brain. I murmur their names to myself with my headphones on, hoping no one will notice my admiring the sound similarities slipping over my tired tongue. When I cannot fall asleep, I find the vibrator I purchased with an Amazon gift card I was awarded for outstanding undergraduate achievement, closing my eyes and hitting the power button. My mouth opens then and a sound comes out, the sort of thing that could be either *Em* or *M*. I arch my back and bite my lip and don't think about who I'm chasing. My body knows as I reach climax. My heart is certain as I pull the covers over my shoulders, slow my breathing, and try to pretend I have the comfort of not sleeping alone.

Summary of *Sex and the City*, Season 4, Ep. 10 'Belles of the Balls'

This is the one after Steve finds out he has testicular cancer and informs Miranda. This is one where Steve feels bad about himself and debates getting a prosthetic testicle, an idea Miranda finds ridiculous (and sleeps with him to prove it). This is the one before Miranda discovers she's pregnant.

Chelsea, New York, 21 October

N makes coffee in the white mugs from the office kitchen and leaves them across the office—in the mailroom, by the bloggers' cubicles, around the corner from his desk—then bashfully walks about in casual search. Sometimes, when feeling bold, I bring them back to his desk with a smile and a knowing nod before pattering back to my desk and picturing a brownstone in Brooklyn filled with boundless paperbacks in cheaply constructed, thrift store bookshelves, constantly expanding due to his never

-ending enthusiasm. I'm more comfortable in this place when wearing my eyeglasses, picking up these coffee mugs and complaining to someone about it on the phone but genuinely enjoying every single second.

I know I'm trying to replicate something. I just don't know if it's working.

Kingston, New York, 25 October

My period arrives the day before my doctor's appointment. While I knew it was impossible to have been pregnant, I still named the hypothetical baby L because it only felt right. Instead, the doctor tells me I'm just a lazy 237 pounds and blames my diet (granola in the morning, stress for lunch, soup for dinner) and exercise routine (walking to avoid paying for transportation). I tell her I don't smoke, just dream of kissing boys who do. Same goes for drugs. I drink socially, when I'm socially anxious.

'Are you sexually active?'

I pause.

She looks up from her iPad. 'Never?'

The doctor orders an ovarian sonogram where I'm vaginally penetrated with a wand, and a blood test where I'm poked until the phlebotomist finds a vein in my fat arm. Afterward, I get in the car and cry for the first time in a month.

Excerpt from *The Cut on Tuesdays*, Episode 'You Should Probably Quit,' 29 October

I started saying, 'I fucking hate New York. I hate my apartment, the colour on my walls. I hate dating here.' The longer I was here, the closer I looked at my life... Like, I find when I stay home from work sick and I spend a lot of time in my living room, I start to notice that it's dusty, and maybe underneath a chair it's kind of dirty. I feel like that about my whole life...The backyard at the house in London has this garden that has been pretty neglected for many, many, many years, and when I think about London, it's the thing that I think about. I think about that more than I think about the office or what my job's going to be. I think that is showing me how much I am craving a life that is about more than going to work all of the time.

The Maine, 'Hold Do You Feel?'

...How do you feel? / What's your condition? / You are alive but are you living? / Give me your voice and I'll give it a listen / Are you complete or is something missing?...

Excerpt from Haley Jakobson, November Survival Guide

*4. sad boy fall AND mercury rx is here. we're listening to our pop-punk & 2000's whiny-balled throwbacks, we're journaling + crying (you multitasker, you star!), but we're *not* texting our exes old pics saying 'ha just found this.'*

Park Slope, Brooklyn, 2 November

I attend Em's party dressed up as something no one understands. He is Weird Al, which is just as elusive. We flirt by the drinks table and he considerably blows Juul vape away from my face. Everything is going fine until his roommate's dog runs a circle around our legs, moving us closer. It's small and black, but nowhere as smart as L. I shortly after forget how to have a conversation as Em pretends he has to go to the bathroom.

Chelsea, New York, 6 November

I come across a book that makes me think of M, so I take letterhead from the supply shelf and one of the nice blue ballpoint pens and draft him a letter. I mention that I'll be back in London for January. I pause before signing the bottom, wanting to wish my best to the dogs but not knowing if there are, indeed, still dogs. I want to add a post-script asking if he still cares (and a parenthetical questioning if he ever really did). I write his name and address on a neon orange index card, attaching it with packaging tape. I print off a postage amount I'm only somewhat confident is correct and stick it in the appropriate location on the customs form before sealing everything up and burying it inside one of the clear postal cartons alongside contracts en route to Canada and manuscripts to Mexico.

Webster Hall, New York, 7 November

I go with my mother to see The Maine and stand on a balcony I haven't stood on since I was in high school with a drink that costs what I make in an hour at work. My mother asks what happened with M and in between giving her drunken pieces to the boring puzzle, I shout the lyrics to the songs that at one time helped me feel alive. I return to my dusty apartment and realize how little the structure feels like a home. I check on my succulent children sitting chilly in their pots, shifting them around as I water them delicately and say hello to each by name: Chester, Arlo, Winnie. A leaf falls from the one I am trying to hold up with chopsticks (the ones I bought with M when we made stir-fry). I break it open to see the moist insides, proving they're still alive.

Kips Bay, New York, 12 November

The urge to know whether or not the book arrived with M overwhelms me to the point where I eventually text him and ask, blaming it on the mailer and not on my shortcomings as a human. I use the facepalming emoji then turn my phone upside down. Hours later, he responds and tells me a package from the states arrived but he has yet to open it. He says he can respond in more detail later but I know he won't. I throw my phone on my bed and feel disappointments creeping out of crevices, staring at me with dopey, watery eyes and large hats, asking if I'm going to be okay.

Churchill's, New York, 16 November

I see K, a friend I haven't seen in a while, and show him my photo essay. He recognizes one of the models as a stripper he met on Tinder who stood him up on a movie date. I remember when it happened, how M went to meet him to make him feel better.

'Did you see him when you were in London?' K asks. He hears from M a couple of times a week, usually aggressive insertions into group chats about sport. 'Do you know if he is seeing anyone?'

I look into K's eyes and see a movie trailer: from when I first met M—when K teased me about the months of losing words whenever M entered a room because I inexplicably felt something unlike what I'd ever felt before—to this summer, when I told K I didn't want to continue caring for someone who acted like a cat, seemingly not caring whether I was there for him or not. I look away and admit I didn't ask. A small dog walks past our table but it isn't black and it isn't L.

'He is probably too busy to date,' K says. 'You know, trying to figure out his life.'

Chelsea, New York, 18 November

N has shaved his beard on the same day people have started to answer their emails, using the excuse that Mercury's coming out of retrograde. He's wearing a turtleneck lightly dusted with dandruff that I pretend is snow because sometimes lies help us get by. I pretend the stray hair is from dogs, too, little black spaniels.

Blink-182, 'What's My Age Again?'

...We started making out and she took off my pants / But then I turned on the TV / And that's about the time she walked away from me / Nobody likes you when you're twenty-three...

Morningside Heights, 19 November

I'm making notes for a novel about burnout culture when I'm supposed to be listening in class. There's a character named N with Em's aesthetic and cocaine problem. I love him in the way I have only ever considered loving M. I want to care about this character more than I care about the real versions, to finally be able to love something that cannot hurt me so much.

N's Tweets, Selected

- *This is a hard question to put my finger on. But, are there any articles on this stupid binary among men now between alpha and beta?*
- *Dry-cleaning clothes from H&M feels like a frivolous way to spend money. Still, here I am #notquite30*
- *What do you do with pain? Where do you put it?*
- *I'm 'All of my high school Facebook friends are going bald' years old.*
- *Sorry to bother you. Does existential sadness have an off button? I've been looking everywhere for a couple of days now and I just can't seem to find it anywhere.*
- *1. Maybe I drink too much? 2. Do I really look like I'm younger than 21? 3. I smoked heavily for five years with the hope that it would make me age... It didn't work.*
- *The harder I work, the more impressed I am by the fact that my parents had something so simple and domestic as a coffee table. I mean, can you even imagine the luxury?!*
- *Tbh, sometimes I look forward to making enemies more than I look forward to making friends.*
- *Being in a long distance relationship is the absolute worst.*

Kips Bay, New York, 20 November

My contacts are starting to itch and my vision is blurring. I haven't changed them since London. Beginning a new pair always feels like the beginning of something a bit too fresh.

Mystic, Connecticut, 23 November

I cross state lines and colour my hair red. I look in the mirror and feel more like myself though I look very little like anything I recognize. I post a photo to show the world: a warning. M isn't watching my Instagram stories anymore and it's bothering me, and the fact that something so ridiculous is bothering me is *really* bothering me. I dream about him. First, I wake myself up sticking, sweaty, and in need of relief. The next night, I am older, dying my hair because it's going grey rather than because I'm going through something, and we are in a house that feels

familiar but I know isn't ours. He touches the waist of a younger woman. She asks me if I want a photo with him. I force my eyes open. A heavy, all-consuming grief moves into my chest and refuses to get up as I lie on my back for hours, tracing invisible lines on the ceiling with my blurry eyes as the sun shows up, ready for another day.

Amtrak Train #241, Empire Service

At some point, I realised in order for the narrative to make sense, L should die. It doesn't matter whether or not she does in reality, but if I want some sort of structure—a point, I suppose, to the past few months—there must be a conclusion. Life doesn't really end until it ultimately ends, but stories have to, and that is what this is: a story, a story where she's a symbol for something else ending, too. So here is me preparing myself, though I have always been prepared to be told of her death. I always knew the situation would be out of my hands. What I haven't prepared for was to be strong enough to do any sort of actual ending of anything on my own.

Definition of winter, Merriam-Webster

\ win-tər \

- 1 : the season between autumn and spring comprising in the northern hemisphere, usually the months of December, January, and February
- 2 : the colder half of the year
- 3 : a period of inactivity or decay

Hurley, New York, 27 November

I am furiously filling out job applications and planning for finals and listening to the annoyingly blonde meteorologist forecast the first snowfall of the season when my phone buzzes from inside my jumper pocket. It's M. It's not important, really. But like the scarecrow on my front door lazily hanging next to my Santa Claus doormat, I have yet to decide how to respond.

Pomegranates & the Slow Decay on My Fertility #1-3

Janelle Bonfour-Mikes



In the photographic still life triptych, *Pomegranates & the Slow Decay of My Fertility #1-3* (2020), I have explored my own fertility and the pressure to choose motherhood. The pomegranate has a history of symbolising fertility and my choice to show the pomegranate in various states of its existence is representative of my struggle with the idea of motherhood. As a woman approaching middle age, I am constantly being told by popular culture that I am not valid unless I become a mother. I cannot and also do not want to choose motherhood.

Valentines 2018

Katherine Westbrook



I Still Think Of You In All My Mundane Moments

Erica Crawford

I've never been scuba diving, but I imagine that the clear blue is where you must be now, floating weightlessly in ways we never could. But I know you couldn't swim, do such things still matter? I think they don't. I think you can touch the buds from fireworks as they extinguish in the sky and that your little toes are painted pink from the sunsets. Your casket was pink. Not the light, natural pink seen in an orchid, but a hot pink that one might wear as a lipstick.

I find the passing of time to be cryptic. It pulls me farther from the last time I ran my hands through your curls, and laughed at your toothless grin. But it pulls me closer to a day where I stop thinking of you and no longer feel the hollow echo of this large empty room. The guilt of being okay is not something often talked about. It is the part of grief nobody understands until they have the brick of it sitting on their stomach. I do not know if I keep your obituary on my fridge to help with the guilt, or if it is because it makes you feel more here than you will ever be again. Maybe next time the broken magnet fails to keep it in place, I won't pick it back up.

Crochet

Taylor Kohn

FASTEN OFF WITHOUT LEAVING A KNOT

Usually at Christmas, our gift from Nan was a check. This freed Uncle Ron and Aunt Donna to track down personalized presents for the younger kids without worrying about us.

Two years ago we were handed large gift bags instead. I opened mine to find a handmade afghan like the ones that had always been draped over Nan's furniture. It was a yellow, white, and cream chevron pattern, heavy but thin. It smelled of Nan, no doubt having soaked in the perfumed air of the farmhouse for years. Someone murmured that these were the afghans Nan had made for each of us, meant to be gifts at our college graduations or weddings.

When I fought through the room to thank her, feeling like I might splinter from the unexpected honor of being given something so precious, I wasn't certain she recognized it. I used the blanket as little as possible to preserve the smell, but it faded by summer.

WEAVE IN THE ENDS AS YOU GO

Before I learned to crochet, it never occurred to me that the yarn could come unraveled. Once it did, I googled every method I could find to prevent it. I feverishly pulled the tails of the yarn through the back loop of each stitch, thinking how crushed I would be if Julia put this blanket in the wash a month from now and the whole thing started coming undone. She would put the remains away in storage, unwilling to throw it away but too polite to tell me it had fallen apart. I would notice the blanket's absence and assume she didn't care for it and feel embarrassed by the time and sweat I put into it. Perhaps the unspoken tension would strain our relationship until we drifted apart. Or maybe she would admit what happened and I would painstakingly repair it. Then we would both know we couldn't fully trust my handiwork again.

BURY THE TAILS

My younger brother's afghan is white and purple. It looks as nice as the yellow one but I wonder whether it was made with him in mind—if Nan had gotten to his name on her to-do list while she was still able

to hold a crochet hook, or if Ron and Donna had grabbed an unclaimed blanket from her stash in order to round out the Christmas presents. My brother showed my mom a long string of purple yarn trailing from a square in the center. My mother realized the end had never been woven in. She quickly folded the blanket back into the bag and promised him she'd fix it for him when we got home.

At dinner, we had Nan's famous buns, though Nan's baking had become dense and lumpy and a source of stress. Aunt Katherine had taken over making them about four Christmases earlier.

STASH BUSTING

Rachel asked if I wanted her old yarn stash or if she should throw it away. I said to send it to me, and now I have a tote full of half-balls of yarn. There is too much of it but there isn't enough of any of it for a project. I don't have anyone to give it away to. I stacked it in my storage closet on top of two other totes full of Christmas decorations I should have waited to buy until I was settled somewhere permanent, but they'd been on clearance at the thrift store and would have been gone the next time I went there.

I packed most of the decorations away a couple weeks ago, but it's April and the colored lights are still strung around the living room. I'm starting to feel like I should take them down but my roommate would ask why.

TEST SWATCH

Shake last year's diary and receipt paper falls out. Eight-hour shifts at the cash register yielded drawings and sketches of budgets and story fragments and lists. I used to pull a fistful of them out of the shallow pockets of my work pants at the end of every day, tossing them on my desk like grain for chickens before staggering off and collapsing. They'd wait there for me to sort through, piling up until I got around to deciding which were trash and which needed to be saved. I put off making the decision to toss or treasure and my rotating fan blew them off the desk and made them collect behind my bookshelf. Only when I packed the apartment did I finally tuck several into the pages of my journal.

MAGIC LOOP

Perhaps I will smother in the paystubs I am too scared to throw out for fear I will need them. Maybe you will find me buried in the gas station receipts I could not lose in case I needed to prove an alibi. Moving will take twice as long because I cannot give up any of my books—not those

either, not the ones I never touch, because my parents had a bookshelf full of books they had no use for, and how else would I have found those books? No, I'm not having kids. Why?

CONSISTENT TENSION

I am soft because the seasons are changing. I go for a walk and people are mowing their lawns. I hear power washers and I try to remain composed but I must come to a stop in front of someone's house. I take a picture of their flowering tree and realize they are standing on their porch. I walk away, heart pounding.

DOUBLE CROCHET IN CLUSTERS OF THREE

Nan was sharp on the phone and it made me feel ashamed. I was used to calling and explaining who I was and I was used to letting her let me off the phone after ten minutes because it seemed about all she could take. I mustered up the nerve to call a few months ago and got her voicemail. I hadn't tried since. But today she was not confused and she talked for half an hour and I heard her say "I haven't heard from you in a long, long time," with two *longs*. After we hung up I sat back down to work and found myself restless, clicking without completing any tasks. A long, long time. A long, long time.

CHAIN THREE. CHAIN FOUR. CHAIN FIVE.

I walk under the flowering trees and catch the scent and know I can't cram it in a notebook or leave it in a tote in the closet. It's almost unbearable when I have learned to second-guess the change of seasons, to wake up from dreams in which gravity itself is wisping off the planet, leaking into space, and I think well at least that won't happen, but I've thought that about other things.

I take a picture of the flowering tree. It's habit. The pictures don't preserve the smell, the rustle, the feeling of being surrounded by short-lived buds. I don't go back and look at them. I rarely post them. I could have taken this picture last year or the year before, and I did, my phone chokes with them. But next year I might not, so I take the picture and I take a picture of the next tree and what else can I do—

TURNING CHAIN

I sit under a tree and watch the light get lower and warmer, painting the headstones. Windchimes play from the porch of the house nearby. They have a plastic playset with a slide and a little hideout for their kids. A dog barks. The person closest to me is named Elizabeth and she passed

away in 1962. She was ninety-five. I wonder how many times she came here before then. Did she come to visit people she knew? Did she come by herself? Did she sit under one of these trees, the lone living woman in this outlot, and feel surrounded by—*not* life—lives?

I will not always have the privilege of relating to death with this amount of peace.

Cut the Cord

Catherine Falco



Raspberry Lips

Moni Brar

the tips of the raspberry shoots
tickle the heavy clouds, teasingly slung low.

the smell of rain ripples through slate
air, sends panic to hands that pick faster.

we choose the reddest ones with stems
still attached. use them as applicators

for our pretend lipstick of raspberry juice.
ruby lips and giggles. we pose and pout,

imagine we're someone else somewhere else,
not the children of migrant workers.

the clouds swing lower. our hands pick faster
to fill ice cream pails tied around thin waists

with rags from our mother's cotton *kameez*. the
clouds let loose. the smell of wet earth rises,

an ancient comfort. thirsty worms push
their way skyward, as rain trails goosebumps

down our brown arms. in the leaves and
damp prickle, crocheted spider webs sag

with wet diamonds and caterpillars inch
to find cover, while we pick on.

Outside of Dreams

Besjana Kryeziu



featuring work by:

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