

redcedar
REVIEW

Volume 61

The *Red Cedar Review* is an annual literary magazine published in the spring by Michigan State University undergraduates with support from the College of Arts and Letters, the Department of English, and the Creative Writing Program.

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Cover image by Anthony Nzekwu and cover design by Brooke Holt.



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MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Red Cedar Review

Volume 61 Staff

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Editors' Note

Spring Editorial Team

Let's be blunt: it's bleak out there. When accepting work for the 61st issue of the Red Cedar Review, it became apparent to the editorial team that the pieces selected for the issue were representative of what we, as people, are thinking about in this current time. We often found ourselves discussing the world during the selection process. As a team, we sought solace from the reality of our world, as well as work directly addressing the state of it. In an increasingly profit-driven and power-hungry society, writers and artists remain steadfast in our desire to create. We stand against false corporate ideas of art and the pressure of political propaganda.

This issue was created in a time in which empathy is discouraged and even condemned as a weakness. The divide between people grows larger every day, encouraged through the news cycle and the current administration. We are threatened to be silenced, to lose our right to the freedom of speech, yet we still persist in our work. Each and every contributor in the Red Cedar Review has taken it upon themselves to exercise their voice; we are honored they entrusted us with it.

Beyond the lack of empathy, we continue to witness the alarmingly quick rise of Generative AI. With its integration into classrooms, search engines, and especially the cultural consciousness, it is easy to feel discouraged. AI is fundamentally conservative. Pattern recognition and recreation are not true demonstrations of art. AI cannot take leaps in logic or build upon

an idea. Only people, writers, and artists are able to truly innovate and create, and nowhere is that more apparent than with the talented writers and artists in our issue. We at the Red Cedar Review believe it is of the utmost importance that literary magazines continue to be shared and read. Literary magazines have always been about sharing human stories, experiences, and art. They act as a starting point for community, conversation, and creativity. It is through community that we are able to find strength.

Our team is incredibly grateful that we are able to continue our magazine. We would like to thank every contribution, every submission, and every reader. It is through these interactions that we are able to exist. We are incredibly honored to be trusted with all of the work submitted to us. Most of all, our editorial team would like to give a shout-out to our beloved Dr. Tim Conrad for mentoring us and assisting us on our journey in the completion of the 61st issue of the Red Cedar Review!

We hope after reading this edition, you find something to take with you, that you find inspiration to keep reading and creating amid the chaos, and that you never let your voice be silenced.

Tabula Rasa

Omar Zefier

Effervescent infant, you're lying
on your back, smiling a toothless
grin—you're the human
potato: helpless, weak, born rock-bottom,
could only grow and grow old; you're
playful soil on the cheek,
a strange being known for soiling the
sheets, using one's face
to plant down their feet, with
mysterious grit found beneath
raw pinky nails one could scarcely see;
I fill my arms with the curious loaf of your life—
milktooth missing, white tongue present—
and I pat your back softly, because my
paranoid mind registers movement
as asphyxiation; you've no understanding of
conception, school, television, food, your
foolmother in prison

in my arms, you're not a baby
but a timeline yet to unfold: my new nephew

I hold you until I'm uncomfortable,
and when I leave you to my mother,
I feel that, in carrying you, something
was taken away from me

A Mundane Road in Yogya

Lara Maun



Another Dead Grandmother Poem

Isa Hoofnagle

Death is wincing as a reedy gas station attendant
puts her cigarette out on the wall.

I am post-weepy, thinned out. I am leaning
on the speed limit sign stuck haphazardly
in the gray grassy median between the 7/11
and the Virginia Suburbia where my father grew up.

It's funeral season. The air smells like brown leaves
and pumpkin projects, like dying. Death buys a pack
of gum from a teenager with knobby knees; She buys
a ginger ale and cracks it open.

Virginia is for lovers, and I'm full of the heavy kind.
The streetlamps buzz to life, light up the roadkill
and my mosquito-bitten arms and
Death's crooked halo thingy.

The world is so ugly, so often—
The weeds are dead, the trees are dead,
and bodies that once were full of blood and life
and other miscellaneous stuff are now ash
for beach waves and backs of closets.

A bird slams into the windshield of a pickup truck
as it speeds past: feathers, bones, blood, rubber, smoke.
Death catches the poor thing in a spectral hand.
sets down her soda and strokes its tiny, crushed-up head.

I have never been more of a passenger in my life,
sitting on this curb, with the crinkled receipt paper
and the petering wobble of my heart under my sternum.
I have never emptied my pitcher of grief.

Backseat of the car, Death is humming. Sobbing sister,
tetchy cousins. Brick house wakes, feeling whatever
is the opposite of hope. My arms shake. Above my head,
a light flicks from yellow to red.

O' Death, O' funeral procession, drop me in the middle
of the road, under the winking stoplights. Crack me open.
Leave me bleeding by the 7/11,
in Portsmouth, in heaven.

The Summer My Stove Knobs Were Stolen

Emma Greathead

I awoke on the cold basement floor, the scent of Tide laundry detergent and mildew thick in my nostrils. It was the summer of 2021, and the morning sun fought to reach me through the thick egress windows, though it wasn't enough to wake me. That had been the front door, loud and croaky enough to find me from down in the basement. Through brain fog and hangover nausea pounding against my skull, I still processed the croak, awaiting the call of my name.

And there it was. The voice of my dad.

For someone inherently soft spoken, he sounded angry, loud. I'd expected no less, but still my heart hammered with anxiety. I tried for a response, though my throat felt too raw—too scratchy and raspy—like the rusty front door. I must've been shouting the night prior, though I hardly remembered. The last thing I recalled, in vivid detail, was sitting cross-legged on my bedroom floor with a girl—a girl who promised to tell my future through her gift of tarot reading. A girl who kissed me like there would be no tomorrow.

And now, in the midst of said *tomorrow*, I was scrambling to recall the mental checklist I'd implanted during my drunken haze.

The Screen door— broken, lying flat on the porch. I'd make up a lie, tell my parents I'd been clumsy and fell into it.

The liquor bottles— dumped and drained down the toilet. All that remained was hidden in a garbage bag, stuffed somewhere in my bedroom closet.

The expensive throw pillows from the living room couch— the ones my mom had spent roughly sixty dollars on at Home Goods—were beneath my bed, hiding while they awaited a deep soak in the bathtub, something to soften the hardening bile from some stranger's throat.

The stove knobs—

Shit. The stove knobs.

My dad called for me again, and this time, instead of responding, I forced my legs from the pile of wood shavings and made my way up the steps. My legs felt like Jello if it were left on a speaker.

The kitchen smelled of bleach, lavender disinfectant, and my own deep-seated guilt, while my parents— the beloved individuals who had raised me— glared at me like I was a suspect in a heinous crime. The scene of said *crime*, however, was spotless— too spotless. Freshly mopped floorboards, a sink so sparkly you could see your own reflection, an empty trash can, and the stove...

A stove missing four stove knobs.

They hadn't yet noticed the missing knobs, but still, they wanted to know what happened while they were gone— how the screen door had been ripped from the hinges, why the neighbors had called in a noise complaint only six hours prior, why the kitchen was clean when I never— and I mean *never*— cleaned up after myself when cooking. I lied like it was second nature.

I'm clumsy, I told them. I fell through the screen door! I

was watching a movie at a ridiculous volume, and the neighbors heard! No, I don't know how expensive those Home Goods pillows were! Matter of fact, I don't think we ever owned Home Goods throw pillows. You must be misremembering!

My dad continued to scour the backyard while I remained in the kitchen, staring at the stove, begging for my mom to not notice— because what idiot attends a house party, and doesn't steal the money, or the television, or the \$60 throw pillows, but the stove knobs?

Looking into my mom's ravenous eyes, I thought of something she'd told me, only a few days prior. It happened after she'd caught me smoking marijuana in my bedroom, crouched beneath the bedside window.

Don't let your father know about this, she'd told me. He still sees you as his little girl.

And what would that little girl think now, after knowing she'd invited dozens of strangers into her home, allowing them to disrespect the place in which countless memories were made?

The stove, where she'd watched her dad sauté pre-cut ham cubes before tossing them with spaghetti sauce, calling the meal “hamaghetti,”— and if that doesn't explain who my dad is as a person, I don't know what does.

The stove, where her mom taught her to cook chicken, explaining the dangers of cross-contamination and salmonella— which ultimately, turned her into a vegan, though it's the thought that counts?

What would that little girl think?

My dad returned inside, a crumbled blackberry White Claw between his calloused fingers.

“What is this?” he asked, though it wasn’t a question, but an accusation. I’d never seen him so disappointed, and it reminded me, that here—now, at age seventeen, I was no longer his little girl. His eyes moved to the vacant space where stove knobs once stood, and with that, my life flashed before my eyes.

I saw visions of him crawling on the trampoline with me as a child, where we’d cry laughing because he stretched the springs so taut. I saw visions of him comforting me through my first breakup, where he thought I’d been crying over a boy, and not a girl— but still, it wouldn’t have mattered. Visions of him cooking “hamaggetti,” even though I’d hated it as a child.

I could have easily taken accountability and told him the truth—*Mom, Dad, I threw a party while you were out of town. I allowed people to disrespect our house, and I disrespected your trust.*

Instead, I looked my dad in the eyes and spoke a truth, but not the truth. “Mom, Dad, I like girls.”

It was my first time coming out.

And for the first time in all of my life, my dad went silent. My dad, the most quick-witted man in my life, didn’t know what to say. That silence stretched, long and painful, until I considered he’d say nothing at all, until:

“Okay,” he said softly, like he was unsure of himself.

Okay.

Okay, because surely hearing such a confession explains what happened to the stove knobs, and the pillows, and the door.

Okay, because—

“But where are the stove knobs?” he continued. And suddenly, telling him the truth felt a lot easier.

The Skin of Water

Athena Serbourne

Somehow, I became addicted
to gliding my hands over
the skin of water, to waist-deep worship,
bouncing palms
atop it like a waterbed. I soothe
when it hugs my burning middle, holds
my hand. Droplets, gem-like, adorn unruly
hair, gather opalescent moon and gift
all of it to me without condition.

Where all the waterbeds of my childhood
were prone to burst and disperse
under any amount of pressure,
this wild water's skin that winks
at every weeping willow stroke it is given,
that reflects stars like submerged fireflies,

can hold the weight of my
touch,

the movement of my
curiosity,

and the apparent burden of my
quintessence.

When I breathe,

move,

expand,

dream,

it spills a nourishment that doesn't leave
legacies of mold, embraces, paints its domain
luscious emerald instead of drowning
family homes.

Couch Baby

Muna Agwa

We point our fat American fingers
through the glassless window
at the helpless mound of flesh
on a tattered cushion.
We are not told
he is ours,
lying prone
in the swollen orange sun,
trying
to lift his head, too big
for his body. *Couch baby*,
we call him affectionately,
as if he isn't dying,
as if he isn't flesh and blood,
wearing our grandfather's pale limbs.
In the Christmas harmuttan,
we go
and come back.
We laugh in shock—
He's still there!
Unmoved, untouched,
Couch baby,
with the thin fingers
balled into fists.
Couch baby,

with the dark circular eyes,
eyes wide with a hunger
I mistook for wonder.
Couch baby, please
forgive us
and our American stupidity.
Tell me about the bag they put you in,
and the warm tiles of the hospital floor,
and the doctor who pronounced you dead.
Tell me about your first intake of breath,
cool and sharp, cratering the plastic,
and the way the room lysed open.
Tell me about fighting your way into being,
however momentarily.
Tell me about that thing in a body
we all agree upon.
Tell me about your mother's limp arm
and about the needles,
and the scary men at night.
Tell me about our grandfather's gravestone
and the thick vines
and the dead grass.
Tell me about that couch in the yard
by the mango tree out front,
and the setting sun.

Nómbrame

Sophia Sarkies



Man's Best Friend

Ryan Offermann

I wake up to voices shouting. Subconsciously, my hand dives off the side of the bed, bumping against my nightstand before I meet the soft fur of Marlin's head. Immediately, my heartbeat slows, and I groan into the pillow, rolling to face him. Alert, ears perked; he sits at my bedside, dark eyes on the door like a silent sentinel while I sleep.

"Good boy," I murmur, sitting up. The clock on the bedside table reads 5:23 a.m., much too early to be woken up, but when another round of Cooper's shouts resonates through the house, I know why.

"I wanna go!" My eight-year-old yells. "Take me with you!"

I can hear the low grumble of my husband's response, though not the words themselves. Assured that there is no way I will be able to return to sleep, I slip out of bed, feeling my frustration build with every step, as I swing open the door and march toward the kitchen. Marlin doesn't follow me, staying in place. When I round the corner, I see Cole in the living room, packing a duffel bag as Cooper stands next to him, arms crossed. On the couch next to the duffel lay Ruger and Remington; their sleek bodies taugth with lean muscles, eyes sharp as they watch the boys.

"What in God's name are the two of you hollering about this early?!" I shout. I might have been raised a lady, but I've got the same pair of lungs as my mother, and I darn sure know how

to use them. Unfortunately, my eight-year-old does as well.

“Now you’ve done it,” Cole tells our son, before he gives me a sheepish smile. “Hi, baby.”

“Don’t try to ‘Hi baby’ me,” I prop my hands on my hips, as they both cringe. “Why in the world are you yelling before it’s even five-thirty in the morning?” I point at Cooper, who is actively trying to become one with the couch. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I’m sorry, Mama.”

“For?”

“For waking you up.”

“And?”

“A-and for yelling.”

I can feel my annoyance dissipating, no matter how much I try to hold onto it. “Come here.” He huffs when I pull him into a hug but lets me hold him. He’s at that age where he thinks it’s not cool to hug your mom anymore, which, in my completely unbiased opinion, is ridiculous. He’s getting tall, too; his head is nearly at my shoulders now.

“What’s going on?”

“Daddy won’t let me go with him,” Cooper mumbles against my shoulder. I let out a sigh, feeling a headache beginning to bloom behind my eyes.

“That’s because Daddy is going with some of his friends on a boys’ trip. You’re too young to be playing with Ru and Remmy anyway.”

Cole zips up his last bag, turning to us, “He’s got to learn sometime, Mel, and it might as well be now. I’ve taken him hunting before. Plus, he should know how to defend himself.”

Cooper perks up, and Cole raises his hands in defeat when I narrow my eyes. *Way to make me the bad guy.* We've had this talk before, and I say he's too young to be playing with things he doesn't understand.

"It's not happening," I reiterate.

Determined, Cooper reaches a hand out toward Ru, who looks at him with dark eyes. "But Mama, I know how to handle them, and Dad takes me out all the time, I'm old enough to--"

"Cooper!" I snap. He rips his hand away. "The answer is *no*."

My tone leaves no room for argument, and his shoulders tighten. I can tell he wants to argue further, but he's wise enough to keep his mouth shut. "Get to bed. Thanks to your ruckus, we're all awake, and I have to be up in less than two hours to take you to school. Now say goodbye to your father and get some sleep. You'll see him again on Monday."

Cooper mumbles a dejected farewell before he stalks back down the hallway towards his room. My husband wraps his arms around me, sighing.

"You'll be safe, right?" I ask.

"Of course, Mel, we'll be back before you know it." He presses a kiss into my hair. "You won't even miss us at all."

I laugh into his chest before pulling away. He turns to grab his duffel, slinging it over his shoulder.

"You have Marlin?" He confirms. I nod. "Good, take him with you when you go out."

"Of course," I parrot. I know better than to go anywhere without protection. Cole whistles, and Ru and Remmy leap down from the couch, rushing to their master's side. He stalks

out the door while I lean against the frame, watching him.

“Love you,” he calls when he gets to his truck. It roars to life, idling in the driveway.

“I love you too.”

There’s no point trying to go back to sleep, so I clean around the house and pack Cooper’s lunch until the sun comes up. Of course, he snoozes his alarm about ten times before I march into his room and tell him that if he isn’t up in the next five minutes, I’m coming in there and dragging him out of bed. That finally gets him going. I have no idea how Denise does it with four little rascals running around.

We finally get on the road, and I load Cooper into the backseat before calling for Marlin. Just the sight of his soft grey coat, his body packed with muscle, and ears sharp as he curls onto the floorboard, puts me at ease. I shut the door and start driving as Cooper plays with his iPad in the back. I turn the music up, letting Shania Twain drown out the gunfire of whatever game he’s playing.

On the drive, we passed the post office on the corner. I went there once, years ago, when I was at the end of my third trimester. I turn onto the main road, thinking back to that day. Cole barely let me leave the house at all during those last couple of months, not that I could do much anyway, and insisted I bring Marlin and Remmy with me everywhere I went. I didn’t protest the extra protection. I was feeling vulnerable, overwhelmed with hormones, and I liked the constant reassuring presence of them. The post office was just down the road, and I needed to get out of the house, so I went to send some packages. There was a woman there picking something up from her P.O. box when

I walked in, and at first she didn't seem to notice the dogs. However, when she saw them walking on either side of me, she became hysterical, screaming that she couldn't believe I had brought them in there, and how dare I threaten her life? What kind of paranoid monster was I to have them with me—hadn't I seen the news? Didn't I know how dangerous they were, that they could kill people? The situation escalated no matter how much I tried to calm her down, and it angered me too. Her ignorance and judgment, her blatant disregard for my rights. I whistled, and Remmy barked at her, not even trying to attack, just showing her what could happen, and the post office attendant, who had been cowering behind the counter, threatened to call the police.

I left, and when I finally got home, I was furious. Cole was ready to march down there with Ru and show them what a real threat was, but my water ended up breaking, and we rushed to the hospital instead. In hindsight, I'm glad, because that insane woman would have probably run to the nearest news station, blubbering about how she had nearly been assaulted and how animal attacks were out of control in this country and needed to be legislated. When I told Denise at church the next day, she laughed. "Liberalists and their fucking nonsense."

Unfortunately, the pastor was walking by at that exact moment, and I don't think he thought it was a Godly message. To this day, Denise still swears he has it out for her. I told her pastors aren't allowed to hold grudges, but I think she might be right. We had a good laugh, though, joking about his scandalized face and that stupid woman. I haven't been back to the post office since.

I turn into the entrance for Cooper's school, reaching

behind me to tap his leg. The drop-off line is always long, but it seems even more congested than usual; the cars all bunched around some obstruction. I try to see what's taking so long, but there's no clear view.

"Okay, baby," I tell Coop, grabbing his lunchbox from the front seat and handing it to him as he slips on his backpack. "I love you, have a great day at school. I'll be back to pick you up this afternoon, okay, Hun?" He nods, hopping out and slamming the door. I watch him until he reaches the front doors and disappears, before pulling into a teacher's parking spot and reversing to go back out the way I came.

As I drive away, stroking Marlin's head absently, I see a throng of bodies all clumped together. People are chanting in front of the doors, holding posters. I make out one that says, "*Leashes Save Lives*" and another that reads "*We NEED canine control!!*" All around the protest, cars are stopped, blocking the drive.

"What in God's name..." I pull over, rolling down my window. There's a woman right next to my car holding a sign that reads: CANINES KILL.

"What do y'all think you're doing? This is a *school* for Christ's sake!!" I yell over the chants.

"Exactly," she calls back, "This is where we need it the most! How many school attacks have we had in the last year? We need legislation!"

"What we *need* is our rights to be protected from folks like you. Go take your propaganda somewhere else, because nobody in this town wants to listen to it." I roll my window up before she can reply, driving off. I'm still agitated several minutes later when

Denise calls me.

“Hey girl!”

“Mornin,” I respond. “You just drop off the twins?” Her twin sons are in the same grade as Cooper. She has another in middle school, and the youngest is still in kindergarten. All of our kids have grown up together.

“Yes, Ma’am. Lord, do those boys drive me crazy. I swear, this morning, they wouldn’t get out of bed if Christ himself returned and ordained it. They’ve got me at my wit’s end. Although I suppose it’s to be expected, Ben kept the twins up late last night, helping him pack everything for the trip and prep the dogs, so there wasn’t much rest to be had. Speaking of, did Cole get out all right this mornin’?”

“He left before traffic hit, but Cooper woke me up at the crack of dawn, hollering about not getting to go, and then slept through his alarm. It was all I could do to get him here on time.”

“Aww, Hun, did you get any sleep at all?”

“Not much, couldn’t go back to bed again– you know how it is. Hey, did you see the riot happening outside the school this morning?”

“That circus?” Denise groans. “Bunch of ignorant idiots who just want someone to listen to their ill-begotten ideas. I hope someone breaks it up. Protesting in front of a school is just shameful, interrupting children trying to learn and ruining everyone’s morning. They’ll tuck tail soon enough; they’re just fired up because of the news lately.”

“What news?”

“There was an attack at a high school south of here, some sicko, out of his mind on God knows what, walked in with a

dog, and it attacked a bunch of teachers. Absolutely terrible, but now the radicals are all using it as fuel. Which is ridiculous; if anything, we ought to stay protected now more than ever. The world's full of crazy people these days, I swear. Personally, I take Taurus with me everywhere I go."

"Marlin comes with me everywhere, too," I add. I don't know why I said it. My blinker clicks steadily as I turn off the highway, taking the long way, so I don't have to drive past the post office again.

"Exactly. Some of the ladies at Church and I are organizing a bake sale to raise funds for the high school. We're all praying for them. You should join. You know everyone adores your blueberry muffins."

"Yeah, maybe I will. I'll make some tomorrow if I get the time."

"I'm sure you must be at your wit's end. Nothing takes it out of me more than a bad night of sleep. Why don't you drop Cooper off here when the boys are done with school and have a night to yourself?"

I hesitate. "Are you sure? Having all the boys at once can be a lot, and you must be tired too, it's really fin—"

"Melanie, when was the last time you were home alone?" I try to think back, but nothing comes to mind.

"Wonderful, then it's settled." She chirps, "Every mother needs a night off sometimes, even you. Just drop the boys off at mine when you pick up Coop, and go enjoy yourself!"

I can't help smiling. "Okay, okay, you're right."

"I'm always right." She replies smugly. "I'll see you later."

When I finally pick Cooper up later, I'm exhausted. I

ran errands for most of the day until I realized it was nearly 4:00. Thankfully, the crowd from earlier is gone when I pull up. I can hear Marlin's soft snores coming from the floorboard beside me as the kids load up in the back, diving into the bag of organic snacks I brought.

The drive to Denise's takes me nearly half an hour, the only downside to our close friendship. Unlike Cole and me, she and Ben opted to live almost completely remote, preferring the privacy that twenty acres provided them. A protection from the prying eyes of neighbors and the government. Gradually, Denise's house comes into view, an old cabin-style home with log walls and a screened-in porch. The house itself has stood there since the seventies and used to be owned by a crotchety old man who collected hounds as a hobby. The front door opens as I pull up, and Denise steps out, grinning at me. She's wearing a pair of blue jeans and a t-shirt, her hands sheathed in red oven mitts.

"Come on in, Darlin', I got cookies in the oven I'm about to take out!"

The boys jump out of the van and chase each other up the porch, disappearing through the door. I grab everyone's backpacks and Cooper's night bag before trudging up after them. The warm smell of chocolate chip cookies surrounds me as I walk in, and I sigh contentedly.

"There better be one of those saved for me."

Denise laughs. "Well, of course, Hun, but you might have to fight the boys for them. Daniel's been begging me to make him a batch all week. I tripled the recipe, but with their appetites, I'm still not sure it's enough."

"Tell me about it," I say, "Cole and Cooper are eating me

out of house and home. I can't even *imagine* what it'll be like when he's older."

"And just think, I've got four of them!" She slaps the oven mitts on the counter. "Keeps me busy, that's for sure. So," Denise leans over the counter, winking suggestively. "Got any plans for the night?"

"Does going to bed before eight count?" I laugh, collapsing onto one of the bar chairs.

"Absolutely not." Denise rolls her eyes to the ceiling. "Lord, what did I do to deserve such a boring best friend?"

I grab the nearest object, a roll of paper towels, and throw it at her. "All right, well, what do you suggest?"

"I suggest you take a tub of cookies home, get disgustingly drunk off a bottle of wine, and sext Cole."

"Denise!!"

"Hey, you asked, Hun."

I leaned back in my chair, sighing. "That does sound nice. The *wine part*, specifically. You're sure you'll be okay with the boys tonight?"

"We'll be fine, quit worrying. I'll drop them off at school in the morning. Now grab some cookies and get goin'!"

On my way out, I hug Cooper, which makes him whine since his friends are watching. "I love you, baby," I say, pressing a kiss to his head. "Have fun tonight, I'll see you tomorrow." He hugs me back before wiggling out of my arms and taking off again. I watch them play in the yard through my rearview mirror as I drive away.

It's nearly 9:00 before I wake up the next morning. I can't remember the last time I got so much sleep. Sunlight peeks in

through the gaps in the curtain, speckling over Marlin's fur from where he sleeps beside me. I go to check my notifications, but when I tap the screen, my phone remains black, and I realize I must have forgotten to charge it last night. I plug it in, just in case Denise or Cole calls me, before sliding out of bed.

The house is dark and silent as I pad barefoot into the kitchen, grabbing a mug from the cupboard. I put a pot on, the only sound being the soft gurgle of the coffee maker brewing. As chaotic as a household of boys is, it feels wrong to have it so quiet, the stillness unfamiliar and unsettling. Absently, I grab the remote to the TV, needing a little background noise. The news pops up automatically, our local anchor, Butch Matthews, reading today's report. I'm not paying attention as I pour a cup of coffee until I hear the name of Cooper's school.

"...has suffered a horrible loss, and my thoughts and prayers go out to all of the families who are suffering today." I snatch the remote, turning the volume up. "It has been confirmed that around 8:02 this morning, a canine that appears to have been smuggled in by a child was let loose within the school and attacked a classroom. At least two children were killed, and six more were injured. Local authorities are actively tracking the person responsible for this devastating tragedy, and we will provide more information as soon as it becomes available. Again, my heart goes out to all of the families and children who were affected--"

I shout for Marlin, my own voice sounding distorted and strange. My heartbeat thunders in my ears as I grab my keys. Butch Matthews is still talking when the door slams shut behind me.

Police cars are swarming when I careen into the parking lot, reporters and yellow tape covering the premises. There are two ambulances in the front, and I see a gurney rushing toward the doors. I look just long enough to see straight blond hair before I rip my gaze away. *It's not him*, I repeat to myself, over and over. *You're just overreacting, and this is all a horrible mistake. Everything is going to be okay.*

I leave my car running, Marlin at my heels as I bolt toward the doors. Everything feels too loud: the sirens, the shouts of parents and officers, reporters going live on the sidewalk. I push through the crowd of people toward the groups of children huddled out front. My mind is spinning so fast I feel like I'm about to collapse, but I need to find Cooper. Everything will be okay if I can find him. I'm scanning every face, looking for those familiar curls and a blue backpack. The longer I search, the more my panic grows.

"Cooper?" I shout. "Cooper!!" *Just answer me, please, just answer me.* I abandon my search, grabbing the nearest police officer.

"Please, my son... I need to know where he is." I'm gasping, and there's so much noise in my head I barely hear her when the officer asks me what his name is. "Cooper Smith," I respond. Her face goes pale, and she reaches out a hand for me. Marlin growls, hackles rising, and for the first time, she seems to notice that he's there. "Jesus! You can't have that here! Why don't we go sit down—"

"No," I say, stepping back, "no, I don't want to sit down. I want to know where my son is."

"Ma'am—"

“He’s eight, in Mrs. Gardner’s class, and he’s got brown c-curly hair, and he’s tall, he’s tall for his age...” There doesn’t seem to be enough air, and I sink my hand into Marlin’s coat, needing something to hold onto. *Oh God, not my boy, not mine...*

“Ma’am, please.” Her eyes are glossy, and she reaches out for me again, before she looks at Marlin and thinks better of it. “Why don’t we just sit over here, and you can bring your dog with you, let’s just sit away from all this.”

“I need you to find my son. WHERE IS MY SON?!”

The officer covers her mouth and looks away, back towards the school, where parents are still calling for their kids. There’s a mother not too far from us who runs to meet her child, sobbing as she falls to the concrete and crushes him into her. When she turns her head, I recognize her. It’s the woman from the protest. By her feet, lying half in the gutter, is a crumpled sign, the paper stained and trampled, but I can still make out the painted words: *CANINES KILL*.

“Ma’am, I’m so sorry... but they already found him.”

If A Bear Should Happen

Ramsey Jester

If a bear should happen upon my camp, we would surely fight.
Fits of fist and teeth, snarl and claw, growl and scream. Then
we'd both apologize,

each embarrassed. I would give the bear a beer
and we would drink, and he'd offer to teach me how to fish.
We'd talk about the lakes and streams, the mountains

and their sunsets. I'd describe for him all the best winters
he's missed. How snowfall in a white birch forest
is so slow and silent and bright. I'd say that
seeing it

seeing it;
a blind sky
shedding skin

from sunburn, past
bleached bones
to pale earth—

We'd've had some whisky too.
More logs on the fire, embers drift,
Shadows play about the veil of night.

Eventually, I'd ask him if he'd read any Plato,
Plainly he'd return a question of how familiar I am
with the thoughts of the many great bear

philosophers. Fair enough. Then
he'd tell me of the burnt lands. The loved ones lost.
The refugee this made of him. I'd be sincere in my condolences

and earnest as I detailed all of the precautions I take,
excessively stating my understanding
of the importance of fire safety. I'd tell him, I think

what happened to the bears is terrible. He'd tell me to relax.
I'd ask if he wanted another beer, I'd get two more beers.
Then I'd ask him if he'd ever heard of Smokey the Bear,

with a sly smile, he'd tell me that Smokey
is his great-uncle, on his mother's side.
For real? I'd ask.

He'd offer an assuring nod and add that Smokey isn't his real name,
that it's a
what's the word? It's a

Pseudonym? Yes! That's it,
Smokey Bear is just his pseudonym.
Amazed by this, I'd say that it's a small world.

He'd echo. Then we'd just sit. When it was time to say goodnight,
I'd tell him that if he's ever in the city, he should stop by and say hi.
The bear would then explain,

of course,
that if he were ever in the city,
the people there would kill him.

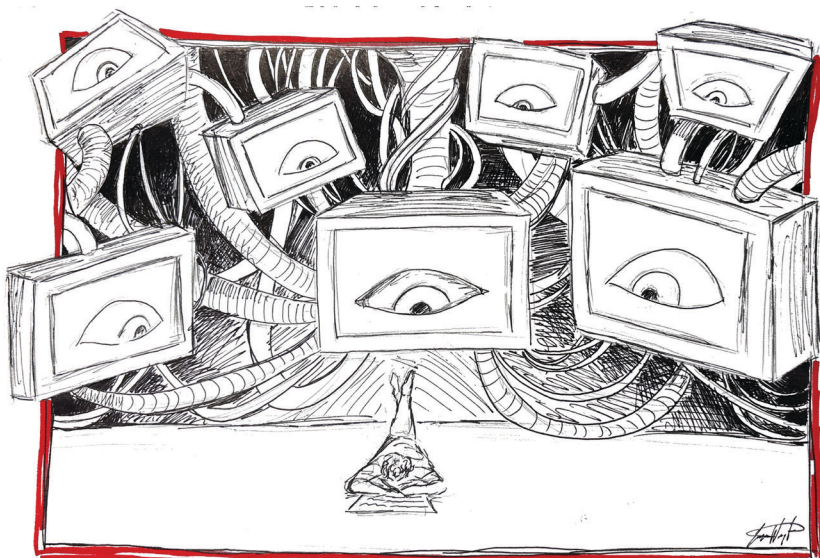
Picture

Meaghan Branham

Last night there were
Vegan birthday cakes
And shared joints
And jazz improv numbers
On the upright bass in the living room.
There were quiet readings among the women
About the intricacies of the female orgasm,
While the men played folk music
Into a microphone.
There were glances across living rooms
And the kitchen conversations.
There were raindrops on the roof
And one quick cigarette on the porch.
There were so many love languages
I lost count.
But I know the cake was one,
The glances another,
I think maybe even the rain
Was there to declare
Its affection for us.

Under Pressure

Lynn Wright



Body Horror

Lucas Lee

Body Horror | *noun*

A subgenre or presentation of horror that mainly depicts the destruction, transformation, or grotesquerie of the human body.

Four weeks ago in the dining hall, I had a friend ask me why I wasn't bigger if I went to the gym so often.

Actually, her exact words were slightly different. "*If you go to the gym so much, why aren't you bigger?*"

I'm glad our conversation is insulated by rows of long, desolate wooden tables. Only the saltshakers and napkins could have overheard us, and I prefer it that way. This isn't something I talk about.

I open my mouth to respond, but the jumble of things I want to say congest into something too haphazard to pass through my airway. I end up saying nothing, my mouth hanging open like a dumb fish. Will, a friend from running club, notices and jumps in on my behalf, some noble attempt to defend my dignity. I appreciate that more than he knows. I should probably tell him that at some point. I break eye contact and check my watch. A cursory glance reads somewhere past 8:00 p.m.

I have a bad habit of staying in the dining hall for too long, especially if I'm talking with friends. But after what's been said, I feel ready to leave. I know she didn't mean anything by her question; it was just supposed to be friendly instigation – and even though she always does it, later that night I'm still listening

to The Weekend's "House of Balloons / Glass Table Girls" as I think about all the things I could've said.

137.9

When I was a kid, long before I shared my first phone with my brother, my family had a metallic gray radio, a relic from the not-too-long-ago early 2000s. It was a peculiar shape to me – some weird amalgamation of a rectangle and an oval, with two speakers divided by the control console in the center. Embedded into the top of the speaker was a DVD player covered by a translucent blue lid, which I sometimes used to listen to demos of how the music I was playing on my trumpet was supposed to sound. Mostly I just liked to watch the DVDs spin in rapid circles, the edges blurring with a soothing mechanical whir. In the front of the speaker was a cassette player that I never fully learned how to use.

Maybe it was broken, or maybe it was the old mixtapes of my parents' music that were, but I could never figure out how to get them to play. Maybe that's telling of my generation and how we grew up. Have you ever seen one of those videos where an adult has their kid try to make a phone call on one of those old rotary phones? It can be difficult navigating dated objects.

The real appeal of the radio to me though was, well, the radio. I would sit in the corner upstairs and listen to music for hours, using a circular dial to flip between stations to avoid ads. 104.5 and 108.8 FM always had the hits of the day: Train's "Hey, Soul Sister," CeeLo Green's "Forget You" (the radio-clean version of what I later learned was actually *Fuck You*), B.o.B and Bruno

Mars' "Nothin' on You," and everything in between. I'm unashamed to say that the music of the early 2010s was the score to my childhood.

From the age of five to the age of nine, I knew the track name and artist of every major song that had ever floated on radio waves from 2010 to 2014, or so I thought. I would – to loosely quote Eminem's hit song "Lose Yourself" – lose myself in the music, the moment of letting chord progressions and baselines and drumbeats and vocals wash over me. The right song commands your attention, and to this day that can be problematic when I'm trying to study amidst finals season. I usually switch to jazz and classical to avoid getting distracted by lyrics, but even that doesn't always work because I do love a good 40's big band or symphony orchestra.

In those pre-adolescent days when I didn't care what anyone thought of me, I used to sing a lot. I knew most of the lyrics to the radio songs by nature of listening so much, and as an added bonus, I still had a few years before my voice dropped, so I could hit all the notes with relative ease. Then, as I got older, I started to learn how I was supposed to act. What expressions are acceptable and vice versa.

One afternoon, I was spending some quality time with my radio, sitting with it in the corner of the room where it always lay waiting for me. I positioned myself as I usually did, legs crisscross and my body facing the radio, my back to the rest of the room and the world. I don't exactly remember what song was playing, but Imagine Dragons' "On Top Of The World" or "Safe and Sound" by Capital Cities are two likely contenders. I'm belting the lyrics in typical fashion, my pre-pubescent voice

gracefully weaving between musical notes. The song ends – I always have to wait until it finishes; no stopping in the middle – and I lift myself up to walk downstairs for lunch. I trod down polished wood steps and settle down at the kitchen table, unknowingly enjoying my last few seconds of blissful ignorance. As I perch on my seat, my brother makes a single teasing comment:

Nice singing.

I suddenly become very interested in the wood stain pattern of the table as the temperature in my face spikes. I say nothing, or at least nothing worth remembering. After that moment of judgment, singing slowly became a thing of the past, and once my voice started to change, it was a done deal.

140.1

I step off the scale at the gym. The little red light next to the button that says pounds watches me as I collect my headphones and keys. I'm pleased that the second digit is a 4 again, not a 3. In the back of my head, I'm not sure why I care so much about this difference. This indistinguishable, imperceptible increase that is only represented by numbers on a screen. It's not like I can notice a visual difference of 2.2 pounds. Hell, 2.2 pounds could be a difference of weighing yourself before or after lunch, or whether you've hydrated throughout the day, or even what clothes you're wearing. It's kind of irrational, no, it is irrational, for me to put stake in such a variable metric at all.

But even if it's better for me to weigh myself once every few months instead of twice a week, I can't help myself.

Sometimes when I'm in the gym, I catch myself looking in the mirror. It's more common when I'm in the private gym that club sports teams at UNC can use, lifting on my own at 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. That weight room is a lot smaller, more intimate. Three of the four walls are lined with mirrors.

I glance at the heads of my tricep: the long head; that wildy hunk of mass running from the back of my arm up to my rear shoulder, the lateral head; that slim band of "L" shaped fibers that look great when viewed from the side, and that often-forgotten medial head; a small triangle just above the elbow that is critical for stability. I trace the Cephalic vein that runs from the front of my shoulder down through my bicep, watching it wind and disappear into the flesh of my forearm. I note the striations of my upper chest muscles as I perform cable flies. I follow the taper of my lats as they fuse with my lower back and mesh with my ribs. Despite the numbers on the scale, my shape is exquisite. Everything I want and not enough. I observe both beauty and horror.

140.3

It's early morning on the weekend, sometime in what I think is 2011, and that means it's time for me to run into my parents' room and wake them up. My little legs swish around in my first grader-size pajamas as I make the short journey down the hall to their room. I clamber up and plop down at the foot of their bed. Their still-drawn blinds cast a clouded tint of light across the room, painting everything a strange haze of brown-gold.

My dad sits up in bed, the sheets rustling around him. He says something silly I don't remember, probably to try and make me smile. Whatever the joke is, I watch him as he flexes his arm, the muscle that I later learn to be the bicep coalescing into a solid lump of blood-infused tissue. It seems massive to me at the time, but now I realize it was just the arm of a normal adult.

He places his hand on the flesh of my own arm. My skin shivers at the contact. *You try.*

I flex, or at least I attempt to, watching as my skin remains pathetically featureless. He smiles, or maybe he doesn't. Sometimes I'm not sure if I should be concerned that *this* is something I remember.

Six or seven years later, my palms are pressed against the dusty waxed-wood floor of my middle-school gymnasium. We were required to conduct fitness testing every year in gym class, and part of that entailed a push-up test with maximum reps until failure. I'm at the point where my arms start shuddering as I drive my hands into the earth to generate the necessary force to press my fatigued body off the ground. My skinny arms reach lockout, and I decide to go for another rep. I slowly lower my body towards the floor because it's all I can do besides folding and falling face first, watching as the individual wood panels on the floor get bigger and bigger to my eyes. I hit the bottom of the rep, and I freeze. I know I'm not making it back up.

If you could somehow take a microscope and watch, you'd see microtears forming along my chest as my immature muscle fibers are torn apart, waiting to be stitched back together by my body. I drop my knees to steady myself and breathe.

I don't remember exactly how many reps I did, but I

know I wasn't happy with it. It was probably around twenty. Maybe I would have been satisfied with myself if it wasn't for the unspoken comparisons most of the guys made with one another. We would congregate on one side of the gym while we waited for everyone else to finish their testing.

Inevitably, someone would ask the question: *How many did you get?* There was no explicit judgment, but there was the underlying pressure of knowing where you stood in relation to everyone else. I always did well enough that I felt respected by everyone, but it always bothered me when David or Matthew did nearly double my number of push-ups. It took me longer than I care to admit figuring out how to label that emotion:

Emasculated | *adjective*

(of a man) deprived of his male role or identity; made to feel less masculine.

After that day, I made it a goal to avoid that feeling as much as possible. It makes you look in the mirror and think about how easily someone could knock you over, or how no girl would ever want to rest her head on a shoulder so skinny. It's a brain-controlling parasite that perpetually feeds on self-confidence, and it makes you do things you wouldn't have done otherwise.

I started doing push-ups every day in the evening. My max of twenty reps slowly turned to thirty, and thirty slowly turned to forty. Then I hit high school and got my first taste of weightlifting, and the rest is history. Different fragments of that original goal are still caught and twisted in my life today. They lie

just beneath the surface of my skin like tumors. I'm still figuring out if they're benign or malignant. Maybe it's both.

138.8

Last year, I purposefully ate more to try and gain weight. I can tell you the exact number of calories in a serving of Lenoir eggs (it's 180 for half a cup), the dining hall cheeseburgers (270 per patty and 150 for the bun), or the Montreal salmon (230 per piece). I forced down extra plates even when I was getting full. If my stomach ever felt flat, I told myself I could eat more. I never threw up though – I knew when my stomach had strained to its limit.

Suffice it to say, my plan worked, and I admit I was proud of myself for following through with a goal I had set for my own self-improvement. But I was also concerned about why I felt compelled to set such a goal in the first place and what satisfying it meant for my relationship with my body moving forward.

137.6

The music is loud in my cousin's wedding venue, that point of volume where sound becomes tangible, as if the treble and bass might physically be flowing through my 7th-grade body as the heavy-duty speakers work their magic. The DJ is doing a good job – “Party Rock Anthem” has things popping, and “Empire State of Mind” couldn't be more fitting given the setting.

An elegant wall of glass windows stretches to the ceiling, providing the best view of the New York City skyline I've ever

seen. The One World Trade Center rises above the other skyscrapers like a twinkling beacon from just across the Hudson; millions of fluorescent lights create specks of artificial stars that greet the night sky. Against this backdrop rests an expansive dance floor. My memory tells me it's made of waxed wood like the gym, but the photos say it's white marble. It radiates with warmth, reflecting the gleam of the chandeliers as if little flames are baked into the tiles. It's also packed with people, most of whom I've never met, all of them gliding, stepping, and swinging to the music.

This is possibly the first time in my life where I've seen men – young men, men not much older than I am now – truly dance. None of that restrained “I'm still trying to look cool” bullshit. A release of passion, an exposing of sensitivity, an absorption in the moment, in the music, in the movement.

Being in 7th grade means I'm still self-conscious to the point where I hold myself back. I'm self-conscious about how my ribs prod through the surface of my skin when I take my shirt off, and how my chest and gangly appendages remain hollow. I'm self-conscious about whether I'm becoming the man people seem to expect me to be.

Someone asks me if I want to go out to the dance floor. I say no, but the truth is I want to. But what would I do? I don't know how to dance. That wasn't a section covered in Jonathan Catherman's book *The Manual to Manhood*, which I received from one of my uncles for Christmas one year. So, I sit in my self-made prison cell of longing and insecurity. I watch with my brother, who is also avoiding the dance floor and live through those that I see. I pick out one of the many Asians dancing and

watch him. That sequence is seared into my head. Him, whoever he is, dancing with a partner, his right arm swinging freely side to side and a foot stepping to the beat. His face tells me that he's engulfed in the music. He seems blissful, unconcerned. With that memory I make a promise:

That will be me someday.

137.8

There are many criticisms I have of traditional masculinity. It is, if nothing else, a dated concept, like rotary phones and the broken cassette player of my childhood radio. The emotional unintelligence, ignorant assertiveness, and general antifemininity that it preaches are all things I might point out to you. But most complicated of all is my resentment and reverence of the masculine body. The Greek god physique plastered on digital screens; a world of high cheekbones and clay-sculpted muscles jagged enough to slice the eye. These deities are my demons, and you might say they curse me, yet I take pride all the same as I watch my form slowly corrupt into theirs. So, when my friend in the dining hall asks me why I'm not bigger from going to the gym, I am disgusted that she might expect such conformation from me, disgusted at myself for being inadequate, and disgusted at myself for being disgusted at all. *Why would she say that? I hate that she's kind of right. Damn it, why do I even care?*

When I finally grow tired of analyzing my geometry in the mirror, I peel my eyes away. I chide myself. *You know that's not healthy.* When this happens, my reprieve is – as it has always

been – music. I ditch the subdued, repetitious movements of lifting weights, the rigid confines of masculine expression.

I have learned to dance.

The first time I ever did, I was still a stick-thin freshman in high school. My school always threw a dance for the freshman class at the beginning of the year, and I was there with my then-girlfriend. The cafeteria had been hollowed of tables and chairs and tasked with providing a cheap dance floor for the night; neon streamers and glittery decorations are strewn along the walls and ceiling. Combined with the dim lighting, they're giving me a surprisingly convincing illusion that I'm someplace new and exotic.

The party is already underway by the time I arrive, the speakers thumping with life, the floor crowded with moving bodies. I know I have a choice to make. Looking around, I can see plenty of boys who aren't partaking in the festivities – they drift about the outskirts of the dance floor, talking in small cliques, playing off insecurity as being too cool to join. That is my norm. That is what I know as safety, the crevice I can hide in to avoid the judgment I've spent so long trying to avoid.

But I also know that I'll be the shittiest boyfriend ever if I don't actually dance with my girlfriend and choose to hide away with my guy friends.

I look out at the floor again. At the movement, at the people, at the bliss. I think back to the man on the dance floor from the wedding, and how it's been two years since that day. Two years and I still haven't made good on that promise. As much as I'm trying to avoid it, the dance floor beckons to me again. Deep in the cavity of my chest, my heart palpitates to the

throbbing of the bass.

The speakers cry out. *Let us help you.*

I make my choice.

Nowadays, if you catch me at a good party, you might see me in the middle of a crowded dance circle or off in the corner grooving with my friends. Some people need to be drunk to dance. I never have and never will. It sounds cheesy, but why bother to intoxicate myself more when moving to the music already does? Plus, I can't do the moves I've learned if I'm stumbling around tipsy.

Just as my relationship to dance has changed and blossomed over time, so too has my music taste. Post Malone, Noah Kahan, and Chappell Roan entered my Spotify rotation as Travis Scott and Drake quietly made their exit. And I know that inevitably, my relationship to my body will change as well.

In those mirror moments when I finally look myself in the eyes instead of picking apart my body, I know I am witness to myself and the mistakes I have yet to make. I'm still in the gym six days a week, and despite everything I've just told you, I still plan on trying to gain more weight. I've deemed 150 pounds an appropriate stopping place. Or maybe 160. I don't know yet.

I do not know who or what I will be in the future. But I hope that one day I will be able to look at myself uncritically in the mirror, with appreciation for the future versions of me I have yet to know and the past versions of me I remember too well – that scrawny kid with the sort-of buzzcut and lack of muscle. I hope I will be free from appeasing social expectations that become my own. I hope I will learn to sing again. And when I do, I hope I will dance.

How to Make Lefse

Maia Patton

it was quiet that night
I laid beneath him
on the velvet couch
maybe I just couldn't hear
maybe my fluttering eyes
filtered sounds

as paper coffee filters
fight the hard, sour ground
from the burnt pit
of a cherry-like fruit
I bite down and taste it:
bitter and bloody

the flesh of my cheek,
dressed in chocolate and wine,
is chewed to a fine dust
when it mixes
with spit that doesn't belong to me
a thick paste is formed

in my mouth
It clogs my throat
my grandmother gathers
the grain from within me

she pats it into thin
circles of *lefse*

awaiting her mother's hot plate
the edges char
and the middle bubbles up
lumps of air
caught in the soft batter
pop and crack against the heat

of his shoulders, steam floats from
him in thin white
strips

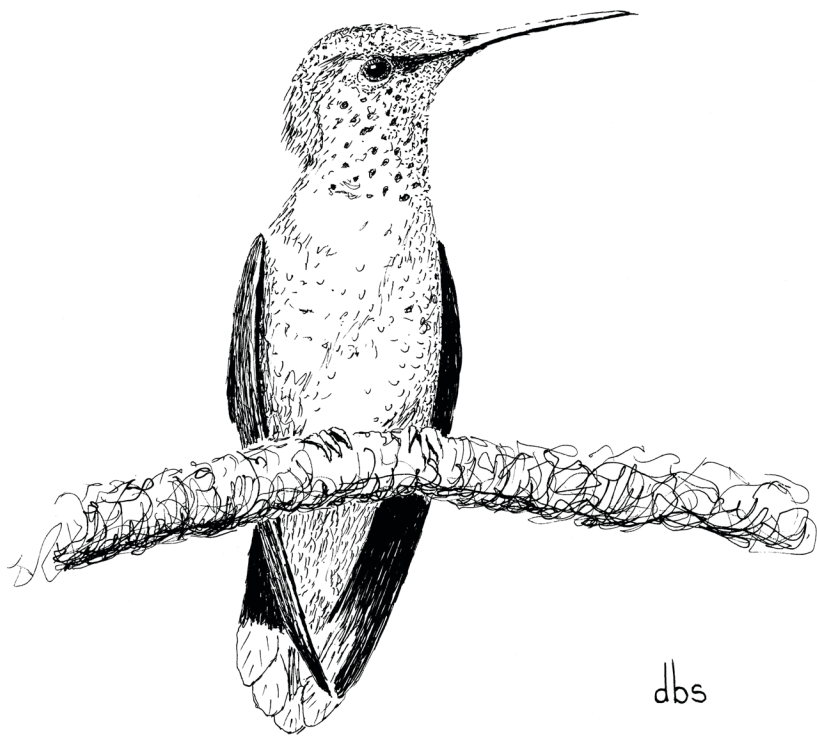
175 After “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)

Caleb Frailey

watch me go—
eat me away—till i am nothing
but a pile of empty space—a crinkled rainbow
in a forgotten coat pocket—sugar can sit too long
on the tongue, so kiss me again—just one more time,
so the taste of our love, the bitter sweetness of existing,
of living another day can die twisted in the knot of our mouths—
the cherry drowns, and i am nothing but the air you are breathing
in chicago, praying over a dune of jewel-tone wrappers
bleeding out the corner of a closed-off exhibit—the urge to crawl back into you
while the curators are away cleaning the chagall windows—my body sinking into the mold
of your living, like we did before the spring—when you were still a kiss—when we were still
(perfect lovers)—but it’s winter now and all i can do is take a piece of you
to my lips and savor the sting of melting snow in my eyes—who knew
missing you could rest so sweet on the tongue—wrapping the world in the love we left untitled.

Broad-Tailed Hummingbird

David Such



How To: Make An American's London Fog Latte

Cassidy Howard

1. Choose any¹ mug, and set your Earl Grey tea bag in it
2. Place your mug under the spicket of the Keurig², and fill it with hot water but be sure to leave space at the top³
3. Add in whatever amount of honey you prefer⁴
4. Fill to the top with a milk of choice⁵
5. Make a piece of toast and top it how you would like⁶
6. Enjoy reading a book, or just relaxing⁷
7. Do not forget to wash your cup, so it is ready the next time you want tea⁸

¹ Does every family have some unspoken mug rule? God forbid I take the mug with a cottage painted on it, or the Batman mug, or whatever mug did not fit my assigned mug archetype. Did I miss the day in class we were all assigned a mug? Did everyone have to wholly avoid the mug that their grandfather stored his teeth in? The day after he died, I saw that mug, and I could not help but laugh. Now it lays as vacant as his side of the bed, but my Lydia Deetz mug stays filled with whatever amalgamation of cultures I am drinking that day.

² Oh the simple joys of a Keurig, because a coffee that was made ten uses ago will without a doubt sink its claws into my tea. *I sit and I think about this for a while.* How many old experiences affect each and every choice I make? I make pasta the way my

grandma taught me, I season my fries with the same seasonings that my fiancé uses on theirs, I do my lipstick in a way that my shitty freshman year roommate hated, and I listen to the songs my best friend showed me before he died and I know that even what is dead, even the taste that is removed from the Keurig, will linger as long as we both stand. Even if the reminder is as bitter as this coffee.

³ I hate notes like this. Why not start with “leaving room at the top...” because now I could have expertly followed all your directions, and I still would be wrong. I am tired of “doing everything right” and being wrong. So if there is too much tea in the mug to add milk, I must now drink this sweet, smooth lavender brew that shares a temperature with Satan’s piss, like I am a scared gazelle drinking from the watering hole. I do not want to clean up after a mess. I am making tea so I can destress. There is no need to be fucking cryptic.

⁴ I am known for having a sweet tooth. Dad (who I am not related to) makes fun of me every time we step into Kretchmar’s Bakery, and I cannot decide what to get. I seem to have this affinity for sweetness, this near addiction to seeking out the good everywhere that I go, sweetening each bad scenario until I can convince myself the world will be okay. My best friend is gone because this world would never give him what he deserved. **No, my best friend is not gone**, he just finally went on his trip to Mexico and is too cheap to pay for international data and it is better for him if he does not come back. There is a line in Hadestown: “To the world we dream about, and the one we live

in now.” I think they are the same; we only need to look close enough. I think there is beauty in finding good and then making it where you cannot. But if my spoon is not coated in honey after twenty seconds of stirring, I know I can be better.

⁵I think I prefer oat milk, but I don’t really know. Milk is milk, and life is life. I will listen to the Beatles, and I will cry, because that is life. I will bitch about the tinge of coffee in this tea, because it is life. I will go visit him in the cemetery again, because that is life, which must continue after death. If we are out of oat milk, I will use whatever else I am given, because I will never have every ingredient for the life that I want. I must build it and find something to savor.

⁶You could also have a cookie or scone. When my grandfather made toast, he topped it with butter and jelly. I have never seen anybody else try it that way, nor can I truthfully tell you that I ever had, but I am convinced it would be exquisite.

⁷I have never been good at relaxing. There is always a bouncing leg, I am always writing down something, I must have music in my ear because, God forbid, I hear my own thoughts. I used to read a lot as a child, mostly heavy subjects like world wars and revolutions. Now I am documenting those very same things in my own writing. I write death so that I can appreciate life, like how a lack of oat milk and the tinge of coffee in my tea remind me how grateful I am for the honey. I think I should write more of the honey. Maybe someone else needs it, or maybe I am the

only one with such a sweet tooth, but isn't it kind to be thought of?

⁸ I enjoy that this says you will want tea. There is no "if." There is something so reassuring about knowing that, despite what could have gone wrong, this will be worth it. Of course, I resent the fact that I have to clean up when I am obviously dealing with a lot right now, but that's whatever. I will see my best friend again, there will be a taste of coffee I didn't ask for, I will love as fiercely as I can, and life will go on.

Net

Danny Mask

Mesh remembers
what it caught—
what slipped through
its thousand openings.

Each hole a question
the ocean refuses to answer—

how it hangs
like exhausted dancers,
bodies curved
by the weight of water.

Sun finds every thread,
every knot tied
by hands that know
what we hold—
what we cannot keep,

fold after fold
asking—

how shall I live,
how shall I wait
holding what cannot
be held long enough.

The Weight of What Isn't There

J.H. Davis

I carry your blanket into the kitchen and drape it over a chair like a flag at half-mast, grab the orange juice from the fridge, drink it straight from the carton this time, waiting for something. A memory, a ghost, a reason not to scream. I find my way to your room, unable to stop myself. My fingers rub the doorframe, tracing the height marks you once made, tiny lines creeping up like vines and then stopping. Your bed sits there—clean, and too white. I press my palm against the mattress—still firm—and I imagine you. Just a tiny weight, warm and real, and lying there. But I pull back. My heart can only break so many times before it starts hiding pieces of itself. Besides, it's buried with you somewhere under dark soil, between the roots of an old oak and stones that resemble bones. I dig with my hands but all I find are other broken things. A bottle cap, a splintered twig, a toy ring. I gather the shoes we bought for you, the blanket, your little stuffed bear with its crooked smile. I carry them to the dining room table and lay them out like antiques from a flea market. I sit there for hours, waiting for them to mean something, but they don't. They're just things, and I hate them for it. It's a strangeness I can't name. As if I'm being haunted by the loss of something I've never held. The same way I keep moving to look for you, like the answer is just around the corner. I walk outside barefoot. The grass is cold and damp. Grief stains everything. It seeps into my skin, so deep it

feels older than blood. The swings attached to the playhouse creak in the breeze. I start digging again. A small shallow grave for the remainders I can't look at anymore. The shoes go in first, then the bear. I hold the blanket for a while, letting it catch the moonlight one last time before I lay it down. I cover it all with earth, patting it smooth to reassure myself that some things are meant to stay buried. The neighbors pay me no mind. They know how heavy a name is when you can't say it out loud. How it sits in your throat like a pebble you can't swallow or spit out. I run inside, so fast this time that a thread of light unravels from the edges of everything I've ever touched. I sit on the floor of your room, my back against the wall, and finally, I let your name break free. I wonder if you'll ever hear it. It's a splinter pulled too fast, tearing flesh, but leaving the wound clean. Sometimes I think my screams are just whispers, a soft mound of dirt covering the graves I dig. But maybe it's the moon again, leaning down to listen, pulling the night tighter and tighter around itself, as if to say *keep going, I'm still right here.*

Privy to Pregnancy

Denver Boxleitner



The Starman

Carter Vance

They noticed one had stopped moving. He was near the back of the group. He had white hairs where the others had brown or black like the ground stones near water. He fell to one knee, pointing up to the far, untouchable brightness some had started calling “stars,” and making a desperate, wailing sort of sound none of them had heard before. They turned back, like it was one of the plain beasts that followed them, seeing only this Old One who had now closed his eyes.

The Leadman wanted to keep moving, like they always did, leave the Old One there like all the others who no longer moved, upright and four-legged alike, to be feasted upon by winged things and pulled to pieces. He motioned to the four who had gathered and were looking down, puzzled that the Old One no longer moved. He pointed with his nose, then his fingers, at the far point beyond the ridge, where the wet places merged and where they found shelter between the sky-stones. It was where they had all agreed they needed to make it to before the Great Bright took over the sky, for it would dampen their brows, their heads unclear when it reached its peak in the Fire Season.

The four of them, even the Secondman, stood unyielding, looking from the Old One back to the sky. They checked his eyes beneath their skin-hoods; they had the gone-look, from which no one came back. A deep slumber that no one awoke from. One pressed his ear to the Old One’s chest, listening for the air to shift; there was none.

He had stopped like the others did, but the four did not want to leave him out, to blend back into the great flow of all things. There was something about this Old One – the way he drew patterns that looked like great winged things none of them had seen before, maybe he only saw in his Dark Space every night, that made him stand out. Even as a Young One, they remembered his eyes moved faster to catch beasts twitching in the dark, which had saved them in the days before the Great Split.

“Great loves,” they said to him for this.

He painted his skin with the red rubbings that came off the ground in the space before the Big Dry Place, which made him glow in the Great Bright as it rose in the sky. He said he could hear the speaking of ones they left behind after their moving stopped, even ones whose faces, eyes, and tongue sounds they had all forgotten; he could conjure them clearly, saying they spoke to him from the things he called “stars.”

As the four stood, they looked around, studying the gnarled branches of the Stopping Trees and the Wonder Trees; they looked so similar it was only in the ends of their green buds you could tell the difference. The Secondman went to the Wonder Tree and picked one of the sweet circles that shone in the same colour as the Great Bright off its branch. He cracked the circle open between his hands, the sticky juices running down his arms, matting down the dark hairs. He put half in his mouth, chewing it with great delight, then walked over to the Old One, drawing a line in the juice over his lips. He remembered how he loved the taste of it when he still moved.

The Leadman shoved his way through the three others,

motioning again to the spot where the wet places merged, this time with more urgency; there was nothing more to do here, nothing more but to walk on. The other three stood between the two, unsure of what to do but knowing there was something more than a usual argument over the biggest cuts of meat happening. This could be something like the Great Split again, that left them more alone, undefended from the sharp creatures at night. All they knew was they didn't want that.

The Secondman stood up from the Old One and criss-crossed his arms which no longer moved on their own into the shape he had remembered from the dirt drawings; one had touched each shoulder, like they did when they pressed close into themselves to keep warm. He made sure both of his eyes had their skin folds shut and that his tongue stayed in his mouth. The Old One looked as he did when he still moved, having an unhurried grace.

The Secondman then motioned to the Youngest One to surrender his picking-stone, the one that had been smoothed to the finest cutting point that any of them had ever seen and had felled many a great beast and sharp thing. The Youngest One pulled it close instead, untrusting of the intention; there was no beast around them that he could see, nor even a high branch they needed for fire; this was not a stopping spot. The Secondman motioned again, this time with greater intent; he then demonstrated with his fingers, plunging them into the ground, which was soft with sky water, until he found the bright red earth that lived just below the surface of brown and green. It was clear he wanted to make a space, go beneath, like when they looked for the bigger clicking bugs that lived near the still water.

But they were nowhere near the still water. The Youngest One wondered, what was the Secondman trying to do?

Irritated, the Secondman grabbed right for the picking-stone, managing to snatch its branch handle in a quick flash. The Youngest One was stunned and stepped back, almost falling over the Leadman's feet, not knowing if he needed defense against the Secondman. The Secondman posed him no danger, however, as he set to work scraping at the earth in a rhythm only he could tell and for a reason only he knew. The rest of them stood, revelling in the Secondman's movements, thinking there was something possessed, like the bad tremblings they knew some to have after eating things from the Stopping Tree. The Leadman motioned for the rest of them to come, to leave the Secondman and the picking stone; surely there would be others of both.

But the rest were intrigued, especially the Youngest One; they wondered what drive the Secondman to such feats, moving earth that got harder as he went further down. It was faster than any of them had seen before. It was not for hunger, nor thirst, but something beyond them both. The Secondman took a second to breathe and looked up from his digging; he had made it some of the way he wanted to but would not be able to make the full space for the Old One without others, not before the Great Bright started its blazing.

He knew the Leadman would not join; he lacked the fevers for anything but what stood in front of him, food and waters, and the things which removed them. But maybe the others would – he had seen the Youngest One draw the pictures of the strange, winged things with the Old One. Maybe that thought was still with him, even in his fear at no longer having his pick-

ing stone.

The Secondman made a motion for them, calling to join, pointing between the half-dug hole, the Old One, and the small points of brightness in the sky. “Stars”, he said, pointing to all three places. The Youngest One took a tentative step forward, feeling the Leadman’s hand on his shoulder, trying to hold him back. He knew it was the wrong choice, could lead to more bad words, but there was something which called him closer to the ground and the Secondman; it sounded like the Old One’s voice, though this could not be. He kneeled beside the Secondman and gave a nod, running his fingers through the red-brown swirl of dirt before beginning to shape his hands into claws, scratching it up the sides, making the hole gradually deeper.

The other two stood waiting a while longer, not wanting to risk the Leadman’s anger while it still seemed like it could bubble over into something greater. The Leadman, after watching the Secondman and the Youngest One push and shove at the earth, eventually turned his back. He was not going to help, but he would not stop anyone from doing what their fevers told them was wise. This was what he did when he could tell it was better not to lead so strongly. If only he had learned that in the days before the Great Split, before the Other Ones had gone away.

The other two took the subtle signal and joined the Secondman and the Youngest One in pushing the dirt, which was now mostly red, away from the ground. One bent the branch of a nearby Stopping Tree until it broke off and split it against a big ground stone; this worked even better than the picking stone at moving the earth. He made the same tool from three other

branches for the rest who were digging. The dirt moved much faster after this, flying high into the air and landing as far as where the Leadman still stood, looking away as it dirtied his feet.

The Secondman's fever began to ease as he saw the hole becoming bigger, bigger than ever he thought it would be – it was enough for the Old One to rest in now, the same way they rested in cool places under the “stars” that were covered. He motioned for all of them to stop and then walked over to the Old One, cradling his head like they did when first one of them emerged into the Great Flat Space where all Comings took place.

The Youngest One held his legs, he was heavier than either of them had expected, and slowly, lightly, they moved him over the hole. They gently set him down and arranged his body again, just like the winged things in his drawings, just so they would have a last sight of him be that. They then, slowly, carefully, with their smashed-open branches, pushed the red-brown dirt back into the hole, over the Old One. When their work was done, they sat, circled the turned-up place that now would hold him for all time, where no beast could find him.

They looked around for the Leadman – had he gone to where the wet places merged without them? It would not be a surprise; this was the way of the Great Split after all. But he came from behind the Wonder Tree, holding two flexible branches he had broken off it, that he had bent into circles, just like those they ate which came from the branch ends. He handed them to the Secondman, smiling though he still did not understand why the Old One could not simply be left, why he needed to live under the earth now.

The Secondman took the two bent branches, small waters

welling in both eyes, plunged them into the earth just above the Old One's head and arranged them into two hoops that crossed each other in the middle, so that one could never tell where each begun and ended. He then motioned up, pointing to the last small brightness that was now nearly invisible in the light of the Great Bright, then back to the hole, now covered and marked, where the Old One could rest, and that was the end. His mind now eased. The burning itch that something had to be done to to make sure the way was set for the Old One was gone. All of the group now moved, the Leadman most eagerly, towards the spot where the wet places merged, seeking shelter from the blazing of the Great Bright that was to come.

The Secondman smiled back, looking at the crossed loops where he could come to visit the Old One. He would be with the things he called stars, with all the Old Ones who had stopped moving; where, the Secondman had decided, to himself, that he would go too, when his moving stopped.

The Moon Is a Boat

Joan Hu

Because,

another Li climbed on the boat

so young at three, not a tear dropped and

Because,

his daughter once said she would

stay in my home city even if she began as a dish runner and

Because,

my surname *is* foreign

Because

there have been too many reasons for me to sail and go (and go
and go).

But I knew my mother's father would let my grandmother be the poet Li
And I knew he would have his feet touching the ground and looking up to
the moon and down at the soil until many

many years later.

And I knew my mother's mother, would stop going
to McDonald's and meeting with her friends, and quit drinking, eating the
fatty pork,

(and weeping less).

They shifted without telling me, like I could never

figure out whose phone

number was whose because
it's only a one-digit
difference.

They never told how they moved after my mother's birth
and my birth.

And they never told me when they stopped looking to the moon and
stopped looking down.

She Was Always Him

E. Jones

Light mud and heavy wind, this body
is mere chance. My features, black sparks
peppered on wet clay, are not from love—
not even desire. I am the inheritor of

regret, the product of fatherless
fathers and Marys not exempt from
sin. Born to bare corn husk children
in the hope they may possess the elemental.

I, mother, am not special; but for
a brief moment, you made me
feel as though I were. Praised my
lightness, tastefully interrupted by thick

black braids that thumped with the beat
of my heart. Innocent, pretty and thin; I promised
your redemption. For a brief, fleeting moment,
I was your savior. A decision undeniably good.

But as the story goes, typically told
over meals and stagnant silence, it was
my departure that led to my disgracing.
At some point in my adolescence, between

seat and desk, or plate and fork, something
distorted my mold. Rather than me filling
this frame, a force had come and switched
the daughter I seemed to be. And I cannot help

but agree. Not that I wish to abandon the truth
in your statements, *anger* *acne* *aggression* *ambition*
like him. Or to soothe the singe of aimed comparatives
of a blood I cannot help but contain. I agree, I am

Him. My angered abandon has boiled the welcome
of my womb. It cannot create the legacy you desire.
I never could hold the celestial. Though, when the
Sun goes to rest, and my lover emerges to chart

the constellations across my back—I find my
Feminine freed.

Take the Lead

K.G. Ricci



Good Grief

Dimitri Teixeira

My grandmother's service has bouncers.

They're standing by the entrance of Snuff & Sons Funeral Home. It looks like a remake of *Twins*. Arnold Jr. is tall and broad with veins popping out of his neck. Danny Jr. is short and round, with the permanent slump of an accountant. Both are zipped into matching puffer jackets. They're defending a building that I originally mistook for a casino. It's lined with abrasive red LED lights and equipped with a sound system pumping out what I could only describe as Biblical Techno. Between the two stooges is a menu board. I start calculating what I can afford.

My bank account has \$389 in it.

Basic admission to see my dead grandmother is \$100. I can afford a little grief, at least. My grandmother made dinner out of scraps, and it was always better than anything you could order from a restaurant. She wouldn't approve of me spending a quarter of my life's savings to look at her corpse under a spotlight, yet here I am. Broke, half guilty, and fully hoping two minutes will be enough.

"Good morning!" Arnold Jr. spreads his arms like he's welcoming me into an exclusive club. His voice doesn't match his face. He has the same practiced warmth of someone who's spent hours in sales seminars learning how to play the role of Totally Normal Human.

"Beautiful day for a memorial service, isn't it? You must be here for the Oliveira viewing."

“Alex!” Danny Jr. chimes in, practically bouncing on his cankles. “We’ve been expecting you. I’m sure traffic was brutal. I-95 just *kills* me sometimes!”

Arnold Jr. produces an iPad with the finesse of a Vegas magician. “We just need to process your admission. Basic viewing is one hundred dollars, though I should mention most of your family went with our Gold Package.”

“What’s included?” I ask.

“Four viewing minutes instead of two, a package of our deluxe imported tissues, and a refrigerator magnet featuring the deceased’s portrait. Grandkids love that one.”

“I’ll stick with the basic.”

“A perfectly respectable choice,” Arnold Jr. declares. “We understand the importance of budget-conscious mourning.”

I tap my debit card against his tablet.

Above the checkout screen is an ad: *Prepare for the Afterlife: Buy A Casket Now, Pay Later. Finance with Affirm Today.* The tablet beeps and then asks how much I want to tip. I hit five dollars, mostly out of fear and peer pressure. Arnold Jr. double-checks the screen, probably looking at the tip, while Danny Jr. smiles and hands me a silver wristband.

I stand there holding my new jewelry, waiting in line behind an unfamiliar old man who reeks of moth balls. The wristband feels flimsy, but right now it’s my ticket to see my grandmother before she checks into her underground accommodations. Two minutes of purchased time.

My bank account has \$284 in it.

Inside, the funeral home looks like an Apple Store that specializes in corpses. The lighting is so bright my features are

erased until I look halfway embalmed. Calming soundscapes play softly overhead. The center of the lobby is dominated by a desk where two more stooges sit, both in matching dark blazers and tablets of their own. I make the mistake of meeting one woman's eyes. She looks built for human resources. She perks up instantly, pupils dilating with predatory focus. She starts gathering her tablet, her stylus, and her stack of brochures.

I slip past the desk and sneak into the viewing room before HR can corner me with her phony smile. The viewing room is chapel meets hotel-chain-chic. At least the lighting isn't as bad as the lobby. I see my grandmother at the far end, roped off until it's my turn to say goodbye. For a second, I remember the way she used to hum while cooking. Then I notice the flowers surrounding her casket are obviously arranged by price tier. Expensive arrangements front and center, cheap bouquets hidden behind the casket like that weird cousin no one wants in the family photo.

Silver-wristbands get the plastic chairs in the back of the room. Gold-bands sit in the cushioned middle rows. Platinum members get the prime spot beside the casket with leather recliners and personal attendants bringing them mocktails. "Hot towel?" I hear one ask. Danny Jr. and Arnold Jr. must've taken one look at my 2005 Toyota Echo and decided I wasn't worth a platinum sales pitch.

"Alex?"

Spotted by the brochure-queen from the front desk.

"I'm Julissa," she beams. "Before you get settled, I wanted to let you know we're running a flash upgrade sale. You can get the gold experience for just sixty dollars for a limited time!"

“No, thank you,” I say without making direct eye contact.

“Most of your family enhanced their experience. Your sister chose platinum. Look,” Julissa counters, as she thrusts the tablet close to my face as if trying to AirDrop the information directly into my skull.

My entire field of vision becomes a ledger of family spending.

Lisa: \$350.

Debbie: \$485.

Weird Cousin: \$840.

Looks like they all upgraded and bought some add-ons. Lisa got the priority pass so she could cut the line to the casket. Debbie splurged on the deluxe mints and hand sanitizer—lots of kissing and shaking hands, so I don’t blame her. Weird Cousin bought the custom grief soundtrack, hug extension, and lock of hair option. Weird.

Julissa’s sales pitch starts up again. “We also offer financing with very competitive rates.” My phone buzzes with a new message: “Pre-approved for Memorial Credit! \$1,000 limit. 29.99% APR. Instant approval. Honor your loved one today!”

“Are you absolutely sure the Basic Package is the right choice for such an important relationship?”

“I’ll stick with what I have.”

“We understand budget considerations are important, but Alex, we want to ensure you don’t have any regrets about your final goodbye.”

Her implication hangs in the air like a fart no one wants to admit to.

“I’m fine for now,” I tell her, a little sterner this time.

“Of course, basic is a completely valid choice for *budget-conscious* families.”

The way she whispers “budget-conscious” makes me feel small, like I’ve failed at something other people don’t even think about.

I find an empty plastic chair and watch as my aunt uses her Condolence FastPass™ to skip the line to Grandma. I start to feel cheap. I’m stuck back here with the general admission grieverers. Above the casket, a countdown begins until her purchased grief is over.

3.59, 3.58, 3.57.

She’s crying into a Snuff & Sons Funeral Home-branded handkerchief that has already started to fray at the edges, while a photographer who works weekends at JCPenney Portraits captures her Authentic Grief Moment™.

My cousin Ferdinand plops down beside me, silver wristband loose on his arm. He looks worn out from waiting. He tells me he’s been here since the service started at 5:00 p.m. He’s had to watch his viewing slot get pushed back every time someone bought an upgrade or add-on or extension or whatever.

“When’s your time now?” I ask.

“They’re saying 7:15,” he mutters. He lifts his phone to show me the official Snuff & Sons Funeral Home app. It looks like a restaurant wait list. At the same time, the countdown above the casket hits zero, and there’s this sad, trombone sound from *The Price Is Right*. Auntie’s shown the exit and the timer resets for the next mourner in line.

Ferdinand’s phone buzzes. “Now 7:30,” he mumbles.

I start to wonder if I will even get my money's worth. She might be in the ground before my viewing time rolls around. If I don't get to say goodbye, maybe I'll get a partial refund or store credit.

I download the app. My viewing time is scheduled for 10:23 to 10:25 p.m. Not bad, I guess, since I showed up late. I start scrolling through the app to pass the time. They've pasted her obituary in Papyrus font with a message under it: "*Customers who viewed this obituary also bought Deluxe Grief Candles.*"

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Julissa drifting around the other side of the room. I glance back down at my phone hoping she won't find me. I squint to read the fine print at the bottom of the app: "*By mourning with us, you agree to our Eternal Terms & Conditions.*"

I sense a pesky visitor. I look up and see Julissa standing directly in front of me. She's holding a velvet-lined display case full of small objects arranged in little protective compartments like archaeological artifacts.

"Alex, I wanted to show you some very special pieces from your grandmother's personal collection that are available for purchase." She picks up a small ceramic elephant. "This good luck charm sat on her kitchen windowsill for decades. It watched her make you weekend dinners when you were young."

I remember that elephant. It was always there, completely unremarkable. That stupid little elephant spent more time with her than I did in the last few years.

"No, thank you," I say, not wanting the reminder.

She sets it down and carefully lifts a chipped coffee cup. "What about this? She started every morning with this

potentially priceless, antique mug.” Julissa sounds so certain, like she was living in my grandmother’s walls.

I squint at it. Pretty sure it came free with a Denny’s Grand Slam.

“No, thank you,” I say again.

Julissa gently closes the display case. “Perhaps you’d prefer one of our *Premium Enhancements* instead, she teases. “Can I interest you in our Digital Flower Preservation? We photograph all the beautiful arrangements and create a virtual garden you can visit online.”

“No, thank you,” I repeat.

“Premium Scent Capsule? We’ll infuse a keepsake vial of your grandmother’s smell.”

“No, thank you,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Comfort Companion? A doll with her likeness. Liver spots and all.”

“Has anyone bought that?” I ask with morbid curiosity.

“Yes,” Julissa says, and points to Weird Cousin.

She starts pitching Ferdinand some limited-time Possession Package while I refresh the app for my viewing slot. The schedule changes and my time shifts: 11:47 p.m. The funeral home closes at midnight.

I interrupt Julissa rambling about a Reincarnation Guarantee. “What if my viewing time keeps getting pushed? I’m afraid I won’t be able to say goodbye.”

“You’re in luck, Alex.” She’s saying my name so often it starts sounding like a made-up word. “We offer the Condolence FastPass™ for these situations. Immediate access to the viewing area. No more waiting!”

My phone buzzes. Pushed to 11:55 p.m.

Her eyes widen and she licks her lips, hungry for the sale.

“I’ll take the FastPass™.”

Plus a five-dollar tip for Julissa.

My bank account has \$129 in it.

Standing next to her casket with the overhead buzz of the digital timer, I realize what I’ll miss most about my grandmother. Not the Sunday dinners or the dollar bills slipped into my pocket. But the way she hummed while doing dishes. She never hummed actual songs, just these little melodic fragments that seemed to come from nowhere, like her brain was composing theme songs for scrubbing pans.

“Sometimes I’ll catch myself humming your melodies,” I told her. That’s what I want back more than anything.

I look up at the timer. 0.47, 0.46, 0.45.

Despite the signature Snuff & Sons Funeral Home lighting, she looks peaceful. She looks happy.

“I’ll miss you,” I whisper.

0.29, 0.28, 0.27.

Two minutes isn’t enough. I haven’t even started saying the things I need to say.

“Julissa, can I buy more time?” I call out.

“Well,” she begins. “Our Extended Farewell Enhancement usually runs \$300, but I can give you the GRANNY promo code to take fifty dollars off.” She inches closer. “That will give you an additional four minutes of viewing time.”

“I’ll take it,” I say, ignoring my bank account and the queue of people behind me sinking lower down the waiting list. I pull out my phone and apply for Memorial Credit. Approved

before I can blink.

Julissa charges \$250 (plus her tip) to my new virtual credit card, already waiting in my Apple Wallet.

My bank account has zero dollars in it.

My Memorial Credit Card has \$121 on it.

I watch the timer above me reset. Four more minutes to say goodbye. Four more minutes to tell her about the job I just lost. About how I still use her pasta sauce recipe, even though it never tastes right when I make it. About the landlord who swears there isn't a commune of rodents living in my walls. About the homeless guy outside my building who swears his uncle once sold a fake ID to Lee Harvey Oswald. About how I always save her voicemails, even the ones that just say, "call me back."

I lean closer to the casket. "I'm sorry I didn't visit more. I thought we'd have more time."

Wah-wahhh.

I step away from my grandmother for the last time.

Someone else shuffles forward on cue. *Mourner seventy-eight, come on down!*

Julissa materializes at the exact wrong moment, as scheduled. "I couldn't help but overhear you mention humming..." She pauses. "My dad used to whistle while working in the garage."

It's the first time her voice doesn't sound rehearsed.

By the time I depart from the funeral home, the neon lights are flickering off one tube at a time. In the corner of the parking lot, I spot Ferdinand sitting in his car, engine off, hands clenched on the steering wheel. I pull up beside him and roll down my window.

He turns to me with eyes red from crying.

"They closed," his voice cracks. "I waited seven fucking hours."

"You never got your viewing time?"

He rolls his eyes at me.

He lifts his phone to show me the message on his Snuff & Sons app: *This Viewing Has Ended. See You at Your Next Bereavement!* "I begged them to let me have my time, but the little fat guard told me her casket was already being cleaned for tomorrow's body. I sat in those plastic chairs all night watching people buy their way to the front, I spent my last hundred dollars just to get in. I couldn't get approved for the financing bullshit. I never got to say goodbye."

He starts the engine. It fills the silence between us.

When he finally looks at me, it's chillier than the night. "At least you got your money's worth."

Two weeks later, I'm standing at the entrance of BeyondLife Cemetery, a Snuff & Sons property, holding discount grocery store flowers. A security booth sits next to the gate. Through the window, I see Arnold Jr. reading the latest issue of *Us Weekly* and Danny Jr. organizing different colored wristbands.

"Hello, sir. It's \$100 for visitor access."

Danny Jr. obviously doesn't remember me.

I pull the new Memorial Credit Card from my wallet and hand it over. They mailed it last week, along with an Audio Memory Enhancement keepsake I bought before leaving. Julissa's last sell: *We can isolate her voice and create a personalized keepsake audio file.* She'd shown me a sample on her tablet, someone's grandfather saying, "Don't buy the name-brand

mayonnaise, Margaret.” When I play it, all I hear is faint static and what might be Julissa’s dishwasher running in the background.

I start toward my grandmother’s headstone. This will be the first time I’m seeing it. Walking through the aisles, I notice a bunch of QR codes stuck to every other memorial with the message: *Scan here to leave a five-star review of your grief experience.*

My grandmother’s headstone is smaller than I expected, wedged between two larger monuments. Middle seat in afterlife economy class. There’s no countdown here, no staff hurrying me along, no upgrades left to consider. Just silence. I find myself smiling.

Toast

Ronald Walker



Night and Dawn

Sara Vernekar

I

It is easy
to feel nothing
on the bumpy ride to work,
the train rattling your bones
like a wake-up call.
You float into unfamiliar cafés
with your friend and his dog,
where a montage of tired baristas
urges you to have a great day
after a reasonable tip paid in cash.
You don't acknowledge this display
of soap dispenser traits,
merely sip your coffee
and blow on the surface to break
the sticky film growing there.
The film does not move, not once,
but your friend has moved on,
with a soundless goodbye
and a comical bark.
Look, it's summer, the light
bouncing off your walls while you
hide behind a curtain and watch
for signs of sun damage
and now the rain is
gunning for the ground,
beating out a purpose so singular
and all-encompassing,
it leaves you breathless.
Yesterday, the water seeped
inside and soaked right through
your black shoes, the serious ones,
yet you didn't utter a single sound
and your heart had no trouble
matching your mouth.

II

It is hard
to feel nothing
when his hands refuse
to slacken on your shoulders
and his worried face stays
the same aching shape.
It's a dingy room, warm,
ripe with secrets.
There is a stench
that only you can smell
and your limp body accepts it
the way it accepts everything,
yet it cannot suppress a flicker
of unidentified feeling,
perhaps a revolt, still budding.
The faces are ever-changing:
your father; your lover;
your friend with the dog;
all desperate to provide relief
without having a definite cure.
Inside you, a cratered moon,
the valleys burning all night long,
sending up great big smoke signals
bound to disappear by dawn.
Today, you are on your tippy toes
trying to decipher their message,
marveling at this scene so tragic
and ridiculous, but also touching
enough to take your breath away.
Tomorrow, you will receive flowers,
lush yellow roses that you will buy
outside a familiar café, and later,
when the barista tells you to have
a great day, you will smile in return.

Mountain Daffodils

After Mary Oliver

Sophia Wherley

I am a ghost in a girl's body—
do not tell them my name.

The mountains echo with stories
forgotten
and rusty, sunk
into the spines of the hills.
Not even the beagles can
find them now.

—

I am not good.

My finger bones are bound in
glass, thick
like an aquarium
and my hair runs with the wind
like a child pulling kite strings
or a dog off her leash.

Please do not think kindly of me.
Or better yet—

do not think of me at all.

I want to be with the dancing mountains,
where the bloodroots bloom in spring,
and gray fields douse the hillsides blue.
I want to feel the waters of the West Prong—so
cold it's electric—and to hold my hands
beneath the rapids until they're blue,
too, grasping the slick skipping
stones like anchors.

I want to soar with the wild geese
on wings loftier than angels, to
touch the moss that cradles the rot,
green as anything can be
and soft.

I want to feel the mountains wheeze.
I'll drift in their wind as smoke, and
it will not be a lie. The coyotes will know
my voice, the tendrils of my skin, and
I won't think of paradise
as my feet grace the daffodils
that hug the hips of the mountains,
lining them like a tattoo.

Death and Decadance: The Brooding Bunch

Emily Smith

Characters: Sem, Thiamin

Place: Their gothic mansion, and also the Arctic.

[SEM and THIAMIN sit at opp site ends of their banquet table. Plates of spaghetti are in front of them. They eat.]

THIAMIN

They would always complain that I was blocking the drawing room door, or blocking the fireplace, or looked unsettling lurking in the corner

SEM

If they would try spending a few hours in a dark dusty corner they would understand

THIAMIN

That is one of the best places to brood

SEM

I've never met someone who makes a point to brood as often as I do

THIAMIN

Me neither it feels like my soul is being /safely carried in the
same urn as your soul

SEM

...

What if.. Sundays were brooding days

THIAMIN

That's a marvelous idea

SEM

Something intentional. It's better to brood with intention

THIAMIN

Marvelous

SEM

You wouldn't be disturbed if you came home and found me
brooding on a day that isn't Sunday? In inconvenient spaces?

THIAMIN

I'd be disturbed if I didn't

[Music plays. Gothic dance spaghetti ritual. They
put more spaghetti on their plates. They sit down
and poke at it with their forks. The forks clink on
the plates.]

THIAMIN

Do you ever...

SEM

Do I ever what?

THIAMIN

Think that you've had all of your good ideas? Or that people are going to look at you exploring things or expressing yourself and be afraid to tell you to leave?

SEM

Why do you think I'm alone?

THIAMIN

That's oddly comforting

SEM

It's peaceful. I can eat plates as I want to
Rip a chapter out of a book if it's upsetting

THIAMIN

Or rip a chapter out if it's amazing

SEM

Or enraging

THIAMIN

Or just...

SEM

Exactly

THIAMIN

What do you think about when you brood?

SEM

I try not to. But when I do think, I think about death

THIAMIN

Death will come eventually and that will be after a Brooding Day

SEM

Or *on* a Brooding Day. You never know when it will come for us

THIAMIN

Which is why we brood when we can

But what if our corners become too familiar and they make us think about death the same way week after week? What if there are many unfamiliar things that could drive us to dread as well?

SEM

What a marvelous world

[They eat. Music plays. They drape onto the table and hold up signs that say "IT'S SUNDAY" "IT'S BROODING DAY". They un-brood and Start eating again.]

SEM

I was thinking of ripping chapters from my books today and burying them in the garden

THIAMIN

I think I'm going to take a vacation to the Arctic

SEM

Tremendous

THIAMIN

Will you be okay to brood on your own?

SEM

You won't be home for Brooding Day?

THIAMIN

I don't know when I will be home

SEM

Oh

[SEM takes a big bite of pasta.]

THIAMIN

I need to know that I haven't discovered everything yet

SEM

What would be wrong with that?

THIAMIN

There would be nowhere else to go. Brooding Days wouldn't feel special because I would know what comes next. I would have

no promise of future melancholy, just the routine morbidity as I
wait for death with no newness in the between

SEM

The Arctic.

THIAMIN

It's cold there. And dark. And there's nothing. I can spread out
and brood in many inconvenient places. Will you be alright to
brood on your own?

SEM

I did for years.

[THIAMIN stuffs spaghetti in his pockets.]

THIAMIN

Farewell friend, I will be back soon

[As THIAMIN goes to the Arctic, SEM flips
through signs that say "Monday- Brooding"
"Tuesday- Brooding" "Wednesday-Brooding" etc.
until he gets to Saturday. He throws his sign
down.]

SEM

(To the audience) I wasn't a happy baby. I hated the sun. My
mother wasn't a happy mother either. This is the last thing I have
from someone I once loved. And I sit and poke at it and carry it

in my pockets.

[SEM pulls pasta out of his pockets.]

Devour it. Break it Bury it. Let it calcify. Boil in the depth of my stomach. Digest and return to the Earth and continue the cycle and grow into a new wheat plant that is nourished by its brothers' corpses. BUT. For now it lives here along with the pages I don't tear out. She would look at me like I was the obscure one for brooding on Sundays, but she would go to church and leave me here and she'd come back and the pictures would be askew and the towels gone and her favorite books missing endings and she never bothered to ask why I'd tear those out so they'd never end for her but it was mischief to her and I was there for seventeen years and would never leave-

[SEM shuts himself up by stuffing the pocket pasta in his mouth.]

I brooded alone for so long, why is it impossible now? Why can't I remember how to let myself decompose and rot with the worms and cobwebs?

[He flops down munching on spaghetti.
THIAMIN is in the Arctic. It is not what he
expected.]

THIAMIN

(To the audience) I never like sitting in the sun. I like to lay

outside of the light on the edge of warmth. It's all sun here. I thought it would be cold and dark because it's the Arctic. But it's hot and bright and I don't feel like myself. I crave the melancholy of clouds. You can't brood in the sun.

[THIAMIN flops and flips through signs that say "Monday- Brooding" "Tuesday- Brooding" "Wednesday-Brooding" etc. Until he gets to Saturday. He takes out a pen and crosses out "Saturday-Brooding" and writes a sign that says "brooding in the Arctic isn't the same without you" and holds it up. SEM sees this and writes "come home." THIAMIN comes home. They see each other and do a happy dance ending in them eating their spaghetti. They don't embrace but they do a gothic version of it.]

THIAMIN

There were no gramophones or tureens. No plates to eat. The sun never set so I couldn't tell when it was Sunday and nothing rots it just freezes. It's too open. There are no drawing rooms or fireplaces or cobwebbed corners. I have found the place I never want to leave and it is here with you. Things will be new because you are new and I am new and death comes for us because we change. Let's hang the paintings askew. Let's rip pages from books and hide the towels and brood together

[THIAMIN pulls a handful of spaghetti out of his pocket and hands it to SEM.]

I found this for you

[SEM takes it and throws it into the audience.]

THIAMIN

That's where I put things for safekeeping too

SEM

You know what day it is...

THIAMIN

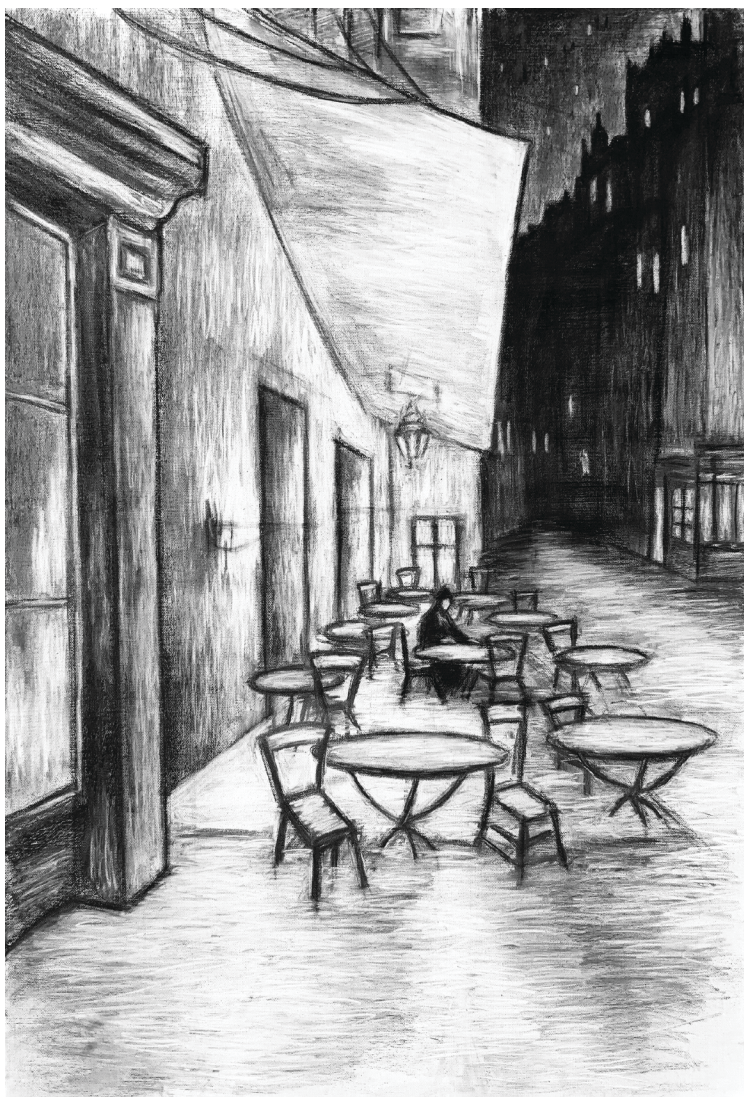
Is it...

[SEM holds up the "IT'S SUNDAY" sign and
THIAMIN holds up the "IT'S BROODING DAY"
sign. They both flop on the table holding their
signs.]

END OF PLAY

Cafe Terrace at COVID Capacity

Donald Patten



Argument: An Explanation That Supports an Idea or Makes It True

Sara S. Barenfeld

At the known sex-offenders funeral you quoted the recent *New York Times* piece and said, regarding a liberal arts education, “the human desire to think deeply and live meaningfully cannot be quenched.”

And my Google searches were as follows:

What is an emotional disability?

Is Bipolar disorder a form of neurodiversity?

Is Bipolar disorder a disability?

Does my trauma qualify me for diversity, equity, and inclusion funding?

Will the current president take away my diversity, equity, and inclusion funding?

Do mothers qualify for scholarships and awards meant for low-income and unrepresented groups?

How much does it cost to get divorced in the State of New Jersey?

What are the first steps to getting divorced?

Will I lose custody of my daughter if I take an anti-psychotic?

What is alimony?

How much alimony will I get?

When does ovulation usually happen?

What time does my favorite coffee shop close?

What time does my favorite coffee shop open?

How many calories are in oat milk?
Will drinking caffeine cause a miscarriage?
How many people live in Gaza?
How many people have died in Gaza?
How many people need to die before you can call something a genocide?
How long can you live without food?
How long can you live without water?
What should I do if ICE agents show up at my class?
What are some causes of rashes in children?
If you delete a Whatsapp conversation and reopen the chat does the chat history show up?
Do you need a meningitis booster shot?
What are the chances of conceiving at age 33?
Is it a risk to have children more than five years apart?
Is it a risk to have children more than six years apart?
Is it a risk to have children more than seven years apart?
Is it a risk to have children more than eight years apart?
Can I take Seroquel during pregnancy?
Who should I call if I smell gas in my house?
Where can I buy matches?

Monsoon Season

Ashmi Ranjan

I remember the alley that led to the hotel where I lived
for 6 weeks in Jaipur, Rajasthan.
Where the monkeys played in the courtyard
as we ate melt in your mouth mangos and cheese omelets with
chili sauce.

In my dreams, I go back there
to the balcony where we drank the Royal Stag
you bought at duty free,
our feet pushing us back and forth on the swing,
humming Nick Drake and Neil Young.

It was the summer I was 19 years old, and I
saw myself in the girls on the street,
in the kajol smudged around their eyes,
and thick black braids swinging from hip to hip.

I spoke sing-song Hindi
and rode on the back of the bellboy's
Royal Enfield in the rain.
I put my head on his shoulder
and my arms around his waist.

In Delhi, I saw my uncle for the first time in 8 years,
he bought me jhumka and mithai,

he held my chin in his palm and looked for the baby features he
once knew,
and as he left he called me darling
and I wept thinking of all the life we should have lived together.

It was monsoon season
and the streets swelled with rushing black water.
I stood at the end of the alley,
watching it seep in,
and follow the path we walked down every night
drunk and happy.

Contributor Biographies

Muna Agwa is a junior studying Neuroscience and Creative Writing at the University of Michigan. She writes poems and loves exploring the intersections between the arts and sciences. When she isn't reading or writing, she enjoys ditching her technology, hiking, and swimming.

Sara S. Barenfeld is a doctoral student in the English department at Stony Brook University where they are also a recipient of the Dr. W. Burghardt Turner Fellowship. They hold a master's in English from Montclair State University, a master's in education from the University of Massachusetts at Boston, and a bachelor's in journalism from CUNY Baruch College. They currently reside on unceded Lenape land.

Meaghan Branham is a writer currently based in Nashville, Tennessee. Previously, she served as managing editor for *i4 Business*, an Orlando-focused business magazine, where she helped to lead an editorial team and contributed monthly. She earned her bachelor's degree in English Literature with a minor in Women's Studies from the University of Central Florida. She is always looking for ways to bridge the gap between pop culture and high art, with a lifelong passion for film, literature, and fashion.

Denver Boxleitner is a University of North Florida fine arts student whose drawings, paintings, poems, and short stories have been published.

J.H. Davis is a writer currently living in Los Angeles. He has previously published in the *Cape Cod Poetry Review*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Laurel Review*, and *Blackheart Magazine*. He currently splits his time between California and Massachusetts with his wife and two daughters.

Caleb Frailey is a 21-year-old poet from Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania. Currently studying at the University of Michigan, he is pursuing a Bachelor of Music in Violin Performance, as well as a Minor in Creative Writing with a focus in poetry. Frailey's poem, "175," is his first published work.

Emma Greathead is an amateur bodybuilder, baking scientist, and fiction enthusiast currently earning her B.F.A. in Creative Writing at Western Michigan University. Between shifts as a barista, she's always writing or listening to podcasts about writing. Emma loves crafting queer, multidimensional characters caught in sappy romance and gasp-worthy drama. She finds inspiration through long walks, hours in a coffee shop, and the kind of daydreaming her friends and family call "spacing out." Passionate, curious, and (dangerously) addicted to caffeine, she's committed to creating stories full of curiosity, humor, and heart.

Isa Hoofnagle is a senior at Florida State University pursuing a degree in Creative Writing. She started speaking at ten months old and hasn't really stopped since. A long-time writer, her main specialty is poetry. Isa is the editor-in-chief of *The Kudzu Review*, the undergraduate literature magazine at FSU. She has a dog, a sister, and two wonderful parents who are probably

proud of how cool she is.

Cassidy Howard is a writer, poet, and student at Michigan State University, pursuing a degree in Journalism with a minor in Creative Writing. Her poetry has been published and performed in venues including PBS's *Detroit Performs*, MSU's FemFest, and the Corona Multimedia Showcase. In 2021, she was part of the InsideOut Youth Performance Troupe, and in 2023, she received an MSU CREATE! Microgrant to produce a film exploring the impact of gun violence on students and teachers (What's Left Behind). Their most recent accomplishment is the publication of their first book, exploring themes of grief: *Limbo*.

Joan Hu is a poet from Shenzhen, China, currently a first-year student at Mount Holyoke College. Her work explores themes inspired by nature, as well as daily interactions with natural products, like fruits and vegetables; she is fascinated by the diversity of ecology and has recently grown fond of exploring the fermentation process. Joan is interested in exploring the forms in writing, experimenting, and experiencing their effects. In her spare time, Joan enjoys crocheting, playing, and playing music (all instruments), and watching movies.

Ramsey Jester is an emerging writer in the Pacific Northwest. His work has been published in *BODY* and the *Licton Springs Review*.

E. Jones is an indigenous writer from the Haudenosaunee Territory. Currently, they are located in New York City as a third-

year undergraduate student majoring in Creative Writing and Film at Columbia University. The transitional experience from reservation to city guides their writing to examine the unique experience of indigeneity and its perseverance in a world diverging from environmental sensitivity.

Lucas Lee is a junior at UNC Chapel Hill, majoring in Political Science and Philosophy on a Pre-Law track. Motivated by service to others, Lucas is interested in litigation at the intersection of law, politics, and social justice. He enjoys writing as a means of reflection and introspection but had never written creative nonfiction prior to spring 2025. In his free time, Lucas enjoys curating Spotify playlists, staying active, spending time with friends, and chasing sunsets.

Daniel L. Mask is a new writer whose work has been published by *Rattle* a few times. Their poems often take an image-driven cinematic approach—meditative, while exploring labor, memory, and disappearance. Danny has a Master's degree in English from the University of Houston. He has taught English in Africa and is a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer. They live in Winnabow/Wilmington, North Carolina.

Lara Maun is an undergraduate student at Michigan State University. Having always harbored a love for art, she uses film photography as a medium to capture her travels and the people and environments she discovers. She hopes to showcase the beauty in the mundane and that peace can come from anywhere.

Ryan Offermann is a Texas-born undergraduate student at Colorado State University, majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. Her favorite genres are poetry and fiction, with an emphasis on ephemerality and the human experience. In her free time, she enjoys reading, baking, painting, and traveling. She plans to continue writing and collecting fun little hobbies and idiosyncrasies.

Donald Patten is an artist and cartoonist from Belfast, Maine. He creates oil paintings, illustrations, ceramics and graphic novels. His art has been exhibited in galleries throughout Maine. To view his online portfolio, visit @donald.patten on Instagram.

Maia Patton is a senior at the University of San Francisco, where she is completing her degree in Creative Writing and English. Her poetry often explores themes of family, memory, and identity. When she was young, she was gifted a set of sparkly notebooks and pens, and since then, writing has been a creative outlet for her. Beyond poetry, she enjoys writing nonfiction, and she hopes to pursue a career as a professor of either creative writing or poetry.

Ashmi Ranjan is a sophomore at MSU.

K.G. Ricci is a self-taught NYC artist who has been creating collages for the past seven years. In that time, his work has evolved from the larger 24x48 panels to 7x10 books and, most recently, to a series of 11x14 collages on cardboard titled *Incongruities*. His work has been in gallery exhibitions throughout the country,

and has appeared in numerous online exhibitions. Many of Ken's most recent "visual stories" have been featured in literary magazines.

Athena Serbourne is a Métis poet from London, Ontario, and a BFA student studying Creative Writing and Psychology at the University of British Columbia. An ardent adorer of nature, she loves to explore themes of nature intertwined with our experiences of love, grief, and intergenerational trauma. Her poems "Home" and "The Hush" will be published in *The Malahat Review's* Winter 2025 issue.

Sophia Sarkies is a first-year undergraduate student at Columbia University, originally from New Jersey. She is currently studying Economics and English. In her free time, she enjoys experimenting with different mediums of art, including oil pastels, acrylics, and watercolors by using unconventional materials such as sand, thread, and wood. Her pieces are an homage to her Ecuadorian heritage, incorporating stylistic renditions of traditional Andean folk art. When she is not creating art, she is listening to Hozier, writing poetry, and publishing legal research papers for the Columbia Hispanic Pre-law Review.

Emily Smith is a multi-disciplinary theatre artist residing in the Pacific Northwest. They hold a BA in Theatre from Pacific University and a certificate from the Institute for Contemporary Performance at PETE. She was Promising Playwright at the 2017 and 2018 Portland Center Stage JAW Festivals. They enjoy finding joy, wonder, and whimsy in the process of decay.

David B. Such is a left-handed mechanical engineer with four decades of experience working with turbines and other machinery. Off the job, he retreats to his home in the foothills of Colorado, where, contrasted to his industrial work environment, he appreciates close connections with natural surroundings and enjoys reading, writing, drawing, and gardening. His essays, poetry, and drawings have appeared in *Weber - The Contemporary West*, *The T.J. Eckleburg Review*, *Penumbra: Literary and Art Journal*, *The Flagler Review*, *Magpie Zine*, and elsewhere. Visit David at dbsuch.wordpress.com.

Dimitri Teixeira is an award-winning grant writer turned creative writer. He was born and raised in Rhode Island, where he still lives with his partner, Dylan, and their dog, Max (affectionately known as Pookie). He's a first-generation college graduate with a BA in sociology from Rhode Island College. Beyond writing, Dimitri appreciates spiders, stargazing, and the music of Sufjan Stevens.

Carter Vance is a writer and poet originally from Cobourg, Ontario, Canada, currently resident in Gatineau, Quebec, Canada. His work has appeared in such publications as *The Smart Set*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, and *A Midwestern Review*, amongst others. His debut novel, *Smaller Animals*, was recently published by Roundfire Books.

Sara Vernekar's writing has appeared in *The Hindu*, *Eunoia Review*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *JAKE*, *Trouvaille Review*, and other publications. An alumna of Anita's Attic and The

Hima ayan Writing Retreat, her work was nominated for Best of the of the Net in 2025.

Ronald Walker is an artist living in the Sacramento area in California. He holds an MFA and an MA in painting, and his work has been shown in more than 50 solo exhibits to date.

Sophia Wherley is a first-year MSU transfer student. She is currently studying English and Creative Writing with a focus on poetry and fiction. The *Red Cedar Review* will be her first publication. When she's not writing, Sophia enjoys listening to music, reading, and hanging out with her childhood dog, Colby.

Lynn Wright is an artist, a writer, and a recent graduate of Michigan State University with a degree in Games and Interactive Media and English with a Creative Writing Concentrate. When not drawing or writing, she can be found playing video games, reading, or rock climbing. *Red Cedar Review* is the first literary magazine her work has been published in.

Omar Zefier, primarily known as a visual artist, is a Native writer, poet, artist, musician, and sound designer from Fort Worth, Texas; he is currently working toward the future release of his debut poetry collection, as well as a collection of short fiction. He's had only one other poem published, in volume one of Tough Poets Press's biannual *Tough Poets Review*.

Editor Biographies

Nura Al-Shumari is a senior at Michigan State University, studying English with a concentration in creative writing. She is expected to graduate at the end of the Spring 2026 semester.

Riley Baker is a prose editor and a senior graduating from Michigan State University with a degree in English and a concentration in Creative Writing. In her spare time, you can find her reading (of course), writing, questioning the universe, or playing video games and TTRPGs.

Victoria Blonde is a senior graduating from Michigan State University with a degree in Political Theory, Constitutional Democracy, and a minor in Creative Writing. She is a prose editor and fiction writer who enjoys reading fantasy, speculative fiction, or anything that confronts her perceptions of the world around her. Victoria plans to pursue further education through a publishing certificate and then a career in publishing. In her free time, she enjoys reading, painting, and jewelry making. Victoria is grateful for the opportunity to work on the RCR's 61st issue. Go Green!

Peyton B Durrett is a writer out of Lansing, Michigan. As of 2025, he is a senior at Michigan State University, pursuing a degree in English (Creative Writing) with a minor in Film Studies. He has published fiction and poetry. When not knee-deep in work, he can be found frequenting your local comic and record shops.

Gavin French has been writing novels since elementary school, and specifically has always loved fantasy. As a senior at Michigan State University, his plans after college include writing, writing, a little bit of writing on the side. Being a part of the Red Cedar Review was one of the most memorable college experiences for him, and as this edition comes to fruition, he's looking forward to what the next edition of life will bring!

Sabrina Girardi is a poetry editor. She is a senior double majoring in English with a Creative Writing concentration and Professional and Public Writing. She enjoys writing and reading stories that challenge the bounds of reality. In leisure, she is traveling or with her life companions.

Bo Hammond is a queer pessimist who enjoys reading, writing, and editing poetry. They graduated from Michigan State University in December, with a bachelors in English, Creative Writing and a minor in Religious Studies. Although they plan to pursue an MFA, they have not committed to a program. If they are not avoiding their own writing, you can find them talking to their cats about poem ideas or procrastinating graduate school applications.

Priscilla Herrmann is a senior studying English with a concentration in Creative Writing and is a member of the poetry editorial team. Being the eldest of three daughters, she is a staunch feminist, and centers the majority of her own work around the perspectives of women. She loves all forms of writing, and she has loved being able to read the variety of works presented to the

Red Cedar Review. In her spare time, Priscilla enjoys spending time with her loved ones and beloved cat, Toaster.

Brooke Holt is a poetry editor and graphic designer. She is a senior at Michigan State University pursuing a degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and a minor in Graphic Design. Brooke would like to break the *fourth* wall at this time to acknowledge the absurdity of writing about yourself in third person. Yes, I am the one writing this. Why can't we just say I? Anyway, you can find me walking me dogs and riding horses.

Jaylan Larkin is a 22-year-old English senior studying at Michigan State University. His main hobbies consist of reading and writing, as well as playing the bass guitar with his buddies. You can often find his partner and him in the Baker woodlot running with our dog, Power. His favorite author is tied between Tatsuki Fujimoto and Fyodor Dostoevsky. He believes everyone should read *Chainsaw Man*.

Indigo Logan is a senior at Michigan State University majoring in Creative Writing and minoring in LGBTQ+ Studies. Their work is primarily fiction and creative nonfiction, with an emphasis on disability and queer representation.

Emily Moore is a senior at Michigan State University studying English with a concentration in creative writing. A writer, artist, and prose editor, this is her first experience with professional editing, and she's enjoyed collaborating with her fellow students to create this edition of the Red Cedar Review. When she's not

working toward her degree, you can usually find her playing *The Sims 4* or screaming at a heavy metal concert.

Amita Mridha is a poetry editor and social media coordinator at the Red Cedar Review. They are currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in Literature and Creative Writing. Their writing explores the intersections of South Asian culture and queer identity, excavating what it means to live between the two. Through their work at the RCR, Amita aims to amplify underrepresented voices and unearth new perspectives.

Micah Prince is a member of the poetry editorial team for the Red Cedar Review. They are a fourth-year student at Michigan State University majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and most often write works of creative fiction and nonfiction, poetry, and sketch comedy.

Isabel Schroeder is a prose editor. She is a graduating senior studying English with a concentration in Creative Writing. Having grown up in Clare, MI, watching Dr. Pol, she wanted to be a veterinarian for twelve years until she realized needles and foul odors are not her strong suit. Now, Isabel is looking to break into the freelance editing scene. Her hobbies include singing, playing piano, and stalking the local cat cafe's Instagram page.

Alex Spevetz is an actor and writer based in Michigan. They are a senior at Michigan State University, studying for a BFA in Acting and a BA in English Creative Writing. Through horrifying short stories and improv comedy, Alex pushes audiences to re

consider who they are and expand their empathy. This past fall, they played Dr. Dorn in Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, but can often be found drinking boba and feeding squirrels when not performing on stage or writing.

Yigit Akan is the project manager of the magazine. Coming from Türkiye, he is a junior studying English with a creative writing concentration, and film studies. He enjoys writing about the human experience, the small and the big things that make our lives unique to ourselves and the places we inhabit. One of the prose editors of the 60th Issue, he enjoys the power that the Red Cedar Review has to highlight the uniqueness of personal experience.

Trevor Sullivan is a prose editor who is majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. He has enjoyed reading and writing ever since he was young, gravitating toward the freedom of stories and the impact that words can have. He loved working with the Red Cedar Review, given his aspirations of working within the publishing industry. When he's not engaging with written word, he's procrastinating and looking for dogs to pet.

Jenna Waggoner calls the Creative Writing program at Michigan State University her home for now. If she could have infinite minors, she would, but is settling on Women's Studies and Art History. She loves searching for poems that compel her to see things upside-down and on their sides, especially when they are found in dog-eared volumes from used bookstores. You can find her re-watching *Daria*, listening to Billie Marten, waiting for winter all year long, and searching for sleeping cats in windows.