THE CAULDRON

2015-2016
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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And to you, the reader.
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Front Cover</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Coyolxauhqui</td>
<td>Isabela Agosa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>To Rihanna*</td>
<td>Cameron Schneberger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Mama Swan</td>
<td>Arianna Letherer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Female Outline on a White Canvas, approx. 24 in x 36 in</td>
<td>Sara McKinney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Dusa</td>
<td>Cecilia DiFranco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>institutionalize you</td>
<td>Justin Danzy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>lil tits</td>
<td>Omari Oliver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Lauren Perlaki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>This, Here</td>
<td>Sarena Brown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>All Right</td>
<td>Lauren Perlaki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Appalachian Trail</td>
<td>Natalie Martell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>I Believe It's Called Dodge</td>
<td>Andrea Beitel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Jordan Meiller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Solomon's Song Under Erasure</td>
<td>Samantha Young</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Devotion</td>
<td>Kate Liska</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Church Windows / Kids at Weddings / Shadow Puppets</td>
<td>Aliera Morasch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>In Praise of the Petal-Plucker</td>
<td>Sarah Schmitt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>I Don't Weep for Dead Flowers</td>
<td>McKenna Bramble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Purple</td>
<td>Mallika Mitra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Flower Vase</td>
<td>Hayleigh Alamo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>material nothings</td>
<td>Lauren Perlaki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Saptapadi*</td>
<td>Malavika Rao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>When We Laugh</td>
<td>Aliera Morasch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Malia</td>
<td>Chiara Sarter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Beautiful Strangers</td>
<td>Mallory McClure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Always Watching</td>
<td>Elizabeth Tyburski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Nova</td>
<td>Sara McKinney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Feeling is Sight</td>
<td>Hayleigh Alamo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Drum Theory</td>
<td>Justin Danzy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Parus: An Essay in Pieces</td>
<td>Jordan Meiller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>The Sun Rose</td>
<td>Aliera Morasch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Look at the Camera and Smile</td>
<td>Elijah Hamilton-Wray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>P.T.S.D.</td>
<td>Isabela Agosa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>Crash (July 3rd, 2014)</td>
<td>Natalie Martell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>Simulated Options for Maxwell's Dilemma</td>
<td>Dillon McMurray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>Pixelated 2</td>
<td>Elizabeth Tyburski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>Waking</td>
<td>Caroline Peterson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>For The High</td>
<td>Cameron Schneberger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>Petra Stoppel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42.</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>Cameron Schneberger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>Petra Stoppel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Jasmine Kyon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td>Foster Naïsuksaa</td>
<td>Marie Fiori</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td>Auntie Val's house</td>
<td>Omari Oliver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td>Evolution Fish</td>
<td>Chiara Sarter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48.</td>
<td>Four Ways to Vanish an Elephant</td>
<td>Jordan Meiller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>Petra Stoppel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>Body</td>
<td>Hadley Harrison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.</td>
<td>trans pt. 2</td>
<td>Omari Oliver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52.</td>
<td>Escaping What's Seen On the Inside</td>
<td>Hayleigh Alamo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.</td>
<td>Windows*</td>
<td>Mallory McClure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54.</td>
<td>7 Maxims for Brenna</td>
<td>Cameron Schneberger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55.</td>
<td>Authenticity on the Near Margin: A Narrative**</td>
<td>Justin Danzy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56.</td>
<td>Always Watching</td>
<td>Maria Fion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57.</td>
<td>in(con)text</td>
<td>Zoe Johannsen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* denotes Divine Crow Award Winner
** denotes Stephanie Vibbert Award Winner
AWARDS

STEPHANIE VIBBERT AWARD**

The Stephanie Vibbert Award is given to one work which exemplifies the intersection between creative writing and community engagement. The award honors Stephanie Vibbert, a double major in English/Psychology, who died her senior year in a car accident while returning from a peace march in Washington D.C. Stephanie was passionately devoted to creativity and community service, and this award was created to encourage Kalamazoo College writers to use their creativity to explore issues of poverty, human rights, sexual orientation, race, class, gender, and cultural diversity, as they affect the larger community.

The recipient of this year's Stephanie Vibbert Award is Justin Danzy for the excerpt of his non-fiction piece, Authenticity on the Near Margin: A Narrative.

DIVINE CROW AWARDS*

"I invented that way back. I had a crow in my office—a fake one—and somehow, we got it in our heads to call the award the Divine Crow. Sort of duende and sort of ridiculous. I still have the crow." – Diane Seuss, Writer-in-Residence

The Divine Crow Awards are given each year to three exceptional pieces of writing. The pieces are judges blindly judged by a writer from the extended Kalamazoo community, and this year's judge is Airea D. Matthews.

Airea D. Matthews was awarded the 2016 Yale Series of Younger Poets prize. She is currently the Assistant Director of the Helen Zell Writers' Program at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where she earned her MFA, and the Executive Editor of The Offing, a channel of the Los Angeles Review of Books. Her poems have appeared in Best American Poetry 2015, edited by Sherman Alexie, American Poet, Four Way Review, The Missouri Review, The Baffler, Callaloo, Indiana Review, WSQ and elsewhere. Matthews’ fiction and essays have appeared in SLAB, Michigan Quarterly Review and Vida: Her Kind. Her performance work has been featured at the Cannes Lions Festival, PBS's RoadTrip Nation and NPR. A Kresge Literary Arts fellow, Matthews lives in Detroit with her husband and their four children.

This year's selections are "To Rihanna" by Cameron Schneberger, "Saptapadi" by Malavika Rao, and "Windows" by Mallory McClure.
We are excited to present the latest edition of the Cauldron. In the process of putting this collection together, one theme came up again and again: identity. The first piece, Isabela Agosa’s “Coyolxauhqui,” explores the author’s relationship to her given name and the name she almost had, while the final two pieces, Justin Danzy’s “Authenticity on the Near Margin” and Zoe Johansen’s “in(con)text,” explore the formation of Black identity, both in presentation and perception. In between, our contributors wrestle with sexual identity, gender identity, racial identity, and “how to be young.”

The beginning of the book finds our writers seeing themselves through external figures before turning their gaze on, and into, themselves. Though occasionally critical, this self-reflection tends to be compassionate, as in Natalie Martell’s “Crash (July 3rd, 2014),” or even unabashedly affirmative, as in Yuri Gutierrez’s “Manifesto of Acts and Alternate Names for Bitch-Freak Brown Girls.” The visual art selections, meanwhile, challenge the viewer to reflect on the identity of the artist’s subject, be it Cecilia DiFranco’s “Dusa” or Petra Stoppels untitled portraits.

Our cover art, Elizabeth Tybuskis’s “Pixelated” series, can also be interpreted as an examination of identity, the way the variations in each leaf become part of the whole, the small nuances affecting how that identity is writ large. One can see this symbolism reflected in the ways our writers claim their own identities and, in doing so, help define those identities.

The Cauldron itself has started to shift its identity. This year found us making a greater effort to connect with students through workshops and readings. We also brought the Cauldron into the 21st century by getting a Submittable, making it easier than ever for students to submit their work (not to mention making our jobs significantly easier). Looking to the future, we hope that the Cauldron will continue to redefine itself, to grow and innovate, and we hope you can be a part of that change. Keep making your art, keep sharing it with the world, and let’s see what we can become.

Jordan Meiller & Omari Oliver,
Co-Editors
My mom thought about naming me Selena.
She didn't, of course. Not because it wasn't a beautiful name, it is obviously. But Selena Quintanilla had just died. My mom thought that everyone would be naming their kids Selena in tribute. And she just couldn't stand the thought of me having the same name as everyone else. She wanted to give me something special. Something that would sound good in English and Spanish, but still be unique. So she named me Isabela.

In 2014, Isabella was the fourth most popular girls name in the United States, so you can see how well that worked out. Thanks, Twilight.

But even before the pop culture boom, I've never felt right in my name. So much of my life has been spent wishing she had named me Selena. Sometimes, even now, I swirl the name around in my mouth, and it makes me blush.

God, this feeling has been around so long. I can't even remember when Mama first told me the story of my almost name. I must have been born knowing. Forever, Selena has been in my sky, hanging over me.

The Moon Goddess. My name, my real name, is useless to me. The meaning of Isabela—God is plentiful—has nothing to do with me. Literally. My name is all about God. What power could I draw from that when I could have been the moon? Fierce and stark and absolute.

At night, I look up into the sky and breathe reincarnation.

It's stupid, because I'm nothing like what anyone would imagine the Moon Goddess to be. There's the obvious. Physically, I bear no resemblance to the moon goddesses my school taught. No part of me is pale or silver. I'm Mexican and Indian. My skin is brown. Artemis, Diana, Selena—none of them had my golds.

Even then, I'm a dweeb. Like a total dork. The moon should be someone cool and mysterious, right? My emotions come out in solar flares—I'm thrilled and vicious and loving, all cloaked in red, all the time.

When I told Marlisa I was going to be in a play, all she did was laugh. I was indignant.

“What's so funny?” I had said.

“It's just, I see the faces you make now, Bela,” She had to pause to laugh again. “I can't imagine what you'll look like when you're actually trying to be dramatic.”

When I told my 6th grade teacher I was moving across the country, she had smiled at me.

“You'll be fine,” she had said, “You're so warm and bubbly. You'll make friends in no time.”

At my best, I think saying I'm sun would be a much easier thesis to prove.

Still, sometimes, when I smile particularly big at my mom, she'll stop. They'll be this look stirring in her eyes. I don't really know how to describe it. Shining, maybe. Mama, she'll lean down and cup my face. Kiss me.

“Mi luna,” she'll say.
To Rihanna
Cameron Schneberger

I come bearing offerings. One traffic light to anchor your charm bracelet. Two bowling trophies to adorn your earlobes. Three golden spheres - I jacked from the tops of flagpoles, for no reason other than that they remind me of you. Hollow and tantalizing. How do you get away with it? I wish I could live off my attitude. Grip the neck of a champagne bottle and pour it down the drain while I reduce life to pastel tunnels and war chants. America is big and needs many sweethearts, but the ocean lives in my eyes and the harp in my throat is strung with dental floss. But maybe for the thrill. For the camp fire songs nestled in my belly.

Four statues of armless women to elevate your mattress. Five smokestack clouds to wear like a scarf. Six sleepless nights in December, because everyone deserves to see snow scatter under streetlights.

I knew I loved you when you lured 150 music journalists on a Boeing jet with the promise of intimate hot tub nights and blunts rolled on plastic tray tables. Instead they waited hours for the plane to leave the runway while you posted a selfie on Instagram. In it you're on a couch opening your mouth just enough for the smoke to creep out. You're topless, covered in foreign money and hibiscus petals.

Seven palm trees and eight guards with reticles fixed on anything that nears the nine hives that nuzzle the palm blossoms. You've inspired me to chain smoke and eat animal crackers at my own funeral while I mark down who cried loudest and saddest. Your tenth gift was gonna be the sea beast that guarded Andromeda. It's tethered to my wrist with a 52-carat collar and I'm keeping it.

Mama Swan
Arianna Letherer

After one of Gazella O'Malley's final paintings

I know it can't be you - illuminated up there in the doorway. You would be the mama swan, leading her young, dipping her neck, long, stretched under for a cold trout dinner, curved with the grace you lusted after. They never stopped calling you Gussy, did they, my dear, dear Gazella? Never stopped twirling you off the stage - you drowned in the rivers lined by their sweaty backs - so much weaker than yours, weaker than the canvas you painted on late at night after your baby swans were safely nestled. I know it can't be you, down by the river, toes near the edge but not dipped in to feel the powerful waves you crested and bowed late at night. If you could lift the form of your poor deformed son with the tip of your brush and cast him far into the sea, would you? Could you have learned to breathe without the weight of your half-dead child pressing into your bones like dust?

You were the mama swan, but you would never capture something so frail, something as fleeting as life born fraught from your loins, would you Gazella?
Female Outline on a White Canvas, approx. 24in x 36in

Sara McKinney

At first I thought the artist used a knife. The way the lines are—jagged, brutal, tearing the white canvas like skin so that the naked figure was more wounded than woman—this seemed to demand some kind of generative violence. I thought, “Yes, of course, I know what the artist is saying here,” picturing at the same time an art student with a large steak knife carefully butchering the canvas into shape. What better way to comment on our culture of plastic surgery, Photoshop, and the multibillion dollar diet industry where the female body is endlessly sliced-and-diced, cut-and-pasted, than by literally cutting the “perfect” woman into a picture? This woman who is herself knife-like in her slimness, her abs taut and defined (a lean look that bodybuilders refer to as “cut”), her outline sharply visible and curved and, at least from a distance, where the canvas had been cut apart, apparently serrated. What better way to illustrate that annoying 1950s pageant girl mantra: beauty is pain?

But then I noticed her demure expression, the way her face turned downward, looking away from the viewer. The broken canvas curled in at her shoulders, giving dimension and a touch of defensiveness to her sensual pose. The nipple on one of her breasts stood erect. Was it sexual, then? I wondered. Predatory? I thought of the other ways women get cut-back-alley ways, burnt-out streetlamp ways, walking home alone from the bar, Jack the Ripper cut women, as did Ted Bundy and H.H. Holmes. In fact, Chicago boasts an entire bus tour devoted to H.H. Holmes and his particularly gruesome system of woman-cutting. One tour is $35 per person, unless you’re a child under 12, in which case it’s $25. Gotta start them young, I guess.

I pictured the artist sleeping alone in her cheap studio apartment and flinching beneath the covers at every passing car and creaking floorboard. She can hear her neighbors in the hallway, I thought. For hours she lies listening to the soft thud of their footsteps as they walk past her door and when their own doors whisper blessedly closed, the tensed muscles in her arms relax. But sometimes, when the night pants its cold breath against the back of her neck and strange shadows huddle in the corners of the room, the footsteps in the hall do not pass but instead stop at her door. The knob rattles. The door twitches. The lock holds. Slow and frustrated, the footsteps continue down the hall. What better way to capture the terror of a man’s shadow?

I drew closer to the picture, saw the wooden backing as it peeked through the gaps in the the figure’s ribcage and then, the smell of char, faint but definitely there, made me stop. The edges of her body were tinged with brown where the canvas was gone; she had not been cut but burned into the canvas. Her long hair, wildly tangled, trailed freely over the top right corner. I looked at the swell of her thighs, her proud posture, the careless way her arm was thrown behind her head. I wondered what it meant to burn like that, to leave her mark like that—to blaze on, in spite of everything.
institutionalize u

Justin Danzy

kendrick told me that i can be a king,
said i might lose a foot in the process,
but you gotta do what it takes to cling
to the throne, claim it as yours so the next

nigga don't gotta be docile as you.
i don't believe a word he said. that short
black ashy ass beadie bead havin' coon
can't be no king, should be cool with a tour,

a mansion, a cuban link, and other
shit you get when christened a star. i once
thought just like him. thought that i could hover
above the other lowly niggas, front

like i was worth somethin', like i never
fingered a strap, thought to pull the lever.

lil tits

Omari Oliver

lil tits, big head.
lil tits, 9th grade?
prolly ain't catch ya cycle yet.

lil tits, boy.
lil tits, girl? nah can't be—
lil tits, training bra.
lil tits, what the fuck they training for?

lil tits, big dreams.
lil tits, indigoed nipples.
lil tits, the right one's still bigger,
and the left one prolly got a french accent.

lil tits' first time in a bra is a nightmare,
and a never ending staring contest with the mirror...
lil tits wonder "will people notice the difference?"
'cause it would be better if no one noticed.
lil tits' first time in a push up bra be a horror movie.
lil tits' blue zebra striped push up just be a closeted shelf memory.

lil tits' home be a sports bra,
or a baggy shirt where don't nobody see 'em.
lil tits not timid, not shy.
lil tits body just not sure if they s'posed to be there.
DISCLAIMER: RATED X
XX ON XX IF LUCKY. HEAD S.E.-
XX MAN UNLESS YOU'RE A 7 YR. OLD GIRL WHO HATES SUGAR.
XX GIRL WHO'S
XX. WRONG CHROMOSOME, RIGHT MUTATION, UNLESS YOU'RE
XX A BOY SRY "BOY"

Xnty – Fred Phelps resurrects himself to show off his butter lumps – his
plumped lips new spew
Xn and I ask him if his name isn’t Fred, but Emily. A rose by any other
name would smell as sweet as
XORCISM. He asks me to press his hands against mine, he asks me not to
object, he takes me to
Xanadu, and he says, This is why you need Jesus. He says, Sign here – I
don’t write. He forces my hand, signs
“X.” says Now you see the truth; the light. All I saw was a kiss that insisted
it was bigger than it really was. So I
- ed out his “X,” made a #, & gave his claims some weight. God knows the
Valley of Dry Bones is gonna need >
xeriscaping to make flesh form, flail, and finally prevail over the hefty slang
of Holy Butter Lumps.

XXL = 1. eXtra eXtra large 2. eXtra eXtra long – I ask Holy Butter Lumps
not to lie to me, He knows he’s
XS = 1. eXtra salty 2. eXtra small – he drops his drawers, a flash of his halo-
head opens the floodgates of my
xerophthalmia eyes. he is beaming, I am on my knees – I am crying. he asks
what I think – I tell him to wait. 300
x magnified and I mistake him for King Kong, push the telescope away and
I compare him to a
Xu – he thinks I’m saying “zoo” and he believes he’s a wild animal – really;
I’m saying he’s 1/100 of a dong.
XX = The sweetest form of sugar known to tongue, sprinkles it over my
head and says Now you are a woman, but
XY is still my genetic code, and I tell him I can’t get any sweeter.
XXXX is the sugar, itself. he makes me bathe with the white lady – so
turned-on, he goes to buy more, but buys
XXX instead, & now it’s the plot line to some sick porno only men of God
enjoy – he is falling-action. I am clima-

XYZ he repeats the last 3 letters of the alphabet 3 times over
XYZ
XYZ
XYZ – he does this to justify the affair, he does this for God. I’m infertile, but
feel a kick in my stomach, the
xenopus smells my urine and produces eggs of her own. he shouts,
REJOICE and names me Mary. HBL = H-
XL = Holy Xero Lips = OG = original god – he prays to himself, isn’t ready
to leave – takes out his
X-acto knife & cuts & cuts hoping to sever his ties with the afterlife. he’s
bound both ways whether he sees it or not.
X Factor = his child growing inside of me
X Factor = XMS sans S add h = his eXtended memory.
Manifesto of Acts and Alternate Names for Bitch-Freak Brown Girls

Yuri Gutiérrez

1) Golden umbilical cords adorning baby girls’ necks
2) Bathing in La Malinche’s Tears
3) Hernan Cortes’ bastard daughter
4) A snake overcoming an eagle
5) Shitty handmade tortillas
6) Starving vegetarians sitting in a naughty corner at family cookouts. Meat-like rituals.
7) Tofu tacos
8) Cactus fruit stinging your hands with thorns
9) Brown skin scrubbed red
10) Defending your coarse arm hairs from bullies
11) Praising and loving the brown nipples
12) Melting Gold skin into pearl skin

13) Blue Hair gone wrong
14) Mispronouncing words in English and Spanish; forgetting which language was first
15) Rio Grande’s hopeful dead souls swallowing me
16) Swaggy strolling down an avenue with XL horchatas and rosaries

17) Juan Diego cutting roses at Tepeyac; Juan Diego carrying roses to Spanish priests
18) Texting my mom, “I’ll be home by 10”, while I sit on his face
19) Daydreaming of rainbow cocks in church
20) Guadalupe’s favorite spiritual masturbator

21) These are the accusations
these are the sins your skin faces backlash for
these are the things that make you some shades lighter of a lie,
and some shades darker of a truth
Gold.
Bitch-freak Brown GIRL
GOLD.

This, Here

After Kush Thompson

Sarena Brown

This, we stutter.
This, we walk in numbers.
This, where her dress falls to the floor
as the earth cries for our mother. We all know it is past our bedtime.
This, where cracked streets drag reckless with the moon, with the fuckboys we call men.
This, where slurred words and smeared makeup make no difference once the lights are shut off, once she is naked, once the door is locked.
This, where your voice box has not yet been stripped for parts.
Pry open your ribcage. Feel your beating heart flounder in the air.
This, savage. This, weak.
This, suffocating heat.

Here, you follow the steps to your old house on Kingsmill Drive.
See the weeds jut through the cracks of sidewalk your mother abandoned.
Here, you peak through the door to find only shadows.
Here, you were raised on Acrylic paint and unemployment.
You were raised away from Indian accents and Bollywood dance clips.
You were raised into all-you-can-eat buffet lines and endless cat gifs.
Here, you were raised to know better than this.

Here, you do not falter.
Here, you are the one brown girls think brown and white girls think tan.
Here, the obnoxious theater kid and the less obnoxious theater kid make you straighten your hair, flatten away your wild curls, burn your identity out.

Stage makeup is not made for this skin. Please know you are not sin.
All Right
Lauren Perlaki

Appalachian Trail
Natalie Martell

White rock rose
around the summit
like slabs of ice roasting
in the August sun, or
teeth, perhaps —
Earth,
I wonder how you feel
as humans climb
over your jaws
while you yawn,
and sleep
in your mouth.
I Believe It's Called Dodge

Andrea Belief

Amongst faded cornfields stretching lazily across forgotten expanses, rickety cars tumble past momentarily kicking up bits of gravel made to dust as they forget the place between somewhere and nowhere.

Amongst marshy knee-high grasses made of pale yellows and pea soup greens, floppy bloodhounds stumble over acting as though their bark is worth a thousand bites.

Amongst old white houses with peeling paint held up by weedy tufts creeping alongside, children run with feet wet and grassy happy with the space between the front-yard and the back-yard.

Amongst tangy dumpsters behind meat markets expelling smells of smoking venison, three guys named Maverick huddle lighting smoke in their lungs wondering why they should like it.

Amongst the tabloids and packs of Big Red in Aisle 3 of the grocery store, a mom secretly buys ice cream in the afternoon wishing the line were longer.

Amongst the cracked front porch steps and the drunken bed of falling tulips a girl stands shoes freshly laced wondering how far she can run before she has to stop.

Learning

Jordan Meiller

Each time, Owl remembers falling, but not how he gets back up. Still, he finds himself always on the edge — stuck in a loop of falling and falling and never catching the air.

He remembers, too, a time before the falling, when he saw birds in flight and simply envied them the sky. He did not think, back then, to try to join them. To have wings, yet believe he could not fly, was itself a kind of freedom.
Solomon's Song Under Erasure

Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you:
arouse or awaken desire
coming desert
on lover
Under the apple I roused you;
conceived you, there in labor
gave birth. Place over heart your arm;
for strong death,
ejalous unyielding blazing fire, mighty flame.
waters cannot love; rivers wash away
his love, scorned
sister, her breasts grown.
the day she is spoken for

Devotion

So it seems to go that the things we deem insignificant often grow into meaning more than anything, and the things we think may kill us eventually fail to do so. The heartbreak I thought would never mend gave way to a seedling of a romance whose flower still has no name; the absent thank-yous and missed connections in train stations and bookstores still thread across my lips in certain conversations. There are no calendars to tell us what interactions, what goodbyes, what phone calls and one-night stands and broken dishes may and may not matter. The easiest way to plan ahead is to assume that it all does.

The question, then, is once we have proven ourselves wrong in the places we poured our devotion, how do we undo it? How do we unstick our knees from the cathedral floor when we were content to pray forever? How do we undivide the nameless blessings and sins gathered at our feet, and how do we unblur the lines, and pry open the stained glass windows, and catch the sunlight we forgot existed? How do we admit we were wrong?

Though there is nobody to admit to. There is no confessional. There is no unwinding of guilt into salvage. Like science erodes religion, truth erodes the promises we thought we'd keep forever tucked between our legs, holding tightly as we knelt before some holy thing we later learned untrue. After this, there are no priests and gods or even devils. There is only you.
Church Windows / Kids at Weddings / Shadow Puppets

Aliena Morasch
In Praise of the Petal-Plucker

In church on Sunday morning, the priest presents a powerpoint with slide after slide after slide of flowers, some with petals, some plucked.

The congregation tilts its head back and opens its throat, accepting the filament with the wine. The church florist is behind schedule, still standing with a pair of shears, clipping stray thorns from St. Rose's shrine.

Blushing, the bluebells smooth satin skirts over their knobby knees and sing their morning glories—Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.

A portrait of Caucasian Jesus, his hand resting on a beatifically blank-eyed lamb in a field of peonies, leans against the peeling stucco paint.

The youth group pansies don't whisper over lavender rosaries, but wait for church on Sunday morning. The priest presents a powerpoint.

Blushing, a bluebell hefts the satin skirts over her knobby knees and breathes in the cloying honeysuckle. He sings softly as he brings her hand against his skin, feels the cold silver sting of her purity ring.

Black-eyed Susan slides into the pew on Sunday morning, covered in dew and missing the comfort of night's shade, mouthing her prayer to Mary.

I Don’t Weep for Dead Flowers

I Don’t Weep for Dead Flowers

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I lost my virginity on my bedroom floor while my parents barbecued in the backyard. My father flipped the burgers, my mother brought out a tray of vegetables from the kitchen, my sister swung on the jungle gym, and I lay in pain on my white area rug. I had been with the boy for over a year and for some reason my parents trusted him enough to be alone with me in my room. Or maybe their trust was with me, but I've never asked because I've never wanted to know. His neck turned a light purple as he concentrated. I told him it hurt and he told me he was sorry. I told him it hurt and he told me he didn't want to hurt me. I told him it hurt and he told me he didn't know how to do it differently. Months later he became our class president and was accepted to a military academy. I became “first lady” or “his girlfriend” and was accepted to a small liberal arts college in Michigan that no one had heard of.

During my sophomore year of college my boyfriend slapped a beer out of another man’s hand at a party. He said that the guy was looking at me for too long but I could hardly hear his words over the rumbling of the music and screams of excitement from my friends and classmates. I apologized for his behavior and he dragged me all the way back to his dorm room. Snow spraying up from where his shoes had been; Captain Morgan on his tongue. I tried to pull my wrist from out of his grasp but with each yank, he held on tighter. I tried to listen to the words he was slurring while I concentrated on not tripping over the ice in my heels. That evening my wrist grew purple like the bushes at my grandparent’s house and in Uncle Blackie’s yard. I traced the bruise with my finger and thought about how those lilacs and blueberries had faded with the coming season, and so would this.

As I told my best friend from high school why I had broken up with my college boyfriend she sipped at a passion fruit iced tea and raised her eyebrows with every detail I gave her. Just as I thought her brows would recede into her hairline, I ended the story and she took my hand in hers. “Never let a man make you feel like that,” she said while she tapped her sandals on the tiled floor. I gazed into her wide-brimmed sunglasses, nodded, and explained that it had been months and I knew that now and it was why I had left him. She smiled and sighed heavily and squeezed my hand. “We shouldn’t make ourselves small. They’re never worth that,” she said. For the next few days I would doodle “Don’t make yourself small” over all of my notes. When I saw my friend next she was on a diet of passion fruit iced tea, smoothies, and raisins and when I asked why she explained that she didn’t want to be heavier than her boyfriend. I looked at the purple raisins parading across her kitchen table and stuck my hand into a nearby bag of potato chips.

I kissed a boy at the edge of a boating dock on a lake in Michigan and he told me he hoped he had been a positive in my life because I had been one
in his. I smiled when he said this but he probably couldn't see it in the dark and maybe that is for the best. He mentioned his move to Charleston and I mentioned my staying behind. He told me he'd miss me. I frowned when he said this it but he probably couldn't see it in the dark and maybe that is for the best. Sometimes I let my fingertips dance up and down his arm and his veins stick out. It might be my favorite shade of purple. His eyes are the color of Lake George in the morning, when the sun's rays hit the surface and you can see each stone and branch lying on the sand. It makes me wonder why I never noticed blues before.

My sister likes to hug much more than I do. She will surprise me with them, calling out her nickname for me, and wrap her arms around my torso. Sometimes, she will grab my wrists in her small hands and hold them tight, forcing me into an embrace I pretend I don't want. But I always end up holding her close. When she does this I think of the lilacs that once grew on those wrists and I hope her favorite color isn't purple.
material nothings
Lauren Perlaki
moody blues.
groovy bruise.

punk music and mosh pits and black eyes and a kind of living that's
addicting and painful and beautiful.

no matter how often i bathe
i can't seem to get clean.

sex: i ask a farmer if i can pet his beanstalk.
he says, "yes, feel my nature."

the coffee sucked
but i couldn't complain
because it was coffee
and it was free.

i miss church.
i miss holy living.

nightmares—
i have daymares
& middaymares
& unwantedmares peeping through my curtains.
the horse head's dead stare makes me uncomfortable.

we stripped down to our underwear
& we danced in the rain
& we lived
& listened to Enya
in our underwear
& it was good.

i think i'm low-key in love.
i always think i'm low-key in love.
i hear—
birds in the distance—
and bees in my ear
play kind, dear mind—
all living things are either
dead or gone this time
of year.

we're all a little stuck on our first loves.

i kneel to my poems,
& sometimes they kneel back.
but sometimes they say,
“fuck you!”
& run off...
and i don't know what to do when this happens.

i wrote a song for you.
i never finished it.

good friends, mystery men.
smooth cigarettes, and fast
rain. late trains
going nowhere—
they never even show up.

everybody poops.
When We Laugh
Alien Mortis

I don't often get the privilege of spending the entire day with my mother. She's working, I'm working. She's working, I'm in Michigan trying to get a degree I should have gotten closer to home. She's working for me to be in Michigan trying to get a degree I should have gotten at the best school in the country. She's working to provide herself and myself a life of stability, comfort, even luxury—a life she could only dream of when she was young; a life she's worked her whole life to have and to provide. So I don't often get the privilege to spend a whole day with my mother because she is working so hard to give me the privilege of opportunity and I'm working so hard not to waste that privilege. But recently, I got to spend most of the day with her, walking around town, going to the mall, doing things we rarely do together. She tells me of her morning at work. She tells me of the lunch meeting she had with her colleagues: white men; white executives. My mother, Small Brown Woman, her colleagues, Tall White Men. According to their job titles, they are equals in power. According to everything else they are not equals in anything. The check comes, and a unique waiter places it beside Small Brown Woman. Tall White Man in the group, smiles, laughs, reaches across the table, says We can't let the woman pay the bill! Small Brown Woman smiles, laughs, reaches faster, says Yes we can. She pays.

We're sitting at our table. We've ordered a bottle of wine. We are celebrating being together before I go back to Michigan where I'm getting that degree I should have gotten closer to home. The waiter brings our wine to the table and looks at my father (the beer-lover) and introduces the wine. It's the wrong wine. My mother says so. The waiter looks at her, notices she is there. She looks back at him. He brings the right wine. He looks at her this time, but still gives my father the taster. I'm willing my father to give it to my mother to taste first. He doesn't. We talk about all of these things at the table, my mother, father, and me. We talk about them and laugh. My mother laughs because this happens with every breath and she needs to cope. My father laughs because he hates that this happens to his wife and hates it more when he doesn't notice, and he needs to cope. I laugh because I see this everywhere, because I see the pain of the people I love, I see it and it happens differently to me and I don't know how to process it and I see it beating down my mother and I see my father not noticing and I need to cope. We all laugh. The restaurant laughs. We blend in to the laughter bouncing off the walls around us, closing us in. But we laugh because it hurts too much to do anything else. We laugh because it happens always and we explain it and it can be explained away. We laugh because it happens always and we know my dad cares, but we know he doesn't see it until we point it out to him and that might be the thing that hurts the most.

We are walking around the mall looking for a nice dress. My mother is to receive an award for her leadership and work in the community. We are looking for a nice dress. We walk to a dress rack in Nordstrom and a woman greets us. She says Hello, she smiles, she says The sales rack is over there. We smile. We say Thank you. And we stay right where we are.

We meet my dad for dinner. It's a nice restaurant. My mom is parking. My dad and I put our names down: it's an hour wait. The hostess smiles, tells us she'll get us a table as soon as she can. My mom finds us and we decide to go for a walk while we wait. We go for a walk. We go back and wait outside the restaurant. My mom walks over to the hostess. I'm with them, she says and points at us, gives the name we put down, How much longer is the wait, do you think? The woman looks at my mother. Then she doesn't look at my mother. Then she walks right past my mother to where I'm standing with my father. She says, Your party was Nathan, right? Yes, my father says. We've had some tables open up and will actually be able to seat you shortly. She walks back past my mother to her notebook. My father doesn't notice. I walk over to my mother and link arms with her.
She gets on, holds her bus pass up to the reader without looking, then beelines for the back seat all the while clutching a phone in her hand with earbuds stuck in her ears. I watch as she settles into her seat, all poise and grace in her brown pencil skirt, silky pink blouse, nude heels and matching belted coat with a cream scarf trailing from around her neck. Even sitting, she holds her arm up slightly so that her large, black Michael Kors purse hangs in the crook of her elbow and her phone hovers just below her chin. With her other hand, she holds the small mic piece of her headphone towards her mouth and speaks rapidly and seriously into it. I assume she is talking to someone at work and not a boyfriend or her mother or any of those types. She is clearly one of those working women who devote themselves to being taken seriously by all their high-powered male associates. Everything about her is serious and severe: her clothes, her dark blonde hair which is pulled back into a ponytail without a wisp out of place, perfectly done makeup in neutral tones, even her face itself which is all high cheekbones and long features. She is beautiful, too, just like all the best high-powered working women. Judging from the perfect smoothness of her face and tightly done hair, she does not seem like someone who smiles often or lets her hair loose at the end of the day. Yet she is beautiful enough she must have a beautiful boyfriend waiting at the end of her bus ride home. She is one of those who you can tell have a charmed life.

My seat faces the back so she is directly in my line of sight, but I turn my head to look out the window instead, determined not to look at her and be envious of her perfect life. She does not look like the type who purposefully tries to stir up envy or drama, but I do not want to give her the satisfaction if she is. I hold this resolution for all of a minute before the low tones of her voice (also beautiful) cause me to look towards her again. I cannot make out what she is talking about from where I am sitting a few rows up the bus, but even if I could her French is too low and fast for me to really make it out. It is the agitation in her voice that holds my attention. It is far from perfect and sounds very out of place coming from her. I study her longer. Whatever she is talking about is definitely work related; probably some incompetent male colleague who can’t make a PowerPoint trying to shove it onto her and blame her for any problems in the process. As she talks into the headphones, trying to remind him she is his colleague and not a secretary or assistant, the phone in her hand lights up with another call. With a short glance over at the screen, she immediately hits ignore without so much as a break in her conversation.

It can only have been her beautiful boyfriend that called her and was ignored so quickly. It makes sense, he is sure and steady and understanding when she has to talk to work instead of him. In fact it was this drive and ambition which drew him towards her in the first place. And because of this, the longer they are together, the more she can unconsciously ignore him, knowing that he is not about to go anywhere; he loves her and understands her. By now she barely looks at the phone before she ignores
“Beautiful Strangers” continued

him, so natural and unnoticed is the motion. But he is noticing. I can imagine him at home, setting the phone carefully on the kitchen counter, placing his hands on either side of it and leaning forward, head bent in defeat. Each time he calls her and she does not answer their apartment feels a little bigger and a little emptier. It is becoming a void that is pulling him and weakening the anchor that keeps him waiting for her. Of course, she is oblivious to this. He fell in love with her because she was driven, ambitious, and dedicated. She fell in love with him because he was driven, ambitious, and dedicated. She fell in love with him before to sit and watch the world go by. Perhaps, he thinks as he picks up the sponge and starts washing a plate, that is where the void in her absence is coming from. Or, perhaps, it was always there but he had enough distractions and excuses to pretend it was not there.

Thoughtfully he runs a sponge across the same plate he has been washing for the last minute. The motion is mechanical, nonsensical, just something to keep him off the phone sitting on the opposite counter. He thinks about how he does not want to crowd her. She is the best thing that ever happened to him, the love of his life, the person he wants to grow old with. Each cliché sounds hollower than the last time he thought them, however, and it’s getting harder and harder to convince himself that they were ever true to begin with. The first couple years of their life together feels too perfect to have happened. Those couple of years, when she came home early to spend time with him, where she called him back each time she missed a call, when thinking of her only made him happy, when they talked about the life they had before them, were a fairytale that he confessed with reality for a moment. Now the moment has ended and he does not know what to do without it. He has stopped washing the plate in his hand entirely and taken to staring out the window instead. He glances behind him at the phone, then forces his eyes forward and down to the sink again. He does not want to crowd her. She is the best thing that ever happened to him. The love of his life. The person he wants to grow old with.

He repeats the mantra as he washes the other plate, a coffee mug, and some assorted silverware. When all the dishes are cleaned and sitting in the dish rack, gleaming with drops of water, he allows the words to stop marching through his head. Exhaustion sweeps over him.

Trying to love someone who is not there is taking its toll. He wonders again if it is worth it. The thought is not new, but for the first time a voice in his mind mutters maybe not. His head jerks up as if someone had actually spoken. The idea of leaving has drifted in and out of his head for a while, but never before had it had enough weight to feel like a true solution. But now, the idea excites him almost as much as it tears him apart. What if he did leave? He would be heartbroken for sure, but would she? And would he be able to mend and be happier for it? Normally he would say no, but this time he wonders if he actually could be happier. The more he thinks about it, the more the idea that he should leave takes hold. The empty apartment is suddenly suffocating and tiny. What if he left tonight? Slept at a friend’s house? He’s not sure if she would even notice.

And as he thinks all this she is on her phone a few rows behind me without a worry about ever coming home to an empty apartment.

I turn back to the window and let the rumbling of the engine drift over me, carrying her low tones that could be seductive if she wanted them to be, over my head. The perfect life I thought she had when she got on the bus seems very far away now. I close my eyes, trying to resist the urge to look at her for a third time; I feel like I have been eavesdropping on her life far too much. But then her voice stops and before I can catch myself I am glancing towards her again. Instead of being off the phone like I thought, she is listening intently to the person on the other end of the line and her face has softened slightly. She is still severe and angled, no wisp out of place, but I see where her beautiful boyfriend might have fallen in love with a gentler person inside and might have stayed around so long hoping she will come back. He cannot keep running on that hope any longer, though, I think sadly.
The screen on her phone flashes again and this time she ignores the call without looking. I want to scream at her to answer, that this is her last chance. At their apartment, his last burst of hope is gone, popped like a bubble and sparkling across the empty counters. He squeezes his eyes shut to keep tears from falling, then walks to the bedroom and begins to throw some clothes and bathroom items into a bag. He does not pay much attention to what he is doing, thinking he will get everything he forgets later. All he can focus on right now is that he needs to leave before the void pulls him apart like that bubble of hope.

The bus nears her stop and she brings her bag closer to her body and buckles the belt on her coat. Still holding the mouthpiece of her headphones towards her lips, she looks up at the monitor and prepares to stand, not knowing that she is a reflection of her boyfriend back at home who is slinging his bag across his shoulder and heading for the door. As he passes the table in the kitchen he pauses then grabs the pad of paper that caught his eye and writes a note. It is short and more information than emotion. He cannot handle more than a few words to say where he went and that will not be coming back for a while, if ever. Even if he did write everything, he is not sure she would understand. The door slamming behind him reverberates through him and it feels like the vibrations will break him apart if he does not get away quickly enough.

The bus screeches to a stop and the doors open. She gets up and wends her way through the people. I avert my eyes as she passes; I do not want her to see the traces of pity there. Once she has passed I look up again and watch her off the bus. As she steps down she stumbles slightly and twists her ankle. A look of pain flashes across her face and I realize I do not want her beautiful boyfriend to be gone. I imagine the pain and confusion that will pull at those high cheekbones and smear her mascara when she reads his note for the third time and finally understands what it means. She does know she loves him even if she will not fully recognize how much until he is gone.

Outside my window she rubs her ankle then starts to walk away from the bus stop just as the bus begins to drive off in the opposite direction. As she shrinks out of my sight I desperately will her boyfriend home, reverse the note, unpack the bag, place him at the kitchen counter again, thinking about leaving but too in love to do it. Maybe tonight they will talk. Maybe tonight they will fight, and yell, but he will finally get her to understand the void she is leaving and it will be the best thing that ever happened to them. And she will realize he is the love of her life and growing old together is more important than her work. And all those clichés will become real again. I feel my own bubble of hope grow in my chest for just a moment until reality jumps in and bursts it. More likely, she will get home and they will fight and she will not understand because she will not be able to understand until he is gone and maybe not even then. Her poise will take over and they will go to bed right back where they started and wake up tomorrow and do it all again until he truly cannot take it anymore.

I want to believe that they can live the life that seems so perfect. If even perfect lives are not perfect, how can I fix an un-perfect life? I settle back into my seat wearily. Today will not be the day that he leaves, I cannot do that to her. But I do not think, even in my wildest imaginings, I can save them from her becoming the beautiful stranger that breaks his heart. For just a moment a thought flits across my mind that perhaps I am like her. Perhaps I am Sean's beautiful stranger. Before it can take hold in my mind though, I push it away. Better to think about the girl on the bus and her beautiful boyfriend. Better to watch their lives connect or diverge. Better to let her be the beautiful stranger that she is.
It was a little past midnight, and from where I squatted, shivering and furious among the naked winter trees, I could just make the man out—a lanky shadow on the limestone railing of Pilgrim's Bridge. If not for the soft light coming off the snow, I might have walked right past him, too busy imagining Jeanette's face as I sprang at Harry Jenson. Too busy thinking how it might feel to crush a man's trachea between my hands (would there be a choking sound? a wheezing panic as larynx, thyroid lamina, corniculate, slammed shut and his eyes strained out of their sockets. Harry's flabby chest hitching—hitching—hitching) that I didn't notice one patch of darkness was more solid than it should have been. But as it was, I saw the man on the bridge from the trail and, clutching the double-barreled shotgun to my chest, hid behind a nearby tree before he could see me.

I can't tell you why I did it. I've been walking the little winding paths of Yellowwood Forest almost daily since Jeanette and I first moved here four years ago, as newlyweds, and I've never hesitated to pass a stranger on the trails. Although, I guess coming home to find your wife enjoying a nice post-coital cuddling with the next-door neighbor can make a guy a little bit paranoid.

Of course, Jeanette and I had been on bad terms for a while. We'd been trying to have a baby since August, but nothing had come of it and I knew Jeanette blamed me. It was in the way she poured my coffee in the mornings, too quickly, so that it splashed out onto the table and left ugly brown stains on the sandy wood. It was in the way she "lost" my favorite shirt in the dryer. It was in the way she left her panties dangling on the edge of the cherry wood dresser each evening, and pretended to be asleep when I came to bed. But we didn't talk about it. She did these things, and I accepted them. At night, we lay, back to back, silent and awake beneath the silk sheets, waiting for the other to say something, all the time the distance between us growing greater and greater until we hardly seemed to be sharing the same bed, much less the same language.

Today, I was stuck at work with a particularly tricky cataract removal and so when I finally managed to get home around 11 o'clock, I thought Jeanette would be in bed. After all, she hadn't waited up for me in years. But as I pulled into the driveway, I noticed the living room light was shining through the blinds. I opened the front door quietly, afraid to disturb her in case she had fallen asleep during her evening Netflix binge. But instead there was Harry, lying naked on the antique chaise lounge I'd bought Jeanette for her last birthday, his pudgy hand on my wife's breast. Grunting as the front door slammed shut, Harry raised his head and saw me standing in the doorway. He went pale.

"You're not s'posed to be here," he said in his pathetic backwoods slur, as if I were the intruder.

My pulse was rising, thundering behind my temples as I stared at the Confederate flag tattooed on Harry's bicep. The line from his farmer's tan ran right through it so that the top half was surrounded by flesh that was
as white as my clenched knuckles. Of course it was Harry. Redneck Harry. Southern pride Harry. Harry with his watery, piggish eyes and tobacco-blackened gums. Looking at him, lying on my couch, in my house, with my wife—the man who made a decent sum selling top-grade fertilizer and drove a Hummer for chrissakes! A Hummer with a gun rack! Every time I left the house, I’d see it sitting there in his driveway, with the front bumper brooding over the green lawn as if the damn thing just couldn’t wait to get back to eroding the ozone. A few years in the Reserve and Harry thought he was entitled to a military-grade vehicle, no matter how environmentally destructive. Jeanette just had to fuck him, didn’t she?

Stretched out on the couch, Jeanette rolled towards me and leaned over to pick her blouse off the floor. She did it slowly, allowing her large breasts to hang and shiver back and forth (Did you think these were only for you, Danny? Did you really think I cared?) before she put her skirt back on, and covered them. Fluffing her tangled blonde curls back into shape, she simply said, “You should leave.”

Her face was jungle-cat beautiful—angular and dispassionate—but her lips trembled and her eyes kept straying to the carpet. They looked wetter than usual.

She turned back to Harry, who was fumbling to zip the fly on his jeans. Jeanette laid her hand on his shoulder. She did not look at me.

“Just go, Daniel.” Her voice, normally light, was thick and watery.

I lingered for a moment, trying to see her face through the curtain of her hair, but she was done with me.

Harry raised an eyebrow and cracked his knuckles. “You gonna try somethin’, chickenshit?”

There are things worth fighting for: your home, your heart, and the life you have built slowly and tenderly within them. There are things worth fighting for, worth losing yourself for, but when I saw Jeanette turn away, the part of me that had risen to Harry’s challenge—that wasn’t too chickenshit to try somethin’—retracted.

Harry cracked his knuckles again. I felt the sound in my back.

I went back to the hallway, and locked the front door behind me as I left. Blind and reeling slightly, as if drunk, I got in my car and began to drive.

Streetlamps flashed by, sickly yellow. Outside my windows, the suburban streets blurred into the night, houses, hedges and bulky sedans losing all shape and coherence. Instead there was darkness, speed. Fury. I don’t remember most of that drive, and to be honest, I don’t want to. What I do remember is gripping the wheel so tightly my fingers went numb. I remember biting my tongue until it bled—and this only because I hit a pothole and almost bit the damn thing off. But mostly what I remember is that wonderfully horrible moment of epiphany as I sped down State Road 46, quick as a rabid greyhound and just as eager to bite. That moment when I realized: there’s a shotgun in the trunk.

I had left it there after last month’s hunting trip at Lake Monroe, still wrapped up in my tent’s bright green groundcloth. For weeks I had been kicking myself to secure it in the small gun safe Jeanette and I kept in the garage, but now...

I braked, hard. The tires screamed. The vents spewed burnt rubber stink. Yanking the wheel, I forced the car into a squalling U-turn. My thoughts came in scatter-shot bursts: Park about a mile down the road from where our property abutted Yellowwood Forest and Jeanette wouldn’t see the headlights. Walk through the woods until I reached the house. Go in with the shotgun. Try somethin’.

The breath filtered out of my nostrils in a single smoky tendril. On the bridge, the stranger’s breath did the same. The moonlight caught it and glistened.

The stranger sat with one leg folded beneath him. The other dangled over the creek, long and limp. His head was thrown back to watch the stars.

I tightened my grip on the shotgun. I assumed he was one of the hobos that liked to camp in the forest on their way to the rail depot in Waterloo. In the summer, I’d catch glimpses of their tawny canvas lean-tos through the underbrush—nomadic cities hidden in the briar and honeysuckle that made whole miles of the trail smell like smoke and baked beans.

From where I sat, he certainly looked as thin as some of the hobos, but other than that, the description didn’t seem to fit him. His shoulders didn’t slump the way theirs did, and the way he sat on the railing was too comfortable, too self-assured, for an old tramp.

The stranger raised a hand and pinched at the air. His breath drifted up, covering his face in a shifting cloud. He pinched again and I thought I saw something wrinkle behind him, like a lip of static against the night sky. I blinked.

Again. The crease was deeper this time, an impossible fold just above the tree line—there and then gone.

I crept to the edge of the trees, my boots noiseless on the fresh powder. The air was brittle and sharp. Hesitantly, I drew it into my lungs.

The stranger seemed to steady himself. He reached up with both arms and, arching his back, strained to lift himself higher. Overhead, the stars flared into sudden brilliance. Still the stranger struggled up and up and up and up, until his bones themselves seemed to stretch, the limbs becoming spindly with desperation, the absurd desire to grasp something he would never, could never, reach.

The stars flared, brighter, brighter, pulsing as the stranger fought to brush them with his fingertips, the snow glittering beneath them like a field of diamonds. The light skittered up into the trees and danced there, impish. Dazzled by the sudden glare, I staggered forward.

The stranger jerked his body up even further—he must have been at least fifteen feet tall by that point, and all that from the waist up, because his legs alone retained their original shape—and then the stars went out.
Something squelched under my heel—I'd wandered onto the creek bank.

The creature (not a stranger but a creature. Sweet Jesus, not a he but an it) stopped. The head swiveled, perched at the top of an impossibly long neck. It looked down at me.

"I'm—I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to—to disturb your, um... stargazing?" I tried to make out a face, and found I couldn't. "I was just walking the trails. Midnight stroll, y'know?" Did it, though? Did the thing even speak English?

The wind picked up, making the trees shift and groan around us. I shivered, but not from the cold.

The Stargazer considered me for another minute, the head moving side to side with the wind, before it turned back to the sky. Slowly, the stars flickered back to life, regaining their usual, distant glow.

The Stargazer paused. It lifted a hand, hesitated for a split second, and then touched a star whose shine was duller than the others. The star flashed, once, twice, three times and my fear began to abate. Something stirred inside me. Something familiar, something warm.

I remembered a blue sky and palm trees, white sand that felt like powdered sugar between my toes. And Jeanette.

Jeanette laughing. Jeanette taking furtive sips from a hairy coconut shell. Jeanette lying, tan and slender, in nothing but the nautical striped bikini she had picked out specifically for our honeymoon in Bermuda, her wet thighs coated with sand. Jeanette and I reclining side by side on overpriced, hibiscus patterned beach towels we'd bought at the Cabana Resort gift shop (in the wedding rush, we'd forgotten to pack ours), while the Caribbean sun hung above us, bloated and unbearably hot.

She rolled over to face me, rumpling the towel beneath her. Sunlight flashed on the diamond stud in her ear. The glare hit my eye and made me blink. Apparently my expression was funny enough for her to do it again. Jeanette flashed the light into my eyes a second—and then a third—time. She giggled.

"You look like a drowsy kitten," she reached out and moved a piece of hair that had strayed onto the wrong side of my part. Her fingers were sandy. "It's cute."

If it had come from anyone else, I would have been put out at being called something so infantilizing as "cute," but when Jeanette said it, I took it as a genuine compliment. I smiled.

She smiled back. Her smile was big and toothy, full of Midwestern sincerity. A little thrill shot through me each time I saw it.

"You're cute," I said, meaning, really, that every good quality she credited me with belonged to her, derived from her, manifested itself explicitly for her. That we were not separate entities but one, divided into two complementary parts and her part, always, the better one.

"I must be, to have you. Cute or lucky," she said, and then, shaking her head, laughed. "Mama always said 'Marry a doctor,' but my god! If

getting a date with you wasn't a nightmare. I should have gone to medical school instead, saved myself a lot of trouble." And by "Mama" she meant her mother, the intimidating Glinda Bickridge, (Miss Lancaster 1962, Miss Fairfield County 1963, Miss Ohio 1965), a woman who had paid for her only daughter's degree in graphic design but would have preferred that the certificate had "MRS" printed in gold leaf at the top rather than "Bachelor of Arts." And by "nightmare" Jeanette meant not only her mother's haranguing phone calls ("Women have an expiration date, Jeanie. You need to find someone new because after 30, it all goes sour") but also my ex Frieda Va larosa. Frieda was a small Latina woman from Hoboken that I had dated for three months, and then dumped when it became clear that she was much more...invested in the relationship than I was. She didn't cope well, and every woman I dated after Frieda found an uncomfortable number of disturbing objects in their mail. Most notably, Jeanette had received a dead Jack Russell two days after we announced our engagement.

Or maybe Jeanette didn't mean Frieda, but meant, instead, Cindy Higgins, an attractive OB/GYN who was determined to win me away from her, and brought me Starbucks each morning for nearly two months. After she had visited me at the hospital a few times, Jeanette noticed that Cindy's generous caramel lattes often came with an extra dollop ofcleavage. There were arguments. Now I brought my coffee to work in a thermos.

"Cute," I repeated and winked behind my sunglasses, meaning: you are more beautiful than Helen, than Cleopatra, than Cindy Higgins.

She grinned and the sunlight flashed on the diamond on her ear once more. It was a red flash, the sun now slipping toward the horizon. I laughed and she was in my arms before the spots cleared from my vision.

Now there it was again, the half-forgotten morse code of Jeanette's earrings winking in the sun, saying "Love me, love me." But not here. That was somewhere else. Some vanished place.

The Stargazer looked at me again, a tall black shadow, a starless patch of night. It seemed to be waiting, but for what, I didn't know.

"DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH?" I asked, careful to enunciate. I felt incredibly stupid. "MY NAME IS DAN."

Silence.

"I LIKE WHAT YOU DID WITH THE STARS."

9/10 therapists will tell you that communication is the most important part of any relationship. Emotional connection and understanding are almost impossible without it. As human beings, we must speak, and touch, and know one another before we can love. The mother must hear her baby cry before she loves him. The baby must feel his mother, must know her touch is gentle and kind, before he loves her. But the Stargazer didn't speak, and I didn't want to touch it. So we stared at each other across the snowy bridge, and remained strangers.

I pointed up at the star it had made flash.

"It reminded me of my wife," I said, quieter this time. I think I said it more for myself than the creature. "She did something awful to me. That's
reached up again, with both arms this time, and for a moment the star rested in its cupped palms, the universal sign for healing and giving. The star flickered and began to fall.

I followed its trajectory through the night. As it neared the tree line, a silver tail appeared behind it, leaving a bright scar on the dark sky. But when the pines should have covered it, they did not. The star left the sky and skated down on the tree branches, but was no larger or brighter than it had been. It entered the clearing, its light raising a spectral glimmer from the snow. I gasped.

The Stargazer had shrunk back to his original size. No more than a scrawny, human-sized shadow, it climbed onto the bridge railing and stood there, wavering in the breeze. The dark, rushing channel at the river's heart gleamed and frothed beneath him. I wanted to call out to it again. A fall from that height was fatal, and with the water this cold...

But it was too late. The star was just above us. Only this close could you appreciate the speed of its descent. The air vibrated with it, and when the light hit the water, my hair stood on end. The star was fading as it came, until at last, its light nearly spent, it reached the river and disappeared silently beneath the surface.

After wavering a moment longer on the limestone railing, the Stargazer followed it, diving head first into the river. There was no splash.

The wind howled. The trees shivered in their bark.

I was alone.

As I picked my way back along the snowy forest path, I wondered how long it would take me to forgive Jeanette, if I ever could forgive her. I wondered if there were moments which did not slip so quietly into darkness. Moments, which, isolated and breathless, did not disappear tragically and beautifully, but instead lived on in a strange, warped reflection, flickering at the edge of our vision until the world itself grew dim. Moments which faded and then flared up, unexpectedly, throughout our lives until we finally came to acknowledge them.

The shotgun's barrel felt cold in my hand, the metal heavy and dumb. On the other side of the creek, I could just make out the light on my back porch, shining faintly through the trees. It would be so easy, I thought and I let my finger creep toward the trigger. So easy. But maybe easy wasn't what I needed.

With my free hand, I fished around in my coat pocket for my cell phone. It was hard to work the touchscreen with my numb fingers, but somehow I managed to select Jeanette's number, and when the phone began to ring, I planted the butt of the shotgun in the snow and let it lean against a tree. Overhead, the stars spilled out in complex, unknowable skeins; Leo and Orion, Cancer and Sagittarius all gleaming brightly between the branches. I did not look at them. I looked ahead, into the light—my light, Jeanette's light—and listened to the phone in my hand, wondering where, exactly, to begin.
Feeling is Sight
Hayleigh Alamo

Drum Theory
Justin Danzy

It started with some cotton and a kick—

deep kick. 808. Rumble through the sound/
system. Quantize the rhythm of the boy,/ 
hear the hi-hat chatter in his mouth./
Watch him grow each time the snare snaps his spine/
straight. Watch as he relearns to walk without/
apologizing. The boy doesn't know/
many words. But he knows he can't shout/
like the cotton in him tells him to. So/
he strips away the sound, relieves himself/
of his rhythm, the regurgitated/
drum loop, practiced 'til he was more villain/

than boy. This time he will make his own beat./

The crack of his snare as cold as his genes.
Paris: An Essay in Pieces

Jordan Meiller

I.

Essay: from the French essayer, "to try."¹

II.

Language seems to me the only place to start.

III.

According to Google Translate:

I am not Paris = je ne suis pas a Paris.
And yet:
Je ne suis pas a Paris = I am not in Paris.

IV.

They say this was "an attack on all humanity," and I find myself wondering what they mean, or rather, who they mean.

V.

A white man in Michigan says he is Paris while a Muslim mother in Paris wonders if she should send her kids to school.
#JeSuisParis = Je sui a Paris.
Je sui a Paris = Je sui Paris.

VI.

Bernie Sanders: "Well, John, let me concur with you and with all Americans who are shocked and disgusted by what we saw in Paris yesterday. Together, leading the world this country will rid our planet of this barbarous organization called ISIS."³

Hillary Clinton: "Well, our prayers are with the people of France tonight. But that is not enough. We need to have a resolve that will bring the world together to root out the kind of radical jihadist ideology that motivates organizations like ISIS, the barbaric, ruthless, violence jihadist, terrorist group."³

Martin O’Malley: "We must anticipate these threats before they happen. This is the new sort of challenge, the new sort of threat that does, in fact, require new thinking, fresh approaches and new leadership. As a former mayor and a former governor, there was never a single day, John, when I went to bed or woke up without realizing that this could happen in our own country."⁴

VII.

"The people who died tonight were out living, drinking, singing. They didn't know they had declared war."⁵

VIII.

Link: “ISIS Announces 6-Month Terror Campaign, Names 5 Targets – CA, VA, MD, IL, MI”

Status: "Idk if this is bullshit but my AR15 is locked and loaded if I need to protect what's mine I will with no hesitation"

Comment: “This article is from May tho”

IX.

Clinton: “So, yes, [ISIS] has developed. I think that there are many other reasons why it has in addition—to what's happened in the region. But I don't think that the United States—has the bulk of the responsibility. I really put that on Assad and on the Iraqis and on the region itself."⁶

Meanwhile on CNN:

"Sir, the Muslim community has nothing to do with these guys," [Yaser Louati, of the Collective Against Islamophobia in France] insisted. "Nothing. We cannot justify ourselves for the actions of someone who claims to be Muslim."

"Why not?" [CNN anchor John Vause interrupted. "What is the responsibility within the Muslim community to identify people within their own ranks when it comes to people who are obviously training and preparing to carry out mass murder."

"Sir, they were not from our ranks!" Louati exclaimed. "We cannot accept the idea that these people are from us, they are not. They are just byproducts of our societies exporting their wars abroad and expecting no repercussions back home."

"Co-host Isha Sesay insisted that Louati had to 'accept that responsibility to prevent the bigger backlash' because the 'finger of blame is pointing at the Muslim community."

"This is a very complicated issue," Vause said, concluding the segment. "I have yet to hear the condemnation from the Muslim community on this."

"The point he is making is, 'It's not our fault,'" Sesay noted. "But the fact of the matter is when these things happen, the finger of blame is pointed at the Muslim community and so you have to be preemptive. It's coming from the community. You've got to take a stand."

"The word responsibility comes to mind," Vause opined.

"It just comes to mind," Sesay agreed. "You can't shirk that."⁷

X.

The guy whose picture of him and his girlfriend is now sporting the tricolor makeover says it's "tactless" to "politicize" this. But personalizing it is okay.

XI.

"In the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living."⁸
"Paris: An Essay in Pieces" continued

XII.


Paris: Fluctuat Nec Mergitur—it is beaten by the waves but does not sink.

XIII.

"JeSuisChien: Hashtag Surfaces in Honor of Police Dog Killed in Raid After Paris Attacks."x

XIV.

"I also want to speak tonight directly to Muslims throughout the world. We respect your faith. It's practiced freely by many millions of Americans, and by millions more in countries that America counts as friends. Its teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah. The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself. The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them."xii

iii Ibid.
iv Ibid.
vi CBS.
ix Facebook Trend Headline
x Facebook Trend Headline

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The Sun Rose

Aliera Morasch

You are packing your daughter's lunch. Leftover spaghetti, a pear, the end of the bag of pretzels. The early-morning TV is on, chatting and humming in the background. Your hands are dry, knuckles flaky, shedding in the dry cold that comes with the beginning of winter and hand-washing clothes. The kitchen smells like coffee. You turn to the cupboard and take out two mugs, the blue one and the yellow one, and put them on the counter. The blue one is dark blue, like the sky outside, the sky that's there before the sun comes out. You pick up the yellow one. It's a golden yellow, the color of sand on a bright day, of a tall-grass prairie at dusk. The mug is the color of the sun in early morning, the first rays reaching from night, stretching, saying good morning, fingertips expectantly welcoming the new day. You pick up the blue mug and pour your coffee. You leave the yellow mug on the counter.

You sip your coffee slowly, savoring it. You look out at the dark horizon. You think about earlier this morning when you got up—before the sun, like you always do—when you realized your only clean tights had a run, so you washed a dirty pair in the sink. You washed your daughter's soccer jersey too. The warm water gripped your knuckles as you scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed the brown muddy stains out of the white fabric. You take another sip of coffee. The TV noises pull at you. Confirmed: Unarmed black teenager shot and killed by police officer. You take another sip of coffee. You turn to the screen and see a face in cap and gown.

You take a sip of coffee. It's a face you've never seen before and a face so familiar. You take a sip of coffee. You look into the eyes of the man in a suit talking on the news. His light hair falls across his face just a bit. His voice is flat, monotone, but his eyes are sad. You turn off the TV. You sip your coffee. You can still hear the news commentator's voice, shot and killed shot and killed, unarmed and black, shot and killed. You can still see the child's graduation picture on the screen. You wondered if his mama had put that photo in her wallet yet. It had taken you a week to do it, to finally put his photo in your wallet. You hadn't wanted to do it because it felt like acceptance. You hadn't been ready to accept it. But then when you did put it in, it was to keep him close. So he'd always be near you. You sip your coffee. You wonder why no one had been interested in seeing his graduation photo. No one ever asked for it. No news commentator spoke your baby's name with sadness in his eyes. You look out at the dark morning.

You sip your coffee.

You look at the blue mug and smile. You imagine your son walking in, just like he had that morning, sleep pulling at his feet. You imagine him going to the counter and picking up the yellow mug you'd put there for him. You imagine him pouring coffee. You imagine him pulling a chocolate
bar out of his pocket. You imagine your face, his face, as he rolls his eyes and sheepishly puts it back. You imagine that sunrise, sitting across from him in silence, the rays turning his soft face gold. You smile.

You've finished your coffee. You are again alone in the dark kitchen, but you see the outline of the sun's fingertips starting to reach for the horizon. You get up and close the blinds. You put the yellow mug back in the cupboard. You finish packing your daughter's lunch. Leftover lasagna, a pear, the end of the bag of pretzels. You decide to add in a piece of chocolate.
Oddly enough, it felt like how car crashes look in the movies: car hurtling toward me as though falling at terminal velocity, or magnetically drawn—metal to metal faster than the message can jump the synapses of my brain, telling me this is wrong. I broke the rules. There are consequences for crossing lines. There’s a panic-stricken face that just watches it come, like here’s my breathing body, take it, and there’s a scream, usually, though I cover my ears, which isn’t very Hollywood. I scream mutely, mouth open, the way I laugh when something’s too funny to make noise. And there’s a jolt—the horizon quakes, but since I blocked my ears all I hear is a tap, like a closing book, or a lamp being switched off.

I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry.
I wasn’t sure who I was saying it to, but I was out of the car, so perhaps it was to the cop who had hit me. He was running over, clutching his radio. His hair was the color of wheat. He was young.

Are you all right?
I didn’t respond. My mind was overflowing with: I almost killed you.
Are you all right? Are you hurt?
I’m fine. I’m not hurt.
The I’m sorry’s started to choke me, so I pressed my face into the window of the van with my hands on either side of my face, like I was looking through glass at a zoo animal. I’d been crying for hours already, so the tears just followed the tracks they’d already forged down my face.

Do you have someone to call, who can come pick you up?
I thought: I don’t know who my family is, and none of this makes sense. I said: Yes.

There were too many people at the scene. I didn’t know where they all came from. Everyone was asking me questions I didn’t know the answers to, like what was the confirmation number for my car insurance, and how did I feel.

Explain to me what happened. His face was so kind that it made me want to break things. I snatched at individual strands of my hair and plucked them out one by one. I didn’t recognize myself, though I was too distraught to care.

I pulled up past the stop line, I said. I was distracted. I got some bad news earlier today.
I’m sorry to hear that, he said. You need to pay more attention.
Yes, I said. If only he knew.
It had been a year and not once had I guessed what was going on. The thought had never even entered my mind, not even in one of those grotesque imaginings that appears against your will, like the thought of leaping to your death when you're on a high-up bridge. It's just in a passive, curious way, of course—but still, I hadn't even thought of it like that.

He just came right out and said it.

He said: affair. He said: six months. He said something about love after that, but I'd stopped listening.

He had been: the one who couldn't lie.

I said: Thank you for telling me, Dad. Thank you? Are you fucking serious?

Don't call my Dad, I said to my grandfather when he came to pick me up. I was watching the minivan being pulled away by a tow truck, which was strange, because I always saw it coming toward me, my mom's blonde hair glowing behind the windshield.

I have to call him, my grandfather said. He did. My father was there within minutes. I didn't look at him. I wondered if he was wondering if this was his fault, in a way.

The cop said goodbye to me. I couldn't find the words to respond. He was telling me things I didn't want to hear, like that everyone makes mistakes, and despite myself I wanted to scream: There are unforgivable things. You are allowed to feel rage.

I promised myself I'd write him a letter later, apologizing again for putting his life in jeopardy. He had been following the rules, after all. I was the one who crossed the line. I was the one who had tried to get away from what would inevitably come back. He had saved both of our lives by swerving.

It was strange that my father didn't lecture me or talk about responsibility on the way home. In fact, he never mentioned the accident to me again. I suppose there are benefits to building walls between people.

I wrote the letter to the cop the next day, but after I'd signed my name it struck me that this thing was too horrible to exist. I didn't want to send it off and let it be real. I almost killed someone. So I erased it—I always wrote in pencil for this very reason—but the impressions of the letters were still carved into the paper. The words stared me down like you really thought you could get out of this? in white now and taking up space, even more real than before.

I told myself that my father made the world wicked. I thought that I finally understood how things worked: you can't write or un-write the thing that haunts you if you want to keep on living. It's best to leave it in that chasm of panic right before the car hits, or right after—that blind feeling, mute scream—and though it's tethered to your heels like a shadow, it's hushed enough that you can tell yourself it's gone away. Later, though, I saw that we always hold our shadows in our own fists.

For a month or so, I wrote the letter to the cop in my head every morning when I woke up. I sent them out like prayers, making sure he got...
them—Brian was his name—**Dear Brian**. I was thinking, I suppose, that after facing death we were both existing so fervently now that we could speak through electric pulses of life, all around us and underground.

I knew that my father was somewhere else drafting letters to me—to all of us—and putting them away in his brain. I doubt he ever wrote them down. He didn't tell me what he was thinking, anyway. But he told me *I'm sorry* every second with his eyes and by then I was sending him prayers too.

It never really went away. Years later, we are both irrevocably incorrect and haunted. I know we are alike. I have lived with the fear that I inherited that dark twist—whatever lived inside him that allowed him to do what he did. (Is it in my veins?) I have lived wondering if I will hurt people I love because I stay numb when I should speak. We are totaled people. Our voices are trapped in warps of metal, but everything else pours out like water. Every word, an apology. And there is one true thing that neither of us can bear to hear, but I'm saying it now: you are forgiven, you are forgiven, you are forgiven.

**Simulated Options For Maxwell's Dilemma**

**OPTION NINE**

Run away. Head to a non-extradition country, like Moldova or Morocco, and take the dog and the kid with you. Change your name, change Danny's name, get the dog a new collar with something soft like Boo Radley engraved in the silver tag. Shave his matted, greasy fur with your own electric razor and give him a bath in whatever shitty place you hole up in. Feed the kid something. Eat something yourself.

**OPTION FOURTEEN**

Get your hands on two gallons of hydrochloric acid from your job and use a different employee PIN to check them out. Make sure to take the security footage. Put the tapes in the tub with the body, bent at the knees to fit snug, and close the bathroom door to block out the kid crying in the living room. You will tie a bandana around your mouth and cover your hands in old, yellow dish gloves, and avoid looking at yourself in the mirror. When steam rises from the glu-glu-glug of the acid running out of their containers into the pearl bath, when you're dizzy from the fumes curling around your head like snakes, then look at your reflection. Realize this is you. This is you now.

**OPTION THIRTY-SEVEN**

Call the police with your own two hands, covered in metal smell and black powder, familiar and comforting. Tell them someone's died, assure them the crying child in the background is fine. Answer truthfully when they ask how he died, that you killed him, shot him dead. Explain that you've lived next to Freddy Hart for years now, since you were taken from the military, and every night, without fail, you heard him beating on his poor kid. The mother left Danny all alone with him, with Freddy, and his little black and white King Charles Spaniel. You heard Danny screaming through the walls of your houses and the fence that separates them when you got home that night and you had to do something. Don't tell them it was actually the cries of the sweet Spaniel you've come to love, and not Danny's shouts, that made you break the door down. Don't tell them it was the image of the little Spaniel's shaking body, and not the memory of Danny's black eyes, that made you grab your Smith & Wesson 1911 and put a single round right between Freddy's eyes.

**OPTION SIXTY-EIGHT**

Call in a favor. Watch the body disappear. Watch the gun disappear. Watch the kid disappear. Buy a new dog bed.

**OPTION ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTEEN**

File the serial numbers from your gun and put it in Freddy's hand. Write a note explaining how much he craved solitude. Make it sound existential like Freddy did after a couple drinks. Wash the residue from your hands.
Ship the kid to his mother bearing the news of his father's death. Adopt the dog from the shelter the police sent him to and care for him like a son.

OPTION TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY THREE
Roll the body into a tarp, a kaleidoscope vision, and weigh it down with bricks on strings that tie the tarp shut. Dump the body into the river and watch as it sinks into its infinity coffin. Send the kid to a boarding school away from this place, with a new name and a new life. Keep the dog with you. Tell everyone who asks about Danny that he and his father moved away. You haven't heard from them. You're sure they're very happy.
Waking
Caroline Peterson

The night I started living again was the most stereotypical romanticized evening ever— prom night. But it wasn’t me I had hopes for. Me and Jonny had a bet going, regarding whether our buddy Greg would score on prom night. I had faith in him, I had faith that the world would tell him yes, yes, but Greg had a habit of drinking too much and this night was no exception. He ended up passed out drunk in the back of his car and his girl was long gone by the time me and Jonny came after the afterparty in Jonny's dad's car to pick him up. I was thinking about being 15 and finding my sister inebriated on the bathroom floor one night and somehow I wondered if it would happen again with Greg and the memory of my sister merged with the scene I was about to see. Jonny went 10 over the whole way there with a nasty cigar hanging out of his mouth, and I saw adulthood on him like an invisible, ridiculous goddamn jester hat on his head.

"You know you've lost, Ian. Girls don't fuck deadweight drunks like Greg." Jonny tapped the end of his cigar out the window and the black ash fell onto the pavement, swept away. I didn't have anything to say to that. The trees rushed on by the wind and I suddenly realized I was small.

When we found Greg in the back of his car, he was half-asleep with one leg hanging off the back seat and at first I couldn't bring myself to touch him. It was like there was glass between us and I couldn't break through that memory of my mom's frantic voice begging my sister to Wake up! but she was ice cold and I couldn't do a damn thing. Jonny nudged me sharply with his elbow and told me to help him pull Greg out of the car and into the passenger seat of Jonny's car. It didn't feel like my own body doing it.

I knew Jonny must’ve been sick of me being a dumb, quiet statue the whole time, and after he shoved Greg into the seat and worked the seat belt around his flailing body, he told me my punishment for losing the bet was to lay in the street next to Greg's car until sunrise. I felt like I was a thousand miles away from what was happening and a distant voice (my own) said Sure. As I lay on the concrete road, I watched as Jonny drove away with Greg, the taillights disappearing as they always did into the blue light of 4am.

Jonny must've taken the whole world with him in that shitty car because I hadn't ever known a silence like that. It was a deep blue quiet, and the concrete against my bones started to feel numb, nearly comfortable. I watched the stars overhead, thinking how they seemed closer to me now than anything, how they seemed beautiful but I couldn't ever touch something like that. They were indescribably beautiful, maybe a bit like death, maybe a bit like staring at your sister in the middle of the night as she lay cold on the bathroom floor, and you can't touch her, you can't touch anything after the suicide is already done. You stand there staring silently at something indescribable right goddamn in front of you as your mom rushes past you and screams for you to Call 911! But you don't do a damn thing

and and you feel dead yourself, staring at everything like you're staring at stars. Ambulance lights, too, can look like stars if you look at them the right way.

I got to thinking about life, about what it meant to take life for all it is and what it meant to leave it all behind at 5am and lay in the street like an imbecile. I knew Jonny would be waiting on his bed for Greg to finally fall asleep on the floor, smoking a second cigar next to his open bedroom window, maybe waking up covered in ash the next morning. I thought about the ash on the pavement, I thought about Greg's incoherent mumbling as we picked him up (I was close, I was so close!), I thought about how far away everything was and how the night my sister died, I died too. I lay there, thinking about different kinds of suicides as the dawn broke over me and told me to get the hell up and live.
For The High
Cameron Schnieberger

I don’t know how to be young. I take notes at the movies. I run on a treadmill for the high. I can’t find the oasis in this basement. I’ll hang from the windowsill for the high.

I didn’t imagine my life past twenty-one candles. I thought a chairlift would snap, a stove would burst or the pistol in my dad’s couch cushions would sing a sweet trill. For the high;

for the assumption he’ll let me spend the night and leave before his mother nips on Sunday Morning; for the price of his shoes. Yes, I steal sneakers. I’d sit atop an anthill for the high.

I don’t know how to be young. All the music on the radio sounds like it’s running away. I found an oasis in the parking lot outside the pharmacy. I wait still for the high.

I always snuff wicks with my fingers. When will a deer rush in front of my fender? When will the garbage disposal hold my hand? What’s in my bottle of Advil? For the high;

for the conical hat of a Spanish priest; for the gold aglets on the ends of the laces. They’re called Red Octobers and they’re going for $4999 on eBay. The bill for the high.

I don’t know how to be young. Or I do know, which is much scarier. I’ve got an oasis balanced on the end of my grandfather’s pocket knife. I snatch a daffodil for the high

and when that doesn’t work, I’ll crawl onto the bar stage on Sunday night and trade my friends’ secrets for shortles. Don’t throw away a secret. I’ll comb a landfill for the high.

As for the owner of the sneakers: never found out. Police found him as a puddle in a handicap parking spot. My school held candles for him. And no, I’d never kill for the high.

Untitled
Peter Stoppel
Family

We were all vicious and unforgiving;
We were all sculptors
A chip off the shoulder, a change of nose,
We knocked in teeth one at a time
We talked with pleasure, planning the next chisel to stone
We said “I love you.”
We said “You could do better.”

My mother is the best sculptor
She is short, but wide and sturdy
Watch her speak.
My mother, she likes to carve deep
She prefers exaggerated lines across the face
Never mind the stray stone, unintentionally fallen
She sweeps them away very quickly
every time.

My father is the perfectionist
He values intricacy
And chose two Chinese characters out of thousands
Calling me 謝宝, his treasure.
Each crease and wrinkle he makes is purposeful
He takes great effort
In locking his sculptures away
Until they are polished and glazed.

My brother was the amateur
His lips curled back every time he thought
He achieved a secret to sculpting that didn’t exist
Which might explain why everything he created resembled a spud
My brother didn’t like the sculpting business much
Instead he accompanied me, sitting on our front porch
Watching ice cream trucks being towed away
He never understood that even potatoes flower.

I didn’t like the business either.
I always ended up nicking myself
With the blade, but I had no choice
This was what my parents taught me
And what their parents taught them
They were only given trimming hooks before leaving their countries

Sometimes I think about my grandparents
And think about shipping the debris and remains across the
Foster Naksuksaa

Mom endured labor resulting in me climbing onto a plane—she cried the whole time. Mom's first to leave home. "Call often!", but I didn't only because I couldn't;

Even Dad said he teared up though he hardly admits to it. He was in the room, but it was as if my father, knew crying was not allowed for the man who as a man, was a stone, made to be catch-playing dad—

Mom and Dad and even Joe and the room into which I was born, were preparing me for what would be normal soon, I would eat solid food, Mom is sad that her milk, is no longer required. My daily reward, sometimes with a smile I truly know they care.

26 hours of my birth, then arriving at the airport after much anticipation. Mae's fifth child, She found I didn't understand the language, I was a dek-dek farang;

when I was born, Paa was silent. He, provided for his family but not literally, that was his son's job.

Mae and Paa and all of my Pis and Nongs and that 26 hour flight, everything foreign, it seemed. Paa's delicious food, packed with love. Sweet liquid Coffee, too sweet for me is given by Mae, it's not until the last day, but Mae brushes my hair.

dek-dek: infant
farang: white foreigner, other.
(Often derogatory, though sometimes a word of affection and protection.)
Mae: mother
nong: younger sibling, family member
naksuksaa: college student
Paa: father
Pi: older sibling, family member
**auntie Val's house**  
*Omari Oliver*

this house brick mason & wrought iron door strong,  
with a dog, a muddled white shi tzu, Max.  
this house a weekend home.  
this house a summer home.

auntie Val'll give me & Vari three dollars to go down to the Mobil. we'll each get a pack of powdered donuts & a slushie. on the one block walk we'll keep eyes glued to ground, as glass and sidewalk synonymous.

this house always been ours,  
grape garden & all.  
at this house we don't get in trouble...  
don't have to do chores.  
we'll watch Spice Girls over & over,  
& prance 'round in underwear,  
& auntie Val's silk scarves.

we'll raid her room and learn things  
we're too young to learn from our parents:  
proof of her white boyfriend,  
& pasty white silicone tits—  
a reason why the family shuffles through  
the annual Karmanos Breast Cancer walks.  
then we'll pick up the phone & be giggly,  
& try not to get caught listening in...  
even when we get caught we don't get in trouble.

at this house, dinner be White Castle,  
or boiled hotdogs, which we hate.  
but this house only be a home for a few more years now.  
'til this house only knows cousins...

'cause this house be a trap house now.
Four Ways to Vanish an Elephant

Jordan Meiller

1. “Is this your card?” Uncle George said, flipping the card over with a flourish. There was a collective gasp from the four great-nieces and nephews gathered around the coffee table.

JJ, the amazing eight-year-old whose card it indeed was, leaned forward loudly, “How did you do that?”

George began gathering up the cards. “You know better than that, James,” he said. “A magician never reveals his secrets.”

And good thing too,” Rick said from the doorway, “or we’d be here all night while the food got cold. Time to wash up for dinner, guys, go on.” He shoed the kids off, ignoring their sighs and cries of protest.

“Need help?” Rick asked, as his uncle slowly rose up off the couch.

George waved him off. “I might not be able to levitate anymore, but I can still stand up on my own.” He straightened up and smiled. “Now, did I hear something about food?”

Once everyone was gathered around the table, prayers were dealt with hastily, piety fighting a losing battle with the aromas wafting from the Thanksgiving feast. Dishes were passed in order of who seemed to want them the most, with the exception of the Brussels sprouts, which were mostly forced onto the plates of the younger diners, disappearing quickly beneath plies of turkey, cranberry sauce, and marshmallow-covered sweet potatoes. Rick noticed that while George was busy making food disappear from plates and reappear behind ears, he was letting most of it pass him by.

As dessert was being prepared, George clinked his fork against his glass. “I would like to propose a toast,” he said, as the table slowly quieted. “That is, I would like to, but my glass appears to be empty, and you can’t toast with an empty glass.” He gestured at the bottle of white wine sitting next to Rick’s brother, David. “Why don’t you pass that down this-a-way?” he said.

David hesitated, looking over at Rick. “I think water will work fine, George,” Rick said.

“Nonsense,” George said. “Water is for quotidian occasions. I need something worthy of a festive salute.”

“I really think water is fine. JJ, pour Uncle George some water,” George grabbed JJ’s hand. “James doesn’t need to pour Uncle George any water. Uncle George can pour his own damn water or whatever he damn well—”

“George!” Rick stood up, then took a deep breath. “Do you need some fresh air, George?” he asked.

George looked down and at Rick’s son. JJ’s eyes were wide and the corners of his mouth quivered. George let go of JJ’s hand, then slowly stood up. “Yes, now that you mention it, I think I do,” he said.

“I think I’ll join you,” Rick said, and together they walked out of the dining room and made their way out to the patio.

Rick turned to his uncle. “I don’t even know where to start. I just wanted to have a pleasant dinner, but you couldn’t go one night without—”

“I know,” George said, “I know. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry isn’t going to cut it this time, George,” Rick said. “I mean, it’s one thing to take it out on me, but JJ? Do you have any idea how much he looks up to you? He thinks you’re larger than life, and I don’t want to be the one to tell him different. Do you?”

“Well, that’s the thing,” George said, “I’m not, am I?”

Rick was about to reply when JJ came running out. “Uncle George, can you come do the pie trick?”

“Uncle George is very tired,” Rick said. “I’m going to take him home.”

2. “Is this your card?” Rick asked, flipping the card over. Silence.

“When’s Uncle George getting here?” JJ asked.

“After I go pick him up.”

“And when will that be?”

“After he calls to tell me he’s ready to leave.”

“And when will that be?”

“I don’t know, JJ.” Rick looked at the clock. George was supposed to call around 4:00; it was now 4:30. He looked at the kids’ expectant faces. “How about you guys sit tight, and I’ll go see what’s what.”

On his way out, he stuck his head into the kitchen. “I’m going over to George’s,” he said.

Katherine looked up from checking the turkey. “I thought we agreed that if he didn’t call, he wasn’t coming,” she said. “Dinner will be ready in five minutes, and I don’t want to make everyone wait.”

“I know,” Rick said, “but I don’t want to have to look at JJ’s ‘sad puppy’ face all night. I’ll be back in fifteen minutes, tops.”

“Fine, fine,” Katherine said, “I’ll try to fend off the starving hoards until then.”

Rick was at George’s door five minutes later. He rang the doorbell a couple times. “George? It’s Rick,” he yelled through the door. “Come on, food’s getting cold.”

“I’m not hungry,” George yelled back.

“Well, come anyway. You don’t want to disappoint your biggest fan, do you?”

Rick waited until finally he heard footsteps, and then the door opened. George stood there in his bathrobe, holding a half-empty bottle. “James asking for me?” he said.

“Yeah—but, really, George?” Rick said, nodding at the bottle.

George looked at it. “Oh, that,” he said, “I didn’t think I was going anywhere, you know, and ... It’s my first one Richard, Scout’s Honor.”

George set the bottle on a table by the door. “Give me a couple minutes to get myself decent and I’ll be ready to go.”

“I don’t know.” The wind picked up, and George shivered. “Okay, look,” Rick said, “I’ll let you come on two conditions. One: nothing but water to drink.”
"Four Ways to Vanish an Elephant" continued

"Promise," George said.
"Two: I want you to talk to David about Pine Valley again, and if JJ really
means that much to you, you’ll go."
George looked at the bottle again, then back at Rick.
"Deal," he said.

3.
"Is this your card?" Rick said, flipping the card over. Silence.
"When’s Uncle George getting here?" JJ asked.
Rick looked at the clock. George was supposed to call around 4:00; it
was now 4:30. "I don’t think Uncle George is coming tonight, JJ," Rick said.
He started shuffling the cards. "Do you want to see another trick?" he asked.
"You only know one trick," JJ said.
"And it’s not very good," said David’s daughter, Cynthia, in a stage whisper.
"Well, then, JJ, why don’t you do a trick?"
JJ grinned. "Ok!" He took the deck of cards and turned to Cynthia.
"Think of a card. Hold it in your mind." His face became an image of
intense concentration. Suddenly, he turned over the top card of the deck.
"Is THIS your card?" he said.
Cynthia shook her head.
"Himm. I must concentrate harder," JJ said. He got a quarter of the way
through the deck before it was time for dinner, and Cynthia admitted that
she’d forgotten what her card was anyway.
Dinner was uneventful. As David’s family was getting ready to leave,
Rick’s brother took him aside. "I think you should check on George," David
said. "I tried calling before we had dessert, and he didn’t pick up."
"What do you expect me to do about it tonight?" Rick said. "It’s late, and
I’m not leaving all the dishes, not to mention JJ, for Katherine to deal with."
"Okay, okay. But I’m worried about him."
Rick sighed. "If it’ll make you feel better, I can swing by in
the morning."
"Okay. Thanks."
Rick drove over to George’s house after breakfast. He rang the doorbell
one, twice. "George," he called, "it’s Rick. Just wanted to check in, make
sure you’re okay." No answer. Rick lifted up the empty flower pot that sat
next to the door, picked up the spare key, and let himself in.
George’s house was a museum—or it would be, if he kept it organized.
The floors and walls were lined with magic memorabilia. Rick was admiring
the posters as he headed toward the living room, when he stumbled over an
overflowing prop chest, knocking it open and spilling some of its contents
on the floor.
Rick managed to steady himself against an empty patch of wall. He bent
down and started putting things back in the chest: an old wooden wand,
chipped and warped; a pair of trick handcuffs; a deck of tarot cards. He
paused as he picked up the last two items, a cape and top hat, much too
small for a grown man. He reached into the top hat and felt around until he
heard a click, then pulled out a stuffed rabbit, moth-eaten, one ear torn. He
held it, and remembered for a while.
Eventually, he got back up. He called for George again. Still no answer.
The house felt empty. Slowly, Rick passed through the living room and
proceeded down the hall to George’s bedroom.
The coroner found him there an hour later, sitting on the floor. Rick
spoke calmly, explained who he was, why he was there, explained George’s
history with alcohol, his voice never faltering. His eyes remained fixed
on one of the posters on the wall. It was the centerpiece of the room, just
across from George’s bed. Two figures were pictured there: a man and a boy.
Rick studied their faces, traced the lines, until, finally, tears clouded
his vision.

4.
"Is this your card?" Uncle George said, flipping the card over with
a flourish. There was a collective gasp from the four great-nieces and
nephews gathered around the coffee table.
JJ, the amazed eight-year-old whose card it indeed was, leaned forward
and whispered loudly, "How did you do that?"
George began gathering up the cards. "You know better than that,
James," he said. "A magician never reveals his secrets."
"Unless you keep hugging him about it," Rick said from the doorway. He
walked over and tousled JJ’s hair. "And it helps if you’re cute. You’ll have to
worry it out of him later though, it’s time to wash up for dinner." The kids
scurried off, eager for food.
"Here, let me help," Rick said, and moved to his uncle’s side as George
slowly rose up off the couch.
"Time was I could’ve levitated myself up," George said as he straightened
up. "Now, did I hear something about food?"
Once everyone was gathered around the table, prayers were dealt with
hastily, piled fighting a losing battle with the aromas wafting from the
Thanksgiving feast. Dishes were passed in order of who seemed to want
them the most, with the exception of the Brussels sprouts, which were
mostly forced onto the plates of the younger diners, disappearing quickly
beneath piles of turkey, cranberry sauce, and marshmallow-covered
sweet potatoes.
Rick noticed that while George was busy making food disappear from
plates and reappear behind ears, he was letting most of it pass him by. At
one point, a Brussels sprout fell out of George’s sleeve and rolled down the
length of the table. George laughed it off, but Rick saw how his face fell
when no one was looking.
As dessert was being prepared, George said something about getting
some fresh air, and made his way out to the patio, grabbing his sports jacket
on the way. Rick followed a few minutes later. He got to the sliding glass
doors just in time to see George slip something into his jacket pocket.
"Four Ways to Vanish an Elephant" continued

“I didn’t know fresh air came in a flask,” Rick said as he stepped outside, sliding the door closed behind him.

“It’s amazing what technology can do these days,” George said. He was sitting facing the lawn, not meeting Rick’s eyes.

“We’ve talked about this, George, you know—”

“Can we not do this tonight, Richard?” George said, finally turning to look at him. “Can you just pretend, just for tonight, that you didn’t see anything?”

Rick looked up at the sky, breathed. “Fine,” he said. He pulled out a chair and sat down beside his uncle. George pulled out his favorite deck of cards, circus-themed, and started shuffling them absentmindedly. Neither of them said anything. After a bit, George pulled out the ace of hearts and looked at it. It had an elephant on the front, with an acrobat sitting sidesaddle on top. George spoke then, quietly, as if to no one in particular.

“Houdini once vanished an elephant on stage,” he said. “Imagine. It’s just standing there, larger than life, and then poof—and with a gesture, the card disappeared—it’s gone. Just like that. It really must have been something.”

Rick didn’t know what to say, so he reached out and laid a hand on George’s shoulder.

At that moment, the patio door slid open, and JJ came rushing out.

“Uncle George, Uncle George, come do the pie trick!”

George looked at Rick, who nodded, and let go of George’s shoulder. George got up, slowly, and turned to JJ, smiling. “Alright, James,” he said. “Ready to be amazed?”
Body

Hadley Harrison

My body is not my own. It's a formation of other peoples' perceptions of it, layered like papier-maché. Layers of beauty standards, feminist reactions to beauty standards, and my own reactions to feminist reactions to beauty standards, coated with a paste of cutting remarks from skinny teenage boys and Macy's makeup counter girls. When people look at my body, they see what they want to see. They see a projection of their own insecurities and ideals, but my body extends beyond their image. It doesn't fit, like the jeans I squeezed into in high school: the largest size in the store didn't fit over my thighs, strong from years of work and sports. I leaned against the thin wall of the dressing room, the inch-thick plaster separating me from my wall-like friend and endless repeating cells, all occupied by girls who effortlessly stand sexual pleasure than my own, but that felt so normal to me. Half of the middle school locker rooms and birthday pool parties, it seemed to shave your she was asleep. Cosmo of the dressing room, the mich-thick plaster separating me from my'.

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I dreamed of cutting my body away like a knife through a sheet of freshly rolled dough, trimming and trimming until it could fit into a cookie cutter that pressed identical molds over and over again. Then, as I scanned middle school locker rooms and birthday pool parties, it seemed as if everyone I knew was pressed from that mold. It was in those locker rooms that I learned to hate my fuzzy legs; I cursed my dad for giving me thick, coarse hair that grew quickly and viciously, responding to razors with violent regrowth. In high school I battled with it, sometimes letting it grow out on Feminist Principles, then aching for the softness of being freshly shaved and engaging in internal debates about whether it was wrong to want to be soft. I read some articles written by white feminists to assure myself of wanting to shave, and they all agreed that you should never shave your pubes and armpits because a man tells you to but they never said anything about what thick girls should do with thick hair that sneaks everywhere, even on their chins and stomach.

My sister ordered a subscription to Cosmo when we still lived together, and I would sneak copies at night and read them in the bathroom when she was asleep. Cosmo told me to love my own body by buying a vibrator but also how to "give the perfect blow job" and "impress him with your knowledge of male erotic zones." Those pages taught me more about male sexual pleasure than my own, but that felt so normal to me. Half of the magazine was advertisements reminding me that my value is in my beauty, and the other half was lists of 100 Hot Sex Tips reminding me that my value is in my sexuality. I never saw a magazine that said, on the cover in bold letters, "It's Okay To Want To Kiss Girls" or "Other People Feel Disconnected From Their Vagina Too.

I wish that I had never stolen those magazines, I wish that my sister hadn't devoured them alongside me in separate rooms, and I wish I didn't still sneak glimpses at the covers in the checkout line in the supermarket because Nicki Minaj and Kim Kardashian leer at me from behind packs of gum and mints.

Every time I climb through a subway turnstile I'm reminded of how wide my hips are, the first part of my body that I learned to love because Nicki Minaj has big hips too. Every time I read the comments under a picture of Nicki Minaj on the internet I'm reminded of how guys like big hips and that's why I should like my own. It's like my opinion of my body is unimportant, since as long as a man masked behind a computer screen, or sitting next to me on a couch, or sleeping next to me in my bed thinks that it's sexy, it's fine. In high school a friend of a friend told me that my breasts were the perfect size because guys don't really want more than a heaping handful. He told me I should go out and buy a push-up bra and learn how to dress to accentuate my chest instead of covering myself in tee shirts and crew-neck sweaters. In college I bought more sports bras and put on an extra layer every time I had to pass a boy's room on the way to the kitchen. An Enlightened Male Feminist shotgunned two beers in front of me, then told me he loved looking at girls who wore natural-looking makeup and having sex with girls who loved themselves. I watched dramatic makeup tutorials on the internet and bought purple lipstick. I put on makeup, I took it off on Feminist Principle. I put it on again. I tried to pluck my eyebrows based on an article in Seventeen Magazine, since even my sister said I looked like the "Before" photo on one of the makeover shows that played during primetime on basic cable. I learned that it made people feel uncomfortable when I called my 200-pound figure fat, because fat is bad and acknowledging my fat is self-hate.

Over time, in darkened rooms and in lukewarm bathtubs, I claimed my own body. I painted my toenails, kept short and square, and signed my authorship on each one like Picasso. I scrubbed at calluses on my heels, thick from miles walked along freeways in wool socks to get to work, to the library, to anywhere that I couldn't see from my bedroom window. I stared at my face in the mirror and forced myself to repeat nice things about it until I meant them: I like my dark eyebrows, the shape of my lips, and my heavy eyelashes that never hold a curl but they don't really need to anyway.

I started talking to women and praising women about things that were beyond beauty. I started to view compassion, intelligence, intimacy as more beautiful than any parts of these women that I could see because they were things that I could feel and they felt good. I found women that loved putting on makeup and women who kept their hair short and un-styled and both taught me that my body is not an image projected upon me, but one that I put forth

I started to take pride in caring for myself, not to make myself pretty, but because I deserved to be taken care of. I privileged style, what I liked, over fashion, what I am told to like. I bought loose clothes that didn't hug my curves or ripple at my chest, I bought lacy underwear that no one has ever seen, and I bought clunky boots that thunder when I walk. I worked lotion into my cracked knees and covered cuts and scabs with bandaids to stop myself from tearing at them. I needed to stop myself from tearing at my scabs, at my skin, at the fat I believed was in all of the wrong places.
I don't hate any part of my body. I hate that I'm expected to hate the thickness of my thighs or the soft waves of my stomach. I hate that it takes so much strength to stop comparing myself to magazine covers and Victoria's Secret advertisements. I hate that little girls in crowded locker rooms feel forced to cover their flabby arms or fuzzy legs. I hate that an essay about a fat girl's body is supposed to be wracked with insecurity and shame and justification and decades of images and insults woven into five paragraphs with a single-sentence conclusion. I hate my body and I wish I could have someone else's. I love my body because it is mine.

day
your body is not the enemy.
you will not contort your mind into a weapon against yourself.
your imagination will not run wild with ways to end it.
today you are thankful.
you were thankful yesterday too.
and the day before, and the day before.
you have learned
how to occupy your body.
your body no longer take critiques, it shouldn't have to.
when you let others' hands learn your body they must be slow, intentional.
you are intentional too.
your body is your only body.
and today it is a gift.
Escaping What's Seen On the Inside

My breaths shorten as the bus draws near. Buses make me anxious; all those metro lines crossing back and forth, pretending there is a semblance of order when all I see are places to get lost and stops that I do not know. With a soul-shuddering screech, it stops and the doors open for me. The fact that I have to rely on buses here sits like a rock in the pit of my stomach. After I step onto the bus, the driver waits barely a moment before taking off, sending me lurching into one of the handrails as I try to put my ticket into the reader. I stagger to the back then collapse into a couple of seats, my bag on one, myself on the other. Aside from me and the bus driver, there are only two blank-faced passengers. We are all spread out as if scared that sitting near someone else would compel us to talk and interact.

When I moved to France at the end of August, I was terrified; I had never lived farther than fifty miles from my hometown before and, though I had been learning French since high school, I was understandably terrifying. One of the first things I did after getting off the plane was lock myself in a bathroom and cry hysterically, shoving practically my entire fist into my mouth attempting to muffle the sound. I was lucky the family I was to be an au pair for picked me up from the airport; if I had had to take a bus I do not think I would have been able to get off the plane. Instead I would have remained frozen in my seat until it arrived back in the States. A week later when I did have to take my first bus trip to get groceries for the family, I spent ten minutes crouching on my bedroom floor, holding my knees and breathing heavily, black spots dancing across my vision. After three months of being here I have managed to move past hyperventilation when I think about taking a bus, but that's about it. As long as I stay on my known route, I am alright; any new route I will not touch.

I think my problem is overthinking everything. All I can seem to think about when I have to use the bus is how easy it would be for something to go wrong. What if I leave too late? What if I can't find the stop? What if there's a strike that halts all public transportation? What if I get on the wrong bus and don't notice? And it's not like I can ask the bus drivers for help; they're always so surly and curt. The driver today has a newspaper sitting on the dashboard and is only driving with one hand as if he cannot stress enough how disinterested he is. The bus jerks to a stop and I slide forward, my hands shooting up to brace myself against the seat in front of me. A young couple clambers on to the bus, navigating a stroller between them which the mother maneuvers into the spot made for wheelchairs while the father feeds their tickets to the machine. The bus driver is slightly more patient this time, allowing them to get almost settled before he pulls back into traffic with a roar of exhaust.

I glance out the window as the couple murmurs about the best placement of the stroller so it does not roll down the bus before the mother settles into the seat next to the stroller, her foot hooked under it as a brake, and the father leans against the side of the bus, one hand wrapped around the handrail and his feet out in front of the stroller as an extra precaution.
The street we are on feels too narrow for the bus: the cars moving past are just inches away from having their sides scraped. Yet somehow the cars and buses and people fit, sliding past each other and filling the maze of alleys and streets with an oddly reassuring chaos. I feel something almost exhilarating, watching us slip through places clearly built before the monstrosities that are buses were thought of.

When I first arrived here, I spent afternoons walking the streets, discovering stone paved roads that spit me out into unknown plazas, streets that circled back to places I had already been. I was overwhelmed by the stone soaring around me, casually supporting the weight of centuries. The city I came from was bigger and shinier and newer and completely lacking in this kind of majesty or awe. At first I did not want to leave my home. I wanted to come here, but what drove me across the ocean was not a desire to leave my city and its familiarity. I had grown up walking down the same streets, past the same buildings, watching the same cars pass me by until I knew them perfectly and they knew me. My life was reflected in the windows of downtown and there was no hiding from it. So when I could no longer stand it and wanted an escape from my life, it meant I had to leave my city too. Initially I tried to cling to something in the city I could know, a place that would be familiar until I realized that this city is unknowable. There was no glass to look at me in the stone buildings and no streets I walked down every day and suddenly I loved that. If I can't figure out this city, then it can't figure out me, something I have never known before.

Across from me a muffled cry comes from the stroller. I am shaken from my reverie and my eyes flick towards the baby lying there. A yellow blanket is tucked around him and a pacifier is in his mouth. Despite all the screeching and lurching of the bus, he is very calm, much calmer than I have ever been on a bus. I can't see his face very well from where I am sitting which sends an odd pang through me. I want to see if his face looks like my own son, Aidan, whom I haven't seen since I left. I did not even bring a picture of him with me, just my memories of his grey eyes and hair that turns darker every day.

When I first took this job, Sean, Aidan's father, did not talk to me for two days. He picked up extra shifts at work and left rooms as soon as I entered them. I told him over and over that it would be temporary, only a year, maybe less. All he could see though was that I was leaving them and he did not understand why. Aidan was born barely six months after Sean and I graduated college. We had help from our families, and support and almost a year and a half of being together. Sean had even suggested we get married. But still, at twenty-two I barely knew how to take care of myself, let alone a child. Sean and I both found solid jobs and Sean found domestic bliss, but I kept getting lost under sleepless nights, piles of diapers, crying that I could not solve. So, how, when Sean was so happy with me and Aidan, could I explain to him that every time I neared Aidan's room my stomach felt like it was full of lead? How could I tell him that every time he said something about a future together I choked on the air I was breathing? How could I say that I had not been ready for them? Had not had time to know if I even wanted them? I loved them with everything I had, but love can only take you so far.

The bus slows to a stop in front of the train station and the couple with the stroller negotiates their way off the bus. Even though I watch the stroller for a glimpse of their little boy's face, I see nothing. As the bus moves again I watch them out the opposite window until we are too far gone. I think of Aidan again and feel twisted inside. The first time I held him was terrible. In the moments before I felt like any other mother: exhausted, anxious, excited only to hold my baby that was finally out in the world. Then he was placed in my arms and I panicked. Here was this red, wrinkly, helpless little thing that was entirely dependent on me, yet he was an accident. I had hugged him closer; black spots dancing across my vision, barely able to breathe until Sean had carefully taken him from me with a kiss to my forehead. I have only felt like a true mother for that one moment, right before holding my son. I had hoped that by the time he turned one I would have learned to love being a mother, but all I felt on his first birthday was that suffocating responsibility for his life.

Leaving Aidan and Sean for this job was supposed to be my solution. If I couldn't love them enough with them, maybe being away would fix that. Isn't absence supposed to make the heart grow fonder? But my love is not moving the right way. Instead of moving towards Sean and Aidan it is shifting and spreading over my new life in this new city, snaking through the alleys, filling the plazas, even touching this god-awful bus. I love that I spend the day with children who I give back to their parents when evening comes. I love that they are only my job for the day, not my life. I love that stone does not stare back at you the way glass. I love with a heart more and miss him a little less as if he is only a child I love, not my own child.

"Prochaine arrête: Alexandre Varenne." I start up and stare out the window. I have no idea what stop Alexandre Varenne is. For once instead of being hyper aware of how many stops are left and continually trying to decipher the map to confirm my stop, the rumbling of the bus has lulled me into my own head. My worst fear has been realized. I have no idea where I am. My breathing shortens and speeds up. Black spots dance in front of my eyes. I lean my forehead against the cold window and try to regain control. My hands fumble blindly for the map of bus routes I keep in my bag. After scanning it for a few minutes I realize I have boarded the right bus going the wrong direction just trying to go to a damn coffee shop. Only my second worst fear then. My eyes dart around the bus. Only one other person remains on it with me and they are resolutely looking away. I glance back down at my map. Alexandre Varenne is the last stop for this line. As if on cue, the bus shudders to a stop and the engine rumbles quiet. The bus driver pulls out his newspaper from beneath seat and the other
passenger climbs off while I just sit there. I try to take a few deep breaths to calm myself but they get progressively shallower and faster and the black spots start to crowd out my sight.

"Breath, Brielle. Breathe," I murmur to myself. I close my eyes and lean back. I force my mind to wander. A memory of Aidan sleeping fills my head, his soft hand, curled around my finger. I feel better. I open my eyes and look back at the map in my lap. The bus driver has not spoken to me. I don't think he cares that I'm still sitting on the bus if he has even noticed. I glance back out the window and realize I have two options: get off the bus and start walking or wait until this bus leaves to go back the way we came. I think again of Aidan and his curled fingers and those grey eyes that might be light or dark and I wonder what it would feel like if stayed here and never saw him again. I wonder what Sean would say if I told him I was not going to come home. Knowing him, he probably wouldn't say anything. I look back at the bus driver who is still reading his newspaper, oblivious to my life. He does not know me, the stone buildings and plaza just outside my window do not know me or Sean or Aidan the way the windows back home do. I fold the map in my hands and put it back in my bag, then settle into my seat to stay.

7 Maxims for Brenna
Cameron Schneberger

1. Her name has teeth around these parts. Her teeth are white like cattle skulls in cartoon deserts. The whites in her eyes could've adorned milk cartons, but she was never lost.

2. A little trust, a fake ID and an apron from home will nab anyone a waitressing job at Zorro's. No sign hangs over the door, but the motorcycles crowd around it like carps to a clap.

3. Anything is amphibious during happy hour. Lime juice prefers shadows. Waitresses prefer mating calls. Disco balls prefer to hibernate all winter. Drink until the skin breathes.

4. There are two types of holes to believe in. The first type promises a sneak peek into the ladies room. The second type litters the walls, the floor, the bar stools, the glass of the broken love tester.

5. Awareness is power and a dirty rag is a clean rag on slow days. It's days like this when the bar boys get the nerve to quit. They never say why, but her touch doesn't require answers.

6. She is not dangerous. She does not crave revenge. She just wants to dance on the empty mahogany and swish her parted hair and tuck some warm air in her pantsuit pocket.

7. There is no undertow without sandcastles. There is no plague without adrenaline junkies disguised as doctors. There is no refund for a platter full of sliders when you accidentally shoot the waitress.
Chicago artist Chancelor Bennett (stage name Chance the Rapper) has been an enigma in the industry ever since he burst onto the scene in 2013 with the release of his second mixtape, Acid Rap. His nasally voice coupled with his free-flowing verses, LSD references, gospel and jazz and juke influences, nostalgia-inducing melodies, and his insistence on mentioning that he was a Chicagoan painted him in stark contrast with the trap music being made by fellow Windy City up-and-comer Chief Keef. The two were positioned as stark opposites, with Chance being hailed as the antidote to Keef, who many viewed as the teenage, dreadlocked representation of the prevalence of gun violence in Chicago.

I remember as a high school senior listening to Keef's Back From the Dead mixtape in the football locker room with the rest of my teammates every day before practice. We were an eclectic group, comprised of hood niggas and suburbanites, future pharmacists, drug dealers, aspiring rappers, felons, and yes, even a few athletes, some of whom fit neatly into the former categories. We would bang Keef's tape before and after practice, interspersed with Gucci Mane or Doughboyz Cashout records, as loud as we could, bobbing our heads as if shaking imaginary dreads, completely unbothered that the volume of the music made conversation with the person next to you nearly impossible. That was our soundtrack. That was the music we lived our day-to-day lives to, that we perhaps believed would morph us into the men we thought we were supposed to be, that taught us to walk as if indestructible.

This was the music I brought with me to college. I brought it in my walk, in the way I'd zip my Adidas jacket all the way to the top so it'd graze the few chin hairs dangling from my face. I brought it in my "What's goods" and in my head nods to strangers that stared for too long as I walked up the hill to one of the buildings named after dead white men. I brought it with me into my college football locker room, where I'd scoff at the country music or dubstep nonsense that my strange white teammates would insist was enjoyable. And I brought this all in defiance of the suburban fortress that incubated me.

Southfield, Michigan, my hometown, is not Detroit, Michigan. It is a suburb of it, outside of it, on its margin. To be from Southfield was to not be from Detroit; it was to be grounded in a space that had no ground, a space that was merely defined by it not being the real thing, no matter that the real and the fraud shared a border. The not real thing, consequently, made its inhabitants not real. It made them marginal, and to be marginal is to be unimportant. The only way to reconcile this inherent unimportance was to adopt the tendencies of those dwelling in the real space, to take those that are useful, that are cool, while holding onto the bloodless streets and better schools allowed in our Sugar Hill.

The real and the fraud oftentimes shared a single household, as mine did growing up. I'm the spawn of two people who are from the real space, the grounded one, though they were raised in a different era, when thepitter-
I immediately downloaded that glorious Acid Rap mixtape and played it the entire weekend while I was home, proselytizing in Chance’s name as any new devotee would. My parents were pretty indifferent to the record, but it spoke to me in a way that no other record up to that point had achieved. Chance was the first rapper I heard that captured the essence of what life is like on the margins of one’s own community, and he was the first rapper I heard that was comfortable existing there.

Chance is from Chatham, a black middle class neighborhood on Chicago’s south side. He attended high school in the city’s downtown and experienced the comfort of middle class life as well as the city’s darker side, which can be summed up by fellow Chicago native Kanye West when he said, “I feel the pain in my city wherever I go / 314 soldiers died in Iraq, 509 died in Chicago” (Carter & West). Chance’s experiences gave him a perspective I could relate to, as he had two feet in the middle class space while being tied to the “real” Chicago no matter what he did. Chance never felt a need to put on a facade, to become that “real” Chicago, or to completely try to run away from the city by accepting “alternative hip hop” boxes. He also didn’t put down Chicago artists who were emerging from the drill music scene like Keef, who brandished handguns with extendable clips like Bibles in a church. Chance was wholly Chicago and wholly marginal at the same time, and he did not see a contradiction between the two. In response to the media’s tendency to paint him in stark opposition to Keef and the rest of his crew, Chance said, “Musically, our sounds are different, but we really need each other in order to exist. We need the idea that rapping is important for people to help us to continue to thrive” (Nosnitsky).

I encountered Chance once again while I was living in New York City in the winter of 2015 when I went to see him perform in person. The show, at the famous SOBs club, was not marketed as a Chance the Rapper show, but as a Donnie Trumpet and the Social Experiment show; the first time Donnie Trumpet was the headliner on a ticket. The Social Experiment, commonly abbreviated to a simple SoX to attest to the group’s Chicago roots, is a band that Chance the Rapper is a member of, and he insists that he is simply another member and not the lead vocalist (Chance the Rapper Interview). Chance turned down multi-million dollar record deals from seemingly every major label in order to become just another member of a band that consists of his friends, and they insist on incessantly touring and releasing music for free, an unheard of strategy in the industry. SoX, like Chance has done throughout his entire career, has placed themselves on the margins, making super positive, borderline corny music, while simultaneously receiving consigns from everyone from Jay Z to Madonna and even Atlanta trap trio Migos.

After the opening band finished their set and a brief intermission to set up the stage for the Social Experiment, the crowd got what they came for, as the band emerged from the stage and immediately burst into a frenzied
rhythm, with the drummer banging away on his drums, Donnie Trumpet summoning delicate sounds from his trumpet, Peter Cottontale and Nate Fox readying their keyboards, and Chance the Rapper, the reluctant man of the hour, skittering about the stage. Chance grabbed the mic, and uttered SoX's first words of the night: "We are the Social Experiment!"

I remained in my position on the rail and observed Chance the entirety of the event, only briefly focusing my attention elsewhere when surprise guests Elle Varner and Robert Glasper each came out to improv with the band. For much of the set, Chance remained in the back or on the side, on the margin of what many believed was his own show, and he seemed entirely comfortable being there. He played the role of backup singer and hype man with the same enthusiasm he exhibited on the few seldom occasions he was called upon to be the band's lead vocalist. Donnie Trumpet manned center stage most of the night, breaking out into trumpet solos more than once, and he did essentially all of the talking for the band.

The highlights of the night, however, all occurred with the man that we all came to see behind the mic. At one point, Chance, from his position on center stage, took the time to teach the audience the words to the chorus of one of the band's songs. He drilled the audience, making sure everyone knew the words, before breaking out into "Paradise." He rapped his verse, and, when it was time for the chorus, he demanded everyone to sing with him, constantly screaming "Sing!" and "Louder!" until his impromptu choir sounded to his liking. This rehearsal led to a room full of people, in unison, singing, "I believe that if I fly I'll probably end up somewhere in paradise," a simple yet refreshingly positive line that aggressively toed the line between uplifting and corny, words written by a black man that refuses to be categorized as anything other than himself.

The band's overwhelming positivity and faith that that positivity was exactly what we needed was an experience that left the crowd dazed and satisfied, though a small group were left wanting for those Acid Rap staples that allowed them to get to know the Chicago emcee. From my space on that rail, I was able to witness a black man like myself, who was raised on the margin of his own community, and witness how he had made a home in that space and even turned it into a place of power. Chance's simultaneous marginality and centrality left him untied to common notions of black male authenticity, giving him space to question and become a black man that is so grounded and connected to community that he turned down millions of dollars in order to give his music to his people for free while remaining. Chance is able to think outside of the box and blend genres and all common conventions of hip hop because he is not tied to that center, though he wholly embraces it and is embraced by it.

The margin allows for experimentation that is seen as inauthentic or not black in the center, which allows one to disregard the hardened facade demanded by the center. This is due to the relative ease with which one is able to dream when raised on the margin. It tears the body in half, with one eye looking into the center and the other looking out into the world that exists even beyond the margin, a new world where the plundering of the bodies of its inhabitants is neither seen nor accepted as simply an operation cost necessary to keep a Starbucks open on every corner or to make sure little Timmy is never told that he has to be twice as good.

The margin also affords a third eye, which some are aware of and others oblivious to the exact way all privileged groups—groups whose identities contain qualities that make them closer to America's ideal—are oblivious to the ramifications of their unearned privilege. This third eye allows inhabitants of the margin to perceive possibilities that aren't as visible to those who dwell in the center, those who are creators of the culture adopted by their kin on the margin and, as a cruel trade-off, are oftentimes surrounded by a level of plunder that puts blinders on the eyes, blurring all that exists outside of the walls surrounding the center. The margin is a step closer to that outside world where no such plunder or fear of plunder exists, freeing the mind to dream and imagine possibilities that aren't as easily visible to those on the center, to whom the American Dream just represents another generation of said plunder.

This triality of vision, the ability to see a world one is supposed to remain caged in and a world that erected those cages while also being fully cognizant of the cusp that one inhabits, represents a sort of triple consciousness particular to those of the black middle class. No matter the upward mobility, one is still black before all else and embodies the consequences of this blackness in the eyes of white America. This is combined with rejection by one's own community, by the center, the authentic, as efforts to assimilate by parents—parents, like my own, who brought or beget children in this cusp after escaping generational wars on the center masked as a war against drugs—have left one just as "black" but not the same "black" that exists in the center. This leaves many on that cusp without an identity, and, unlike Chance the Rapper, many do not forge an identity on this island and instead veer to either hub adjacent to them, which explains the black boys from Southfield that immerse themselves in the scriptures of Chief Keef or that pick up a gun, the boys that write gangsta raps in their bedrooms on 9 Mile and Evergreen; the boys that try to embody what they cannot understand, that have faith in an idea of themselves that will not save them.


