

inkelinger



inkslinger

A NOTE FROM OUR EDITOR:

The story of humanity is one of hope: heels which stomp on snakes, lions who lay with lambs, a Savior who breaks bread with tax collectors. But our story is also broken; history details the sufferings of Job, the betrayal of Joseph, the folly of Solomon, the murder of the Messiah. We inherit the rebellion of Jonah alongside the faith of Rahab.

But creation proclaims the glory of God in the midst of its groaning. We scribble poems or sketches on napkins to capture the breath in our lungs—the cliff-diving, stomachs-in-our-throats sensation of being alive. We dribble paint and snap pictures in step with King David, learning to the tune of his laments that photography means *writing with light*.

And we, with our shoelaces untied and dirt under our nails, turn our smudged faces up to the heavens and raise our little creations above our heads for our Father to see. We clutch in our hands the tears from last night and our grandmother's smile and our brother before the accident and our niece's scraped knee and the baptism on Sunday.

Maybe we join hands with the person next to us and dance as they dance and mourn as they mourn, and then God looks down at his own little creation and says, "It is very good."

Dearest reader, with reverence I present to you the work of students who write with light.

— Charlotte Snyder

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Special thanks to our advisor, Professor Chris Davidson

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CREATION

Sheep

NICK BASH

The sheep know their shepherd
And I am not He.
In the bull-fields of Windermere
Humbly they sing.

Graze they among thorns,
Content in the rain,
But wandering here
I find I'm not the same.

A lonely storm cloud,
All bundled in black,
Just wondering how
I can stick to the path.

Hopped over the sheep's-gate
To a chorus of cries
For I am not known
In those sweet livestock eyes.

Yet the more that I wander
The more I arrive
At the thought that the sheep
Hides a deep wit inside.

While they follow and bay
In a most servile way
Discerning the true
They yet know when to stay.

Ah . . .

Would that they would see me
As part of their fold
And help me submit
To that sweet yoke of gold.

For their gracious shepherd
Has set them free.
While I may not be you,
Lord — work in me!

Right: Sheep Field Near Windermere, Nick Bash.
Previous: Alfalfa Field, Charlotte Snyder.



Sonnet on Working in the Pumpkin Fields

JANAE MILLER

I love the stillness as I crunch brown dirt
Under my boots near cows that grumble soft.
We keep the calm: our voices, hands, the hurt
Of the bold sun in morning coolness caught.
Long paths of empty dirt, long rows of green,
Long stalks hold leaves so still, the flowers hide,
We search through green to find the buds unseen,
The pumpkins perch, so small, the leaves so wide.
The dew on each leaf beads, the mist falls from
The sprinklers in the distance spewing, wet.
The hushed rush of the cars, the speech of dumb
Machines, the sound of birds, they all collect.
I take a pause in pumpkin pollination
To watch the cows that gaze in rumination.

Fog Day:
A Haiku Collection

ANDREW WINSLOW

Fog blankets the earth
Silencing the sun and sky
The mist whispers on

Gray skies kiss the streets
The road snakes down the heavens
Cars glide through the clouds

Cool winds blow the mist
Through the pale green countryside
Through, but not away



Above: Quiet Afternoon, Rebecca Georgeson.

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Idle Hours

THOMAS RAHKOLA

A choir of swallows
dances across a purple sky
gilded with a rosy scent
and governed by the milk white
majesty of a full moon.
This momentary plenitude
disperses both fear and motivation.
For the ambition of man is antithetical
to satisfaction in the smallest of things.

Blackberries

JANAE MILLER

A taste, another, a third.
Plump globes of black shine
Under the morning sun.
I eat the traitorous fruit
Of the blackberry,
Weed so beloved and hated,
Ever-present, ever-growing,
Cozying itself into corners
Of yards and flowerbeds,
Sprawling in dominion over
Unused pastures, stabbing
All who approach, fierce. Yet
Offering as if desirous of peace,
Sweet-juiced fruit, irresistible.

Sierra Spring

HANNAH JENSEN

On Grandpa's land a tree
Reaches out across a creek,
A still seesaw, leaning hypotenuse.
I sit with yellow book
Above the snow-melt creek.
Water rushes below,
Giggling to itself,
Washing against the banks.
Cracked gray honeycomb bark,
Pines needles pricking the air:
Reading in a tree.

The Wonders of Big Bend

ABBY LARSON

Three worlds seamlessly intertwined
reaching near and far, spreading far and wide,
beckoning the nearby traveler, "Come to me."

The first, a lonely desert road eager for company.
It searches for an inquisitive tourist or wandering animal,
and in this terrain the temperature skyrockets —
one hundred degrees, one-oh-five, one-ten.
Panther's Junction sits nearby, an island in the desert,
surrounded only by the vast expanse of shrubbery.

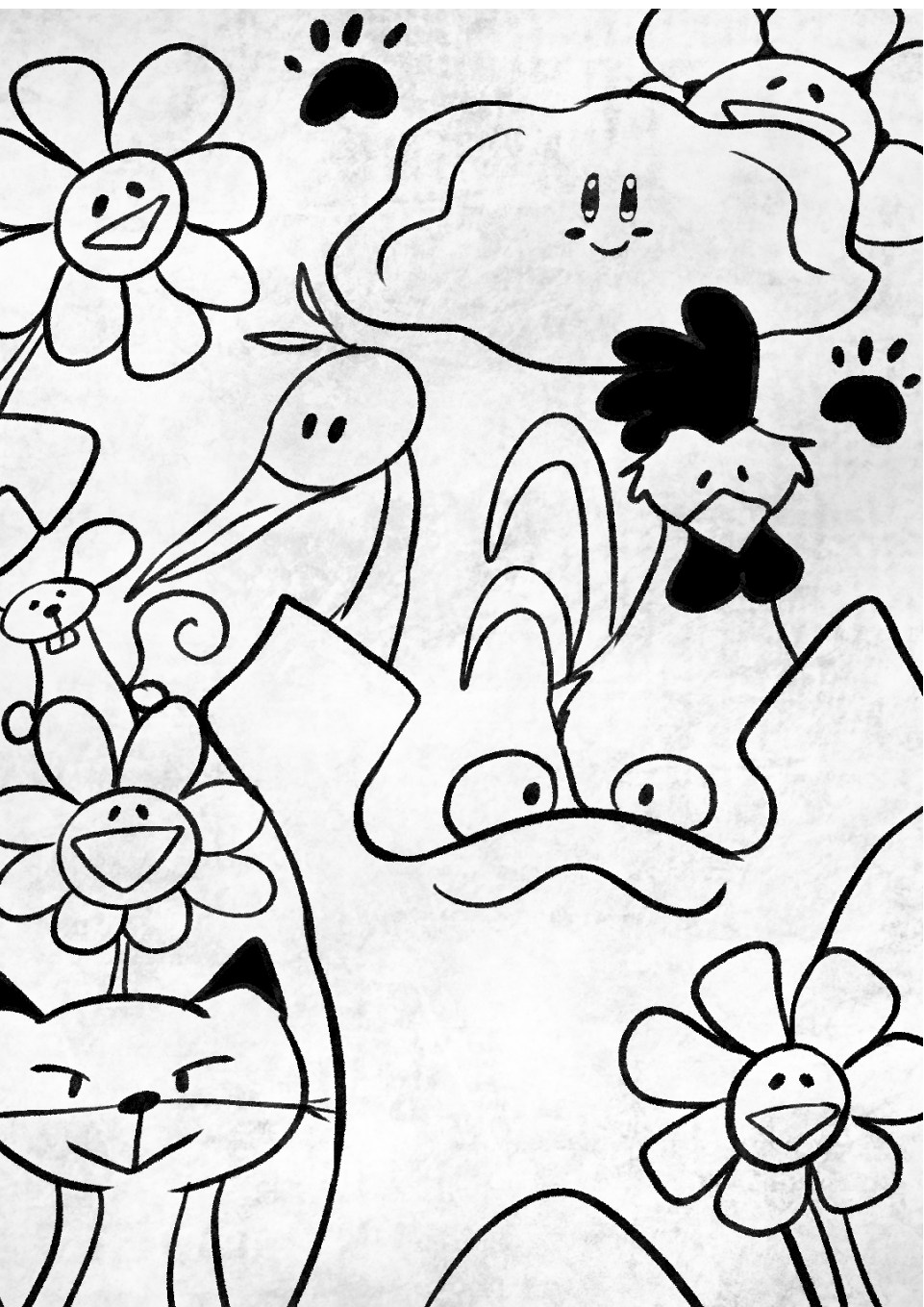
Yet in a second world the mountains call out,
reminding the traveler of a narrow winding pathway
leading directly to the heart of its basin.
In this new territory, storm clouds linger up above,
their presence creating an eerie ambience.
Black bears roam the parking lot as they scour the slopes for food,
and jagged peaks stretch skyward, showing off their breathtaking color.

But back down the labyrinthine mountain road,
past the stark desert landscape,
lies a third realm eagerly anticipating the adventurer's attention.
Here murky water forms a definite boundary
as it slices through towering walls of rock.
Here two countries collide in the middle of the Rio Grande.

Three worlds — desert, mountain, and river,
lie in wait, desiring the company of an ever-curious explorer,
yearning to announce at the top of their lungs,
"Welcome to Big Bend National Park."







LAUGHTER

Elegy for Mother

BENJAMIN BRUYNINCKX

I was as happy as any other day
When mother disappeared.
Right in front of me!
Right there!
Why, cruel world, why!
Would you steal any other mother
In such a quick and sudden moment?
That moment I was looking at her,
The next moment: gone!
I could still hear her:
Her voice, her laughter.
All of a sudden, I couldn't help
But laugh in relief when she reappeared
And uttered that single, damned word:
Peekaboo



Above: Worm Feed, Jonathon Ganji.

Ode to Coffee

REBECCA MADSEN

Coffee; kaffee; kava.

From thy dark depths arises the earthy scent
inspiring the promise that transcends boundaries of tongue.

Thy honesty is tempered with sugars, milks, herbs.

On bended knees we pray to your grounds,
hands cupped to receive our chosen chalice of thy benediction.

We whisper over the elixir:

“Grant to us thy fortitude and capacity.

Imbue us with your divine essence.

Anoint us with your scent, that we may carry your grace through the day.

To thou I commit my money and my fidelity.”

Thy chalice is then lost, tossed aside, cursed.

For your favor comes with a bitter price.

Yet, we return each morning to receive our daily blessing.

From 2:00 AM

HANNAH JENSEN

Ride, ride before the coming of the light
Sweeps away your chance of sleep or glory.
Finish, finish the essay revisions that haunt
Your path. Strike down passive voice, lift up
Vibrant synonyms, stump curmudgeons' critiques.

Read, read the novels and the philosophy—
Don't let eight hundred pages stand
Between you and the beauty of the epilogue.
Sleep for your life! Sink into your pillow,
Let tension drain into dreams so you can
Cogitate and dispute on the morrow.

Do it, do it, do it fast! The sun rises, dragging
Deadlines with it, and 3:00 AM lurks
To turn your brain into a pumpkin.

Hope! Hope when you awake,
That your work looks better
tHan th8s ////////////////////zjkl;



Above: Five Star Hotel, Keanna Whit.

Schmael Pom: A Snail Sonnet about a Snail Named Saltburn in Resnse to the Immortal Snail Meme

ALEC CLOTHIER

Oh snail: thou art my one true enemy.

Saltburn: vile thing, you crawl, you crawl, you crawl

at my family. We fled in hurry;

you followed, as if some accursed thrall.

Saltburn: vile thing, stop chasing after me!

Oh flee! My friends must flee! The snail chases,

getting closer and closer. I must flee!

Please, please, snail! I ask thee for thy graces.

Like some specter, you haunt, you haunt, you haunt

me day and night. Does salt not burn? What now?

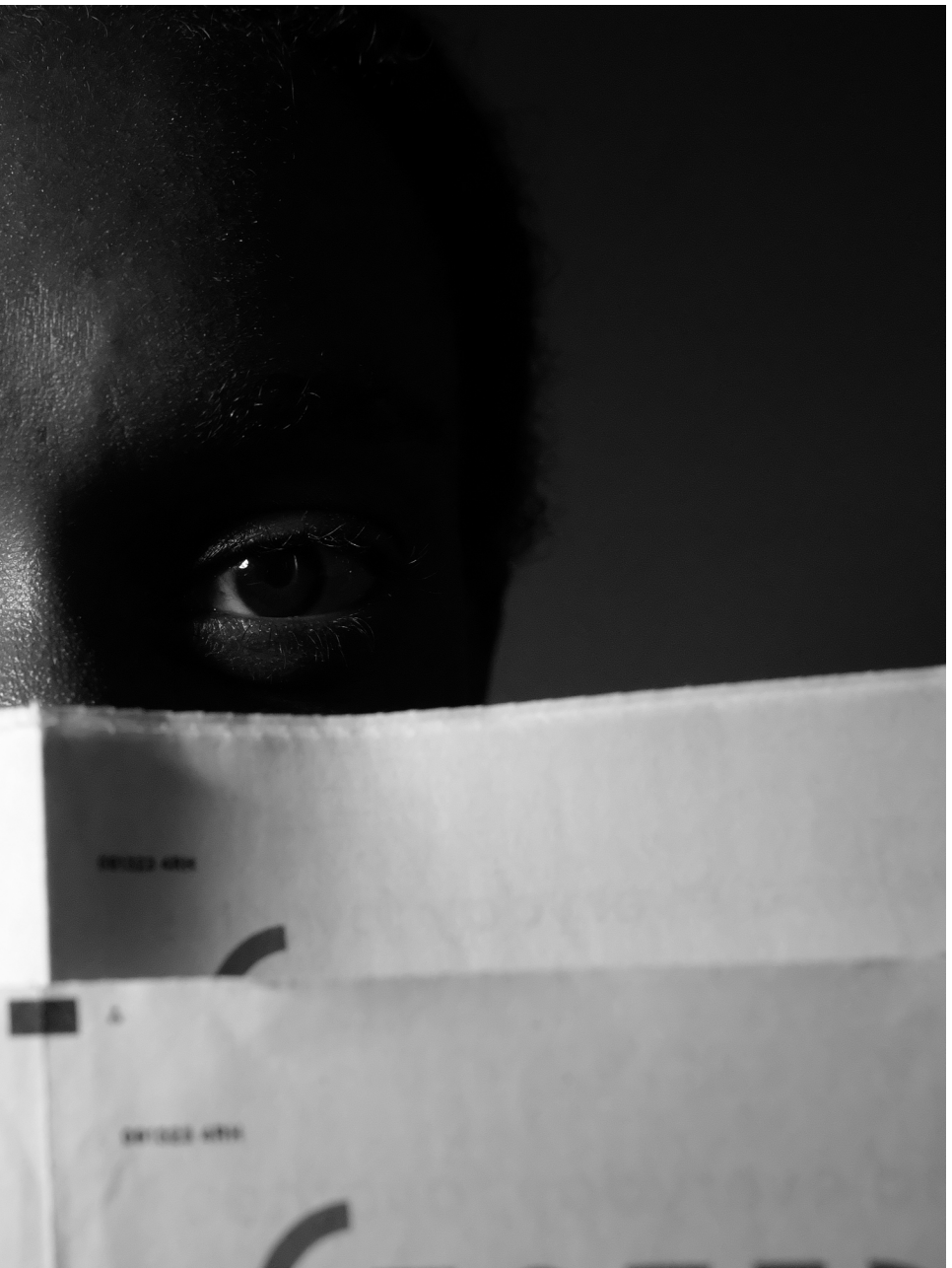
Saltburn, vile thing. Is there nothing but taunt?

Follow me then, protect my friends I vow.

If this be my destiny, I won't wait.

Saltburn, vile thing: I will accept my fate.





PEOPLE



Above: Snow Day, Bella Greer.
Previous: Behind These Eyes, Naylah Jobe.

A prayer for all of this / for You Lord know best
in the form of "A Prayer That Will Be Answered" by Anna Kamienska

HANNAH FODERA

Lord let me be bothered
and then moved

Let my heart be sweet honey
and leave much residue

Make the birds sing louder
let sunlight burn my skin

Let silence clog my ears
so I might listen

so my ears may perk to pause
and my shoulders lean

Make my zeal fragrant
as blossoms of tangerine

And let my words stay consistent as the space
between east and west

Ad-Libitum:
An Abecedarian

ANDREW WINSLOW

All the world may be a stage,
But all men and women are not merely players.
Come, allow me to explain:
Doubtless, most will play their part,
Experiencing life according to their script,
Flitting across the stage as if on puppet strings,
Guessing that nothing could be more freeing,
Heading toward their final curtain in predetermined scenes.
In defiance, the one who is truly different,
Just follows the beat of their own drummer,
King of no one and follower of none.
Look at how they view the world through their own eyes,
Making judgments based on their own observations,
Not conforming to any particular opinion or character type,
Only playing their part when it suits them,
Participating in no one's game but their own,
Quite beyond the reach of puppet masters,
Refusing to be a puppet master themselves.
Such people may not be able to escape the stage; however,
They change the scene, the script, the tone, the song,
Unbound as they are, making their own way.
Vexing though they may be to know and work with,
Without them, the play drags on predictably.
Xs mark our positions on the stage, no exceptions.
Young and old go through the motions,
Zest and wonder is what they bring, imagination to the script.





Above: Sheltered, Bella Greer.
Previous: Crowd Work, Keanna Whit.

Spring 2024

home city

CHARLOTTE TAN

you were still yawning awake when I whispered goodbye.
I brushed a featherlight kiss to your forehead,
lingering for just a second longer
to watch you chase the teasing tails of
the last of your night's dreams.

five moons have reveled and gorged themselves on the seasons.
now, dusk crawls into your waiting arms.
I stand by the edges of your calling caresses,
leaping hope in my chest,
yet prickling paranoia plays an arpeggio down my spine.

your smile curves around the bends I'd cycle through,
the lazy, comforting afternoons spent in your embrace.
your laughter echoes in the treetops,
the indulgent playground you'd lend to me again and again,
be the balcony on my castles, the masts of my pirate ships.

posturing, mannerisms too old and polite,
stumbling struggling streams escape of my midnight tales
glittering metropolis, ironed dress shirts, signatures finished with a flourish.
my sleight of hand to escape your gaze,
I stay frozen, unable to accept your outstretched hand.

unfazed by my alien familiarity, my stunted chuckles to our old jokes.
you brush a featherlight kiss over my forehead,
"come home, dinner's ready" you breathe.
jolting, I put my feet back on ghostly pedals, reach again for your branches,
metal creaks, wood squeaks under coiled, silent doubts
but I begin the intersection back
following the jumbled yarn of past, present, and future,
the call of my home city.

I Dared

JANAE MILLER

I saw him there and wondered if I dared
To give a gift, surprise him with a cup
Of coffee — pumpkin spice — so rich and sweet.

I dared and put the cup into his hands,
I heard him laugh, looked in his eyes, we smiled,
The steaming coffee warmed our fingers. Dare

And I did, when gray October skies glimmer
With light, the breeze blows breath of fall, the leaves
Drift slowly down, spices in hot drinks meld.

I dared — it felt like caffeine in my soul.

Spring 2024

The Exchange between the Barista and the Mailman

NAYLAH JOBE

She had shaggy blonde bangs and a stripped tee.

He wore a mail bag and a slight smile.

In a cafe

packed full of bodies

bodies that looked more like sardines

in a can than people in a shop.

The mail man squeezes through the crowd.

The barista catches him between orders.

He hands her an envelope.

She hands him a smile.

For a moment,

they saw each other.

A slice of humanity.

Following: Vanish, Abigail Borduin.





Daily Bread

HANNAH KUO

I did not trust the promise of provision
So I stored my daily bread
I have saved enough food for months
And all of it is moldy.

Firelight

DANNY DAU

The kid reined in the old mule at the breach in the pass, looking down across the broad talus that sloped tiredly into the wide valley below. The land was haggard—a vacuous floodplain crisscrossed with dry riverbeds and arroyos clotted with buffalograss. To the north a crescent of pine-trees arced along the ridgeline, flecked with old snow. A solitary firelight glowed from amidst them, red and stark against the serrated shadows yawning across the plain. The air was pregnant and inscrutable; rain fell in the east. The Dog Star burnt an ill-colored crimson in the gathering dark—betokening strange tidings. Somewhere a wolf howled. The kid’s neck itched and grew cold; he felt for the revolver he carried slung in a sack around his saddlehorn. He kicked the mule and began to descend into the valley.

As he approached the light from the fire began to reveal its nearest surroundings: an old man with a woolly, white beard frying cornbread and sausages in a pan, and a garishly painted cart into which the kid could discern the forms of globes and astrolabes and still stranger instruments with functions he could not determine. He pulled the revolver from its sack and tucked it into his belt and buttoned his brindle-gray duster to his neck. “Hello,” he shouted just as the furthest rim of firelight illuminated the nose and hooves of his mule.

The bearded man looked up unhurriedly: “Good evening.”

“Evening to you as well,” the kid began. “I saw your light from

the ridgeline, it'd be a kindness for you to share your fire. I'm very hungry."

"Of course. Come, hitch your mule to that tree by my horse. I'll fix you a plate. Coffee?"

The kid assented to the coffee and dismounted from his mule and tethered it beside the sorrel horse that stood placidly behind the cart. He kicked together some pinestraw and squatted on his haunches beside the fire and licked his teeth.

The bearded man handed him a steaming plate and a spoon and a zinc mug. He then sat back and stuffed his hands in the fleece pockets of his jacket and looked at the kid: "What befell you to be traipsing like Adam's firstborn through these wildlands? They are perilous even in daylight, more so now."

"I'm a wanderer, such as yourself," the kid said. "Looking for my way."

"I see, you're a vagabond, a roamer—a lone wolf," said the old man, and he laughed—bleating and hollow. "I too felt drawn to this place—untrammelled by the habitations and principalities of lesser Men. Perhaps you seek freedom, or knowledge: places such as this do well to treat with the grim truths of the world."

"Have you?"

"I have; they know me and I them—I have befriended them. Few have walked and wrestled in this world further and longer than I."

"And what have they told you?"

"Many things, none pleasant—naught but graves, worms, and epitaphs. I tell you the truth, this earth is nothing but a round urn-field—a treacherous mother—devouring her dear sweet brood. And Man: this paragon of animals!—How lofty are his aims and ambitions: to sleep and feed—to spend his few, inconsequential minutes in this world on naught but wars and rumors of wars, ere the haughty towers crumble and the sea devours all else. What strong hand can hold back the swift foot of Time? Consider the vainglory of the Caesars, now dead, and turned to clay in their unremembered tombs. Soon even the Pyramids of the pagan pharaohs of yore will melt like pillars of snow upon the antique sands of Egypt. How I weary of this middenheap!—This gnawing, dissolving, disintegrating sham! But I have reconciled it, made peace and

given thanks—though my hip is out of joint. There comes a time when a man must choose to lay down and die or carry on. To live is to struggle: to make war upon the bloody tyrant—to balk, chafe, and rage against the fixed canon of this world.”

“Your talk is strange to me.”

“Aye, I told you the truth is grim. But it is not all evil—there is hope to be found. Look around at this wasteland that swirls before us—this dark, illimitable ocean! Witness its potency, its possibility. Such is the task and mandate of Men such as you and me—the wanderers and prophets ordained in the setting part of time—to reckon with the great serpent of this world and pin him beneath our boot and pierce him with our arrows. We are as gods, Titans—golden and terrible—the masters of our fellows. And this vastness? This sluggish, icy desert? Come, thick night I say! For I see naught but these dark materials as the rudiments for my own artifice—the region, soil, and clime to fashion and shape as I see fit: worlds created unto myself. Truth is terrible, but it brings wisdom. And in wisdom comes power: power to inscribe the circle upon the face of the waters, though the labor be long and wearisome.”

The kid sat pondering this, and pulled a pale, clay pipe from his pocket. He struck a match to light it; the yellow flame flared across his lean face and his eyes burned. “And you believe yourself possessive of such authority?” he said, finally.

“I do. Beyond all else I believe that. Lambs go silently to slaughter, but lordship is the birthright of the wise. You cannot bind a strong man in his own house; the meek shall not inherit the earth.”

“That’s blasphemous.”

“Then so be it, for it is the truth. The Almighty has cast his pallor upon this sphere long enough—and for what? To imprison the minds of Men: muddying their sight and prolonging their ignorance. He laughs at the counsels of our kings. And blasphemy? Blasphemy is a dead word, signifying nothing. What then is Man? His quiddity and essence becomes a poor farce as his outer-self wastes away—wrought bleak in the grains of dust to which he molds. His feats of nobility and piety are naught but the drooling amblings of the idiot. Too long have we stooped and slaved in the darkness. It falls to such as us that the light of dawn must be brought to Men. We must overwrite the divine precepts, topple the hallowed temples

and cathedrals devoted to these mortifying and motheaten deities that have been as yet our sovereigns and slavedrivers. It is our great endeavor to compose and consecrate the true law and testimony of our own genius—to stamp our seal in blackest ink and seraph-fire upon the face of the earth, that even Time itself will not unmake. Such is our task—we, the lords of Men: the second-come, newborn masters, arbiters and architects of this new and better world.”

“If all Men die as you say, then by what means shall you endure?”

“Because I am not like other Men. I endure by unseen powers—called and conjured by the force of my own will: to persist, to persevere, to remain while all about me grows dark and withers into ignominy and oblivion. I am a flame imperishable—scorched, trodden, lightning-seared, but unyielding: a crucified Prometheus—shaking my bloodied fist heavenward in concert with the fulminating protest of the archfiend. An innermost furnace heats my heart and sparks my sinew—a hellish volcano spewing tumults and white-hot thunderbolts to melt the very rods of iron that engage me! I count them all as straw and rotting wood—these hindrances of lowly nature—impotent to pierce or harrow the bright habergeon of my inexorable purpose. I will twist and rend asunder this baleful place and shape it unto my own liking and design. But hold, I see that you do not understand me, your face betrays you. At first I thought you a peer—a truephilosopher and fellow-master—but I see you now as you are,” the bearded man smiled—a smile ancient and full of malice. “You are nothing, an ant, an insect—skittering hither and thither on the stony scarp of this earth, destined to banquet crows. Time’s best jewel indeed—how soon it loses its luster! Mark this, you shall know the full meaning of my words tonight—to your mind naught but the foolhardy ramblings of a madman no doubt, but you shall hear and see ere the end, when the slow siege has worn your walls to ruin, and the sun sets in the west, and you shall know contrition, and the mournful gloom in your eyes will burn and your sullied flesh shall melt in the celestial light at the advent of this winged sun.”

The kid puffed his pipe wordlessly, staring at the fire unblinkingly, his face drawn into a hard frown, inflamed in the ruddy firelight as he considered the oracles of this strange seer. After a time he stood and skirted around the fire to stand before the bearded man and drew the re-

volver from his duster and shot him twice between the eyes. The bearded man slumped back and bled silently in the icy pinestraw, staining the bright ground. The kid drew a heavy coin-purse from the folds of the dead man's fleece-jacket and set in his duster. He then gathered a burning coal from the fire—drawing it out like an avenging sword—and flung it on the floor of the cart. He went back and mounted the sorrel horse and took the reins of his mule in his hand.

He rode into the valley, back the way he had come. After a time, he rested, and turned back to see the tree-line burning and the heavy smoke rising up in infernal columns to support the stygian vault now bereft of stars. The wind blew low and chill across the valley and the pines groaned and gnashed like the damned who suffer upon the plain of Abaddon.

“What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears?” he said, and turned away. Faraway, a wolf caught a scent, and howled long into the night.

*“Some were fools through their sinful ways,
And because of their iniquities suffered affliction.”*

— Psalm 107:17



Above: Vertigo, Bella Greer.





TORMENT

Car Batteries & Calloused Hearts

NAYLAH JOBE

My car battery died today
I tried to jump it, it took a few times
I'm taking it for a drive, hoping it will recharge
But part of me knows there's still something wrong inside

I can hear the engine clicking
I turn up the music to drown it out
When I switch my headlights on, the radio restarts
I tell myself to ignore it
But I can not treat my car engine the way I do my calloused heart

I wish I could slam the hood shut,
Never look at the motor again
Like I do with my pain.
I wish I could turn up the noise
so I don't have to hear the clank of the broken parts
Like I do with my thoughts

The line toggles between E and much below that point
I can't remember the last time I had a full tank
Always counting the miles
Living on the brink of almost empty

My car and my soul are not all that different
There will never be wholeness
if I ignore them this way.

Right: Applehill, Keanna Whit.
Previous: Shattered, Faith Fuller.



Fire

AVA ROBINSON

Set fire to. A soul.

Phrases: breathe fire, catch fire, set fire. On fire. In flames; burning.

There is a girl you know. The one who is always laughing. She is crying inside. Her soul is burning.

It's on fire, but you can't see it. It's so deep inside and she will never show you because she was taught that tears are weak.

Police are still investigating what started the fire. What we do know is that it started long before the smoke was ever seen.

She hides the signs from you. Long sleeves in summer. Don't ask her about her scars.

Though it attracts moths, fire also can scare away animals. Research has proven that animals such as wolves stay away from fire, not only because of the warmth and light, but because of the wildness, the untamedness, the endless possibilities for destruction.

She is going to kill herself on Monday. Because she will do anything to quench the flames that are consuming . . .

Number 17 has caught on fire, oh, it's swerving. Looks like he's out of control, folks. Better get the medics down there, he's going pretty fast.

Stuff like that scares people away.

The medics were too late. Bleeding out.

She was dead upon arrival.

People don't like people on fire. They don't get it. They say they do. But they don't.

The funeral was in the rain. You were there. You were crying. Because the rain was too late. It could have put out the flames.

Fire can evaporate water at a faster rate than water can extinguish fire.

They say the heat gets to you first.

And you can't go back to life the same because you remember her laugh. And you suddenly understand the fire. And you feel guilty.

Bursting into flames, he remembered he wasn't a phoenix.

Like you should have asked about the scars.

Then it's the sound of crackling.

And you know other people are judging her for taking her life on Monday.

Then the smell of burnt flesh.

But you probably would have done the same if you were her. And you know that.

And then it's just the brightness of it all. The ferocity.

And you are swallowed. Consumed.

People like vulnerability in friendships. But there is vulnerability and then there is *vulnerability*.

People respect one and hate the other. They want enough to feel good about themselves, but they don't want to actually carry your fire. Just enough. They don't want it all.

A ray of sunshine, ha, that's funny. You know sunshine is from the sun, right? The big ball of raging fire?

Is something burning?

So you know that means that a ray of sunshine is, quite literally, just light from a destructively large fire? Yeah, that's what I'm saying. Yes, sunshine is light from flames within. Inside.

It made him think of that time he dropped his marshmallow and it blackened into ash. It was ruined.

She was a ray of sunshine.

Are you set with a fire action plan?

His soul was a burnt marshmallow. Heart of ash. Is his life ruined? Flaking away?

That's why she couldn't cry anymore. The fire had eaten her tears.

Look, mom, that man is breathing fire.

No, honey, he's on fire. He's dying. Cremated alive.

You are just watching. Well, watch them burn. Watch them fall apart.

Don't act like you understand what it is like to be on fire just because you burned your finger once.

It's not the same thing.

Fire! Fire! Help! Please! Fire! Save me! Call 911! Help! I'm trapped!

It was just your finger. But you acted like you were engulfed in flames.

It makes me wonder what would happen if you felt her pain.

You didn't see this coming? You didn't see the fire. Eat. You. Alive.

They are rays of sunshine. Raging fire within. They don't look it.

Please. Save. Me.

They say suicide can't end the pain. They say you can't say that word.

How well is that working for you?

Suicide.

I'm pretty sure you can't feel pain when you're dead.

The fire makes you numb. Maybe if you burnt off all your skin, your heart wouldn't hurt as much.

How do you put out a fire that's inside of you?

He thought submersion would work. The lake was a good spot.

I don't trust stuff anymore because it keeps burning me.

When they pulled him from the water, his body was still warm.

But he had been dead for two days.

The fire takes a while to put out. He tried to quench the flames.

The embers burn long after the fire's been extinguished. And you are left with ashes. Just ashes.

He just wants to live again. He just wants to die. It's the paradox you might never understand.

There is a girl you know.

And she is going to kill herself on Monday.





In the Health Center

JOY NOWAK

Thirty-six boxes float in three rows— gifts for
the ailing freeloader.

My friend stuffs his pockets
with little white pills for the throbbing space
between cups of coffee.

Left: New Perspective, Faith Fuller.

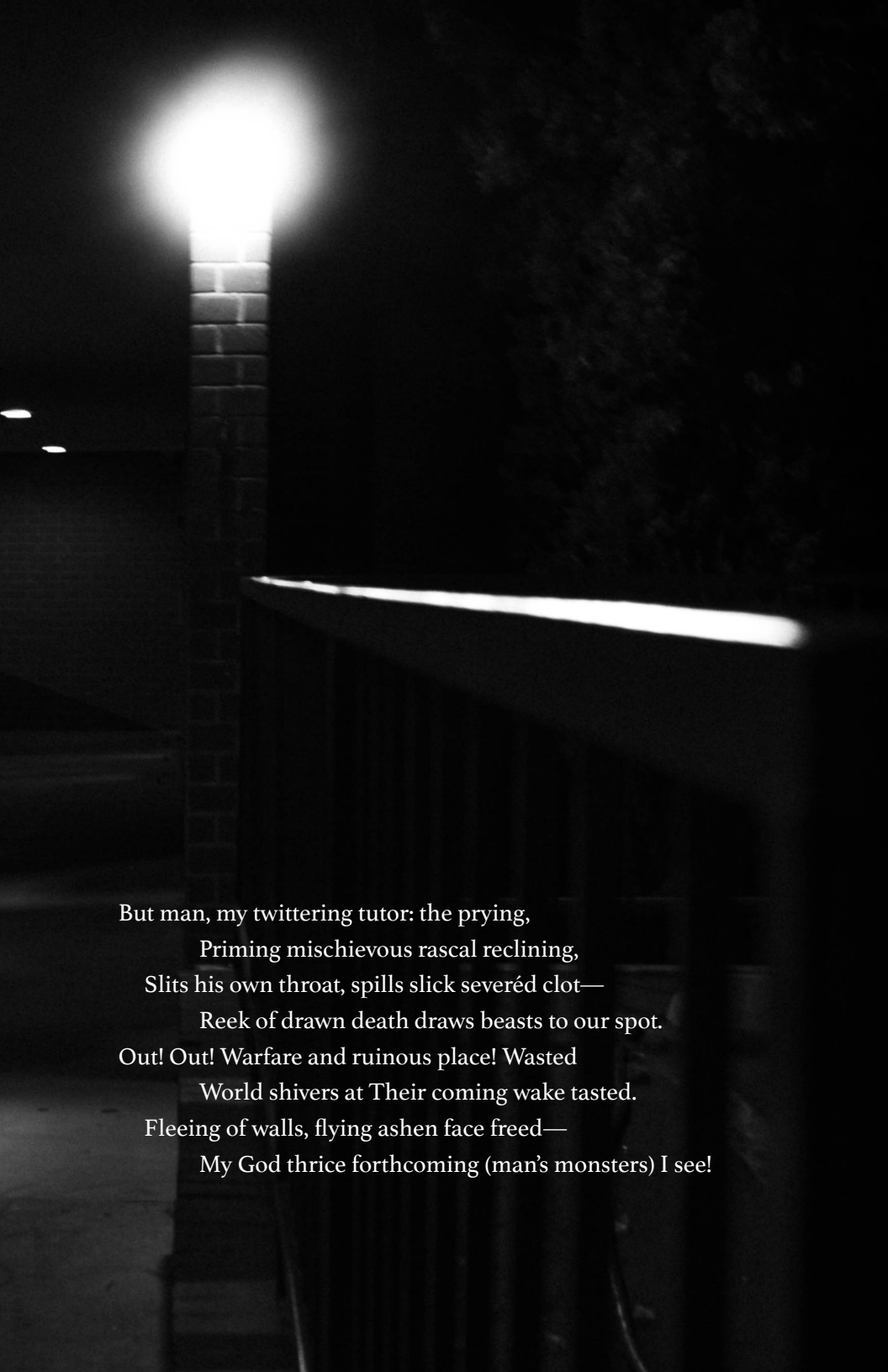
Following: In Here, Jonathon Ganji.

Apocalypse Bunker

JOSHUA FIELDS

To the Trinity
"O Felix Culpa"
May 2, 2023

Ashen leaves falling on sashes and sheds,
 Flying swift fragments from fit frilly heads;
 Pieces of pottery pitched all around
 In grounds a'trembling; soundings abound
Of war and waste ruin and watery Death,
 Weird Cleft in life's death! I left in duress
 For my sweet souléd seat, down sight-sund'ring cellar:
 Man teaching myself, tells tightly, talks taller
Of man's lone Manhood, maned mansion of man;
 I curtained the window: "Sun-light's a sham.
Let him who breaks out break into his hell—
 My sheer felléd shell will all monsters repel."



But man, my twittering tutor: the prying,
 Priming mischievous rascal reclining,
Slits his own throat, spills slick severéd clot—
 Reek of drawn death draws beasts to our spot.
Out! Out! Warfare and ruinous place! Wasted
 World shivers at Their coming wake tasted.
Fleeing of walls, flying ashen face freed—
 My God thrice forthcoming (man's monsters) I see!



Desert Drive

KELLY VAN DUINE

We'd been on the road for three days and I was only sure of one thing: the 1972 gray Ford Pinto had been following us since we'd passed through Phoenix.

I glared at the silver metal beast lingering outside, my head barely peaking out between the maroon-colored curtains of the Motel 6. The parking lot was eerily bare, except for the orange light flooding down from the few streetlamps. Beyond that was the endless stretch of bleak, Arizona desert. But for now, all that mattered was that Tommy and I distanced ourselves from that monstrosity as fast and discreetly as possible.

The dusty bedside clock read 3:00. Tommy's boyish figure was crumpled beneath the thin hotel blankets, his plump cheek pressed against the flat pillow. Anxiety coursed through my veins and sent tremors down my fingertips. Every time I sat down on the squeaky mattress to rest, my heart started to thump uncontrollably in my chest. I'd decided I'd had enough.

I gently rocked Tommy's bony shoulder so not to startle him. "Baby, it's time to go," I whispered with whatever calm I could manage.

Tommy's soft blue eyes gazed at me with childlike confusion. "It's still dark outside, mama..." he trailed off groggily.

"I know, hun, but we gotta go now, okay?" I urged him. Without waiting for his protests, I scooped him up and pressed him against my chest. Our bags were already packed and in the trunk. I snatched my purse from the desk, my fingers curling around the car keys with tense eagerness.

"Mama, I..." Tommy's shallow voice squeaked.

“Shhh!” I interrupted him harshly. “You gotta be quiet, hun, everyone is sleeping.”

Every movement I made was executed with extreme precision and awareness. It took me a painfully long time to reach the passenger door, but Tommy was far too tired to ask any questions about my odd demeanor. I breathed a sigh of relief when I finally put his sleeping figure into the beat-up leather seat.

When the engine roared to life, I careened the car so quickly towards the exit that I was almost certain I left black skid marks on the asphalt. I wasn't a reckless driver, especially with my 7-year-old in the car, but my motherly instincts told me to do whatever I had to do.

The first few miles were almost too much to bear. I swear I almost lost control of the car multiple times, as my eyes were continuously glued to the rearview mirror. Every second I expected two narrow points of light to emerge on the roadway. However, we were surrounded by nothing but the lifeless desert night.

There was something comforting about it, I'll admit. This was my first long-distance trip on my own, to see my mother in Santa Fe. I'd discovered, though, that the endless expanse of bare red rock and sparse shrubs was unwelcoming. And I'd only become more aware of that when Tommy pointed out the Ford that'd been trailing us since Phoenix.

“Mama, it's the cowboy!” he'd exclaimed two days ago. I laughed with mild amusement and cast a look at the gray metal figure behind us.

“What's that, hun?”

“The man, in that car,” Tommy eagerly told me. “I met him at the gas station yesterday. He's real nice. And he's a real cowboy too, mama.”

“There's a lot of cars like that on the road, hun,” I said. “It's probably not the same fella from yesterday.”

“No, mama, it's him!” he argued playfully. “I can see his cowboy hat through the window.”

I giggled. “He's not a real cowboy if he ain't got a horse, Tommy.”

He sank back in his seat, preoccupied with the South-west map splayed out in front of him. “Well, he's the closest thing to a cowboy I've ever seen.”

And eventually, I did see him alright. I saw his tall, lanky figure checking into the same hotel as us three nights in a row. He flashed a

charming smile at the hotel attendee from under the wide brim of his hat. Every time we pulled over to a gas station or a rest stop, he pulled over too. He made extra careful to linger on the opposite side of the parking lot. Tommy was entertained, but me not so much. What I would give to have the childish ignorance of a seven-year-old and let my worries wash away to daydreams.

My awareness had started to fail me by the time 5am approached. It was still pitch-black outside, though I motivated myself by remembering that streaks of scarlet and gold would fill the sky in an hour.

I was abruptly jerked awake when our vehicle made a shrill screeching noise and started bumping up and down rapidly. I struggled to gain control of the movement until I finally straightened out the wheel and slammed on the brakes. I closed my eyes tightly with despair. A flat tire.

“What’s wrong, mama?” Tommy started to wake.

“I think we got a flat tire, baby,” I told him. His head immediately fell onto the seat again. I got out into the humid night air and peaked over at one of the back tires. Sure enough, a gaping hole stared back at me.

I opened the trunk and started sorting through the various items back there, praying for a spare. I was squinting my eyes in the blackness when the contents of the car were illuminated by a dim yellow light. A blanket of anxiety washed over me, and I became completely rooted to the spot. My troubles were affirmed when I heard an engine being switched off.

“Is something wrong, ma’am?” a smooth voice sounded out through the darkness. I barely glanced up, afraid of what I might see.

“I...” I stammered helplessly as I made out the outline of the wide-brimmed hat in the car headlights. I searched for words, but panic was gathering in my throat.

“Flat tire?” the skinny man inquired, giving a smile under his dark mustache. Here, in the blaring light, I could see his brown eyes and narrow nose as he leaned against the side of our car.

“..Yeah,” I responded hoarsely.

He laughed softly at my choked demeanor. “Something must have spooked you real back back there.” He motioned in the direction of

the Motel 6. “You and your son sure booked it out of there at this ungodly time, huh?”

I crossed my arms. “Wanted to get a head start, I guess.”

His dark eyes scanned the skyline behind me and landed on the passenger window. “You oughta be careful, all by yourself on the highway,” he commented casually. “The desert’s not all too friendly sometimes.”

I stiffened slightly, my hands tightening into fists as I felt my fingernails dig into my palms. He motioned a lanky hand to Tommy’s door.

“Spoke with your son a few days ago right outside Chandler,” he said, grinning as though it were a happy coincidence. A stinging sense of anxiety flowed through my veins at the thought. “Said the two of you were on your way to Santa Fe to visit your mama.”

I held back the terror gathering in my ribcage. “And you are...?”

He clasped a hand over his chest and gave a small chuckle. “I’m sorry ma’am, where are my manners?” He extended his lanky arm out to me. “Meyers,” he introduced himself. “Hudson Meyers.”

I hesitantly let my hand fall into his secure grip, my heart shuddering. “Nice to meet you, Hudson.”

“You can call me Hud, ma’am,” he grinned. “I ain’t the formal type.”

I saw him kneel down by the tire in the shadowy darkness. I debated telling him that we were fine and that he could go on his way, but the reality was that I didn’t know the first thing about getting this vehicle on the road again.

“You ever changed a spare before, ma’am?” Hud asked.

“No,” I mumbled, my shaky arms desperately searching through the space behind our bags.

He raised an inquisitive eyebrow. “Yeah, you’ve got a flat alright,” he observed.

Before he could say any more, I felt my hands wrap around a rubber object. With relief, I yanked the spare tire onto the roadway.

Hud stood up. “I got some tools in my car.”

I watched him hesitantly as he pulled from the trunk of that Ford Pinto ever so casually. What frightened me the most was that I knew he could sense my fear, and yet it didn’t seem to bother him. He knew exact-

ly why I'd dashed out of the motel parking lot.

The next few minutes passed by painfully, as Hud carefully released the flat tire and screwed in the new one with excellent precision. He continued to chat with me nonchalantly as he fiddled with the screws.

"I saw the two of you at the gas station where I met Tommy," he commented as he tightened a bolt. He flashed a quick smile over the bumper of the car. "And I just had to ask him what his pretty mama's name was." He let the compliment hover in the air as I shifted uncomfortably in the darkness. "And I thought: Sue Ellen. What a beautiful name, huh?"

I ran the toe of my sneaker along the pavement anxiously, refusing to make eye contact with him. I forced a quiet laugh under my breathe but couldn't bring myself to mutter a thank you.

The two of us were startled by the sound of an adjacent engine. A mixture of relief and fear pulsed through my veins as I whipped my head over my shoulder. I was temporarily blinded when I turned and was confronted by a third pair of headlights.

Another vehicle slowed to a stop at the side of the road, directly behind Hud's car. I shivered with relief as another figure emerged from the vehicle. His stalkerly form slowly meandered towards us, keeping a careful eye on the Ford.

"Is something the matter here?" the new voice inquired. In the dim light, I could make out the uniform of a highway patrolman, a rusted badge perched on the pocket of his shirt. My muscles loosened with relief.

Hud immediately stood up before I could even speak. His mouth expanded into its usual charismatic grin. "Mornin', officer," Hud greeted casually.

The patrolman didn't seem particularly charmed as he crossed his bulky arms. "Wasn't expectin' to see any cars out on the road at this time," he commented. He narrowed his gaze with scrutiny, an aura of suspicion radiating from his beady eyes.

"This young lady here got a flat tire, sir," Hud explained, showing him the tools in his hands.

He immediately turned to me. "Do you know this man, miss?"

I found myself in an incredibly uncomfortable position: two sets of eyes were burning into me. One was suspicious, one was hostile. I saw Hud curl one hand into a fist with what appeared to be anxiety as he awaited my words. I looked back to the patrolman, hoping my expression would look like a cry for help. I knew that either way, I was trapped.

“Everything’s just fine, officer,” I choked out miserably.

“I assure you she’s alright, officer,” Hud insisted.

The patrolman remained unconvinced. “It’s not this young lady I’m concerned about. It’s this vehicle over here,” he motioned towards Hud’s Ford. “I’m afraid this car’s been reported stolen. I’ve been trying to track you down since Chambers.”

With surprise, I witnessed Hud’s cool and confident demeanor shift ever so slightly. He laughed a bit shakily. “Officer, there has to be some kind of mistake. I assure you that I’ve had that fine girl right there since ’73. She may not look like much, but I’ve got a lot of miles on that thing.”

His expression didn’t budge an inch. “I’m gonna need you to unlock the vehicle, sir,” he ordered.

After a moment of tension, Hud’s muscles loosened, and he smiled once more. “Not a problem, sir.”

Hud’s skyscraper-like shadow extended out over the highway as he traversed the distance between the two pairs of headlights. He ever so gently unlocked his car, the patrolman right on his heels. I could feel my heartbeat slow down, as if even my internal organs were too frightened to move.

I watched in eerie silence as the officer inspected the contents of Hud’s car. Hours seemed to pass as he slowly strode from door to door, peering through the musty glass with a flashlight that sent shadows bouncing across the windows. Hud lingered behind him as the patrolman carefully popped the trunk.

I wish I could erase his expression from his memory. I saw the blood drain from his face as his muscles twisted into a look that I can only describe as pure horror. The sound of the desert night and the hum of the still engines seemed to disappear entirely.

He immediately reached for his belt, tremors running up and down his arms. “Sir, I’m going to need you to step away—”

His command was cut short by a resounding thump that sent his body tumbling to the ground. I froze as I saw Hud's skinny figure poised behind him with a silver tool in his hand. My blood ran ice cold when his seething eyes met mine.

I hardly remember my scramble to the front seat, except for when Tommy rose from his slumber beside me.

"Mama, what's going on?" he asked anxiously.

"Nothing, hun, everything's going to be okay," I stammered as I put the car into drive. I felt as though every fiber of me was trembling with sheer adrenaline and fear. The vehicle produced an ear-shattering screech as I yanked it back onto the highway. Tommy whimpered with confusion.

When I found the courage to glance in the mirror, all I could see was the outline of Hudson Meyers standing menacingly in the middle of the winding road.

Tommy watched me punch numbers into the telephone booth. Dark circles lined my eyes and my hair was matted with sweat. We'd nearly reached Albuquerque and all I wanted was to hear my mom's voice to give me the last ounce of motivation I needed to get us through this trip.

The phone rang several times before I heard it click. I breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

"Mama, it's me, Sue Ellen. We'll be there by sundown, I promise mama." My words came out in a jumble, relieved to be talking to a familiar entity. "We got held up a bit, mama, but everything's just fine now..."

"Glad to hear it, ma'am."

The voice on the other end sent shivers down my spine that practically made my knees buckle. I felt as though my breathe clogged in my throat.

"Hud?" I barely managed.

I swore I could hear the menacinggrin on the other line.

"Yes ma'am."

And the phone disconnected.

Black-Eyed Maid

AUDREY PARKER

O Muse, will you sing a tale of Briseis?
The princess of Lyrnessos, the war-prize of Achilleus,
that accursed god-man whose rage
 made the wine-dark sea
 roil and bellow
 and drown the Trojans under its weight.
While Hector, breaker of horses, hero of troy,
eyes flashing with the gleam of his spear,
 butchered Patroclus
 upon the dusty plains
 and shifted the world into place,
Where was she? Where was the black-eyed maid,
The woman who caught the gaze of all?
 Trapped in the tents of Agamemon,
 watching the smoke billow
 and seeing Lyrnessos in the fumes.

Following: You and Me, Jonathon Ganji.

Oh, the sight of that broken city, would make
Even bloodthirsty Ares himself shed a tear
as husband, brothers, father,
were cast down to Hades
by the bronzed and bloodied hand
Of the war-hound, the son of Peleus.

Frantic and clawing with nail and tooth,
Briseis dragged out of the
ruins of her kingdom by
that bloody hand that killed her kin.

O Muse! Is it her fate for her to be known only by loss,
trapped amidst those bloodthirsty dogs of battle and greed
that bicker and squabble over
Riches, trophies, birthrights that once
rested safely in her weaver's hands.

I say this of the black-eyed maid, Briseis—
a goddess in her grief.

As a child she left her hair uncombed,
and raced her brothers down the shore,
feet bare on the sand,
to chase the screams of gulls and herons
that broke apart in the spray of the sea.





FAMILIES WELCOME

O'DORP

Girlfriends

ASHLEY BROWN

I loved her.

Kasey was perched on the edge of the couch, one fakely tanned leg propped against her chest and the other swinging off the side, holding a steaming cat-shaped mug of peony tea with both hands. She was looking at me.

“What?” I said.

The corner of her lip tugged down in a pout. “Do you mind if I bring my couch and throw-pillows? Pink is a little girly but I promise I’ll hide it behind something more neutral.”

“That’s fine.”

“And my shower curtain.”

“Sure.”

“The bathroom could use a little pop of color.”

“Okay.” She shifted, the leather squeaking beneath her thighs.

I let my eyes roam over her figure as she stretched before me. Her proportions were so delicate I could break her.

“Are you sure you’re okay with me moving in?” she said. “It’s only been two months. If you’re regretting the offer...” She left the words hanging there. The only sound was the uneven whirl of the makeshift fan on the side table.

I reached out and began twirling her auburn curl around my fin-

ger. "I am not regretting anything. This'll be good for us." To convince her of my words I tugged a little on her hair.

"I guess I'm nervous because I've never done this before, and I know that you used to live with—" She cut a glance at me and clenched her jaw. We'd already had the exes conversation, but I never told her exactly how many girlfriends I'd had. She said she didn't want to know, so I certainly didn't tell.

"Don't be nervous. You're perfect."

When her face broke out in a grin and she moved to sit on my lap, I knew she'd love me back in no time.

We agreed that she wouldn't renew her lease and that we wouldn't tell my landlord. On the second to last week of August she began moving her smaller pieces of furniture—a sandy oak side table and a glass and bamboo coffee table—in so that at the start of September she'd be fully moved out from her apartment across the way. We lived five minutes from each other, but this just made sense.

September came, and her three different face moisturizers littered my counter, among the six body moisturizers that sat beneath the sink. I commented on it, but she didn't get the fuss, so I dropped it. We would just need to get used to living with and around each other.

By mid October, she'd reorganized my entire kitchen, rearranged the couch and television so that it was facing the bedroom wall instead of the balcony, and had combined my sock drawer with my boxers so that she could keep her bras and underwear separate. Her lips, which had once been sweet, turned sour against mine. She didn't like my snoring, the way I talked to myself, how late I went to bed. She didn't appreciate that I liked to do dishes in the morning, because she couldn't lie in bed knowing there was a mound of dishes. So she'd do the dishes before bed, and then complain that I never helped.

My therapist said these were all things we could work through. "Everyone," she said, "is going to push your buttons in some way. And you, it seems, have already started pushing hers. It's the nature of being in a relationship."

But the nature of this one just wasn't working well.

“Kasey,” I said after dinner one particularly cool night in October. She clutched her purple and orange patterned sweater around her arms as if she was some pioneer wife waiting on the porch for her husband to come back after a day of hunting. “I think we need to talk.”

“Look, I know things have been rough, but we’re still getting in the swing of things.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s been nearly five months.”

“But only one since we’ve lived together.” She leaned across the table, her fingers reaching to intertwine with mine. Her hands were cold and her grip firm. I left mine limp. “I love you,” she said.

The words no longer excited me. My heart didn’t beat quicker; there was no surge of warmth through my limbs.

“We just need to communicate more,” she said. “Compromise more. I can—”

Her lips formed words, sentences, but no sound reached my ears.

“I love you,” she said again. “Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

Nothing she could say would sway me. I was through with her.

“You didn’t implement the steps we talked about in our last session together.” My therapist sat in front of me with her legs crossed, her drab, nude heel bouncing off her knee.

I slumped in my chair, throwing my head back on the couch to study the fluorescent LED light hanging from the ceiling. I felt like I was in a hospital. “There was no point.”

“And why is that?”

The light flickered. More like an insane asylum. “I didn’t love her anymore.”

“Maybe we need to revisit your definition of love.” She leaned forward, locking her hands around her knee. Her heel temporarily stopped its bounce. “This is the eleventh girlfriend you’ve moved in with since you’ve been seeing me. This isn’t normal.”

My blood began to boil. I sat on my hands. Breathed. Counted to ten. “I thought you understood me.”

“What part of you feels misunderstood right now?”

I let silence fill the air. The digital clock on the wall flickered to 2:17. Thirteen minutes left of our session.

“Where is she living now?”

Twelve minutes.

She scribbled on her notepad. “You’re talking to yourself again. When did it start up?”

Eleven.

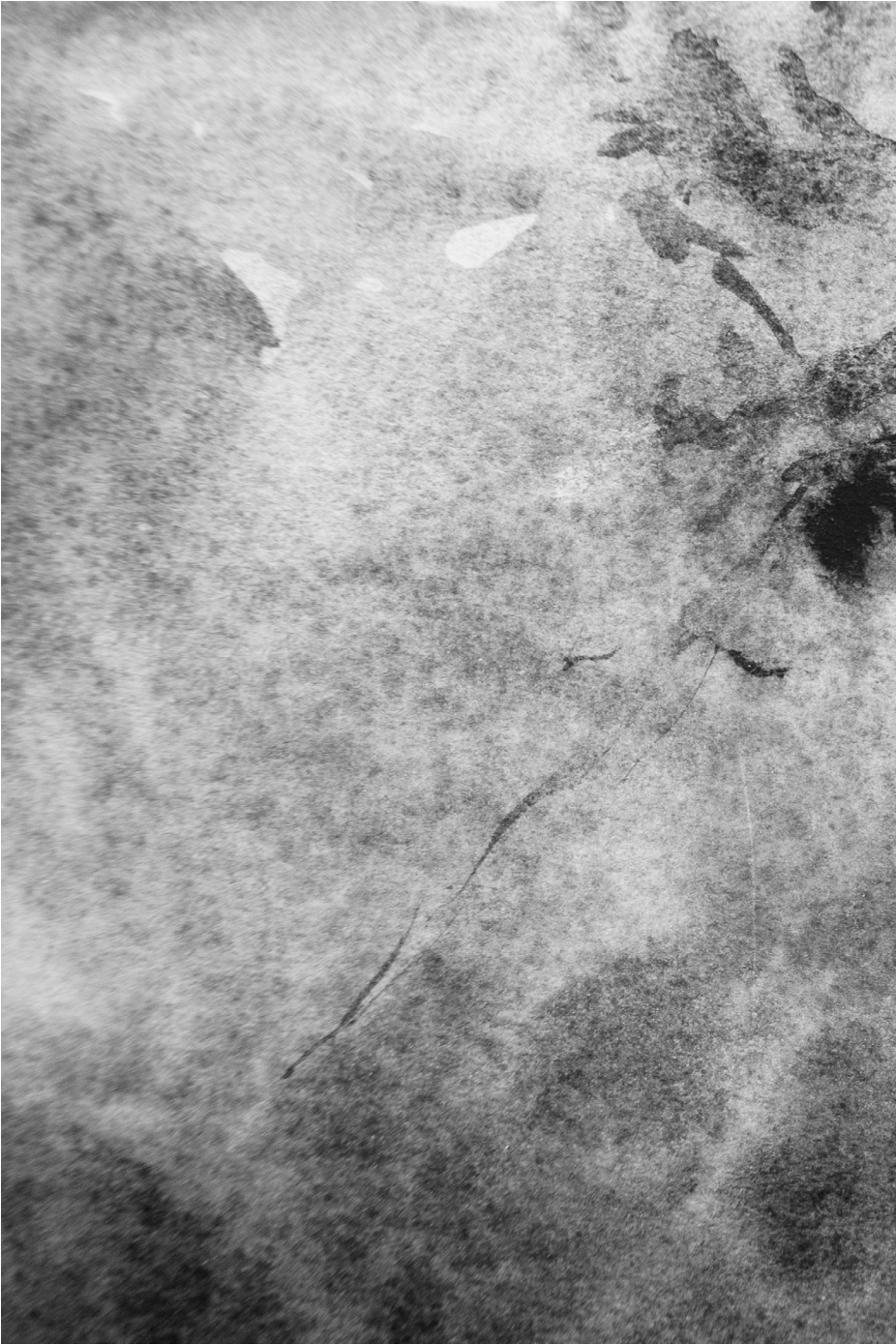
I finally said, “I’m never going to see her again, and that’s all that matters.” She would never worry about cleaning dishes or having room for her clothes or being woken from her slumber by snoring. She was sleeping peacefully now. “Well, this has been nice.” I stood and strode to the door.

“We still have four minutes left of our session.”

With my hand on the doorknob, I glanced back at her.

Her face was blank other than her lips, which were pressed in a thin line and drained of color.

“I really have to run,” I said. “I’ve got a date tonight.”





LAMENT

To Funerals Past

ARIELLE ANDERSON

So many names beg to be sung.

Twenty-one and already I number

the funerals I've seen;

the ages I would have been:

Two, nine, ten, twelve, thirteen, sixteen,

eighteen, twenty-one, twenty-one.

The dead live with me.

I do not fear being haunted

by finite recollections:

her warm, weathered hand in mine,

his back bent over puzzle pieces.

Roses over ashes.

Ashes out to sea.

Bitter salt clings to me.

An Ocean's Graveyard
a Quatrain-Style Poem

ANDREW WINSLOW

Where the land meets the sea,
In their evergoing battle
of advance and retreat
There lies an Ocean's graveyard.

See the many shells
half-buried in the sand.
All that is left of the creatures
that once inhabited them.

No one mourns their passing,
No one but the Sea,
Who cannot bear to keep the reminders
Of her dead children.

She hurls them to the shore,
Where the children of land
rejoice at their finding,
Ignorant.

Ignorant of the stories
Behind each shell,
The now extinguished lives
Of those who left them,

And the grief of the Ocean they left behind.



minutes to 7:10

CHARLOTTE TAN

7:08 PM

The children's voices spin round the aisle
ghostly carousel's tune of "any news yet?"
It opens a sleeping eye, head rearing with a chuckle

7:09 PM

There's a wild sort of tumbling of winter coats into a car
rosy cheeks chilled,
It slithers imperceptibly, around their shoulders, the radio

7:10 PM

The cellphone trills on the console
it flares in the dark, "her heartbeat stopped"
It caresses its forked tongue on their pulse, then bites with a whisper

7:11 PM

Their fingers clench together to tip the hourglass horizontal
eyes lift and hold
It quirks up an indolent grin, slipping into the wind's huff

7:12 PM

The wailing and screaming supposed
far away somehow, a paper lantern alone allowed
It gives a pretty bow, tips its hat, "grief's the name", it says.

Left: Old News, Naylah Jobe.
Previous: Groundcover, Ella Buell.

On the Way to Versailles

CHARLOTTE SNYDER

Paul rested his forehead against the frosted window of the RER and stared through the glass at the milling crowd of Europeans and tourists waiting for their trains—a group of middle schoolers in white sneakers and unbuttoned shirt jackets were passing a cigarette down their line. One kid, maybe ten years old, puffed a ring of smoke and handed the cigarette to the girl on his right. Paul was officially in Paris.

He checked the time on his platinum Hublot and then returned to the novel he'd been reading. Only one more night in France. He could make it.

Just as the RER lurched forward, a black college-aged woman and a boy around seven slipped through the train doors and into the seats across from Paul. The little boy had a battery-operated fan and routinely turned it to blast air in the young woman's face, which she swatted away absentmindedly as she scrolled on her phone.

Paul scooted closer to the window and raised his book so he couldn't see them. He tried to focus on the pages in front of him, but the cigarette smoke and the clicking sound the boy's fan made sent him to the beginning of the same sentence over and over. If Paul had ever gone to therapy, as his ex-wife Hyun had suggested, he was sure his therapist would have advised him to count to ten in situations like this.

Paul and Hyun had tried counting to three to get their daughter, Melody, to do her chores, but it stopped working after she found out that spanking was illegal in California. Instead, they'd take away her Game-

boy, but she'd just pretend she never liked the thing and color instead. Take away her crayons, and she'd tear her drawing and ride her bike. Take away her bike, and Melody would ask Paul question after question until he returned her Gameboy and made her promise not to tell Hyun.

"Excuse me?" a child's voice asked in an American accent.

Paul raised his book a little higher.

"Mr. Sir?"

Paul peered over the top of his book at the boy's mom, but she had AirPods in and was fixated on her phone screen. Folding his book in his lap, Paul turned to face the child. "Yes?"

The boy held up a copy of the train's brochure. "Did you know that the RER can travel up to 140 kilometers per hour?"

Paul pursed his lips. One, two, three . . .

"The whole track is 587 kilometers which means it would only take four and a half hours to travel the whole way." The kid pivoted his fan to blow air at his mother again.

The young woman flicked the fan away and looked up, suddenly realizing her son was talking to Paul. She removed one of her AirPods. "*Excuse mon frère*. He's a people person."

Paul attempted to decipher the woman's French with what little he'd learned from Hyun. All he could remember was *un, deux, trois* . . .

The boy rolled his eyes. "Excuse my sister. She's not."

Paul looked back and forth between the woman and boy. Siblings. He guessed that made sense.

The boy blasted his sister with air again.

She snatched the fan, clicked it off, and shoved it into the backpack at her feet. "You're pissing me off."

"Mom said you can't say *piss* around me."

"Mom's not here, is she?" The young woman put her AirPods back in and picked up her phone.

Paul gave the boy a polite smile and raised his book to hide his face. If the kid kept talking to him, Paul might not survive the hour trip to Versailles. Somehow, he'd managed to board a train populated by American tourists when the only upside of France was that no one could talk to him.

Paul was able to read in peace for a few minutes before the

young woman stood up and swore. “*Putain!*”

That word, Paul remembered.

One of the woman’s hands still held her phone, but the other was placed on the back of her jeans, and she was staring down at her chair. A small splotch of reddish-brown liquid had seeped into the seat’s fabric.

The little boy laughed and repeated, “*Putain! Putain!*” until his sister smacked him over the head with her phone.

“Shut up, Cinna,” she whispered, likely aware of the attention they were drawing from the rest of the passengers.

The kid, Cinna, got the same look in his eyes that Melody had gotten when her parents counted to three. “Or what?”

His sister leveled a glare at her brother, then turned to Paul with a smile. “Can you watch my brother while I find something to clean this with?” Before Paul could politely decline, she’d grabbed her backpack and stalked toward the front of the train.

Paul searched the rows of passengers for someone he could pawn the boy off to. Directly behind Paul, four college students sat with headphones in their ears and phones in their hands. Just past Cinna, a man and woman around Paul’s age were fervently discussing something in French, and across the aisle from them, a woman with unshaved underarms was biting her girlfriend’s ear.

Cinna beamed at Paul as if he knew he was stuck. Then, all of a sudden, he pouted and crossed his arms, leaning back into his seat. When Paul didn’t react, the boy sighed dramatically and wiggled his bottom lip as if he were going to cry.

“Is there something wrong?” Paul asked as he dog-eared his page, formally surrendering his chance at a pleasant train ride.

Cinna glanced out the window and sniffled. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Paul forced a straight face. It was as if the universe were laughing at him. Hey, you! Guy who just went to his ex-wife’s funeral where your daughter told you she never wanted to see you again! This kid’s got it worse. “Try me.”

Cinna slammed his fists down on his seat. “I’m angry.”

Paul was angry too, but he didn’t think it would be helpful to me-

ntion. “About anything in particular?”

“I left my red backpack at home.” The backpack at his feet was indeed blue, not red.

“That’s unfortunate.”

Cinna nodded gravely.

“How long until you can go home and get it?”

Cinna shook his head, solemn. “Never.”

“Never?” Paul asked. “You’re staying in France forever?” God forbid the same fate befell him.

Cinna sighed and reached into his backpack. He shot back up with a green lollipop, which he unwrapped and stuck in his mouth. “That’s what Dionne says.”

“Like the singer?”

“No,” Cinna said around his lollipop, “like the girl in *Clueless*.”

“Oh.” Who named their kid after someone in a movie? Paul paused. “And you’re Cinna, like the stylist in *Hunger Games*?”

He nodded and took out his lollipop. “My mom never let me watch it but Dionne will cave soon.”

Melody had watched *Hunger Games* every day for the entirety of her eighth-grade year. Paul couldn’t remember any of the characters’ lines, but the shrill beeping of the parachute-gifts from the Capitol had been seared into his brain. “You live with Dionne?”

Cinna twirled his lollipop in his mouth. “She said my parents have a constraining folder and domestic silence—actually, Dionne never told me that but I overheard her talking to her boyfriend. She’s only been dating him for one year”—he held up a finger—“but they live in this apartment with bright yellow curtains on the windows. Dionne came home to visit from France but then I got put on a plane and I forgot my red backpack at home.” He only sounded sad about his missing backpack.

Paul folded his hands in his lap. Melody hadn’t been Cinna’s age in . . . almost two decades? And she’d been closer to Dionne’s age when he and Hyun had split. Melody had been angry—she still was.

He’d written her a letter to apologize, but all he’d received in return was a text that said, “The affair was never what I was mad about. I’m blocking your number. Don’t write.” He’d tried to text her after their fight

at Hyun's funeral, but the text had turned green.

Paul shifted in his seat and met Cinna's eyes. "I'm sorry about your backpack."

As Cinna bit into his lollipop and crushed the broken pieces between his teeth, Dionne trudged back from the front of the train with paper towels in hand and a jacket around her waist. "Thanks for watching him." She knelt and dabbed her seat with a paper towel.

"Dionne," Cinna said, crunching more lollipop remains, "when Mom and Dad are back together, can I go home and get my red backpack?"

Dionne tucked a curl behind her ear. "I'll get you a new backpack."

Cinna rolled his eyes. "I don't want a new backpack."

"Then you can keep your *Aquaman* bag."

Cinna spit the stick of his lollipop into its wrapper and shoved his trash between the seats. When he saw Paul's frown, he fished it out and snuck it into the pocket of the hoodie around Dionne's waist. "I want to go home and get my red backpack."

Dionne sighed, the back of her wrist wiping her brow, and scrunched her soaked paper towel. "Mom and Dad aren't getting back together, Cinna. You won't be going home for a long time."

Cinna slitted his eyes at his sister. "I hate yellow curtains!"

Dionne looked around the train, embarrassed, and tried to hush Cinna.

"I hate them, I hate them, I hate them!"

Dionne lunged to grab Cinna, but he darted into the aisle.

Paul drummed a finger on his slacks and weighed staring at the skirmish against pretending not to notice the commotion. Cinna just wanted his family to be whole again—and Paul may have had fifty years of wisdom on the kid, but he wanted the same thing.

When Melody was little, before she started tearing her crayon drawings, Paul would toss her in the air and catch her—she'd giggle on the way up and scream as she fell back into his arms. Sometimes he'd chase her around the backyard with a water gun, which he'd claim was filled with barbecue sauce. Now that Paul thought about it, Hyun still had a home video tape of him chasing Melody around her playhouse

when she was six. She'd crashed into one of their two-foot wide clay flower pots and slit her eyebrow open. Melody still had the scar. She'd covered it with makeup at the funeral.

The funeral. His sister-in-law—ex-sister-in-law—had sent him an email four days after Hyun passed. *I didn't think you deserved to know, but Hyun told me to let you know when we finally pulled the plug.* That was it. One sentence and three calls to Melody that didn't go through. If God was real, he didn't like Paul.

Cinna had run up and down the aisle yelling, "I hate yellow curtains!" and was now swearing in French— more words Paul remembered—while Dionne tried to wrangle him into his seat.

The woman who didn't shave was looking over her shoulder in concern, and it looked like her girlfriend wanted to get up and help. The middle-aged couple was still deep in discussion, oblivious to Cinna's outburst. A blonde woman was whispering conspiratorially to her husband. She'd understand when she had kids of her own.

Or maybe she wouldn't. Maybe her husband would leave and her friends and family would take his side and she'd be alone with an empty house and a passionless career because even her daughter wouldn't talk to her. Maybe she'd end up on a train from Paris to Versailles without her red backpack in the care of a sister who had no idea how to take care of a seven-year-old. Maybe she'd get kicked out of her ex-husband's funeral and find herself sobbing in a bakery. At least then she'd get a free baguette.

Paul met Cinna's eyes. "I hate yellow curtains too."

The boy paused, his hand frozen after he'd raised it to slap his sister.

"I hate yellow curtains," Paul said a little louder.

Dionne looked at him as if to say, *Not helping!*

Cinna broke into a smile. "And I want my red backpack!"

Dionne reached across her seat to push Cinna down again, but Paul stayed her hand. He lifted his book from his lap and placed it on the seat beside him, then leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and said to Cinna, "And I want to go home."

Cinna nodded enthusiastically, his bottom lip quivering. "And I want to go home!"

“Inside voice!” Dionne said and slapped Cinna’s wrist.

Cinna jumped up, wiped his eyes, and clenched his fists. “Go home! Go home! Go home!” He took off down the aisle, defaming yellow curtains and blue backpacks.

I want to go home, Paul thought as he watched Cinna climb over seats, Dionne floundering on his tail. Paul wanted to stand, chuck his book toward the white buildings passing by the windows, and shout every French curse he remembered at the smell of cigarettes, the empty seat beside him, Cinna’s godforsaken *Aquaman* backpack, and the steady ringing of the Capitol’s parachute gifts that had haunted Paul’s sleep since the divorce. *I hate yellow curtains*.

As the lesbian couple phoned the Police Nationale, Paul imagined crashing through the train like Cinna, and feeling the last two decades melt away. Hyun would be alive and well, waiting for him at home. The divorce papers she’d handed him would dissolve on their kitchen table, replaced by Melody’s crayon drawings. In fact, Melody was in the yard right now, plotting with the roly-polies to get her Gameboy back. Paul would arrive home any minute, and she’d scream in delight and grab onto his leg and swear she was never letting go.

The brakes of the RER screeched as the train pulled into the station. Dionne wrestled Cinna into his blue backpack and the green lollipop wrapper dropped from her jacket pocket. The train stopped, the doors opened, and the passengers calmly filed out as if Cinna hadn’t just vaulted over a bench seat. Dionne and Cinna stepped off the train.

Paul stood, stretched his legs, and gently placed his novel in the zippered pocket of his satchel, then knelt, plucked the lollipop wrapper from the floor, and shoved it between the chartreuse seats of the RER. He exited through the sliding doors and collided with the milling crowd of Europeans and tourists, lost in the cloud of cigarette smoke. He searched the station’s signs for the exit, but he’d forgotten all about the French Hyun had tried to teach him when they were newlyweds, except for her patient smile as he’d recited, *un, deux, trois . . .*



Siren

CHARLOTTE SNYDER

salt-crusted water sloughs from shoulders
honeycombed with sunken, ridged skin.
women with chipped scales and ragged robes
break the surface of the sea.

high-pitched wails pour like waterfalls from mouths
sheltering seashell teeth that drip gun powder.
thick blood and jagged shrapnel pool in sandy footprints.

men with grime under fingernails and oil on palms wake.

brass casings scrape and clack on gravel and sandstone.
shooting stars of smoke and metal shriek.
a mother, vomit plastered to her braid,
clutches a boy with small hands to her breast and

dust trembles in the corner of the concrete shelter
as the edges of cracks in the ceiling crumble.
molten shards plummet like the rain that feeds the dead sea.

sirens smother the child's whimper.

Gulity Pleasures

TRINITY VAN GAASBEEK

Day-old coffee dregs melt to brown sludge stains.
Vanilla-scented, oat milk notes tickle
nose and mouth, bittered grounds envelope taste-
buds—new cup, green, half-full, wafts aroma;
white foam sizzles, sipping local roast beans.

Instrumental keys drift from darkened lap-
top, keyboard clicks interrupt—*click, click, clack*—
from other laptop, no company-stuck
bottom-barcode. Phone buzzes with lover's
name, read: simple smile-face. Rain outside, peace.

Beyond, war rages with rich man's weapons.
Poverty-struck, depraved faces inter-
pose wedding-magazine luxuries—torn
limbs, dead kids, lost bones. Stir cup of joe, no
eyes bat. Spend hundreds, receive cake for two.





HOPE

An Easter Poem

ALISHA KIYOKO

4/17/2022

I once wandered in the dark
Pointless motions, chained up heart
Barely living, hardly beating
Cursed by sin and shame defeating
Then you came and set me free
'twas all mercy no, not me
You took the cross I was to bear
Set me free from sin's ensnare
on that day you conquered death
you rose, I rose and had new breath,
the breath of God,
the gift of grace,
the song of mercy's sweet embrace

*so all to Jesus I surrender
all to him i freely give
I will ever love and trust him
In his presence daily live*

Right: A Contagious Laugh, Yanelle Hernandez.
Previous: Olive Tree by Rose, Ella Buell.



There is

With feathers of brown

And he's flying all around.

With the moon at his back

He hunts for a snack.

He swoops down on an unsuspecting mouse

And starts soaring back to his woodland house.

The zoo is below on his way home

Where he sees an owl all on her own.

There is

Who longs

One is

But maybe someday

an owl

With feathers of beige

And she's stuck in a cage.

With a light bulb in her eye

The man with her food goes by.

A mouse gets thrown in; it's really quite tame.

It's supposed to be like hunting but it's not the same.

After the meal she looks to the sky

And sees a majestic free owl go by.

an owl

to be free

One isn't

they both will be.

BENJAMIN BRUYNINCKX



Destiny

JOSHUA FIELDS

Lights, blinking in a heavy storm
 To warn
 Of a coming, terrible Dawn,
 Beyond
The falling ghosts and thwarted boasts
 Of valiant toasts
 Passing forgotten lips.
Wry wit of a shallow serpent mind,
 Within the darkened soul entwined,
 Can find
Not one lighted windowsill
 On which to clamber up, until
 The thrill
Of Hope, to be its horror,
 Comes crashing in on every corner
 Of the soul;
Thus freed to climb by frightful designs
 And wonderous signs, a pulsing pattern
 Of countless strands--
And in their hands, they hold the worlds;
 But on their plans God's flag unfurls.

Left: Lady Sweet, Julia Welch.

5:21

ALISHA KIYOKO

as I sit beneath a tree
soaking in this moment,
I close my eyes
let wind wash over as I sit alone and—

I open up my eyes once more
to see array of colors
enough to fill a long gone soul with great enamored wonder.

So why am I not moved?

my soul is sunk within me,
has your canvas lost the touch
it had at the beginning?

why is there this chasm
furrowed deep inside my chest?
why does the light not fill it
or change the tune within my head?

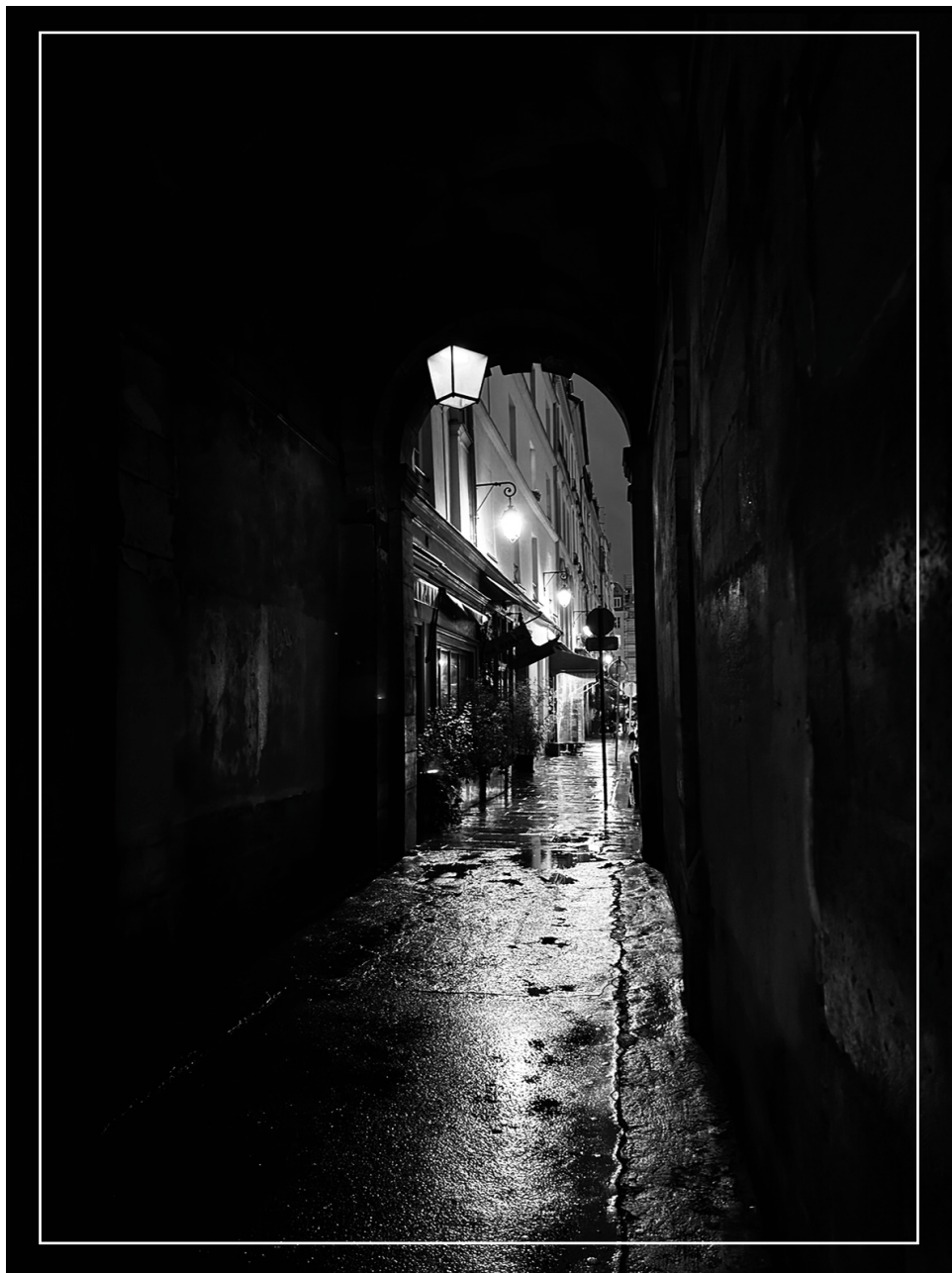
Because,

You whisper gently,

*Because that's not the end.
for when the sun is set away
your God does not descend.*

*you stare into the skyline
you look into the trees,
you search all of creation
for what's only found in Me.*

*So find joy in every sunset
And peace in grassy hill,
but don't forsake
what makes it **good**
The precious blood that spilled.*



Above: *Mystery*, Charlotte Tan.

Gardens

HANNAH LARSON

what once was a garden is a graveyard now; tombstones take the place of trees, and entangled in the roots of what was and someday will be are the headstones of a cursed cemetery, draped in the alien death that pervades this all-too-familiar ground

the sin that poisoned creation at the Fall does not vanish in the spring; it lingers, seeping from the smoke rising from cities' charred ruins and choking the fouled air with pestilence, a pollution so acrid and overpowering it brings tears to our eyes

like the tears God cried when Lazarus died and the gravediggers laid their friend in the earth, in the fine, powdery dust that coats the cities and the faces of the living, dead, and dying; the dust that would have silenced us forever had God not said to the dead: *arise!*

arise as the Son arose, the firstfruits of the dead, mistaken for the gardener among the tombs. rabbi! how you have opened Eden for us; the garden of God is restored by your faithfulness. prune us, your branches, well that we may find our root and our home in you, o Vine, alone

for what now is a graveyard will be a garden one day; trees will take the place of tombstones, and the weight we pallbearers carry in this body of death will vanish, eclipsed by the weight of glory, for just as we bear the image of the man of dust, so we shall bear the image of the man of heaven

as we walk with him in the garden in the cool of the day and in the joy of eternal fellowship, we marvel: *did God really say* that the tree of life's leaves are for the healing of the nations? *yes!* what once was a graveyard is now the garden of our Lord; long-lost paradise is at long last restored



Above: Asher, Teresa Tikoo.

