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Spring 2021

## Notations

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# NOTATIONS

THE UNDERGRADUATE LITERARY  
MAGAZINE OF MURRAY STATE

fiction  
poetry  
creative  
nonfiction

Spring 2021





# NOTATIONS

THE UNDERGRADUATE LITERARY  
MAGAZINE OF MURRAY STATE

SPRING 2021

## Editing Staff

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Torrey Diniz, *Creative Nonfiction Editor*

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# Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

It is our great pleasure to present the 2021 edition of *Notations*, a journal of undergraduate poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction produced by students in the Department of English and Philosophy at Murray State University. After a brief hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are excited to share this edition with you.

Since the onset of COVID in early spring 2020, everything in life has been put on pause, and *Notations* is no exception. Last March, MSU students and faculty went into lockdown with the rest of the world. All of our classes switched to online. Students moved out of their dorms early. Events were postponed or cancelled, including the publication of *Notations*, which, in the past, has been a collaborative project between creative writing students and advanced graphic design students.

The 2020-21 academic year has been full of adjustments -- from wearing masks on campus to Zoom classes to socially distanced activities. While we're all looking forward to seeing campus and our classes at full capacity again, the challenges of the school year have also created opportunities to try new ideas. A re-imagined *Notations* is one of them.

Because close, in-person collaboration during the pandemic has been so difficult, the faculty advisors from Art & Design and English & Philosophy agreed that, for at least this year, E&P would helm the design and production of *Notations* as well as their traditional task of literary editing. Under the guidance of Dr. Carrie Jerrell, we six senior creative writing majors (Jenna Carnes, Makenna Crowley, Torrey Diniz, Pam Goodwin, Kaylan Hall, and Gabby Sullivan) created this year's journal. We chose a digital format because of its flexibility and accessibility. We utilized Instagram and email to encourage submissions, highlight the editing process, and share our tips and tricks for navigating college as creative writing students. All in all, this semester has been about experimentation and imagining what *Notations* and the editing experience could be for future students and writers within the creative writing community of Murray State.

We were thrilled to receive so many great submissions. Our fiction selections are incredibly diverse in form and content. All of our submissions are short stories, but their brevity does not mean they took little effort on the authors' part. While some of our works cover intimately realistic issues, like "The Bar Scene" and "Mother's Farewell," others aim for a more speculative route, like "Life and Death in Ambrewster County." Both terrible parents and literal harbingers of death can serve the same role in a story. Some focus on simple, personal issues like "His Deceptive Song," while others attempt to make commentary on society and art, like "Where Would I Be" and "so sorry to hear about the death of the artist."

Of the three genres we publish, we received the most submissions in poetry. Like the fiction selections, the poems included in this issue represent a wide variety of styles and voices and subjects -- everything from the disappointment of heartbreak in "This is Love" to racial injustice in "Ring of Fire" to healing from traumatic events in poems like "Touching Problem."

Creative Nonfiction is one of the most versatile genres that creative writing students at MSU will have a chance to experiment with. In this edition of *Notations*, our exploration of the CNF genre begins with a literary journalism essay titled "Perspectives in Flight," which delves into the wonders and horrors of aviation. Next, the personal essay "Wild Horse Creek" celebrates the discovery of imagination that can be found in a child's backyard. Following that, there is a meditation on the season of fall, aptly named "Fall in Love." Finally, we end this round of CNF pieces with a memoir called "I'll Do Better," which details the author's struggles with an eating disorder.

We want to thank all of the undergraduate writers who submitted work to *Notations*. While we could not accept every piece, every submission was a pleasure to read, and choosing which works to select was difficult on our part! Please consider submitting in the fall for our next edition of *Notations*, and thank you again for taking the time to submit. We also want to thank our faculty advisor, Dr. Carrie Jerrell, for all she did to streamline the process and support us both in and out of class.

If you have any feedback, comments, or suggestions for future issues, we'd love to hear about it! You can email us at [msunotations@gmail.com](mailto:msunotations@gmail.com) and follow us on Instagram at [@murraystatecreativewriting](https://www.instagram.com/murraystatecreativewriting) and [@murraystateenglish](https://www.instagram.com/murraystateenglish). We are eager to hear from you. Keep your eyes out for next year's publication announcements, and until then, enjoy this issue. We hope you find it colorful, moving, and inspiring!

Sincerely,  
The Editors





# Table of Contents

## Poetry

Self-Portrait in an Abbey 1  
by Abigail Moore

Ring of Fire 13  
by Chelsea Carter

Ode to the Eyes of Sharon Tate 19  
by Abigail Moore

Disputes and Blues 24  
by Chelsea Carter

Daisies from My Fingertips 33  
by Caroline Winnenberg

This Is Love 6  
by Autumn Anderson

Fairytale 15  
by Abigail Moore

Alone in the Cold 21  
by Emma Hargrave

Christmas Eve 32  
by Abigail Moore

Touching Problem 39  
by Libby Gerdes

Home 55  
by Abbey Avis





# Fiction

His Deceptive Song **2**  
by Gabbie Lamb

The Bar Scene **7**  
by Cole Scherer

Where Would I Be **16**  
by Micah Prakin

A Mother's Farewell **26**  
by Kaylan Hall

Life and Death in Ambrewster County **35**  
by Isaac Gish

So Sorry to Hear About the Death  
of the Artist **46**  
by Abigail Moore

# Nonfiction

Perspectives in Flight **5**  
by Sam Guthrie

Wild Horse Creek **22**  
by Gabby Sullivan

Fall in Love **31**  
by Olivia Dennison

I'll Do Better **41**  
by Caroline Winnenberg





# SELF PORTRAIT IN AN ABBEY

by Abigail Moore

Hold off the earth awhile.

I have just been taught what love is,  
meat-cleaver heartache.

Living is spiraling earthward,  
far from the smiling moon,  
the fiery stars,  
shaking nebulae, like eternity incarnate.

Here, I love maudlinly, sore.

I revel in what I do not believe  
and my dreamy Sunday worries,  
wondering while the stained-glass glows:

Why do Jesus' round eyes narrow sadly?

And where do untold thoughts go,  
the gawking depravity behind  
an angel's smile, teeth white as habits?  
And words, when thoughts are not attached –  
do prayers sink to the bottom of the sea?

And why do I feel it is my duty  
to clarify the misheard  
when I long to lie in blackness,  
sealed sarcophagus,  
my veins stagnant like the Styx?

A revisit to this sullen stone house,  
which bears my likeness already.

I want to be thought of.

To live forever through the blue rosemary, the royal pansies.

To never see the one I love again.

To be a martyr for a generation of sadness  
who do not have the abandon to hate and destroy.

To sleep soundly against the  
glutton wildfire, mammoth tide.

I want to be buried in a pauper's grave  
with a magnolia over my heart.

To lie far beneath the abbey,  
tucked deep, cold and rotting.



# His Deceptive Song

by Gabbie Lamb

**"A greedy father has thieves for children."  
-Serbian Proverb**

For Daniel, there was always a moment right before laying his bow on the strings when everything around him would become still and silent. There was a time when he used to live for that moment, that fleeting instance when his focus consorted and his heart paused. When the world and all its occupants faded away. The weight of the violin supported by his shoulder, the twitch of nerves that surged from his fingers to his toes, the warmth that painted his body in an eager, pleasant glow.

He hadn't felt one of those moments since his mother left six years ago.

During the day, the New York subway station was a seething beast of humanity; people of every size, shape, and color walking shoulder to shoulder. Despite the fact that by late morning the frantic mass of confused chatter, machinery, and PA systems that no one could quite understand quietened to a somewhat bearable degree, there was still the putrid stench--a smell so horribly rancid one would bury their head in a stranger's coat to escape it--that shrouded every square inch of the poorly ventilated tube of gray aluminum.

The bow was already rosined and Daniel flexed his fingers before he took hold of it. Drawing in several deep breaths, he could feel the burn of anticipation already, setting his blood on fire. Withdrawing the violin from its case with practiced ease, Daniel nestled it under his chin. There was a violent shuddering in his chest, as if it was brimming with wasps, as his fingers found their positions. He exhaled again and forced the tension from his limbs. Across the platform, Daniel's blue eyes meet his brother Andy's, whose identical gaze spoke wordlessly to him: *on your mark.*

Daniel forced his lips to shape a smile; it came all too easily at this point.





The first notes that spilled into the prattle of noise were soft—pianissimo—almost timorous as he cleverly lulled them from the beloved instrument. They loitered in the stale air before he smoothly rooted sound into them, charming and coaxing the melody together. Daniel had no need nor desire to glimpse at the absent sheet music; every note was already branded into his mind. He slid effortlessly through an intricate assortment of agile notes and just as subtly flowed into a decrescendo that fashioned the growing throng of people who flocked toward him to grow even calmer, straining their ears to hear every scale of his performance.

They had no idea he was merely the distraction.

Andy, with deft hands and a ghost-like presence, made his way through the credulous swarm. *What's the trick to swiping a man's wallet?* Andy had once asked him. After Daniel shrugged his shoulders, Andy told him the trick to swiping a man's wallet was to direct the man's attention to where the thief wanted it to be. Daniel vocalized his doubts immediately. Surely someone would notice. Surely someone would see him reaching out and taking what he wanted, or the man would at least feel the weight difference.

He never even shifted.

Daniel altered the tempo as his long fingers danced down the neck in a proficient blur of motion. He closed his eyes as he neared the slyly built crescendo and rushed to escape the reality of it all. The sound of his father's voice, the weight of the crowd's presence—they faded, leaving Daniel with only his hands and the strings.

There, he was alone, unbothered and unheeded. It was his world. In the pulsing darkness, with only himself, he searched for the beat of the music and let his fingers find it. He and his violin were all that mattered there, the two of them constructing a single unit with a single cognizance. It was calm and peaceful and controlled; a place where he needed nothing and no one, only the glide of his bow and the serenading sound of the music he crafted as carefully as if he were cutting the notes from glass.

*You're good, Danny, but at your age, I was better.*

His father's voice shattered the fragile domain within Daniel's mind, drawing him back to his audience with a force that was anything but gentle. In spite of himself, a small, perfect tempest of anger and frustration fused in the pit of his stomach. His focus

elsewhere, Daniel felt his fingers speed up, disturbing the fluidity of his bow. He bit his lip and forced himself back into rhythm.

What had his father always told him? *You play the piece fluently, without mistakes, or you do not play it at all.*

Daniel recoiled at the sudden memory—his father's wheat-colored hair stark against his anger-reddened face. Cruel blue eyes pierced Daniel with all the sharpness of an actual razor as he reached for his belt. *You're just like her.* His father snarled at him, right hand white against the neck of a bottle. *You've always been just like her.*

Daniel's fingers stumbled over each other. He managed to catch the mistake before it ruined the piece, but one of his fingers still slipped off its string.

The note came out scratchy, an obnoxious gap between rising arpeggios.

Blood rushed to his cheeks and he cast a quick glance toward his audience to see Andy's eyes dart at him, surprise and concern clear on his face.

Daniel wasn't like Andy; he wouldn't argue with their father or fight back—he was too much of a coward for that. Since the day he took up the violin, his father had drilled many lessons into him. Some were just more painful than others.

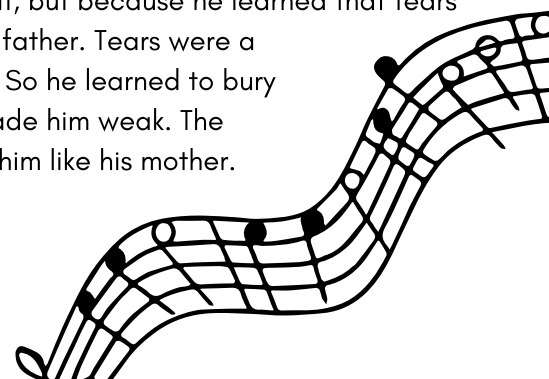
*Just play, dammit. Just play. Just play them all.*

His brain acted on autopilot. The show went on.

Daniel often wondered if, somewhere, there was a version of himself who enjoyed playing the violin with his father in attendance. Feet planted and body loose while he and his father sight-read through a duet piece, both playing wrong notes and screwing up the melody because it was fun to play when you knew it was safe to make a mistake.

It shouldn't have made Daniel feel better to think of all those other lives, but it did.

Years ago, when the wound of his mother's absence was still fresh and bleeding, Daniel had pleaded and begged for his father to look at him, to stay home, but over time, he stopped. Not because he stopped wanting it, but because he learned that tears didn't work on his father. Tears were a sign of weakness. So he learned to bury the things that made him weak. The things that made him like his mother.





Her face flashed in his mind then, lit by the morning sun, those hazel eyes somber, the grunting of the car's engine and the screeching of worn tires on loose gravel. Her lips had been moving; she was mouthing something through the dirty windshield—

*Enough.*

Since that day, Daniel had spent all his life trying to become the son his father wanted—talented, strong, dependable, worthy—only to realize he would never be good enough. *Help me be the son he wants*, he used to pray. *Make me worthy of his praise. Worthy of my father's love.* These thoughts used to trail through Daniel's mind in a circle, relentless and hungry and useless.

*I've done everything right by you, Danny, and one day you're gonna walk out on me.*

*Just like her.*

## Just. Like. Her.

*You're just like—*

At the sound of the final note, hushed and gorgeous and teeming with the concept that it came from the very depths of his soul, Daniel felt as if he could finally breathe again. Applause petered out just after the vibrant sound ceased to inhabit the air, and Daniel lowered his violin, trembling. He dropped into a bow as a few spare dollar bills fell into his open case.

A pinch in his chest; a drop in his gut. Guilt, he knew the feeling. It's all a lie, he wanted to scream. I'm lying right to your faces and you're paying me for it. But, like always, he couldn't find his voice, so he flashed another brilliant smile instead. *Me, me, me.* Perhaps he was as selfish as his mother.

Or maybe he was as cruel as his father.

That thought alone caught all the air in Daniel's throat—not out of shock or fear, but the strange and unsettling relief that festered.

As the crowd dispersed, Daniel put away his instrument, collected the green strips of paper, and pretended not to watch the man six years his senior disappear into the roaming masses with his hands carefully placed in his now bulging pockets.

If Daniel had to describe himself and Andy, he would say they were like a magician's coin; there one minute, then gone the next.

# Perspective in Flight

by Sam Guthrie

*What is an airplane? An airplane is apathetic.*

According to the Lexico dictionary, an airplane is as follows: "A powered flying vehicle with fixed wings and a weight greater than that of the air it displaces." A dictionary definition doesn't do the description of airplanes justice. They typically have one or more wings and are powered by a multitude of different engines, for example most commercial jets rely on the turbofan engine. Modern airplanes are typically hosts to extremely efficient aerofoil, a fancy term for the wings of the contraption. The wings assist in the aircraft's flight, as it helps direct air above, and below the plane. Airplanes can come in a variety of colors, ranging from all over the color spectrum. Most commercial planes bear the insignia of their owners as they are made to order. Airplanes can be as small as the Starr Bumble Bee, with a wingspan of just over five feet, and a length of just under nine feet, to as large as the Aero Spacelines Super Guppy, with a height of 58 and a half feet, a length of about 144 feet, and a wingspan of 156 feet, an absolute behemoth of the skies. The first known successful airplane flight occurred on December 17, 1903, thanks to the Wright brothers. Since then airplanes have been used for combat, research, travel, and even freight moving. What was once the fantasy of the past has become a beacon of the future.

*What is an airplane? An airplane is abhorrent.*

Its very existence is heretical to nature itself, it is a metallic mockery of God's very own creatures. It is merely man's pitiful attempt at capturing and encompassing the beauty and elegance of the avian. It is a steely grave for the soaring aspirations, of mortal men's struggles. It is a reminder that man must impose its will on the natural order by, twisting and defying nature. Its very existence results in the death of thousands each year, whether from commercial accidents, or clandestine military operations. These burlesque beasts also contribute unfathomable amounts of carbon into the atmosphere every year. Planes are war machines, and harbingers of death and destruction, dropping explosive ordinance, deforestation chemicals, and hot lead onto friend and foe alike; a machine of indiscriminate murder. It is a contraption that brings about the madness of those few who seek the best for the natural, providing plenty of noise pollution in even the most remote of locations.

*What is an airplane? An airplane is admirable.*

A majestic beast, wings spread soaring through a picturesque sky, an open field of baby blue with tufts and bushels of soft whites, and heavy grays throughout. A duality of light and heavy resistances, sandwiching the great bird's steely, rigid, and frigid aerofoil, keeping its heavy body afloat. Its lightweight yet aerodynamic coat of shining feathers. It plightlessly propels itself through the air, its brain and body working in unison maneuvering through the deep heavens and fast currents. The acrid aroma of kerosene being spent as the bird streams on. Its frame gleaming from the light around it, passengers gazing out windows at the wonders below and above them. Its stomach lying within its wings, holding its meal for the long voyage ahead.





# THIS IS LOVE by Autumn Anderson

*So, this is love.*

*The thing you've been fed to want*

*Since you watched your first Disney movie,*

*Whether poised and privileged like Prince Charming—*

*Or a street rat like Aladdin with a heart of gold,*

*Doesn't matter how you get them as long as you have them.*

*That lambent feeling bubbling in your chest*

*When you see them, becomes downright combustible*

*When you spend time with them.*

*Screaming parents steal your attention away from the screen*

*And to your very pregnant and recently abandoned sister*

*And your spiteful brother who spends his time*

*Lamenting his disdain for women.*

*Thanksgiving dinner left to cook itself.*

*You suddenly have recollections of your first boyfriend*

*Who you barely had anything in common with*

*Whose sloppy kisses and explorative hands*

*left you uncomfortable and emotionally unsatisfied.*

*Who broke up with you at prom*

*Leaving you to fight salty tears*

*And gasp mouthfuls of air stale with teenagers' sweat*

*and hormones all night.*

*You slowly give your attention back to the television*

*And turn up the volume because*

*Yes, this is unfortunately love.*



# THE BAR SCENE

by Cole Scherer

My mother wanted a daughter, and in some ways, she got one. She had a nasty habit of gossiping to her friends about me. It's the only thing south-eastern middle-aged women know how to do. I was born with bright eyes and a small stature, a pathetic height for a man. I wouldn't have cared, but the topics she decided that were worth praise bothered me. She'd often go on about what a great cook I was as a ten-year-old child, and how she wished she could steal my eyelashes. Each quip would earn an expectant look from her friends. It didn't matter if I just refused to respond, she'd just say "Oh, he's always so bashful."

I was much prouder of the six-point buck I took down on my first hunt, sitting in a dusty frame hidden behind several other photos my mother decided upon. My dad had shared my sentiment, but he gave up after a few years. I liked to think that he was sitting out in the woods waiting for me to reclaim my pride, rather than halfway across the country with a different name. He left the moment my mother dressed me up for the first time. Seeing me in a dress was just too much.





I didn't dare protest when it happened; Mother would do what she wanted anyway. A knot curled its way into the bottom of my stomach while I dragged a chair from the kitchen table into the bathroom. Mom's vast collection of exotic bottles and containers, each a different shade of black or pink, sat lined up on the edge of the bathtub. A half-empty bottle of vodka punctuated the end of the line. The makeup gave off an overpowering odor that threatened the knot in my stomach to retch its way into my throat.

I turned and caught a gasp of clean air from outside the bathroom before she hissed my name and grabbed at my wrist. I turned around and imagined the frustrated look on her face. I figured that I may have scratched the floor dragging the chair. Her expression surprised me.

## "A half-empty bottle of vodka punctuated the end of the line."

There was an energized glow in her eyes that I hadn't seen before in person. Her face was a flawless match to several of the older photos sitting in the living room. I actually thought she was kind of pretty.

I felt something tug at my knees; it pulled them to move towards the dark wood chair. I knew I didn't have a choice in the matter, but I didn't imagine myself winding up that complicit in the whole affair. After settling down into it, she set to work. Gentle bristles brushed against my cheeks and eyes. It would have lulled me to sleep if it weren't for the acrid stench that still hung in the air.

By the time she was done, I couldn't tell if it felt like I was in the bathroom for a long time or only briefly. It felt as if I existed outside of that moment and watched myself sitting in the chair. Mother prodded at my back with her knuckles, leading me back towards the kitchen. Dread settled into my chest once my eyes met Dad's.

"Isn't he just darling? He didn't even need mascara," she said.

I think Dad's face in that moment was the first time I saw true terror. I recognized it again when I looked at myself in the mirror just a few moments later. He didn't say a word while he packed a suitcase and went out the door. I trotted after him in a pathetic attempt to stay on his heels.

I stood in the door frame with the frilly pink dress hanging loose from my shoulders, and my face resembling a disgraced clown.

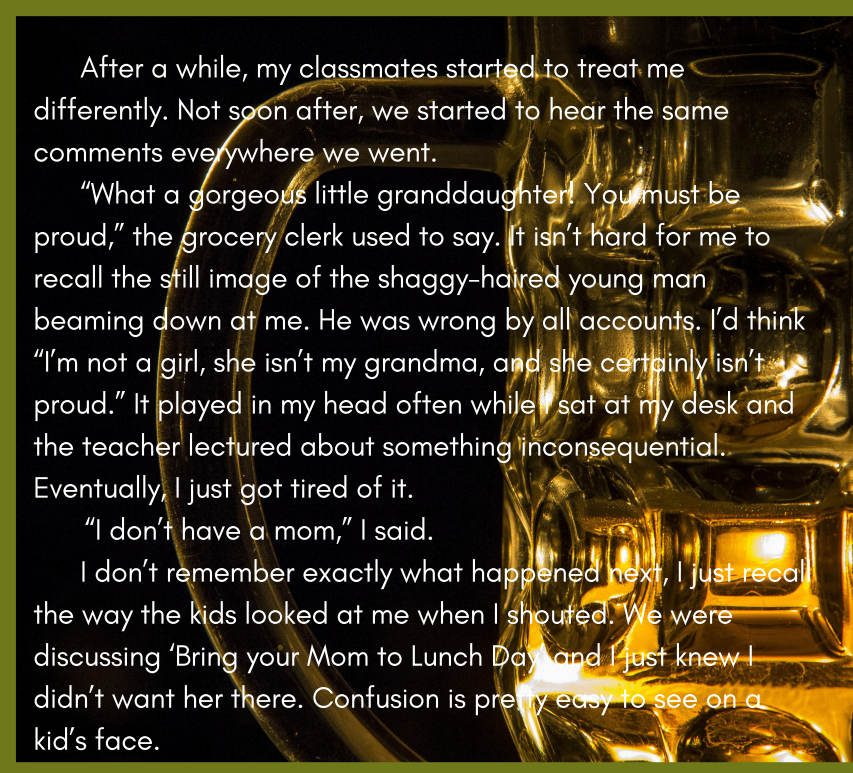
None of it fit me right, and I imagine the image to have looked something like a toddler's first attempt at a Halloween costume. I heard Mom's tone-deaf hums lilt from the bathroom. They were accompanied by the sharp clicks of makeup containers snapping shut and clattering into their travel bag.

After Dad left, we took frequent visits to a friend of hers. I didn't mind, there was a pool. She would often sit at a cheap picnic table by the pool's edge and ingest substances that I didn't understand at the time. Her hair would be scrunched up in an awful bun with more hair falling loose than staying together. Her skin looked to be wrapped taut around a skeleton.

Mom would tell me several times that the pool visits were just a small treat that I should only expect occasionally. I didn't question it until much later whether or not she was attempting to convince me or herself of that fact. A seasonal visit became monthly, and then eventually weekly. When the pool was covered up for the winter, I would sit outside and play pretend. I don't remember those days very well.

It was the pool that stuck in my mind. The crisp water littered with leaves and other debris from the trees was one of the prettiest sights I'd witnessed up until that point. I couldn't swim, so I avoided the deep end. I still had a blast in the shallow water. I was in a spa, away from home and away from Mom. I didn't have to pretend when I was wading around in the warm water.

I don't really remember much about her face or eyes when she exited the house. She'd grab my wrist and drag me out of the pool and straight into the car. I came down with a few nasty colds from her blasting the AC while I was sopping wet.



After a while, my classmates started to treat me differently. Not soon after, we started to hear the same comments everywhere we went.

"What a gorgeous little granddaughter! You must be proud," the grocery clerk used to say. It isn't hard for me to recall the still image of the shaggy-haired young man beaming down at me. He was wrong by all accounts. I'd think "I'm not a girl, she isn't my grandma, and she certainly isn't proud." It played in my head often while I sat at my desk and the teacher lectured about something inconsequential. Eventually, I just got tired of it.

"I don't have a mom," I said.

I don't remember exactly what happened next, I just recall the way the kids looked at me when I shouted. We were discussing 'Bring your Mom to Lunch Day' and I just knew I didn't want her there. Confusion is pretty easy to see on a kid's face.

They all make the same dumb expression. A half open mouth, and eyes that stare into nothing. But really, those expressions were nothing compared to the teacher's. She was flush in the face, with what I could only assume to be secondhand embarrassment for my mother. I was dragged out into the hallway immediately and given a firm instruction on the importance of honesty, coming from a woman that I now know had been divorced twice on adultery claims.

"Now, we're going to try again. Okay?" she said. Her hair revealed a failure of an attempt to go blonde. Instead, she was left with a stringy mop that didn't completely conceal her scalp. I stared with empty eyes and didn't say a word. If I didn't come up with some poor excuse, it was usually enough to let me get away with a simple scolding.

I didn't expect to return home that afternoon without a mother after all. A couple of adults dressed in jeans and plaid vests stood at the door. They looked loose and calm, I probably wouldn't have batted an eye if they said they lived in that house and I had walked up to the wrong one. Apparently, Mother had been arrested.

Sometime after it was all said and done, she called her first trip to jail a learning experience. While she learned, I wound up in a Catholic youth center for a year and I hated every minute of it. I can figure now why church kids go wild in college. I would have as well if I hadn't had a chance to try alcohol or be a dumb kid for a while.

The youth center was my first introduction to what a stable environment looked like. At least, that's what Mother's parole officers called it. It was a cult. The moment you got caught with something, it was either time in the closet or dismissal. Not sure where they dismissed the bad kids to, but I knew the inside of the closet pretty well.

"You can't talk to him anymore, he's a sinner," one of the parish leaders said.



I don't really remember the kid. He always had a big smile on his face, and he had an oppressive scent of mint. He wore the same blue striped button-up and loose khakis that the rest of the boys wore. There weren't any girls.

Of course, I talked to the kid anyway. I didn't like him, and the novelty of talking to a gay kid wore off pretty quick, but it was against the rules. We kissed in the ditch behind the school, and I didn't feel anything. I still don't really think I'm gay.

I didn't expect Mother to pick me up, but it was the first time I was excited to see her. She was a mess of snot and tears when she knelt down to me on the front patio of the complex. It was pathetic that she believed it was that simple. She slowed down quite a bit afterwards. We visited the stranger's pool less frequently, and she stopped asking me about my grades. I don't doubt Mother probably learned a lot in her experience, but I learned quite a bit too.



My gender ended up a very convenient thing I would lie about. It got me into college, my job as a beat journalist, and the country club I frequent for skeet shooting. Missouri isn't really all that progressive, though it's a bit surprising considering the day and age. Farm boys have a pretty loose set of requirements for what constitutes femininity. The average women around here are a little more complicated, but they aren't my type anyway. If I smack on a little eyeshadow, contour my jaw, and wear something black; I can get a few free drinks at a bar outside of town. It's too bad my mom is a household name at the local joint.

I love the Stray Sheep regardless. The name is pretty lame and so are the people. The air is moist and has a pungent smell, it's something similar to standing in front of a truck exhaust. It's pretty noisy for a local bar, not for traffic but rather the clientele. The moment I take a step into the place, my ears are assaulted with several loud conversations happening at once. No matter when I decide to walk in, someone is having a good time. The walls are decorated with a confusing mix of sports memorabilia, classic art, and graffiti. It's about as strange as the clientele I just mentioned.

The scene isn't complete without Vincent passed out in the only booth the place had. I can probably count on one hand the number of times I saw it actually get used for something other than a bed. I had come to accept the scene, it's the only place I could ever get Mom to spend a little bit of time with me. I wouldn't have wound up with my small alcohol problem if it weren't for her. I gave Martha a nod and slipped onto my bright red stool, worn down with imprints of my ass. Martha sat at a stool she smuggled from the front of the bar, and fiddled with her phone.



Wouldn't hurt her to stand for her shifts. She was built like a top-heavy pear, complete with bingo wings and a pair of legs that I respected for holding up a frame that was twice their size.

"I dunno how you put up with Liz never showing up to anything," Martha said.

"Mom'll come. She'll probably want an RCV," I said.

"Don't know how she drinks that shit so stout, either. Especially as often as she's here. I need at least a day or two recover every once in a while, y'know," Martha said. Her eyebrows curled close to the bridge of her nose while she fished out a Red Bull from beneath the counter and popped it open.

*Battle hardened stomach. Martha knew that. I guess she just wanted to sound wistful and chatty today. It was Mom's birthday after all.*

"She used to have a harder time with it, when she'd visit out of town," I said. She knew that too, but she just gave me this stupid nod with a face that made it seem like she was receiving important information. *Might as well give her the time of day, posterity's sake.*

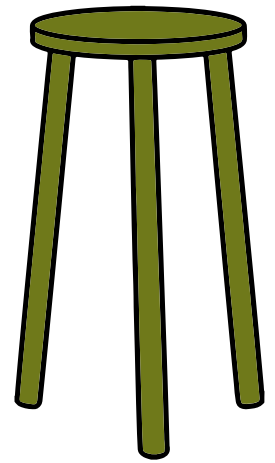
"Until I started drinking, it was about as symbiotic as our relationship ever got," I said. *The damned pool.*

The front door's bell was a gentle opener for the cacophony of sounds that began once Mom came through. The door slammed against the wall, and she howled. I shrunk down and stared down at the counter while I waited out the belligerent shouting and greetings. She'd been given the same little surprise party every year since she started coming, and every year she was given the same five-minute welcome wagon.

A couple of people, usually new folks that would be moved off somewhere else in a couple of weeks, would stand at the door and wait for her to come in. The few regulars who knew what was going on would start to sing happy birthday, and everyone else can't help but pitch in.



It would all be punctuated by Vincent leaning up from his nap and saying "Oh, well habby burday," before slapping back down. Then the topic would shift to how Vincent actually participated for once, as if he doesn't heckle people every evening before he plops down at his booth and drinks himself unconscious.



Mom clattered down onto the stool next to me and offered a grin. She reached over and smacked Martha's shoulder.

"Drink's right there 'ya ditz," Martha said.

She peered down and her mouth opened up in a small "o", taking a peek at me and winking as if we just shared a secret. She's so damn immature. Her lanky fingers reached around the glass and she gave me another stupid grin. Her scarred and marked skin gave her expression an unflattering angle. She finally fell back onto the stool in a sloppy fashion with an unceremonious fart. She gave me a silly look that implied it was just the chair.

Pregaming, really? Why did I even bother coming? She spent several moments focusing on something before lifting her drink. Her wrinkles looked worse with her face scrunched up. She doesn't even bother to wear makeup, and it makes her look manly. She doesn't even look like a mom.

"Hey, hey now, what if I didn't want the cranberry," Mom said. The grin hadn't left her face.

"Well looks like you'd either drink it or wear it," Martha said. They both cackled like hyenas.

"It's what you always order. You know you're going to drink it," I said.

"Y'know, people might change their minds sometimes," Mom said. She caught me off guard.

I sat quiet while the two caught up on the past day they hadn't seen each other. They talked about pointless things like recent local news and gossip. Theresa got caught with heroin again. That charge could lock her up for good. I cut my eyes at Mom when she mentioned it. *Hypocrites are pathetic.*

"I'm gonna rock a piss," She said.

I kept my attention on her and watched her sloppy movements. She looked like a snake that was attempting to slither midair rather than on the ground. *She doesn't even appreciate the fact I'm here.* I looked at Martha and I guess I expected something resembling sympathy at the whole fiasco. Instead I was treated to a frustrating parade of giggles and snorts.

There was something tender in Martha's expression, like a doe watching her child climb to their feet for the first time. Mom waved her hand in a dismissive fashion and leant on the bar to mutter something. I guess she got distracted again. I shouted and reminded her that she was going to the bathroom.

"She just got here, and she's gonna be in there for probably an hour doing god knows what," I said.

"Hey, it's her birthday, cut the bitch a bit of slack," Martha said. I got the feeling the bitch was referring to Mom, but the word's tone wasn't directed at her.

## "They're both middle-aged women who amounted to nothing, and they're happy that way."

Martha is just as complicit as Mom. *They're both middle aged women who amounted to nothing, and they're happy that way. It's infuriating.* Mom had always been in and out of jail, and my whereabouts were a second thought.

After the predicted hour, she wobbled back out of the bathroom with a burp that announced her arrival.

"You enjoy your birthday in the bathroom?" I asked.

"Really gonna start this crap? I had to shit, it's always taken me a little while. God forbid I sit for a minute and relax before coming back out here." There wasn't any bite in her voice, but I didn't like the way she said it anyway. She always has some sort of excuse.

"Isn't any of my business, all I did was mention it."

Mom's face appeared as if she washed her hands of it. It always looks as if she doesn't spend more than a fleeting moment to think about things. There's no wisdom in her face. I'd learned what wisdom looked like in college. It's the greatest thing that came out of my Journalism degree.

I couldn't help but draw comparisons to the awe I felt listening to men and women that could quote Shakespeare from memory. They appeared disinterested, but distinctly alive. They believed every word they said and knew it to be correct.

"Say just about whatever the hell 'ya want! Long as you ain't hurting anyone, why sweat the details?" Mom said. I guess she's the same in her own way. I don't have a clue how I ended up the mature one out of the two of us.

I knew everything I needed to know very early on. I know what sort of woman she is.

"I think you should be more worried about what you don't say, rather than what you do say," I said. I don't think it ended up under my breath like I had intended. The world didn't move as fast as my head did as I spun to catch her reaction.

"Good fucking christ, Erin, what's the fucking deal?"

I'm gonna bring it up, I'm gonna call her out on it. I bet she doesn't even remember scaring off dad. Why would she, if she's capable of forcing an innocent child to cross dress on her own stupid whim. I felt the need to stand, but I didn't want to stumble. She's going to take me seriously this time, I can walk out if I want to.

"I just want to know why you felt the need to treat me like your daughter," I said.

"I wanted to give you the option that I didn't have, and your father didn't want you to have," she said. I didn't expect her to answer so quickly, like she knew what the issue was to begin with.

I didn't expect an immediate apology, but it was ridiculous that she had the audacity to spin it on me. I wasn't the one that cross-dressed my ten-year-old kid. I stared at her. I don't recognize this woman.

"Do you remember raiding my closet and cabinets? You made a huge mess of my room. What if you were allergic to any of the makeup," Mom said.

I don't really remember that. Well, I guess I do. I wanted to explore, so I decided I was going to.

"That doesn't give you a reason to just make me do it anyway," I hissed the words through my teeth and kicked the counter. "That isn't an excuse."

"Good god, I fucked up; I get it. I pay for it every day and I wonder whether or not your father was right. But I have done my damned best to make sure you're comfortable in your own skin regardless of the circumstances," She said.

Makes sense. I slumped my shoulders and finally took a look at her. She looked about as tired as I probably did. She tilted her glass up and took large swigs. Her wrinkled face straightened up just enough as she opened her jaw to make her appear maybe just a couple of years younger.

I felt like I was actually sitting next to her in that moment, rather than sitting so far below her. She's shorter than me in reality.

"Then why didn't you get me a cat when Dad left?"

Mom looked shocked. Maybe I went too far, I'm just making shit up at this point. She spun back to face the bar.

"Did you seriously think we could afford that? Have



you grown up at all? I'd at least have hoped you had a clue how money works," She said. I do know how money works, no thanks to you.

"We'd have had it if you didn't spend it all on booze and whatever vices you felt that you needed."

"It didn't really help that you felt the need to tell fibs about the lunch debt you racked up," She said. That's low. "The late fees were crippling."

"I wouldn't have to lie about it if I thought we had enough money."

"You shouldn't lie about anything," Mom said. She gets this preachy tone that never fails to give me a headache. "I had at least thought I taught you that much. I was nothing but forward with you about what was going on."

"Like a kid needs to hear that shit."

"It ain't easy fighting addiction, kid, I figured you were a little more understanding of that fact," Martha said.

*Why the hell is she interjecting?* Mom looked hurt.

"I did my damn best with the cards I was dealt. I ain't ever claimed to be perfect, I just do what I think is right by people," Mom said.

I had a habit of just sitting quiet when I didn't have anything quick to say. They both stared at me like they were still waiting for an answer. After several minutes passed, they went back to chatting like nothing happened. That's probably the last I'm going to hear of that discussion. She never dwelled on anything, I never understood it. I'm still hung up after several years.

Her slender fingers reached around the mug and she

gave me a grin full of white teeth. That's a pretty major shift in tone. I'm amazed she kept them healthy, I never noticed. She'd put on some weight, too, in the past few years. Her arms were full and defined, with strong forearms leading up to the biceps threatening to pop open her sleeve. Her taut skin wraps around a muscular frame, littered with scars and marks. She doesn't wear makeup; her jaw is more defined than mine and she wears the same nose that I do. Mom's actually really pretty. I guess I should cut her some slack. At least she's honest.





# RING OF FIRE

by Chelsea Carter

I'm running from the devil  
I know he's searching for me  
He's coming to collect my soul  
He's coming to make me pay,  
make me pay, for what he thinks  
I done did to you.

I'm running from the devil  
suffocating on the hot Florida air  
I hear the echoes of their rage, outside my cage  
Kingdoms of demons, rising in the midst,  
their pale fists, beating on the walls of my pen  
until the white light unbinds itself from the dark  
blinding me, protecting my eyes from seeing these people full of fury,  
protecting my eyes from seeing,  
seeing what these people are about to do to me.

I'm running from the devil  
The tides are high,  
and the world begins to grow blurry  
as my body gets snatched, thrown,  
and catapulted into thicker air  
all the while I am being violated,  
only inching closer towards my certain death, I think,  
I can't even remember what you look like,  
Lola Cannady, now an unpigmented bag of bones,  
What do you look like? Who did this to you?  
Why are you letting them do the same thing to me?

I'm running with the devil  
because sometimes we ain't meant to be free  
everything's burning, blazing in and out of me  
they ripped my manhood away, and fed it back to me  
they cloaked a noose around my neck,  
and dropped my body from a tree.

Thousands of hellhounds  
tear into my mutilated corpse,  
stealing my fingers and toes  
to keep as momentos, to show off  
to their deranged peers and anyone else  
who can stomach to see what's left of me.

I was left there for days  
until I became nothing but a specter,  
A story of a man,  
a statistic, a reason to riot,  
a reminder of the deep need to be free.

Maybe I will exist here forever  
as the surreal memory of the lynching of Claude Neal,  
a ghost of a brutal past,  
a haunting reminder that we will never be safe in this country.



# FAIRYTALE

by Abigail Moore

Tell me more about the fantasy, Grandpa,  
of seeing your radiant bride  
for the first time as she lay on an altar  
with her head chopped off,  
blotches of clay still caked on her skin.  
I want to prepare for the day  
that I see my lover across the party,  
at least two income brackets above me,  
with his rings shining like a crown.

*Am I the woman you thought of, once upon a dream?*

There's a ribbon around my neck,  
tight, and I've grown accustomed to  
chopping off my heels for him,  
pricking my finger on a spinning wheel for him,  
waiting in this great stone tower for him.  
Have I done enough for you, lover?  
Or shall I become the shoes under your feet,  
cut myself into pieces  
and wash up at your feet like Moses?  
I crave and caw for more anecdotal material  
to tell our great-great grandchildren.  
My miller father and spinner mother  
watch from the trees;  
this is the day of my fairytale ending.  
I imagine you kissing me out  
of death, my deepest, darkest sleep.



# WHERE WOULD I BE?

by Micah Prakin

I often wonder what it felt like at my birth. Was it cold? It was the 13th of January, so surely it was cold, although my mother never told me. She never took to liking me much, for she was a hurt woman. Growing up Catholic ruined her. The guilt, the routine, and the guilt again made her bitter as dark chocolate. It was almost as if she knew that I was broken. Different. Defective.

I was thirteen when I came to terms with my ailment. My mother cried. My father went silent, and he stayed that way until he died. At least, he was silent towards me. Despite coming to terms with my illness, I was still called by my deadname.

\*\*\*

I'm sure raising a non-conforming child was terrifying, horrible. After all, we were barely allowed to dance in our home. I hated the therapy. All of the doctors looked at me as if I were a freak and maybe, I was. I just wanted to be treated as I felt, as I saw myself, as I was. As a girl.

\*\*\*

I was eighteen when I graduated high school. I put on the button-up, the freshly ironed slacks. I tied the

laces of my polished dress shoes, adjusted the cheaply-made cap over my newly buzzed hair, and made sure the tassel was on the left side.

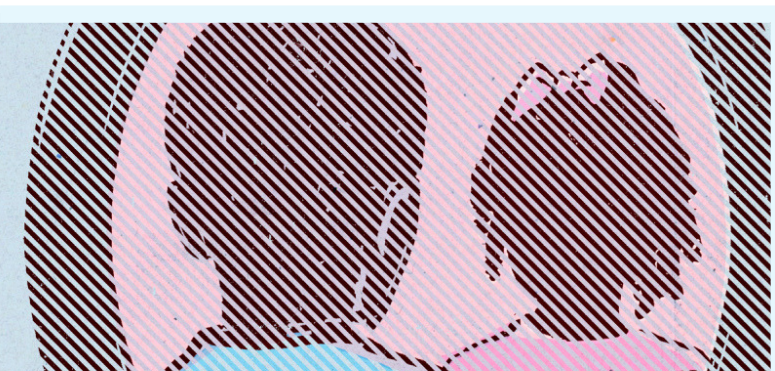
I was nineteen in my second year of college. I went to NYU through the pre-med program. I wanted to understand myself more. Maybe this would give me the answers I've been yearning for. It didn't. Nothing biological told me about my abnormality. Instead, I found a group of people who were like me. How do they love themselves? I would think to myself. We are despicable. Vile. This was the year of Stonewall. I was invited by some of the others like me, but I was confused. How were they all able to dress like that? Kissing the same sex? And the other ones like me, I could tell they were men in makeup. and gaudy clothes. But they told me they weren't women.

"What the hell is a drag queen?" I asked.

They all laughed at me. "Oh, honey."

Back then, I didn't understand what was so funny.

I was twenty-one when I dated my first girlfriend. She was a nursing student named Geraldine. I thought I loved her. Well, I did love her, but it was some sort of forced love. A love I forced myself to feel in order to prove to everyone that I wasn't different. We would go to the diner to study. We talked, laughed, but never touched. I hated my body, but that was just another side effect of my illness. The thought of sex terrified me, much less holding hands, or kissing. Geraldine didn't seem bothered by it.



Geraldine and I got married when I was twenty-four. I had graduated with my bachelor's degree from NYU and was on my way to medical school at Johns Hopkins. Geraldine was a registered nurse at a small hospital outside of Baltimore. She wanted a baby. We had sex on our wedding night, but I always made excuses after that.

"I have an exam tomorrow."

"I'm tired."

"I feel sick."

Looking at my penis was disgusting. Geraldine, though, was beautiful. I would often pleasure her orally to make up for my lack of confidence, but that wasn't enough. She wanted her husband's touch. She wanted a baby.

I graduated from Johns Hopkins when I was twenty-eight. My focus was in pediatrics. Fitting for a man who couldn't even get his wife pregnant, wasn't it? Geraldine wanted a baby.

"All of my sisters have children."

"You aren't your sisters."

"Come on! All of the girls at work are getting pregnant."

We had one daughter when I was twenty-nine. Geraldine was the same age. We named her Jody. She was both of our greatest achievements. She was perfect, not damaged like me.

**"Looking at my  
penis was  
disgusting."**

I was thirty-five when I got divorced. A child drives two people apart. Maybe your husband being a woman does it as well. Sometimes when I was alone, I would try on Geraldine's lingerie. I would catch myself thinking of those drag queens at Stonewall, how confident they were. I was like them, but I was a woman. Geraldine caught me a few times. Not much was said, but then she saw that I had newspaper clippings of Stonewall. I think she began to hate me for the lack of sex. Sometimes, I would feel the bed shake as she would masturbate. I didn't do anything. I mean, I couldn't fuck her again. I wouldn't.

I was thirty-seven when I looked into hormones. As a doctor, it was difficult to obtain them anonymously, but I did it. The next time I picked Jody up for my weekly visits, I told Geraldine. I never saw Jody after that.


Six months later, I watched lesbians and gays march in Washington for the second time.

Two weeks after that, someone leaked my medical records, and I was fired from my job. After all, "Who would want a tranny to care for their child?"

I had enough put aside from the divorce to buy a home in the country of Pennsylvania and, for eighteen years, I lived in reclusion from everyone. I was an educated individual working at a small grocery store in rural Pennsylvania. I was on estrogen for long enough that I "passed."

In 2015, same sex marriage was legalized.





In 2016, President Obama lifted the ban on transgender men and women in the military.

I was sixty-seven when I came out to one of my coworkers. Her name was Jenny, and she accepted me. It was the first time since I saw Jody that I said, "I am a transgender woman."

I was sixty-nine when I got bottom surgery and breast implants. Jenny posted a GoFundMe page and raised more than enough money. I was a woman.

I am now seventy-one, my name is Donna, and I live in rural Pennsylvania with my wife, Jenny.

I am happily retired from my grocery store job. Jenny works at the local paper. I live my life to the fullest. I am true to myself.

I am a woman.

I often think about Stonewall. If Marsha hadn't thrown that brick, if I hadn't gone to the riots, I hadn't married Geraldine, hadn't become a doctor, hadn't gotten hormones,

## Where would I be?

# ODE TO THE EYES OF SHARON TATE

by Abigail Moore



I cannot call them shining seas, wide oceans –  
maybe a wild, attentive lake, unbound by human desire,  
untouched by the suburbanites.

Waiting, silent but stewing, sit a thousand patient goodbyes  
and enough love to choke us – L.A. smog, the best pollution.  
The reflections of neon lights and stoplights and murals on walls,  
the glimmer of million-dollar homes, not adjusted for inflation.

Before Woodstock, miles away, your eyes regarded all,  
burning and shining golden under the ultraviolet sun.  
Buried six-feet deep is the memory of all-American afternoons:  
lying in cornfields, jack and diane, times past.  
I can see the music filling your ears and spilling out of your soul,  
encased in glass: the shimmer of your corneas  
like a case in the Met.

They are the rings of Saturn pressed together like papyrus –  
and the hieroglyphs, the sun and moon and mercury,  
and just echoes of past lives, smelted.  
As cliché as compliments come, your eyes are soft,  
but risqué, never quite controversial, and never scared.  
The spirit of an old sage at the circus, like a corduroy mirror of 1969.



And such a primavera about them, and sticky residue of eternity.  
Mary, Guinevere, Joan, Eleanor, Judith, Sharon.  
A water-giver in the Age of Aquarius;  
your eyes are a sharp brown, not milky, not milled, unadulterated,  
sealed from delusion but surrounded by the otherworldly.

Surely, in the shaking vein of heartache,  
the tenderest, saccharine become bittersweet in the cloudy lens:  
petrichor, your fifth car in so many years, a thought exercise,  
reciting Old McDonald's Farm in a sanguine voice.

Before Woodstock, after Apollo, an era in yourself,  
the fantasy tucked between world and veil.  
Now they close, your velvet eyelids, painted Egyptian,  
and the light of the bronze supernova may smolder  
and rest.





# ALONE IN THE COLD

by Emma Hargrave

stars and streetlights meet in the middle  
air seems to swell around you  
the chill of late february falling onto you  
like snowflakes  
dancing  
down  
slowly,  
all at once

the sun is shining below the horizon  
and the world is teeter-tottering  
birds on branches still singing,  
thinking one day it might become spring

your eyes are sleepy  
but the world is not

it is peaceful now  
but soon the day must erupt through the seams of the sky  
not yet,  
we are safe here now  
below the birds and the streetlights  
above the warm and waiting sun



Wild Horse Creek wasn't a creek, except when it was. It was a roaring river, a guarding moat, an ever-deepening cavern, a thoroughfare for leaf-boats. We'd leap over its widest point as monsters, or an enemy army, or when Gary with a snowball chased us, and I imagined I heard the pulsing of rapids beneath me as my feet touched the spotty grass on the other side, safe.

Wild Horse Creek united children who shouldn't have been. I was 9 and Kailey was 8, and that was normal. We'd known each other since we'd both moved into the neighborhood four years before, and in sweltering Midwest summers Kailey spent more time playing with me in my unfinished basement than she did at home, making Barbies fall in love and battling the stray daddy long legs that came out of the concrete walls. Calvin, though, was an outlier. His father was a military man, so they were one family in the revolving door of move-ins and move-outs in a neighborhood so close to an Air Force base. Calvin was 6—blond-haired, chubby-cheeked, cherubic with a secret like Dennis the Menace. His brother Gary was the opposite—8 like Kailey, weedy and thin, with a crooked smile made more crooked by his teeth that grew in wrong. He wasn't a bad kid, I know now, but I found him irredeemably dull. He wouldn't play our games, instead mocking us from the deck. Calvin, though every other 6-year-old was a baby, was fun. He'd climb on his playset with me and Kailey for hours and plan raids of the nearby villages across the creek.

The creek was in his backyard. A drainage ditch left over from the rapid construction of the cookie-cutter houses we lived in. Two-and-a-half feet deep at its most hollow point, and wide enough that I could lay my feet at one end and have my head touch the other. It filled with water after every summer rain, and sometimes Calvin (not minding the mud, though his mother did) would jump in and forage like a gold miner sluicing through rocks. Once he found a turtle—a small, red-speckled thing that he stuck in a cardboard box outside with a few lettuce leaves from the vegetable drawer. Other times he'd find a bug and chase Kailey and me with it until we climbed onto the top of the playset and became princesses in a tower fleeing a Bug-Beast. I named it Wild Horse Creek, after the street we lived on. I liked the drama of it, the natural wildness of it. I liked how the battle of Wild Horse Creek sounded when we crossed stick-swords with imaginary invaders, and it was especially fitting when we pretended to tame our own wild horses, nuzzling

# WILD HORSE CREEK

by Gabby Sullivan





at the crumbling banks to find water. It glamorized even the most unpleasant of events; when I jumped over and the loose dirt scattered at my weight and my ankle twisted under me, it sounded better to tell my mother that the banks of Wild Horse Creek crumbled beneath me rather than *I fell in the drainage ditch*.

When the creek was dry, Calvin and I would squat in it, knee to knee, eyes at the grass, to ambush the enemies (Gary and his friends, who were 12 and imminently cooler and crueller) while Kailey kept watch from the playset's castle turret. Calvin would arm us with water guns from their arsenal and give us a bucket slopping water over the brim for ammunition. In the winter, on a rare day when Gary was less an enemy and more a playmate, we'd fill the same buckets with snowballs, turned grenades, turned cannonballs in the catapults of our mittened hands.

Calvin and Gary moved away after two years of constant summer and weekend play. By that time I was 11, and I finally thought myself too cool to play with an 8-year-old. But on that last day when they moved, Calvin, Kailey, and I still found our place at Wild Horse Creek and defended it from the encroaching enemies. We laughed, and we played, and we all looked at the plain dirt and the backyard and witnessed the same imaginations: warriors bearing bows and swords, feral beasts with colored coats gnashing their teeth against our shields, and beneath it all, Wild Horse Creek, roaring its own battle cry even as the murky rainwater sat perfectly still in the muddied, shallow bottom.

They left the playset and the creek. A new family moved in, but their only child was a baby.

*"I liked the drama of it, the natural wildness of it."*

Kailey and I stopped playing at the creek. We tried, once, but it felt strange without Calvin there. What was a moat without a castle to defend? A river without a treehouse to shelter in? A snowball fight without a brother to aim for?

We aged. We stopped playing. One day, a teenager, I turned the corner onto Wild Horse Creek Drive and looked in Calvin's backyard to see Wild Horse Creek filled with coarse gray stones, piled like rubble. I parked there for a moment and just stared, and I felt a pang of loss I hadn't felt since Kailey and I tried to play there one last time. Something had been lost, irrevocably. Wild Horse Creek was no longer a creek, a river, a moat, a cavern. It was a hole in the ground filled with rocks.



# Disputes

# and

# Blues

by Chelsea Carter

I stand still, ears ringing, eyes stinging,  
as I watch his body gyrate about the room.  
His lips move fast, water droplets escaping  
the rageful sounds of a man, unhinged,  
heartbroken, miserable,  
beads of saliva,  
dripping.

The killing of a coffee mug,  
as it is catapulted into the cerulean wall,  
just past my noggin,  
the rush of the wind making the hairs on my ear,  
stand,  
tall.

The room is silent,  
the deafening sounds of the noiseless,  
unspoken words of unspoken emotions,  
tension so thick,  
it suffocates.

A cacophony of pleas fills the room,  
as I make my way to the door,  
warm hand gripping the coldness of the handle,  
I pause, waiting for the question.

He only love me when I walk,  
He only loves me when I walk away.

Yes, baby I'll stay.  
Yes, baby I'll stay.  
Yes, baby I'll stay.



# Natural Light

by Caroline Winnenberg

Small shadows still kiss between my ribs  
Taut under my skin. I trace my fingers  
From my waist, past my hips, along where  
My thigh meets my pelvis. I lightly drag my  
Nails up the side of my thighs and turn  
To gaze at my profile. I twist and contort  
Until my silhouette matches the girls  
In the magazines. I stare until I realize  
I hadn't taken a breath in a minute.  
My muscles relax and my back curves,  
My stomach releases and my shoulders drop;  
The sun's kiss through the blinds  
Warms my arms. I stretch and yawn and watch  
As my blue eyes glow in the light.  
This girl is perfect.





# Mother's Farewell

Cadillac Lounge



Every weekend  
11AM to 3PM

LIVE  
BANDS

OPEN

by Kaylan  
Hall

Leslie Jenkins is what the world labeled a no good mother, a drunk, a slut. She found it more important to spend her 22 hour a week paycheck on a bottle of José and a night with his cousins Pablo and Carlos. Men were her only comfort after being abandoned by the two men who promised never to leave. My father couldn't deal with my mother's moods that led to days of her never leaving her bed or outbursts of anger and broken bones. He left clutching his bloodied nose without a second glance towards my sleeping form on the flower print sofa.

My Pop didn't have much choice, as the cancer had broken down his body into nothing but bones and stretched grey skin. The moment the breath ripped from his body, the rot settled in Leslie's body and in my life. She stayed, screaming at the fresh mound, hours after the funeral procession and ceremony. Then she left me for the first time.

I stood next to my Pop's rain-soaked headstone, gripping the granite like it was his actual hand. The sun had already set and I continued to sit, obediently shivering and wondering when Leslie Jenkins would be back for her four-year-old. The groundskeeper found me around 3 a.m. (at least I believe that's what the CPS report read) and I was placed in my first link on the chain of foster homes.

It was another weekend that my mother had me during the Oklahoma summer months. We were on our way to the first liquor stop of the day, which was a lie as it was really our second. The first was to Andy's Drinks and Delights, but my mother had let it slip from her soft mind that she had been banned from the property over four years ago. Her mats of black hair were quivering tree limbs being blown by an approaching tornado as she screamed in Andy's face and knocked over a case or two of beer.

"Les, you get your ass out of here now or I will call the law," Andy himself spoke calmly through the spittle that had landed on his face. "I know you don't wann--"

"You just try it, ole Andrew!" The purple in her cheeks deepened. "I bet your Ma is still the one paying for the cheap shit you keep in this place."

My hand moved to unfasten my seatbelt as she reached to shove another case of Millers, but ole Andy had firmly taken her forearm and twisted until she was subdued. She fought him through the door like a cat fighting a bath, screeching and twisting her back until he had planted her in front of the car.

"Les, I'm warning you to keep your distance from my place," he stated firmly, like a chastising father. "I was good friends with your Pa and I really don't wanna be the one to send you to county today."

Leslie sat down at the mention of her father, the rusted bumper digging into her back. I reached across the middle console and fished for the car door handle and pushed. Andy caught the frame of the door and pulled it open with a pop and groan. He tried to lift my mother up more onto her feet and into the car, but she slapped his hands away. Her anger was resurfacing and the second wave would be worse than the last.



“Mom, come on -- you said we were gonna get food and I’m starving.” I rubbed my stomach for extra emphasis. “Can we go?”

She glared at Andy, but my voice sobered her for half a second. “Alright, alright, shut it, Liss. We’re going.” She stomped her way into her seat, shoved the keys into the ignition, and peeled away.

A few miles down the road I finally spoke. “Thank you momma.” Sometimes she would soften when I talked like a child, but it didn’t always work.

Her hand came across the car and caught me high on my cheek. “Don’t you ever interrupt me talking with a grownup again!”

I rubbed the rising skin and simply muttered a “yes momma.” She moved her hand under her seat, fighting for a second with a weathered bottle of Jim Beam. A burning swig or two and she would be quiet for at least twenty minutes. Twenty minutes during which she would be a version of an actual mother.

“I’m sorry, hon,” her reddened hand moved to grasp mine. “Andy just had no business telling me to leave and then bringing up your Pop like that. Acting like he knows shit.” She took another swig. What my mother couldn’t remember about her last visit at Andy’s was the thousands of dollars in damages she had done. In her blackened state, Leslie had lost her shit over the price of her whiskey. She was escorted out in handcuffs after knocking over four cases of alcohol and smashing multiple bottles of cabernet sauvignon and sauvignon blanc. I was left in the back of a police cruiser waiting once again for my social worker. I was only thankful this wasn’t the case now, and I was so close to never having to be detained by another government official.

“It’s okay, momma, you always got me.” I was barely audible, but she still heard me in the almost-silence of the car. The ride was punctuated by a grinding coming every so often from somewhere under the hood of the car.

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We had driven for four hours and the sun was bleeding in the sky as we pulled into a gravel parking lot. The amber liquid in the Jim Beam bottle had dried up an hour ago and Leslie was almost frothing at the mouth for a drink. The blue neon lights of the Lost Boy bar glowed like a beacon for alcoholics such as Leslie.

“Momma, where are we?”

## “It’s okay, Momma, you always got me.”

“I saw a board while we were driving and thought it’d be a good place to grab you a burger.” She meant a good place to grab a shot or five.

There had been no mention of food since we’d left Andy’s. I had learned to stash a small package of corn nuts or sunflower seeds in the passenger’s door. My stomach was my own personal Judas as it screamed for nourishment.

“Well it seems we’re in agreement.” The door creaked open and with a throw of the car keys into the middle console, Leslie was halfway inside the door before I had unbuckled my seatbelt. The gravel crunched beneath my glued-together chucks. The bar had a peeling grey exterior that blended into the darkening scape behind it. The soft glow of the neon signs and table lamps illuminated the building like a haven. A haven that was drenched in sweat and piss every time the door opened to release a stumbling fool out of its mouth. I ventured in, pushing past the sharp smells and the sticky texture of the floor, to stare into its belly.

The tables were missing pieces from different puzzles smashed together at various heights, colors and materials. To the right of the jumble was the watering hole, where my mother with her hippo hips leaned over the counter. Beyond her stood a plump redhead near the door with a stamp pad who was preoccupied with two college students trying to talk their way in. With her attention elsewhere, I moved across the floor, feet squishing, to a table on the perimeter of the bar. It was near enough that I had a direct view of Leslie’s mating ritual with the bartender.

My mother wasn’t ugly for her age and her rate of alcohol consumption. Her dark hair fell in heavy waves



with no signs of grey. Her eyes were the real treasures as they glowed like dewy moss in spring. They illuminated her ample breasts, always swollen and jutting for attention as they were doing now. They were also the reason she had been beaten so many times by her boyfriend, Dale, another asshole she had run after instead of staying with her daughter.

I was 12 years old when the court granted my mother temporary custody of me based on her so-called "good behavior." When she picked me up from the foster family, I discovered it was because of a man named Dale Peters. Dale had been my mother's AA pal and fuck buddy for the last five months. He ensured she completed every step and attended every meeting and additional meetings when she needed it.

Leslie and Dale bought a three bedroom house with a fenced in backyard that even had an above ground pool. I had walked into my very own room painted in a loud fuschia, with a frilly white bed and bookshelves overflowing with toys, magazines, and makeup. My mother was smiling again and not in the scary way she did before she hit me. Dale was the father and man we never had before.

But nothing lasts for Leslie.

The real meeting that Dale needed was pedophile anonymous. It started as small things. One day I was making a bologna sandwich at the island counter as Leslie cut an apple into slivers. We were laughing about the episode of *Seinfeld* we had watched right before lunchtime when Dale walked in. I could barely breathe because of the punchline my mother continuously repeated, but the laugh died in my throat when I felt something press against my rear. She continued to wail as Dale's fingers settled between the crevices of my ass cheeks to warm themselves like little worms.

"Oh baby girl, such a funny one, we'll watch more tomorrow when we roll out those cookies." My mother wiped at her eyes as she finished cutting her fruit.

Dale's fingers wiggled, nestling deeper. "I would love that momma," I squeaked out.

"Are y'all gonna go swimming tomorrow?" Dale questioned as a single finger slipped past my shorts. "The pool is all warmed up and ready." I could cry, momma hated when I cried. "Oh thank you baby! Liss and I will get out there tomorrow!" She slathered the apples with a layer of peanut butter. "Are you excited, baby girl?"

"Yes momma."

This excited him. The rubbing came harder. My eyes burned.

His touches never stopped. The next day he grabbed me in a victory hug after I sank one on the basketball hoop in the pool. I froze as his hands grazed across the sides of the small lumps on my chest. Then it was a squeeze of my hip as he passed me in the hall. He always liked to do it when my mother was around, as if he enjoyed the thrill of almost being caught. It only made him harder as she sat there oblivious while he pressed his crotch against me, digging in the stiff reminder of his absolute power over me. Dale was the reason we had everything, but I was the reason we would lose everything.

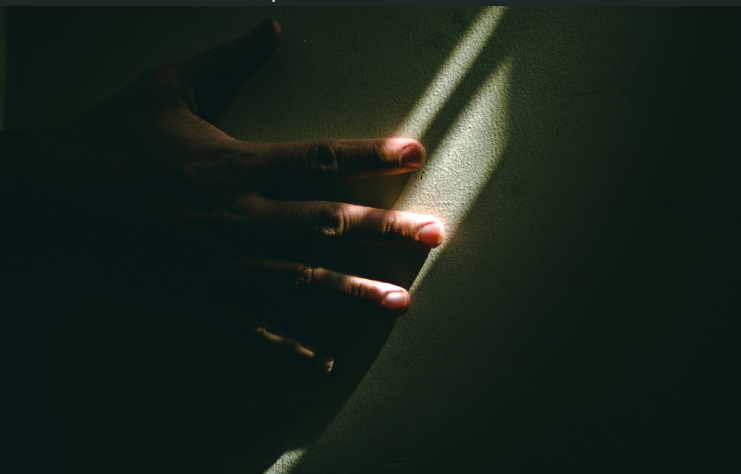
The social worker began to notice my decline and sent me to weekly therapy. I wasn't eating because he liked how the small lumps and hips were filling out. A therapist was finally able to get the truth about Dale in our third session and I was immediately ripped out of the appointment. The social worker accompanied me back to the home to collect my things until the investigation was finished. My mother sat perched on the porch when the car pulled up to the house. Leslie shot off the porch like an angry bullet and pulled me from the car by my hair.

"How dare you even accuse Dale of this vile shit," she said, and her hand rained down on my back and arms. "You little bitch!"

"Momma please!" The shock of her hand shook me and finally the social worker desperately dialed 911.

She stopped swinging and grabbed me up by the front of my shirt, spitting in my face as she screamed. "You are going to tell these people that it was all a mistake. That Dale was just showing you love like any normal father would." When I didn't respond she shook me harder. "Do you fucking hear me?"

The authorities arrived shortly and pulled her off of me. Their sirens didn't slow down her mouth and she was cuffed once again. I was placed back into the social worker's car while all of the pretty things Dale bought for me left to collect dust in the house. It wasn't until explicit photos of me were found on Dale's phone that he confessed to the investigator and my mother finally believed what happened. Instead of facing her daughter, she buried herself in the bottle.





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The bar had livened up since we first entered it. All the appetizers had disappeared from the bar tops and tables and were replaced by liquid sustenance. Leslie was working the masses, laughing way too loud and flipping her rat nest. A tall waitress finished her orders for the two guys next to me, then flipped around to me with her pad ready.

"Ya need anything sweetie?" She sounded bored.

"Just a cheeseburger and fries and--" I glanced and pointed at the first beverage on the gummy drink menu.

"And an amaretto sour, alrighty--nice and sweet. No problem, I'll get it put in." She snapped the pad close and sauntered back to the bar. I noticed the distinct eyeroll she gave Leslie as she passed. Leslie's arms were snaked around the neck of a burly meathead whose friend was eyeing jealously. I could see the shine of her eyes from where I sat. She would have a good time with one of the oafs in the back of a car, and I would be left to my cheeseburger and fries. Leslie dragged (let's call him Mike) to a small square of rubber that I guess was a makeshift dance floor, as "Hooked on a Feeling" rang out of the jukebox.

"I just love this song!" She detached herself from Mike and began to spin in languid circles with her arms above her head.

Her eyes closed softly in near ecstasy, and the moment took me back to my mother who would dance in her kitchen every day while baking with me. The sweet pastry smell would waft into her soul and bring out the Leslie Jenkins that wasn't marred and broken. She made a prograde revolution until she stepped off the mat and

next to my table, softly bumping the side and spilling the untouched mixed drink.

"Baby girl, dance with me!" She almost shouted at me with a giggle. She looked twenty years younger as she grabbed my hand and pulled me back to the rubber mat.

Mike and his stubby friend stared on with looks of pleasure and I felt my face redden. "Momma there are people looking." I tried to take back my hands, but they were somehow trapped in her lax, ironclad grasp.

"Well let's give 'em a show, Liss." She grabbed a half drunk beer bottle abandoned on another table and chugged it. Rivulets of piss-colored foam traveled into the chasm of her cleavage that eyes followed closely. She shoved the bottle into my hand and fished for another as she twirled faster and harder--her hips jutting wildly.

All of a sudden our hips were pressed tightly against each other as something balmy touched the exposed skin of my thighs. We were caged between Mike and his buddy whose hot breath molested my neck. I looked straight into my mother's drunken eyes and could see my own panic reflected in them.

"Mom let's go." My plea fell on her deaf ears. She wrapped her arms behind Mike's neck and gyrated faster to the new song. "Mom." The friend's hand moved up to splay across my stomach, fingers millimeters from the underside of my breasts. "STOP IT!"

I tore myself from the orgy, shocking the other participants. Mike and his friend glared and Leslie's eyes seemed to sober up for a moment.

"What's wrong Liss?" She stumbled from Mike to me. Her grin had vanished and she pouted like a two-year-old. "Let's dance." She tugged on me again.

"Do you not care that a forty-year-old man is touching





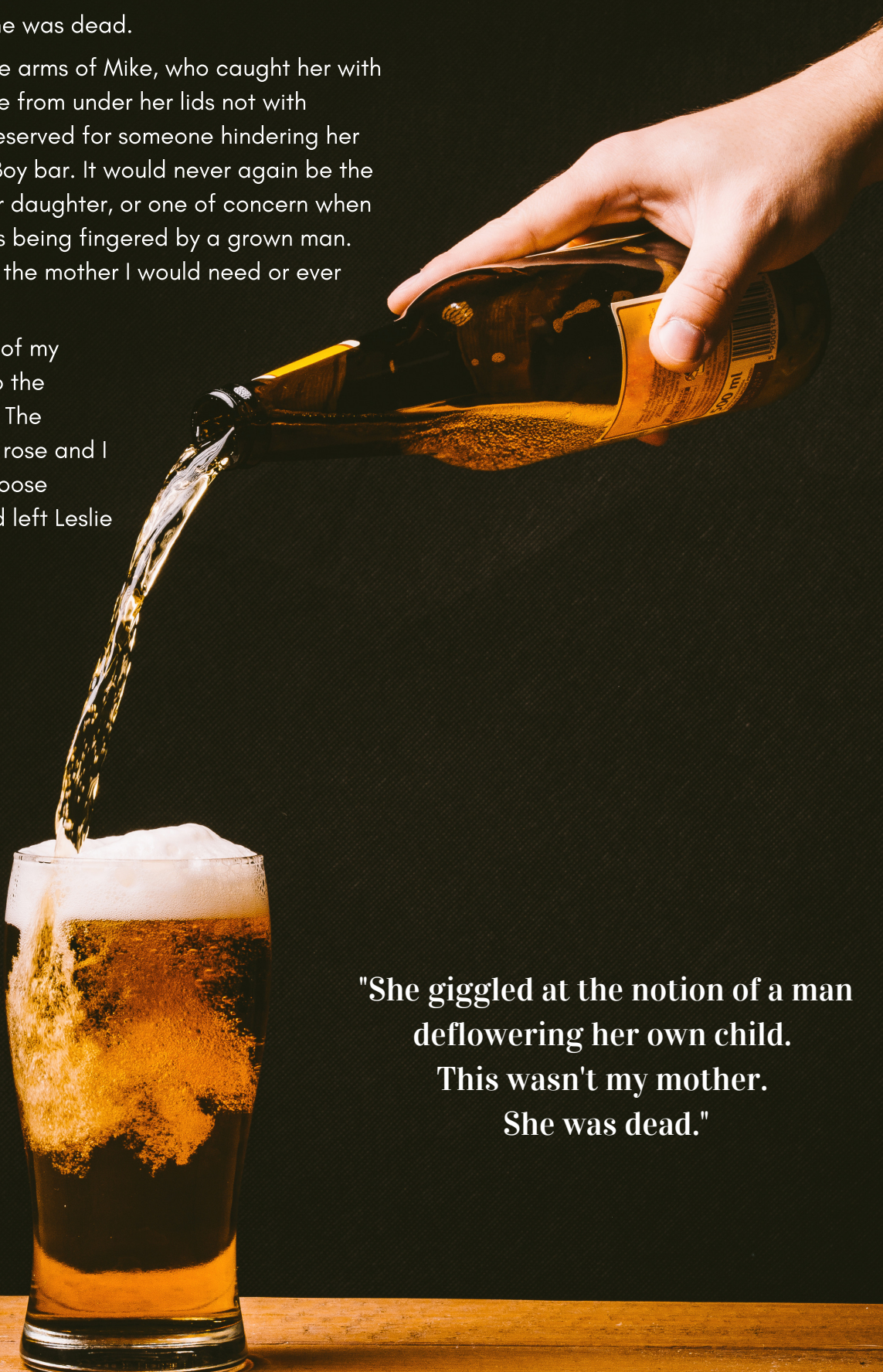
me?" I knew the answer. She didn't care when Dale did it, why would she care now? "I'm seventeen mom!" I shook her.

"Oh but you'll be eighteen in like two days." Two weeks actually, but she hadn't been around to celebrate in over six years. "Darryl would show you a good time. Aren't you ready to become a woman?" She giggled at the notion of a man deflowering her own child.

This wasn't my mother. She was dead.

I pushed her back into the arms of Mike, who caught her with earnestness. She stared at me from under her lids not with recognition, but with a look reserved for someone hindering her fun. I walked out of the Lost Boy bar. It would never again be the loving look a mother gives her daughter, or one of concern when she learned her daughter was being fingered by a grown man. Leslie Jenkins would never be the mother I would need or ever have in this life.

Opening the creaky door of my mother's beater car, I slid into the driver's seat for the first time. The choking breath of the engine rose and I pressed my foot against the loose pedal. With a jerk, I drove and left Leslie Jenkins to her demons.

A close-up photograph of a hand pouring beer from a dark glass bottle into a tall, clear glass. The beer is golden and has a thick, white head of foam. The background is dark, and the scene is lit from the side, creating a dramatic effect. The glass sits on a wooden surface.

**"She giggled at the notion of a man  
deflowering her own child.  
This wasn't my mother.  
She was dead."**





# FALL IN LOVE

by Olivia Dennison

The tumble of whispering wind carries a dead piece of the earth. At the prime of its life, its main purpose in this world was to absorb the light radiating from the sun and the air leaving from the lungs of those who survive on oxygen to ultimately make food for the entire plant. The journey for this leaf ends as it skids against the concrete, landing underneath my white Converse with a satisfying crunch. My navy hoodie dress doesn't supply enough protection from the chilling winds, but it's enough to be aesthetically pleasing for the season. There are many reasons to love fall. It's the best season.

Outside, the atmosphere resembles a scene from Ravenswood. The skies hold a smoky appearance, giving the impression that rain would eventually fall. Dark clouds create a gloomy, ominous painting of the day as a crow sings in the distance. The spooky vibes are perfect for the month of October; I almost expect to find an elderly woman standing just across the yard, watching me as I innocently listen to seasonally appropriate music. However, she would no longer be standing in front of the crumbling brick wall as I would gather my items to leave. In fact, she would be nowhere to be seen.

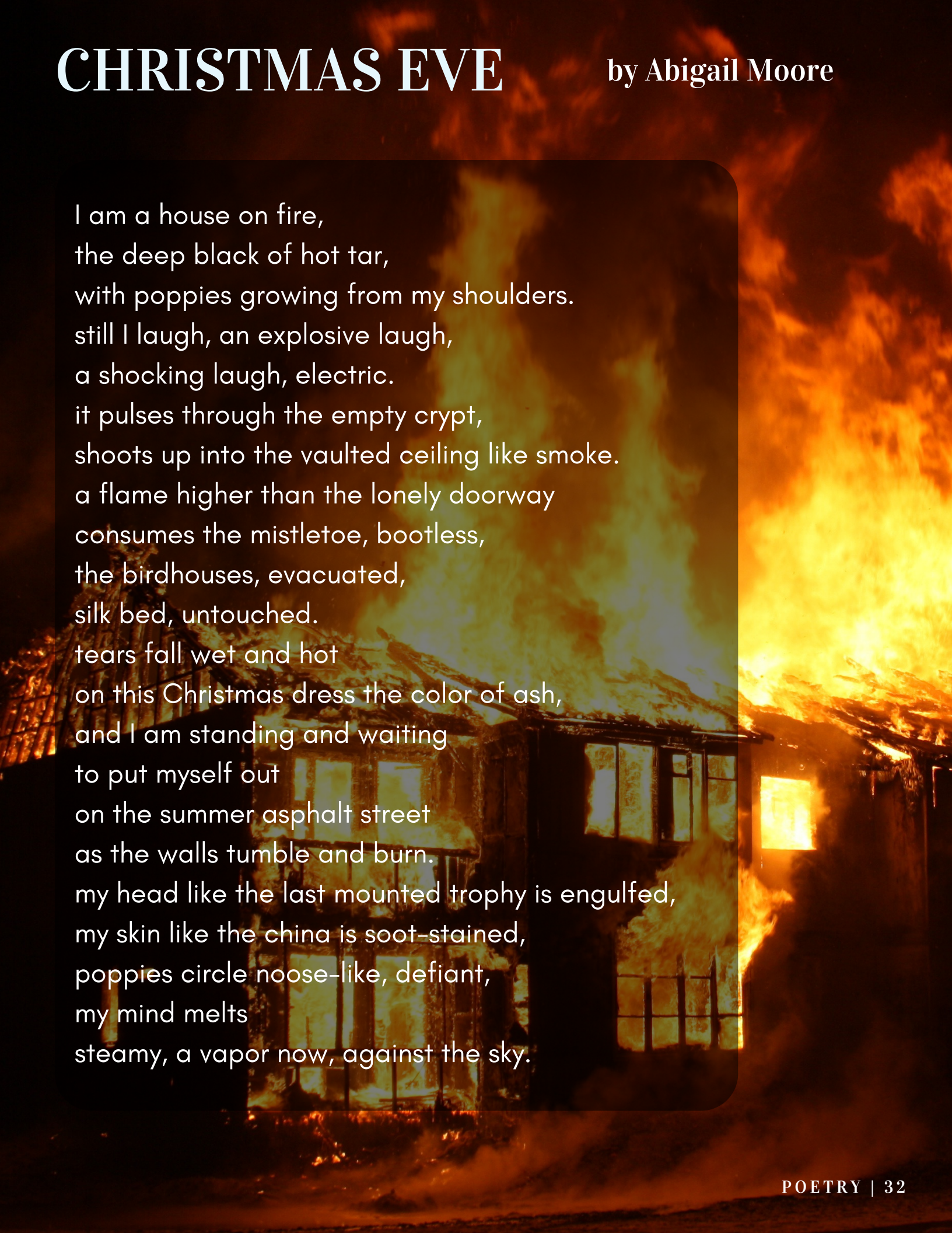
Various activities loom during this season. From getting lost in the dense corn stalks of a trailed maze to picking pumpkins at a pumpkin patch, there's no chance you can become bored. Movie marathons, haunted houses, hayrides, and bonfires give something for the night owls. Inevitably bonfires lead to the deepest conversations friends can have. With the heat radiating off the flames to burn the front of your body and the cold night air freezing your backside, you make meaningful memories that will last for years to come.

The absolute best part about fall is the limited days of sun that shine through the changing leaves. The beauty of the green leaves turning yellow, orange, red, and eventually brown provides a sense of change in the season that urges you to admire every single leaf. The trees paint a magnificent piece of art that can only be observed a few months every year. Fall is not only the most gorgeous season of all, but it brings people together in the most meaningful ways.



# CHRISTMAS EVE

by Abigail Moore



I am a house on fire,  
the deep black of hot tar,  
with poppies growing from my shoulders.  
still I laugh, an explosive laugh,  
a shocking laugh, electric.  
it pulses through the empty crypt,  
shoots up into the vaulted ceiling like smoke.  
a flame higher than the lonely doorway  
consumes the mistletoe, bootless,  
the birdhouses, evacuated,  
silk bed, untouched.  
tears fall wet and hot  
on this Christmas dress the color of ash,  
and I am standing and waiting  
to put myself out  
on the summer asphalt street  
as the walls tumble and burn.  
my head like the last mounted trophy is engulfed,  
my skin like the china is soot-stained,  
poppies circle noose-like, defiant,  
my mind melts  
steamy, a vapor now, against the sky.





# Daisies from My Fingertips

by Caroline Winnenberg

When I was a little girl,  
I used to dream about flowers  
Sprouting from my fingertips  
Like a magical power  
That only I had,  
Making me worth something to someone.

Growing up I was afraid of being forgotten.  
I would constantly do something new--  
Something to get attention--  
Because being silent  
Was choking me like vines  
Wrapping themselves around my neck  
And squeezing my voice from my throat.

I would sit alone in my bedroom  
And pretend to save the lives of my  
American girl dolls who all looked  
A little too much like me;  
And in hindsight,  
Which I hear is 20/20,  
I realized I was trying to save myself  
From lying in a small casket  
Holding a bouquet of daisies in the very  
hands  
my childhood was ripped from  
at just eleven years old.



So in these dreams,  
As I watched the flowers bloom  
from my crackle-nail-polished fingertips,  
I would pluck each blossom out,  
Wincing in pain as I pulled hope  
after hope from my hands, throwing them  
onto the linoleum floor of a kitchen I barely remember.

Slowly these dreams of being magic  
turned into nightmares  
as the stems grew thorns  
and I scarred my pure, untattered hands  
with each tug and pull of the weeds.



I have been wilting for a long time,  
Like flowers that were picked from a garden just a month ago,  
Now dying in a glass vase of murky water  
that was poured to keep me alive,  
But it is now the very thing that is killing me.

I now exist as a weed small children steal away  
to make into crowns for their make-believe games.  
My purpose in this world is no longer to help myself,  
But to give others the same joy I longed for  
And allow others to dream about flowers  
Sprouting from their fingertips  
Like a magical power,  
Making them worth something to someone.







*"The Pines  
They often Whisper  
What no tongue can tell  
He who drinks from the deep water  
May he know  
The depths of the well.  
May I, stand unshaken  
Amidst, amidst a crash of worlds."  
-D'Angelo*

by Isaac Gish

# Life and Death in Ambrewster County

The breeze blows through the sparse trees and angry hard landscape of Ambrewster County, carrying with it the anguish and heartache of the times, a changing America—a livelihood turned to the dust that cakes the boots of men who walk over it. The 20th Century was a new sunrise on the horizon and the 1800s had set, giving way to a new dawn of civilized man. The lawless utopia that once stood on the cracked earth turned to stone and railway cars. Dirt roads travelled by men of honor and denizens of notoriety, mythical heroes and villains of the west were now being paved and hardened. Turned to blackened stone and mortar, and from the trees which once shaded the sleepless rustlers and fevered storytellers now hung the very men they swore to protect.

Busting through the cracked earth, alone in the desert and gasping for water, a lone tree stood tall, casting long, twisting shadows across the dust as if even its shadow was reaching with outstretched hands for the water that would never come. From its decaying and parched branches swung one such man. He had no name, no dreams, no pulse, just a new post as a wind-chime, a morbid sort of bird feeder. There he swung, lightly, twisting in the heat,

**back and forth,  
back and forth,  
back and forth.**

The flies were buzzing as well, crawling in and out of open holes in his face and body, navigating his flesh like ants in a hill. They lighted on the swollen black tongue and began to crawl in his mouth, down his throat and back again, navigating his body like coal miners, picking away at the soft unexposed flesh of his insides and devouring it all for themselves before the predatory birds could get to it. It was a black cloud swarming around his head, kissing his flesh and remaining undeterred from the winged monsters as they continued to gorge on the viscera.

He kept time with the breeze lazily while the buzzards perched on his shoulders and feet, one picking at the angry red suncooked flesh around his cheek while the other gorged himself on the grey flesh buffet of a wide open eye, sending the pearl-colored jelly that leaked from the punctured orb down his cheek to pool in the clavicle well underneath the stretched neck that twisted up towards the frayed rope above him.

The man began to drip, spilling black-red morsels himself onto the thirsty earth, wetting the ground with the crimson tears from his open cheeks, but still swinging, unfazed and unknowing of his new family of decomposition and decay in the oppressive and vindictive heat of an endless summer.

**back and forth,  
back and forth,  
back and forth.**

And yet the blind Singer walked on, unknowing of the cruelly beautiful mosaic of death swinging before him. The Singer, whose black skin cooked in the sun as well, barely shaded from the hat laying on the crown of his head, strummed the guitar just as lazily as the rocking of the human metronome that clicked to his north. A song from his mother's old and cracked hymn book was on his cracked lips, smiling even though the blood ran from the open fissures and down the sides of his chin to become trapped in the mess of tangled white hair hanging from his chin. The words flowed out of his mouth like the faraway water from the craggy outline of the mountains looming far out in the distance like jagged teeth and talons, the open maw of the devil moments before it would finally swallow the Singer and the Swinger, putting an end to this ethereal chess game once and for all.

*"We cannot think of them as dead  
Who walk with us no more;  
Along the path of life we tread—  
They have but gone before.  
The Father's house is mansion'ed fair  
Beyond our vision dim;  
All souls are His, and here or there  
Are living unto Him.  
But still their silent ministries  
Within our hearts have place,  
As when on earth they walked with us  
And met us face to face.  
Ours are they by an ownership  
Nor time nor death can free;  
For God hath given love to keep  
Its own eternally."*

He passed the Swinger, hearing the creaking of the rope from his macabre tango with the summer breeze, and stopped just short of stepping over the farthest dry root of the tree reaching deep down into the earth, clawing for the water that had long since moved from this cursed valley of bones and ruin.

The fingers of the wind caressed the lines etched into the Singer's skin roughened by a century in the endless summer, and over his nose and into his nostrils and mouth, filling him with the stench of an old friend, long remembered and never forgotten.

The Singer's fingers hovered over the strings of the guitar, unmoving, unplaying, unbreathing. He stood there for a moment, preparing himself for the introduction.

"Got anything to drink?"

The Singer's voice cut through the stale and dehydrated air. The buzzards looked at the man without malice or curiosity, but with divine understanding. This was an appointment with a power far greater than their own and they knew the importance that this meeting held deep within their bones, and respected it enough to pause their dinner, bearing witness to the unstoppable force and the immovable object that stood mere feet away.

The voice that spoke from the Swinger was close to human, choked from the pressure of the rope crushing its windpipe, but his lips stayed agape, unmoving. His eyes unblinking. His soul departed. All was still, save for the dangling limbs moving—

**back and forth,  
back and forth,  
back and forth.**

"It's time to settle up, cowboy," the Swinger said, his voice raspy and broken.

The Singer smiled, fingers plucking lightly at the strings as he spoke to the man that once was and who never would be again hanging in the tree behind him.

"Not a single drop of water for an old blind friend?" the Singer said through his cracked and bleeding smile. His eyes were pointed to the sky as if in prayer, never facing his would-be drinking buddy.

His thumb flicked the deepest string, sending the note's reverberations out into the desert, the underscoring heard only by the scavengers who stared at the Singer, unblinking and callused.

"It's time to settle," the Swinger spoke again, his voice groaning out of unmoving lips and against the woven hand that crushed its trachea weeks before, like a heavy foot on an old stair coming to take you in your sleep. Menace, malice and hate joining together in a melting pot of despair.

It was the voice of Old Scratch beckoning Tom Walker to move in just a bit closer.

It was the voice calling out to young children safe in their beds to come follow it into the night, into the woods while their parents slumbered, never to be seen again.

It was the voice of mourning parents sobbing in the houses that feel so cold and so empty. Little Orphan Annie herself beckoning to come.



"The winds are blowing across the sand seas for you, cowboy to bring you and your summer back to me," the Swinger said.

The birds, still unfazed, looked at the Singer, never blinking. The Swingers' words cut through the soul of the critters, but beckoned to heed its words. The flies seemed to double around his head, obscuring his face to all but the blind Singer as they began to crawl under his eyelids, burrowing deep into his plaid face to gorge on the rotting grey matter within and lay their wriggling young. More buzzards circled the sky, afraid to alight. The Singer however, remained unfazed. Unswayed. Solid metal in the blistering heat, above it.

"I'd say it's still a pretty light breeze." The Singer grinned fingers playing the guitar lightly and playfully, fighting the oppression with glee. "I reckon I'm just following the blind man's compass."

"Mock all you want, cowboy, but your hour is up," the Swinger said, as the flies crawled out of his throat, following his words as they shambled out past unmoving lips. "Your soul for another twenty-five, and a coin toss for every twenty-five after."

And still he swung.

**back and forth,  
back and forth,  
back and forth.**

The Swinger's voice became louder in volume but still lacked power and depth. His words hung in the air, hoarse, lighting the stale oxygen aflame, but his voice was that of a man long dead. A throat never meant to feel air in its walls was awakened once more, but still the Singer smiled and nodded in time with the music.

"No man's summer is endless, cowboy."

"Every summer is," the Singer replied, "with the right weather."

The smirk widened over the Singer's face, opening more fissures in the bleeding lips to darken his beard even more.

"A coin toss for every twenty-five after." the Swinger said. His stomach swelled, its paper thin skin stretched tight over the expanding gases in the dead man's stomach until it popped, exposing the offal that hid within. The bones in his neck started to splinter and creak, and something began to ascend from his exposed bowels and into his throat, pressing against the thin skin and empty blood vessels of his neck, rising upward and upward until it



came to the front of its aged teeth. The muscles in the Swinger's broken chest contracted and released, pushing upward against the outside husk of the vessel, causing the skin to ripple and contort. His hanging entrails wriggled and writhed, busting forward and retracting as whatever was going out of the Swinger's stomach came to the top like a dead fish in a barrel, escaping from his mouth with the profaned laugh as it tainted the air around them, souring the sky above and the ground that they stood on. Through it all, the Swinger's lips never moved, its face never twitched as it looked out across the desert with its shredded eyes.

Out on the ground, covered in a sheen of inky blue-black blood, lay a large, heavy, silver coin glistening in the afternoon sun.

"Flip it, and call it in the air," the Swinger croaked, undeterred by the trauma his throat just went through. Its guts still steamed and swayed in time with him in the tree.

The Singer laughed, still unbroken in spirit. "I'll call it. How am I supposed to find the damned thing, I'm blind you dumb shit."

One of the buzzards circling around in the sky swooped down to pick up the coin in its long, crooked beak and set itself down on the Singer's shoulder. He let the guitar swing to his side as he opened his hand. The bird gently placed it face up on his palm before taking off, back to the open sky. He let the coin's weight sink into his fingers, feeling the density and power of it. His thumb felt over the raised metal artwork: a deer made its way through a clearing on the heads side as a coyote looked on at a gathering storm on its reverse.

The Swinger said nothing now, and continued to dance with the breeze.

**back and forth,  
back and forth,  
back and forth.**



The Singer slid a gnarled thumb under the rim, his splintered and dirty nails catching the end of the solid coin, and flicked upwards. Only the birds could see the coin's journey but all life and lack-there-of under the tree could both feel the energy that it carried, the significance of this solid piece of silver metal spinning like a comet in the afternoon sun. The Singer took a short breath as the coin peaked at its apex and started to spin downwards from its short ascent to the heavens and began to plummet towards the dust.

"Heads."

The coin landed on the ground with a long, hard thunk, like the swing of a judge's gavel. Neither of them spoke, they just stood there for a moment, feeling the heat claw at their skin like razors. After a long pause, the Singer adjusted his hat and lifted his head towards the path ahead, a path that had been long traveled and now would be traveled further still. An endless summer.

The Singer spoke without joy or relief in his voice, but with sadness, mourning a life lived. "I've wandered this rock for decades, old friend. I've walked and walked and walked 'till my feet were bloody to the bone. I've been shot, killed, hung, stabbed, filleted, and half of that I did to myself, but each time, I wake up in the desert, and start walking again. Over and Over. I'm tired, old friend. I'm dog tired. Sometimes I wonder if I'm ever gonna stop. Will you ever get lucky enough to collect on what's owed, or do I just keep walking through my own hell, dust and blood at my feet forever? Did I win the first coin toss or is this it, did you collect a long time ago? Will this ever end?"

The Swinger didn't speak. The animals began to eat again, picking rotted flesh from bone as he swung, still lazy in the July heat.

**back and forth,  
back and forth,  
back and forth.**

The Singer made his way from the tree, crossing the desert again. The birds continued to feast, and the Singer began to play a melancholic lament to a heaven he would never see, saccharinely safe and secure in his newest twenty-five year lease.

The Man That Was No More swung and continued to cook in the heat above, eyes open and mouth wide in his final silent scream. Throat silent, as the tune sung by the weeping Singer wafted further and further across the plains.

*"Soon we'll come to the end of life's journey  
And perhaps we'll never meet anymore  
'Til we gather in heaven's bright city  
Far away on that beautiful shore  
If we never meet again this side of heaven  
As we struggle through this world and its strife  
There's another meeting place somewhere in  
heaven  
By the river of life  
Where the charming roses bloom forever  
And where separation come no more  
If we never meet again this side of heaven  
I will meet you on that beautiful shore."*





# Touching Problems

by Libby Gerdes

Breath of booze,  
you spit on my face.  
The dog flees the room  
to vacate your boom,  
eliminating your obstacle  
and my protection.

Your fists flail in a riot,  
one landing in the wall.  
As the Crucifix falls to the ground,  
I thank the Universe  
for not letting your hand  
land on me.

"I'm sorry, but you made me lose my temper."  
Please,  
let me help you find it.

You command me to sit on your lap.  
At seventeen,  
I am not a little girl anymore.  
This is not a bedtime story.

But I oblige.  
Entrapped in your two tree trunks for arms,  
you force my face into your chest;  
there's not enough space between us for air.  
My nose  
is too close to your armpits;  
shoulders at my ears,  
my body converts to a board.





You say I have a touching problem.

But if that is so,  
why do I touch my lover  
at every possible opportunity?  
Her hand rests on my thigh  
when we are out to eat with friends.  
We use the booth to hide the sin  
and avoid the stares.

(I didn't lie  
when I said the  
sleepover was at my  
Best friend's house;  
It was a simple omission of the truth  
as she was my best friend  
and lover  
in one.)

She  
can attest  
that my only touching problem  
is with you.

In her arms  
I feel a safety  
that before was foreign to me.  
If home is where the heart is,  
forget my the house I grew up in.

So continue thinking  
I hate hugs;  
don't touch me again.  
Meanwhile,  
I'll be at home  
in her arms.





# I'll Do Better

by Caroline Winnenberg

## Moving, July 2016

I've been sick for three years now, but it's gotten worse since I left Washington and started hearing *her*.

I click the seat belt of my dad's Jeep into the lock and pull the cross-body strap behind my back. My dad tells me I shouldn't do that, but the seat belt rubs against my neck and leaves a bruise. My frail body struggles to function throughout today's eight hours of driving in the July heat. Dad's Jeep has a tendency to overheat, so we have to blast the heater inside the car to keep the engine cool. The air blowing through the open windows hurts my ears and tangles my hair.

*As long as you're in the car, you don't have to worry about eating.*

I shake my head to push away the thought. I don't know who she is, but she's been talking to me for about a week now. I open the notes app on my phone and record the calories of what I've eaten so far today.

- Wheat toast: 75 calories
- Hard-boiled egg: 78 calories
- Cranberry juice: 117 calories
  - Total: 270 calories
  - Today's goal: < 600 calories

*Make your goal 500. I know you can do it.*

I nod to myself and change my goal. The voice is warm, calming, and encouraging. I feel in control when she talks to me, like she knows I'm worth more than what I am right now.

That night I wake up from a nightmare in the musty-smelling motel. I walk into the bathroom to splash water on my face. When I look in the mirror, I see a girl. She's older than me, probably in her early twenties. She speaks to me and I immediately recognize her voice.

*My name is Ana. I'm going to take care of you.*

That night she holds me as I cry about Jakob, about leaving my friends, about feeling alone and afraid. She tells me that I have more control over my life than I think I do. She explains that I can be as beautiful as I want to be, that I can show Jakob and everyone just how strong and perfect I am.

*I can help you find yourself.*

I'm scared to trust her at first, but her voice sounds like trust and her embrace feels like love. I decide to listen to her. She tells me she knows I can do better.



**She tells me she knows I can do better.**

Ana first walked into my life the summer after 9th grade. My therapist says she manifested as a coping mechanism in response to my domestic abuse and to comfort me as I moved across the country with my family. Ana says she was born to show me my potential. I don't know which is worse. Ana was my only friend for a long time and the only person who saw the best in me. She held me when I woke up crying from violent nightmares. She encouraged me to

shower when my depression tied me down to my bed. She gave me advice when nobody was willing to listen.

Ana loved me. I truly believe that. From the start, she believed she had my best interest in mind. All she wanted to do was help me find control in the life I was losing control of. In fact, food was the only thing I had control over for a long time. Due to circumstances beyond my control, everything turned upside down and I didn't recognize my life anymore. So I took control of what I could.

I started by skipping breakfast. This was easy enough. I just set my alarm late enough that I didn't have enough time to eat before my uncle had to drive me and my brother to school. Ana smiled and told me she was proud of me when I first touched 110.

Then I started skipping lunch. This was a bit harder, but only because I felt guilty for throwing away the lunches my mom packed for me. Ana told me my mom didn't know what was best for me. Hearing that made throwing away my food easier.

Skipping dinner was the hardest, but I could usually get away with doing so by falling asleep right after school. My mom would wake me up when dinner was ready, but I could tell her I had a headache and she would let me go back to sleep. My mom never noticed the melting weight, but Ana did.



Ana smiled and told me she was proud of me when I first touched 110.

### Preparing, October 2018

I tug at the edge of my sleeve, pulling my sweatshirt further over my wrists to hide my arms from the world. Though my wrists are tiny enough that my pinky and thumb can wrap around them

without stretching and my pale skin clings to the skinny bones in my fingers and the tops of my hands, I still can't bring myself to be proud of the payoff my six years of hard work has provided.

*Nobody can see you.*

My eyes squeeze shut at the instructions the sickly girl sitting beside me shares.

*I have three simple rules.*

1. Eat what I tell you
2. Exercise when I tell you
3. Don't tell anyone

*Follow those rules and it'll all pay off in the end.*

My knees press together uncomfortably as I try to shift my weight in my seat to relieve the pinching pressure in my hips; a feat I will never achieve since losing my last ten cost me my ass.

*You're not perfect yet.*

The cacophony of the cafeteria makes my eyes cross as my ears ring relentlessly. No amount of scrolling through my phone could distract me long enough from the twisting knots in my stomach. I clench my jaw as the pain passes, taking a sip of water to remind myself why I'm here; why I'm doing this to myself again.

The feeling of cold water running down my throat to my empty stomach energizes me like a drug. Nothing has ever compared to this borderline euphoric moment of clarity from just one drink of ice water.

*Just think; one day you'll be so small it won't hurt anymore.*

Ana's shaking hand runs up and down my back. Bone meets bone as her cadaverous fingers knock against my protruding spine. Whether she was trying to comfort me in my discomfort or if she was admiring my progress, I'll never know, but the attention is



appreciated nonetheless. My arms cross against my chest and my posture slouches as a breeze blows through the open window a few tables down. No amount of layering sweatshirt over sweater would replace the natural insulation my body no longer has.

*Imagine how pretty and cool you'll be in the summer.*

Images of denim shorts and the crop top I bought two sizes too small last summer flood my brain and overthrow the discomfort I caused myself. The chills and the twisting are part of it, but I'll feel undeniable pride in myself soon. I want to look back at the summer before my senior year and not be disgusted with how I look in all the pictures I want to take.

I stand and leave the cafeteria, moving quickly down the hallway to the restroom around the corner. I check that the stalls are empty, and I look into the full mirror hanging next to the last row of sinks. Ana grabs the back of my sweatshirt and pulls it tight to reveal my silhouette. I take the bunched fabric from her and hold it myself, admiring how my skirt hangs off of my hips.

*You look proud of yourself.*

"I am," I admit, letting go of my sweatshirt and retying my thinned-out ponytail. For the first time, I really think I am actually proud of myself. I feel her hand grab mine as we look at each other in the mirror.

*You still have a long way to go before you should be proud of yourself*

I nod to myself and scan my body, making a mental list of what I still want to accomplish before I can be proud of myself.

- Get my thigh gap back
- Flatten my stomach
- Thin out my hands and arms
- Get my collarbones to show again

My shoulders drop when I realize how much further I have to go, but Ana squeezes my hand once more, assuring me that I can do it if I work hard enough. When I get home that afternoon, I step onto the scale in my mother's bathroom. 101 is the number that shines on the digital screen. Ana yells at me for not breaking 100 pounds yet. I tell her I'll do better tomorrow.

*Good. Now let's do a quick workout before dinner.*

I hit 97 before Christmas break.



When someone finds the strength and courage to leave an abusive relationship, they often say to their loved ones, "He wasn't always like this. I didn't even realize he changed." I've said these exact words to my friends. This is all too common. The manipulator is very good at slowly revealing themselves without abrasively changing overnight.

Ana wasn't always manipulative and toxic. She changed so slowly that I was blind until it was too late. I was too dependent on her to be able to let go. By the time I saw who she really was, around November of my senior year, I was completely under her control. I loved her, so I stayed.

As an exercise in therapy in January of 2020, I used a worksheet young writers often use to create characters and I used it to describe Ana. As it turns out, I can describe her as well as I can describe myself. She has light-colored skin, so sickly it looks grey, and tangled, light-brown hair thinned out from

years of vitamin deficiency. Her eyes match mine and she stands at my height when I don't slouch. Ana is a ballerina, something I wanted to grow up to become when I was little. She's not me, though. She looks like me the way my big sister looks like me. Ana feels like a big sister, and I somehow know that she's about 22 years old. She hasn't aged at all since I met her.

When my therapist heard how vividly I could describe Ana, she suggested getting screened for Dissociative Identity Disorder, formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder. The three weeks of sessions it took to screen me for DID caused an identity crisis I still haven't quite gotten over. I was afraid of being diagnosed with this disorder that has no defined treatment. I didn't trust myself anymore. Every little shift in mood sparked an anxious thought of "is this a different personality?"

The clean diagnosis was a bittersweet affair. No, I don't have DID, but that means I don't have answers either. What is Ana, and why am I so attached to her?



## **Spiraling, September 2019**

I open my Tumblr page on my phone and stare at the bio of my blog.

**~F18~ Anorexic since 7th grade~ 5'6~ UGW: 100 lbs  
(45.4 kg)~ NOT PRO ANA~ "body check" for my  
progress~**

Images of boney thin women with flawless skin scroll across the screen of my phone as I browse the "thinspo" tag. As I read posts about fasting tips and diet diaries, my left hand locks around my right wrist, the pad of my thumb wrapping over the nail of my

middle finger. My greatest achievement of this habitual measurement was back in the fall of the 11th grade when my pinky and thumb remained pointed together as my hand slid halfway up my forearm, only breaking two inches before my elbow. Now, two years and twenty pounds later, my middle finger gaps away from my thumb two inches sooner. I grimace at the failure and climb out of the bottom bunk of my freshman dorm room.

*This is why you shouldn't ignore me.*

Hot water pours out of my coffee maker and into a lemon-shaped mug with a green tea bag sitting at the bottom. It's too hot to drink yet, so I let it cool on the middle shelf of my secondhand mini-fridge. I toss a pillow from my bed onto the edge of my blue Five Below rug, preparing to work once more to remedy my mistake. I lay on the rug, the rough material rubbing a burn onto my spine as I sit up and down and up and down until I counted 100. I stand and count the same number of jumping jacks.

*Not enough. Do another set of each.*

She leans against my bathroom door with her corpse-like arms crossed and her sunken eyes watching my workout. A black sweater hangs off of her unflatteringly and her grey sweatpants stay up only by the assistance of the drawstring tied in a knot around her protruding hip bones. Before starting another set, I sit and plan my rules for the week. I know I sit at around 115 pounds and my ultimate goal weight (ugw on Tumblr) is 100, so I also take a minute to write out a shopping list.

*Be smart, we have a goal and a budget.*

- Analog scale
- Decaffeinated green tea
- Zero-calorie Mio
- Cutie clementines



After three sets of each and an hour of burning calories I didn't consume, I pull my tea from the fridge and let it slosh around my empty stomach. I hate the taste, but the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.

*Good, now let's get ready for class.*

When I get back to my dorm that afternoon, I keep myself busy long enough to skip dinner. I go to bed hungry for the first time since March of my senior year, breaking six months of recovery. Her expectations of me have grown, and two new rules were added to the three she gave me the year prior.

4. Calories are earned based on merit. Restricting well today earns you a bigger allowance tomorrow.
5. Start eating alone. Being around people with food will make you hungry.

I avoid my friends for a while after that. I focus on my body and my weight.

The next night, my roommate begs me to eat, so order a small pizza and eat it all myself. Ana yells at me for throwing away two days of hard work. I tell her I'll do better. For two months, I continue to follow Ana's weight loss regimen. When I go home for the first time since starting college, I weigh 109 pounds.



I think Ana looks like shit. I don't want to look like her, I don't even want to get close. As long as I've known her, her condition has gotten worse and worse. Her bones creak like an old

door and her hair is patchy like an abused Barbie doll. Someone of her size would be on a 1500 calorie feeding tube at a hospital right now. I just want her to be proud of me. Her opinion of me matters so much that I have listened to every order she has given me in the six years I have known her.

My breaking point came when I spent New Year's alone in bed, crying about who I turned into. I couldn't silence her anymore. I couldn't recognize myself anymore. I couldn't separate my body goals from the reality of how I looked. I realized that no amount of weight loss would be enough. I would never be enough for her.

I am 19 years old. I have been sick for eight years now, but it's gotten better since I stopped listening to her. I am 125 pounds. My thighs stick together in the summer and rub through my tights in the winter. My pinky barely meets my thumb around my wrist. The bones in my hand only show when I type and my pants fit without strapping a belt around my waist. I haven't seen Ana since April. She left when I stopped listening to her and started listening to my body.

I miss her sometimes. When I have to buy shorts in a size bigger than I did in January, I miss having her voice telling me I can fix it. When I criticize the acne that popped up as a result of eating too many sugary foods, I miss her voice motivating me to drink water instead of snacking.

I told my therapist this and she told me that I had some form of Stockholm Syndrome. Ana has been abusing me and gaslighting me since she first showed up, yet I loved her like I love my own sister. Having to ignore her for months was hard. I cried when my therapist first told me I needed to try to cut her off. The last time I saw her, Ana yelled at me for wasting her time. I told her I'll do better without her.



# SO SORRY TO HEAR ABOUT THE DEATH OF THE ARTIST

by Abigail Moore

Winter keeps us warm from loving, and snowflakes crowd the alley to become black sludge under our boots. Freddie is flushed even under his leather jacket, from the rush of perdition, from the natural disappointments of love, and from the burning in his veins that could only come from a syringe. There is much to be said about the lame-duck musings as one awaits fallout, but it's a biting cold tonight, and sometime it will eat away at the hangnails and chapped skin and find its way inside. Garbage mingles with sweat. The sewer smell has never bothered him; he has found himself comfortable in the familiar muck of the underworld. What bothers him most of all is how comfortable he is being damned.

He thinks back. When Dan rolled up his sleeves and ripped open the kitchen drawer, and he produced a needle, Freddie was shocked for a moment. In his mind, a flash of Sharon's dreams -- apple-pie, white fences, mortgages, early death, coronary, suicide. The years of therapy and methadone passed by in an instant, and then he was sure he could be happy with her again. It could be like before, or much better. *Tabula rasa*. Then the first memory came crashing like a comet into him, back when his nails were longer and she liked it when he played guitar, kissing under red lights, smoke everywhere.

After the initial nauseous waves of shame, there is a sense of relief and another of inevitability. It was like this before, when he relapsed; it was like this when he began to break the law, and it was like this

“It could be like before, or much better. *Tabula rasa*.”

when he kissed Janey. We are all scum, from scum we come, to scum we return. The snake eats its tail. That guilt will cool and fall, roll off of him as he manifests in Sharon's doorway. She is always so glad to see him. There is the sickness again at the sight, in his mind, of her smiling face, and of the possibility he will never see it again. Naïve, unbelieving, she waits for him. But she isn't waiting anymore. Everything is so complicated; there are so many stitches and halts in the grey matter. Sharon is never coming back. You've gotta keep yourself warm in the winter months. Someone could freeze to death in a city like this.

The plan is in its early stages already. Janey has prodded and pushed the right buttons, and Freddie has been just dumb enough to listen and just lustful enough to hang onto every word. Still, things got so different when he came home. The light hit the apartment in a just familiar way, hit Sharon in a way he knew and loved. There wasn't



much he could do to force himself to break away from her, but it was true what Janey said. She knew so much about him, and she wasn't budging. Anyway, he could never look Sharon in her beautiful eyes and confess to the habits he just couldn't break.

It was late in the morning, and, sighing, Sharon fell against the sofa and ran her hands along the velvet, as long as she could stretch until she felt her spine cracking. She closed her eyes and wished for a peaceful, deep, long sleep.



The apartment was small even for the city, but the rent wasn't bad. Sharon was an old face in the building. In what passed for a living room, the larger part of a long space of hardwood floors and taupe walls, there were trinkets and souvenirs, velour and tassels, her artwork and her records. The apartment was dark even on the sunniest of days, with red

curtains. The curtains were parted this morning, and just enough light reached inside to keep the peace lily alive.

She heard bare feet on the floor. It was Freddie, coming in from the bedroom. She squinted her eyes against the light, where she saw his silhouette pass and then stop. He was rubbing his hands all over his neck and face. She looked at him with some curiosity, as if with new eyes. Lately there had been a little disgust in their interactions, a little contempt. But this morning, despite her exhausting night of dreaming, she felt only fondness for him.

He was on the tall side, built well, and his slick hair was always falling just so into his face. He stood as if waiting for one of them to speak, but he didn't look at her. Her eyes trailed down to the scar on his abdomen, the sloppy shape of a star, which he liked to keep hidden and secret. She hadn't asked him about it in a long time; maybe he would tell her now.

Before she could ask, he turned toward the window and sniffled, leaning against the windowsill with his hands. "Nice day outside, looks like," he said. "You couldn't tell from this crypt."

Sharon was wide awake now. She sat up and smoothed out her hair. Last night came back to her suddenly, and she had something to say. "You were out late." She cast her gaze over at him in time to see him tense.

"Yeah." He turned around and rolled his shoulders as he leaned against the window. "Yeah, it was Jeff's birthday yesterday. What was I gonna do, skip out? I didn't wake you. Did I wake you?"

Sharon shook her head.

"I don't see what the problem is," he muttered. He passed her and crossed the barrier -- a wall of beads they'd imparted between the dining and living areas. She heard the light come on in the kitchen, a loud fluorescent light that made a buzzing sound like a fly zipping past her ear.

She stared at the beads swinging and wondered what could be wrong. She was compelled to the

doorway of the kitchen, watching him pull open noisy drawers which scraped metal against wood. He cracked eggs lazily and forgot to grease the pan, so the eggs stuck and began to cook unevenly.

He saw her there. Frustration shone on his face. "You know I can't cook," he said.

She grinned, leaning against the doorway. "Shall we get married, so I can be your housewife?" She began to braid a strand of her hair. "Really, let's do it. I'll cook and clean and... I can do my art while you're at work." She laughed, and she spotted a smile on his face, though he was mostly turned away from her. "I had a dream -- I had the weirdest dream last night. Would you like to hear about it?"

He shifted away from the stove so he leaned back against the counter. He picked a pack of cigarettes off the counter and lit one. He took the cigarette from his lips for a moment. He smirked at her. "I'm listening," he said.

"I was in the theater where we had our first date. The red and gold one. Remember?" He nodded. "The movie didn't interest me, so I was about to ditch. Then, in the aisle, all of the sudden, you're there. To kill me."

His eyes fell. "To kill you?" he repeated without feeling.

"You chased me through the projector screen like Buster Keaton."

"Did I get you?"

She shook her head. "I woke up sweating. I don't remember anything else."

Freddie chuckled, and she did as well. "Hell of a dream."

She crossed her arms. "This a long winded way of asking if you want to see a movie tonight."

His face settled and the lightness faded. She waited, still eager, and watched him. He looked between the eggs and her as he answered, "I would, baby, but I've got a gig tonight."

## "He picked a pack of cigarettes off the counter and lit one."

"Whereabouts?"

His voice was low. "The bar."

"The bar?" She furrowed her eyebrows.

"Dan's dad's bar?"

"Well, it's not just Dan's dad's bar, is it?"

He looked at her again. "You and I went to that bar before I even met Dan."

She smiled. "Fair enough." She had to ask: "Is this gig going to pay?"

He opened a squeaking cabinet and pulled out a plate. "I'm not doing it for money." His voice was a little unsteady.

"Right," she said. "I understand. I just thought... I thought maybe you could call back about that job uptown."





He groaned as he slid the eggs neatly from pan to dish. "Sharon, why are we splitting hairs here? Why are you bringing that up?" He didn't turn to look at her. "You know I don't wanna work there."

"I don't want to forge the checks anymore, Freddie."

He took a long, final drag of his cigarette. "I know, baby," he said. "We need the money."

"It's wrong," she said. She hardly got the words out before he crossed over to her and took her face between his hands. It was a grasp that was gentle but desperate, as if he were holding her in place. His skin felt foreign, rough.

He stared into her eyes, and now she saw beads of sweat on his forehead and cheeks. "Nothing's gonna happen," he said. "Do you trust me?" She didn't respond. "Sharon, do you believe me?"

She nodded, and he released her. For a second, he stood in front of her awkwardly, and then he hugged her, which shocked her. She only took a moment to return the embrace fully, closing her eyes and running her hands along his skin, thinking of the sheets in her teenage bedroom. There were so few things left in her memories that he hadn't consumed, and he was closing in on them, too. He pulled himself away, and her arms felt empty and cold suddenly.

"Maybe," she said, "I could come tonight. To see you play."

She was unsettled by how he stared at her then. Guilty, nervous. "Don't you have a party to go to tonight?"

A rush of reality. "Oh," she said. She bit her fingernail and shook her head. "I don't know how I forgot." Or how he remembered.

He glared at his plate. "I don't... want these." He added in a mumble, "I feel sick." And then she eyed him as he passed her.

She followed him. "Hey!" He turned from the bedroom doorway. "How'd you get that scar?" She pointed at it. "Now's... as good a time to answer as any."

He looked down at it, as if reminding himself. He was silent for a while, and she wondered if he would cave. "You wanna know the truth?" She nodded. "I got shot, holding up a liquor store."

"You what?" She laughed. "You held up a liquor store. That's a joke."

He shook his head. "Nope. It's true. But I knew you'd never believe me."

"Uh-huh," she said, nodding. "And how come you don't have a criminal record?"

His face was nostalgic. "I cried like a bitch and ran like hell," he said. "And they never got me." Then he went into the bedroom and slammed the door behind him.

She was jolted by the harshness of the door hitting the frame, the shocking plausibility of his answer, the sadness on his face. The sweat on his skin and his erratic behavior. He was the same way, more or less, when they were younger and she first met him. She looked at the window. It was a casement, with a wide and sturdy sill, and she knew the latter because Freddie liked to open it all the way and sit on it, playing his guitar. And then, suddenly, she was much younger, many floors down, in her mother's apartment.

**"It was a grasp that was gentle but desperate, as if he were holding her in place. His skin felt foreign, rough."**

She was standing at her window, listening to the strumming and the singing falling down the courtyard where all her neighbors' windows stared at each other. Mother liked to stand at the window of the apartment in her apron, taking a break from her domestic duties to chain-smoke and stare outside. Sharon hated the smoking -- when she smoked, her face contorted in a way that made her look monstrous, with her heavily-lined and angled eyebrows, her purple eyelids unraveling into wrinkles, and her overdrawn red lips resting menacingly on a cigarette. The smoking, too,

she reminded her mother, would ruin her lungs, and at some point, she would never be able to return to singing. In the early years, this would shame her into putting out her cigarette, but after a while, it became clear to her she would never sing again.

For a moment, standing in the living room, Sharon missed her mother, but that, like every time, soon passed. She'd been dwelling a lot more lately, as she'd been spending a lot more time alone. She missed Freddie, and she wanted more than anything to go back to when they were younger and Sharon would sneak out of the apartment to go and see him. Now they were too adult; now things were falling apart instead of coming together. But, as usual, only the bad things resurface -- guilt, grief, heroin.

Freddie emerged from the bedroom in the late afternoon, dressed in a white t-shirt tucked into his jeans. His hair was carefully messy, and his blue eyes were bloodshot. Sharon, reading on the couch, felt him staring. She was more sobered than that morning; her romantic inclinations had inevitably faded. "Why don't you take a picture?" she mumbled, turning back to her book.

In her peripheral vision, she saw him edge towards her, sitting gently and slowly on the other end of the sofa. When she met his eyes again, she found his gaze was as soft as it had ever been. There was something sincere in him that compelled her to stare back. The rain, turning to sleet, outside was loud in their silence. "Hey." His voice was faint; one of his hands rested on her back. "I love you."

"Why does that sound like goodbye?"

He didn't answer. She removed her hand, and she felt colder. Suddenly it seemed clear to her that it wasn't heroin eating at his veins. There was some-

**"She was inside, deep inside,  
somewhere in her memories,  
watching this altercation  
with no hand in it."**

thing else, something more poisonous. She narrowed her eyes at him. "Is there... someone else?"

He shook his head vehemently. "No," he said, and he repeated it a few times.

She scoffed. "The lady doth protest too much," she muttered. She stood up. "I don't want to know. I know I don't want to know."

"There's nothing to know." He ran his hands through his hair, and she wandered to the wall of beads. "Don't overreact, don't -- don't do what you always do and start projecting shit on me."

She turned to look at him slowly, a wild look to her eye, and, feeling scorned and surer than ever he was lying to her, she felt a moment of wrath that wasn't natural for her. In the moment, however, it felt right. "You know, I could give you up right now."

He leaned back. "You couldn't live without me," he said, with a light laugh. "We couldn't live without each other." His voice was bitter. "Huh? Where are you gonna go?"

She crossed her arms slowly. "That isn't what I mean," she said. She took a step toward him. "I could call the cops right now and give you up." His smile was gone; they stared at each other intensely. "Even besides the fraud you committed, I'm sure you've done plenty of other things." Her eyes fell to his scar, covered up now, and then quickly raised back. "I swear to God, Freddie. I will watch you rot in prison before you leave me. I swear to God." She didn't hear what she was saying. She was inside, deep inside, somewhere in her memories, watching this altercation with no hand in it, like watching a movie. She wasn't there.



He stared at her for a while without saying anything, and she wasn't sure what he would do. He suddenly turned his head to his right and let out a breath between his lips, almost cavalier. The breath extended as he began to shake his head, until it dissipated totally, and he stood up. Sharon backed up. He approached her and reached out with both of his hands, palms up. "I could kill you right now."

She stood still and watched him through squinted eyelids, her eyes burning and lips quivering. He seemed calm. He bowed his head, and then she knew he was crying. She tried to tell him *I'm sorry*, but it came out so low it was inaudible. There was nothing she could make herself do, so she watched him.

Freddie passed her, quickly, violently, and she watched the front door of the apartment slam behind him. Was that goodbye, then? After everything. She sat down on the couch slowly, one of her hands steadying her, and she blinked into the dimming room, watching the sunset bounce off the walls, until she was staring into darkness.

The phone rang, and this is what woke her up. She found she was uncomfortably twisted on the sofa, having fallen asleep in her stupor. The metallic banging hit her head in a wave, and once she realized what it was, she moved in one swift motion to pick it up. "Hello?" Her voice was groggy.

"Sharon."

"Freddie. I..." What could she say?

"I'm sorry about that," he said. "I overreacted."

She closed her eyes and covered the phone as she exhaled in relief.

"Sharon?"

"I'm here. I'm here." She laughed. "God, that was... stupid, wasn't it?"

He laughed, too, perhaps a little uneasy. "Listen." There was a lot of music and conversation behind him, and she knew he was at the bar. "I'll be late coming home. Go on to your party, really."



"Oh. Freddie, I don't know."

"Go," he insisted. "Go." That same strained laugh again. "You d—" He cleared his throat. "You deserve it."

Sharon's eyes adjusted to the darkness, and she stared at the hem of her skirt. "Will you be here when I come home?" she asked.

His voice was lower now. "Yes."

She furrowed her eyebrows. "You never used to lie about anything."

"I'm not lying," he said. Agitation was clear in his voice.

She nodded, though he couldn't see it. "I'll go," she said.

"I'm glad." He rustled a paper on the other end of the line and then gave her the number of the bar, in case she needed anything. That wasn't characteristic of him, and she was afraid again. "Alright, Sharon." She covered the phone again and whimpered. "Goodbye."

Quickly, she uncovered it. "Freddie, wait, I..." He was gone already.

He rested his forehead against the wall and breathed slowly and deeply, while his hand still lingered on the phone where he'd hung up. He rolled against the wall and faced the little hallway, dimly lit and covered in posters and some graffiti. His hand fell from the phone and trembled at his side. Music from the bar rolled down the hallway; he closed his eyes and heard the

He rested his forehead against the wall and breathed slowly and deeply, while his hand still lingered on the phone where he'd hung up. He rolled against the wall and faced the little hallway, dimly lit and covered in posters and some graffiti. His hand fell from the phone and trembled at his side. Music from the bar rolled down the hallway; he closed his eyes and heard the laughter, the overlapping discussions. He wanted, more than anything, to be many years younger, naïve and free, like one of those boys in the bar now. Staggering out of the hallway, he felt sick and confused, and he wanted not to feel anything. To kiss someone, to drink until he couldn't stand. A cigarette - he wanted a cigarette.



She found him smoking at the bar, calmer now but still quiet, sitting alone in the fog turning blue from the colored lights, working on a drink, the latest in a long line of emptied glasses. He saw her coming.

She stopped before him, expectant but cool. Her hair was short, curled, and platinum blonde like Madonna's, and she stood naturally contrapposto.

"Hey there," she said. She hopped on the barstool. "You... arrange everything?"

He nodded.

"I brought you a gift." She reached into her bag, and he grabbed her hand. "Baby." She touched the side of his head, and he yanked himself away from her. "What is it?"

"Don't do that here," he mumbled.

She huffed and sat back. She ordered a drink, and then she watched him for a while. "How many is that?" She nodded to his hands on the bar, and then she took a cigarette from him. "You know, I could make you feel better."

"I don't want anything, Janey," he said. "I feel sick. I've felt sick all day."

When she touched him this time, he didn't shrink away. "Poor baby," she whispered.

"Oh, God." The tears reached his eyes again. "God, Janey, what did we do?"

She shushed him and looked around. "Come on," she said, and she led him off the barstool, out of the bar, outside to the alley. She watched, making sure no one was around, and he kicked the garbage by the door. "Freddie, calm down." He whipped around and hugged her. It wasn't affectionate -- it was a clawing, desperate embrace. Her hands lingered above him, and she didn't return his advance. He was searching for something she wasn't going to give him. "Freddie," she hissed in his ear.

After she delicately pushed him away from her, he stood there, a miserable grimace on his face. Light from the back of the bar and neon from further down the alley reverberated between them, leaving him lit up halfway. The cold outside was forcing each exhale into clouds like cigarette smoke. "You don't feel it?"

She crossed her arms. "You've got to pull it together."

He stepped closer, out of the light, and squinted. "Inside of you." He pointed to her chest. "In your heart." She pushed his hand away. "Do you have a heart, Janey?"

She seethed. "You're gonna blow this to hell."

He turned away from her. "We're gonna burn for this." He felt her hands reach his skin, electric feeling and then warm, rubbing up and down his arm.

"Then let's get started."

She goes inside and leaves him.



There is blood and glass. It fades into blackness. Chemtrails of memories. He cries into his sleeve. Red and blue, smoke. Flashing, flashing.

Across the city, across the night, he knows what Sharon is doing. She puts on her green dress, her special one. She is slipping it on now, satin on her shoulders... on her hips.

The yellow taxi drops her in the lap of the glass house, and she finds an anonymous company within a group of similar girls as they wander up to the door. The party is spilling over, the house is glowing, and alcohol is palpable in the air. Heartbroken, she avoids the crowd and doesn't stop to look for a familiar face. She finds the makeshift bar and gets a drink, and then she sits on the nearest armchair. Her hair is messier now, falling into her eyes, and maybe her mascara is running. She is sitting on it as if she has fallen there, just ended up there somehow, eyes set on a vague point somewhere in the midst of the people, body loose and pliable.

When the man sits down across from her, she doesn't see him. When he leans over to wordlessly offer her a cigarette, maybe she shakes her head at him. He leans back and lights up, and she closes her eyes and thinks of Freddie. She wonders where he is, whom he is with, what the hell he is doing. She thinks of that morning and wishes she could go back there and convince him to stay.



## “Across the city, across the night, he knows what Sharon is doing.”

You live around here?” She doesn't respond. “Is the smoke bothering you?”

Taking her time, she shifts her gaze to him. He isn't a bad looking guy, but he is a different sort from Freddie. He's in a suit, but he has no tie. Clean-shaven. “No,” she says.

He nods. “I'm Jeremy.” He extends his hand.

She sets down her drink and shakes his hand. “Sharon.”

“What do you do?”

“I'm an artist.”

His eyebrows rise, and he leans back. “An artist,” he repeats. “What kind of art do you make, Sharon?”

Her eyes flicker around him. His legs are crossed, and his arms rest leisurely on each side of the chair. His body is open, but he holds his cigarette stiffly. Still, she decides to answer. “I do sculptures mostly.”

“Any money in that?” He smokes slowly and moves deliberately. There is a little menace, a little suggestiveness. She is captivated by it.

She shrugs. “If you sell to the right people.”

“Do you?”

“I do sometimes.”

Then she continues her staring and drinking until she glances at him again. In her brain, flashing: *Freddie is upset, he's never coming back, he's with someone else.* He's in love with someone else. He made her bend over backwards for him, and then he left her out in the cold, the dark. She feels heat rising within her, from her feet to her chest, and suddenly she isn't herself anymore.

As her mind retreats inwards like before, her body moves, and she moves on Jeremy. He doesn't react in surprise when she kisses him -- it's almost as if he expects it -- but she doesn't notice this. She kisses him with her eyes closed, uncaring of who he is, only reminding herself that he isn't Freddie and that Freddie isn't there. He will never come back.

## “He isn't Freddie and that Freddie isn't here. He will never come back.”

They find themselves in a bedroom, moving steadily and carefully. She is consumed by sadness, desperate, while he is methodical and calm. Even as she touches him, tears on her face, she knows inside -- wherever she is inside -- something is wrong. Beyond the taboo, the guiltiness inside, there is a sense of impending doom. Perhaps then she stops, and her stained eyelids open, and in the dimness of the room, her hazy eyes focus on him again. Yes, then she sees him differently.

“Who are you?”

His face is emotionless, steady like his movements. Her eyes jump around again, around the room and to the door and back to him. Her mind races, and then she shuts her eyes, retreats again, clawing and screaming blindly.

In a moment, a single moment, he makes a mistake. She slips just once from his hand, and she tosses herself away from him. Before he can get her back, she grabs something -- a trophy, a vase, a bookend -- and hurls it savagely toward his pretty face.

And then she is free. She is disoriented and terrified, but she is free. She is strong but not brave; she forces open the window and falls safely into a bush below. It isn't her first time sneaking out of a house. She drags herself through the trees beside the house, down to the road, until the party is a receding light behind her, smaller and smaller, like a star. Flagging down a car is easy with the traffic, and maybe someone will take her home.

She will find the apartment dark and cold. It will appear smaller and quieter than it ever has before. Alone, after her ordeal, and crying in the darkness, she looks at the moonlight bouncing off of the gold sculptures on the mantel. Then everything will seem so unimportant except for their happiness, their love, and she will pick up the telephone and punch the numbers desperately, through her teary eyes.

And then everything would be okay; they could have their happy ending. Freddie knows he could apologize, he could change. He would take the job uptown, he would throw his guitar from the window and watch it shatter in the courtyard, he would start ripping up every check. The love that shone back at him through her eyes, as it always had, would be so much brighter, and he could expel all of the demons from his body. No burning. No guilt. All he has to do is stand there in the cold light and wait for her call.







# Home

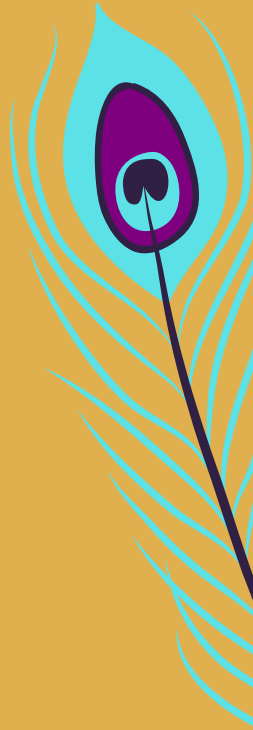
by Abbey Avis

How is it that colors are loud here  
and one can feel the spices, abiding in their skin,  
a place of love, a place of fear.  
Out in the village, you can find my heart within.

My heart is found in the open air  
Smelling of warmth and hope,  
yet, in some faces one might find despair.  
Tell my children I'm coming home.

They are the hidden jewels, disguised on the streets,  
walking past banana leaf thatched huts,  
playing and sleeping under palm trees.  
Their skin beautiful and as dark as the coconuts

India, how you possess such beauty  
and tragedy, I'll never fully know.  
And of these unseen jewels the world is unworthy.  
Please, tell my children I'm coming home.





# CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES



**Autumn Anderson** is a graphic communications media major and creative writing minor originally from Memphis, TN. Her poem, "This is love" was inspired by a marathon of Disney movies. Her favorite authors are Toni Morrison and Jane Austen.

**Abbey Avis** is a soon-to-be senior TESOL major from New Orleans, Louisiana. Her poem "Home" was inspired by a mission trip she took to India in 2015 where the impoverished, smiling orphans had a major impact on her life. She got her love of poetry from her PawPaw Lee who passed away in late January. It is her goal to publish her first book of poetry in his honor someday.

**Chelsea Carter** is a junior liberal arts major and a creative writing minor originally from Louisville, Kentucky. Her poem "Ring of Fire" was inspired by the lynching of Claude Neal, and she often draws inspiration for her poems from music. Her favorite authors are Caroline Kepnes and Zora Neale Hurston, and she hopes to become a professional writer in the future.

**Olivia Dennison** is a senior Middle School Education major and Creative Writing minor originally from Central Illinois. Her story was inspired by a beautiful, fall day outside of Faculty Hall on the MSU campus. Her favorite authors are Dean Koontz and Ruth Ware. She is also an Atlanta Braves fan.

**Libby Gerdes** is a sophomore Professional Writing major and Creative Writing minor from St. Louis, Missouri. This piece is about the chasm between her familial and romantic relationships at seventeen, touching on the secrecy required in her same-sex relationship. She is inspired to write poetry by both her life experiences and other art forms like literature, film, and music.

**Isaac Gish** is a senior theatre major and creative writing minor from Nashville, Tennessee. "Life and Death in Ambrewster County" was inspired by Clint Eastwood's "A Man with No Name" and Isaac's personal love of westerns. He dedicates this work both to his loving girlfriend Caroline Winnenberg and to his Super Duper David Cooper professor Will Miller.

**Samuel Guthrie** is an amateur author, and Computer Science major studying at Murray State University. He is from the St. Louis area, and his piece "Perspectives in flight" was written because he originally wanted to compare planes to boats, then swiftly realized he knew nothing about boats.

**Kaylan Hall** is a senior creative writing major and humanities minor. Kaylan is originally from Stilwell, OK, but moved to Murray at a young age. Her story "Mother's Farewell" was inspired by different relationships in her own life. Her favorite authors are Margaret Atwood and Tolkien. Kaylan is such a big fan of Tolkien she can quote the entire Lord of the Rings trilogy.

**Emma Hargrave** is a junior pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in English/Literature. She is from Louisville, Kentucky.





# CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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**Gabbie Lamb** is a junior at Murray State University with a major in English and Philosophy and a minor in legal studies. She currently lives with her family and has three sisters. Her story "His Deceptive Song" was inspired by a duo of street violinists she saw while on vacation in California. Outside of writing, Gabbie loves watching Star Wars, arguing with her coworkers, and spending time with her charmingly supportive partner, Jack.

**Abigail Moore** is a sophomore creative writing major and film studies minor from Jackson, Tennessee. Both her included fiction and poetry pieces reflect her desire to explore feminism, self-knowledge, and religious themes, often through reworking known imagery into the dreamlike. She takes inspiration from David Lynch, Bruce Springsteen, Jack Kerouac, artists like Artemisia Gentileschi, and the beat and modernist poets.

**Micah Prakin** is a second year Creative Writing major with a minor in Political Science from Madisonville, Kentucky. The piece, "Where Would I Be?" stemmed from the growing awareness of LGBTQ+ representation in American culture, but the lack of representation within the elderly community. Micah is so grateful for this opportunity and is so excited for others to read his work! Some of his favorite authors are Alice Walker, Stephen King, Charlotte Brontë and Paula Garner.

**Cole Scherer** is a senior Creative Writing major with a minor in Mass Communications. "The Bar Scene" is a story that has undergone several complete reconstructions. It started as an uninspired story about cave diving and wound up an outlet for a complicated mother-son relationship. He studies Japanese with plans to pursue a career in localization writing and editing.



**Gabby Sullivan** is a senior creative writing major and professional writing minor from Fairview Heights, Illinois. Though primarily a fiction writer, she wrote "Wild Horse Creek" initially as a prompt in her workshop and found that she enjoyed writing about her childhood and the crazy imagination she can't seem to shake. This is dedicated to her childhood friends, and anti-dedicated to the rocks in the creek.

**Caroline Winnenberg** is a junior creative writing major and theatre minor who primarily writes poetry. This piece is inspired by a poem she wrote about her experience with anorexia. Caroline dedicates this piece to her big sister and best friend Lauren and her annoyingly wonderful boyfriend Isaac.





This issue of *Notations* was produced as part of the requirements for ENG 488: *Notations / Literary Editing Internship*, a course offered as part of the creative writing major at Murray State University.

The creative writing program at Murray State offers three degree options – the Bachelor of Fine Arts, the Bachelor of Arts, and the Bachelor of Science – more than any other public university in the state. Under the guidance of our award-winning faculty, our majors hone their craft in small workshops that offer individualized attention and a vibrant peer community.

Students who major in creative writing may take introductory, intermediate, and advanced courses in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, as well as specialty courses on topics ranging from horror writing to nature poetry. In addition to working closely with our faculty, creative writing majors learn from other publishing authors who visit campus as part of the annual Murray State Reading Series. They also have the opportunity to develop their editing skills by working on *Notations*, the student-run literary journal.

Creative Writing majors are prepared to use their degree in a wide variety of careers, including screenwriting, editing, publishing, technical writing, video game design, marketing, journalism, teaching, business, law, and professional writing. Other creative writing majors attend graduate school to further advance their art. Ultimately, creative writers learn many skills that employers find desirable.

If you are considering one of our creative writing programs, we encourage you to visit campus, where you can talk to our faculty, visit a class or two, and see what it's like to be an emerging writer at Murray State. Contact Dr. Carrie Jerrell ([cjerrell1@murraystate.edu](mailto:cjerrell1@murraystate.edu)), our undergraduate creative writing program coordinator, for more information. Follow our program Instagram account ([@murraystatecreativewriting](https://www.instagram.com/murraystatecreativewriting)), and department Instagram account ([@murraystateenglish](https://www.instagram.com/murraystateenglish)) for announcements regarding upcoming events, classes, and student and faculty achievements.







