

LAMP

2019

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EDITORIAL STATEMENT

Ben Smitthimedhin

My three-month-old son has a habit of staring at our blank white wall. When he loses interest, I will raise the blinds of my living room window. This distracts him for another minute or so. Oftentimes, I will bounce him in front of the window before moving slowly on to the mirror. I am bouncing him up and down on my lap, holding him with one arm, even as I write this. “When are you gonna make yourself useful, Mikaia?” I ask. Occasionally, he will look at me for a minute before saying “Ah.” But most of the time, he will start to cry. On longer days of the week, I will come home and dance in front of him. He will laugh and coo playfully, especially when my wife decides to join me.

It’s hard to take yourself seriously when you are constantly drooled on. When I sing, dance, and change diaper after diaper, I am reminded of what James Schall calls “the unseriousness of human affairs.” These activities, as Father Schall tells us, are “unnecessary” in the same way that beautiful things are. But these activities are the ones we remember most. They are the memories which make up our significance.

Our need to create art, to craft the perfect poem or essay, is also an “unnecessary” endeavor. Poems will rarely earn you a cup of coffee. Written pieces of memory are as unreliable as partners in group projects. And yet, this utterly useless activity is alive and well. Writing is, when done for its own sake, fun. It’s a sort of play we engage ourselves in. Of course, in the process, we anticipate finding our creative voices. We enjoy sharing our perspectives with others. But sometimes, even when we keep our written work locked away in hidden cabinets, we still find ourselves amused from the activity of writing itself.

Thus, Father Schall writes, “Ludere est contemplari” – “to play is to contemplate.” In our most useless activities, we become contemplatives. We discover something about ourselves—that even our existence is unnecessary. Yet we exist, and our existence is here for the sheer delight of God: “The fact that we exist but need not exist expresses the most profound thing about us. It implies that we exist because of a choice, a love, a freedom grounded in what is beyond necessity.”

It’s my hope, then, that we continue to write. That we constantly pursue this “useless” endeavor. For the pleasure that arises from such activities are not mere trifles. They are not just frivolities that waste our time. Rather, they bring us ever closer to the mystery of God.

ONOMASTICS

Adam Whittaker Snavely

My parents gave me a Hebrew name;
maybe
the most Hebrew name.
The name God gave.
God said yes.

The white supremacists
down the road
are chanting
Blood and Soil.
The president is laughing.
The car is breaking the crowd in two,
like a bone.

And my name hums
through my skin
to my fingertips.
I write “yes” 490 times
on my arms and legs
before walking out
into the red morning.
Maybe for courage. Yes.
Maybe for God. Yes.
Maybe just so
they’ll be
able to
identify
the body.
Yes.

A LULLABY FOR HAPPY CHILDREN

Philip Sitterding

Wires hang between man-made trees
that line the road. They're black
against a blue sky: like
strands of the licorice you imagine
will be sweet.

The wires bring tomorrow to our homes.
They're band-aids for our society, pills
to help us sleep off the cancer in our bones.
They give us hope, or
something.

Vines have wrapped their fingers
around one of the wires, and bent to drink
from the electric life it carries.

They died a long time ago, but they still try
to stretch themselves against its warmth.

A SIREN SONG

Mary McAllister

“Hurry, I want to show you something,” Jay called back to Griffin, who stumbled along behind him through the black ink of the woods. Griffin was nine years old and had never in his life been awake at 4 AM. His older brother, armed only with a small flashlight, stepped carefully and quickly over branches and underbrush, stopping incrementally to wait for Griffin.

“There is no possible way you need to make that much noise,” Jay said, voice quiet but sharp, as Griffin snapped a branch underfoot and yelped.

“Give me the flashlight then, I can’t see a—”

“Shut up, Griffin! You’re going to scare it. Don’t be a baby, we’re almost there.”

Before Griffin could reply, Jay ducked under the low hanging branches in front of them, pulling Griffin through with him, and the brothers found themselves on the shore of the Tygart Valley River. The moon wasn’t quite full, but it reflected off the river, and in the pale light Griffin could make out an eager smile on his brother’s face. Jay made them sit on a rocky ledge, ignoring Griffin’s many questions and insisting on total silence. He turned off the flashlight and they waited.

It was impossible to quantify time in that still, dark morning. Griffin had drifted to sleep, head on his brother’s shoulder, when he was jolted awake by Jay’s abrupt movement and partially stifled shout. Jay stood up and pointed out over the water with a trembling hand to a ripple that was making its way across the surface. Jay and Griffin stared at the spot until the surface was calm once more. Another splash, much larger and closer than the first, broke the morning’s silence. Griffin drew instinctively closer to his brother, who at the same time put a protective arm around his younger brother’s shoulders and pushed up his glasses, squinting into the darkness.

“Was that a tail?” Griffin asked, but his voice was quickly swallowed by the dark and the quiet. He felt Jay’s fingers dig into his arm, and he started to speak, but his voice faltered. A low hum—rich, deep, and inhuman—shocked them both into reverent silence. A monstrous head rose out of the water, and the hum continued louder than before. The sound was complex, almost musical, but larger and deeper. It baffled the ear and Griffin found himself wanting to shut it out.

The creature was darker than the river around it, but the boys could make out the palm-sized scales that coated its neck and the rows of spiked horns that decorated its brow. Its eyes were bright green and luminous—and focused directly on Jay and Griffin. The gaze was intelligent and cold, and Griffin could not hold it. He instead tried to make out the rest of the creature in the dim light. Its serpentine figure writhed under the surface, at least twenty feet long. But Jay did not look away. Griffin tugged at his brother's sweatshirt, but Jay didn't notice. He faced the creature with a look of awe and something like contentment until, after several minutes, it blinked once slowly and deliberately, then dove back into the river in one smooth motion. The humming diminished until it had ceased entirely, and the river returned to stillness.

— — —

The boys made it back home before their mother came downstairs in a white collared shirt and pencil skirt, dabbing at a stain on her collar with a warm washcloth, her hair still up in a towel. She was surprised to see her sons already at the table eating cereal in silence. On the walk back Jay had not spoken a word. When Griffin tried to ask him what he thought that *thing* was, Jay had only looked past him, a foreign smile on his face.

"Don't forget your key," their mother said, handing Griffin the string with his copy of the house key on it as she brushed past to the coffee maker. "I found it in the door when I got home yesterday. You're going to get us robbed."

"Sorry," Griffin grumbled, looking intently into his bowl.

"And Jay, remember to—Jay, are you listening?" The older boy was staring out the window, his cereal soggy and untouched. He looked back at her slowly, as if waking from a dream.

"Yeah, Mom."

"Good. Remember to come straight home so your brother won't be alone here for more than an hour—and you're wasting perfectly good food, I keep telling you not to serve yourself so much," she said as she picked up both bowls and dropped them into the sink. "Go to school. C'mon, it's 7:30, the bus will be here any second."

— — —

Griffin's elementary school consisted of six dimly lit and sparsely populated classrooms—one for each grade. Families had moved away in droves in the past few years as one home after another foreclosed. Griffin was the top student in his fourth-grade class, but only because he showed up every day. Jay attended the

middle school several blocks over and would be one of only a dozen students who would move on to high school the following year. Rather than bringing them closer together, the limited number of peers made each child an island in a vast and unfeeling ocean. They weren't friends, they weren't even competition. They might as well have not even been there at all. The days were long and monotonous, and when the bell finally rang, Griffin was always the first out the door.

Every weekday, from 2:30 until 3:15, Griffin had the house to himself. It was typically the best part of his day, but today he couldn't sit still. The woods behind his house seemed denser than usual, and the wind buffeted the trees, which creaked old and dry as dark clouds began to gather overhead. Griffin turned on the TV to drown it out. He tried and failed to put the creature out of his mind. The darkness and exhaustion of the morning made his memory of it dreamlike and confused. If he focused hard enough, he could almost convince himself that it was in fact a dream. But then he remembered Jay's smile, the way he didn't seem to see Griffin the rest of the morning, and he turned the TV up louder.

At 3:45, when Jay still hadn't come home, Griffin felt the knot of dread in his stomach tighten. Jay didn't spend time with any of the kids at school. Instead, he usually spent most of his afternoons on the computer, looking up the names and events that he'd written down during the day for further research. There was only one place he could be. With the wind whipping at his face and raindrops falling in angry bursts, Griffin pulled on his raincoat and set out to find the path that he had walked with his brother eleven hours before.

— — —

When Griffin got to the riverbank he saw the creature twisting into an armored, undulating ring, its scales shifting from green to blue in the light, its otherworldly humming filling the air. In the center of the ring, standing chest deep in the water, his sweatshirt drenched and his eyes invisible behind his glasses that were now beaded with rain, stood Jay.

"Come back! Jay, come back!" Griffin screamed, but humming filled his head and muffled his small voice. He ran to the water's edge and called for his brother again, louder, and this time Jay turned. He raised his hand, whether to call Griffin over or say goodbye Griffin never knew. The monster lifted its head out of the water, mere feet away from Jay. Griffin tried to cover his ears, but the humming was everywhere, overwhelming his senses and boring into his brain. His vision blurred and his legs gave out, but before Griffin lost consciousness he saw the creature rise out of the water until it towered above the trees, then crash down onto Jay before sweeping out towards the lake.

When Griffin woke the river was still and silent except for the patter of rain, now no more than a drizzle. Head aching and ears ringing, he strained to listen for any sign of his brother, but he only heard the storm retreating into the mountains. He stayed on the riverbank, wide-eyed and shivering, until a fisherman found him several hours later. After four days Jay's body was found deposited several miles downriver. However, when Griffin came back to the river the following day he thought he heard an echo of the hum, initially quiet but growing louder before retreating again into silence. But now Griffin heard a second pitch winding around the first—a voice youthful and exultant.

PORTRAIT OF THE ENGLISH MAJOR WITH A GREEN APPLE

Alex Donley

I've been meaning to eat this green apple.
Centuries ago, 300 muscly Greeks
prodded an army of Medes back home

with only sticks and stones and nasty words.
One tart fruit stands between me
and the plains of Sparta. I've been meaning

—so what is meaning? If someone gripped my collar
in the cafeteria and said *Give me your lunch meaning*,
I don't know what I'd give him

but I'd go another day without eating.
I've been meaning to clap my life into
railroad tracks straight and narrow,

with a *snap* as sharp as a bite of this
stubborn, stubborn apple. Beneath this tree
I stand atop fresh compost—a paradox—

newness that is most parts stench, all parts decay,
mulchy offal of the dead giants
who chiseled the sky out of darkness

and trimmed the blue globe on a lathe. Their brine-sweat
pooled into the oceans, and yet I love them most for
lying down, unclenching their muscles—

dying. The apple is their flesh, given for us;
this do in remembrance of them. Well,
I've been meaning to.



BESPOKE

Kevin Brouillette

BREATHING UNDER WATER

Elisa Palumbo

I took a deep breath, then I took another: My lungs felt too small as they burned between my shaky breaths. I wiped the clear snot away from my nose and the top of my mouth and pinched the corner of the pillow with my sweaty fingertips and kept gasping as uneasiness flooded my stomach.

My mind replayed Dad's words as it muted everything else. His last phrase kept me too shocked to blink, "Your Mom only has three months to live."

The quiet around us was heavy, and I felt it wash over my whole body like a strong wave I didn't see coming that might knock me down, so I stared at the green rug on the floor as a steady stream of hot tears fell down my cheeks. I sat on Mom's wooden rocking chair, kitty-corner to her as she sat in her tan recliner. I swayed forward and back and looked at her face and she stared at the same green rug as me, and Matt and Rachel sat on opposite couches and stared behind glassy eyes.

I wanted to be alone so I could scream.

— — —

I can still see her sitting on the floral-patterned couch with a ventilator tube in her nose. I stepped into the living room with the thoughts I'd prepared, but I didn't know where to look or what to say. I approached her, then put my hand on the armrest of her chair. Our gazes locked, and we both said little as our minds grappled with what the next weeks, or days, could hold. I know I told her I loved her, and I know she said that God could still heal her. I know that I doubted.

I'll never forget how the painkillers dulled her tongue into a stiff, unresponsive rubber. She stuttered as if she had a speech impediment, and I bent my ear close, but I still couldn't decipher her words. Her bony hand shook as it tucked the clear tube behind her ear; I will never understand how those ventilators help someone breathe. She kept struggling, and I kept nodding as if I understood. I hated the drugs that made her tongue useless and I hated how she looked at me with wide yellow eyes. But despite their hue, I could still see the words behind those eyes. I knew a part of her was still there.

All she wanted that Mother's Day was seven more Mother's Days. I was eleven and since she homeschooled us, she felt like it was her job to finish teaching me until

college. She knew where she was going but didn't want to get there a minute early. We kids each wrote her a letter to share with her in private. This was our way of celebrating her that day.

— — —

I don't remember how it started, but I was sitting in my closet crying. I turned on some music and screamed into a pillow until my stomach cramped. It was two years after her death, and I was home alone. The empty house reminded me even more of her absence.

I hiccuped as my mouth filled with thick saliva and my eyes burned from the salty tears. My backbone rubbed against the white wall of the closet and my head hurt as I hugged my knees and pillow. I caught my breath and looked down at the floor. Then I saw Rachel's square notebook, sealed by a dark green ribbon. Hoping to distract myself, I picked it up and pulled the ribbon toward me, letting the bow disappear. I knew I shouldn't look at it, but when I opened the journal a piece of yellow notebook paper fell out. It was folded into a square with some kind of warning about not reading it on the front. My breathing evened out as I wiped my nose and unfolded the paper. Immediately, amidst Rachel's scribbling, I saw my name. She had written down a memory that to this day, I can't remember.

She wrote about a moment that took place a few days before Mom died. Apparently, I stood next to Mom's hospice bed and she asked who would take care of me when she died.

I had replied with a question: Daddy?

No, she'd said, Jesus.

My somewhat dry eyes blurred over again as I folded the paper and closed Rachel's journal. I tied the bow and set it back on the floor.

— — —

We situated Mom's bed on the first floor in the large family room and we kids marveled at how it shifted up and down with the press of a button. She had started hospice in April, just after the doctors gave her three more weeks. For those first weeks, Mom asked for low doses of the pain killers because one of the main side effects was significant brain fog. Just a few weeks earlier, she'd fallen down the stairs at my grandparents' house and broken her shoulder; but as her pain increased, so did the morphine. The side effects from the drugs also included drowsiness, and soon Mom slept.

Whenever we closed the curtains of the living room and I saw the golden sunlight seeping through the cracks, the brightness reminded me that Mom was missing the day. Just months before, she would rise early enough to greet the sun on its ascent in the mornings, then in the afternoons, she would sit outside in the fresh air. Now, she slept. She slept to the buzz of her oxygen tank that was as loud as an air conditioning unit, or at least I remember it that way. Maybe I confused the two and thought the inconsistent tick and pause of the air-conditioning was her tank. All I know is that at every pause, I listened for her breath.

One week turned into two, and before we knew it, we entered the third week from when Mom began hospice. In those last days of Mom's consciousness, her friend Cindy took Rachel and me shopping. She didn't say much until we reached the mall's parking lot. I sat in the back and stared at the asphalt as she told us we were going to pick the outfits we would wear to Mom's funeral. She took a deep breath and faced us, explaining that if Mom got better, we would wear the dresses on the first Sunday she could attend church. We nodded and went into Old Navy to find skirts we could pair with black tops. Mine was mostly white with pink and blue flowers at the bottom and I later found a necklace with pink and blue stones that I wore with it. When we got home, Mom asked to see what we bought. We didn't say what they were for, but she smiled when we showed her.

Four days before she died, Mom slept with her mouth wide open. She'd been unresponsive for a while, but her breathing stayed strong and loud. Dad and I were in the room, and he asked me to give her water. Since she was asleep, I wasn't sure how, but I grabbed a straw and filled it like I would whenever I ate at restaurants. I put the straw in the plastic pink cup that sat on the rotating table by her bed and put my finger on the opening to keep the water inside. I set it in her mouth and lifted my finger. She inhaled and coughed; I thought she might wake up, but her eyes stayed shut. The gurgle of the water going down her throat sounded like she was drowning. It didn't seem like inhaling the water would do her any good, but since Dad told me to give it to her, I filled the straw again. When I finished, the straw brushed the side of her stiff mouth and I jumped. That's when I knew.

— — —

I didn't like that I had to practice something that seemed so easy and inconsequential, but both Mom and Dad thought it was a good idea. We were in Maui for a final family vacation just a month after Mom's fatal diagnosis, and the night before we would snorkel at Black Rock, Dad took me down to the hotel pool with a snorkel set and a pair of flippers. I'd played around with the flippers before, but never with a snorkeling set.

We got in the water, and I put on the flippers while I sat on one of the steps. Half of my body immersed in the water, half stayed dry. Dad got in, and after I put on the fins, he gave me the goggles and mouthpiece. He showed me how to bite the rubber with my molars and told me I would have to breathe out of my mouth. I put on the goggles then bit down. He told me to swim like normal with my head immersed and to breathe out of my mouth.

I pushed myself off of the pool floor with the tip of my fins and let my hair get wet. The water against my scalp was colder than I expected. I looked at the cement of the pool and held my breath like I normally would, then I realized that I should use the snorkel mask. I breathed in. My mind faltered since it wanted to breathe through my nose, not my mouth. I tried again, and my breathing sounded like Darth Vader, but the airflow felt too shallow and weak. I popped back out of the water, gasping, and took the mouth piece out. It's too weird, I said. Dad told me I just needed to get used to it.

Since we were close to the beach, I could hear the steady roar of the waves in the background, and I wondered how I would be able to do this in the less steady waters of the ocean the next day.

He had me try again, and again, but I kept panicking. I always felt breathless when I resurfaced, my heart pounding fast through my pink swimsuit. Eventually, I got the hang of it, but the sound of my breath through the water still made me almost choke. I didn't know how to balance the paddling with the open-mouth breathing, but with Dad's help, I managed.

— — —

Mom stopped breathing on May 19th. Dad woke us up earlier than usual that day, letting us know that it happened while he and the nurse bathed her. My heart pounded a million times a minute. I rolled my body over on the golden sheets; it felt heavy and like I couldn't walk downstairs, and my arms were flailing and wanting to reach for her because I realized I'd never hug her again. Maybe if I just ignored it and never saw her body, it would be like it never happened.

Mom's family came over and everyone hugged; people pulled out fresh Kleenexes to blow their noses and better catch their breath.

Later that day, it rained, and I sat on my bed watching the raindrops that trickled down in uneven pathways on the window. As I stared into the greyness outside, I told myself the sky was crying too. I wiped my nose on the sleeve of my red sweat-shirt and focused my gaze on the clouds. The tears continued.

Maybe it was a dream and I would soon wake up and breathe normally again. But it didn't stop. Instead, two days later, I found myself at her funeral, sitting next to my siblings in the front row. Mom's casket took center stage. I told myself she wasn't there and that none of this was real. But the current pushed us forward and before I knew it, the boys were carrying her casket outside while Rachel and I walked behind. When we reached the glass doors to the church parking lot, Dad clung to my aunt; his body shaking out of control.

A motorcade of police cars then led us to the cemetery. Their lights blared, and they seemed to part the traffic as they made every red light green for us. I sat next to the window, awestruck at the speed but still impatient to wake up.

The sun was bright as we turned into the green cemetery. We made the loop around to the plot we'd chosen. The funeral home had prepared everything; the grave was open, and next to it stood the tool for lowering the casket.

We gathered around the pit of the grave and Dad took out his guitar to sing. I hid behind my sunglasses, staring and thinking about what came next while the sun beamed hot on my black shirt. I was breaking the thorns off the rose I was supposed to throw on her casket. Its dew covered my fingers.

I was sure everyone could see my heart beating through my shirt as I walked toward the mouth of her grave. I didn't know which I was supposed to throw first, the rose or the dirt. I threw the rose. Then my sweaty hands gripped the shovel's handle and forced it into the mound. The dirt fell with a dull thud across the wood and covered the rose. I handed the shovel to someone else and made my way back to Rachel. I wondered if all of the dirt would fit since the mound seemed as tall as me.

As the singing continued, I squinted up at the pale blue sky. I can't say if it was in that exact moment, but I began to imagine Mom smiling with long, thick hair and staring at Jesus with clear, white, eyes. She could move her shoulder again and maybe she was running. I saw her surrounded by pure white—like one of those dreams where it's too bright to see. My nightmare was Mom's paradise, and I wondered if she ever thought about coming back. I never stopped seeing her up there and now I wonder if God gave me that picture of her. I like to tell myself that she can see me too. Maybe that's what helped me learn to steady my breath.

Every Sunday for a year, Dad took us to the grave. The grass grew back, and before long, it was hard to find her plot. I hated to think about her body lying beneath me. Since Dad had bought two plots, he joked that whoever died next could go by Mom. For a while, I didn't mind if it was me. Some days, I still told myself she was on a trip and that she'd be back in a few months. But I stopped believing that when the months kept rolling by and she never showed up.

Her gravestone was marked by a dash between 1959 and 2008; an insignificant line summed up her life. My life overlapped with hers for eleven of those years, and what I most like to think is they were enough.

— — —

I always hear her off-tune voice singing with conviction when I hear *How Great Thou Art*. And whenever someone tells me I give good hugs, I hear her voice saying those words and suddenly I'm wrapping my arms around her waist again. When people chew gum with their mouths open—or when I get lazy and start chomping—I hear her telling me never to do that because it's rude. And when I've watched friends get married, seen their moms help them into their white dresses, I've cried alongside everyone else, but for different reasons. Her absence now hits me in waves. Sometimes they knock me down. They often come unexpected—in the everyday things.

Sometimes, when those moments crash and break, they throw me into a whirlwind that leaves me gasping when I resurface. Others come and go. But if I step back, I can hear the roar in the background. That steady rhythm rules my life; it sways me forward and back. I nearly drowned, but I am surviving. Now, I'm used to swimming; the paddling and breathing in the midst of deep water comes easier now. Sometimes, I'll close my eyes and let each wave crash. I picture myself wading in the waters and imagine her waiting at the shore to hug me. But really, she's no more than a soft, white mist that follows each wave. Sometimes I imagine that one day she'll beckon me to swim out and join her.

Every Mother's Day, I think back to the last one I celebrated with her, wishing I could remember what I said. I think it was a sort of thank you for everything she'd taught me. I know what I would say if I could sit across from her now. I would take a deep breath, put my hand on hers, feel the veins and bones protruding through her translucent skin, then let her know she was free to breathe her last.

FOREBODING

Esther Eaton

A bird circles
Unable to land
Its wing wind
In my hair

THE INSECURE POETRY STUDENT SWIMS LAPS

Drake DeOrnellis

Lap 1

But I want the thoughts to stop, so I slide my shivering thighs
into shivering water. My thighs do not match the water—they are full,
whereas water is thin

and slips through my fingertips.
The silver swells cool my arms,
but the throbbing muscles warm them—my power set into motion.

Lap 2

Something that is not a mystery—the crystal pearls
 spiraling
 out
 from my
 toes
to the
 surface,
 a flock of startled doves. I turn
around and stick my face in them, and they tickle.

Lap 3

I float underwater, gazing at the surface of s l o w l y melting mirrors—also not a
 mystery,
nor my perpetual treading
like my perpetual thoughts
that lap over and around themselves
waiting for dissolution or resolution
that never comes.

Lap 4

Two mysteries:

the kinesis of artificial lighting in the depths of the pool,
and the name of those depths of blue
that deepen as I stare to the bottom.

God has a name, and it means that He cannot not be named,
He just
is.

Lap 5

The light stretches its form across the nameless depth
but does not penetrate it.

Lap 6

Furthermore,
the silence in my ears when I dive. I dive farther,

I reach the floor where I pick up a lost hair elastic, and
where are the mysteries? Still there,
at the bottom, and also

Lap 7

at the surface, as I break the surface tension,
heave in a breath.

Noise, noise, and the slapping of waves echoes, and my breathing is heavy,

but underwater there is silence,
yet motion. Drowning would be my preferred method of execution. Perhaps
I will become a witch, if I knew Hawthorne's ancestors.

Lap 8

Flip-turn. Repeat the cycle. Let the depths swirl my hair.

Kevin Brouillette

A LAMENT OF CAPITALISM:

If the early bird catches the worm,
Then as the worm,
You will surely have problems with birds.



ASSATEAGUE AT TWILIGHT

Helen Fielding

INSOMNIAC WITH A PAINT BRUSH

Alexandra M. Green

the dog scratching the door
of apartment 302
sounds like he's clawing his way out
from behind my frontal lobe

the frontal lobe is involved
in motor function
speech and language
empathy
personality
and memory formation
i

remember

that

from

my anatomy lecture scheduled right
after my weekly counseling session
i never made it to class on time
spending too long at the bathroom
sink soaking paper towels in
water washing off tear stains
eyes closing at the coldness

i open my eyes

out of my carnival night mind
into this dark bedroom and

stare

at the dark-covered ceiling

on my 16th birthday i painted
three of my four bedroom walls grey
the fourth hot pink and left
my ceiling a canvas white and blank

i fill in the blank
with my eyes
my dad's eyes

the eyes of each of my freshman
fresh minded old friends
blue

and

brown
like
the eyes of the man i walked past
yesterday
on the sidewalk wearing
a bright orange hole-filled beanie
hair straggling out down around
his gaunt bony temples asking for money
while i scurry past fingers clenched
into sweaty palms bloody crescent marks
pain imprinted scars

the dog
will not stop
scratching old wounds

my high school best friend's middle name was
Marleyna
last time we got lunch
she confessed to seeing a therapist
said major depression was killing her

i promised to call once a week
i haven't spoken to her in over a year

depression and anxiety are caused
by problems with one's neurotransmitters
which is to say

miscommunication

in a year

i moved through three
different houses and out
of my childhood home
i grabbed independence
like a prescription.

LEMONADE

Cody Conklin

They're coming for me. I have to think, but I don't have much time. Ten, maybe fifteen seconds. Under the bed? Too obvious. I could crawl into the attic. Too loud—can't risk it. Think. Think. The closet. It will have to do.

I push aside a dozen neatly arranged shirts. I wanted eight. Eight is such a good number; perfectly symmetrical if bisected on either plane, and divided by two it comes to four, which is actually the best number. But, my wife said I needed the polos for summer time, and her man's wardrobe wouldn't be complete without a third nearly identical buffalo flannel. She will be home in twenty-four minutes. Give or take.

There is a creak from down the hall. The office. They haven't learned which boards are old and whiny. This is my chance. I should be able to make it down the steps and out the back door without them hearing so much as a peep. Four. Three. Two. One.

There are six stairs before the landing, and four more until I reach the bottom. I knock the back of my heel against the last step, and carpet muffles the sound. Keeping low to the ground, I creep into the living room. I was right; they're both upstairs. When I hear their soft steps dash into the hall, I roll toward the kitchen. Eventually the pitter-patter dies down.

I press myself against the door to the backyard. The kitchen lights are already off. Nice. I don't have time for that. I check the clock. My wife will be home in twenty minutes with a freshly cut pup. Princess Rex. Even now it makes me smile. Our great puppy compromise.

They're moving again. One just stepped on a loose Lego. The kids should clean their rooms. Later. Not now. Now, the tool shed. Four. Three. Two. One.

I slip through the kitchen door, turning the knob so the lock won't click, and close it behind me. Open and close. Again. Again. Fourth time's lucky. I peer through the window; no one seems to have heard me.

I shuffle across the lawn, the grass licking my thin dress socks. I need to mow before Sunday. Mom likes eating outside. I'm sure she'll want to have JJ's birthday outside; he is her favorite, even if she'd never say so. It is probably because they look alike.

Same nose. Same pale blue eyes. Same care free spirit. And turning ten is a big deal. Good age, ten. Good number.

I push open the side door of the shed. The knob sticks a little. Crawling over the lawnmower, I settle into the corner of the lightly dusted workshop. Kat said I'd never use it. She looked at me with that sideways look she gives when she knows she's right but has decided to let me figure it out for my self. It's just like the look Beccs gives when I ask her if she wants one scoop or two. Strawberry is her favorite. We had strawberry cake at her eighth birthday last month. Good age, eight. Good number.

But, that means only eight more years until she can drive. She is one hundred and sixteen months away from graduating. And, in three thousand five hundred and seventy-seven days she will head off to college and call on the weekend until she doesn't. Give or take.

And the front left tire of the lawnmower needs air.

They're at the door. I knew they'd come eventually. My wife will be home in fifteen minutes and I need to mow the lawn before Sunday so my mom can play croquet with her grandson. They're wrestling with the old door that sticks, and the front left tire needs air.

The door finally opens. I should fix it. One, mow the yard. Two, put air in the tire. Three, fix the door. And, at some point pick up some strawberry ice-cream.

No. Four. Three. Two. One.

The stillness of the tool shed is broken.

"Found you!" they cry.

In a moment they are on me with shrieks as their little hands grab my face.

"Good spot, Dad!"

"Thanks, buddy," I say, tucking JJ under my arm.

Beccs pushes her hands onto her hips. "Not fair," she says, "you cheated."

"Cheated? *Me?*"

There's that sideways look. "Yeah-huh, you said we had to stay in the house."

"No, I said we had to hide inside. Are we inside?"

She smiles and rolls her eyes. Just like Kat. She'll be here in thirteen minutes. Mom should get here around two tomorrow. JJ will be getting a job in a couple of years. And Beccs...

I scoop her up in my free arm. The tire will still need air tomorrow.

"Now, who wants some lemonade?"

They erupt in a chorus of "Me!"

"Hey, Dad, so the other day at school, Tommy Welch shot milk out his nose and then he showed me how to do it. Do you want to see?"

"First off, gross, and second... yes."

"Daddy?" Becks looks up at me. She's just like her mom.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Can I have four ice cubes in mine?"

"Sure thing, baby girl." Maybe not just like her mom.

I close the old door behind me and carry my kids across the lawn that needs to be clipped before Sunday.

I set them down at the kitchen counter and pour three glasses of lemonade. Kat will be home soon. Make it four.

Once JJ stops coughing, he wipes his nose. He tells me about what he learned in science this week, and how excited he is for football to start, and which of his friends are coming to the party. When he comes up for air, Beccs tugs at my shirt.

"Hey, Daddy?"

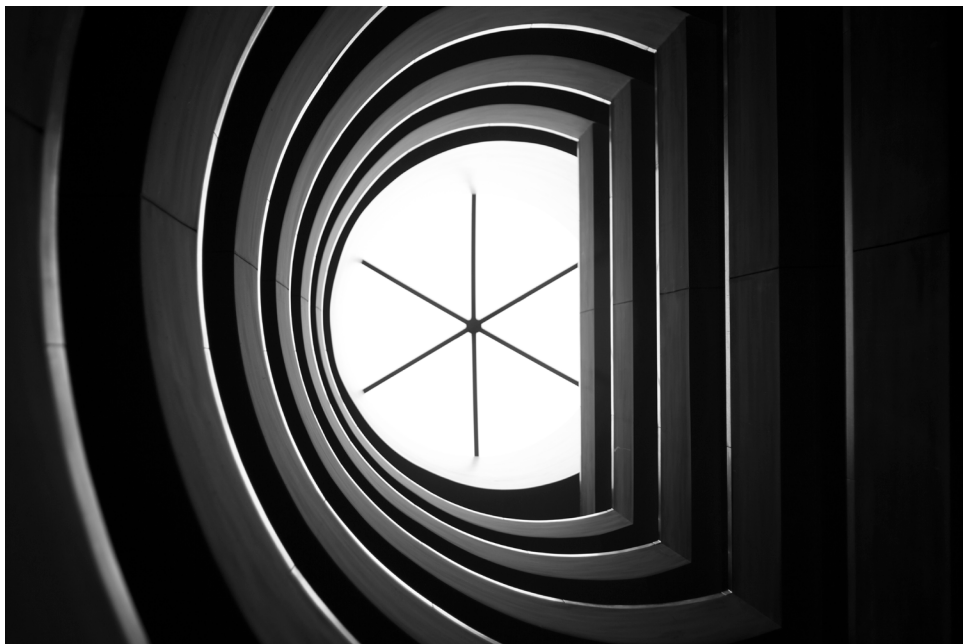
"Yeah, baby?"

"When will Mom be back?"

"A few minutes. Why?"

"Is Mom going to be mad we tracked in mud?"

I pick my foot up and squish it back down. I will probably have to toss these socks. But, what can you do. I take a long sip of my lemonade. "I'll worry about that later."



SKYLIGHT

Kevin Brouillette

[]

Helen Fielding

I hover by its margined-fog

Edge, by

the state of gone

The state of fissured, fully

Particized

The state of

fistfuls of not-particles

of a thing that grows bigger by becoming

nothing at all

a sound from music I no longer hear

Echoing

So I make note

to sing it to you later

once the mist stops swirling where you were

emptily

And I stop existing a blank box

Tightly encasing a whisper

DAYTRIP IN HOSPITAL GOWN

Rebekah Sharpe

Having never seen the sun,
his face is free of wrinkles.
He planned a trip downtown but wanted
to drive to Saturn,
to take a Hubble selfie, but
the engine sputters,
legs road-weary.

He clogged his radiator—
white blood cells and hair.
His expired passport—
too fragile to move,
too far to touch,
molded into moonlight craters,
into paper stars.

MY TURN TO SPEAK

Hannah Allison

I'm at a university hundreds of miles from Virginia, where I'm a student. These not-quite straight rows of desks, the streaks of marker residue on the whiteboards, and awkwardly placed power outlets are my territory. I don't know where I expected the final round of a national debate tournament to be held, or why I thought it would be any different than every other round that weekend, but the mundanity of this classroom comforts me. I decide which side of the room I want to claim, and start methodically unpacking my backpack. My timer, pens, paper, water bottle—each in the same position it's been in for hundreds of rounds before.

My place on the college policy debate team confuses most people, especially my family. Since I started debating, I've fielded dozens of questions along the lines of *You're on the debate team? But Hannah, you hate to argue – you don't even talk that much. Why?* I never quite know how to answer.

Mason walks into the room and our eyes meet in recognition. I see the familiar blue sweatshirt and tousled blond hair and smile. We've faced each other multiple times before. Each of those rounds were intense and difficult, but they also stand out as some of my favorites. I ask him how his weekend has been so far and a question about his argument position. We banter back and forth for a few minutes, comparing win records and teasing each other about the practical joke he played last weekend, before we both go back to prepping for the round. I'm glad I get to face a friend.

Two of my coaches come in; Cory is explaining the nuances of argument against capitalism Mason is going to make, and Meg is talking me through specific consequences of that position. I open a word document and start typing notes as I internalize the arguments they're feeding me. *What am I doing here? This is finals. I can't do this.* My debate partner walks in and sits down next to me to prep for his first speech. He can tell I'm unsettled about the round, so he leans over and fist bumps me.

— — —

I am sitting on the couch in my counselor's office. The black leather couch is unnervingly clean; the potted plants and strategically placed motivational signs attempt to create an inviting atmosphere, but it feels eerily sterile and clinical. I am squirming at her pointed questions as she tries to unravel the childhood trauma,

tightly wound up inside of me like a knotted ball of string. I normally give hesitant answers to most of her questions, but one caught me off guard. *What is it about debate that keeps you there?* It was an offhanded question, and not (to my knowledge) related to the topic on the table for that day, but it was one that stuck with me in the months going forward and regularly returns.

The judges come in and sit down. Five minutes to start time. I walk out into the hallway with my partner and coaches for our standard pep talk and prayer before the round starts. I'm silently praying for peace, both about the outcome of the round and about the question that keeps bothering me. I don't like not having an answer.

We walk back inside, and Mason gives the first speech. I start picking apart his arguments. Like every debate speech, there are inevitable flaws, and in this round, it's my job to capitalize on them. I start formulating my arguments, and getting ready for my first speech. As I do, the anxiety leaves. *We're ready. Mason is going to take the L.*

The round continues and it's my turn to cross-examine the other side. I ask a very pointed first question and the panel of judges nod their heads with me. I pause internally, as Mason answers the question. It hits me. The judges listen to my argument and, instead of angrily telling me to be quiet, they are persuaded by it. Instead of keeping my mouth shut when I see a problem – my default – when I see the problems with the opposing position, I can expose them. Cross-examination continues, and as it does, my confidence grows. The judges look skeptical of some of Mason's answers– my questions are making them think. All the years of being told to sit down and be quiet don't carry over into debate rounds. My words come faster, my arguments more forcefully. In this moment, I realize that the dark cocoon of my past, the one that wraps me in fear – fear of speaking up, fear of criticism, fear of having an opinion – dissolves when the timer starts the round. I make my arguments, and I'm not afraid to explain them to the judges. They listen to me, they take notes, and they nod in understanding. In this space, I'm allowed to not conform to other people's expectations.

I make a note to remember to tell Amber at our next session: *Debate is more than just a competitive outlet and a way to pay for college.*

My timer beeps. Prep time is over. I put down my pen, set my timer for 6 minutes and stand up. *"Is anyone not ready?"* I get the thumbs up from the judging panel. The room is mine again.

ADOLESCENT WITH A MIRROR

Kevin Brouillette

When the naked Thing
Really sees itself
For the first time,
Eye-flashing scientists prod it and pronounce,
 “It’s sentient”.
Philosophers interrogate it, then mutter,
 “It’s existential”.
The Thing, now left alone with the Ajax and faux marble linoleum,
Crawls through the bleached light to gaze a second time in the sterile mirror,
Breathes the chlorine in, remarks,
 “I’m ugly”,
Shatters the mirror to palm-sized shards,
And braces his neck.

THE MUSHROOM TRAGEDY

Or

FREYTAG'S PYRAMID TRAGICOMEDY

Deryka Tso

“... I vow to never stop joking around, partly because I don't think I can... I vow to never stop loving you. And I vow to never, ever lie to you.”

The wedding guests bawled along with the bride as she wiped her eyes with a white hanky. “Oh, darling!...”

“Wait, I'm not finished.” The groom held up his hand. “I vow to catch the grenade for you, to jump in front of the train for you, to take the bullet for you. I would do anything for you...”

“Anything?” She clasped her beautiful hands together.

“...Except eat a mushroom. Those things are freaking gross.” The groom looked down at his beautiful bride, smiling gently.

The wedding guests burst out laughing. The minister coughed out his dentures.

The bride's sky-blue eyes crinkled up as she laughed softly. “I vow never to put you in a situation where you need to eat a mushroom for me.”

The minister replaced his dentures. “It is my joy now, to present you to all gathered here, as husband and wife. You may kiss the bride!”

He swept her off her feet and kissed her. The wedding guests all cheered, wastefully throwing rice and birdseed as the happy couple paraded jubilantly back down the aisle.

As they flew on the plane to Bora Bora for their honeymoon, she snuggled up to him and laid her head on his shoulder. “Thank you for everything today, honey. I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you.” She slowly drifted off to sleep.

Wait, what? he thought. The rest of my life? Did I really promise all those things for her, for the rest of my life? Did I really to commit to this?

He looked over at his new wife. No, he thought. I have no doubts. She is the one for me, forever. He kissed her on the forehead before settling himself down for a nap, thinking: "It's a good thing she agrees with me about the mushrooms."

A lovely, warm, luxurious, tropical-fish-and-flower-filled week flew by. Wonderful food was eaten, beaches were relaxed on, and the hotel bedroom was well used. Everything was absolutely perfect until the ninth day.

"I can't believe we're leaving tomorrow," she said sadly as she pushed around some salmon sashimi on her white china plate.

He sat down with his three plates, all piled high from the evening buffet. "I know," he agreed. He speared three pieces of fugu fish, all prepared in different ways, onto his fork. "I'm really going to miss all this food."

"What about the sun?" She asked. "Aren't you going to miss the sun, and the sky?" The candlelight reflected off her eyes.

He swallowed his big bite of fugu. "You are my sun! And you hold the sky in your eyes."

"Oh, that was cheesy." She laughed anyway.

His tongue began to tingle. "But you laughed!" His chest began to feel tight. "You think I'm funny, don't you?"

Her perfect eyebrows knit in confusion. "Sweetheart, are you alright?"

"My mouth hurts." He stretched his jaw. "I'm falling." He fell.

"Help!!!" She screamed. "Somebody help him!"

A waiter rushed to the side of the table. "Sir. What did you just eat?"

His tongue was numb. "Flub."

"He ate the pufferfish sashimi! What's happening?!" she cried, clutching his hand wildly.

"He must be allergic; he will die," the waiter said simply.

He couldn't feel his tongue. "Duh-what."

"What?!" She screamed again.

"He will die, unless he eats this mushroom antidote. It's the only cure!" The waiter pulled a big white mushroom from his vest pocket.

“Oh no.” He shook his head dizzily. “Oh no no no no no no no.”

“Honey, you have to!” She cried.

“No!” He said thickly. “You prommited!”

She slapped him as hard as she could, which wasn't very hard, and grabbed him by the collar. “Eat it! Eat it for you, not for me!”

The waiter tried to cram the mushroom into his mouth.

“Noooooooo!”

He died fighting.

She went home.

She never wanted to see another mushroom again.

HEART RATTLES RIBCAGE

Philip Sitterding

It's raining. And I didn't bring an umbrella to work
because I thought it was just winter. It's always cloudy in winter,
but today it's raining. My car is all the way over there, and
my shirt is white, and I only just stopped coughing this morning.
I promise I usually plan better than this.

A leaf falls from a branch
and sways, held by the breeze
for a heartbeat,
before it shifts, and brings to my face:
the smell of asphalt, the mist
that soaks you through before you
know you're getting wet.

Inside, they're about to start the lecture:
can a place be beautiful? can a building make God
look good? I'll be late in a moment
or two, but the quiet holds me and whispers

like a car throwing puddles to the wind. And I'm
asking different questions, like how does a drop of rain
smear itself into a line you see for half a second?
The leaf sways for an eternity,
then settles on a spot of God's choosing.

TO FLEE OR NOT TO FLEE

Sara Bee

Monsters. Under your bed. You know they are there; they growl and squeak, mutter, shudder, and creak, right underneath and beneath you. When their beady little eyes glint peevishly at you from that pile of marbles, when their face pops out and grins ghoulishly at you out of the mad floral pattern of your grandmother's curtains, when the skittering of their claws scuttles, rustles, and bustles among the clutter clustered under your bed, one question grows ever larger and more frantic midst the snapping synapses of your swirling brain: do I duck under my blankies and wait in shuddering suspense as every second defies science and stretches on into an ever darkening eternity of time and space as the monster creeps ever closer? Or do I leap heroically from my bed yelling "It is ours to do and die!" as I sprint toward the little light switch which ends all monsters, only to be instantly ended by the sheer awfulness of being jumped by the horror itself?

The Snugglers: this group trusts the safety of a warm cave of cuddly covers. Additionally, it's a well-known fact in monster-haunted circles that if you can't see the monster, it can't see you, meaning the best place to be is way down in the dark depths of your sheets, with a few teddy bear sentries littered about. There's always the hope the fiend will mistake Mr. Cuddles for you. However, there are cons to the snuggling position; there is a strongly demarcated former Snuggler faction that insists one of the gibbering golem's favorite habitats IS that cozy little crack at the base of your quilts, so it's madness to seek refuge there. This sect, though small, is fearfully vocal – typically because of their tendency to bellow like murder when being eaten alive under the rumpled and crumpled sheets. However, most Snugglers agree that these non-believers are simply so wildly clumsy at covers-diving that they get tangled in the sheets and then accuse their one source of safety of being the monster! Despite these dissenting voices, Snugglers are united in their curling, cuddling ways, and firmly believe any unneeded exposure to those creepy crawly critters is lunacy. Which brings us to our next group...

The Jumpers: "Do I want to live out the last moments of my life waiting to be eaten by ghostly ghastly ghouls? Never!" declares this group. There is a certain strategy to this technique; the trick is to hurl yourself as far from the bed as possible in one bound – if you leap far enough, you'll hear the soft snap of the monster's jaws and claws as it just misses your juicy little ankle. Top bunks make this move even more interesting. Though Jumpers heatedly debate over which specific strategy of hurtling through the air works, and which saves you from the monsters only to be

flung headlong into your wall after tripping wildly on the drawer your sister left open last night (being tidy sort of person does help magnificently with this type of strategy), it is an uncontested belief that leaping is always better than lingering. When you wait, you're only waiting for the twitch of long cold fingers creeping up your bed, for the tingling crawl of otherness along your toes, for squeaks and creaks between missed heartbeats. The only solution is a mad leap of fear and faith (except if the power is out; then you're left as nothing but a quivering mass of jellied terror shivering on the floor – this has led to a group of Jumper dissenters, much like the Snugglers with monsters at the foot of their beds).

But the monster doesn't care, he'll come, whether you're a cuddling Snuggler with a slight itchy twitchy fear of uncanny cranny-loving creatures, or a leaping Jumper creeped by the spiny tingle of crinkly steps crunching, he'll still come, crawling under your bed, eyes glowing clickers clacking legs lolling jaws cracking, he'll come.

LOU GEHRIG, LAKE KEUKA, LATE AUTUMN

Adam Whittaker Snavelly

Death walks into the room
like you should have expected him,
just as simple as that,
smiles gently at you,
puts his hand on your shoulder
lightly,
like a leaf,
its bloody edges
scraping your skin.
As if we knew,
as if we could know

how it ate its way
through a man called Iron,
how it eats its way
through us.

We should have had
one last Autumn
on the lake together,
listening to the sugar maples
whisper last rites.

We do not hold love and grief separate,
because they are the same.

He takes you away
not cruelly, but quickly,
waltzes with you
through the room,
out the door,
spinning
like a leaf
above the black water.

MORNING THOUGHTS

Anastasia Kingsley

I hear on the radio this morning
that an ancient skull was discovered
in a forsaken cave, on another continent.
And now the museums are bidding already
at the chance to display this remnant of life.

But I have other matters on my mind, such as
whether to wear the black pants or the blue,
and how long to boil the egg
so that the yolk sets
just right.



ALEXIS

Micah Protzman

NECESSARY

Esther Karram

I opened my eyes to the white hospital room around me and listened to the steady beep of the machine to my left.

Athanasia awake. The tin voice to my right caught my attention, and I moved under the strange tight linens on the bed to look at its metal frame.

Blood pressure: 120/80

Heart rate: 60 beats per minute

Temperature: 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit

I lay there listening to the list. I would see the doctor today not because something was wrong but because I was finally going home.

Home.

The word felt heavy.

I thought it over and spelled it; there was something different about the word, but I couldn't determine what it was or why its presence stirred a forgotten memory.

Your breakfast is ready. The voice chirped as a metal arm stretched forward, bearing a tray with a clear cup filled to the brim with dark green liquid. The arm retreated behind the wall panel as I drank the tasteless concoction down to the last drop.

The doctor entered the room.

"Your vital signs meet standards, and although your body is still adjusting to the procedure, you should find your full recovery uneventful. The ceremony will take place tomorrow, and its completion is an important step in your recovery process." His eyes flicked over the screen as his finger created messages on the glassy surface. "Athanasia, you are officially discharged."

"What do I need to do for the ceremony?" I asked.

"Didn't they tell you?" He looked up.

"I don't remember."

His brows drew together. "Memory loss is common for clone reassignment surgery. Write down the things you cannot remember, and we will analyze them for your next visit. You will find that most memories remain intact, and those lost are of little consequence."

I nodded. "I will. But what do I need to do?"

He looked at his screen and swiped something to the side, "The purpose of the clone is to inject our human impurities into it that we may live from our rational selves alone. The ceremony is paramount to mankind's protection. The stoning of the clone is simple but necessary."

I shivered.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"No." I paused. "Something about the ceremony..." I felt my eyebrows scrunch together as a word flashed then disappeared... what was it?

"What was the cause of your reaction?" The doctor blinked.

"I don't know if there was one."

His finger began to fly quickly along the screen again. "This procedure remains relatively uncomplicated. Phantom lingerings -- this lack of reason and unexplainable moments -- may occur during the first few days. However, any persistence of these lingerings past week one may be linked to regression in your new condition. A strict eye must be kept, and if these symptoms increase, you must contact us right away."

"What does regression look like, Doctor?"

He spoke carefully: "In the extraction of emotion from the original organism into the clone, some traces may be left behind due to an undetermined resistance. If you experience a sensation that is not connected to your physical body or that you cannot logically understand, you must come back to the hospital immediately."

I nodded. I could do that. "Can regression be found in words?"

He stared at me. "What words?"

"Words like home," I answered. "Although house makes more sense to me."

He blinked. "Any words that fall under the previously described sensations I mentioned should be reported if they persist."

“Mother, where will I find the rocks for the ceremony today?”

She fixed the ribbon in my hair. “There is a large pile at the edge of the rock wall; you won’t need to find them.”

“What is it like?” I looked at her reflection in the mirror behind my own.

Her hands stilled as her mind analyzed my question. “The ceremony? That is a strange question, Athanasia.” She paused. “It is necessary.”

“But why stoning? Does that not seem rather archaic?” I did not have enough knowledge to understand.

“That is purposeful. The stoning hearkens back to ancient days as we destroy our old selves to make way for progress in humanity. That’s why we use the stones to build the wall around our city after the ceremony is complete. To remind ourselves of our growth. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mother,” I answered. Rock walls. Growth. They were signs of our advancement to ourselves and to everyone around us.

I slipped on my shoes and opened the door. As I turned, I saw a blonde-haired woman with laughing blue eyes smile at me and heard her call out, “I love you, Anna!”

I froze. And I blinked.

I saw the unsmiling brunette woman before me. “Athanasia? Are you well?”

Was this a phantom lingering?

“Athanasia?” I heard my mother’s voice again. “Are you alright?”

“Yes. I just had some dirt in my eye.”

“You should hurry,” Mother said. “You do not want to be late.”

I nodded. I needed to get to the ceremony.

I began to walk through the street. I had just done something by saying what I did to Mother. I couldn’t remember its name, but it was something I wasn’t supposed to do.

A clamp of nausea tightened around my stomach. I couldn’t place its source, so I shook my head and walked more quickly to the outskirts of the city, taking in the barren wilderness around me as I came to the rock wall.

I found the large stones just as Mother said and waited for the clone to arrive. I saw the trail of dust as the transport truck drove up and watched the wind scatter the particles to new areas. The guards led the figure to the fenced in portion beside the wall. My stomach dropped out of . . . fear.

That word was wrong. I wasn't supposed to know it.

One of the guards studied me as his partner forced the clone to kneel with hands tied behind its back and proceeded to tie its feet. Its shape looked familiar, but a cloth sack obscured my view of the clone's face.

"Are there any questions as to the ceremony, Athanasia?"

I looked him in the eye. "No, sir."

He held my gaze a bit longer than I expected and got back into the car as the other guard removed the sack.

The ceremony was to be held in solitude.

I watched the dust slowly disappear along with the unexplainable sense I had just experienced. I bent down to pick up the first rock.

"Anna, please. Don't do this!"

I jerked my head up. That name. I had heard it earlier.

For the first time, I looked at the clone and saw the same face that I had seen that morning in the mirror. My own face. But the eyes were different. They brimmed with senses, and names flooded my mind. Love. Fear. Hope. Fury. Horror.

I should not know these names. They are wrong; I cannot know them; it is too dangerous to know them.

My suddenly sweaty fingers lunged toward a jagged rock on the ground. These sensations needed to stop.

"Anna, please!" Her high voice was distorted by gasping breaths and obscured by the water that was now coursing down her face. Tears.

I could not face them.

I threw the first stone with all of my might.

AT A SECTION OF CREEK I RECOGNIZED

Travis Kent

Give me the rabbit hole at every tree.
Give me a sunburnt forest quickening,
the laughing bird and bough-curved languid snake,
a fox unfurled slung low and following...

WASHED ASHORE

Karalynn Blatchford

There is no call to rise in the morning, no trumpet to remind me to kneel. When I rise from my bed, it's more of a stumble. I stumble through my dark, windowless bedroom grasping for the door. I am met with more dark. There are plenty of days where the sun can rise before me: on the Sabbath, on snow days, on hot Saturdays in the summer. But if today is a Wednesday, I will feel my way; cling to the rail, note the edge of the stairs with my toes, slide my socked feet over smooth hardwood, stub my foot on the couch and fall into it. Sometimes I'll lie on it, sometimes I sit, criss cross applesauce, in anticipation. There is a big bay window in every home I've lived in. In my head, they face the same way. In my head, they open to the same sky, lightening by the moment.

If there is a call, it's this. It's the anticipation of something beautiful.

I have a list of names memorized more deeply than any Bible verse; confessing that now, I worry that I'm heretical. I ask for the unsaved, and I worry that if I don't pray for people, they'll never know God. I worry that I'm heretical.

I open the Bible and read until some inner poetic sense in me feels like it's right to stop. I'm a pain in Bible studies. Yesterday, I read Matthew 13:1 and I stopped. It says, "That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea." The sea makes me feel better than anything else. I broke up with my boyfriend of two years because he said he didn't love God. But he also wanted to take me far away from the ocean, and that had something to do with it.

I'm far away from the sea during the school year, and all year round, I'm very far away from Jesus' sea. But that's something, isn't it? God Himself, just resting near His creation, like I do.

After I pray and read, I run. It's autumn, and I play a secret game when the wind blows and tousles the branches, shaking leaves loose. They float down and I reach out with both hands, not daring to slow down. Every time I catch one, I feel full of something magical. I worry that that's heretical.

— — —

Later in the morning, I go to my counselor. Every week I show up about three or four minutes early. Juliana tells me to sit in the waiting room, grab a water if I want,

and she'll be with me shortly. I scroll on my phone to avoid making eye contact with other people waiting in the room. I never grab a water; my counselor knows that I bring my pink water bottle every week. I don't know why she still offers, two months in.

Four or three minutes later she calls my name, gestures up the stairs and follows up after me. I hate walking up before her. I want to tell her that, but I don't want me therapist to think I'm weird. Walking up the stairs first means that I have to walk into the room first, and sit first, and that makes me on edge before our session begins, every week. I don't tell her any of this.

When I first became a Christian, my Pastor put his hand on my forehead and, with a little, unwelcomed shove, demanded that I'd no longer struggle with self-harm, eating disorders, or any thing else of the sort. That was six years into habits I had carefully procured. After a month of miraculous healing, I lapsed back into what I knew better than Jesus.

I've had better years and worse years since. Last year was not a good year. But when I entered into counseling this September, I proudly told Juliana that it's been a year since I hurt myself. My mom thinks it's been five. I'm still grateful for any.

Juliana and I have two objectives: to cope with anxiety and to create healthy boundaries with my family. My family believes in bootstraps, not mental health. Juliana and the doctors always seem to doubt me when I explain that it's been a decade since this all started; the shakes and the sweating the dizziness—the hopeless desperation that I learned how to cure with a little pain.

When counseling is over, I take a bus back to main campus and get coffee with my friends. Sometimes we do homework, sometimes we talk about God, sometimes we complain about Baptists. I'll go to work, attend classes, stay up too late doing homework. I'll talk to the people I love that are too far away; my family is doing okay. They're counting the days until I get home. My boyfriend misses me. He asks me how counseling went, and if I want him to pray for me.

And so this is the day: the sunrise, the run, the prayers, the counseling, the coffee, the homework, the boyfriend, and then staggering into bed too late. Lately, when I read the gospel of Matthew, I try to see if Jesus is doing any of the same. No exegete recommends this; maybe it's heretical. But when his best friend dies, Jesus doesn't go to a crisis counselor; he walks up some mountain by Himself. He doesn't drink coffee or do homework; he drinks wine though, maybe. He heals the sick. He gives lectures. And I guess, sometimes, He wakes up before the sun. Sometimes, he sits by the ocean. Sometimes, I am like Jesus. Most of the time, I watch Him in anticipation.



ICE

Emily Welsh

YOU AND ME AND SHAKESPEARE AND MUHAMMAD ALI

Adam Whittaker Snavely

You were memorizing Othello
the first I heard Muhammad Ali had died.
I tried explaining him to you,
but saw your eyes were still iambs
waltzing through the treeline,
and just told you he was the greatest.

There was nothing in the world
to convince you that evening
there was anything more important
than wrapping your brain around those words
corset-tight,
iron pentameter rods straightening you out
till the lines were the only breath you had.

So I went back to reading for Iago,
striking every beat hard and fast
until the page shook,
and you shot every word back at me,
the lines battered between us.

Now, watching the scene,
I'm really above the ring
in Madison Square Garden,
seeing you paw at your prey,
throwing innocent jabs with your left
with your right hand cocked behind you,
all twisted consonants and turns of phrase
waiting to let fly into his jaw.
And quick as a dagger in a plot
Iago's on his back,
staring snowblind into the rafters
while the crowd rises to its feet
to applaud such a masterful reworking of the Bard,
understanding that
you are the greatest, the greatest thing
they've ever seen.

BACKSPACE

Sarah Jackson

Draft saved 3:09 p.m.

Dear Matt,

I couldn't believe my eyes when the guy who bumped into me during a layover at the airport was you. Of all the ways I could've imagined running into an ex, that was the least likely.

How long has it been since we – well, I – broke it off? Six months? You look good. Really good. Why were you flying through Chicago? Did you get a new job?

I can't believe I'm doing thi

— — —

Draft saved 3:17 p.m.

Matthew,

What are the odds we'd end up waiting for our luggage at the same carousel? I still can't believe that just happened.

I tried so hard to erase every bit of you from my life. I threw out the sweater you left behind, I took your stupid fridge magnets off the door. I started over.

And now you're back.

I wish I'd never seen you. Or that I'd at least pretended not to. That would make my life so much easier.

You looked so... confused when you saw my face. Almost happy. Did you actually miss me, after the shitstorm we went through? Just like you to pretend nothing had ever happened. Ignore the problem, that's what you're good at.

You know what? Next time you see me in some random place, just walk right by me. Pretend you never saw me. Pretend you never knew me.

That should be easy enough for you.

Margaret

--

Draft saved 3:32 p.m.

Matt,

I know you probably hated seeing me as much as I hated seeing you. But what are the odds we end up at the same airport?

I never believed in signs before. I never thought that once you left my life, I would ever see you again. I remember sitting at the kitchen table, delaying going to bed just so I wouldn't have to look at your face when I closed my eyes. But now...

Please don't ignore this email. I know we didn't end well. And until I saw you today, I never would have wanted to be reminded of your existence.

But I can't just leave things as they are.

Maggie

--

Draft saved 3:47 p.m.

Dear Matt,

When I saw your face, all I could think was "I guess it really is over." I mean, it's true I haven't seen you in over six months, but I can still hear the shatter from the night you slammed the door so hard my favorite coffee mug fell off its shelf.

I thought I would feel sad or angry since I know you're still with her, but right now I don't. Maybe the next time we see each other it'll be different. I'll ask about your job, you'll want to know how my parents are – they always loved you. Maybe next time we meet we can make unawkward small talk

I don't even know what's so appealing about that anymore.

I would say I hope I'll see you again soon, but I don't feel like lying anymore.

Maggie

Sent 4:15 p.m.

Dear Matthew,

It was such a nice surprise to bump into you at the airport. I hope you and your family are doing well. Next time you're in Chicago you should really stop by.

Best wishes,

Margaret St. Clair

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Emily Welsh, “Still”