LAMP

2020

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Editorial Statement

Jonathan Hart

To put it mildly, friend, you are living in interesting times. You might be reading this year's issue in one degree of quarantine or another—even as spring is beginning to blossom, students are packing up and hunkering down to avoid catching or spreading the coronavirus. At this point, the plans of students, the university, the country, and the world are all in flux, waiting to see how bad things might be. Maybe you don't know what exactly that looks like yet when you read this. Maybe you do, and you are engaged with the work of prevention and treatment, in whatever forms those take. Or maybe you happened on this issue at some point in the near-to-distant future, and all this talk is so much context-less hyperbole and sorry alarmism. (On the off-chance you're in the post-apocalypse, though, sorry about all the YA dystopian fiction you're finding in the bookstore ruins; it probably seems even kitschier now.)

With a human crisis possibly facing us, the arts community has been buzzing these days. How do we support the arts in the middle of a quarantine? What is the responsibility for creating art under these circumstances, and how should we receive it? In answering this last question, some frame art as a refuge or a solace. In the middle of suspended sorrow, or the fear of imminent suffering, maybe literature is a cool washcloth on our foreheads. Through a participation in the sorrow and pain (or, lest we forget, the joy) of others, we arrive at a greater love for and appreciation of one another. This is to say nothing of the deepening of our own interior life. All of this can provide a deep sense of comfort. Others take a different angle and view literature as a spur, or a prod to further action. How can we attend to the exultation and lamentation of another and not come out with a resolve to love, for God's sake? Literature can show us who is unseen, tell us who is unheard, and demand that we address their lack.

For many, of course, these perspectives are not mutually exclusive. And frankly, however we as readers and writers navigate this time we have, I hope we do not reach too absolute a stance. Even within this issue, there are pieces that reflect and react, pieces that soothe and spur. We have room for both in a world that indulges in despair and talks about the "only" victims of this or that disease or action. I hope it is not too reductive to suggest that, wherever and whenever you are, the world is likely not too much different. Wherever you are, in whatever world you live, here we are mid-pandemic, with our uncertainty, our fear, and our collection of literature. We offer all of it to you.

p.s.: wash your hands.

Alice out of Wonderland

Deryka Tso

Lydia Elrod

Self-Portrait with a Playground

Chain-link fence stalks the perimeter / The playground covered in damp mulch smells of sulfur / Just left of the border gate sits / A huge swing set where I fly pump / My brown legs up and down the world hazy/ There I balance tip-toed on the thin edge where / Mulch mixes with gravel few dare follow me / I prefer to be alone with thoughts and stories of purple / Pink mountains mysteries farmhouses sounds nouns / Ugly questions pull me out of trances like who made you / Where are you from who are your parents why do you look / Like that your hair is strange can I touch it what color are / You black and white how does that work my mom says that / I should never marry someone different maybe your skin will / Even out to look like your mom's are you adopted is your / Dad your real dad I just don't think that's right maybe you /

I

keep walking where mulch meets gravel I / Want to keep walking until I reach black asphalt / On the road and then to the forest beyond where / Big tall pines touch the sky and where I could climb / Above and leave all the questions behind now in the dim corner / cubicle with the flickering fluorescent light they still ask me / Why I wear my hair so unprofessionally why my skin / Doesn't look like hers how did my parents manage / To love I could never let my son but maybe you're the / Exception you're not really like the rest of them / I still go to the chain-link fence digging a hole around / The edge that never seems deep enough to slip beneath / In blank hallways I take hold of thoughts and stories of purple / Pink mountains mysteries farmhouses sounds nouns /

Chain-link fence perimeter
Playground smelling like sulfur

Meagan Shelley

me, bumblebee

let me spit into the old ways, fathers,
two gossamer feet stand amidst the corn
my, how strong you've grown, my love
not quite 22 next year.

my rope undid the night my mother conceived,
trailing feathers pointing towards heaven
like wings, the most beautiful i could ever be.

all i leave beside myself
are some lines, some broken pottery

little bees sleep on my flowers here
halting, spinning towards freedom
a fearful thing to have no home

Sarah Galade

The Suburbs

When the sun that brightly lit the sidewalk
and burned your feet through the soles of your flip flops
slips away,

When the venders selling flavored ices
Head down ninth street and the jingle of the truck
fades away,

When children scurry home to their mama's voice,
Yelling "come wash up!"
Listen to what their footsteps say:

Some fathers come home from work,
some never come home at all.

Mamas feed their children homecooked meals
or children heat up frozen dinners.

Some streetlights glisten on the pavement
but some of them only flicker.

Shadows of algebra homework dance
In neighborhoods shrouded in stores that sell liquor.

We are all different, but we are all the same.
Some of us just realize it quicker.

When streetlights come on, or don't
and the sun slips away

Listen to your Mamas, eat your dinner.

Summer in North Carolina
Nychele Kemper

Gifts from God

Tolu Ojuola

We went to Open House that day to meet my new teachers, get my supplies, and do the other Open-House-things. At my new school in this little town they gave us our labeled notebooks and school supplies at Open House, so the minute we got to our wing, I scurried past my new teacher in search of my stuff. I finally discovered a set of notebooks and folders with "Sharon" written on them. Sharon is my middle name. I showed my mom the notebooks while she cleverly evaded my teacher's fresh batch of invasive questions. One look at Mom and I knew exactly where these notebooks would end up.

The droning bell and the pledge of allegiance signified the first day of school. I sat up straight in an outfit sure to wow the kids at school, my baby phat sparkle jeans and Aéropostale shirt. I pulled out my "Toluwani" labeled notebook and waited for my name to be called. Mrs. Jones, my homeroom teacher, went down the roster until abruptly stopping on the name right after Tiffany O'Brien's. She furrowed her brows and ran her perfectly manicured nails through her dusky blonde hair. Eventually, she moved her lips, but no sound came out. We watched her quietly struggle for almost five minutes. Finally, a quivering *Ttttt* sound came out of her mouth, which was all it took to send a bunch of ten-year-olds into a fit of laughter. Eventually, the laughter died down, and I slowly raised my hand and mumbled, "It's Tolu. My name is Tolu." Tolu because I wanted to make it easier for her. I pulled out my notebook and scratched out the last half of my name.

That year, my grandpa came to visit us from Nigeria. Nigeria is the most populated country in Africa, with over 500 ethnic groups or tribes. Our tribe, the Yoruba tribe, is the second-largest tribe in the country. Grandpa was a majority back home, but quite the opposite in South Boston, Virginia, where everyone was faintly related, and the dwindling population never rose over 8,000.

One afternoon, Grandpa came along with my dad to pick us up from school. With a huge grin on his face, my little brother raced over and flew right into our grandpa's arms. I gave Grandpa a half-hearted side hug while nudging him back into the car. Grandpa was wearing one of his brightly colored *agbadas*, a traditional Nigerian piece of clothing that resembled a large robe with wide sleeves. We once took them to be dry cleaned, and the dry cleaner thought it was a parachute. There was no way my friends didn't see him. I bent down in the backseat and pretended to fish for something in my backpack until we left the school campus.

On Sunday, we all left for service at our small Baptist church near the house. I still remember watching the ushers fumble to hand us bulletins when we first entered, and how everyone (well, it seemed like everyone) stared when my parents sat our family in the second row of the church. On the chorus of "Ancient Words," my Pentecostal parents raised their hands, and Bobby back in the tech booth forgot to change the slide because he was still staring. When my parents introduced themselves after service, one Southern lady smiled and pleasantly exclaimed, "Oh, you have accents!"

My dad, also smiling, replied, "Everyone has an accent."

I must have mumbled something because the lady then said she loved all of our Nigerian accents, including mine. I didn't have a Nigerian accent, I was basically just like her, and I needed her to know that. As she was telling us about her Nigerian sister-in-law, I interrupted and said, "I've lived here my whole life, I don't have an accent." I moved here when I was four.

We piled into the car, and I silently prayed that Grandpa would wear something a little more "normal." He didn't. I must have forgotten that God doesn't answer selfish prayers. We got to church and everyone there was so kind and welcoming to my grandpa. They loved him, genuinely loved him, but I kept waiting for things to go horribly wrong. They never did, but that feeling never left me.

After church, our family would usually swing by the grocery store to pick up some items for lunch. I suggested that we go to Food Lion because I knew it wasn't the office water cooler that Walmart was. But we went to Walmart, where we inevitably

bumped into half the town. The friends I'd tried to hide my grandpa from were all there. When they waved at me, I pretended to be engaged in a crucial round of Tetris on my mom's phone. I hoped that they would think my grandpa was just some random guy we were hosting for lunch after church.

Unable to get my attention, they made their way over to us with their moms. When I looked up, I saw that it was just Grandpa and me. Grandpa was busy musing to himself, as usual, and never asked if I would introduce him, but I could tell that he wanted me to. I told him that I didn't really know them. Waving at complete strangers was just one of those small-town things that we did. My grandpa was, and still is, an intelligent man. He was a professor of chemistry at the University of Ilorin and spent his sabbatical researching in the UK. He nodded anyway.

For lunch that afternoon, my mom made Jollof rice and fried plantain. Jollof rice is a Nigerian specialty and my favorite food. It's a delicious combination of spicy stew, a blend of habanero peppers, onions, and tomatoes, and white rice. But if you'd asked me then, I would've told you my favorite food was pasta. Mom made some extra rice for me to take to school for lunch the next day. In the cafeteria, Nick asked me what I was eating, and I passed it off as some ethnic takeout from a local restaurant in hopes that my answer would discourage any further questions. It did. We went back to class after lunch, and Mrs. Jones passed out a form and told us that she had an announcement to make after we turned them in. The form was some kind of government form that read like a legal questionnaire. I quickly filled it out but paused at the one particular question that asked if I was a US citizen.

I glanced around the room, and even though everyone was hard at work on their own forms, I still felt like they were watching me. I hunched over my covered hand and circled no. When I finished the form, I flipped it over to the back before passing it to Tiffany, just in case. My American accent convinced most people that I was a citizen, and I didn't need this form outing me. As we passed in the forms, Mrs. Jones announced that two students in our grade would be receiving awards at graduation for how many books they read. I was one of the students. I couldn't even be excited about the ceremony because I knew it meant that the person I had worked so hard to hide would soon be seen by all.

The day before the ceremony, my sweet, ever-perceptive grandpa came over and asked me to choose between the two outfits he had picked to wear to the ceremony. In his right hand, he held up a freshly pressed *agbada*, his favorite one

I think, and in his other hand he held up a generic gray suit. He asked me, "Ebun," (that was his name for me), "which one do you want me to wear?" I picked the gray suit without even thinking about it. He smiled, kind of, and promised to wear it for his granddaughter. We left for the ceremony the next morning, around 11, and everyone was dressed in their Sunday best. I didn't think my hair looked straight enough, but I was happy that Grandpa was finally blending in. Even though the suit was his size, something about it didn't quite fit him.

We had a little reception outside before the ceremony, and the late May humidity ruined all of the hard work I'd put in on my hair. I caught a glimpse of myself on the way in, and I looked a lot churchier than I'd intended. In my poufy white and green dress and white ankle socks paired with white Mary Jane shoes, I was a far cry from the "cool" look I'd been going for.

After a few interruptions, we finally made it to our seats and talked until our principal started calling people up to receive their certificates. From my seat, I watched Grandpa adjust his suit every few minutes. He was clearly uncomfortable. Even while he was in his suit, I wanted to hide him.

Grandpa had come to visit just two years prior while we were still in Jersey, and during that trip, I had an orchestra concert. That time, he picked out a traditional outfit, not one of his *agbadas*, and laid it out days before the concert in preparation. I remember passing by it and being struck by its distinctiveness. Because clothes are specially designed and tailor-made back in Nigeria, I was fairly confident that it was the only one of its kind in the world. I asked my mom if that was what Grandpa was wearing, and she told me that he had specially picked it out for the evening of my concert. And I said, "I don't want him to come if that's what he's wearing." I may have left Jersey for SoBo, but my change of location hadn't resulted in a change of heart.

My grandpa was the most educated man in his family. He supported all of his siblings financially and in any other way that he could without ever complaining. He loved my grandmother to her very last breath and understood her in a way that the rest of us never did. In all my life, I never heard him speak ill of her. Before my parents got married, he adopted my dad, who'd lost his dad as a child, and welcomed him with open arms into his family. Dad has called Grandpa Dad ever since. Every time Grandpa came to visit, he played soccer with my brother in the yard even though he was well into his seventies. Every night we sat in the leather

seats in the living room and fellowshipped over our cups of green tea. Grandpa could make anyone laugh. But at the time it wasn't enough. He wasn't. What more could I possibly have wanted?

A few days later, we all piled into the car to take Grandpa to the airport. We waved at him as he took off his belt and shoes at security. One minute we could see him, and he was with us, and the next minute he was gone. We waited until his plane took off, and as I watched his plane ascend to the clouds, I asked my mom, "Hey Mom, what does Ebunolorun mean?" She looked at me and said, "It means gift of God."

On the first day of my senior year of college, a few days from my twentieth birthday, I introduced myself in class as Tolu. Tolu now, not for ease or simplicity, but because Toluwani was too precious to entrust to just anyone.

Last night, I called my grandpa and invited him to my college graduation. I asked him to pack his favorite *agbada* and matching *fila*.

Desolate

Abigail Bettenhausen

Aidan Claire Daniel

Fenton Mill Road Is Vacant

We stand in the house to say goodbye;
kiss walls, water carpets

as we go. What is lost.
Before the sun rose, you'd leave for work,

say, *I'm going, I'll see you, I love*
in the blue; awoke with reminders—

in higher light, end of day, we raised
the baby to a tree branch, to see

you pull to the driveway—the last night
of your homeness, the baby slept

through the retching—a beginning,
forever missing. We did not

always miss you when you left.
The high points of trees

were high points. You did not always
say goodbye, and we

did not always notice.

How did we love you. The unoiled shriek
of your coffee grinder in mornings—

cheerful whistlings pierced
into fogged ears—our invitations

to join games you did not care for—you
slammed frustrated cabinet doors—we

sighed heavy and guiltless—
But all of us, Saturday all-days,

spent living in the room made for living
and smiling. I forget

days like those most. Collection
of jewel-toned afternoons in a case. And now,

kitchen and trees and family rooms
behind, I comb window panes

for a shining. I won't forget
that you live here. Everything, here.

Before the sun opened, you woke us,
and the trees greeted you

on your way out. I could not have known.

Of all moments, all days, I see
pieces of us, tableauxed.

—cleared leaves in a cold spell—
dirtclod tomato gardens—

tension-laced Thanksgiving—
sitting on counters, relieved breath—

home all at once—How did we love you?
I woke up to nothing. No sound,

just burgeoning sun. The baby
grew taller and forgot part of your face.

What is lost? I whistle through
shaded dioramas. Blink, breathe, countermelody.

In the after, we extended
our still lives; but the trees

still breathe, and the sun
is staring. I won't forget again.

Every light that crosses
will pass through my fingers, first.

Alexandra M. Green

All women are already their mothers to each other.

Fingers gripping ends of shirt and sleeves, she enters—
back hunched, shoulders bunched—curved into one
concentric collapse.

Sans seeking, you and I spot her
hiding in the wrapped-up wrists and shrunken spine.
We've played the game enough to know every guilt-
curled cranny where one can cram the body.

A cry escapes, an off-tone tremor or accidental attempt
at articulation before she speaks, our names now
synonymous with words like: "please" and "help."

We sift
through rooms and repetition of the same *I'm sorry*
to the scene of her sliced thighs, slipping care on quickly—
a hand-me-down dragged from mommy's coat closet. One day
we decided to never stop playing dress-up.

We move in instinct—
inhale and hide
the knife. Hide
all sharp objects.
Hide her

under comforters, while you and I lie
on our backs in our beds. Crack the doors and listen

like one does to a child who tried
to swallow too much:

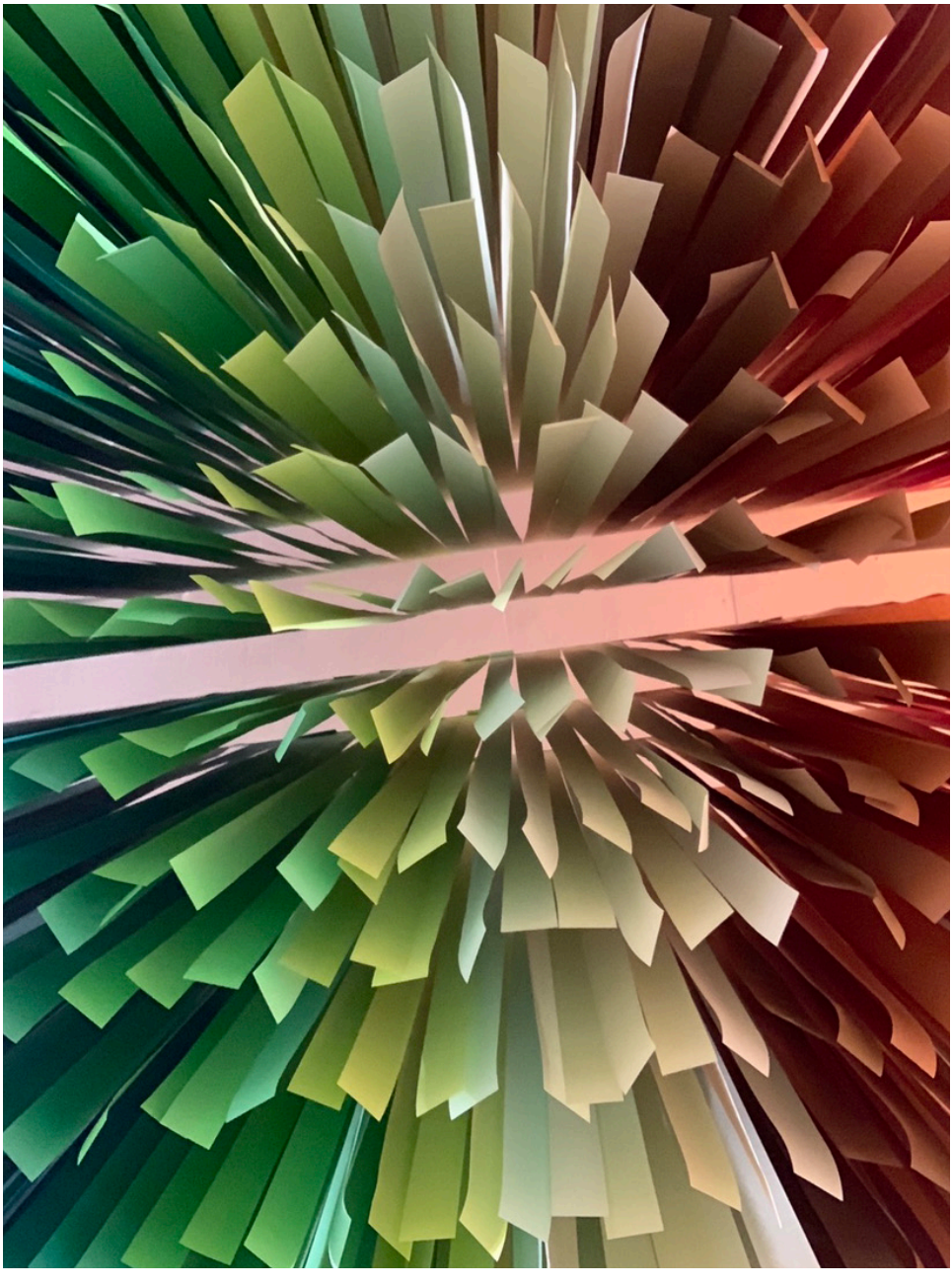
If she can cough,
then she can breathe.
If she can cry,
then she can breathe.

Later, we handle waiting-room wounds
lightly with laughter before she settles in
for a short stay. Outside,

in the parking lot at
patient intake, our faces fracture, out of their bent
benevolence—a downturn into a teary dissolution.

We get sick of being sad.
We get sick of being.
We get sick.

We have learned to bear one another—
growing lives, heavy and pronounced.



Color Factory
Hannah Kaplan

Hand-Me-Downs

Elisa Palumbo

"Mommy, I love your clothes," I said from her soft king-size bed while I waited for her to braid my hair one morning. I was maybe seven, maybe eight, and it was during my I-can't-do-my-own-hair phase, when braids were the only thing that kept it out of my face. I liked my long hair, but I didn't like when it fell loose around my shoulders. Mom sat on her black leather chair and buckled her sandals before looking up at me with a smile. Sunshine flooded through the open curtain behind her, filling the whole room. The rays reflected off her shoulder-length hair, making the chestnut brown shimmer blonde. I squinted as I looked at her.

She laughed and thanked me as she walked to her closet and grabbed my favorite blouse of hers. It was a white viscose, button-up with a collar, spotted with a faint print of light pink roses and green stems. That shirt she wore only on days when the sky was bright blue and free of clouds. The thin white would ripple soft in the breeze because she didn't button it. Instead, she always layered it over a light pink tank top that matched the tiny roses. When I was a child, I found the combination magical.

"I have an idea," I said, as she covered her bare shoulders with the shirt.

"Yeah?" she asked, folding the collar down.

"Can you save me your clothes when I get older?"

"I mean, if you really want. But I'm not sure you'll still like them," she said and faced the mirror.

“Oh, I will!”

“Well, that’s still in a while, Sweets. I might not even have them once they fit you.” She seemed convinced that one day I wouldn’t want her clothes. That one day I would understand.

“Can I at least show you the ones I want you to save?” And I ran to the closet before she could reply.

The hangers squeaked against the metal rack as I flipped through the blouses that hung above me. First, I made her promise to save me the one she was wearing. Then my small hands pulled at the edges of the weightless shirts to find my second favorite: a thicker cotton, off-white shirt with an embroidered center and a design of vine-like green flowers that stretched up both sides of the embroidery. My favorites were the ones with similar intricate designs. Whenever she’d wear them, I was mesmerized.

Once I couldn’t find any more, she put her arm on my shoulder and led me to face her dresser. Standing behind me, she brushed my hair. The plastic bristles massaged my scalp and sent shivers up my spine. With a thin pink comb, she parted my hair down the middle, almost drawing a straight line down my scalp. At that time, the top of my head barely reached her chest. As I stared at Mom’s hands in the mirror, I watched her fingers stroke and part my chestnut brown hair, the hair that matched hers almost exactly in thickness and color. Her nails made a crisp click as they twisted my hair around itself, weaving it, almost knitting it. She knew how to braid my hair just right so that it wouldn’t fall out when I’d play outside, and in my mind, Mom always knew what she was doing.

Mom sat in the black leather chair as she directed her friends who had come to help pack her clothes. I stood in the doorway of her room and watched as tall cardboard boxes covered the light green carpet. Summer clothes went in one box, winter clothes in the other. It was late evening; the curtains were closed. By then, it had been years since Mom had braided my hair. I was eleven, and I had tied my hair back into a low ponytail like the ones Mom always tied in her own hair. But by then, Mom’s hair was short, curly, and dark brown-grey. The chemo had changed its texture and color.

Roughly two months earlier, the doctors had told Mom she only had three months left. Now, in a few days, she and my sister, Rachel, would fly from Mexico to

Minnesota to see more doctors, but mainly, to be with Mom's immediate family. Dad, my brother, and I would stay home and pack up the rest, then drive up with the most important boxes—including Mom's clothes.

Mom sat quiet and watched as her friends folded the blouses and placed them into the boxes. She seemed calm as her friends packed. And she stayed calm as she insisted that they pack her winter clothes, because she insisted she'd need them. But maybe I just remember her looking calm. Now part of me wonders if she feared what her trip back to Minnesota, back to the place where she'd been born, really meant. Now I imagine that inside she was not so calm because, like her, I often get nervous when things don't go according to my plan.

I stood quiet and tried to smile at Mom while I told myself she was only packing for a trip. Then I watched as the boxes were taped shut. The scotch tape screeched a protest as it was pulled apart and stuck to the boxes. I wondered when Mom would open them again.

A month later, I was in Minnesota. I sat on the black couch in the second living room next to the larger one that had been Mom's room for the last few weeks. I sat on my hands and let my feet glide from side to side over the light wood floor. My dry eyes searched Dad's face as he paced back and forth and talked on the phone. Even though it was the afternoon, the curtains to Mom's living room were shut. He hung up and told me to find Rachel while he looked for Aunt Angie. We all met back in the living room where I'd been sitting.

The undertaker needed us to find an outfit for Mom to wear for the visitation, and Dad wanted us to decide. I thought of the tall boxes labeled "Tami's Summer Clothes" and "Tami's Winter Clothes" that I'd watched be filled just a month before. I didn't want to break their seals.

"What about that outfit she liked to wear on Easter?" Aunt Angie suggested.

Rachel and I nodded. It was perfect and made up of several pieces: a light tan skirt that Mom paired with a tan tank top and layered under a sheer, long-sleeved, white blouse. I thought it was exotic. The sleeves reminded me of something the Egyptians might have worn. Something special. When she wanted to dress up, she'd worn that outfit. We looked at Dad. He shook his head.

"That's the one I was thinking of, too, but she told me to leave it for you, Elisa."

Helen Fielding

Passing

What about
        people who
graze our lives, who slip
through the edges like dragonflies,
        skimming a lake and breaking the clear surface
        just for an instant?

Or, objects in a mist,
they fade in and out as our paths intersect through time
        and then diverge again

leaving us this one pristine memory,
trailing muted magic as they pass.

Drake DeOrnellis

Evening After a Storm

Shreds of clouds in pale blue skies
periwinkle and cream
puddles glistening gold

When my dreams lay battered by Atlantic gales,
I'll remember today
and shreds of

clouds.

tender

Laura Martin

The Only Room in the Hospital with Christmas Lights

Taryn Noelle Nunley

Withered dandelions pressed in Bible pages.

Christmas lights and medical masks.

The tile floor is yellow. So are the walls.

Mama's face, damp bed sheets, and the lukewarm hand I hold.

The air smells yellow too. It's not hazy, but it's tangible. It's air I feel go all the way down, fill my lungs, and then return. I don't think I ever get used to it.

Styrofoam boxed lunch, scentless hand sanitizer, and the sterilization of loss.

You'd think a place with this much tile and hard, disinfectable surfaces would echo more. But the air: it's stagnant, stiffened so with analgesics and antiseptics. The steady, sterile beeping of vitals simply hangs. Each beep the same as the next. And the next. And next. And next. Monotonous. Moot.

The floors and walls don't even bother reverberating.

There's a white board with a marker and a box labeled "Goals." Before, its space was filled with words like "rest," "pain management," "hospice"—stepping stones, each carefully placed, reconsidered, and replaced to create a path home. They're

gone now. I see the nurse poised. I see the motion of scrawling loops. I see the disconnected letters spelling out:

Comfortable.

That's it. That's the goal. *Comfortable*. It sits there and stares at the only room in the hospital with Christmas lights. It stares at my aunt as she prays. It stares at me. It sits there and stares, enthroned among the debris of erased goals, betraying its own definition with the disquiet it causes.

During the following days, I am devoted to my mother and this word. When the nurse comes to give morphine, she smudges the lower part of the *C*. As she refills the painkillers, I retrace the goal. And then I hold the yellowed hand under the yellow lights.

Helen Fielding

creative consciousness

eraser shavings and their warm spicy smell

scatter pink around my hand—

within their circle I form a hologram and project it into charcoal

and oil paint, in case some soul ever needs to see

a rainbow or

a velvet rose or

rest themselves in a mahogany pigment rocking chair

Korean Color

Hannah Kaplan

Lydia Elrod

Sauté for Ten Minutes, or Until Soft and Sweet

You chop up the red bell pepper, carelessly pop some in your mouth,
Juicy flesh oozing out.
Then you stir up the pot so gently.

Our love is new, pink/pastel on the inside.
I fall asleep with red memory
(your arms around (cradling) my neck—surface level veins beat).

My cheeks—a deep flush when you tell me about your last love.
I can't tell you about mine.
I can't be the devoured red bell pepper.

The squelch of red cud between tongue and teeth makes my insides crawl,
Like a beached crab, skidding fast across land to get to the ocean—
A blue, tumultuous life.

You can hold my hand, that's fine.
I don't know if you can hold my bloody spleen.
I can't hold a bloody anything.

Cut it open one more time, the bell pepper, toss it in the pan,
Watch it sizzle, let it burn a little.

Alexandra M. Green

Comparative Anatomy

Galaxies like
numinous neurons
floating
in dark divine
mind matter.

In the beginning,
neural plasticity—
life made up,
marked out,
a product
of potentials and pathways.

"Let there be light"—
electric
impulses firing like
supernovae
into the void,
upon the deep,
behind Your unseen face.

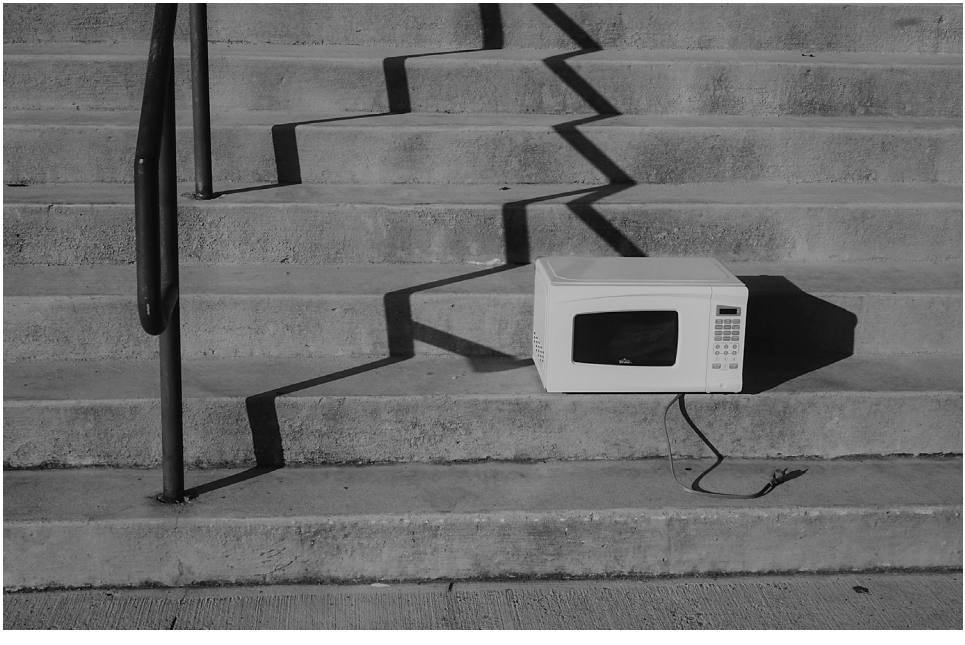
The Milky Way—
microscopic,
some cosmic construct.
Cells *swirled*
in sacred cerebrum.

Sun-sized stars:
heavenly bodies—
nuclei navigating
celestial cytoplasm
beneath Christ's cortex.

Jesus—a junction,
a Messianic gap,
Creator/creation synapsed.

God made permeable
to prayers poured out—

innervated intercession,
willing Your hands to work.



Vanilla

Kayla Coghlan

Something Like Comfort

Brodie Robinson

Patience in affliction.

Brick-red dust had graced the shoulder pads of Pastor Alan's sport coat by the time he realized what Barbara was doing. An off-hand remark had sent her to the Chevy, and now, after a vicious kick into reverse and an equally vicious turn up the gravel drive, he was alone, standing on the stoop of one freshly mourning congregant. He sighed. "Barbara" would be the next entry on his list of fires to quell, right after a church in the red, a drying up congregation, a serious set of swelling knees, and a flaring hay fever. The old pastor was in the straits. There he was, back to the chipping blue paint of a grieving sheep's door, and everything occupied him save that lone sheep.

Patience in affliction.

Perhaps Barbara would come to the end of her fuming before she came to the end of the road. That glorified trail, padded with the tracks of International Harvesters, only stretched so far through the fields of corn. She'd turn back before she hit the main road, or at least turn back when she got to it—the Chevy probably couldn't take a U-turn without clearing out a swath of stalks. But she'd return. And she'd bring the casserole with her. He couldn't conduct a visitation without a *casserole*. Or her, for that matter.

This was no work for him, consoling those who mourned. Barbara had a presence that exuded warmth—she could walk into a room, grab a widower by the hand, and show him hope without saying a word—but Alan's presence was that of the dignitary from on high. His presence was appreciated—reveled in, even—but the burden of the cloth wedged a demeanor of formality between himself and his congregation. Funerals were better: his sermons were canned, and family could comfort itself. In the case of visitations, that little refrain, "patience in affliction," rattled through his head more than the proper "grieving with those who grieve."

He sneezed. This farm would be the end of him. An old friend who shepherded the flock one town over had told him that working the land in places like this was something sacred to be cherished. "You can till up the topsoil with the sweat of your brow and germinate a life by the labor of your hand," he'd say. *Should you manage to stave off the locusts, pests, and blight*, Alan would add to himself, *and keep your nose dry*. He was in the process of wiping some stray mucus onto his sleeve when he heard a gentle rapping on the glass of the door. By the time he had turned, he was eye-to-eye and nose-to-nose with the man that he should meet.

"Need a napkin, Pastor?" his congregant asked.

Neville Travers Hendrix was a stout son of a farmer, a boy widowed young by the providence of God. His cheeks bore the scruff of more than a month's grief; his eyes were bloodshot and glassed over; and his living room, though still bearing the remnants of a feminine touch, like doilies on the side-tables and an empty vase in the corner, now had dirty laundry strewn about it. Something smelled like curdling milk.

"Excuse the mess, Pastor," the boy said, clearing some cans from a faux leather lounger, "You'd think I'd been living in squalor for ages with the way this looks."

"I've seen worse. It's normal in times like this."

"It's just that Dana was the cleaner—that should suit you there." He gestured to the chair as he took the cans to the kitchen. "When I get back from the fields, I just don't have it in me."

"Good crop this year?"

"About same as the last. Good thing, too. Without a good haul, we'd be forced to sell to the warehouses." Neville returned to the room with a little mahogany box.

He set it on the coffee table and plopped himself down on the couch without care for the shirts in his way.

"And you've been eating okay?"

"I've been eating every day."

"And what've you been eating?"

"Whatever's around."

"Burgers and fries?"

"You are a prophet."

But it was nothing so miraculous. Alan could only recall a handful of conversations with Neville and the deceased. Dana had mentioned offhand at one of the church potlucks that were it not for her cooking, Neville would eat exclusively from the dollar menu.

"We had a casserole for you—Barb and I. I should've got it for you before she drove off, but—"

"Something came up?"

The old pastor grinned, then looked out the window. "I'm sure you understand. Something's always coming up when your life is the ministry."

"Something's *always* coming up."

"Nothing too serious. She just needed to go."

"She just needed to go," Neville nodded along.

Alan felt no need to explain that it had been a matter of finance. He had complimented Barb on the black shoes she was wearing. She had mentioned that they were a name-brand purchase, something to put her together for these sorts of visitations. He had told her the purchase was an "unwise investment" given that they were hardly accepting a salary. She had informed him that she had walked through her last pair. The tête-à-tête escalated from being spoken to being yelled, and before Alan knew it, Neville's green bean casserole was halfway across the county, or wherever Barb was.

"So, is there anything happening that I and the church can help you with?"

Neville met Alan's eyes. "My wife's dead, Pastor."

It was times like this where Barb would be useful.

"And what can I do? Are there any questions that I could answer, or . . . ?"

Neville sat up on the couch and drummed his hands on the mahogany box. His head was turned away from the pastor's. It seemed to be fixated on the corner of the room. "No, sir, no questions. This is more of a notification."

"A notification?"

"A notice and a request." Neville sat back into his sofa and rubbed his eyes with his hands. His nails still bore grime from the fields. "You want a drink?"

The pastor shook his head. Neville carried on.

"You see here, Pastor, there's no easy way of saying this, not to a man as righteous as you, but I've never believed in any of this Jesus stuff. It was Dana's thing, not mine. She was the one who dragged me to the services and the Bible studies and the this and the that. It was all her doing, not mine. She wouldn't marry me if I was just a pagan, so for her I ponied up and got myself baptized."

Alan remembered Neville's baptism, the first they'd had in two whole years when it came about. "You pretended… for her?"

"Well, sure I did! A good woman's a hard thing to find, and I wasn't about to let her get away because of Jesus."

"But Jesus is more than a prerequisite for marriage, Neville. When Jesus enters your—"

"No no, none of that!" Neville said, cutting off the pastor. "I don't want you trying to convert me. I made my mind up on the matter."

But Alan was making no further attempt. The pastor was staring through the farmer now. Mere days before Neville had asked to be baptized, Alan held a kitchen-island chat with his wife about moving on. The laborers had outmanned the crop. No new faces had joined the body, and those that remained were aging away. Fewer and fewer filled the pews. But that night—hadn't she fought with him for the good of the faith? Hadn't she given him those words—"Patience in affliction"—and encouraged him to stay? Hadn't she told him that God would give them a sign one way or the other? Hadn't she told him that this sign would be a comfort?

Wasn't this man their sign?

Wasn't he their comfort?

Neville reclined once more, glanced at what appeared to be an empty can, and picked it up. Without breaking eye contact with the pastor, he shook it, heard some beer-hued backwash splashing around, took a swig, and let his hand rest upon his lap. For a minute or so they remained there—pastor and congregant—until Pastor Alan's eyes once more brought Neville into focus.

"Now, about my request," Neville said. He put his can down and pushed the mahogany box toward the pastor. "After the accident, this was strewn across the whole interstate. It was shredded by the windshield, somehow got through it."

Pastor Alan reached for the box and opened it up. Within it was a collection of scraps and pages held together by the remnants of a binding.

"I thought that if I collected the pages, I'd have something to remember her by, a little memorial made from that thing she was so wild about."

The pages were covered in two columns of text divided by a thin blue line. The line itself was filled with numbers and letters—verse references—and among the pages of the printed word of God lay cursive notes penned in Dana's hand. It was an ark, an ark of remembrance, and in Neville's little ark, what little remained of a sham covenant lay honored in the embrace of tattered leather and velvet felt.

"But I need to move on," Neville continued, "and that thing's stopping me. Can't get peace with the Holy Ghost haunting the farm. Still, felt wrong to burn it, so I called you to take it off my hands."

"That's it?" the pastor said, more confirming than questioning.

"That's it," Neville replied with no joy in his tone.

When Barbara returned for her husband, she didn't need to drive her way through the farmer's endless fields, nor did she need to muddy her shoes again with the trek to the door, for when she returned to the mourning congregant's lot, the disheveled pastor was sitting where the gravel met the pavement, rubbing away the pain in his old arthritic knees and intermittently wiping nose mucus onto his sleeve. He hailed her, stuck his thumb out in rote, dry mockery, climbed into the

passenger's seat when the Chevy pulled up, and slammed the door behind him. He bore nothing with him.

"That poor boy's casserole," she said, and gestured to where it sat.

But the old pastor picked it up, tore off its foil, grabbed a handful of the stuff, and took a vicious bite.

She wouldn't ask about the mahogany box he'd been sitting on, or the shredded, gold-trimmed papers that blew along the asphalt.

Garrett Stoecker

Nepal

It makes me nervous
when goats are on death row,
and the footsteps pass by
  together alone.

  And life, dear death,
how did the goat die?
The blood ran down the sidewalk
only a block away from the fruit
  market. I watched.

I remember those ripe so ripe
oranges and crisp wax-melt apples
Dirt covered prayer flags
  on the ground.
  Dead goat, lying next to a chicken.

reflection
Laura Martin

Sarah Jackson

The Thursday After

the phone has been ringing for hours
it will not stop
ringing
ringing people will not stop

calling
the hook barely holds the phone
against the wall condolences crawl
down the lines *we're so sorry*

for your loss
slide through telephone wires *she's in*
a better place now
creep through the speaker *call me*

if you need anything
I stare
at the crack branching out from the corner of the wall
a growing spider's web reaching through the plaster

it wasn't there Tuesday I can't remember
what happened after
Tuesday but I still hear the phone
calling

even when the line pauses
no voices
of the distantly
related listing the name

of the hotel they've booked
for the funeral
can nobody find one
second of un

shattered silence
I still hear the ringing
ringing *Pick Up*
the Damn Phone

Corley Humphrey

Morning after the Thunderstorm

Leaves and limbs tossed around the yard;
a plastic chair stuck atop the neighbors' fence;
the colorful pinwheel, once tucked in the dirt, vanished;
trees ripped up by roots or their tough bark peeled off.
I look up:
Lightning has struck the atmosphere clean;
Wind has loosened rotting plants;
Rain will bring back growth.
The storm has worked its worst and passed;

Life is cleaner than before.

Skipping Stones

Abigail Bettenhausen

A Walk around Camp | The Nurse's Station

Berkeley Freeman

The Middle of Nowhere | Delevan | Berkeley

Before the summer of 2019, I'd been to New York once and that was the city, which I'd describe as the antonym for Circle C Ranch. The old-western themed camp was located on the top of a mountain in the-middle-of-nowhere-Delevan, New York. I applied to be a counselor for middle school girls. They're young enough to be silly and imaginative, but mature enough to be honest about struggles. Instead I was hired as the counselor for the high school girls.

The Cabin | Heat Stroke

I was told that New York was chilly, even in the summer. That may have been true for parts of New York that had AC units; our cabins didn't. Each cabin held twenty-four girls and each side had twelve. Both sides had two co-counselors. In total, that's twenty-eight people without AC.

The Nurse's Station

The nurse's station was less than two hundred steps from our cabin. We were required to take campers there for everything. The small building was bright and naturally lit. Inside were a few chairs, a large stuffed horse, and a desk for the nurse. Nothing forms a connection with campers like walking the gravel road that snaked through camp to the nurse's station ten times a day for Tylenol, water, and band-aids.

The Gravel Road | Kaley

Kaley visited the nurse so much that we threatened to send her home. Somehow, we kept her all week. I think she grew attached to something at the nurse's station. Or someone. Maybe she liked being in a place where people didn't judge her for the scars on her legs.

The Gravel Road | Maren

Maren walked with her head hung low; her short hair covering her eyes. Her arms were permanently crossed and she wore extra layers of dark clothing. I'd typically find her huddled in a corner with her sketchbook, so I'd ask about her drawings. The more I asked, the more she talked. She described how her parents are divorced and her mother spends her time out most nights, "having fun."

The Cabin | Sarah

Sarah's single mom sent her to camp every week of the summer. She enjoyed things like: taping her belongings to the ceiling and wearing heels to every activity. This made for many limping walks to the nurse's station.

The Basketball Court | Thalia

Games were held on a basketball court to the right of the nurse's station. Thalia, a fragile Ariana Grande lookalike, came to me complaining about a headache and nausea. The nurse and I quickly discover she'd been skipping meals.

The Longbranch | Malnutrition

To the left of the nurse's station was the cafeteria called the Longbranch. Items not on the menu included: fruits, vegetables, and anything resembling nutrition. We had chicken patties, pizza, burgers, hotdogs, potato chips, grilled cheese, and lots of dessert. The female counselors gained weight. The male counselors lost weight. The campers loved it—at least, those who ate.

The Nurse's Porch | Thalia

We sat on the porch and watched other campers throw water balloons for game time. As I coaxed her to eat my granola bar, she told me about her sister who kept having kids that their mom is raising.

The Gravel Road | Sarah

On our way to and from the cabin, Sarah would fight us on things like washing her hands, and not bringing frogs into the cabin. When she refused to listen, she'd say:

"I have ODD and ADHD, I can't control it."

She had a name for every frog at camp.

The Gravel Road | Thalia

One night, we had a relay race in a game building by the basketball court. The colorful strobe lights were clouded by fog. Music blasted from the speakers as campers pedaled against each other on tricycles. The perfect ingredients to make Thalia's head hurt.

After getting Tylenol from the nurse's station, we headed up the gravel road to our cabin. Inside, she told me that she believed people would only love her because of her looks. I tried to tell her that's not true love. On that hot, New York night, I think Thalia finally understood where her worth is found.

Outside the Cabin | Kaley

I'd take her outside to distract her with the stars instead of claustrophobia. The sky was black, freckled with millions of white dots. We laughed at my embarrassing stories: a good substitute for Tylenol. I tried to tell her about the Creator of the stars. She grew quiet.

"I don't want to follow a God who makes me follow rules. I feel trapped."

Outside the Cabin | Maren

One night, I could tell by her slouched shoulders and frown that she was upset more than usual. I took her outside and we stood in silence under the stars until she was ready to talk. Eventually, she told me about her loneliness, gender identity, and anger.

Bonfire | Sarah

The bonfire was on the last night of camp. Sarah laid her head on my shoulder and watched orange sparks drift into the dark sky. Maybe she liked having someone

interested in those frogs she had names for. The other counselors would ask how my co-counselor and I handled her. I just had to remember what Sarah said when I met her:

"My mom wants to get rid of me."

Home Sweet Home | Berkeley

I don't remember how sluggish the food made me feel. I can't recall every humid, sleepless night. I'm often asked if I regretted being a counselor. All I have to do is read the letters Thalia has sent me since camp. I wouldn't change last summer if I had the choice. Not because I lived on a huge mountain, and certainly not because of the paycheck; but because of every trip to and from the nurse's station. Sometimes wounds need to be aired out, not just covered up with a band-aid.

Abigail Bettenhausen

Ars Poetica

My poetry is salt in the cuts of the hurt,
not a salve in the eyes of the lonely—

not a sharp slice seizing the seer.
I yearn to be rough and real, recapturing the radiance

Timely and thoughtful; today I cannot.
Poets teach me what I forgot.

Jessica Orton

In this red summer

I learn for the first time
How perverse it is
To pluck a muse from the clear sky
And bind her to this chair

I am sixteen with nothing better to do

Holding fire to my lips in the name of art
is still torture
She says and folds her porcelain doll hands
Her sunbeams scatter on the cold barn floor

Lydia Elrod

Call Me Mchawi

Cinder-block, dummy dummy man,
I let you into the bungalow
For one big fête.

I'll scalp you, primitively,
Like a Pygmy. Dangling limbs
From the blowback.

I am Érzulie.
You are just yams feeding
My meaty metabolism.

Chocolate chokes the throat,
But the Tokoloshe swallows.
Let the Pat Pat begin!

My womb is target-rich,
Like the Zambezi river valley,
Ugliness crawling and weeping.

You ain't neck-breaking me.
You wish you could, lougarou,
But the daylilies open on my command.

Storm Clouds

Esther Karram

For Now

Esther Karram

My mother's green eyes gaze off into the distance, seeing beyond the front window, beyond the road outside. I tilt my head as I stare at her frame sunken into the plush rocking chair. She reaches for her coffee, and her limp red hair lies in heavy waves across her shoulders. The rocking chair groans at the imposition of movement.

Her eyes still stare straight ahead.

"What are you looking at?" I ask softly from the wooden doorframe.

Her eyebrows raise suddenly, but the rest of her movements are steady as if they were already aware that I have been watching. It looks as if a smile might light her whole being in every feature of her face, but instead it flickers a moment as a dull ray. The spark fades quickly.

"Nothing," she replies. Her eyes glance out the window again, if only for a moment. Her brows furrow together as her eyes roam over the long grass in the front yard. She sighs.

I don't speak. She isn't a woman of single words. And I am not disappointed.

"I am tired of running." She sips her coffee and turns back to me. The embers in her eyes produce light and vivacity and catch others aflame, but when the embers have smoldered, the shadows also cast upon others. I'm no longer sure which is happening here. Maybe both.

“Mom?” I ask, “Can I help you at all?” I have seen the list on the fridge and know it is only a fraction of the list in her mind.

“No,” she sighs. “Thank you, though, honey. It’s stuff I need to do myself.” Her eyes follow the petite high schooler from next door carrying a backpack with bulging seams.

We both stare out the window.

Now there is only the sound of the wall clock’s ticking.

I think about all that has to be done. Insurance payments, phone calls, files of paperwork. They all have sucked the oxygen from the atmosphere. I flip through my internal calendar. Is there a date when the continuous list will end? Is there a possibility that it would never—

“Did you see that?” Mom’s words interrupt the noise in my head.

“See what?”

“A cardinal just flew out of that tree. There. Do you see a nest?”

I squint my eyes and watch the branches sway as the wind nudges the leaves aside. That’s when my eyes catch sight of the little furry heads popping out of a brown ball nestled in the branches. The new lives cause me to smile for the first time this visit. The first time in a while.

“They’re there. On the right side of the tree. See it?” I point with my index finger.

Red-tinged wings flutter as the cardinal lights back on the nest. Its head tilts to the side and bends over the fuzzy brown ones. Their beaks open with expectation.

Mom’s eyes take in every detail of the sight before her, unwilling to miss a thing. She smiles.

The clock ticks on; the list is still on the fridge; there is wind in the trees and birds in a nest. And for now that is enough.

Ketchikan Docks

Deryka Tso

Aidan Claire Daniel

In the Dollhouse

When I entered the house, goodness
surrounded and made me.
Plastic finery finally mine:
peach candy bowls and false nectarines.

The chance to be made small!
Perfectly perfect and safe amongst
love notes on fortune cookie paper,
hidden and asking to be found.

Once, in the kitchen, a scroll read,
Like you: special and everyday,
with a gift: a caramel-colored disk
stuck with a picture of apple pie.

Manicured and puzzle-pieced together,
I spent my time tending felt gardens,
unburying notes tied to yarn roots:
Pansies for thoughts. Sweets to the sweet.

My merged fingers picked notes down
as they began to grow from doorways;
I found the fruit around the house,
its handwriting decomposing.

In the clamshell sink:

And, precious, now she'll lament

a toothbrush without bristles?

May her teeth cement in her mouth.

Wallpapered in dreams:

What did she think would happen?

It won't be long at all, now;

next to freeze will be her eyes.

The last sound to hit vinyl ears:

It's what she deserves.

Stupid thing.

Still thing.

Only dead things

live in boxes.

This Light
Deryka Tso

Promise Bread

Brooke Smoke

Preparation, wrestling, ritual. It ends with closure, which is the thing we most want whether we say it or not. There's a warm weight in your stomach that absorbs right into you. And it strengthens you. It gives you fuel for a few hours, doesn't it? I've begun to see baking as an extremely helpful tool for the grieving process. Please keep in mind I've never grieved anything more serious than a wonderful 18-year-old cat I've known for most of my life and a miserable year-long romantic relationship, the latter of which produced two loaves—one sweet and cinnamon and the other plain and buttered. Yes, I have relatives who've passed away, but then I was too young to know why death was sad. Or, alternatively, I was too distant from them to understand what had been taken from me. There are people with deeper voids. They have big black holes and supernova burn marks. My griefs have been just scattered gopher holes; not massive, collapsing stars.

Being a middle schooler with persistent baby fat and a forehead full of acne was the hardest version of myself I've had to embody thus far. My life has been far from tragic, but I still blush when I think of how much I've done to avoid being myself. I wore my hair swooped over my acne like a shield and held firmly in place with a headband. I focused on the ground when I walked and I minimized my posture. These security measures were the best I could come up with in a stage of life where my smile stuck out even more crooked than it does now post-braces, after years of living life without a retainer. Around this time, I knew a girl named Sophie that I

admired a lot. I met her on a soccer field. I stuck back, away from the crowd. Sophie stuck back too, but not for that reason. She likely had a virtual dog to take care of. I did a rare thing and approached her.

"I like your pants."

They were flared jeans with paint splattered on them. She'd customized them herself. I really did love them. They were colorful and different and they complemented the way her curly blonde hair sprung out of her head and fell over her shoulders. She was, as I remember it, perfectly herself. I can still feel the way it stung inside me. I didn't know how to be myself the way she did. I envied the way it seemed to come naturally to her. She smiled a mouth full of colorful rubber bands at me and thanked me for the compliment, giving me a few lines of advice on how to make the pants myself.

A few weeks later, there was an enormous playdate for the co-op kids at a homeschool mom's large, well-acred home. These events happened fairly often in our little society, and my mom, at the time, had been trying to navigate her role in this world of well-pressed khakis and home-baked refreshments. Sophie had been there, but had quickly dispersed without so much as acknowledging me. So I sat for an hour or so listening to the moms chat. They urged me every now and then to join the other kids outdoors, but my own mind forbid it. I was perfectly content sitting by the veggie plate, I assured them. I hid my childish mourning in a very grown up cup of coffee.

A family with two sisters showed up late to the playdate with their mom. They all had naturally curly hair and toted organic baked goods. Upon their entrance, the conversation in the room quickly shifted to essential oils and some vague concern about various allergens.

"I have an anger problem, and gluten exacerbates it," said the younger girl gravely. Her mother rolled her eyes at her own creation.

"No you don't, Olivia."

Olivia stood by her words.

She had eventually introduced herself to me directly and we talked for the rest of the day. She was talkative and deeply mature. I was good at listening. I offered enthusiastic nodding between sips of coffee. I admired Olivia in very a different way. Her hair was lazily pulled back into a low pony, her turns of expression were

hard to follow, but undeniably genuine, and she made me laugh and question life in ways I'd never considered. I haven't seen her since, but I've never once mourned her. Her immediate acceptance of me had left something that made up for her later absence. She had a way of carelessness and expression that naturally invited others to join in the fun. I wish it'd stuck with me longer—the concept of a friendship that didn't require of me constant ritual sacrifices of self; constant repentance for the way I naturally was.

The night my latest idol had fallen, I made bread in the morning. I'd met him the summer before and we'd burned blue and fast, putting words like marriage in between our teeth. It all ended with the summer next. A perfect year cycle. I posted a picture as I was going at the bread-making, and a Jewish friend of mine excitedly asked me if I was making Challah bread.

As a quick aside based on later research, the braided Challah bread comes in three or four or six or sometimes even twelve strands (twelve for each of the tribes of Israel). No matter how many strands, there's always a loaf of tangled arms squeezing together a comforting reassurance. According to Jewish tradition, Challah represents the manna that God sent to the Israelites during their prescribed forty desert years. It is, I think, meant to remind us of the Exodus promise that empty stomachs will be filled.

But no, it wasn't Challah. I grew up Catholic and was at this point some type of non-denominational mess. This bread was meant to be my comeback bread. The three strands had meant nothing to me but an added bit of intricacy. The purpose of this bread, to be blunt, was to take my mind off things. As I twisted the strands together I pulled apart at the false front I'd constructed over the last year. Here was I now, beginning the complicated work of deciphering what parts of me were me and which parts of me were him. My little over-stuffed void was empty and my soul was trying to figure out what came next. The raw dough submitted to the frustrated, emotional beating I gave it. I kneaded my confusion into it, every single one of the stages of grief.

I responded to my friend's comment and told her I wasn't Jewish. I set my raw dough aside and let it swell up, and when I came back to it I subdued and rearranged the dough, anointed it with an egg wash, and sprinkled on a poppy-seed manna-promise from the sky. I felt a strange calm now. Even a sick sense of humor. Maybe there was a peace that came from the Jewish promises that weren't mine, but

somehow belonged to me too. Maybe there's a stillness that comes after an altar has crumbled. Maybe my now increasingly gluten-sensitive stomach wouldn't even be able to handle this over-loaded creation of mine anyway. I pushed the baking pan into the oven, rested, and my mind fell to dissecting the notion of covenants and the mingled scents of cinnamon and butter.

Sky Lift
Kayla Coghlan

Alexandra M. Green

Aftermath

Eventually, all mathematics
becomes applied.

Memory:
reverse engineering—

is from *was*
back to *is*
again.

In the aftermath,
everything must add up.

To be is to become skilled
in the slow study of value and
how to assign it—

for every *X* a *why*,
cause and effect,
each input its output.

In hindsight, isolate
        people and places,
        events into variables,
        add and subtract,
and
r e a r r a n g e .

How
        did
                this
                I
        get
here?

Each tragedy—
another something to solve.

Drake DeOrnellis

"So how was the work picnic?"

There was an accident on 29 on the way home. Traffic was backed up farther than usual, and at first I groaned because it was 6:14 and I hate parties and Robin cried in my office today and I just wanted to see you and eat mashed potatoes. Then I saw the cars parked on the other side of the median strip, people rushing over to our side. Sirens sounded behind me, and I merged into the right lane so the state police could pass me, but my mind was a blur. Then there was smoke. It curled, curled, curled, into the blue sky, like the smoke from Mitch's grill. I inched forward, until I could see between the packed cars . . . And then a burst of flame. A pillar of smoke billowing into the air. They leapt back, the people helping the Honda I mean. Two more police cars. Fire extinguishers. I think I prayed then. I wanted to help. But there were already too many people getting in the way. I heard another siren and drove forward, past the flaming car, watching the heated air ripple in my peripheral.

Then the highway was clear, and I kept driving home.

"It was fine. The sky was so blue."

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