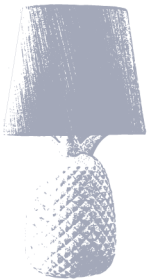
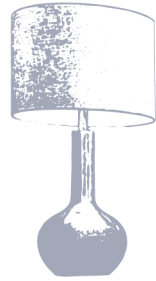
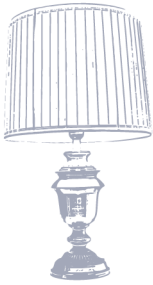


# LAMP

Literary Magazine



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# LAMP

*Literary Magazine*

**2024**

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# The Last Supper

Kaley Hutter

## *First Course*

My salad has fruit in it. Nubby strawberries plunked in the wilted romaine and poppyseed dressing. I can't remember why I wanted them there, red pretension glaring up at me from the purple-rimmed paper plate. Grammy would've put it all on the white ceramic. But those are all packed up.

Across the table, Pop stares at me under gnarled gray brows. "You're crying," he says.

"I'm not."

"Do you have a cold?"

"No."

"My lettuce is brown."

"Mine is fine." I scoop up walnuts, trapping them between my plastic fork and the lip of my plate. Outside the house, the rain has stopped.

"What do you study now?" he asks.

"Graphic Design."

"I thought it was Art."

"It's kind of like that."

"You know, Grammy's an artist."

Something close to reverence colors his voice. Behind him, the sliding glass door stands ajar, filtering strands of garden smells through its screen—purple pansies. Wet dirt. The heaviness of the pregnant heat that follows rain.

"Too much dressing," he mutters.

"I don't mind it."

His quivering eyes fasten back on me. "Don't get sad again."

"I won't."

Under the table, I trace the scar tissue in the wood. Round and round my fingertips thread its fault lines, like a mare nosing around an abandoned racetrack.

## *Second Course*

I overcooked the sirloin. I set down my plastic knife. He gnaws on his garlic bread.

"This bread is tough. What kind is it?" he asks.

"It's a baguette."

"Tastes like it's been sitting out for a week."

"Do you want me to cut it up for you?"

"No, no."

*Scenes From an Italian Restaurant* ambles from the radio in the den. From two rooms away, the sound has lost its usual warm crackle.

"Where are you in school now?" he wants to know.

"Chapel Hill."

"In Carolina!"

"Yeah. You went there."

"I did! And what are you studying?"

"Art."

"Art. That's lovely."

"I like it."

"What kind did you say?"

"A baguette. It's French. It's supposed to be hard on the outside."

"Bag-ette." He pronounces the word carefully, like he's trying to get it off the roof of his mouth. "Did your dad make all of this?"

“I made it.”

“You did?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s good. Is he at the hospital?”

“No, Pop, he’s back at the house.”

“I bet you want me out of this place too.”

His accusation cuts. A shard of glass in the steak. I pick up my plastic knife, set it down again. “It’s a nice place they picked out,” I say.

“I don’t need help. We have everything we need right here.”

“They do all your meals and everything.”

“They’re kicking me out of my house.”

His eyes are gray and watery, seeing past me. Little droplets still cling to the sliding door. Wet lines trail down the glass like forgotten trains of thought. Will he say my name? Does he know me still?

“Grammy wanted you to go,” I try.

“I’m not going.”

“I’m really not the one to take it up with.” I probe my fork into the meat. Far away, the radio croons for Brenda and Eddie, waving goodbye.

“Tough,” he says. “The bread is too tough. Don’t you think?”

### *Third Course*

There was leftover cheesecake in the fridge from his birthday. When he speaks, his mouth is full, and his eyes are clear.

“You don’t like it?” he says.

“Just not hungry.”

“Grammy doesn’t like cheesecake.”

“No, she didn’t. She made the best Bundt cake though.”

“Glory! When she comes home, she can make us some.”

Under the table, my fingers pause. A wet leaf catches on the screen door, flapping like a cardinal’s wing. He scrapes his fork across his plate. I stand.

“Are you finished?” I ask.

“Yes, thank you.”

He says my name. With it, a selfish relief breaks open, pours over me as I gather up the plates and plastic and head for the kitchen, sliding the glass door shut with my elbow as I pass.

# To the Lyft Driver Who Ripped Me Off \$20

Sarah Tate

Your cologne fills the car like beach air  
before the release of a rainstorm.  
When I say, I'm new here, you point out  
the smooth shapes of the buildings,  
the sun landing like strips of confetti.  
Do you celebrate here? Smile  
over the shine of stars in puddles?  
Are there birds in your city?  
Birds to take the bread from your hands,  
to dart around in a dance above your head?  
Do you pray for God to line the moonless roads  
with angel wings folded over you?  
When you leave me at the hotel forever,  
will you return home, take off your shoes,  
and cry, sometimes with the ease of music?  
I can't tell by staring at the back of your head  
if you're the kind who thinks  
the iron of the air, the blood of survival,  
is what the world really smells like.  
Maybe, though, you're really a man  
who takes long walks in your city  
while the pink sun fades away,  
who stops to admire the sidewalk lilies,  
noticing they grow taller every year.

# Endurance

Hudson Rice

You have spring moon eyes that do not wander,  
and you run so fast, and it does not make sense—  
water frothing and jumping off  
irresponsibly mossed rocks.  
Here in the mouth of civilization.  
you on my mind, I am lulled into the  
warmer kind of sadness.  
A plaintive mule-cry,  
ignoble, unsteady sadness—  
the only thing I will not forgive you is  
your boiling way of knowing yourself.

You have seen me mendicant,  
and you're kind like overpass wildflowers  
or tired midnight river mud.

Relief-bound in the dark and savory air,  
high above the domain of flippant young men  
and the cruelly soft, sleepily empty words of those  
cost-benefit monarchs and monastics,  
you will sway in time with some gentle song  
that will know you recklessly,  
battered heart mending slow  
but mending stubbornly.

# Interruption

Melia Tetrault

Cora Morton was jostled out of her television-induced stupor by a knock on the door. She frowned and looked over her shoulder before settling back into the couch. The knock came again. Louder this time. Cora gritted her teeth and fumbled for her cane. She braced one hand against the couch, planted the other firm on the head of her cane, and pushed upward. Her hips creaked and her knees clicked as she transferred her weight to her legs. She stood still for a few seconds. No dizziness. As she walked toward the door, familiar sparks of pain shot through her ankles.

There was another knock. “Hold on,” she snapped, her fingers stiff as she twisted the lock. Then she shuffled back a few steps to swing open the door.

“Mrs. Morton?” There was a young woman on the leaf-strewn front porch, her hands clutching a bundle of flyers.

“I don’t want whatever it is you’re selling,” Cora said, moving to shut the door.

“Wait!” The woman held out a hand to stop the door from swinging shut. “Your neighbor sent me.”

Cora blinked. “Which neighbor?”

“Alice Levine. She wanted to invite you to her husband’s service.” The woman extended a flyer. Cora took it from her hand and saw that it was a funeral program. She squinted. The words *In Loving Memory of Aaron Levine* were looped in cursive across the front. She recognized the man in the picture. Dark brown hair, a soft jaw, easy eyes, red cheeks.

“How did he pass?” she asked.

“He had a stroke.”

“He was barely thirty.”

“It happens.”

“I suppose so. Why does his wife want me at the service? I barely knew the man.”

“Alice said he brought your cans up for you. And that when he did, you’d give him advice. About Layla.”

“The baby?”

“Yes.”

“And for some advice, she wants me at his funeral?”

“She thinks Aaron would’ve wanted you there.”

“And who are you?”

“Harper. Her sister.”

Cora shook her head. “I don’t go to funerals.”

“Please. Alice wants you there.”

“I’ve never met Alice.”

“For Aaron, then. He was a good man.”

“They’re all good men after they die,” Cora said, raising a brow.

Harper bit her lip. “Fine. But hold onto the program. The address is on the back page. I hope you change your mind.”

Cora stuffed the program into her pocket and shut the door. Then she reversed paths, heading back to the couch. She bent to straighten the waterproof pad on the worn cushion, then lowered herself down. Turned the TV on, then muted it and pulled out the program. It was certainly a shame that Aaron was dead. She’d have to find someone else to bring her cans up from the road.

\*\*\*

Cora woke up to find her living room bathed in evening light. Streaks of sun splintered through the blinds and scattered across the shag carpet. The TV was still on, playing old Westerns. Cora adjusted and felt

warmth beneath her. She sighed and waited a moment before repeating the process of getting up off the couch. She made a slow circuit from the couch to the bathroom to the laundry room. She'd once told Thomas that if she ever had to wear diapers, he was required to shoot her first. They'd laughed. Now he was dead, and she wet herself every time she fell asleep.

Once she was dry, Cora turned on the yellow kitchen lights and opened the freezer for her frozen lasagna. Oven on. Timer set. She poured a glass of water and added the regular amount of thickening powder. Took a sip. Chalky, but smooth and thickened enough for her to swallow. Cora hated the stuff, especially when it lumped up in grains at the bottom of the glass. But it was better than aspirating. She sat at the chipped wooden table with her hands in her lap, waiting for the lasagna to heat.

On the day Thomas died, Cora had left the living room with a smile to fetch a DVD. When she returned a few minutes later, he was slumped on the floor. Cora had stared down at his body, a pile of clothes and bones at the foot of the couch. His eyes were shut, and his face was calm. His tawny brown hair was ruffled and fanned out on the carpet around his head. Everything in Cora had longed to kneel at his side and slide his head onto her lap. But she knew that if she got down on the floor, her hips and knees wouldn't allow her to get back up again without help. So she had settled for calling 911, pulling a chair in from the kitchen, and sitting beside him with her hands folded in her lap until the paramedics arrived.

In church that Sunday, the pastor had announced Thomas's death for the prayer list.

*Please keep Cora Morton in your prayers. Her husband, Thomas, passed away four nights ago of a heart attack—*

Before he'd finished the phrase, Cora had noted the reactions of those seated around her. Frowns and slight intakes of breath. A few tuts and shakes of the head. Concern. Empathy. Then the pastor had finished the announcement.

*—at ninety-six years of age.*

Cora watched. Their faces changed. Nods and pursed lips. The looks of sharp concern faded slightly. Frowns softened. Cora's fingers twisted together in her lap, forming a tight clump.

Cora figured she knew what they were thinking.

*Ah, they said to themselves. It was his time. That's alright then.*

Didn't they know that her universe had crumbled in the span of a single moment?

When the service was over, Cora had left as quickly as her aching bones would allow. She hadn't been to church since. She told herself that doing her hair and makeup took too much time. It was too difficult to pull up her stockings. Too hard to slide on her shoes. Too dangerous to drive.

The timer went off; its shrill alarm made her jump. Cora swallowed hard, erasing the faint metallic taste of tears that had gathered in the back of her throat, and slowly stood. She braced herself on the counter and bent down to open the oven. Slowly and carefully.

Thomas's death had pained her, but not so much in the initial weeks. Cora had assumed she'd die soon after. Isn't that what was supposed to happen? But the weeks had gone on. And on. And she'd kept breathing. It wasn't right. She staved off her grief for four months, waiting and hoping for release.

Then one day she woke, and it hit her. She was only ninety-one. He'd lived to be ninety-six. She might have years left to live.

She didn't get out of bed that day. But the next day, she rose. Not out of any sense of resolve or desire to persevere, but because the bed was wet, she was wet, her back was itchy, and she smelled sour. If she was going to lie in bed and wait for death, she'd do it in a clean brief, atop clean sheets.

Cora had laboriously cleaned both herself and the bed, then migrated to the couch. She put on the DVD they'd tried to watch that night and cried.

Everyone always described grief as synonymous with violence. They often said that a person had been ripped from them, leaving a raw hole behind

in their chests like a gunshot wound. Cora found those sentiments theatrical. For her, Thomas hadn't been ripped from her life. He'd faded like ink. For months she felt him, saw him, smelled him, expected his familiar face around every corner. As the months went by, he'd melted away, until she couldn't remember the exact way his hair curled behind his ears or the precise angle of the laugh lines around his eyes.

Cora scraped the last of the lasagna off her plate and took a swallow of the thickened water. She looked at the clock and grimaced. Nearly two hours had passed. Cora hated it when she drifted in thought and lost her sense of time. It made her feel old. As if her mind was slipping.

Had it really been two months since she'd stepped outside her house? She counted on her fingers. It certainly had. The groceries were delivered and that man, Aaron Levine, took care of her cans. She pulled the program out of her pocket.

It truly was a shame that he was dead. She hadn't really known him, but he'd loved that baby. Layla. He'd knock on her front door after finishing with her cans, and when she answered, he'd ask some sort of new-father question. *Her diaper rash won't let up—any suggestions? She's colicky and the medicine isn't doing much. What should I do?*

The first few questions had annoyed Cora. She barely remembered how to form words after so many days of silence. But he'd looked so earnest and concerned. She'd assumed he was unmarried. A single father. *Doesn't that internet answer questions?* she would ask him. Aaron would nod and shrug. *Better to get advice from a woman, right?* And Cora would answer his questions, less reluctantly each time.

Cora squinted and studied the face printed on the page. She turned the program over. The funeral was tomorrow evening at Grace and Mercy Church.

\*\*\*

Cora stood in front of her bathroom mirror, debating whether to curl her thin mass of white hair. She only curled her hair when she was planning to go out. Did she plan to go out? It puzzled Cora that she was even considering it.

Thomas's funeral had been so small, Cora had wondered why she'd even arranged for it to happen. Neither of them had any living family, so the whole affair had consisted of her pastor and a few older members of the church. Why would she want to go to some young man's funeral, where there was bound to be a multitude of people who cared more for the death of a young man than an old one?

But she wondered. Maybe grieving would feel different in a room full of others grieving. Alice had lost her husband, and so had Cora. It wasn't quite the same. They couldn't have been married for more than ten years. What was ten years to sixty-four? There weren't many who could understand the devastation that came from losing a partner after more than half a century. But Aaron was a good man. And she had never actually met his daughter. By now, she must be almost four months old.

*Yes, she thought. I think I'd like to meet this baby.*

\*\*\*

Cora was not surprised to find that grief felt practically the same. The church consisted of a room full of people trying to hold back sobs. Wasn't that exactly what she did at home? Held back her sobs because the motion hurt her chest and lungs?

The bundles of flowers spread throughout the church hall were artful and smelled sweet, but they looked oddly dreary amidst the crowd of black dresses and coats. The room was tense with clogged tears and the rustling of tissues. The only one who cried loudly was the baby. Her shrieks and whines echoed, and the woman delivering the eulogy was sending Alice concerned glances, raising her voice more and more to be heard over the wails.

Cora craned her neck and saw Alice and Layla in the front row, near the aisle. Alice was bouncing the baby in a sorry attempt to stop the crying. She wasn't really bouncing Layla so much as she was jostling her around. The baby's tear-stained cheeks bounced with each bump of her mother's knee. The purple bow atop her head wobbled and slid down the side of her little face, finally resting against her ear. Alice was staring wide-eyed at the podium, as if to solve the problem by looking away.

Cora shook her head and reached for her cane. *Some people just don't seem cut out for parenthood*, she thought to herself. Heads turned as she slowly made her way to the front of the church. The muffled tap of her cane, followed by the scuff of her shoes on the polished floor, seemed like the loudest sounds in the church. The speaker at the podium scowled. Cora scowled back.

*They probably think I'm senile*, she thought. She trudged her way to the front of the church and stood in front of Alice and Layla. Alice looked up and blinked.

Cora motioned for the people in the pew to make space so she could sit down. They exchanged puzzled glances, but when Cora huffed and motioned again, they reluctantly obliged. Cora turned and lowered herself onto the pew, feeling the rounded head of the cane cut into her palm as she put her weight on it. Finally, she sat down with a sigh and turned to Alice. The woman was most certainly confused. She didn't seem to recognize Cora. Cora also noticed that the speaker had stopped talking. Everyone was staring at her, waiting for some sort of explanation.

"Give me the girl if you're not going to stop her crying," Cora said.

Alice looked affronted. "I've tried. She just—"

"You're shaking her. She's a baby, not a rattle. Give her here."

Alice hesitated, then handed Cora the baby. The tension around her eyes eased as Cora took Layla into her arms.

Cora leaned against the pew and stood the baby on her lap. She held the girl under her arms and gently bounced her up and down with a few smooth motions. Layla sniffed and hiccupped, but the wailing calmed. Layla reached for Cora's cross necklace and clenched it in her little fist.

Cora gave the speaker a pointed look. "Continue," she said.

The woman swallowed and returned to her notes, stammering out her last few lines.

Alice sagged against the side of the pew and rested her face in her hands. She truly looked terrible, Cora thought. Her hair was limp against her neck, and her clothes were rumpled, like she'd wadded them into a tight ball before putting them on.

Cora kept Layla busy throughout the rest of the service. She didn't notice how tired her arms had grown until she handed her back to Alice, who took her back with a look of dread.

"Thank you," Alice muttered. Then she turned away and handed the baby to her sister, Harper.

Harper settled Layla on her hip and turned to Cora, looking as if she had something to say. Cora stood as quickly as she could, turned, and worked her way out the back of the church.

\*\*\*

Cora was settled on her couch, eating breakfast and watching the Game Show Network, when she was interrupted by a knock on the door. She frowned. Couldn't anyone watch a show in peace these days?

Cora shuffled over to the door, opened it, and peered outside. Alice was standing on the porch, crying. She was holding Layla, who was also crying. Alice's eyes were surrounded by bits of smudged mascara, and her baggy shirt was speckled with white powder.

"What have you done to that poor baby now?" Cora snapped.

"I don't know. I was just trying to change her," Alice sniffed. "Aaron was the one who..." Her voice trembled, and she pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. "You see, I'm in the middle of my residency. Aaron was staying at home with her."

Cora bit her tongue. A stay-at-home father was a strange notion to her, but things were different these days.

"You were so good with her at the church a few days ago. I just thought—"

"I'm ninety-one years old. I can't babysit for you. I couldn't even pick her up out of a crib, not with my back the way it is." Cora heard a note of regret in her voice that surprised her. She stared at Layla. She was surprised to find that her arms ached to hold the baby, even though she knew the added weight would hurt her joints.

"I'm not asking you to babysit, not really," Alice explained. "I'm assigned

to night shifts right now. I've been up for over twenty-four hours, and I just need someone to stop her crying so I can get a few hours of sleep. Every time I get her settled, she starts crying as soon as I set her down. Please, I just need a few hours."

"You shouldn't leave me alone with her," Cora said. "Like I said, I can't care for her properly."

"Maybe I could sleep on your couch?"

Cora narrowed her eyes. "What about your sister?"

"She had to fly back home for work. Please."

"Fine." Cora stepped aside. "Go ahead and take the guest bedroom. It's the first door on the left, down the hall."

"Thank you. Truly," Alice said, her voice breathy with relief. "If you need anything, just wake me up."

Alice got Cora settled with Layla on the couch, then stumbled down the hall to the guest room. Cora stuffed a pillow under her arm for support and held Layla close to her chest. The baby settled into a restless sleep. When Layla grew fussy, Cora bounced her ever so slightly, and she calmed.

Alice woke a few hours later and took Layla back to her house, thanking Cora again and again. Cora called her the next morning.

"You can bring her today, if you need to," Cora said.

"Are you sure? I don't want to impose."

"I don't have much else to do. Feel free to bring her."

So Alice did. She also brought some takeout containers of soup and vegetables for lunch. The food tasted better with company. They didn't talk much about their husbands, but Alice had endless questions about Layla. Cora dragged some old baby books out of the garage. After a few weeks, Alice smiled as she held Layla, and Cora smiled when Alice knocked on the door.

## Currents

Kyle M. Lowry



*Digital Photography*

# The Hoping

Lily Coddington

(A re-organization of “Days” by Billy Collins)

Somehow, before the waking moments  
of each so bright and glinting a day,  
everything is precariously set in place.

With no used ground or no Wednesday to find,  
entertainers might clink on a cold stage  
through the thick ice upon your eyes.

This heavy cup and saucer on your forehead,  
just another one of the stacked dishes,  
placed like masonry, mysteriously resting

on all of the days past,  
but without one more.

Turrets of clouds build off your breath,  
*be you*, you whisper to yourself,  
*it is impossible*.

The slightest doubt perched on the top  
of the tall ladder, one high tower,  
before the open window.

Today begins in its place, yesterday’s gift,  
this calm, the hand holding you, the sun,  
your eye of wonder, then add the snow

**Author’s Note:** This poem was created from the words of “Days” by Billy Collins. To me, the poem’s original imagery built toward an idea of hope, finding the joy in each day and being grateful for each new morning that is given. The goal of my revision was to approach that idea from a new angle.

# To the Dead Bird Outside My Window

Ashley Schwartzkopf

Withered flight of bone and broth,  
A tragedy that foolishness brought.  
Your song no more to sing for me,  
A life by the window set free.  
Can you rest your little soul,  
Plastered against the stones  
And gravel of your tomb,  
Baking in the sun and  
Simmering in the moon?

# Eulogy

Sophia Jantomaso

My gaze crawled around you. I *saw* you. And I fell in love with you after I saw that hammering heart, a schizophrenic metronome, banging and banging, reaching out to me, if eyes were hands, from underneath your skin. And now my memory sings over you, standing with hands clasped soberly in front, at the grave of someone I loved—loved madly, loved unthinkingly—and out of my folded hands slip dried red petals from the books where I laid those five fresh ones I ran upstairs to put in water when you brought them to me that first Sunday afternoon before the park. Five red roses. I laughed. What a strange number, one less than half a dozen.

# Gull (Sea)

Tyne Glen

On  
sea-wind  
above white sails  
and blue whales,  
or shore-gusts over  
rooftop tiles, the  
waterbirds fly.  
They have all the  
sky. They own the land  
and churning crystalline waves alike. No nook of the  
earth is beyond their jet-tipped wing's sharp touch. Why then,  
when they have the world, do some wispy gulls choose  
to parade around gooey  
parking lots? Where  
their yellow bold  
mouths berate  
whomever while the  
black tar melts  
with hot car tires.  
Why? They cheat  
on the  
sea.

## Conservation: A Haiku

Liv Matson

Real squirrel perched on  
Fake rock—he doesn't divine  
The difference in homes.

## Anywyn

Daniel Elmore



*Ink and Paper Illustration*

# The Rain Is Full of Ghosts Tonight

Jack Fanning

Delaney thinks more in the dead of night than she ever does during the day. That isn't to say that she thinks *better* at night. She doesn't. But that's okay. Daylight may be focused and present, but moonlight is reflective. Moonlight is soft.

She pulls a blanket around herself and sits by the window. She looks at other windows, imagines the people sleeping behind them.

She has smoked three cigarettes in her life, and it is moments like this when she wishes for another. The ember dangling from her fingers would glow against her cheeks. Smoke would stream from her pursed lips like a long breath freezing in the air.

It is a romantic image. It is cinematic, even. And every day, she decides that it will remain imaginary.

Time, it seems to her, has left her behind. She used to have friends, used to keep herself busy. It was an exercise of power to decide that she didn't want to be alone and, as if by magic, to no longer be alone. Those friends could be cruel, sure, but all that mattered was that they were there. Besides, liquor enough could make anyone tolerable.

Now, though, she isn't like that. She doesn't drink. Hasn't talked to those friends in months. And in daylight, in monologues to therapists and mirrors, she says that she is doing better. That she is making better choices.

But with moonlight streaming through the window, holding gentle to her cheek, she knows that she is just tired. If it would change the hard knot of emptiness in her chest, she would welcome any friend or lover, any drug or drink.

But nothing has changed her yet. She isn't sure that anything ever could, really. Every path she has tried to take away from this version of herself leads right back to sitting by a window, desperate for a cigarette she wouldn't even like.

So she breathes deep, hugs her chest, and begins to tap her collarbones with a slow rhythm she can only hope will put her to sleep. Eventually.

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"Delaney? Where are you right now?"

The therapist's office is cold, and while the couch appears both professional and comfortable, she cannot relax on it. Delaney drags the toe of her shoe across the carpet and focuses on how the fibers spring back into place.

"Sorry."

"That's okay. Do you feel comfortable enough to continue?"

"Sure. Yes."

"Alright then. We were talking about the target memory, one that comes up when you think of these feelings."

Delaney thinks for a long time, flicking her eyes around the room.

"When I was fifteen, I took all the liquor out of the house and set the bottles up in a line on the porch. I took my dad's pitching wedge and started smashing them. It was early. My breath was all misty. I think I hoped it would wake them up, but I don't remember. It wasn't until I was almost done that my dad opened the sliding glass door." Delaney runs her fingers along the seams of the couch, picking at stray fibers sticking up at angles.

"I thought he was going to yell at me, but we just stared at each other. I know that he was angry, but he looked more tired than anything. Like he woke up to some dog that wasn't his chewing on his leg."

"What happened next?"

"I did my best to break the last three before he could stop me."

\*\*\*

Delaney is in the bath, lit by candlelight and the glare of her phone. The bath is to take care of her, to tend to the body. The phone is her concession, the unhealthy thing that pacifies the mind.

*Positive plus a negative, she thinks. They wash out.*

She thought she would shave her legs tonight and is surprised to find that she won't. She even likes shaving her legs. The before and after, the

disparity, satisfies her. Like a clean kitchen or fresh laundry. She struggles with her shins and the broken-bottle scars there. Still, imperfection is the better half of beauty. Or so she is told.

Once, a boyfriend had hated it when she didn't shave. The hairs always left a sentence of red dots where they touched his skin. He would push her legs away from him absentmindedly. When she was with him, she had started shaving every few days. More habitual, no longer a project. No longer something for her to take pleasure in. He had never asked her to, but how much of love is softening your edges for another?

Their relationship had ended in that long, protracted death of the half-hearted. No big fights, just little ones that never resolved. Small pains that wore them both down.

In an act of curiosity and self-infliction, she finds him online. She stares at pictures of him and his wife, married in the spring. She wipes drops of water away from the screen.

"What is it you don't like about me?" he had asked her, small and bitter tears in his eyes. They had argued in a car, somewhere that wouldn't matter in a year.

How did you answer a question like that? She could have said that she hated how he talked incessantly of self-help and philosophy but never changed. She could have told him that it was because of how sullen he got whenever no one laughed at his jokes, an attempt to punish others for his failures.

But she hadn't hated those things, not really. She had liked him enough to listen and laugh. But just as nothing pushed her to hate, nothing compelled her to love. How do you tell someone that you haven't stopped loving them but that you'd never started? That you were tired of waiting to feel something?

Delaney rubs her temples and thinks about stones. Smooth, heavy stones that glide deeper and deeper into cold water. She wonders if that is what peace is like, what life is all about. A long descent into something incalculable.

\*\*\*

Delaney rolls the rubber spike-covered ball between her palms as she tries her best to think.

"I guess I sometimes wonder if this is working."

"Hmm," her therapist says, looking at her over horn-rimmed glasses. "Is there a question for me in there?"

Delaney takes a deep breath.

"Do you—" she says. Her hands roll the ball to the tips of her fingers then back down to her wrist. "When I first started coming here, I wasn't coping. Every emotion I felt was so big I couldn't see a way around it. So I would do something else. I would find someone to distract me. I would drink, but I was drowning.

"So I stopped. I started coming here, and I stopped doing the things that hurt. My feelings don't drown me out. I think about my decisions. I drink tea now. I watch movies. But I still don't feel real. I'm hollow. And when I wake up, I stare at the ceiling, and I try to remember who I am, and sometimes it takes me so, so long. And I know that should scare me, but I'm not scared. If anything, I'm relieved." Delaney's cheeks are full of heat that could turn to tears if she willed it. She blinks them back. Her therapist silently adjusts.

"Because maybe if I forget who I am all the way, I'll just stop. I'll fade from pictures, from memories. Someone else will move into my apartment. I can just leave. I'll be done." The heat is in Delaney's palms now. She presses them into the couch, feeling the springs flex beneath the cushion.

"And the question?"

"What if I was just the bad parts of me? What if, now that they're gone, there's nothing left?"

\*\*\*

Delaney's progress is many things.

It is boring, for one. Worse, it is *intentionally* boring. She has to choose to do the dishes and the laundry. She has to contend with the fact that she will need to do them again tomorrow. Her check engine light will always be on, and she has to convince herself that this is a good thing, that this is healing.

Progress is also lonely, and excruciating, and blind.

But for all the marbles, Delaney would have to say that the most unbearable part of trying to get better is the relentless awareness of just how fragile that progress is.

She cannot shake the feeling that every good day, every milestone, is just another piece of kindling on the stack. Her life is a gasoline-soaked tower of Lincoln Logs, and she is thistledown waiting to burn.

The therapy and medication and the lukewarm cups of Al-Anon coffee do a lot to keep her steady. She knows, too, that she has done hard work to keep herself steady as well.

But then there are days like today. Days like fire, burning.

She lays on the ground and wishes that she were bloody. That her fists hung by her sides as limp tangles of viscera, or that her face was swollen beyond recognition. It would be easier, then, to feel bad for herself.

Because really, what is her problem? Maybe it's that she's sad, or lonely, or that she would do anything to be someone else. But there are a million people who have it worse than her. People who are real victims, real survivors.

*I survived only myself, she thinks. I am a victim of myself.*

So Delaney pushes herself up. She finds her copy of Holst's *The Planets* on the shelf and sets the record on her player. She finds the thick band she is looking for and drops the needle.

When "Jupiter, Bringer of Jollity" finishes, she levers the needle back up and to the start of the song. Then again.

The tears swarming down her face are not sad, but neither are they happy. If anything, they are disbelieving.

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"Have you ever rescued a cat, Delaney?"

Delaney draws lines in her palm with a nail. She shakes her head.

"Well, when you rescue a cat," the therapist continues, "you're almost always taking it in from a place where it was scared. Maybe a house where it was left to fend for itself. Maybe a crowded shelter. Somewhere where it wasn't safe. And you do your best to make your house safe, to buy toys

and scratching posts. Maybe you buy it a bed shaped like a little fish. Before you even get to take the cat home, you sign all these papers promising that you're a good person. That you'll be kind to the hurt thing you're taking home." The therapist taps pen against paper, not writing anything.

"And the first thing that cat does when you let it out of the cardboard carrier is run, right? It finds the smallest, darkest place it can, and it sits so still that you can't even tell if it's breathing. Because it doesn't want you to know that. Sure, maybe some cats curl up in your lap right out of the box, but those are outliers. There's no toy, no bed, no action you can take to stop a cat that's scared from hiding from you." Delaney is holding the spikey ball now, not rolling it. She tightens her grip on it like she is waiting for something to happen, and she wonders if the toy will burst.

"If you give that cat the space it needs, the love it can accept, all the patience you have, it will warm up to you. Eventually. It takes time. But do you know what happens in between them being scared and being warm?"

"What?" Delaney asks, letting the ball in her hand drop to her lap. It bounces once. Her hand is patterned with dots of white flesh that rise, slowly, back to the surface.

"They haunt you. They enter rooms that you leave. They push things over when you aren't looking. Their toys move when you aren't around. You won't find that your chairs have been stacked in the middle of the night, but maybe you come home to a blanket that's still warm from them. They wake you up with their nose on yours before dawn."

Delaney looks at the ground, tracing patterns in the carpet with eyes that will not focus.

"I don't think you're empty, Delaney. And I certainly don't think you're wasting time here, mine or yours. Showing up here is hard work. The progress that you've made here is astounding. I'm impressed. I'm proud of you."

Delaney could never say, could never understand, why hearing those four words made her feel so guilty.

"I don't believe in ghosts," Delaney says, the words finding their own way out.

"Neither do I," says her therapist. "I think we haunt ourselves. I think the people we used to be sit in the corners of our houses and tell us things

that we don't want to hear. I think our memories hurt us because they hate not being dead. And I think you know who you are, Delaney. What you're afraid of is who you're going to be next."

\*\*\*

Delaney cries infrequently, but not because she hates it. It just doesn't come easily to her. Normally, she is crying for herself, for the child she once was. She holds her memories and cries for what happened to her, and around her, and to others.

Tonight, though, is different. The tears that she wipes at in the dark are small, scared tears. She cries for the labor in tomorrow, in every sunrise. She cries for the nights to come. For all the people she will have to become, all the selves that she will have to kill before she is someone she is happy to be.

"When will I be someone I can love?" she asks, her voice tired of crying.

In the moonlight, her nightmares and her memories whisper back:

*We are loving you. We are you. We believe in you. Keep going.*

## 2012 Nissan Altima 2.5 SL

Elijah Sirilan

Driveway pavements smeared by burned rubber  
From a Rushing Husband arriving for an impatient Wife  
Cooking concoctions; chili cooling by the hour  
Served for a family of four.  
Age served my old tito by years of  
Work, play, and rest.  
Counting the heartbeats  
Of lives living on his 70s dream.  
Immigrating American children to  
A 70s American dream turning his 50s into  
100s.  
Impulsive purchase. The  
Baby blue buggy.  
By day, accompanied by Husband, Wife, and groceries—  
By night, accompanied by son and his girlfriends.  
  
Photographs on the dashboard.  
Thousand-word stories  
Sold only for a grand.

# A Woman I Once Knew

Kailey Fontaine

Something about the kitchen never fully sat right with me. It was small, with barely enough room to fit all three of us as we tried to squeeze between the old wood counters and the folding table covered by a plastic tarp decorated with flowers and ladybugs. It was a pretty tarp, but it was still just a tarp. I don't remember it being this small, the last time I had been here (maybe five years ago now?) it had seemed big enough to hold a circus. The box television in the corner had once seemed like a time machine, as it only played soap opera reruns in Italian, which I never understood but as a kid simply didn't care, and the large bird clock above it that had once seemed like the most normal thing for a person to ever own.

My *zia* sits between my mother and me in her place at the head of the table, always the head. It had been many years since her husband had passed, but even when he was alive, he never sat in her place. She looks old now, old and frail. Her skin sticks to her bones, her hair thin and almost completely transparent, her eyes no longer glowing with the awe that I remember. My mom asks her how she's doing, how her day had been before we arrived. She laughs and makes a joke about how she should have died in her sleep the night before, how she's disappointed that she woke at all.

My mom laughs with her.

I sit at the side of the table, silent with a small polite smile on my face, wondering how we got to this place. Stunned at how, for a brief moment, I no longer recognize either of the women in front of me. Speaking of death like it's nothing, just a normal conversation on a Tuesday afternoon. What happened to the aunt I used to know? What happened to the woman who used to dance around the kitchen humming *arias* along with the television, occasionally gasping each time the oh-so-predictable twist came in the second act of the episode? Where is the woman who once told me stories of how she traveled for days across the Pacific without a penny to her name or shoes on her feet, all in order to find a new life with her husband and elderly parents? The woman who would laugh as

she brought spaghetti to the beach and shared of her adventures living in New York City while all the grandchildren and nieces and nephews gathered around to listen, caught up in her ever-present magic.

But now? Her garden sits barren outside, long abandoned and falling apart. The stove gathers new layers of dust as it sits cold. I'm not certain it would turn on now if I tried. The television no longer plays as loud, and there is no more joyous laughter at lyrics sung purposely out of tune.

And they keep laughing with each other, like they have just heard the funniest thing in the world. Like time has frozen and traveled back and everything is the way it once was before.

But it's not, and it never will be again.

And I think, at some unknown time, my aunt died. In the dark, in her bed, at home. Utterly alone. I think at some terrible and lonely point a part of her soul died, and none of us noticed until it was too late and the damage had already been done.

## Cottage Mill

Leah Besser

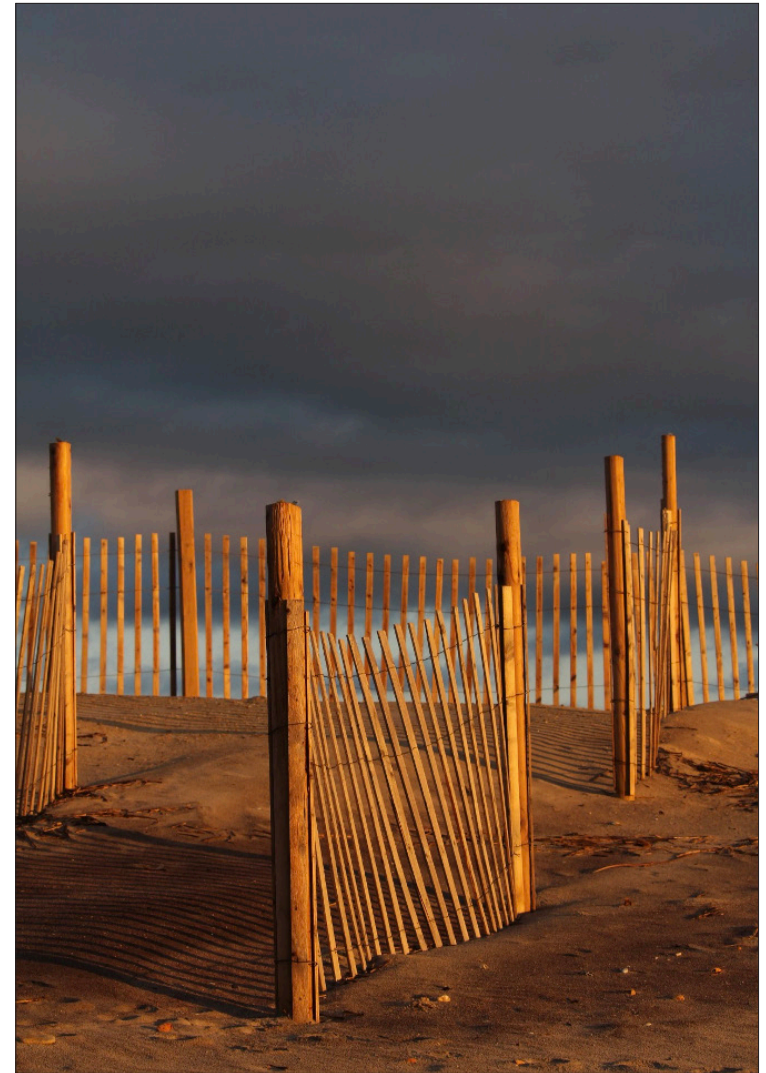
I miss when we had the brown armoire  
With a gallon bag of tealights  
I miss when we had brownish red brick  
Instead of Southern Living white  
I miss when we were children  
When mom's red turtle-neck  
And the kitchen's wooden cabinets  
Spoke of home  
Home

I miss the simplicity of 6  
The intimacy of 4 and  
The tenderness of 2  
I miss the way that small number felt  
So large, yet so contained within  
The brownish red brick and pecan tarts  
Within the tealights and turtle-necks

I miss when home  
Was both a place and a feeling  
I miss home the place  
But maybe more so the feeling

## Fences at Sunrise

Lily Avery Mills



*Digital Photography*

# Of Pen and Plain

Ben Mears

The first time the pen spoke to me, I thought it was because of the carbon monoxide leak in my apartment. It made sense, right? Carbon monoxide is, like, really poisonous. Messes with your brain. It could happen. In high school, I'd spent a lot of time on those Internet psychonaut forums for reasons that I don't want to put in writing, and I thought maybe plumbing the depths of that whole thing had made me more susceptible to weirdness like that. Hat man . . . Pencil talking . . . The only real difference between the two is how mundane even my hallucinations managed to be.

I never considered myself anything but average, and if history was any indicator, no one else considered me at all. My dad used to joke that I was so plain-looking that the doctors at the hospital gave me to Mom and him by mistake. That my real parents had forgotten what I looked like and just left me there. Mom didn't think that was very funny, so she got Dad to stop, but he wasn't far off. When I was in fourth grade, for instance, my class of thirty went on a trip to the zoo and left a class of twenty-nine because I hung back to stare at the jaguars. But when I fell into their enclosure, even the jaguars failed to notice me. The zoo staff sure noticed once people started screaming though.

I always took some amount of comfort in being completely forgettable. Somehow, it made anything threatening or out-of-the-ordinary seem impossible. After all, nothing interesting ever happens to boring people; otherwise, there wouldn't be any.

So when the pen said "Hello, Jamie" while I was writing out my schedule for the week in my planner, I said, "Huh, that's weird. Pens don't usually talk to people." You know, as a rule.

And the pen replied, "True. In many ways, I have little to offer modern man."

And then I said, "Yeah, I guess so," and ran out of the apartment.

And then I ran back into my apartment to get my phone so I could call 911.

I spent the next couple nights at a friend's house while the heating system was fixed. The doctor said my CO exposure had been relatively minor and was very confused when I asked her about hallucinations.

"You couldn't have been exposed for more than an hour or two," she said. "If you did have an unrelated hallucination, it sure came at a good time."

I laughed, but it didn't make me feel any better. I grabbed a carbon monoxide alarm before I went back to the apartment.

I didn't hear the pen again until two weeks later. It was just past midnight on a Friday evening, and I couldn't sleep. This wasn't unusual for me; I've struggled with insomnia since I was in middle school. What was unusual was the reason: I couldn't stop thinking about Sam. And it was stupid. Nothing had happened. She'd just smiled and said, "See you tomorrow."

It didn't mean anything. *We had* to see each other tomorrow. *We* worked together. It was a perfectly normal thing to say. I mean, sure, she had never said it before, but that didn't mean she was in love with me or anything. She barely even knew me. I barely knew her.

But I couldn't stop thinking about it.

"Did you take your meds?"

I shot straight up in bed and yanked my desk lamp from the wall like a sword from its sheath. "Whoever you are," I said, "I'm not afraid to use this. It's cheap." I stood from my bed and approached the closet on the other side of the room, plastic bludgeon in hand. My carbon monoxide alarm hadn't gone off.

"You shouldn't be skipping your meds, Jamie."

I swung the lamp at darkness and struck air. "Where are you?" I stammered. "Are you another gas leak? Because if you are, management and I are going to have words. And I'm still going to hit you. Even if you are a gas."

"Were you always this oblivious?" The voice was low and sonorous, like a rumbling steam train at the far end of a tunnel. It sounded like it was coming from my desk, but there was no one beneath it.

I tried to turn the lamp on before remembering it wasn't plugged in anymore. "How do you know I didn't take my meds?"

"Open the desk drawer, and I'll show you, Jamie."

I stepped back against the wall and flipped on the overhead light. "Can't you show me from over there, and I stay over here?"

An exasperated sigh came from the desk. "Fine. You have no flair for the dramatic."

"In this case, no, I don't."

"Your prescription bottle is in the right-hand drawer," the voice said. "It's empty, and it has been for a week. I know because I've been stuck staring at it the whole time."

The voice was right. I hadn't had the energy to make the trip to the pharmacy yet. "If I open that drawer, am I gonna find a little spy camera or an evil robot?"

"No."

"Are you an alien?"

"No."

"What are you then?"

"You haven't figured it out yet?"

"No! I'm freaking out!"

"Okay, I'll make this simple then. I'm your pen. I'm in the desk drawer. And I can help you sleep," it said. "But you should still go refill your prescription tomorrow."

"You're joking. I must have stepped on a dirty needle or something."

"The only places you've been today are here, class, and a Best Buy. You didn't step on any hallucinogens."

"How do you know I work at the Best Buy?"

"You write down your schedule with me every week, Jamie. Tomorrow, for instance, you are planning to 'Go to work, call Mom, and clean my filthy, filthy, disgusting, ratty apartment.' You seemed angry when you wrote that last bit."

My breath caught in my chest, and I took one step away from the far wall, the lamp raised high. "If I open that drawer, and you aren't what you say you are, I'm going to break this over your head. We clear?"

"Do what you must," the voice said with a sigh.

I approached the desk, reached out from as far away as I could, and opened the drawer. Inside was an open pack of gum, a stack of post-it notes, an empty prescription bottle, and a cheap plastic pen.

After a few moments of waiting for something to move, I snatched the pen from the drawer and slammed it shut. I placed the lamp back on the desk and looked up and down the pen for a microphone, but I couldn't see anything.

"If I take you apart, would it kill you?" I asked.

"You've done it plenty of times before. I'm still here."

The proximity and power of its voice made me unconsciously tighten my grip on it. It was like holding a portable speaker in my hand. The inside of the pen yielded no surveillance equipment either, so I reassembled it and sat down at the desk.

"Now how are you going to get me to sleep?" I asked. "How do I know I'm not just having a crazy dream?"

"Maybe you are," the pen said. "The only way to find out is to leave you-in-the-morning a sign, so let's write something. What do you want to write about?"

I shook my head. "I don't know! I can't relax enough to write!"

"Why can't you relax?"

"Oh gee, I don't know," I shouted. "Maybe it's because I'm having a conversation with a writing utensil!"

"You weren't relaxed before you even knew I was here, Jamie. I could hear you muttering to yourself."

I wanted to throw a rebuttal its way, but nothing came.

"Who's Sam?" the pen asked.

"She's just a coworker."

"Did she do something to make you upset?"

I floundered for a moment before a feeble "Not really" fell out of me.

"You seem confused," the pen said, its voice tinged with concern. "Are you having trouble remembering?"

“Remembering’s not the problem.”

“So, what is the problem, Jamie? Whatever it is, it’s impeding your sleep, so it’s important that you get to the bottom of it.”

“I thought the whole point of this was *you* helping *me*.” I leaned back in my chair and rubbed my eyes. “I can’t even fall asleep on my own, and as far as difficult tasks go, that’s, like, not one.”

The pen chuckled. I could feel the vibration travel through its cam and up my thumb. “For some people, maybe, but this isn’t about them. Do you always assume your difference is deficiency?”

“No, but I wouldn’t call it an asset either.”

“Well, maybe it’s time for you to consider that, in some ways, it might be. Do you think that’s why Sam upset you? Because she made you consider that you might have something to offer?”

I dropped the pen on the desk and stood from the chair. “I’m not talking about this with you. We’re done.” I yanked my blanket and pillow off the bed and headed for the door.

“Then don’t,” the pen said. “Just write.”

I wrenched my eyes shut and tried to wake from whatever dream realm I had stumbled into, but it was no use. When I opened my eyes, the cream-colored walls were still there, illuminated in soft yellow light. My blanket was still hanging off my shoulder, and the pillow was still held tight in my fist. A loose pile of dirty clothes still sat, mountainous and shameful, in the far corner.

“I don’t do that anymore,” I said, turning to face the desk once more.

The pen was still where I had left it, but it made no sound. It seemed an ordinary pen. I glanced around the room, expecting the camera crew to jump out any second, but they never came.

My sense that there was another presence in the room slowly faded, and as it did, I stepped closer and closer to the desk. It couldn’t hurt to journal, right? For old time’s sake? I set my bedding down and grabbed the pen once more. Still nothing. I dug into another drawer on the desk and pulled out a fresh sheet of notebook paper that had a number of uneven folds in it from the office supplies I’d tossed onto it while doing school-

work. At the top of the page, I scrawled “Why Can’t I Sleep?” in big, uneven letters and stared at it for a moment. Then, I set to answering the impossible question.

It wasn’t easy at first. I scratched out the first line twice, then thrice. Words that sprang to mind when I spoke weren’t there when I tried to write. All the pathways were old and mangled, and I felt like I was sixteen again writing in that journal my mom had gotten me because she “thought it would help me keep track of my homework” when actually she was just worried I was depressed. The cobwebs never fully cleared, but by the time I had gotten a few sentences down that didn’t make me want to collapse in on myself, the feeling was all there was. With each word that fell from the tip of the pen to the surface of the page, the sensation grew, and it wasn’t just in my hands. I could feel something churning in my head, my chest, moving in tandem with the ink as it traced across the paper, and once I got going, the something didn’t stop when I did. It couldn’t. Ideas and images and memories kept coming, and I kept what was relevant and discarded what wasn’t until the page was full of information. No, not information. Music. I could hear the symphony of my life in my ears, and its notes were words, and it was beautiful and pathetic and exciting and somber, and it was here on the page and in my head and my chest, and I could feel myself harmonizing with it and I wanted to cry and I wanted to sing because there I was. It was all real. The movements of my life were real, and they were playing out right in front of me. They were playing out even as I wrote, and they would continue to play out tomorrow and the day after until I was dead or forgot how to hear them.

And then I passed out at my desk.

The next morning, I was late for work. My boss, Jeremy, already knew about my insomnia and was just grateful that I showed up at all. He’d dealt with enough flakes to know that I wasn’t one. “No one’s tried to steal an iPhone charger yet, so no harm no foul,” he said. “Did you take your pills?”

“Ran out,” I said sheepishly. “Gonna get some after work.”

He slapped me a little too hard on the back. “That’s fine with me. As long as you stay awake while you’re here!”

I offered a conciliatory smile, and he turned to go until I called after him.

“Jeremy, have you ever heard of an AI pen?” I asked. “Like an Echo, but, like, a pen version?”

Jeremy smirked. “Why, you selling?”

I shook my head. “I’m waiting for my patent to clear first. Was just wondering.”

I didn’t see Sam much on my shift. We were both pretty busy the whole time, so I barely got to talk to her. Initiating conversation made me a bit more nervous now that I had written the phrase “I am terrified that she will get bored of me.” Somehow though, writing it down had made it look stupider than it had sounded in my head, and maybe that was a good thing?

After work, I picked up my prescription, and by the time I got home, I had almost forgotten about the events of the previous night. The human brain really is amazingly terrible in that regard. But then I saw the paper on my desk, and it all seemed real again. All the words were there, just as I had written them, even the part where I mentioned the time Mom had come to pick me up from second grade because I was hiding in the bathroom. I wasn’t sure I had ever written that down before, much less told anyone about it. The pen laid nearby.

I poked it with my apartment key. “Pen? I did what you wanted.”

No reply.

“That’s what I figured,” I said, sending the pen spinning in place with an outstretched finger. I watched it spiral until it came to a dead stop and rolled to its side with a soft *clack*.

Satisfied, I set to cleaning up my apartment, and after a few hours, it didn’t look like two tornadoes had collided in my living room during a monsoon. Now it looked like there had just been one, which is all you can hope for sometimes. As I tossed the first of many loads of clothes in the washer, my phone rang.

“Hey, Mom. Sorry. I wrote ‘Call Mom’ in my schedule and everything, but I had a long night, I guess.”

She asked about the pills, and I told her I’d just gotten my refill today. We chatted about work and school for a little bit, and she did her usual ribbing about the fact that she and Dad were still helping to pay my rent, to

which I responded by reminding her that my upcoming salary as a high school biology teacher would more than make up for it.

At one point, I considered asking her what I should do about Sam, but I decided against it. For better or worse, this was something I wanted to figure out for myself. Just another jaguar enclosure for me to climb into or something. I’d have to think of a better metaphor before I tried explaining it to anyone.

Before Mom hung up, she told me that she and Dad were thinking about coming up for Fall Break instead of the other way around, and I immediately became aware of every speck of dust in the room. She said they’d talked about it for a while and had been saving the vacation days. I asked where they’d be staying. A wave of relief washed over me when she named a hotel I passed by on my way to work.

As we made our way through the usual *yeahs* and *uh-huhs* that wrap up any phone call, I paced around my apartment, seeing what else I could clean up. Once again, my gaze fell on the scrap of paper from the night before. I was overcome by an odd sense of embarrassment. I wasn’t necessarily ashamed of what I’d written; I needed to write it out to make sense of it. But it felt uncomfortable having a part of myself so visible like that. It was like I was walking around with my guts hanging out for everyone to see. I picked up the scrap of paper from my desk and skimmed through a few lines. Nope, I wasn’t imagining things. This was profoundly embarrassing, and the more I read, the more I wanted to destroy what I had written. Mom was now talking about what day they were planning to leave and what food she wanted to try. As she launched into her monologue about her long-time fascination with seafood, I headed toward the trash can in my kitchen to dispose of last night’s handiwork. But as the jaws of the receptacle parted, a memory emerged, one I hadn’t thought about in a long time.

I was sixteen. I had just started doing behind-the-wheel, and the first time I showed up for lessons, there was a girl in the car, one I had never seen before. The teacher said her name was Kim and that he’d have to squeeze us both in during the same slot because he was busy, so I hopped in the back seat and waited for my turn. I remember thinking it smelled like chlorine, so I was constantly breathing through my mouth to avoid the smell when I wasn’t driving.

Kim and I never saw each other outside of lessons, but I started to look forward to seeing her. It was cool knowing someone that nobody else in

my life knew, and we became friends of a sort. At school, I would say things like “Kim told me that her dad used to play for Duke” to impress the other guys, and they would all make fun of my imaginary girlfriend, but I knew they were just pretending not to be jealous. I didn’t have much else that would interest them, so Kim became my trump card, and I used her to buy as much social credit as I could.

By the time behind-the-wheel was coming to an end, it was a big deal in my class whether Kim and I were going to get together or not. People who would normally never speak to me were now invested in the outcome of the one part of my life that had been my own, and I started to think that maybe this thing with Kim really was something, or if it wasn’t, it could be.

The night before our last lesson, I wrote a note and sealed it inside an envelope to give to her. For the whole lesson, I was sweaty and nervous and constantly aware of the note stuffed in my pocket. Once we were done, I walked up and said, “I’ve been meaning to give this to you,” like I practiced, and I handed her the envelope. Kim’s eyes went a little wide, but she accepted it and opened it without saying anything. By the time she got to the end, her face had softened with sympathy. She handed the note back to me, said, “You’re sweet. My dad’s here to pick me up,” and then I never saw her again. I didn’t tell my parents what had happened when I got home, and I flushed the note down the toilet so no one would ever find it.

That night, I couldn’t sleep.

As I wrapped up my conversation with Mom and hung up the phone, part of me wished I could read what I had written to Kim, to see what love meant to a sixteen-year-old with no friends and nothing to offer. Another part wished I could forget the whole thing. With the trash can yawning before me, I looked down at the paper in my hands and saw how much and how little had changed since then. And I closed the lid.

## First Cradle

Trinity Sailer



*Digital Photography*

# Portuguese Man of War

Hannah Bunch

Seagulls yap in the sky's blue field, chase each other among fluffy clouds  
The ocean spills over the horizon  
Waves wink at the sun and play with dolphins  
As billows drag me like a doll, scratch me with their salty sting

Ocean spills over horizon and  
Shoves clownfish, dolphins, and jellyfish towards the sandpaper shore  
Roaring hills drag me like a doll, scratch me with their salty sting  
Flecks of water burn my eyes while I watch giggling children  
construct sandcastles

Water's sparkling surface wrestles clownfish, dolphins, and jellyfish  
towards the shore  
Wind whips whitecaps, carries the stench of seaweed  
A child screams after a foamy wave gobbles her sandcastle  
I slip on the gloopy sand and swallow bitter saltwater

The tide rises with the moods of the moon as booming breakers slap the shore  
Glistening jellyfish glide on the swells and scatter shrieking swimmers  
My feet slip on gloopy sand as saltwater burns my nose  
A biting sting clambers up my leg before it numbs like the echoes of  
a church bell

A *ping* peals, grows to a ravenous hum. A jellyfish like cotton candy  
floats by.

In my struggle to shore, warm grains of sand stick to my teeth, skin,  
and nails like ticks

The hum ceases and the sting softens to an itch  
Like a swamp fog, people engulf me. Tangy sunscreen, fruity perfume,  
and musty sweat grapple in my nose

The sun hugs me, sweat drips like a faucet and loosens the sand  
Lidocaine eases the sting like dripping ice cream in July  
The crowd fizzles like a bath bomb. The breeze feels like fresh linen  
Seagulls yap in the sky's blue field, chase each other among fluffy clouds

## Pink Frosting

Lily Walter

“We’ll be friends forever,” she swears,  
her pinky finger twisted around mine.  
Something that lasts forever  
can never end. But  
everything ends.

Leaves abandon branches, drifting  
past our vanishing scribbles  
beneath the gnarled oak skin.  
Snow turns to slush on  
an empty driveway.

“What can last forever?”  
Behind the marble counter, mother’s cheeks pink like frosting  
from the birthday cake last month.  
Birthdays don’t last forever, or cake.  
“Love.” And she smiles a smile  
I know will fade.

## Through the Stained Glass [Sestina]

Katherine Bechter

The architecture boasts elegance over an invisible congregation.  
My dress shoes scuff on wood panels as I shuffle into the pew.  
I fan my skirt across the vacant bench and glance about the building.  
Stale radiator air buzzes with muffled emptiness—there is no church.  
Still, the pastor clears his throat and opens his hymnal.  
“The Lord is with us today; can I get an Amen?”

Somewhere behind my gathered curls comes a feeble “Amen.”  
The pastor turns tired eyes toward a diminished congregation.  
“Open now and turn to hymn nine. That’s nine in your hymnal—”  
Cracked knuckles probe for beat-up books in the backs of pews.  
Weathered fingers plunk organ keys while scattered voices haunt the church.  
Not near enough to rival or revive the grandeur of the building.

Breathing bodies have abandoned their crucifixes in this hollow building.  
The organ’s final chord lingers as I sigh my practiced, “Amen.”  
My eyes fall blind on the pulpit, waiting for a sermon to rally the church.  
The pastor waves vehemently at the ghost of his congregation.  
Two rows in front of me, a woman shifts awkward in her pew.  
I remain frozen, methodically fondling worn edges on my hymnal.

I envision a time when the ink lay fresh on the pages of that hymnal.  
My eyes scan ceiling panels, contemplating a first Sunday in the building.  
My mind refashions their hushed conversations and crowded pews.  
A time when the Lord’s body cried in unison a resounding “Amen!”  
Back when the organ was overwhelmed by the hum of the congregation.  
A sanctuary filled with the subdued whispers and blush faces of the church.

Shaking the glaze from my eyes, I search now for the church.  
 I push the hand fan aside in its wood holder and drop in the hymnal.  
 It tumbles into place with a soft thump, rousing the congregation.  
 Heads turn, then settle back into shoulders to face the front of the building.  
 The pastor leans on his pulpit, his breath caught in his throat. "Amen?"  
 I fail to recall his remarks but murmur my reply and reposition in the pew.

He stands alone at the head of his scant flock, gazing over the pews.  
 Perspiration forming on his brow, refusing to realize he has lost his church.  
 Abandoned at his altar, repeating scripture and pleading for "Amen."  
 Struggling through sermons, echoing ancient phrases from his hymnal.  
 His thunderous voice crashes against the walls of the empty building,  
 desperately groping about for the remnants of a bygone congregation.

There is no sanctuary in this congregation of bowed heads among the pews.  
 All that is left now is a grandiose building that once housed a church,  
 Reduced to a pulpit and some hymnals. How can we sit and simply say,  
 "So be it"?

## The Turtle

Micah Gilmer

"Another drink, sir?"

His hand that held up his head fell to his side; his white, fist-imprinted cheek slowly regained color. He turned toward the flight attendant.

"Yes. *Please.*" He nodded with a funny look of exhaustion and desperation.

The flight attendant smiled and said she'd be right back.

"Richard," said his wife. "Richard!"

He swiveled his head around like a lazy turtle looking out for cars on the highway. He looked directly at his wife, blinked a few times, and waited for her to continue.

"Richard. I know it's hahd to see 'em go, but'cha gotta keep your chin up. Ya can't keep lookin' so down—you're depressin' everyone."

The turtle turned his head away, staring at the seat in front of him. The seat's back was white. *White*, he thought. *She's gonna have a white dress on tomorrow. I bet she'll look beautiful. Absolutely stunning. I mean, she already is, of course, but—*

A little smile happened across Richard's face.

He closed his eyes with that smile still across his face. "Richard!" She elbowed him and his eyes flew open. "Quit ignorin' me. It's rude. I know ya don't get out much bur'cha gotta stop lookin' like ya head's in the clouds."

"Our heads *are* in the clouds, honey." The smile was replaced by a smirk.

"Oh, shut up. Smaht mouth of yours. Ya know what I mean." His wife rolled her eyes and kept talking, but Richard stopped listening. The flight attendant reappeared with a glass of red wine, and she placed it on Richard's tray table. Richard opened his mouth to say "thank you," but his wife started snapping her fingers at the attendant. "Hey, you been married before?"

The attendant held up her bare left hand. "Nope, not yet." She smiled.

“Ugh, *yet!* Do me a favor, honey. M'kay? Change that ‘not yet’ ta ‘*nevah!* *not nevah!*’ Saves ya lots a trouble, alright?”

“Alright,” she laughed. “I won’t ‘nevah’ get married.”

The wife didn’t pick up on the slight accent that the attendant used, but Richard did. He chuckled.

“Whatta *you* laughin’ at?”

“Nothing, honey. Thank you for the wine, ma’am.” The attendant nodded and smiled. “You have a lovely smile,” he added.

The attendant smiled even more, said “thank you,” and walked toward the front of the plane.

“Richard, don’ say things like that. That scares younger women.”

“She didn’t seem to mind.” *Besides, that smile looks like my daughter’s. I hope she’s beaming up there tomorrow.*

The wife flipped up her tray table and picked out a magazine from the pouch. “One a these days, Richard. One a these days, and you’ll realize that you shoulda listened to me all along.”

“One a these days,” he grumbled back dazedly.

After a few minutes, she shoved the magazine back into the pouch. “I have to use the restroom, Richard. Hold my purse.”

She waddled past him, bonking him on the head with her elbow as she stuffed her purse into his arms. The turtle watched her walk down the aisle.

*She’ll be walking down the aisle. Hold her hand firmly—let her know you’ll always be there—but don’t forget to let go.*

He noticed the flight attendant exiting the bathroom as his wife walked in. Her hand was pressed against her mouth, and small, black trails of mascara ran down her cheeks. She headed toward his seat, making her rounds past several fliers who were totally oblivious to her state. Finally, she walked up to Richard.

“Everything okay, sir?”

“Well,” he said, “I suppose I could ask the same question about you, ma’am. What’s the matter, dear?”

She gazed at the old man, her mouth slightly agape.

“That’s—that’s very kind of you to ask. I—” She cleared her throat and straightened her posture. “I was going to meet my boyfriend. He lives right outside Denver, so I took a few days off to spend some time together.” A tear slid down her cheek. “It was supposed to be like a mini vacation. I guess a staycation for him, but—” She paused and pulled her phone out of her pocket. She gave it to him, and he, in typical “I don’t have my glasses” response, stretched his arms out far and squinted his eyes.

The several blurbs of gray led up to the final text: “It’s over.”

She snatched the phone back, said “I’m so sorry,” and hurried down to the next line of fliers—all before he could say anything.

His wife came back shortly. After she sat down, she reached into her purse on Richard’s lap and pulled out her reading glasses—the kind that you hang around your neck with the magnetic bridge—and her phone. Richard had closed his eyes. She scrolled and tapped and scrolled and turned the volume up a lot to listen to a video about a baby bear getting rescued by local authorities, and scrolled and tapped some more. Then, she stopped her scrolling for a moment, and she started reading slower, more intently, half-mouthing the words she read. She elbowed Richard again, and his eyes flew open again.

“Richard, look at what Chris and Lorraine are gettin’ for ‘em.”

He glanced down at the Facebook post, saw the message—(“John, we love you so much and we’re so happy for you and Megan. Enjoy an *all-expenses paid honeymoon* in Maui! We’ll see you at the ceremony!!!”)—and nodded slowly. “I don’t think we can afford that, honey.”

“Exactly, Richard. Exactly.” She pulled at her reading glasses and let them fall onto her chest. “We’ll nevah be able to afford what they really want. I told ya to take that job in Vermont.”

“Thought we agreed that job in Vermont wasn’t good for the family.”

“Oh, shut up. Now ya just puttin’ words in my mouth.” She snatched the purse out of his hands—as if he wanted to hold it in the first place—and crossed her arms on top of it. “We’re gonna be the grandparents they don’t visit, Richard. All because ya won’t spend a penny.”

He peered down the aisle and waved down the flight attendant.

“Richard!” his wife interjected. “Whatta ya doing?” He ignored her as the attendant approached him. “Richard, I sw—”

“Excuse me, ma’am.” He spoke a little more quietly to the flight attendant. “My daughter’s getting married tomorrow, and we’ll be in the city for a couple days after that. We’d be happy to getcha a hotel room, and—well, heck—why don’t you come to the wedding with us? I know my daughter’d love to meet you.”

A little smile happened across the flight attendant’s face.

“Besides,” he continued, “there’s lots of single, handsome men.” He raised his eyebrows, and the attendant let out an awkward chuckle.

“Richard, we are not lettin’ some *strang-ah* crash our daughter’s wedding!” she whispered furiously.

The turtle looked at his wife. “Aw, heck,” he said gently. “Strangers crash a lot of things.” *But doesn’t love crash stuff all the time, too? And we’d never want it to stop its destruction.* He smiled and turned to the attendant: “Why don’t we pick you up?” He grabbed a sticky note and a pen from his wife’s purse and scribbled down his phone number. “We can pick you up at the—”

“Richard, you make no sense sometimes, ya know that?” His wife turned toward the window as she mumbled off, “*No* sense—I swear...”

Richard mouthed “One second” to the attendant and politely smiled. Then, he leaned toward his wife and whispered something in her ear. She turned slowly toward the attendant and gazed at her face for a long time. And then:

A little smile happened across Richard’s wife’s face.

“Oh! No, no, hun! I wasn’t sayin’ my husband’s idea makes no sense. I meant that *pickin’ ya* up makes no sense. You can just come right along with us to our hotel. And we’ll get your room sorted out when we get to the hotel; I have a rewards card with them, too so it’s no trouble for us. And—do ya know how to use Uber?” She snapped her reading glasses back on and tapped the app on her phone. “Ugh, I’ve been messin’ with this app all day long, and I can’t seem to figure it out yet. Well, you can help us figure that out, cause we’re still gettin’ used to these iPhones. Oh, this is my husband Richard, and I’m...” She went on for quite a while. The flight attendant listened to every word patiently until another

attendant approached her and scolded her for not doing her job. “Just call us when ya get off your shift, okay? We’ll be in the airport eatin’ or sum’n. Bye now!”

Richard and his wife sat quietly for a moment. Then, his wife continued: “I think they said they were reservin’ the first three rows for family. Well, then *she’s* gonna be all alone. Oh, it’s *awub-ful* to go to a wedding on your own. I’m sure Megan’ll make an exception. But if there’s no seats up there, there’s no seats. Or maybe it’s got pews? I wondah what kinda church it’ll be. I’ll look it up. You know, Jennifer’s probably not showin’ up anyways. Maybe she could have her seat. Jeff’s gonna probably wanna sit in the front, but he can move his lazy butt so she can sit with us. And...”

*And that’s the crusher I married.*

...

Richard and his wife turned off the television. They nestled into the sheets of the fluffy queen mattress of the Holiday Inn. Richard turned off the bedside lamp, and the two lay in the quiet darkness.

Richard could hear the traffic in the distance. He heard a semi honk. A motorcycle engine rev and rumble. A plane buzz. And he heard a not-so-common statement uttered by his wife:

“Richard, I think you were right earlier,” she said contemplatively. “She does have Megan’s smile.”

The turtle closed his eyes and embraced sleep in peace.

## Man in a Sea of Color

Kyle M. Lowry



*Digital Photography*

## Left to Be Found

Katherine L. Williams

The beach is deserted, and that, perhaps, is the main problem. No joggers drum rhythms on the sand. No laughing children chase their dogs through the surf. Not even the wind dares to touch such a place with its rippling fingers. Only the waves remain, sullen, silent in the grayness of dawn, washing starkness into the sand with each relentless lap. I stand without words and stare.

There is a stone nearby, interrupting the unmarked beach with its shimmering surface. I pick it up and hurl it into the water so hard my shoulder aches. It has no place here, for I do not want to give it one. Be open-minded, my mother would say, because moving is an adventure. But my mind has no place for possibilities. It merely sees reality: my settled life has been shaken. Taken from me. Shattered. A life-warping event, moving is.

Here, all is still, waiting. In the colorless light of the sleepy morning, I see no life.

A shout cuts through the silence, and I turn. Small and wildly bright, Little Sister bounds across the beach. Footprints and a spray of laughing sand awaken the ground behind her. I scowl as I watch her make the beach her own, pressing life into the unmarked.

“Can’t you be quiet?” I shout. The beach seizes my voice and sucks it into silence. She does not hear me. *Too fast, too fast*, my mind hisses. *She makes it hers too fast*. But then, *Too slow, too slow, too slow*, each step she takes seems to chant. *You make it yours too slow*.

At last, I catch Little Sister’s attention. A smile sparkles on her face, preceding the dawn with its brightness. I am something familiar in the unexplored territory. She prances toward me, and the air around her simmers hot with visions of memories not yet created, adventures waiting to live.

“I found this,” she says to me, opening her palms to reveal a coiled shell, empty of the small animal it once housed.

“Put it back.” I will not praise this place, not even to please her. “It belongs to the crab.”

“No, no, crabby has gone,” she sings, waving the shell like a flag. “He found a new one, and so this one here is mine!”

I look. The shell coils are ridged, tiny mountains and valleys, always shifting and changing in delicate, pink swirls. Designed and purposeful in each twisting curve. I see it. Have I been led to fill a shell? To give purpose to a place left behind? The waves behind me crash, retreat, and crash, retreat, growing louder with each pulse. Life in the movement.

I look to Little Sister’s face, awash with hope, shell held out with open hands. My chest aches, but the words come, bittersweet as they leave me. “It’s pretty.”

The beach glows brighter; sunrise approaches. Yes, it is pretty.

## Reflections Through Generations

Caralyn Hamby

I once thought I was unlovable for the curves handed down to me from my ancestors. I once thought that if my clothes weren’t tight, I would be seen as large and looming. It was only in recent years that I learned that it is a fool’s pastime to hate taking up space. I was given what I am, gifted a body that works and a mind that strings together conversation between those who don’t exist. If I hate that, my mind will fold as a construction paper castle. If I hate the very body that allows me to dance with my friends, taste the bitter and indulgent sweetness of my coffee, and laugh so hard that I ache, then I hate what is good.

I remember how it felt to hate my form. I look exactly like my mother. There are days I still hear her words ricochet in my head as she looked at the form we shared. I hear her exasperated sigh as she looks at her stomach showing through the fabric of her shirt.

“Disgusting,” she says. “I have gotten so fat.”

Whether she is searching for my reassurance or not, I don’t know. If we shared nothing else, we shared our hatred for the way we look. With time my baby fat fell away, but I was left with wide hips, large thighs, and a stomach that was far from flat. I struggled to accept my features and form, as my friends stood thin and graceful, never pulling their shirts out from their stomachs when they sat. I hated the number eight on the inside of my jeans. As time went on, that number got bigger and bigger, becoming a fiery pit which I threw myself in. I hated the way my body had seemed to control itself without consulting me. I cried with rage and sadness over the smaller form I used to inhabit. There is no quick fix for rage over the way the body mocks the mind’s desires. The best of me has become tied into a place I have lost, a piece of me I have lost. I long to be back with my childhood self at the swing under my family’s treehouse. I made a frequent getaway to the swing under the treehouse my grandpa and dad built for my siblings and me. Swinging on the pendulum, my thoughts became clearer as my senses got used to the overwhelming

sound of nothing. Dull pain bit into my sides. The swing made of plastic dug into my hips and held me as a snake constricting its prey. Its grasp was a jarring reminder that I was not small like I used to be. Decomposing leaves covered the ground as I could not help but think how one day I will join them. I pondered whether I will be small again when I meet the afterlife. I wished to be thin like my friends who never seemed to gain the layer of thick fat that I had in middle school.

I go back to the swing time and time again. Even as the baby fat fell into curves, I felt the same ugly girl I was when I first started going to the swing in middle school. At sixteen, the swing held me as I sobbed over the anxiety that breathed fire down my face from dusk to dusk. At eighteen, Mom and Dad had sold the house I lived in my whole life. But the swing sat with me and held me all the same the last time I basked in its company. I wished for a way to make life stop moving. I wished to be convinced that the only hurt in life was hating my body in middle school again. I missed the bitterness of my biggest issue being the hatred I held towards myself. That hatred fell away like an old stuffed animal sliding to the floor under the bed. It was only in moments of yearning for the past that I would dig under the bed to find the dust-littered toy and hate my body nostalgically.

Perhaps it is a sign of brokenness to crave the very place that made me feel too big in the first place. I miss a place I don't fit into anymore, like when I was young and I outgrew my favorite clothes, like my red sweatpants with cartoon animals on the legs. The swing was meant for me when I was a kid. When I returned, I always wanted to feel little again. I never really did. The swing pinched my skin, the old chains groaned. I try to kick the tree in front of the swing as high up as I can. I remember when my legs were too short to reach the tree at all. I wish I was small like that, when my worries were futile, and life wasn't ever-shifting. I wish that I could go back to not worrying about needing friends and instead spend my time alone on the playground. I wish I could go back now and watch my child self on this swing. If I saw her wisps of blonde hair go back and forth, flicking into the clothes her mom had surely set out for her to wear, and watched her as she tried to kick up that tree, then maybe I could warn her. If I saw her little smile and got to smile back at her, then maybe the piece of me that is still her would finally rest. Maybe I could hug

her tight and finally let go of her. I could stop warring with her. I could stop crying every time I think Mom doesn't like who I grew into. I could live in reality, without her putting false notions of love in my head. If I could see myself as a kid again, I could abandon her on that swing under the treehouse and forget she ever existed.

But I would never be able to leave her if I was with her. She has always been the best of me. Her soft kindness and daydreams contrast my jaded hardness and cynicism. I may have darkened into the color of midnight skies, but she was bright like the summers she spent in the pool. If she was in front of me, I would hold her close to my heart and protect her. I would watch her grow, take the hurt from her hands, and bear it for her. I would wipe her tears and never leave her. I would be for her what I knew she always needed. I would protect her from her own hatred. She would know she is loved and that she is beautiful.

We would play with the dolls she wanted to play with and color when she wanted, and she could ask things of me without feeling like a burden. She would learn that home can be another person. She would believe that the world is safe because I spilled blood to make it safe for her. She could walk into any room knowing she deserves the love there, not fearing it like I always had. We would erase the bad from my past and fill me with her ease. We would be okay. We would be happy. If only I could see my childhood self on that swing.

As young girls, women learn to hate their bodies from their mothers. As teenage girls, women get angry at the form they inhabit. Young adult women try to unlearn the hatred that used to be their constant companion. When life gets too busy, the hatred will become just a piece of a mirage of other issues in their lives. They clean their closets, trying on an old dress that is too small now, and there behind the muddy gym shoes from ninth grade, they would find their old self-hatred belt and tie the dust-sprinkled belt around their waists. It would squeeze and pinch the supple flesh, a perfectly harsh accessory to the snug outfit and tears.

I recall hating myself in middle school for the way the swing in my backyard pinched my hips. I picture my childhood self, too small to get

on the swing without having to jump into it. I want to believe if I saw and held her for a moment, I could abandon her forever. Yet I know if I was reunited with her sweet smile and she showed me the things she loved, the Barbie house she got for Christmas, the rabbit she had since she was four, and the swing we had always been fond of, I would never be able to part from her. I would make sure the life she lived was an easy and happy one. I would devote myself to helping her unlearn the insecurities she was beginning to grow into. I would make sure we grew into a happy young woman who knew she deserved love without conditions. She would know that she deserved love because of who she was. She would learn to be soft in a world that is rough. She wouldn't become harsh like I did. But I will never be able to hold her like I wish I could. I won't be able to comfort her in the sixth grade after her mom brings her to tears in the YMCA in front of her sister's friends. It's a melancholic acceptance to know that the piece of me with the biggest heart will always be hurt, and I can't protect her or even hold her. But one day I will hold my own daughter. When I look in the mirror in front of her body that mimics mine and her grandmothers', I will never criticize it. I will tell the both of us that we are beautiful.

## Perception

Heather DeJarnatt

Perception is the unit  
that measures reality:  
you spray paint pigeons  
and call them peacocks,  
and your cold, take-out curry  
becomes authentic Indian cuisine.

# Ithaka

Perry O'Connor

But while he sleeps,  
rocked by the yaw,  
the shift and the tilt,  
while the shade  
of the sail  
settles and shivers  
algal on fire-gold hair,  
while closed his restless eyes  
sift out lightless spaces,  
whisk swiftly under skin  
fringed with copper lashes,  
seeing such a sweet-water spring  
as the parched man prizes  
out of the horizon's palimpsest  
in dear Penelope,  
the olive pillar of all his love  
about whom he has built the lush country of his being,  
fire-gold as when at Troy he strung his bow,  
already, against his heavens,  
sailors are stealing toward the sealed storm.

# Shadow of God

Aurora Brande

## *Day 1*

Outside of an apartment dripping in brick and construction dust were two streetlights. They stood right next to each other, drowning each other, one white, one yellow, close as the space between two drunk men chest-to-chest. Their light mixed together and blasted against everything in sight, hurling out a sickness of illumination.

They strained against each other, fading during the day before turning their full force on each other every time they sensed the first nightly weakness of the sun. The shadows they cast crossed each other and blurred each other out, a kaleidoscope of competition. Exhaustion embodied, an unending war, holding fast to their pointless angry purpose with never a flicker.

## *Day 2*

The creek met the ears before the eyes, as it was contained close between concrete. It flowed at night, too, even without anyone around to know. It looked nothing like a faucet. The river it became didn't either; it had run continuously, always, for thousands of years before the pipe factory squatted down and made its home on the banks, before man crossed it without effort, before it was clogged with poison and neon plastic kayaks. The dark vortices of submerged rocks had swirled synchronous, forever never-changing. Life independent of observation. An impossibility. It had to be stopped.

## *Day 3*

Looking down after the sun disappears, the earth looks like a black hole. The endless gaping abyss, stretching toward the circular horizon, uniform and chillingly dangerous.

Grasping across that terrifying, silent, sleeping giant are bright infectious growths, pinpointed of fungal light and everything else ignored. Streets barreling haphazard across nothing, really.

From that high, the pit of the earth yawns open and groans out, a low humming rumble of ancient pain, the twisted thing it has been pushed to become.

Look at me, little gods, it says.

Look on your works, the blood of my veins drained, the air that grows thin. Look on, ye mighty.

I run out.

#### ***Day 4***

The astronomy textbook in Barnes & Noble, published in 2008, dissects the planets into their mineral compositions, their elliptical orbits, and their Greek astronomical glyphs of designation. The universe flattened: constellations, the phases of the moon, the solar system, fake theoretical pictures of the auroras borealis and australis on Saturn.

Outside of Barnes & Noble, absent the sun, the only lights overhead are those of airplanes passing by. The asphalt main road across the drainage ditch squeals with passing car tires as the torturous primal need to see combined with centuries of mechanical progress blinds the night sky.

#### ***Day 5***

There are multiple stages to replacing the fish in a fish tank.

Stage 1: Buy several kinds of the same kind of fish. African cichlids or tropical cichlids, but not a mix of the two. Like beta fish, they don't play nice with each other. The suckermouth catfish you bought several years ago is probably still alive, so you don't have to replace him.

Stage 2: Place the plastic bags the fish came in into the water without opening them. If the temperature difference between the water in the tank and the water in the bag is too much, the fish will die upon entry. Change kills. Wait at least five hours before letting them free.

Stage 3: Feed the fish twice, before and after night, and keep the tank light on 24/7 if you want. One of the fish will grow faster than the others and establish itself on one side of the tank, attacking anything that comes

past the invisible barrier. It must always be on alert. At some point, it will try to attack the suckermouth catfish and lose.

Stage 4: Watch the fish eat each other because you bought too many of them. They will start with the smallest and take tiny nibbling bites out of its side and back fins. The victim will begin to swim at an angle, its head higher in the water than its devastated tail. Eventually it will die. Take the body and throw it into the woods by your backyard. Repeat this stage until there are two or three fish left, not including the suckermouth catfish.

Stage 5: Continue to remove dead fish as they begin to die of the ick. They will slow their swimming speed, and a wispy white mildewy growth will spread across their skin and into their eyes because you did not clean the tank, and the cycled water grew stagnant. The only fish that will be unaffected is the suckermouth catfish, which doesn't rely on you for food. It fed on the disgusting green sickness of algae that also grew because you did not clean the tank. By now, it is at least a foot long, mottled, and unable to live without excessive amounts of filth.

Repeat.

#### ***Day 6***

A dead doe expands on its side at the edge of the highway and looks nowhere, all four legs sticking straight out in the sunlight, cold and hard as a rotting wooden board. Tied to one unyielding wooden back leg is a helium balloon, tugging softly on the leg in the cold and hard wind of the cars, a yellow balloon bright in the sunlight, a smiley face looking nowhere, deflating, saying, "Happy Birthday!"

#### ***Day 7***

There are moments when it stops. Something shifts. The light bends, turns away for a moment, and the soul, who has not looked at these things, who has stopped knowing these things, remembers a shadow, an ancient something, and slows. Sees. Grazes fingers across the top of a leaf, a wilted little thing, half-choked on clogged air. Reaches out.

# The Abundance

Julia Faith Lehman



*35mm Film*

# LAMP

*Literary Magazine*