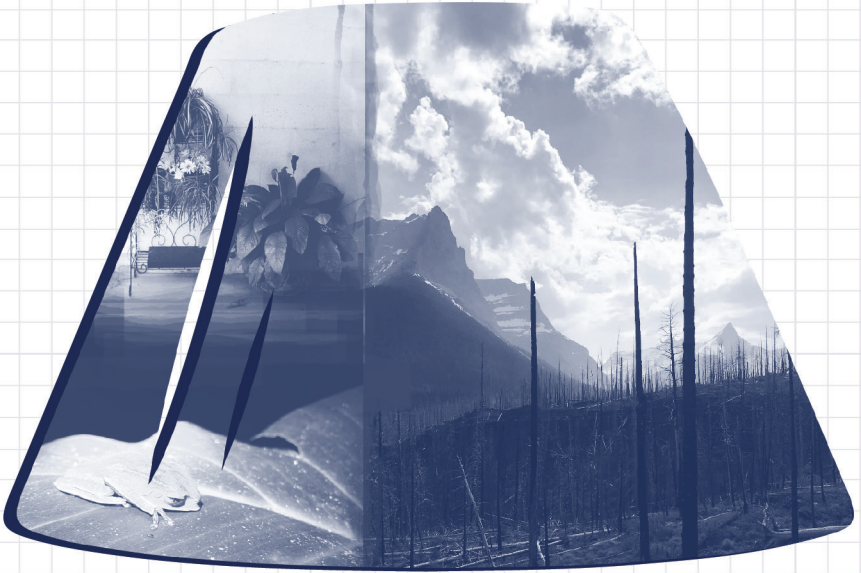


LAMP

Literary Magazine



Poetry
Fiction
Creative Nonfiction
& Photography



2025 |

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2025

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Thaw

Sarah Tate

The splurge of cherry
blossoms before their time
at the frost edge of spring
waiting for the watery pink light
to smoke out the frozen thistles of winter
against hard blue sky.

Soon, a bit of mint will grow wild
alongside the gravel roads,
and the smell of my grandfather's pipe
will spill from the mist
across the gleaned fields
and take my arm.

Memories thaw out and trickle
in a flow of brackish water.
A vanishing into ghost woods
without even a scratch of sun.
Time, always time,
tugs on the evening like wind.

I practice a raw unraveling
as I listen to words flowering soft
sung by my mother in the corner,
and the shadows have yet to do
their slow seeping
into the sidewalks—

I am not ready
to wake in someone else's body,
fitted with bones not my own.
But time, always time,
with eyes that dance like sparks
across luminous skulls,
breaks my heart in the grass.

Ode to Two-Month-Old Kimbap Sitting in My Freezer

Leah Besser

You are a scepter put away for safe keeping

I was awkward in your making
But you were
Assembled and adorned
And on your first day
You filled me with the most
Delicious guilt
Your pickled radish, cucumber, and carrot
Crunched
Under the weight of my dread
My cheeks
Stretched
And
My tongue
Parted your white rice fields
And like a gilded prince
You were crowned with the
Gloss of sesame oil
Then, because I loved you
So selfishly,
I constricted you in plastic
And for two months
You sat, hidden, hoarded

Last night, you blessed me so abundantly
Like a key,
Crafted in secret, crafted with
Solid gold, ancient chili oil rubies
Centuries old
The lashes of frost you took on
The silky slime of your egg bath
The humidity of that oiled pan
You grasped it all

As one would a sword,
Yet
You were

Gentle

Now your white rice fields
Spoke words of kindness
Your hibernation in that arctic
Must have awoken wisdom
Because last night
There was
Joy

Fear, Fire, and Deer¹

Rebekah Yockey

The baby deer had its nose in the dirt. I swear, that's what he was doing when I drove toward him—or her, I didn't exactly get that close of a look—at sixty miles per hour. Then the thing started walking.

It was five in the morning. The sun wasn't quite teasing the horizon yet, so only the blinding car headlights lit the road.

And then there was this deer.

Here's the thing: I know I'm not going to earn likability points for this, but I had time to stop, and I didn't. I hit it. I hit Bambi.

I told everyone afterward that it would have been more dangerous to slam on my brakes. I told them that all I could imagine was the nose of the car behind me tucked into my car's rear end like two dogs meeting for the first time, but the car was far enough to be only a glimmer of light. If I'm honest with myself, there was this second—a *second*—where I just . . . didn't do anything. That second, that moment when my foot hovered over the brake and fear puffed its chest and sent my senses into submission, made all the difference. After a while, we believe whatever we tell ourselves, but the fact is that there was enough time to stop. And I didn't.

Now, I'm not a complete monster—I did brake *eventually*. I got down to about half my speed, but I knew I would hit the deer the moment I pressed my foot down. I tell myself now that I did the right thing, that I minimized the damage I was going to do, even though I was going to do the damage anyway. I tell myself that fear grabs us right by the throat, lifting us off the ground until our feet dangle like a weak child hanging from a monkey bar, and we don't—can't—move.

I think about that a lot. Fear. It's completely created in our minds, yet it does the most damage.

So, fear turned me into a trembling chihuahua version of myself as I pulled over and got out of my car to look at the damage. In painfully coincidental timing, a siren traveled down the highway like a roaring

¹All names in this piece have been changed to protect individual privacy.

wave. My blinking yellow headlights were inferior in comparison to its bright red and white lights, and I held my phone to my chest as if it held every ounce of my pride. *Oh no*, I thought. *Someone called 911. This is so embarrassing. I'm fine.*

And then the ambulance rode right past me. It had to swerve around me: the inconvenience on the road. I watched it drive away until it was only a speck in the distance and its siren a low whine, off to help someone who had bigger problems, I'm sure.

I turned to the long crack in the front bumper, and this feeling coursed through me. Maybe it was because I thought the ambulance was coming for me, or that I was clad in my sweats and Looney Tunes shirt on a dark backroad. Regardless of the reason, I felt pretty stupid. The feeling grew in my stomach until it balled up and formed a pressure in my chest. Why did the deer have to walk out at that moment? And *why* didn't I brake sooner?

In retrospect, this is an unfair question to ask myself. To ask anyone. I know that now, but it wasn't until I was driving through my hometown a few weeks later and saw a memorial picture of a girl I once knew on a mailbox that I remembered that I've asked others this same unanswerable question: in the moment when you have no time to rationalize and ask, *Why didn't you choose differently?* It's easier, I think, to imply blame to the recipient of the danger.

Kendall was her name—the girl I knew on the mailbox. Somewhere in my shoebox of pictures beneath my bed is a picture of us in our cheerleading attire, eyes bright with youth and our hair shining with hairspray. Her hair was the color of the sun and her eyes the color of the sea. She was what I imagined the beach would look like if it took human form. In that photo, we're smiling into the digital camera with pom-poms pressed against our hips, leaning into each other's shoulders. Before her parents divorced. Before her mother left one night and a man with alcohol on his breath decided to get behind the wheel. Before my mother sat me down, gently, like she had when she told me my grandfather passed away and said that Kendall's mother was killed in an accident. Kendall and I didn't see each other that summer. To be honest, I forgot about her for a long time.

Then, one morning, it was all over Facebook. A house—or what was once a house—exposed and stained with black. The entire second floor looked like a cake a child had manhandled with his bare hands. Its insides were exposed; the outside was broken and crumbling. Engulfed in flames

during the night, the roof had caved in and taken the lives of Kendall, her father, and her stepsister Anna, who was only eight.

A lady who went to my church lived in the neighboring house and was one of the people to call the police. She told her pastor, my uncle, that Anna was at the window on the second floor when the fire department arrived. Red patches spanned across all her visible skin, but she was alive as the flames raged behind her. The firefighters held out their arms to her.

They told her to jump.

But Anna, for a reason I'm only beginning to understand, did not jump. The fire licked at her back and consumed her.

I heard that story, and that feeling was there. That pressure in my chest. A bitter frustration. I couldn't stop thinking about it for weeks, and when I saw Lydia, Anna and Kendall's other sister and the one who did jump, in our church chairs the next week, my throat felt like I was having a bad allergic reaction. I knew whatever anger I felt was unjustified, but knowing a feeling is wrong doesn't make it go away.

Why couldn't she just jump?

I asked myself that question so many times, not daring to voice it out loud because, well, the only person who could answer that question—couldn't.

My best conclusion I have is that jumping can be scarier than dying. Succumbing can be easier than fighting. Stopping can seem harder than accepting the collision. And sometimes, we know exactly what will save us, what will minimize the damage—stare at it in its pleading eyes and outstretched hands—and fall into the fire anyway.

Viper Alert

Alyssa Busby



Digital Photography

Two boys, noon in late July

Daniel Letz

Handlebars grasped with sweaty palms.
Bikes rumbling toward the woods.

Lunchboxes packed by their mothers, full
of peanut butter sandwiches and Cokes.

Hands wave goodbye. The boys, unaware
of their mother's send-off, venture onward.

Sweat rolls down their cheeks into their
eyes. Burning. They wander toward relief.

A canopy of green covers them into
shade. Moisture purrs from the ground

and nestles onto their skin. Nearby a
creek laughs. The birds warble to them

far above in the Oaks. A breeze passes and
cools them, brushing the leaves against one

another, asking their names. The boys travel
farther, catching a dirt path. They amble on

until a doe runs from behind a tall Maple,
blocking their path. It eyes them, curious,

hooves sinking into the soft dirt. It studies
them, then moves along into the underbrush,

padding away steadily as the trees sigh in
contentment. On the ground, a mossy stone

points the way. The boys take a deep
breath and carry on into wonder.

Soul-Tied Mermaids

Emilia Tattrie

They peer at the ferocious waters below:
cerulean blue engulfs the foamy edges
as they crash against the cliffs.

Their dreams ripple in the tide's whispers,
carried on the breeze, soft as a secret,
unfolding in the rhythm of the ocean's hum.

Laughter fuses with the salty air,
almost as if the waves themselves are in on the joke,
holding secrets only the waters understand.

They braid each other's hair, doused in seaweed and salt.
Their toes tickle the cool, smooth stones,
fingertips trace the frothy white waters.

Imagination weaves between them,
a shimmer of things unseen,
bound by the quiet glow of shared dreams.

To them—they are mermaids
gazing at the horizon where the sky kisses the sea,
dreaming of worlds beyond their own.

Simple Cycle

Katherine Bechter

After the First Law of Thermodynamics

Breath caught in her hands.
She values her power to
produce warmth in cold.

Fault Lines

Kaley Hutter

Cat hadn't meant anything by it. It's an old habit, really, to ignore the tip jar on your way out. It takes a moment to check your pockets for loose change, just quarters, because nickels and pennies are just a tease. And then you have the whole business of looking the high-cheek-boned barista in the smile-crinkled eye and nodding at him in a pretense of charity, like your fifty-two cents just made all the difference in his paycheck. And then you fumble away your wallet and gather yourself and make your brisk yet nonchalant exit in a manner that lets everyone in the room know that while you have places to be, you are in no way rushed. And then there's the moment of dealing with the doorhandle, because sometimes in that particular shop it gets stuck, and then suddenly you *are* in a rush because you made a whole deal of making sure the barista watched you leave, and now here you are, a full woman, fifty-two cents poorer, jiggling a doorknob that's older than you, hoping the barista won't have to come over and help again, and thinking maybe if you hadn't stopped for the tip jar then you could have caught the swing of the door as the previous customer left, and—ah!—miraculously, it opens.

No, she had decided. It wasn't worth the trouble. And so she didn't stop, skated instead to the exit, where a tall woman with long dark hair had just finagled the door open. On the threshold, the woman stuck the crook of her elbow out to hold the door's swing. Cat caught it with a free hand, and they both slipped out without looking at each other.

If she had stopped for the tip jar and the barista and the door handle, she wouldn't have followed the woman to the crosswalk, might have been on the other side of the street when it happened. But when Cat did catch the door, follow the woman to the crosswalk, cross the street with only a few seconds left in the glowing walking signal, and reach the other side, the dark-haired woman fell to the ground and began seizing.

Her whole body rattled, legs and arms flailing, black hair splayed out like fringe on the pavement. This stranger, the one who held the door for Cat on the way out of really the only half-good coffee joint in the neighborhood, here, on the ground next to the antique store with the blue and white awning, seizing. It was not a moment Cat had anticipated in the day's events.

She was a sensible person with a good head on her shoulders, or so she knew people to say of her, a truly lucid young woman who did not shriek

or freeze or panic in the sudden emergencies of one's imagined daily encounters. And yet, here, a woman was seizing on the street corner, and Cat could not find a word in her mouth.

It occurred to her that the other folks around them were screaming. *On her side*, the thought came. That was the next step in the proper order of things. Yes, it was.

She lowered herself to the ground. Fastened a hand to the shoulder of the shaking woman, then another hand—then rolled her on her side and held her there.

A man to the right was calling 911. His khaki pants made a column in Cat's periphery.

The woman rumbled under Cat's hands. Although *rumbled* didn't quite seem like the appropriate word to describe a woman in distress. An earthquake, maybe. Cat particularly liked the idea of earthquakes. They never happened here, but Cat supposed in places like California they all knew what it meant to feel the earth rumbling under their skin. Children knew, from a young age. The earth bucking up at you as if it was alive.

The woman shook beneath her hands beside the antique store. Cat had found a fault line map there once. There are eight major continental fault lines in the earth, but only one of them runs through America. The North American Plate. Appropriately named. Cat liked to trace the lines all over the map. They sprawled like veins. Now, on the ground, Cat waited, held the bucking stranger by the palms of her hands. It seemed she did not stand up for a very long time.

Finally, the woman was still. Another man—a doctor, Cat supposed—knelt on the other side of the body.

The body. Not a body. A woman. Alive. Breathing. Not dead. Not Mary.

This woman is not Mary.

And yet she looked like her. Long black hair and tall. Their grandmother had always joked that Mary was adopted, her hair so different from Cat's and their mother's auburn sheens.

Black hair splayed like fringe on the living room floor. Arms and legs flailing.

This woman is not Mary.

The doctor was talking. Asking how long. Cat did not know. It was 3:55. The receipt on her coffee had said 3:47. Her drink took approximately four minutes to come out. Then, it was a short walk to the crosswalk, to the antique store.

All this Cat tried to explain to the doctor. The door handle, how the door handle normally gets stuck, how the crosswalk signal was almost red, how downtown was a good place to have an emergency because there were always different types of people around. His attention was fixed on the woman. A minute, maybe, Cat might have said out loud. So much she might have said out loud. Much later, she could not remember what she said and what she did not say. What she released and what she kept buried, beside the map of veins, beside the black hair splayed like fringe on the living room floor. The arms and legs flailing. Mary shaking, shaking, shaking like the crusted plates of the earth itself.

The woman was okay. She was awake again. An ambulance had arrived. The crowd was evolving and shifting as some people dispersed and others wanted to see what the commotion was about.

Black hair splayed like fringe on the—

This woman is not Mary.

Cat stood and picked the dirt off her jeans. They were carrying the woman away. The doctor thanked her. They lifted the woman into the back of the ambulance, closed the doors, and drove away.

Cat stood under the antique store awning. The storefront remained pale blue and trimmed in white like every other day in its long, loping history. It stared back at her, standing its ground. The late afternoon shadows were beginning to crawl up its seams.

She walked toward home, coffee cup still full in her hand. She walked past the CVS. She walked inside, picked up a package of Bounty paper towels, put it back, and walked back out to the street. She counted cracks in the sidewalk. Stepped over them carefully, like a child following an old nursery rhyme.

She walked up the two flights of stairs to her apartment. Unlocked the door, which didn't use a key, really, just a magnet, some innovative way of

locking your door so you could only lock it using your key and therefore could never be locked out. Mary had found ways of getting herself locked out, though.

Mary.

Cat closed the door. She slid off her sneakers and left them on the mat. She hung her key on the hook and placed her bag on the kitchen table. She opened the fridge and set her coffee on the top shelf, next to the oat milk. Then she moved into the living room, stretched out on the faded floral-print couch, and allowed herself to remember her younger sister. Black hair splayed like fringe on the living room floor. Arms and legs flailing. Mary shaking, shaking, shaking like the crusted plates of the earth itself. Cat shaking, holding her on her side, calling 911, trying to tame an earthquake with only the pads of her fingers, trying to ease the tectonic forces in her sister's brain with hushed croons.

The early evening light fell over the far corner of the couch, carving shadows into the daisy fabric.

Several minutes later, Cat stood, wiped her face, walked to the fridge, took out her coffee, and placed it in the microwave. She set the timer for thirty-three seconds and waited, her fingers tracing the marbling in the granite countertop. When her coffee was hot again, she sat on the couch and traced the floral pattern in the dying window-filtered light. She sat, and she traced, and she allowed herself to remember, and she did not stand up for a very long time.

From Death to Life

Seth Sexton



Digital Photography

Hydrangeas

EliAnna Schoonover

Wasted rainwater drains from the hanging
hydrangea baskets.

Windowsills filled with a wet, windy chill
whistle and eventually fill with silky droplets.

Green tea boils on the toiling stove.
I only hope the bowl of leaves

leaves me whole.
I stay in a state of grace looking

for a place to throw away my old ways.
Tears drain down my face like wasted rain.

Now, I count every cloud and cower
at the sound of thunder

under the downpour's howl, tracing
rainy fingers over smothered hydrangeas.

The Untranslatable Words

Ellery Gallagher

6 AM and January are for me and the untranslatable words,
which keep me company as I try to make shape of what they replaced,
fitting into the mold of something always lost to me.

I round my tongue, trying to elicit the sound of *it*.
It, which I can only recognize because when *it* went, it left with me *saudade*.
A foreign word. On a foreign tongue. In a foreign country.

A hunger that I won't feel if I refuse to look.
Only when I pull out my pen to say something I will never and only ever
understand—that 6 AM and January are for me and the untranslatable words.

The Anxiety of Legacy

Desiree Cotto

my grandfather wipes sweat off his brow
at 21, takes a red eye to
New York although terrified
to fly,
as rough winds rattle his
young man bones.

he beats the sun to rise,
his cracked hands and quick
breath pave the way
for me to end up

here
writing poems,
taking naps at 7 pm.

my grandmother cannot read or write,
yet here I am.

my hands quiver
at the thought of pen and paper,
just like hers.

we are one
in terror
at the sight of a
blank page,

mine not
for lack of knowing
how letters form words.
rather,

as remembrance rattles
my young girl bones,
I am paralyzed, that I
might put
the wrong words
in the wrong spaces

and with each stroke my pen weeps
somehow erase
their legacy

Old Growth

Julia Lehman



Digital Photography

Words for Arriving Somewhere: An Interview with Alum Rebecca Pickard

Interviewed by Kaley Hutter

What does it mean to be a creative writer after the English or Writing degree?

*In our conversation on craft and research, Rebecca Pickard demonstrates her identities as a poet and historian after the classroom—how to make choices, discover form, and draw from deep research, merely out of an encompassing desire for the craft itself. Since graduating from the Liberty University English Department in 2020, Rebecca has published poetry in magazines such as *Revolute* and *Letters*, served as a researcher on the South River Quaker Meeting House and Burial Ground Committee, and worked full-time in marketing for Baker Academic.*

*During this time, Rebecca has worked to keep “being curious and being excited to do the work of articulation.” For her, this pursuit means active dedication to creative and critical work. Her ongoing projects include a long-form poetic sequence on the color blue; a contemporary cento entirely constructed from lines of *Moby-Dick*, which began as her senior capstone; and a scholarly article on the last sayings of Sarah Terrell and her impact on the Quakers living in 18th-century Lynchburg.*

Rebecca and I spent a rainy Sunday evening in December 2024 discussing these projects, as well as our encounters with poetry, faith, research, and language. In the conversation below, we wonder about craft and form, pursuit and arrival, history and ethics, and what it might mean as poets and scholars of faith to explore the unknown until we arrive somewhere. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

KH: To start, Rebecca, I'd like to hear you talk about the etymology of the word “blue,” which seems like a big driving force for you right now.

RP: I began exploring the etymology of “blue” in the spring of 2021. Over conversations with friends, I had identified a particular feeling that had been with me much of my life, something like anger, but not exactly, that felt like a dark blue. I was working a few jobs at the time, one of them being a Latin teacher, and derivatives and translation were on my mind. English has derivatives like “veridian” for “green,” and our word

“purple” comes directly from the Latin “pupura.” But there’s no “bl” word in Latin that turns into “blue”—our “blue” comes from our Germanic/Norse side and doesn’t start to exist until Middle English.

KH: What was surprising to you in your research on this? Was there anything that took you off guard by how much it made sense?

RP: Yes! When it comes to color, “bl” gets pulled into English to describe a deep, dark blue, akin to bruising—and “bruised/dark blue” is the older meaning of “livid,” from Latin. I had been so lost having this word, “blue,” for that lifelong feeling, and thinking, *I feel like my anger is blue, like a dark blue*, and I didn’t know what that meant. So, to arrive at “livid” and to see all of those etymological connections with “blue” and with “bruising”—it felt correct. I was wrestling with an anger that I don’t feel in the same way now; it felt like a childhood wound that had stayed with me, an anger of feeling too old as a child. And that settled into this seething, rumbling, dark blue color in my mind. Right now, with the larger poetic sequence of “blue,” I feel like it lands in a place of *not* naming—of taking comfort in an unknown feeling. In other words: why do we feel the compulsion to name, and why am I searching for this thing? Why do I feel so drawn to name this anger, somehow, when I have the word “anger,” and I have the word “blue”? Why do I need more than that, right? I know why—because I *need* to—but what is served in *naming*?

KH: Is our desire to name a God-given quality or a man-made quality? What’s that tension like for you?

RP: I mean, the first task God gives Adam in the garden is to name the animals. It seems like the process of naming things is something given to us. I don’t know, I kind of feel like Adam would have named the animals whether God told him to or not. But by giving him the task, God blesses that desire. But I’ve been wondering when the search for the right name, or the right language, becomes fruitless—because it’s more for my own comfort or my own pride than it is for the genuine exploration of my inner and outer world.

KH: In your *Moby-Dick* cento, a phrase you used when outlining your research is that the form became a “constructivist exercise” rather than an “expressivist revelation.” Can you talk some about indulgence and restraint as it relates to that form?

RP: When I first started writing poetry, I cut my teeth on long iambic pentameter. I wrote twelve-page, single-spaced, iambic pentameter narra-

tive poems. What form does it bounce you back to yourself. There were times writing in iambic pentameter where I wanted to say something, and I couldn't say it the way that I initially thought it. It forced me back to myself and out again into new words and new ways. It bounced me off of my "easy button," the phrases and rhythms I used all the time. I think easy buttons are fine—we're always going to have them—but form forces you to give up on those for a moment and enter into a new world. It gives you the ladder upon which to string your poems. Form works to help you make discoveries that you wouldn't make if you're always allowing the first move to be the right move. I think if most poets don't learn this through form, they learn it through revision. They'll learn it through breaking up poetry or destroying it in some way. But for me, form is the best way to make these discoveries. The cento is obviously the most rigid form you can use; you can't even choose your own words. I've enjoyed the challenge of working with Melville as a collaborator; his words are the ones I have, and I can't do much to change them. But there's also something freeing about not coming to it from my own self; I'm taking something that already exists and building something new from it. I'm not having to make the bricks myself.

I grew up going to an Episcopal school, and we prayed a lot of recited prayers. I think one of the blessings of that has been that when I didn't know how to pray, I had something to build from, either in a written prayer, or in the familiar rhythm of how a prayer, how a collect, goes. I have felt a very similar comfort with the cento and with Melville. When I'm dry for words, those are the moments when I go to this piece and play with it. I don't have to think of brilliant words myself because Melville has already written them. I just have to go find them. I can go and be searching and finding out there more than I'm having to do that diving into myself.

KH: You make a distinction between looking outside the self and looking inside the self, even with the words "construction" and "expression"—"construction" definitely has a sense of *building* something solid in order to look at it and make sense of it, versus "expression" has a little more of a connotation of expelling something that then disappears. Can you speak more to this?

RP: Expression also by necessity has an outside viewer or listener—someone to be expressed to—whereas construction doesn't. This was something that I loved with my research for the cento. The poets who wrote centos in the Roman era did it mostly as a ludic exercise—it was just a fun way to show your friends how much Virgil you had memorized. In doing that

research, and in some of the other projects I did in undergrad, I found this sense of play with poetry—playing around with words, and breaking things, and reworking things, and trying new things. The pieces ended up being less about needing this perfect thing for everyone to fully understand, and more about wanting to see what happens when I play around with language. Where does it go, and what can I find at the end of it? A poem is much more about the finding, and the searching, and the discovery process for myself as well. Hopefully other people are able to enjoy it, but it's not trying to be a communicative device, if that makes sense—it's not trying to *communicate* something, it truly is trying to *be* something.

KH: It makes me think of that drive towards neat articulation we were talking about. I wonder if what poets love about poetry is the fact that we can't arrive.

RP: I think that's why we write more than one poem, too. It's not ever done. It's not ever—it being *life*, being all of it—it's not ever summed up in one piece. I also think part of that is because our sanctification isn't finished. We're continually walking with God towards what we know will be complete and is already complete, but our experience of it is still not completely fulfilled, and we are walking through time towards that. We simultaneously are experiencing it and are trying to articulate it, but we also do not know that fulfillment yet. If you're able to be at peace with the moment that you're in—I think it lets you move forward.

KH: As a poet, what does it mean for you to want well on earth, knowing that we're going to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living, but we're also called to want more?

RP: I do think that the fullness we have access to is the already/not-yet. It's always "already" and "not yet," and I think poetry lives in that space much of the time. Part of it is because poetry really *is* a thing versus simply describing a thing. That's sort of in that already/not-yet place, a little bit outside of time. It is kind of timeless, and it exists in a way that I think is a little analogous to an already/not-yet view of creation.

KH: You're talking about this simultaneous stasis of wanting, searching, and being content all at the same time, and how poetry has space for that. In what way, if any, does your scholarship also have that space for you?

RP: Honestly, my scholarship is mostly a searching thing, searching through mundane things and making connections. I've been researching the Quakers that founded Lynchburg, especially their abolitionist efforts,

and that has involved lots of reading old meeting notes, and wills, and receipts, and property lists, and free Negro registers. I catalog transcripts and data into Excel sheets, and through all these little notes you find out a story that is much bigger than just the raw facts.

But that's what I really enjoy about scholarship—the hunt and the find. I was trained in this kind of research not by getting a master's in history, but by working at a museum, where the question was always about translating scholarship for the average person—helping the average person, the audience, connect with history, and helping them discover those connections themselves, and then hopefully tell others. So, a lot of the work I've been doing has been more focused on that. I'm part of a committee working to plan the future of the South River meeting house, and over the course of my research I've uncovered a document called “The Last Sayings of Sarah Terrell,” a document that hasn't really had a lot of widespread scholarship done about it. But I think it's incredibly useful and important for Lynchburg's history, and so it feels really good to bring that to light and help people understand the context around it.

KH: What do you think the importance of it is for Lynchburg right now?

RP: The document records the last words of John Lynch's sister, Sarah Lynch Terrell, in 1773; in her “Last Sayings” she tells her Quaker friends about a vision she received from God that condemned the Quaker practice of slavery, even though it was a “humane” slavery. Her words are essentially an articulation from a Christian perspective of why even humane slavery is wrong in the eyes of God. And it's radical—she essentially is telling her friends, “We're gonna go to Hell if we don't free our slaves.” Her “Last Sayings” were passed around among Quakers all over Virginia, and it essentially kicked them into high gear about freeing people, which in turn led to a lot of abolitionist efforts and the freeing of over one hundred people in this area.

When I worked at the museum, we occasionally encountered guests who wanted to argue that slavery was just a product of its time. “The Last Sayings of Sarah Terrell” is such a crucial document for demonstrating that there *were* people who were compelled by their Christian belief to look at the institution of slavery and see how wrong it was. And they weren't just writing that in letters and living something else, but they sought to make their lives match what they believed, which I love. It shines a light that the problem wasn't just inevitable in the culture at that time; the culture *could have* changed. And it did. In Lynchburg, in their small Quaker community, it did. But it also was the reason that the Quakers couldn't stay in Lynchburg long term. They really couldn't survive in a slave economy without participating in it.

KH: I've heard you talk about before how sometimes when you're reading in a certain scholarly vein, your poetry changes. Have you experienced that at all, or have they felt pretty separate?

RP: Quakers begin their services in silence. Sometimes their services are entirely silent; they wait for the prompting of the Spirit before they speak. I've been feeling very aware that I don't leave a lot of space in my life for silence. I always have podcasts playing, or I'm listening to music, or I'm yapping, or something like that. Even when I'm reading, I'll usually put on music or a soundscape in the background. I'll even listen to a podcast to go to sleep. I've realized that I'm not leaving myself the space to receive and hear, whether that's receiving and hearing God, or receiving and hearing new words, new sentences, new ideas. I think that's why driving ends up being present in a lot of my poetry, because it's one of the only spaces in my everyday life where my mind has that space to wander, where it's not focusing on some household task or work—it just is existing for twenty minutes. It's feeling every minute of the twenty minutes, and it's going where it wants to go. Anyway, Quaker silences . . .

KH: What does it mean for you—as a poet, scholar, Christian, human—to arrive somewhere? In the sense of seeking a “blue” that is richer, seeking a heaven on earth, seeking an arrival or articulation, or whatever that looks like for you?

RP: I think it looks like the comfort of the search in a lot of ways: simultaneously searching while being content that I am searching. I've swung wildly between those places. There are times in my life where I have been nothing but search, and there are times in my life where I've sat still and let the world wash over me rather than being an active participant in the movement of my world. I don't think those are opposed things; I think that they are things I have turned into opposition. But the ability to do them both at the same time—being curious, and being excited to do the work of articulation—that's good work. It's honest work. It's a good thing to do because it's part of the way that we understand more fully the world, and ourselves, and God. It's a good thing to give that attention where it ought to be, to let it speak to you but also speak back and understand in that way as well. It's about finding that space where I can be searching without being indulgent about the search, and also being okay with the search itself being where contentment is. That is part of the goal. That's the fun of life.

Slant Moon Outside

Tyne Glen

The brand-new streetlamp
Is so loud outside my window.

It shines like an offensive
Copy of the moon,
White with whatever new
Eco-friendly fluorescent bulb
They screwed in today.

I miss the orange that used
To, more considerately,
Welcome the dark.

Precipice



Digital Photography



Night Lights

Daniel Z. McKenzie

Scratch scrawling scratch, like twice-struck match,
Shoes speak with wan-hued walk.
The banshee bees still haunt the trees;
My ears they gently knock.

Upon an iron pine I light—
'Midst inky sea a dock.
Its roots commune with every home
And civilize my walk.

While strolling by, a lanternfly
On fallen frond I see.
Red velvet scrolls and rubber soles:
We've found a place to be.

Beijos de Morango com Chocolate

Kayla Santos

For Gramps

Model cars and tinkering watches.
Yellow and plaid and half a middle finger.
Handmade trinkets and wooden canes
Video call kisses of strawberries with chocolate.

She's too old for that, Grandma chides.
 But I'm not, not really.

Hobbling and following his wife like a puppy,
He'd ask where she was going,
Unashamed at his own cheek,
And she'd laugh as he followed.

Scarfig down food and fat like water
And helping to chop the veggies before.
Laughter cutting off unfinished jokes,
An old harmonica playing gentle notes.

Hurried gasps and uncontrolled jerks,
His panics hurt to see.
Matching tears with mum,
His fit finally gone.

Treasured photos and silly trinkets
 Like the handmade cars
 And the watch that won't work.
His favorite soap and yellow everywhere.

Kisses on the tip of my nose of strawberries and chocolate.
I was never too old for it.
 Not really.

Fairy Child

Leona Johnson

I was ambitious. I dropped you,
slick with cocoon juice
 and newborn skin.
They'd said you couldn't fly
yet, but I believed in you.
Cast out to dwell alone,
I'd watched each layer of silk
expand around your curled frame.
Your plum-sized mouth opened
in a baby's-breath yawn,
little wings shriveled against
your round feet and wiggling toes.
I'm all horns,
hoofed feet,
 and corded muscle.
But you—
you are a dollop of sunshine
surrounded by butterflies.
You can't be weak;
at every stage I've guarded you.
I clench my hands.
Your bright body tumbles
 through the air.
You might fall.
 You could fly.
The fragile bones of your wrists
would snap if they
 touched the ground.
Only nine inches left
before you smash
into the dirt. Now,
I see you're too small.
Reaching with talons, I stoop,
scoop you up by the ankle.
I wrap you on my hairy lap
and let you play with my finger.

Turning Point

Katherine Williams

Though my toes are going numb, the coldness of the ice rink is the least of my problems. *Scrape, scrape*, the blades on my feet sing with each little movement, but not the movement I want. The two-foot turn is a modest step, at least to an outside observer. A bend of your knees, a quick flick of your hips, and suddenly, your entire world has reversed. A simple adjustment, but as I work, and more weeks pass without making that turn, I soon discover that learning to figure skate alone quickly becomes a trial of the will.

Today, blurs of other skaters zoom past, splashes of color against the white ice. I am alone, with no coach to guide me, no friend to offer encouragement. I try again, over and over, to make that little turn. My skates won't change direction; my balance has left me; every attempt is a struggle not to go *splat!* on the ice.

Not far away, another skater is working on her turns as well. I watch her carefully, cautious not to stare too long. She is an older skater, somewhere in her sixties, I guess, but she skates with the precision and control of a well-trained athlete. I return to my own footwork without speaking. *Be quiet, be invisible*, I tell myself. It is much too nerve-wracking to talk with people; you never know what stupid things might come out of your mouth.

But still, I continue to watch from a distance, glancing at her after each of my own failed attempts. My frustration builds. Why will this move not work? What am I doing wrong?

The other skater is still on the ice, just a few strokes away. Exasperation simmers at my lack of progress, and eventually, it dulls my nerves. Without waiting to talk myself out of it, I skate toward her.

“Hello,” I say in my polite, meeting-you-for-the-first-time tone of voice. “Your turns are really good. Would you mind helping me?”

The skater—Marilyn—is more than happy to help, for as it would turn out, she is a retired coach, and she misses her students.

Taking me by the hand as she has so many before me, she walks me through the turn. The emphasis, the one I had missed, is an arm move-

ment. What was frustrating and unclear to me is explained in an instant. But only after I asked.

And of course, I don't get it right away. When I try to turn, my blades catch, and I stagger forward, catching myself before sprawling onto the ice. I glance at Marilyn to find her smiling, eyebrow raised.

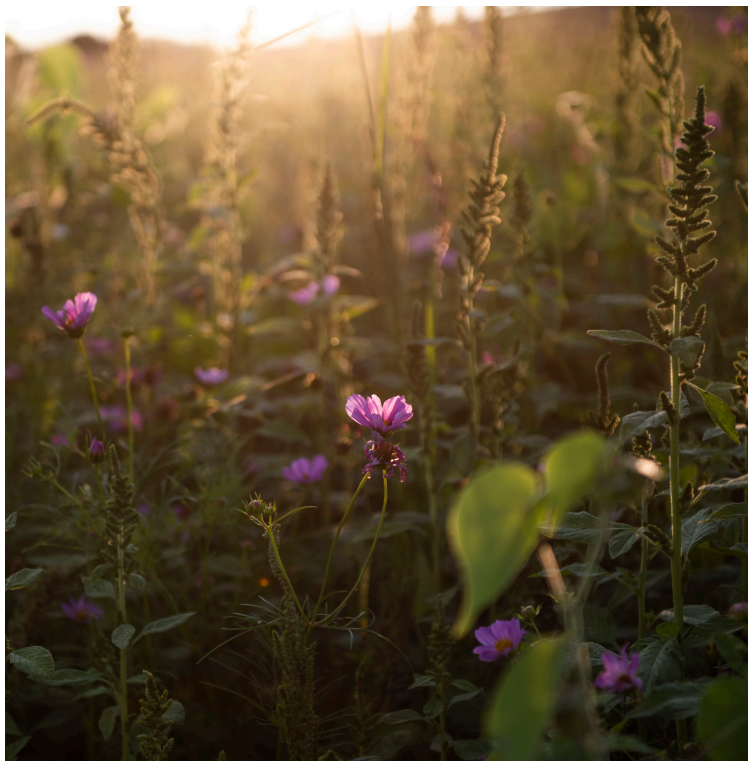
"What happened to your arms?" she asks me when, even after her instruction, I still forget to apply.

"Whoops," I say, grinning back. I spread my arms for balance the way she showed me and try again.

My blades scrape, and finally, *finally*, I turn from forward to backward. And for the first time, I have someone on the ice to share my success. Marilyn applauds and offers a high-five. "Is there anything else you need help with?" she asks.

I smile a bit self-consciously. "Well, now that you mention it . . ."

My list is long, but Marilyn doesn't mind. Cold seeps into my toes, but I could listen to her for hours. We move on to the other elements that I had been struggling to learn alone. But I'm not alone anymore, and the ice has never looked brighter.



Digital Photography

Too Busy

John Wuest

I'll sleep when I'm dead.

That's
what

I

have
always
said.

Now death has come, and

I still don't have time to
sleep.

North of the River

Claudia Gamble

Front porch dreamers
Go north of the river
These hills cannot sustain their children
Vacant storefronts gather vacant men
A center of industry crumbles into infamy
Employees casually turn to casualties
Souls blanketed in coal dust
Turn to whatever gets them through
Forlorn skeletons in forgotten closets

Cataloguing

A.R. Brande

I kicked my feet on the swing to make dust clouds and looked down the hill towards the property line. I stared at it for a long time. Tried to believe in it.

There's lots of things you should believe in even though you can't see them. Radiation, for example. The ocean floor. Stomachs.

The thing I can't believe in, though, is the line between my dad's property and the Beals'. There's nothing there. No fence, no creek, no tree, nothing. You just take a few steps, and bam, you're on someone else's land. Their dirt. Their . . . bedrock? I guess I don't know anything about property law, because how far down does it go? Does everybody own a little piece of the earth's core? And what about up? Airplanes go over all the time. Are they trespassing?

I stopped kicking dirt, 'cause the wind changed and it got in my eyes. The rope above my head creaked a little, and I glanced up to make sure it wasn't gonna break anytime soon. It was splintery, but it still looked okay.

I sighed.

The air was hotter than anything. Sticky, too, humidity like swimming, so your sweat rolled down your back soon as you stepped out the front door, soon as your feet hit the porch. Wasn't nothing to do. Couldn't go to the creek anymore, couldn't leave the yard, couldn't do anything. Dad said he was gonna build a fence, a big wooden one, with some of the guys from the church if they would help. Gonna put it up where the property line was and block the view down the hill. I wouldn't be able to see the trees past the road anymore, or the road past the field, or the field.

Maybe if I dug down far enough, I could get under the fence, and—

“Makenna!” Mom's voice cut through the distant back door. “We're about to head over! Come get ready!”

I dug my toes into the dirt without moving and sniffed up at the sky. A couple clouds, nothing else, just blue, blue forever. My eyes wouldn't focus on it.

Infinity. You can't see that either, but it's real. I added it to my list.

"Makenna!"

That got me up the porch and inside.

Mom was moving around the kitchen at the speed of light, wrapping aluminum foil around the casserole dishes. "Take out the trash and get that dress on," she said over her shoulder, not looking.

"Where's Dad?"

"In the bedroom." She yanked out a piece of foil so hard it got too long and twisted up before she even ripped it, and her mouth twisted. That meant I better get out of the kitchen. So I got.

The trash was full of scraps from Mom's cooking, and it was leaking a little out the bottom, so I jogged over to the trash can by the back door and tried to get it in there fast as I could. Even though I closed the lid real quick, I still caught sight of all the little red plastic pieces of Gunner's broken food bowl spread across the tops of the bags. I backed a few steps away from the trash can and stood there with my eyes closed, feeling the grass tickle my ankles. Somehow, it kinda felt like I could feel where Gunner's pen was, right over my left shoulder and behind a little ways. Like its emptiness was a force pushing out, all the way around the pen in a circle, all the way up against the walls of the house. I added the emptiness to my list too.

Back inside, I climbed the stairs fast as I could to avoid Mom and cut on the light in the guest bathroom. The bathtub water ran red mud when I stuck my feet under the faucet. Sitting on the side of the tub, I could look up and see the moldy spots under the shower head, under the faucet handles, under all the spots you can't see standing up. I tried closing my eyes and pretending it was clean. It didn't work, 'cause my feet could still feel the slimy pink stuff around the drain.

The black dress Mom had bought me yesterday was laid out on my bed already. I hated the lacy bits, but put it on anyway because it wasn't like I could go in shorts, even though I wanted to. I checked the mirror over the dresser, but it only showed me how bad my hair looked when I tried to brush it. So I put it up in a braid and tromped down the stairs loud so Mom knew I was coming.

“Get in the car,” Mom said when she saw me. She dumped the sweet tea in the Tupperware jug and popped the lid on.

“Is Dad coming?”

“He is,” she snapped. “Just get in the car. Take this.”

I grabbed the jug as Mom disappeared down the hall to her bedroom, and I heard her knock on the door a little too loud. That was my cue to get out the door quick, before she started shouting.

Mom drove the car. I don’t think Dad really could’ve. The bags under his eyes were the biggest they’d been all week, and he just stared down the road like he couldn’t see it at all. Like he was the one dead.

I rolled the question around in my head before asking, but eventually, I couldn’t keep it in there, and it just jumped out. “Are they gonna let us in?”

From the backseat, I could see Mom’s hands tighten on the wheel. “I hope so,” she said quietly.

Dad bowed his head and didn’t say anything.

When we parked at the church, Mom sat there for a few seconds before she opened the door, like she was praying. I helped get the sweet tea jug, and Mom got both of the casserole dishes, and then she led me and Dad towards the front doors like a general at the front of a phalanx.

There were other people walking in, lots of people. By all the cars in the parking lot, it looked like the whole church showed up, and most of the town, too. Mrs. Mayburn and Mrs. Cornet were handing out bulletins, and smiling sadly at people when they came in, and speaking in hushed voices. As we walked towards them, Mom started looking less like a general with every step, until she hunched down like she wanted to hide behind the food. She edged up to Mrs. Mayburn from the side, putting her between us and the propped front doors. “Mrs. Mayburn . . . we weren’t . . . well.” She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “We’ll understand if they don’t want us, but my daughter—she was Cooper’s friend...”

Dad looked away from the church, off across the field. I caught a whiff from the sanctuary, an overpowering mix of perfume and flowers to

hide something chemical underneath. Uncle Frank had told me about embalming. That they have to break the jaw, and take a wire and sew the mouth shut, and inject all kinds of stuff into the skin to make it not burst, and then put makeup all over it so no one could tell. Embalming could go on the list, or maybe not because you can kind of see it, because it doesn't look right, and Cooper was gonna look like—like—

I took a half-step backwards and started to hope they'd turn us away.

Mrs. Mayburn pursed her lips, looked at me, and nodded slowly, which I thought was maybe her trying to act gracious or something. "You can come. But just for the family's sake, y'all might should sit in the back."

"Of course," Mom said quickly. "Of course. And we brought this food, is there a place to . . .?"

"We'll put it in the fellowship hall. Daniel! Put this with the rest. And don't tell nobody who they're from, understand?"

Daniel popped his head out from behind the front doors. He was a senior, and we were in youth group together, so I waved at him, but he didn't wave back. Just stared, took the jug out of my hands, scooped up the casseroles, and disappeared into the church.

It really reeked in the sanctuary. Even though we were all the way in the last row, in the corner away from the stage, I had to wrinkle my nose up and squint through the stuff. It didn't even help to breathe through my mouth, because it was so thick I could feel it settle on my tongue. Cooper wouldn't have liked that. Not at all.

Something twisted in my chest, and then tears started up in my eyes, so I brushed them away real fast.

Mom put a hand on my arm, gentler than normal. "You want to go up and see him?"

Wire thread and formaldehyde. "I'm good."

"You sure? They'll let you."

"No."

Her eyes got watery, and she let go of my arm and sat up straight.

The pastor got up and started the service. It droned on and on, so I closed my eyes and ran my fingers over the rough cloth on the seats, feeling the threads with my fingers. Cooper had explained it to me, that he kind of knew where everything was because he'd felt around the furniture so often, and that he knew the church pretty well too because he'd been there a ton. I figured it was kind of like knowing what the inside of your mouth was like, because I pretty much never saw it, but I knew where my teeth were because of my tongue, and Cooper said he'd never thought about us not being able to see our mouths.

He showed me his braille Bible when our parents went over to their house for the first time, and my jaw had dropped open, because who knew that version had to be eighteen books long? He had his very own shelf for them, and when I told him I didn't believe anybody could read dots on a page, he'd read to me out loud from 1 Kings, finger skimming across the tiny rows just as quick as you please. I tried it and couldn't feel the difference in the dots unless I had my eyes closed. Then it was easier because there wasn't anything else to distract me.

Then he asked me if he could feel my face so he knew what I looked like, which was a little weird to me at first, but then I figured I'd want to do the same thing in reverse, so I let him. He'd told me I had a good nose, as far as noses go, and I'd cracked up.

The piano started to play.

“Let's stand together.”

I stood up with everybody else and sang some song I didn't know. There was a picture of Cooper up by the casket. I could just barely see it over everybody's heads. That seemed stupid to me. He never saw a single picture. What was the point of having one?

Dad was trying to sing, and suddenly I couldn't stand being next to him. It was—it was his fault, it was all his fault, with his stupid ideas and his stupid YouTube videos and his stupid paranoia, always had to keep the doors locked, always had to double-check the bolts, always had to turn on the alarm when we left and before we slept, always checking his guns, always going on and on about a guard dog and how safe we would be and how easy it would be to train one—

The song ended and we all sat back down, only I sat down on Mom's other side instead. Dad didn't even look at me. I glared forward and put paranoia on the list. Right under stupidity.

The service was an hour. Lots of people cried. I could see just a little bit of the back of Cooper's mom's head from where I was, and she was straight upright, not moving an inch the whole time. When it was over, everybody lined up to say they were sorry to the family, and Mom teetered on the edge of her seat like she didn't know whether she wanted to go up there or not.

I didn't. I didn't ever want to see the Beals ever again.

So when we stood up, I made my escape, ducking out of the row and back through the front doors, kicking off my shoes and putting them behind one of the bushes in the parking lot and then running around to the back of the church, over to the playground, over to the tree.

It was a magnolia tree, the best kind for climbing, because the branches fit in your hand just right, and they're all spaced really good, almost in rows, since the branches have to have room to dip out like a plastic Christmas tree. That's what I'd told Cooper. But he'd still looked nervous, and it'd taken a lot of talking to get him to start. He got up on the first branch just fine, and since it was my favorite climbing tree, I knew there were two routes where the trunk split, and I took the harder one.

We were up there forever. He'd pause and feel around until he got the branch I told him to grab next, and then slowly, so slowly, he'd pull himself up, like he was worried about bonking his head any second. But I got him up there. I told him where to put his feet, where to put his hands, and at one point I even leaned over and guided one of his shoes around the trunk to a thicker branch on the other side that was a little twisty. And when we were finally at the top, he sat on the best crooked branch, for a seat, and said he could feel how high we were. Said he could tell in his heart. And he'd grinned.

I looked up the tree and felt the bark under my fingers. The wind blew a little, just enough to make the leaves rustle. The cones were starting to bud with the little red seeds like they did in the fall.

Then, closing my eyes shut tight, I started to climb.

It was slow, way slower than I expected. The branches I knew like the back of my hand weren't where I thought they'd be. I scraped my hand on a broken

branch and felt blood roll down my palm. Did it feel worse than normal? It stung all the way up my forearm. Tears started to build up in my eyes.

Right from the start I'd hated Gunner. Couldn't go outside when Dad was with him in the backyard. Too dangerous, he'd said.

I kicked my leg around the side of the tree and stomped down on the next branch.

He barked all the time. Every night, at every little thing that went down the road, even though the road was a quarter of a mile away and cars barely ever went down it. Wasn't nobody down where we were except us and the Beals, anyway. That's what Mom tried to tell him. Over and over.

I waved an arm above my head to check for branches in the way, felt nothing, and dragged myself up like rungs on a ladder.

That's what it says on YouTube, Dad always said. All proud of himself, for doing it solo. A guard dog for nothing. What did we even have, anyway, that anybody'd want to steal? Nothing. Not a single thing.

Tears were sliding down my face now. Falling off my chin. Dripping down who knew how far to the ground.

And then, last Tuesday, Dad let Gunner out for the first time, right when the bus dropped Cooper Beal off by our house after school.

Gunner had taken off. I was getting off the bus right after him. My feet hit the dirt and the bus started to drive away.

I heard shouting. Across the field, a brown bullet streaked towards us.

Gunner knew me.

But he didn't know Cooper.

The tree swayed underneath me. I'd reached the top, felt the curve of the crooked branch where I'd sat so many times before, where Cooper had sat and grinned at me, where we'd become friends for real and not just because of our parents. I kept my eyes shut and thought about Cooper's soul. Tried to believe in it.

My anger was real, and my hands and feet, that was for sure. I could believe in that, in me being real. But I was here. I was *alive*. I could feel the tree bend in the wind, rocking me, holding me like it held Cooper, who was brave enough to climb it too. I couldn't see the church with my eyes shut. Or my mom, or my dad, or the Beals, or my house or the planets or anything. But they were out there. I knew it.

I took a deep breath and tried to believe in the height of the tree, like Cooper did. My hands gripped the branches tight, and suddenly I could feel it. The drop all around. A distance that could have anything in it.

There's lots of things you should believe in even though you can't see them.

Radiation.

The ocean floor.

Infinity.

I opened my eyes, added Cooper to the list, and started climbing down.

Sleeping on a Leaf

Alyssa Busby



Digital Photography

April Storm

Ellie Kasper

I'm still afraid of the dark
Have you ever experienced springtime insomnia?
The white-tailed deer is graying
A flock of crows spirals from the pines
Clouds are layered dense and thick
The weighted sky waters dreams
Nourishing the garden of zealous youthfulness
Streaks of light stripe the scene
The air is sweet with fragmenting buds
I'm no longer afraid of the future

Not Enjoying the Sun

Hudson Rice

You were two floors above me when I dreamt of generosity
for a sunset that did not need it.

In those dreams I would beat back the sun and moon that would attrite
the antique and fleeting colors of half-dusk and delay the obligation
of being either awake or asleep and allow the toddling sunset to mature
into something that was not an endcap but its own third phase of day

With melted cursive blotting out the cynical unyielding blue(!)

[And I did not miss the blue, but I missed terribly the stars.
I missed the owls I could not see, breathing their nocturne and knowing
I have no right to navigate the night with grace.]

LAMP

Literary Magazine