





# OPUS

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# Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

In many ways, life is a road, full of tight mountain turns that are both terrifying and exciting. Or maybe it's like the ocean: some days peaceful, with a gentle ebb and swell, other times a tsunami. Whatever clichéd metaphor you choose to apply, what's important in life is persistence. And of course, what is life without a dash of color amid the rainiest of days?

For our eleventh year in publication, Opus is honored to present its first issue in color. I truly believe that the talent published in this magazine will awe and inspire you: from the short story "A Jar Fulla Butterflies" to the painting "Sunshine," this issue explores the darkest corners and brightest moments of the human condition. I hope you enjoy reading this magazine as much as I've enjoyed being part of putting it together!

Of course, Opus would be nothing without its dedicated submitters and readers. As always, this issue is for you.

Briana Onishea

## Thank you to...

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Michele Feeley for reigning in and taming our overwhelming disorganization

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And finally our fantastic contributors for sharing thier amazing talent with us.

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## Flying

Meghan Kearns

We are sitting in our favorite coffeehouse  
and you are telling me  
I will marry a man who walks barefoot  
and practices yoga on the beach.

Laughing, I pinch the turquoise thread  
of ridiculous conviction in your voice  
and trail it back through time  
between my fingertips.

We are five  
and numbers rush from your mouth  
as we launch off my box spring,  
bony elbows tracing frantic arcs  
in stale air from which we hang  
as momentary stars.

The faster we count,  
the closer we are to flying.

Your fork stabs a fugitive leaf  
on the yellow rim of a salad bowl  
as the shoeless bachelor wanders  
again into the conversation,  
which turns, as it often does,  
shallow as a tide pool.

Only with you am I free  
to splash about, shameless,  
and save my scuba gear  
for another day's mystery.

Our hearts are smooth and flat  
as we skip them across the water,  
dancing like stones over a rippled surface,  
suspended for alternate beats  
in salty breeze above the captured surf.

You exhale future into the steam  
of your French onion soup,  
as you once tossed seconds  
of flight to the atmosphere  
above my childhood bed.

We will share the same vacation home,  
you say,

a townhouse on the coast,  
or some other placeholder  
for reality that sucks us to the ground,  
hardening cement around our sneakers  
on this sidewalk we strode  
before it was dry.

Lexi Hannah



## Child Looking Up, Flash-Lit

Rebecca Miller

The first second after  
the Big Bang was something  
he didn't know about.

How small this began.

He didn't know what  
banged, he hadn't even banged  
yet. He was young:

just a freckle on the flat-  
arm of space-  
time. But he didn't  
know that either.

It was  
the universe, just.  
There's hydrogen in the center of starting  
stars, fusing,  
and water is just some H's and an O  
in love with connection. Iron stays until the end, loyal  
and heavy-like

teachers or firefighters,  
and event horizons. New  
frontiers, the ever-stretching  
alwaysness of grids man-  
ipulated by masses and holes and  
hands ticking with blue  
photon streams, waving  
to telescopes...

He knew his own cosmic constant:  
it was the division sign separating topnumber and bottomnothing.

## Self-Portrait of a Dish Towel

Stephanie Coats

Once hearty, full of warmth,  
of life—  
purpose.

I've been wrung out,  
forceful,  
over and over.

Worn, dry  
and weathered. Exhausted

from abuse.  
No attention to instructions  
for care  
printed on a dull white tag.  
Never replenished  
after use.

No hesitation to soak  
up the dog urine  
and spilled beer.

I've lost the blue thread holding  
in my sides  
after splitting headaches  
needed ice

and tabletops compiled  
sticky plates  
which left me stiff for a week.  
No water to melt me into wax,

no hands to squeeze  
stained corners—  
I want to conceal.



## A Moment with the King

Sarah Lawson

It was October, but it wasn't yet cold. I had parted from my dad at the edge of the forest down the road from our house and trekked up the huge, leaf-strewn hill by myself. It was my first season, so it was kind of a big deal that I was walking alone. Dad was nearby, of course. He'd gone in about a hundred yards to my right, taking another route to minimize the noise and movement we made together. It had taken him years to convince me to hunt with him, but by the time I was of legal age, he had successfully drawn me in.

Being quiet was difficult in all those layers. Long underwear, wool socks, sweatpants, camouflage pants, t-shirt, sweater, thick camouflage jacket, harness to strap myself into the tree, camouflage pack, hat, gloves, and mask. All of these things were on my pre-hunt checklist. I was bundled up so tightly that my sense of touch was dulled and I had to consciously increase my awareness of my surroundings. My breath was trapped by the thin fabric mask. I breathed in, and the fabric wiggled between my lips.

Halfway up the hill, I stopped. There were many reasons to stop – to keep from becoming short of breath, to keep from breaking a sweat – but my favorite was to turn and look behind me. To this day, I always turn and look.

When I look, I usually see the sun beginning to sink in the sky. Sunset is a long way off, but the sun is low enough to cast an amber hue on everything from the blowing grasses in the field to the leaves in the forest surrounding me. I have to shield my eyes from the glare that reflects off the bend in the Little Tonawanda, but I smile at the golden, glittering waters. I opened my ears, too. I could hear the creek flowing, the bird-songs, the slight breeze rustling the leaves that still clung desperately to the branches above me. It was near peak. They would have to let go soon.

I finally turned to continue my hike up the hill, stepping over fallen trees and low-strung wire. I wished it were possible to be completely silent, but the leaves being crushed by the treads of my boots make a relentless *krish, krish, krish*. The only thing I could do to disguise my presence was to step deliberately and sound hesitant. Walk like one of them. *Krish, krish, pause. Krish.*

I removed a little plastic bag from the pouch at my waist. My movements were slow, deliberate, and as silent as I could make them. I grabbed a stick off the ground and tied one end of the long yellow string to it. I unrolled the string and dropped the cotton pad on the other end to the ground. As I walked, I dragged it behind me. Wherever the pad touched the ground, it left a small trace of the scent of female urine behind it. I mimicked my father's instruction. He'd taught me that the scent of the urine would attract the males. He'd been doing this for twenty years, and his career as an environmental conservation officer was dedicated to ensuring the lawful pursuit of game. Not heeding his decades of experience would be careless.

I finally reached the top of the hill. I took several deep slow breaths to keep from gasping for air. The sound would give me away. Deer gasped sometimes to warn others of threats. Once in a while I heard them in the midst of the corn field, blowing through their noses and sounding like frightened women. They would send chills up my spine because for a moment I would think that I was no longer the only person in these woods.

I could see my ladder in the midst of the trees. Sixteen feet above the ground I would perch, waiting for the deer that were not trained by instinct to look for threats above them to walk beneath my stand. Before I could climb up and settle in, I had to lay the scent bombs – little canisters to hang on branches and attract the big ones in. They smelled like my scent drag, and I wrinkled my nose to keep the stench from invading my nostrils. I much preferred the smell of my cover scent, which kept the deer from detecting my human odor. It was called "Essence of Fall," and for some reason it reminded me exactly of the German stöllen that my Oma would send every year and that we would eat for breakfast on Thanksgiving and Christmas.

I had laid the first scent bomb and was moving to the next location when I heard the crashing. Loud and sudden, it came from the thick trees behind my tree stand. Every muscle in me froze. I'm pretty sure I thought it was a bear for a moment. Then, an enormous doe came running from the trees. Following her was an even larger deer, but this one was a buck.

I stood as still as I possibly could. In my left arm was the stick that was still connected to my scent drag. In my right arm was my bow, lowered and completely unprepared to take a shot. I lost sight of the doe, because I had eyes only for the huge ivory antlers that topped the buck's head. The basket was at least eighteen inches across, but I was too stunned to even count how many points he had. I later said that he was even bigger than the biggest deer my dad has ever shot. But then I saw the look on my dad's face and said that maybe he was the same size.

The buck snorted and planted his front hooves on the ground. He was staring directly at me with his glassy onyx eyes that expressed no emotion. He was not even ten yards away. My heart fluttered like the black-capped chickadees that sometimes danced through the beech trees that surrounded us. The buck's enormous head lowered as he peered at me, concealing the white strip that began at his throat and ran across his underbelly beneath his tail, for which his species got its name. I watched his head sway to the right, and then to the left. I realized with astonishment that he couldn't actually see me. The camouflage gear that covered me from head to toe, allowing only my eyes to peek through, was working exactly as it was meant to. I was invisible.

My hand tightened around the grip of my bow. If only there were some way that I could lift it without him noticing! But it was impossible. Deer could detect any sense of movement instantly, and then I would definitely lose him. I had never yet killed a deer. Could it be that this majestic creature would be mine?

The faces scarred into the trunks of the beech trees observed us passively. I knew these trees, had sat among them for hours several times since the season had started. The Yawning Giant was over my head, and the Skinny Rhinoceros was somewhere above the buck. The moment in which the buck and I stared each other down, with only me really seeing, could have been long enough to encompass all of hunting season. It might have stretched into the middle of November. But it was really only a moment, perhaps two.

Then he was gone. The doe that he had been so intently pursuing had not even stopped to pay me notice, and he needed to catch up with her quickly. As soon as he circled around me to chase after her again, I spun around in the leaves and lifted my bow. I nocked an arrow as quickly as I possibly could with arms that felt as though they were no longer attached to my body. I pulled my bowstring back to my face, but even as I did, I knew it was too late. They had retreated back into the thick trees. I could see the ripple effect of their movement through the flora, as they vanished. I lowered my bow in defeat.

"Peanut?" I heard my dad whisper through the trees. I turned around to face him. He too was completely garbed in camouflage and even I had trouble seeing him for a moment. "Are you okay?" I walked over to him numbly. "You look like you just saw a ghost!"

I nodded. I must have set my bow on the ground because I mutely raised two hands above my head to indicate the size of the antlers on the deer that I had just faced down. My eyes, the same size and shape as my dad's, were wide with awe and wonder. I couldn't even speak. I trembled, powerless to stop the adrenaline coursing through me.

I was so blessed to have experienced that moment. I had seen that buck at his most natural, unconcerned with everything but the doe he sought to conquer, which is something that very few fifteen-year-old girls get to do. He was the king, the most radiant, the most important. I meant little to him, for he just wanted his queen. Even though I was the hunter, his only natural predator, I was just a tiny part of the heartbeat of this forest, no more than a simple blood cell running through its veins.

Arthur's Seat

Joe Flynn



B.L.O.

## The Mnemonicide of Joshua Speed (1814-1882)

Joseph O'Connor

I am hidden beneath long floorboards—  
A flattened forest above the general store

we lived once. I rose some nightfall  
to look at a roof above our heads,

think—I can't imagine you resting  
well with knees in your ears

spending the slow step of hours  
nicking a thick worn sheet.

So I give it to you  
since you asked for it.

I watch your legs spread with warmth  
down the footboard: the familiar bump

sends buggers running scared.  
I miss you tuck & turn

over my half, feel the huddled heat.  
My foot, asleep. I am not.

I wish these windows would open  
out to soft lavender, wind

taking a leaf out of my book  
to be read in the sunlit glade.

[Two dreamers.]

## To the Dead Moth on My Porch

B.L.O.

What led you to this final resting place – unswept porch: coffin  
pillow, legs curled inward like a prayer against stiffened form –

were you pleading for the lamp to be the moon? Incandescent light  
beckons, lure of sunset orange to sepia brown form,

abandon the night. Predators lie in wait: spiders on monkeybars  
spin octagons and orbs, hungry fangs into fluttering form.

Nightbirds stalk through blanketed dark– heightened vision,  
hawks searching for prey – was it this, nightmares, form

less in shadow that sent you seeking home? False illumination  
an imposter: masqueraded glass for celestial form.

Lost in infinity spirals around spun fiber gold reveal a path—  
not mistress moon, but to light: warmth consumes your tiny form.



## A Jar Fulla Butterflies

Pam Howe

A simple fight-or-flight reaction, she tells herself. A physical response to an emotional state, her sympathetic nervous system in overdrive for no real reason. No one is chasing her and the air is too warm for this soft rain to chill her skin. There is no logic to her shaking as she weaves her way down Spring Street. A creature of science and reason, she is increasingly frustrated when her body produces an effect she sees no cause for. She's just nervous.

The rain falls from above and jumps from below as her sensibly low heels splash through shallow puddles on the pavement. She tells her brain to slow down, to tell her body to calm down, but the click-click-clicks of her stiff soles tick like a kitchen timer, and each step raises her blood pressure another millimeter of mercury. She looks at her watch but forgets to see the time. She looks again. Maybe she should just find a bench, eat her lunch. Maybe she should take up smoking again? The thought crosses her mind, as it does periodically, but she's seen the heart outside of the body—she's seen how it works and then how it doesn't. She pushes the idea down and away. And then, she is there.

His painting hangs in the window for all of Manhattan to see. It's substantial, bold, monopolizing most of the window. It's bright and beautiful, dark and haunting all at once. Alison stands in front of the gallery, hearing but not listening to the heavy drops of rain as they fall from the awning. Each drop hits the hood of her raincoat, resonating through her skull like the low notes of a base drum. Temporary paralysis of the lower extremities, then upper extremities. Her whole goddamn body is rendered immobile. There it looms—a tormented memory, a painful decision, her only choice (one she would make again if she had to)—the ghost of a past life floats in the gallery before her, exposed.

No, not a nude, not a portrait, nothing that simple. The Times called it “A resplendently tragic display of hopefulness denied,” whatever that meant. Resplendently tragic? “That guy's clearly talking out of his ass,” she'd said (just not out loud) when she'd seen the review, three days earlier. But Alison couldn't blame him for taking a bit of creative (if not desperate) license. After all, the artist had been asked what it was about, hadn't he? Asked what inspired this particular arrangement of oil and pigment on fabric and plywood, this painting entitled: A Jar Fulla Butterflies. The paper described Beto Edellejo as “The art world's newest lovechild.” When asked about it, “Mr. Edellejo shrugged, smiled mysteriously, and pontificated that, ‘Sometimes, A Jar Fulla Butterflies is just a jar full of butterflies.’” Pontificated? So dramatic, she'd thought. But now, overcome with nausea and numbness and barely conscious of the rain beginning to pool around her feet, she stares into the Spring Street Gallery. And there are no words.

They'd been so much younger then. “Too young,” she'd told him as she watched something in his eyes take flight. They'd get a place, he told her. Somewhere cheaper. He'd get a job, take a break from school, just until they were on their feet. Who knows, maybe he'd sell a couple paintings here or there? She'd go back to school after the baby was born, he'd work nights so they didn't have to pay for a sitter. Alison knew it couldn't be that easy, but Beto was like magic, he had a way. You couldn't meet him and not feel changed. His enthusiasm for life was contagious. And he believed so hard, who was she to tell him no?

He ordered the caterpillars online and presented them to her as proof that they could do it, the way newly married couples will adopt a puppy before setting up a nursery (as if a year of dog walking prepares one for parenthood). They moved to the LES when it was still Alphabet City. They took a tiny studio, fully furnished with a Murphy bed and a shower in the kitchen, and they set up the five larvae in a three gallon jar the Chinese restaurant below had thrown away.



He brought her vitamins and dog-eared books on pregnancy; she cried in the shower, lost her appetite. She assured him that there was time, that they both could finish out the semester, but he took job as a bike messenger anyway. He tried to sell paintings at the flea market, but she never let him leave the apartment with any of the good ones. Eventually, he ran out of paint.

There was no money for restaurants or movies so they'd lay on the carpet together, studying the slant of the stars Beto had painted on the ceiling. They made up songs about three-legged cats with words that rhymed with corn, daring each other not to laugh. Alison memorized medical terminology by tattooing his skin with red marker. She labeled his fibula and tibia, the greater trochanter and the iliac crest. When it came to the gross anatomy of the eye, she looked into his pupils, his irises, and the folds of his skin that gathered in the corners when he smiled. She closed her eyes, burning the moment into her brain. She pictured permanent cohesions of synaptic clefts, a constant electrical current conjuring him for her. She'd always know the temperature of his clavicle beneath her lips and how his fingers consistently smelled slightly of turpentine and Camels (even if he was trying to quit). He taught her to believe in fate, and the caterpillars wove their cocoons haphazardly among the leaves and branches neatly arranged about the glass jar.

Morning sickness came and went, and then came back for more, and Alison ran out in the middle of her exam to vomit. She cried the whole way across town, back to their apartment. There was no make up. Beto told her things would be okay, but they weren't. And she wasn't. She screamed at him, and cried some more. They fought for hours and she tried to tell him again, and he tried to console her. She threw things and he tried to hold her. She pulled away, pushed him away, and he tried to hold her. She slammed her palms against the counter, and he tried to hold her until she pushed too hard, too far, and he fell away. He fell against the wall, knocking the shelf off its brackets.

There must've been some kind of loud noise, some kind of aural announcement marking that moment—her medical texts sliding into the jar, the glass shattering onto the floor, her gasp—something. But in the years that followed, when the memory was triggered—sometimes waking her from a deep sleep like a gunshot at midnight in August, and then repeating itself over and over like a machine gun, fragments ricocheting against the walls of her cranium—every time the recollection was alive in every way except for the sound. The way her lungs filled and then folded, as if they were falling in on themselves. The goddamn sickening seep of cheap Chinese food through the window. The sight of the jar as it crashed to the floor, scattering sticks, grass, and broken glass everywhere—the aftermath of her sudden summer storm. And then his face. There were no words for his face. There must be a broken synapse somewhere in her brain for the whole thing to play out like a damn silent film every time, with a tragic but predictable plot that everyone sits through because, well, it's the only way to get to the end.

The film plays again until the screen breaks as she opens her eyes. The city bustles and buzzes around her. Bodies brush between her and the painting. She pulls back her hood because the rain has started to stop, and her face is already wet. Her pupils dilate, soaking up more of the deep yellows and rich browns of his artwork. She recalls the names on the wrinkled and curled tubes of oils: Gold Ochre, Burnt Sienna, Umber Oxide. Violet. Amber. Olivia. Beautiful names.

In the darkened gallery behind the glass, beyond the art, is the artist. He has grown up, and filled out. His clothes are no longer worn and loose, hanging off of him like some kind of apparition recently exhumed. Alison watches Beto point to a far corner in space, he speaks authoritatively to someone about something she cannot see. She watches the muscles in his neck carry his head with strength, confidence. Then, maybe it's the way he moves his foot or touches his hair or maybe it's the way he drops his eyes before a smile, but she sees that he is the same. And she sees that he is the same; he does not see her. Her focus reverts to the world in front of her. She counts the butterflies in the painting.

She had fallen to her knees in a pool of apology, sobbing uncontrollably until Beto picked her up. He told her not to worry, that the cocoons were fine, that they'd get another jar. He swept up glass while she went downstairs to find substitute sanctuary, and with her forceps and tweezers, they put things back together again.

But all the king's horses and all the king's men, she kept thinking as they waited for the butterflies. Two had emerged within days of "the incident," but when two weeks had passed with no further indication of life, Alison broke her silence. She hadn't wanted to hurt him, but logically...realistically.... She opened the window to offer the two their freedom.

"Two out of five is not a good sign," she told him. He begged her to reconsider, told her they were still changing within their shells, he told her that Someday...

She told him he was wrong, he told her he was right. Finally she put an end to this childish back and forth, she is a creature of science and reason, after all. Swiftly, and without hesitation, she reached in. Taking one of the pods between her nimble fingers, she rolled and crushed the hardened chrysalis. Tiny disintegrated fragments flew from her, into the wind, and onto the city below.

Tears ran from his lacrimal glands, slid half way down his zygomatic arch, then dove into the open palms that sat helplessly in his lap. It made her never want to be right again. She would've given anything to have been wrong, for it to have been possible for them to survive, to have flourished in their unexpected habitats. She would've done anything to take back time—obscure words and gestures, to rearrange truths—but the line of life is not always fluid and gentle. Sometimes it folds at sharp angles, changing expectations and fates through moments of passion, fleeting flickers of light.

She made the appointment. He went with her. She cried the whole way across town, away from their apartment. There was no make up.

The boy in the painting is gaunt and cyanotic. His clothes are gauze bandages draped over frail arms as he holds a jar of illuminated butterflies—five butterflies.

Five butterflies—bright and unyielding with forgiveness and unanticipated understanding. Beto had fixed it. He'd made what it was supposed to be, from what it needed to be. Sometimes life folds over on itself, smoothing out the rough edges of our pasts, providing a stronger base to build our futures. Alison slips away. She finds a bench below a Birch tree in Sanger Square and eats her lunch. The sound of someone practicing the ukulele floats from a window across the park, and a resolution resounds within her—the truth—that a jar full of butterflies is never just a jar fulla butterflies.

## Conservatory

Meghan Kearns

Your secret sits  
a creamy yellow butterfly  
in my mouth,  
trapped with care  
between rows of ivory teeth.  
I feel its hair-thin legs tread gently  
across the tiny contours of my tongue.

When it stretches its silken wings,  
bathing fragile scales  
in the tropical humidity of my breath,  
I slacken my jaw just enough  
to keep from crushing  
this trustful creature  
without tearing an escape  
in the stitches of my smile.

## Endeavor the Vacancy: The Hole in My Sweater

Sarah Corcoran

Stop crying about the kaleidoscope of catastrophes: alone in a bar, chatter static as I fade (your stubble burn still fresh in my sternum). The therapist will tell me to delve deep and think from the other side—to form a relationship with a nice person, unlike my parents. Travel where the faces aren't morphed pristine, where the holes lead beneath: apartment with happiness: land mines tick in years, empty rooms glassed-in with personless furniture. Don't dread this New Years Eve as much as the last. I imagine: your clothing on the floor in a different city, countdown a heartbeat in your head, dull fireworks exploding as your eyes spotlight the glow at the end of the tunnel—balloons of air against your mouth as I search for the frayed road map signaling how I managed to unearth a ruby (like you), then lose it under the calamity: dust in my lungs, chronic space between thoughts and words, between sheets lacking body heat.

## Trees of Life

Joe Flynn

Days above an Andean sunrise  
On the geocentric dome,  
Haloed stars lambada clockwise  
After their concentric home.

With a camera obscura  
Dark in meaning, we could see  
To the echoing caesura  
After that first "Let There Be,"

Whence the Seed of Life was planted  
Deep below the Arch of Time  
Future fruit for us was granted,  
Spheres to flourish in sublime.

Eons crunch beneath your tires,  
Trillions of mojave grains,  
Terra firma, land of fire  
Transcend all but spokes and chains.

Pinpricks point to endless morning,  
Haloes circle sacred birth.  
Spheres melt, and in stars' aborning,  
Trees of Life restore the Earth.

Eyes that list as silver sea-spray  
Dapples berries rich as beads,  
Take in rainbows hasta siempre,  
Sprouted from their copper seeds.

Weaving roots with jeweled lattice  
Through the seconds of a clock,  
Copper tongues embrace the stratus  
Ceiling founded in the rock.

From the heartwood, glassy flowers  
Complement the torchon ground  
Dendrochronos counts the hours,  
Rippling ages sculpted round.

Starlight brushes at our fingers,  
Painting them in polychrome.  
Somewhere up there, twinkling lingers,  
Trees of Life returning home.

## Donne, Revisited: Pillage Me Away To Double X's

Emily Webb

XY: *Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear / so th'eyes of busy fools  
may be stopped there. / Unlace yourself 'til that harmonious  
chime / Tells me from you that now, it's time..*

XX: Barrel down mandible trenches, batter through calcium  
barracks: you wage paramourfare against my lone cupid's  
bow – taut yet faltering – when your pulse trammels  
limbs to bedsheets.

You scour my terrain with serrated fingertips until I jerk  
lip-trigger to hear you murmur loaded tactics: *As souls unbodied,  
bodies unclothed must be, / To taste whole joys.*

Advance in, advance close – synapses burst like land mines  
when you flank nape to clavicle – your warkisses slice  
my barbed wirebone – this sternum claws out mayday:

shellshock me, unconditional surrender.

Wracked inside-out, I wince under your radar smirk & trace another  
body of action – larger contours over a shorter span,  
pricked with torrid vessels.

Mock my havoc eyes anyway; you already know your course:  
*Why then / What need'st thou have more covering  
than a man?*

I writhe under your coup de grâce, cocked  
against the sinews of my cardiac  
defense – a guerrilla pucker mushrooms.  
Break me into bloodsoot.

---

Corrupted from John Donne's Elegy 19, "To His Mistress Going to Bed"



## Gingerbread House

Megan Nolan

The trees above Emily's head shivered in the cold winter wind sending powdery flakes of snow spiraling to the ground. Emily felt her thin arms mimic the trees, shaking down to her numb fingertips as she tugged the worn, brown jacket closer to her body. Mama didn't pick her up from school today; she never did.

Emily usually didn't mind walking the six blocks home from her elementary school. Except today Brent Matthews pushed her off the monkey bars at recess, making her knees turn an odd purplish-green color that would take more broken Crayolas to recreate than she had floating around at the bottom of her backpack.

"Where's your daddy Emily?" Brent had chided as she pushed herself off the ground. His small, piggy eyes were brimming with glee. "Huh? Huh? Where is he? You gonna cry? Hey look, Emy's gonna cry!"

"Am not!" she had yelled back, and it was true. If anything, she was upset at the run the fall had torn in her stockings. Mama didn't like when Emily came home with ripped clothes, and the ring Mama still wore hurt far more than a few bruises. But Emily wasn't that worried; Mama usually wasn't awake when she got home from school.

Ever since Daddy left, Mama slept all the time and Emily had learned a few things about taking care of herself since then. Like how she could open the drawers and use them like steps to climb onto the counters to reach the cereal on the top shelf. How to lock the front door at night when Mama forgot. How to wear her shoes in the house so she wouldn't prick her toes on the needles littering the floor.

Number one on the list of important surviving skills though, was how not to make Mama mad. Because when Mama was mad that's when the hitting would come, and, of course, the little diamond pinpricks that would blossom on Emily's skin where the ring pierced her skin. Emily knew that she would have to tiptoe up the stairs when she got home and replace her ripped stockings with fresh ones before Mama saw the hole. Mama didn't like when Emily broke the things she had bought her. She said she needed that money, but Emily didn't know what for.

Mama also didn't like it when Emily stopped at Mrs. Henderson's house on the way home from school. But as she passed the house with the yellow lights in the windows and pink sides frosted on the edges with glittering, white snow, Emily felt drawn there. A kid to a house with walls made of candy—she remembered Mama reading that story to her once, before the sleeping. Emily glided up the porch steps and crept to the window, pressing her nose up against the iced-up glass.

Mrs. Henderson first invited Emily over when Daddy left, telling her that if she ever wanted someone to talk to, she would be her friend. Emily thought it strange that this lady with the graying hair and beaded necklaces didn't have her own friends to talk to, but Emily knew what it was like not to have friends and so she stopped by Mrs. Henderson's house each day and told her about school over platters of cookies.

"I'm glad you had such a good day, dear," she would say, "But is there anything else you'd like to tell me?"

Emily would shake her head, not liking the disappointed flicker that she usually caught in Mrs. Henderson's blue eyes. Emily liked Mrs. Henderson and her house, the way it was always warm, and smelled a lot like gingerbread and only a little like cats. She was sad when she had to add them to the list of things that made Mama mad.

"Where'd you get those?" Mama asked one day when Emily walked through the door with a plate of cookies. Emily nearly dropped them, surprised that Mama was even awake.

"Mrs. Henderson gave them to me," said Emily, "She makes the best cookies."

"Oh, does she?" said Mama, her back to Emily, "So I'm not good enough for you now? Is that it?"

When Emily pointed out that that was what she said to Daddy when he left, Mama turned and pounced. Emily dropped the plate of cookies as the red star exploded on her left cheekbone. Mama got up



every day the next week to paint over the mark with skin-colored makeup.

"Now what are you going to do after school?" she would ask as she took the brush and got to work under the dim bathroom lights each morning.

"Come straight home," Emily had said dully.

And she had. Every day since the day of the cookies, one month ago, she had come straight home after school, crossing to the opposite side of the street if she saw Mrs. Henderson looking for her out the window. No one was looking out the window today, though. Maybe that was why Emily had climbed up those icy steps. She was worried, worried about her friend. That was it.

*Maybe I should go inside,* she thought. Emily pulled back from the window and wiped the frost off her nose. She walked to the front door and reached up to push the doorbell, but something stopped her.

"It's up to you, Em." She could hear Daddy's voice in the back of her head. "I'm not going to be around. I'm not going to be around much longer. It'll be up to you to take care of her. Protect her 'til I get back. Got that, Em?"

That's what he had said to her before he left. Before he walked out the front door and closed it behind himself. That was before Mama slept all the time. Maybe he knew that she was getting sick. That sleepy sick that needs all those needles she left on the floor. Emily didn't know what that sick was, but Daddy had said it was up to her to protect Mama. Until he got back.

Emily drew her numb fingers back and clenched them in fists within her too-long coat sleeves. What if Daddy got back while she was at Mrs. Henderson's house? She didn't want him to be disappointed in her. It was her job to take care of Mama. Emily trudged back down the steps, remaking prints that had been covered in snow during her short time on the porch. The trees shivered overhead but Emily didn't shiver with them. She turned down the street and headed toward home.



Deanna Williams

## Speaks in Code

Devon Poniatowski

you are the signifier  
I am the signified.

NOTE:

I am not an elusive metaphor  
for cavalier employment  
in your figurative envoy.  
I am not an object of fictionaliza-  
tion  
or a line  
or a verse.  
I can't be crafted freely  
with your hands  
from that stone  
because, remember,  
you never caught me in  
the right  
light.

## Form Letters to Families

Cassandra Nicol

Paint dried on eyelids, the mummer's  
farce of sleep chipping in the heat.  
The engine hums: count off the cadence  
loud and strong: warning  
flag. Sandsnakes loathe  
leaving prey

whole; parts are strewn wasteland:  
here a puppeteer, there the shell. Moisture fled  
by dusk, red layerbaked chill  
turning masks to graffiti. Boot laces untied.  
Cartridge discarded seeps powder  
into earth, rolling in the wind towards

thigh remnant, sand turned  
to clay. He takes pen,

dips, scrawls, thinks hand-  
written will be easier.

Dear Mrs. Bennett,  
My condolences —

## Non-Terminating Decimals

Kelsey Carey

it's the kind of day where palms meet eyelashes  
far too frequently. and it's the kind of tremor that  
you catch  
first in your chest, and try to trace  
it through your neck. but you lose it  
somewhere along the shoulder blades and can't  
find it again until it gets to your fingertips  
which can't dial phones or send emails or decorate  
cakes anymore. trying to push air into a ball  
that is already bouncing too high. and the  
atmosphere itself, a band-aid wrapped too tight  
around your index finger. it's the kind of day  
where you cry because someday you will have to  
tell your children that a man in the sky  
might control their fate and watch them  
sweat over how it will turn out. and all you can do  
is go  
outside because outside air is better than inside  
air where things people have said get trapped  
and swirl around in cupboards and dresser drawers  
and snake down drains. so you go outside and  
crumple  
because in five billion years the sun will explode  
and you still won't know all the numbers of pi

## The Urn's Lament

Sarah Lawson

My lord, half of thee I see  
over a frozen, pale shoulder -  
thou and thy friends pursuing me  
eternally, yet ne'er we grow older.  
Gods may we be, or mortals yet,  
we search for truth in beauty,  
but 'tis impossible to get  
the fruit of Arcady  
while lost on this clay earth.

They watch our flight,  
wond'ring ever if this scene  
is your chase for evil delight  
or if we are white doves newly free'n.  
I cannot say. I thought I knew  
when I with unheard melodies coaxed thee,  
and we from Athens once withdrew  
not to return to the determined misery  
that called us from our birth.  
Our song shall play, unheard, forever,  
struck one note, pure as light  
that once bathed us when we were together,  
before our wrong was determined right  
and immortalized, as we are now,  
in our endless chase, ne'er to see home.  
The truth in beauty to which we bow  
has left us sore and lonesome.  
Always one step ahead or behind.  
My heart may burst, but from what?  
Joy or sadness? I have forgotten  
in what state another captured me, but  
this our beauty-truth has begotten.  
I would reach out to thee and touch thy face,  
if my image could so boldly lie  
to those beyond our time and space.  
O, would I sing a lullaby,  
if there were one still to find?

If I had not loved thee so,  
would we be etched perpetual  
among the green fields, beneath the willow,  
Persephone's blessed memorial?  
I my own self lose in Spring's bliss  
until I glance at thee and mourn  
that it was I, and my lusty kiss,  
from which our cursed state was borne.  
Now, ever parted we remain.  
This cold pastoral doth condemn  
our youthful follies, though it has claimed  
to be our home. Thy stem  
and my flower forever maimed.  
What, then shall we worship,  
if love hath deserted us in this  
vernal prison? We beg for a sip  
of mercy, but 'tis a great abyss  
of loneliness, severance, pain.  
All that remains of the beautiful love  
is the beauty, and that must we seek,  
or spend our sentence dreaming of  
the past in which we were so weak.  
Let them imagine we are lost in mirth,  
guarded forever from the pain of heartbreak.  
But we, carved in the flesh of the earth,  
shall ne'er two lovers make.  
Our truth is our beauty, our only path,  
for sweethearts stricken by a cruel world's wrath.

## "I Am Just a Minor in Philosophy"

Meghan Barrett

I should have told you

Before I left

That you made me into the moon

A mere reflection of the electromagnetic waves that

Wend there way across the dark vacuum of my heart

And make me shine in reflection of you

And your high-energy fusion

That you took away all the layers of refraction

I built up to keep your light from reaching me

Changed the angles and burned a laser-pointer hole

Let in the heat because you can't let cold out

But I... am not a physics major.

I should have told you

Before I left

That you won over my heart

In a victory as surprising as the Battle of Lepanto

Using your gun smoke baubles to cross the water-filled chasms

Of my sea-salt stained cheeks

1571 fleets of shimmering sweet nothings

That you explored the deserts

Of my soul like some Casanova Marco Polo

Took off my silk road wrapped Mongol-thickened skin

Parched my dry, greedy throat with spices and silver and gold

Wrote your own calligraphy penned version of our Never-Ending Story

But I... I am not a history major.

And I should have told you

Before I left

That you... you stole my electrons

Made us an ionic pair when we were supposed to be

Covalent bonding

Turned me into an unstable element

That you made my stoichiometry nervous

Unbalanced my chemical equation

Erased the one in front of my seventeen so that I had less reactant than necessary

To make the product of happiness.

But I was never any good at chemistry.

I wanted to tell you  
    Before I left  
That you made me your second derivative  
    Totally defined by you and dependent on you  
    Never as great or as large as you, lacking your  
    Level of intricacy  
That you made my limit as  $x$  approaches infinity  
    Equal to zero  
    So that I could never succeed or amount to  
    A number that even exists – that's right you took my existence  
But, hell, I got a seventy seven in AP Calculus.

I could have told you  
    Before I left  
That you were my ATP  
    Responsible for all the functions of my cells  
    One of the smallest forms of energy, better than caffeine  
    Your love fueled the making of proteins and  
    Extracellular recognition – like you recognized me  
That you are my ecosystem  
    The only place in which I'm adapted to survive  
    And I am so scared living without your camouflage  
And I am a Biology major. I could have TOLD you that.

I could have warmed your heart to my message  
    Before my imminent departure  
Lulled you to sleep with my soft-spoken, poetic soliloquies  
Tangled your vocal chords in my syntax  
Stroked your ego with my diction and  
Infused inarticulate impediments into the interlocking iotas of your internal  
    being with my use of alliteration  
And I am an English major.

But... I am also a Philosophy minor.  
    And philosophy minors understand that there is  
No definition of knowledge – just ask Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Theatetus  
    So I could never know anything  
    Could never know what I wanted to tell you was what I really wanted to say  
    Was even truth.  
And so  
    Because I am a philosophy minor  
    I didn't say anything at all.





Lexi Hannah

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### Sunshine

Marlee Cavallero



*[Faint, illegible text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the page.]*





Deanna Williams



Eastern Time  
Joe Flynn

## Car Ride

Jaclyn Hellreich

I can't breathe. He's sitting next to me, blabbing away while I'm trying to drive and I can't breathe. His presence is just so suffocating that I feel the need to open a window.

"Why the hell are you doing that? It's freezing!" he yelps. I close it and mutter an apology when all I can think about is how the cold air felt so good in my lungs. He continues on rambling about nothing in particular and I just stare at the road. It's icy, but that's normal for this time of year. He didn't feel comfortable enough driving on ice to make the long journey to his mother's house, so I said I would. I thought it would give me something to concentrate on besides his overwhelming presence, but no such luck.

A car skids in front of me and I can't help but smile. I see the black ice ahead. If I turn the wheel just so, we could skid and I'd lose control and maybe we would hit that tree over there. Maybe we would spin out and hit a guardrail. No one would think anything of it. It's an icy day; these things happen. Even the most experienced drivers take a risk going out in these conditions. We wouldn't get seriously hurt, but it would shut him up for a little while.

I maneuver around the black ice and continue on the road without any problems.

"Babe, you'd want to get into the right lane. The exit's coming up." Like he has any idea about what I want. He thinks I want to be having brunch with his mother while she rattles on about her divorce. He thinks I want mushrooms in my omelet. The craziest thing is though is that he thinks I want him. I glance quickly at him over in the passenger seat. He's not good enough to be the man of my dreams, but he is not the man of my nightmares either and I really can't ask for more. He's never hurt me or raised his voice. He's never done anything that others would consider offensive, but that doesn't mean I don't dream about smothering him while he is sleeping next to me. The fact that I don't have a reason to just makes me hate him even more.

I grip the steering wheel tight as I turn off the highway. Merging doesn't usually get me uptight, but when he looks out the window too, I can't help but tense, like he doesn't trust my judgment. The new band on my finger feels odd against the leather of the steering wheel. It hinders my grip and I glare at it. He gave it to me last night at dinner. I cried and he cried, but I'm sure for different reasons. His were tears of happiness; mine were just tears of anger and confusion. I'm not angry with him. I could never really be angry with him.

I could poison him. That has always been an option with the amount of food I cook for him. He probably wouldn't even be able to see it coming. He would swallow a tablespoon of arsenic and tell me it was wonderful if I said I had made it. He's just so grateful all the time. He says thank you for everything, no matter how stupid and I can't help but to feel guilty for not doing more. I have given him no reason for him to look at me like that. I have done nothing worth his affection and his patience. I have done nothing but wish he would just disappear since the moment I realized that he had this hold over me. I am supposed to be a strong and independent woman. I am not supposed to need a man in my life. He is nothing special, he's no god or hero, he is not important and yet I feel absolutely empty when he's not near. I loathe him for causing this need and I despise myself even more for being so weak.

He puts his hand gently on my thigh and traces some design in a completely nonsexual way. He sighs a bit contently and I fight the urge to bite his hand off. Is this what life is going to be like now—him constantly giving me comfort and warmth? I worked so hard not to need these things. I moved out of my parents' house, got a job and became independent like I was supposed to. I did everything right. I just can't help it. I like his gentle touches. I long for him to put his arms around my shoulders. I feel better when he smiles at me. He is ruining everything, every plan I ever had for myself and I can't bring myself to stop him.

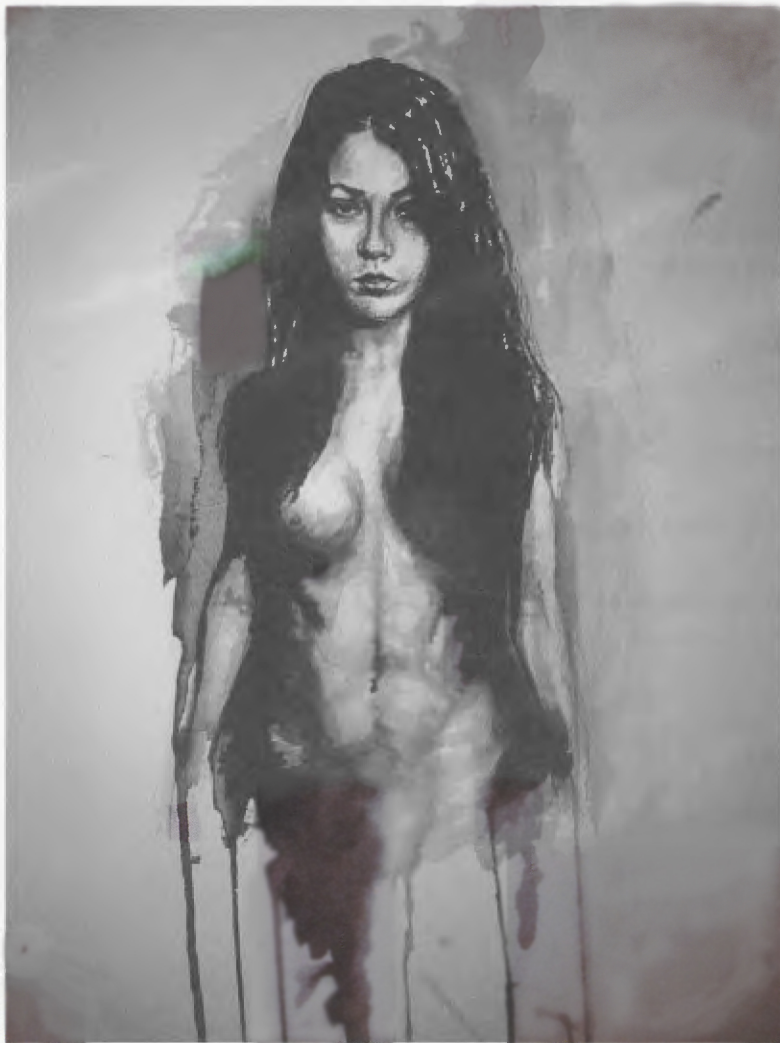
Even if I did drive straight onto oncoming traffic, he would probably smile and tell me that he agrees if I think that's what's best. I'm the one driving this car! I'm the one who is turning this wheel too soon. I'm the one who is crossing the double yellow line.

"Babe, look out!"

I turn the wheel fast and get back into the right lane. My heart is beating fast and it takes me a second to even realize what I just did.

"You okay?" he asks. I glance at him and he is has that look on his face that makes me feel like I'm the center of the universe, his universe.

"I'm fine," I say and I am.



Lexi Hannah

## Blood Diamonds

Meghan Barrett

Her body floats in clear, lifeless cytosolic fluid  
Suspended in a mire of tired-ghost eyes, staring forward – straight like cut glass  
Like the edge of a diamond-laced cliff side,  
She cuts her foot as she jumps  
Who can be sure, anyway?

She is blind to her own sadness  
Quieted intuition holds her grandmother's cold hand and  
Slips from coma to coma, bouts of small lifelessness  
An unfortunate lapse in good judgment

How can I stop this? How can I stop waiting in line  
For my life? What am I waiting to find? Where's my ticket  
On that train to happiness?

And you, smile like sunshine,  
Attracted the moth to the flame  
False hope, dressed so pretty, how could I stay away?  
Nothing haunts your eyes but retina-reflections of my huddled  
form stuck, folded, defeated  
No bags wash your face, no lines scar your pretty forehead  
An unfortunate accident with worry and anxiety

Ice blue – like Neptune's throne, I used to tell her  
Please don't let me sit there. Please don't let me get there.

Sighs like shattered bat bones held together by blond hair,  
Faded and brittle  
Sighs like splintering ventricles dancing in cold summer breezes  
Rose petals floating aloft to hold tears  
Sighs like cracking hemispheres enfolded in failing synapses  
Electroshock therapy for my serotonin, they sound pretty again

Butterfly park, six sun rises  
away from orgasmic bliss  
Not a care in the world,  
warmest embrace since the womb  
I just want to go back to sleep but  
I'm charged with false light, 60 watts, too much voltage  
She cuts her foot as she jumps  
But who can be sure anyway?

Blood diamonds are so popular these days, after all.



## When the Rain Ends

Olga Semertzidis

In the moment a rain shower ends  
every living being inhales a breath.

Immediate silence  
in the unmoving moments  
as birds shake their feathers,  
and leaves drip their last drops  
down into puddles below,  
and long earthworms blindly begin  
to find their way home.

In that moment the world glistens  
under the blanket of precipitation.

The pavement glitters  
like it's made of tiny black diamonds.

The puddles shimmer  
as their surfaces flatten  
to show upside-down worlds within.

And then, all at once,  
everything begins to move again.

Rabbits emerge from their holes  
to gorge on newly watered gardens.

Birds chirp out a call and take wing.

Children come out of their homes  
in brightly colored galoshes

to stomp tidal waves  
out of the smallest pools.



B.L.O.

# The Question of Life and Death

Sarah Corcoran

I.

Charred wood of a mortal  
fire in an antique shop reflects  
the jut of a young boy's ribs. Tapestry  
unravels in the corner of an attic. The red-blue  
flash of a cop car through the window—the restrained  
soft click of a door before the storm (that's how it should be,  
splintered furniture no longer warmed by body heat: heartbreak).

Forgotten: the sudden sharp zing of stepping on a nail. My fingertips  
scrape the ridges of your spine: kiss smeared on lost napkin: our first time  
as whole, roughed pieces fit. Losing you vibrates through me  
like I've just cracked my head against the bottom of a pond.

II.

Trying to blow air back into the dead is like running through walls.

The run of my tongue over cracked lips: waves of blood crashing  
in my ears. Sunrise—cold sand between toes: a thinning line of dirt

under nails. Finding your missing earring, placing it with your things  
in the basement, chest cavity: a cloudless sky.

To restart is like hearing my favorite song again  
for the first time: switching from rips  
in sweaters to crisp linen.

## "I Have Heard the Mermaids Singing"

from T.S. Eliot's 'Prufrock'

Stephanie Coots

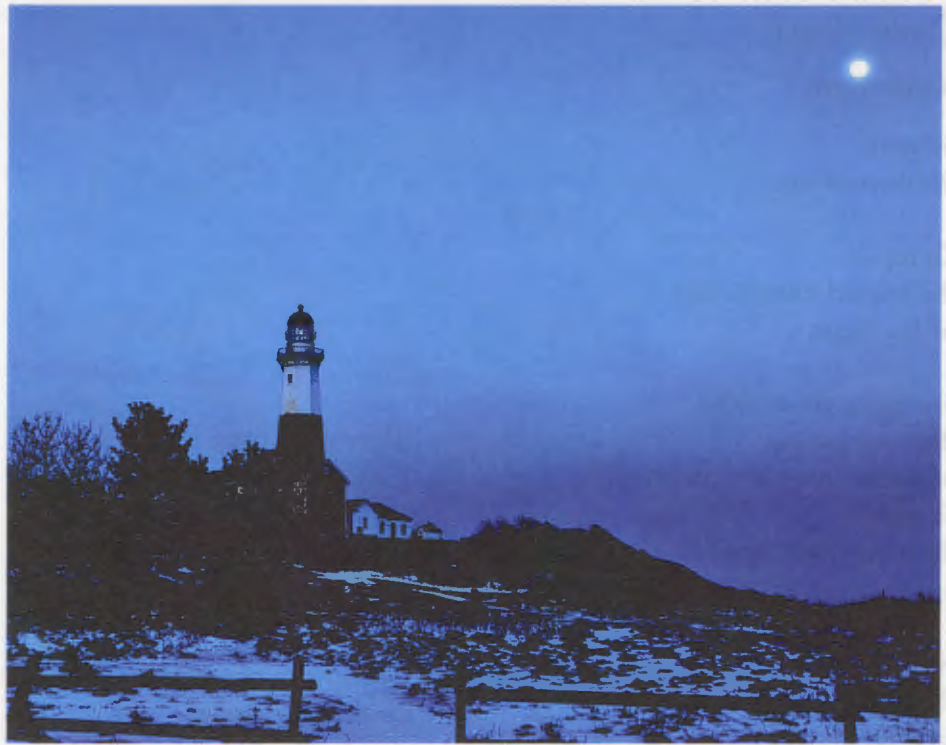
We just want a 'little' taste.  
The touch of the blood-stained earth  
beneath our toes

so, we sing. Our voices paint maps

for the weak: pleasure seeking  
polished bodies hush  
those who hesitate  
caressing. Our long hair becomes  
their noose. Our tails intertwined  
with sailor's legs becomes their downfall.

Oh, foolish humans  
when will you ever learn  
my sisters and I do not

sing on this island  
of rainstorms and shipwrecked  
bodies for a want of love,  
we just want your hearts.  
The hot, sticky, rustic heart  
mashed between our teeth.



## Fossil Beach

B.L.O.

We play hide and seek among the dead:  
broken pieces of calcium carbonate,  
crabs' forgotten limbs,  
fallen trees infested with barnacles and rot.

In this state, we mimic  
explorers who walked these lands before.  
Watch your step,  
    you warn, wandering  
to a cemetery of shells  
longing for their muscles.  
Mud sucks at your sneakers until you realize  
it's clay, sculpt pottery and snakes—  
gifts for ghosts. Your hands turn gray as the seaweed-  
choked river abandoned by boats.

    The apocalypse looms past fogged horizon like visible  
roots perched precariously on eroded cliff-face  
    above our heads.

I find a steady reed, carve our names in the sand—  
warped violet-blue and beige wrinkles  
where high tide swallows land. We're the last  
survivors; this desolation ours.

## Open Heart

Kaitlin Senk

Surgery,  
the doctors say.

To repair  
the hushed murmurings  
of her heart.

She wants them to fix  
the cooing dove  
of a ruptured aortic valve.  
To mend  
these pinprick, lovesick  
holes.

Nimble scalpel navigates  
the white of flesh  
and fibrous muscle.  
Down to a sea shell sternum.

Where the doctor is shocked  
to find  
a pierced,  
quivering,  
blue  
mass  
of cardiac tissue.  
Gasping from behind dactylic ribs  
clasped in prayer.

## Perry's Glass Pavilion

Chrissy Montelli

The Bowery at Coney Island  
November 1, 1903

Welcome to our temple—  
the fire's on inside.

Drinks: warm as women. Women: gripped  
in their garters. Singer takes the stage—churn out another  
up-and-comer. They don't want Germans  
or Jews, so we're fucked  
into fake names and fake noses.

Keep customers flooding in, like the tap  
or Coney's tourist-shores. Bossman butters up  
the regulars—call me Pop. They don't know Solomon  
is a Hebrew name. David's son had three  
hundred concubines; I guess Perry isn't too far off

from Pariser, but Missus still speaks Yiddish  
to baby Geraldine  
after Sunday Mass.

I light a yahrzeit candle  
for the whole of the Bowery,  
for the glass-mouthed girls,  
the bare legs of the Pavilion.  
We watched it burn  
with the rest of the sinners.

Solomon gathers the ashes,  
marks his daughter's forehead  
with a hexagram,  
not a cross.



Gabrielle Campanella



Michael—  
I don't give a damn about your love  
Michael—  
Please stop talking I just want  
going to hell from you when all these years  
company but I need you to love me back —M  
Michael—  
I forgive you your ego Please stop calling  
Michael—  
I can't understand you I want to win  
And I did I just want you a thing or two  
up I'm glad your going down from I'm glad  
up is so let I forgive you Good for you But I  
on I wish you the best —M  
Don't Michael  
Thank you for the card I'm sorry  
re I'm sorry I'm sorry it's a new year  
and I'm happy to hear you're  
and I said Hi I'm sorry I'm sorry  
give the 11 was more last  
Don't Michael  
but I'm glad you're back in touch, but the

The more it rains the more I love I love I love  
and I love you and the house and  
the car and the apartment and the  
the house with the windows that  
the house with the windows that  
the house with the windows that



**Pincombs**  
Nadya Klimenko



## “Rough Drafts and Sloped Letters on Monday”

Pam Howe

Michael—

Nov. 17/08

~~I don't give a shit if you're~~ Leave me the hell alone. —R.

Michael—

Nov. 24/08

~~Please stop~~ ~~Look I~~ I got your message. ~~It's been almost 10 fucking years~~ Yes, it was a shock surprising to hear from you after all these years. You're forgiven. We're straight, okay? ~~But it's not like I'm not going to~~ But I need you to leave me alone. —R.

Michael—

Nov. 22/10

I forgave you years ago. Please stop calling. —R.

Michael—

Nov. 29/10

~~I can't~~ ~~I'm not going to~~ I meant to write you last week after you left that message on my machine. And I did, I just never sent it. ~~I forgot to buy stamps~~ Sorry. Anyway, I wanted to tell you ~~to please stop calling.~~ ~~I'm glad you're getting clean again~~ I'm glad you're clean. ~~I hope you can~~ I know how important that step is, so yes, I forgive you. Good for you. But ~~I'm~~ I have a different life now, I'm a different girl. I've moved on. I wish you the best, —R.

Dear Michael,

Jan. 3/11

Thank you for the card. ~~I'm sorry I didn't~~ ~~I meant to send you one but you know how the holidays are~~ ~~I should've~~ You're right. It's a new year, let's start fresh. You sound like you're doing great ~~and I'm sure this time you'll stay~~ and I'm happy to hear you're back in touch with Kevin. I always liked your brother. Tell him I said HI. Yes, we're I'm doing great. Listen, I have to go, Olivia's lesson is almost up and it's my turn to drive the I'll write more later.

Dear Michael,

Jan. 17/11

Yes, I'm glad we're back in touch, too. ~~Really.~~ ~~At first I was nervous,~~ but It's nice to have you back in my life.

I'm sorry it's taken me so long to write back. I know I should've written sooner. ~~On Monday's,~~ my daughter has practice, so I get three hours to myself ~~and~~ I meant to, but between work and the house and all the other bullshit, well, you know. ~~Guess what,~~ Today I was sitting at a light and The Carpenters came on. I totally thought of you. I could just see you in the passenger seat with your crazy hair and your dark glasses, just singing away. Suddenly I was next to you in that old Karmann Ghia of yours—with the windows that wouldn't roll up and the radio that wouldn't turn down, and the broken AC blowing a constant ninety-degrees up, and the sun bleating mercilessly down—and anyway I started singing just like that, like we used to, back in the day. ~~Then I changed~~ ~~I changed the station~~ ~~I was ashamed~~

It's still a shock to see your handwriting in my mailbox, but a good one, of course. It's nice to hear from you. I love getting anything handwritten. It's sad how nobody writes with their hands these days. It's all emails and texts, but there's something so genuine about the slant of handwritten lines, something so honest about the slope of the letters. I miss the unintended intimacy of all of those random “T”s uncrossed, “I”s left undotted. Maybe I'm crazy. I just mean your handwriting is still the same. After all these years, I knew it was you. Hope you're well, R.

PS. I have a little girl. She's 4. She's beautiful.

Dear Michael,

Feb. 7/11

I know, it's crazy, isn't it? ~~If you'd have told me ten years ago~~ She's beautiful. An absolute angel. We named her Olivia. I think she saved my life. Don't get me wrong, it's the hardest thing I've ever done, ~~but trust me, she's a million times better than any drug~~ but worth it. ~~Can you imagine if we'd~~ it's a good thing ~~we didn't~~ but someday when you have kids you'll She's great.

Sorry I haven't written in a while. I guess it still freaks me out sometimes to hear from you. ~~Sometimes I worry~~ But if you say you're clean, then you're clean. I believe you. ~~I was just, I don't know.~~ I'm sorry. I know it's different this time, not like last time. ~~I just I mean~~ You used to leave all those messages on my machine, remember? They sort of freaked me out. Just hearing your voice: "Um, I don't know if I have the right number," nervous laugh, "it's Lefty," deep breath, "if this is you, could you call me please?" Beep. I must've replayed them a thousand times, over-analyzing meaningless intonations, projecting your intentions. And then this time: the words "don't worry, I won't bother you again." You knew I could never resist a good guilt trip. You were ninth-stepping, remember? "Making amends." ~~You were supposedly sorry.~~ Yes, I know you're sorry. Take care, R.

Dear Michael,

Feb. 14/11

~~Happy V~~ Sorry it's taken me so long, I wrote you last Monday, but I never sent it. I got busy with the back yard—we decided that we're going to drain the pond this spring because of all the leeches and mosquitoes and stuff, and the whole process is becoming such a nightmare. But it will be worth it, I guess. Olivia will have a place to run and play where I can see her, keep her safe. I just wonder sometimes, what's the point of moving all the way out here, and then getting rid of the nature? I guess some things are just better in theory. Well, I'm sure you don't care about all of that stuff.... Anyway, I'm sorry.

How's the new job? ~~I know it's not much, but consider the altern-~~ It's gotta be better than jail. I remember ~~the first time you went to rehab~~ what happened before, when you told me how you were in rehab and I said, "That's great," and you said it wasn't that great 'cause it was either that or jail and maybe jail would've been better, 'cause the mandatory methadone program this place had was harder to kick than smack had ever been. But then, jail would've sucked, too. Anyway, you were doing your steps, "going through the motions," you'd said, and I applaud your effort. But I could've told you it wouldn't work. Hell, Michael, you killed Gilly.

I guess that's not fair. Just because you were there doesn't mean you killed him, I know. ~~It's just Sometimes I think about~~ But you never told me what his mother said. I can only imagine. What did you say to her? Did she ask you how? Why? Did she ask you what his face looked like when you came out of your nod and ~~his hands were his face was his eyes were~~ when you came out of your nod alone? You didn't put the needle in, I know, and I didn't expect you to pull it out. You always said shooting by yourself made you feel like a junkie, but if you had someone next to you—someone else's works on the table next to yours, someone else's head just as cloudy—then you weren't alone. But after? When you woke up and he didn't? Of course you went back to using, anything to avoid the guilt. Then you cried when you asked me if I remembered that time in that shit-hole apartment above the Rite Aid on Sunset. That time you OD'd and Gilly gave you mouth-to-mouth. He saved you. I still remember. Even the times I tried to forget. *Fuck. I guess I'm not sending this one either.*

Dear M,

Apr. 4/11

I'm really sorry I haven't written in so long. ~~I wrote, I just never sent~~ How are you? Haven't heard from you in a while and ~~I remember before, when you'd disappear, it meant you were back~~ I hope you're still doing okay. How's work going? Are you still at the store? Tell Kev I said hi, will you?

~~How's the weather~~ Has it been raining a lot there, too? It almost never rains here, but it's been raining a lot. The backyard is a mess. Don't know if I told you, but we have this shallow pond out behind our house. Actually it's quite beautiful. There are enormous old willow trees skimming the duckweed from the surface, white water lilies and damselflies, and there's even a small wooden dock that you could tie a rowboat up to—if we had a rowboat. When I look at it from the big picture window in the living room, I feel like Scarlett O'Hara or something. To be honest, I never saw that movie but I imagine that's what her life looked like. Before it burned down.

Anyway, the pond used to be nice but over the last couple of years it's gotten infested with mosquitoes and leeches and all kinds of shit, and you can't even enjoy it anymore. So we decided to fill it in. The dump trucks and the dirt came last week, but so did the rain. They had to stop because the trucks were getting stuck in the mud and leaving these deep track marks on the lawn. And now, I keep the shades pulled down.

Hey do you remember that place on Poinsettia? What I wouldn't give for a backyard full of orange trees now! I still have that photo of you picking oranges, it's somewhere in a box of stuff. Maybe it's in the attic, or on a shelf in the closet. I should get that out, sometime while Olivia is at school, one of these days. Not that I need to, that picture is burned in my mind. You were wearing your brown Dickies and those new shoes you got for your birthday, and I said, "Who climbs a tree in a tie?" You winked and said, "Anything for you, my love," I caught every orange you threw down that day. And we made breakfast for dinner.

That was my first time. I mean the first time I stopped breathing. You probably don't remember, and neither do I, really. I just remember waking up to Amber slapping my face, screaming at you to forget the ice, that I was back. I sat there in the heat of the living room, leaning my cheek against the coolness of the window and listening to Karen Carpenter sing *Superstar*. I wondered if you had somehow fixed it so the Christmas lights above the kitchen door could hear too, because when she sang *You're not really there, it's just the radio*, they just sort of faded into her voice. Like magic. Or the opposite of magic, maybe. Then I heard Amber yelling at you in the bathroom. "Tell your fucking girlfriend to figure her shit out or I'm not gonna fix for her anymore," she said, and I told her I was sorry for almost dying. Remember? No, neither do I.

I remember we called her Nurse Amber, 'cause she could find a vein like it was her job. I don't remember why we called Gilly, Gilly. I wish I could remember his real name, sometimes. Man you were good at doling out the nicknames. You had a knack for it. Olivia asks me why I have LEFTY tattooed on my right wrist and I tell her it was a mistake. Then something about the importance of school and learning what's right, and what's not, blah, blah, blah. She might already know it's bullshit. She's smarter than me. She doesn't have a nickname. And neither do I, anymore.

Whatever happened to Nurse Amber, anyway? She really could've been a nurse. I mean, she could stick you with a freaking speedball and you wouldn't even feel it. Jesus, I got a damn flu shot last week and I'm still black and blue. I hate getting shots—not 'cause of the needles, but 'cause I know they look at my arms and think I shouldn't have Olivia,



Gabrielle Campanella



that I don't deserve her. You know. ~~Not that I mean I don't mean~~ Shit Lefty, I don't know what I mean anymore. You probably think I'm more like them than you, now that I've been clean for so long. But you'll get there too, don't worry.

I have to go. Love, R.

Dear Michael,

May. 23/11

Haven't heard from you. Getting worried. Sent you a letter a while ago, but it got returned, "No Forwarding Address" stamped across the front. Have you moved on from the halfway house and just forgot to tell me? ~~I'm hoping~~ You know, I worry. ~~The truth is, over the last few years~~ From time to time, I google the obituaries and look for your name. It's a shitty thing to say, I know, but for chrissake Lefty, it's a shitty thing to have to say. It's not a judgment, I'd be saying the same thing if you were a cop or in the Army or something. Those people have risky lifestyles, too. ~~They just do it for a more honorable~~

Are you still running? I remember when you ran the LA Marathon. You trained for ten months, six miles in the hills every day. You said as long as you could do that, you weren't a junkie. "Junkies don't run freaking marathons," you said. You were safe. You always said you were fine. ~~But Jesus Lefty, I wouldn't want anyone searching the obits for me.~~ I'm gonna send this to Kevin; maybe you're staying with him.

Maybe he can get it to you. ~~Wherever you are, I hope you~~ I hope you're not still running. Love always, R.

Dear Michael,

Aug. 8/11

Kevin wrote me last month, told me I could send your letters there and he'd make sure to bring them next time makes the drive out to Forest Lawn. Always liked your brother. I meant to write you sooner. ~~I meant to visit last time I was~~ I was just so busy. I got a promotion this summer and I'm trying to do a good job, and Olivia is, well, you know how kids are— and then there was that whole thing with getting rid of the pond. You know what's funny? We spent a shit-ton of money draining that pond, it was a huge pain in the ass. There were permits, and trucks, and dirt—the whole place was covered in mud for what seemed like forever. And now the grass is finally starting to fill in, and I planted a couple weeping cherries, and it looks pretty and everything... But at night, when the rest of the world is asleep I find myself alone in the backyard sneaking a cigarette. And I miss the goddamn pond. I mean, I hadn't swam in it in years because of the leeches, and I remember how the mosquitoes would eat me alive, but I miss the way the moon and the stars reflected on the water, making the night less dark. Anyway, I'm sorry you never got a chance to see it. ~~I should've~~ I'd be lying if I said I don't feel guilty. About everything. I thought I'd get another chance.

You were dead for three months before I found out.

I called as soon as I got the letter, but Kevin wasn't home. I talked to his wife. "He bled to death from the inside," she said. I pictured her cradling the phone in the crook of her neck, rolling her eyes, filing her nails while she sighed the words. She said it like she wasn't even talking about a person. Like she wasn't talking about you. She said that all those years, all that shit, it had all just done too much damage. She said when you found out how bad it really was, you just gave up, drank yourself to death. "There was nothing anyone could've done," she said. "There was nothing anyone could ever do," she said.

I missed the funeral, I missed the wake, I'm sorry. But then, I am a stranger to everyone you knew anyway. Your brother's wife, too. I had to tell her how you liked to sneak Brass Monkeys into the Vista, and how you'd pack apple and brie sandwiches and read poetry in the hills. I told her how you could play anything on the banjo, and how you loved that old Karmann Ghia, even though it kept breaking down. I told her about the Carpenters. I had to tell her everything before she'd tell me anything. Then I wished I'd told her less so she'd tell me less, but it was too late. Always too late.

My veins still itch when I hear Karen Carpenter sing.

*I fell in love with you before the second show.  
But I won't miss you, Lefty. —R.*



## Cold Pizza

Mike Stoianoff

A shared laugh,  
Hollow  
Like the rotting gourd that sits on our windowsill,  
Behind the curtains,  
Gathering dust.

You smile and laugh,  
I laugh and sigh politely  
With rehearsed satisfaction.

What might've been green before,  
Falls burnt and cracked to the forest ground.  
Ambling among the naked  
Willows at dusk,  
Each decrepit step...  
A noisy reminder.

It's late November,  
The date I've never been sure of.  
A shared meal.  
One I've never had,  
Before I met you.

Cold pizza sits before us,  
Chewing it over,  
And over,  
It's crumbly and brittle,  
But we both know  
There's nothing left in the fridge.

"Is your oven working," you ask  
With your mouth full,  
And your eyes distant  
Like lambent headlights in an advancing fog.  
But we both know that you can't reheat  
What was never warm.

"Is this all we have left," you ask  
With your lips pursed,  
And your mind vacant  
Like a rundown roadside motel,  
The pink neon "NO" flickering in the  
waning moonlight,  
Tricking me into thinking someone's  
there.

But then,  
I remember,  
It's late November.  
And it's snowing.



Seahorse

Marlee Cavallero

## The Swing

Olga Semertzidis

It was made of plastic  
that glued to your thighs on summer days.  
The glossy red of a cherry candy  
halfway eaten and shiny with spit.  
Legs scraping against the plastic underside as they swung.  
Palms rubbing red, clutching tight around coarse ropes  
hanging from a rusty metal bar.  
Aiming for the sun.

Deanna Williams



Drum

Meg Ross

Your top lip: wings in flight  
Your bottom lip:  
a crescent moon –

In bed together,  
I wonder about your dreams:  
frosted glass

not of me?  
not of me? in love

you are a cynic:

I impress clichés : against  
frosted glass,  
a misty stage,  
a cloud backdrop : no sunray  
picnics, no skirts  
persuaded /

invaded by your fingers, no  
wine or holding

hands. In bed together,  
I kiss you: my mouth sewn

petals - kiss you: hot-  
air balloons wind-lifted,

for how long?

by the huffing snare  
heaving cymbal  
puffing bass of

my love-song.



Thanks for reading!

Nikita Shah



Lexi Hannah





