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EDITOR'S NOTE

Depicted on the cover of our decennial issue of *Hothouse* is a time-worn little building that many UT English majors and Creative Writing certificate students will find familiar: Parlin Hall. The illustration is a fitting, homegrown rendering of a place that so many of us have come to know, love, and call our own—myself included. Through the "Best of Hothouse" anthology in this issue, we invite you to revisit some of Parlin's finest literati from the past decade, even as you welcome the new voices featured within.

Many of the new pieces in this issue circle back to notions of community—forming, losing, finding, and redefining it. In "A Young Revolution," the poet speaker struggles to give voice to the suppressed identity of their lost motherland alongside the American identity they were born into. "Sofreye Ma" resurrects and celebrates the poet speaker's roots, while "Bedlam Here, Tomorrow Too" rebuilds community out of rubble and rebellion. The protagonist of "The Sheep Round-up" cannot find belonging in her old friend group. "Los Centavos del Puente" teaches us about the strength of familial ties. These poems and stories, in addition to many others, teach us that community lacks a singular definition or place. But while communities are diverse and myriad, the state of mind they inspire is one we all share, all seek comfort in.

To turn through the pages of this issue is to find that state of mind—to peer into the windows of Parlin and discover the magic of our literary community. With this issue we celebrate a decade brimming with passion, dedication, craft, and—above all—the unwavering empathy that pushes us to keep telling each other stories, and to never stop listening to them.

–Delia Maria Davis

FICTION

Los Centavos del Puente

Samantha Babiak

My mother's skin is brown, wrinkled, and layered with years of age and work. Spotted with the effects of the sun, my mother's face is worn. She has creases at the sides of her eyes that never fade and a deep crevice between her brows that seems to go on deeper than should be possible when she is worried. She has a mouth that screams, smiles, laughs, and frowns, but a mouth that only speaks one language: Spanish. She has eyes that see and cry, that grow wary and harder when the police are near. She has hands that cook my dinner, and wash my clothes, that are calloused and rough, but are the only hands that rub my back when I am upset. She sings loudly and dances circles around the kitchen table when her favorite *corrido* comes on, but she shrinks herself in public far more often than she should.

She is my mami. But in this country, she is illegal.

I was six years old when she first explained the plan. My mami sat me down at our kitchen table and I watched as her hands kneaded the *masa* that would become our tortillas for dinner that night. The yellowing table was covered in saran wrap, sprinkled with a sheen of flour. The *masa* that had already been pressed into little pancakes littered every inch of it, hiding the fading *noples* on the tiles beneath. I kept my hands in my lap, waiting.

"*Mijito*," she said, flattening the *masa* in her hands as she spoke. "If your papi or I, or both of us, don't come home one day, you need to know what to do."

"Mami, what are you talking about?" I shifted in my seat, rubbing the sole of my dingy sneakers against the table leg across from me.

"When you grow older, I'll tell you." She didn't look at me when she said that. The strands of hair that had escaped her braid tickled her cheek. She brushed them away with flour-coated hands, leaving a white powdery smear across her face. It looked like war paint; I didn't tell her it was there.

She began, "If we don't come home one day, Julián, you need to take your *hermanita* with you to the neighbors, and then call your *abuela en México* right away." Under all of the methodical planning and her careful tone, it was easy to sense that my mami was afraid of something.

"You know the number by heart, *sí*?" By this time, my mami had finished pressing the *masa* into tortilla shapes. She gathered up the flattened circular pieces to cook on the stove. The aroma of jalapeños, *cebolla*, and frijoles floated through the air of our kitchen.

"*Sí*, mami. I know the number."

"*Bueno*," she nodded in my direction, but didn't meet my eyes. Maybe she was afraid I'd see the fear that swam in my eyes was mirrored in hers. They were the same after all. I watched as the line of her mouth pressed together even tighter, like she was trying to keep something locked away.

She continued with the plan. After I took Norita to the neighbors and called my *abuela*, I needed to call my Tía Luz in Arizona. She was documented, my mami had said, she would be able to take care of us.

I didn't understand what "documented" meant at the time. I was six years old after all, but I could see the weight of the word in the way my mami's mouth molded around its syllables. *Documentada*, *ilegal*: words thrown around in the news, in the classroom, across cultures, and countries. They weren't just words in our home.

For years, I watched as those words ate their way through my mami's flesh and bone, through her wellness. I watched her pace across the worn tiles of our kitchen when papi ran ten minutes late from work. I watched her grip the rosary around her neck like it held the answers to the universe, and I wondered why she was so afraid. "*Diosito*," she would whisper, "*por favor*."

Maybe the indentation of the cross on her palm made her feel like she was connected to Him somehow. Like she wasn't just speaking to nothing in the sky when she tilted her head back with tears in her eyes and begged for my papi to make it home to us. Maybe it relieved the fear that swarmed inside of her like a disease, that ate away at her insides and dimmed her brightness.

We all suffered from it though, the disease of uncertainty. It stained our fading, cross-adorned walls and the thick wool blankets that my parents had kept from their journey across. It was in the darkest parts and deepest crevices of our home, an invasion that tainted the sunlight, seeped through our windows and the moonlight that peeked through the blinds. Most of all though, it was in the sadness of my mami's smile when she spoke of her childhood, of the home she could never go back to, but that she had left willingly.

She used to tell me stories, right before she tucked me into bed. She would say, "Julián, *¿quieres escuchar una historia?*" I only needed to nod my head and close my eyes. She would push the stray strands that rested on my forehead back, smoothing the dark curls until I relaxed into the down of my pillow.

My favorite story to listen to, and I think her favorite to tell, was the story of her days selling chicle on the bridge.

"*En México*," she would begin, "*no teníamos mucho*." From the one bathroom that all five of her and her siblings shared, to the swimming pool in her front yard that was really just a hole in the ground filled to the brim with water from the *manguera*, my mami painted her childhood for me in whispers. Her papá, she explained, used to buy value-sized packs of gum *chiclitos*—they called them. Packaged in clear plastic wrappers, they were small squares of gum that came in fours, all different kinds of flavors too. "Barely the size of my little finger," she used to say. Her papá would tell her, "*Mija*, sell as many as you can today. *Lo necesitamos*."

"*Sí*, papi."

And so my mami would walk the two miles to the bridge that connected Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, to Laredo, Texas. She would

walk up and down the burning concrete, in the raging heat, in the cool air, even in the pouring rain, and she would sell these tiny packages of gum for 25 centavos a piece. The best part, my mami would whisper, was when she got home from her day on *el puente*.

Sun-kissed and sweaty from her afternoon in the sun, with her chocolate brown pigtails hanging by the sides of her face, my mami would cross her legs in front of her and count. She would count all of the centavos, and then she would order them into neat stacks all around her, for her papá to count when he got home from work. She said she loved the sight of coins surrounding her—like tiny towers of metal, some leaning, some straight, some bronze, some silver; her fortress of centavos. She would pretend she was a *sirena*, a collector of all shiny things that fell into her sea. The centavo towers were her castle of gold. Her favorite make believe.

"*Mijito*," she would whisper, "*Me fui de México porque quería más por ti. No quiero que unos centavos del puente sean los mejores recuerdos de tu infancia.*"

I kept my eyes closed.

"*Te quiero mucho, mi changuito*."

With a kiss to the center of my forehead and a *bendición—el nombre del padre, del hijo, y del espíritu santo*—my mami tucked me into bed. She left my bedroom door slightly open, letting a sliver of light slice through the darkness of my room. Amen.

✳✳✳

I always knew my mami was different. The differences weren't just notable in my bedtime stories or the food packed into my sack lunch either. It was in the way my mami bought her groceries, with a look over her shoulder at every aisle and a shaking hand that reached for the *plátanos*. It was in the slight tremble of her voice when the principal from my school called home, or when the neighbors peeked over the fence into our yard to say hello. It was in the way she drilled the plan into my head more than the prayers in our worn bible.

She used to always say, "*Mijo, dígame*. What's the plan?"

I used to whine back, "Mami, you know I know it."

"Tell me again," she always insisted.

And there I was, six, seven, eight-year-old me, reciting what I'd do if my parents disappeared. Sometimes I'd imagine they had an irrational fear of alien abductions, or maybe they were secret spies. I didn't like to think about what they were really afraid of. I didn't want to believe that the place I thought to be my home didn't want my mami and papi there too.

✳✳✳

My mami never told me what being illegal really meant to her, but we learn to see the world through the eyes of our parents, and that very same shade of fear that veiled their eyes cast a shadow over mine. It's like the photos you find in basements, with a yellowing tint that make them look older than they are. Everything is tinted so that any questions are just a little bit menacing, and any look from across the theater or the groceries is just a little bit threatening.

The first time one of my teachers asked me where my parents were from I lied.

Ms. George's short brown locks reached just below her earlobes, and the bright purple glasses that rested on her beaked nose stood out against her pale skin. She smiled like there was a bad taste in her mouth as I rushed up the steps leading to my homeroom door.

"Julian, sweetie," she always said my name JEWEL-E-AN not HOO-LEE-ANN, like it was meant to be pronounced. "Where are your parents from again?"

She side-eyed my father's retreating pickup truck, caked with dirt from the muddy land he was working on, and his rusted tool box that just slightly peeked out of the bed. One hand rested on her hip, the other kept our classroom door propped open, expectant.

"Laredo, Texas," I nodded my head up at her and smiled too big. My cheeks lifted so that my eyes squinted so far, she didn't look like

Ms. George anymore. My mami hated when I smiled like that, she said it made me look like a real *changuito.*

"Are your grandparents the ones from Mexico, then?"

I nodded at her question and rushed to my desk. Too many questions about where my parents came from, they had taught me, was dangerous. Maybe Ms. George didn't have bad intentions, but the fear that gripped me from the possibility that I had said too much didn't seem to care.

I couldn't keep still in my seat all day. Every glance, or stern eyebrow in my direction, caused a fit in my stomach. I went home with a nibbled-at lunch of homemade tostadas and an irrational fear of prying eyes. I felt like they could see through me to my parents and their secrets.

My mami was ironing our clothes when I walked through the front door. She stood in front of the television, shaking her head at whichever one of her *novelas* was on. The water stains that began where the ceiling met the wall behind our television set made me anxious. I used to be afraid they'd swallow the crosses hanging on the wall whole, and then us too.

"Mami?" I called from the entrance of the house. "What do I tell people when they ask where you and papi came from?"

"*Nada*. It's not any of their business where we're from." She was stern in her answer, so I left her to her *novela*.

It was never a good idea to push her for answers, so I didn't. And even though I didn't learn what being illegal meant from my mami, she showed me what living in fear, living in a constant state of cortisol-pumped veins, was like. It was never "fight" for us, always "flight," because we knew we couldn't win. And we couldn't risk our family.

That weekend I forgot all about Ms. George's questions because we had our annual carne asada.

"Julián!" The sound of my father's booming voice woke me up that morning; it reverberated around my small room, bouncing around until I got up.

I rolled over in my bed, smothering my face into my tattered navy pillow. "*Ya voy*," I mumbled into it. Of course, he didn't hear me, and the next thing I knew the blankets that cocooned me in blissful warmth were being ripped away.

"*Levántate*," he ordered. "We're starting the *carne*." His rough hand smacked the bottom of my foot before he walked out of my room.

I groaned into my pillow again before pulling myself from the warm embrace of my bed. Sleeping in was virtually unheard of in our home.

Every curtain in the house was pulled back, letting the sun's rays lighten every inch of our home. My mami had already started cleaning the house for the guests. She had enlisted Norita as her helper for the morning. Her small frame crouched beneath the dining table scrubbing at stains that had probably been there before I was born. According to mami, nothing was ever too clean. She used to say that if your arm didn't hurt, you weren't scrubbing hard enough.

Papi stood in the kitchen, seasoning the slabs of meat that would become our dinner that night. I padded over to him quietly.

"Okay, *estoy aquí*. What do I do?" I tiptoed up to the corner of the counter, peeking precariously over the edge of the pan that held the carne.

My papi's gruff response, "Too close," was accompanied with a *zape* to the back of my head. He pointed to the chicken breasts on the other side of the kitchen, "Season."

"*Sí*, papi."

I picked up the pan filled with chicken breasts and moved it to the counter opposite of where my father stood. I watched the way he rubbed the fajita seasoning into the red meat, almost like he was giving it a massage. Trying to emulate his movements, I grabbed the lemon pepper bottle, dumped its contents into the pan and did the same to the chicken breasts. The corner of my papi's mustache-clad lips picked up slightly, his version of a smile. It made me grin like a *changuito*, even though he only nodded back in my direction. I knew I had done something right.

The rest of the morning was spent seasoning, chopping, dicing, and grilling to the sounds of *banda* and *corridos*. Norita and I were exhausted hours before the party had even started, but once the clock struck 6 p.m. we were sent off to get cleaned up.

Our shared bathroom wasn't actually meant for two. When I think about my childhood with Norita, too many of my memories reroute to the toilet. There was no mirror behind our sink, but rather it was on the wall behind the toilet. This unfortunate placement never failed to stir up an argument. So when mami sent us to get ready at the exact same time, she should've known what was coming.

As Norita stood on top of the toilet seat, whining at me to get out of my own restroom, I lost my patience. Wrapping my hand around her tiny arm, I yanked her from the top of the seat.

The second Norita hit the ground, I heard the slam of the backyard door. I immediately crouched down by Norita's wailing form and put my hand over her mouth, effectively silencing her. In her ear, so my parents couldn't hear, I tried to calm her.

"Norita, *cállate*," I urged. "*Nada pasó*, *nada pasó*, you're not even hurt. See!" I grabbed one of her arms and tried to pull her up.

She cried even harder.

Her wails had me switching my tactics to threats.

"If you tell mami and papi that I hurt you, I swear I will flush your piggy down the toilet," I said this through clenched teeth, while my unoccupied hand reached for the ratty pig that sat against the wall opposite Norita.

Piggy was Norita's favorite stuffed animal. It was small, pink, and it was missing both eyes. It was a hideous little thing, but she loved it anyways. She slept with it, she dragged it behind her while she learned to crawl, and later when she learned to walk, she'd rest him on her shoulders—"A piggyback ride for her piggy," she used to squeal.

Threatening Piggy finally shut her up, but the scene as mami walked in didn't do much for my case. I still had one hand gripping

Norita's arm, and the tears that silently leaked out of the corners of her eyes gave us away.

"*Pinche huerco*," she bent over and grabbed me by the ear, pulling me up so that I stood with her.

"Mami, I'm sorry!"

"How many times do I have to tell you not to pick on your *hermanita*?" She dragged me along behind her, towards my father no doubt. I didn't even try to attempt an escape.

"She wasn't letting me get ready! I just did what you said to do!"

"*No me digas*. I don't want to hear it."

By the time we reached the back door, my ear was throbbing and burning red. Mami had an unshakeable grip.

She handed me over to papi with a gruff, "Teach him a lesson."

Papi noted my terrified expression and the angry tilt of mami's eyebrows. He reached for his belt immediately.

"What'd he do?" He asked, putting down his long-handled tongs by the grill.

"Fighting with Norita, *otra vez*."

"*Vas a verlo, mijo*." If there was anything my papi could have said in that moment to let me know I had it coming, it was that.

I cowered, but there was nowhere to hide. Our small backyard provided little coverage, save for the grill and a half-dead tree situated in the middle of the yard. Papi made sure I couldn't sit down properly for the rest of the carne asada. I had to learn how to handle Norita on my own, he had said, without fighting with her.

I slowly made my way back inside, with my head hanging and my hands on my bottom. I still had to get ready for the party.

That night, papi had his usual cervezas and mami drank her usual *clamatos*. A few too many later and the party was in full swing. It went on until the early hours of the morning, the voices of *mariachis* along with the strums of the *guitarrón* and *vihuela* floated down the street for hours. The wind carried the smell of *carne* and burning coal down the block.

Our backyard was crowded. My parents sat side by side near the entrance of the house, holding hands for the first time in a long time. Mami's dark hair was let down from her usual braid. It was long, reaching her lower back, and I wondered when the last time she had gotten a haircut was. Her smile stretched across her face, making the crows' feet at the corners of her eyes deepen further. There was a glow about her that I think came from the lightness in her chest. The crease between her eyebrows, for once, was shallow. Papi was just a little less stoic than usual, the ends of his lips were turned up in that subtle smile of his. But the way he looked at mami spoke volumes more than he ever would, or probably could. I remember watching them from across the yard, smiling quietly to myself.

They didn't seem so afraid to me then.

✳✳✳

The day my parents disappeared, the sun was shining. There were no clouds in sight on my walk home from school and the breeze tickled the hairs at the nape of my neck like a cool caress. The creaking screen door was just slightly ajar, but that wasn't unusual because it never closed properly. Papi spent most of his time fixing other people's homes, so I understood that he was sometimes too tired to fix ours. The house was quiet.

I walked into the kitchen and sat down at the round table where mami usually pressed the tortillas for dinner. She was running late, but I didn't worry. Today wasn't the day they disappeared.

Mami always made dinner by herself, Norita would help her set the table sometimes, or flip the tortillas, or stir the *caldo*, but she never asked me or papi for help. She said it was because *niños* weren't supposed to cook, that was the job of the *niñas*. I always wanted to help though, so that day, I did.

I pulled the lettuce head and tomatoes out of the old, flickering refrigerator and began chopping. I chopped the lettuce into strands and diced the tomatoes, just like mami did. Then I took out the *queso*

fresco and began crumbling it onto a paper plate, so that it would be ready to sprinkle on the enchiladas later. I had watched my mami's hands prepare these ingredients my entire life. I had memorized them all, the movements, everything, just like I had memorized the plan.

Once I finished chopping, dicing, and crumbling, I realized I didn't know how to make the *pollo* for the enchiladas, so I sat at our empty table and tried my best not to stare at the clock's slowly advancing hands.

When Norita walked through the door, and her tiny frame shrunk in half, I had to remind myself that today wasn't the day. She looked disheveled in her basketball uniform, with her double socks peeking out over her hand-me-down high tops. They were too big for her because she had gotten them from me. She dropped her backpack by her feet at the sight of me. Piggy fell out of it. I didn't want her to be afraid, so I looked into her shining eyes and said, "Norita, come sit with me. We have to wait for mami and papi." I repeated that there was nothing to be afraid of.

She nodded and sat down by the crumbled cheese. I patted the top of her little hand and she gave me a half smile. I prayed she believed me.

Then we waited together.

It wasn't until the sunlight outside our kitchen window began to fade and the symphonic melody of crickets and cicadas permeated our ears that I realized that was it. Mami and papi weren't coming home. I heard Norita's stomach grumble beside me. She had started picking at the ingredients on the table, still waiting to be turned into enchiladas.

But then I realized that they wouldn't be, because our parents weren't coming back. Today was the day they disappeared.

I grabbed Norita's hand and strode to the door, ignoring the unbearable tightness in my chest.

After all, mami always made sure I knew what to do.

Abigail

J. T. Wardlow

Abigail had not left the house for six hundred and thirty-two days.

She laid, on her back, in the overstuffed leather of a cracked and scuffed sofa. Her eyes were buried in the crook of her arm. Pinpricks of light filtered through plantation shutters, boring into her chalky skin. The hair on her head was sleep greased and lank and red like the hair on her legs and under her arms. She snored softly, mouth hanging open.

Abigail started, pulled her arm away, and squinted in the dim. She was confused for a moment, unsure of where she was, but the uncommon feeling faded. She knew these walls, knew the fading navy paint and the dull molding at their feet. Knew the overfilled bookshelves, dark-stained oak built-ins that matched the massive, looming desk in the center of the room. Knew the cobwebs, long abandoned by spiders and conquered by dust, bridging the blades of the ceiling fan. Knew the shutters, deep green but sunbleached on their outsides. She knew the house like she knew her skin.

The couch was stuck to her back and shoulders, and it sucked at her as Abigail sat up. It was hot, and she was sweating. Ratty cotton clung to her stomach and chest. She stripped off the tank top and threw it, wadded, into the corner. She pulled her legs over the side of the sofa and planted bare feet onto the hardwood. As she stood, she groaned and cracked her neck, and the floorboards creaked with her.

She padded down the hallway, past sheet-covered mirrors and locked bedrooms, and down the stairs. She walked with a slump in her shoulders and a curve in her spine like gravity was too much for her to bear. Eyes sticky with sleep, Abigail gripped the bannister for support. She knew which steps would wail under her small weight,

had mapped them as a child. She stepped on them all for the company of noise.

At the foot of the stairs was the front door, flanked on either side by windows that Abigail had long since blockaded with cardboard and masking tape. The mailslot was stuck open. She slammed it closed, wiped her fingers on her shorts, and bent to pick up the mail. Envelopes and ads, she passed through the dining room and tossed them onto the table with the rest. The pile was high and due for an avalanche, and many of the envelopes were stamped with an angry, demanding red. They said things like PAST DUE and FINAL NOTICE.

The kitchen was marble topped and wood hewn like the rest of the house. She opened the fridge. Cold and light spilled over her naked torso. She picked a half-eaten can of peaches and ate it over the sink. Staring at a blinded window, she tried thinking of nothing. The house, the empty house, was quiet. The kind of quiet that hung in the air, stilled the light and shadows, that filled every splinter of wood, every knickknack, every carpet fiber, every wire. Pushing at her, condensing her, trapping her. It filled her mouth and her nose and seeped down her throat and into her lungs and stomach and into her intestines and blood, so that it flowed out of her and through her, and she could feel it beating in her heart and soul.

Abigail turned on the TV and upped the volume as loud as it would go. She tossed her spoon into the sink where it clattered against the rest of the dishes. She trashed the peach can and went into the laundry room and put on a wrinkled t-shirt. She collapsed into the sueded cloth of another couch and looked at the TV without watching it. She let her eyes glaze.

Later she ate again and read and masturbated and sat at the TV. She counted the dust bunnies of grime and red hair along the baseboards. The sun faded to moonlight, and when it rose again Abigail drifted off. On the border of dreaming she made herself a promise, as she had yesterday and as she would tomorrow. She promised she would change, that she would soon be someone else, somewhere else.

Abigail had not left the house for seven hundred and twenty-one days.

✳✳✳

Sometimes, pacing through rooms, Abigail would stretch her body wide to fill the empty spaces of the house. She spread her arms and hands and fingers high above her head, reaching for the small cracks in smooth ceilings. Her steps were massive and loping, so that each footfall thudded down into the foundations, shaking the furniture and rattling her dead mother's crystal. She spun on the balls of her feet and turned on her heels and danced without form or music until all the pent energy leached from her blood.

At other times, she spoke to herself. Abigail's words twisted and skittered across octaves, between voices, so that whatever room she was in filled with ghosts of her own imagining. She sang, too. Her voice was not high, clear, or beautiful, but her dead father had always liked it.

She had a sister once, who was too young to have left much behind. A few tick marks on a wall in the garage, one for each year of growth, signed Catherine in clumsy scrawl. And there were toys, odds and ends, which sat untouched on side tables and under dining room chairs.

The dead had rooms on the second floor.

At the top of the stairs was the master, bordering the study. Down the hall, Abigail's room faced Catherine's. The doors were thick slabs of wood stained a brown so dark it might have been black. Each had a round doorknob of oxidized bronze and a keyhole. All but the study was locked.

Some nights, when songs and distractions couldn't dispel the silence, Abigail would creep up the stairs and press her ear against a door and listen and hope for some remnant of life. But she had never opened the doors. And she didn't believe in ghosts.

✶✶✶

The day Abigail's family died, they had eaten breakfast in the kitchen nook and left their dishes. Abigail had never moved them. A bowl and spoon, calcified milk and sugar pooled in the bottom, crusted and jaundiced. The hollowed shell of half a grapefruit, warped and desiccated like ancient shoe leather and grey. A plate, cleaned but for the coat of bacon grease whose shine was killed by dust.

Sat in her place, beside the plates, she ate rice and beans. She was still hungry when she finished but didn't eat any more. She licked her plate clean and rinsed it and added it to the pile in the sink. The plates, the bowls, the silverware stacked high over the edge of the basin, leaning into the wall and creeping to the windowsill.

Abigail had always been small, but now she was thin. She lifted her shirt and counted her ribs. Taut skin spanned her hip bones. She ran her fingers over the bones, finding them unfamiliar and alien. Her knees and elbows protruded, huge and knobby next to wasting legs, arms, hands.

The money, the inheritance and the insurance, was running out.

"You can't sit still forever," said Abigail in a low, gruff voice.

"You can't sit still forever," in a voice much like her own but higher.

"You can't sit still forever." A voice higher still, childish lisps on the *s* sounds.

She looked back to the nook, to the empty plates and places and made herself feel nothing. In her mind she closed a door. Later, she ate again (barely) and read and masturbated and ate (barely) and sat at the TV.

Abigail had not left the house for eight hundred and two days.

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The house swelled in the storm. Its old, rheumatic joints ballooned up in the wet. All the air of the place was damp and smelled like earth

and sawdust. It was cold, going on freezing, and Abigail had taken to wrapping herself in blankets that trailed behind her like robes, cutting wide, clean swaths in the dust of the floor. She lit candles for warmth and light, drifting from room to room with a flame in hand, flickering at the end of a long sliver of wax. If she stopped and sat, the chill would sink into her bones and never leave.

Candlelight birthed strange creatures. Sharp edges like teeth grew out of the walls. Spindly shadow-hands and arms spawned from wall hangings and bits of kitsch, small goblin things that covered the floors and snatched at Abigail's feet.

Thunder cracked overhead. Its great bellow shook the house, and Abigail with it, so that she felt a tingling in her bones as if invisible lightning had wrapped its claws around her chest. Banshee winds whistled and moaned past the windows. Abigail imagined them as solid snake-things, slithering through the streets, encircling the house and hissing outside her doors.

A million schizophrenic drumbeats hammered the roof. The rain was working its way in: dripping from ceilings, worming through window sills. The beating grew louder, denser, heavier, until Abigail was sure it must be hail. It grew harsher still, and her mind wandered to meteorites and missiles.

Abigail was under siege. She paced faster and faster, caged and feeling it unlike ever before. Under the shell of wool and cotton draped over her shoulders, she wrung her fingers and sweated everywhere.

A lull, a retreat of wind and hail and thunder.

She breathed deep and sighed. Then she heard glass shattering upstairs. Seeing a crack in the walls, the storm launched its second assault, and now Abigail was frozen. Wind rattled overhead, shaking her locked doors. A grating noise, and a massive thud. Banging, and more of the hail, but closer now, just above her.

Abigail rocked in place and listened, one ear cocked upward. She pulled air through her teeth and grimaced and climbed the stairs. A low breeze skated over the steps, filtering down from above. She

went slow, climbing one stair at a time. In her blankets, hunched against the cold and bent from fear, she looked like an old woman struggling up a mountain.

Catherine's door battered against its frame, shaking the walls. Rainwater oozed from the crack beneath, and flickers of distant lightning cast strobes on the hardwood. Abigail leaned into the door and pressed her ear against the wood. Inside, she heard the shrieking gales and the hail, and she heard paper flapping. She remembered: afternoons of ink-stained fingertips, sixty-four packs of crayons, washed-out watercolors, and Catherine smiling over her work, pinning it to her walls.

Abigail was furious now. Furious at the memories, at herself for remembering. Furious at the rain and wind and hail for its destruction, for its trespass. She shrugged off her blankets and went into the office and dug into the bottom drawer of the desk. She found the key to the bedroom doors and pocketed it and then went back down the stairs, taking them two at a time.

In the kitchen, she opened the door to the attached garage and stepped in, then back out as she saw the total blackness inside. The stench of rot, hot and sticky and too sweet, hit her like a wall. She dug through a kitchen drawer and found a flashlight, turned it on, and pointed it into the garage.

Stacks upon stacks of shiny plastic bags cascaded down from the back wall to the front. The garbage reeked of death and decay. Abigail gagged and dry heaved twice. She pinched her nose and stepped in, landing one delicate step between bags, and then another, until she was surrounded by the heap. The floor was slick and tacky in places, gummy between her toes. The taste of it was in her mouth, acid like mold and rotten strawberries. Air painted thick onto her skin, a second layer of spoiled flesh.

She aimed the light and found what she was looking for: her father's shiny red tool chest. She moved for it, too quickly, and misaimed her step. Her foot crashed into a bag, and the thin plastic split. Her right foot sank into its guts up to the shin, a sludge drown-

ing her skin. The smell was unbearable. She turned her head and retched onto the heap, though she had little but bile in her stomach. Somewhere there was a mass of skittering and motion under the farther bags as rats shifted to her sounds.

She made it to the chest and pulled open all its drawers and took her father's staple gun and a thick, oily canvas tarpaulin. She followed the low candlelight and found the door back to the house. On the threshold she looked down at her feet, at the coated skin and matted hair and filthy toenails, and jerked her head back up. She took off her sweatpants, took the key out of the pocket, wiped her feet with their tops and tossed the ruined fabric into the garage and pulled shut the door.

Remnant grime followed her upstairs, greenish-brown footprints on the wood and carpets. She came to Catherine's door and unlocked it. The wind pushed, and Abigail pushed back. Inch by inch, the door cracked and then there was another lull in the wind, and Abigail staggered forward and stumbled into the bedroom.

The broken window was a great, circular porthole that dominated the outward wall. Shards of glass jutted out from its perimeter and scattered like shrapnel on the floor. Under the glass was a bench window seat built into the wall where Catherine had often sat and peered out into the wide world like the sole passenger of some giant ship. The floor was littered with all of Catherine's drawings and paintings, soaked through and tattered and lost. Pellets of tennis-ball-sized hail filled the corners. Catherine's narrow brass bed had flipped and stood now on its side against the wall. Her soft pink comforter, stamped with a cartoon princess, laid crumpled underneath. The walls were as pink as they'd ever been. Abigail stared at the room for a while and felt like crying, but didn't let herself.

She went to the window and tried to step up onto the bench, but she was weak from hunger, weaker than she'd realized, and she had to claw onto a corner of wall to pull herself up. Abigail wobbled and misjudged her balance and fell forward. As she caught herself on the window frame, a spike of broken glass caught in the palm of her

left hand and sliced it from heel to joint. She called out, cursing, and leaned back into the wall.

The staple gun was heavy, and she could barely reach the top of the window with the tarp. Blood ran from her hand, winding in rivulets down her arm and under her shirt. She drove the staples through the tarp and into the window frame, and she was sweating by the end of the effort. She stepped down from the seal, careful to avoid more broken glass, and looked at the window from afar.

Cradling her wounded hand between her breasts, Abigail stooped to collect Catherine's drawings. The rain started again in earnest, pelting the tarpaulin. The wind came, and the canvas ballooned out like a fat stomach. There was a ripping noise, and the fabric tore away from the staples. A circle severed from the middle of the tarp and caught a gust and flew off down the hall. Rain and wind flowed like all the seas of the world through the porthole.

Abigail straightened and walked to the door. When she tried to close it, a gust caught the wood and jammed it back against the wall. She went to the hall and leaned her head against the door to her own bedroom, then turned and slid down until her legs crumpled beneath her.

The rain was so thick that she couldn't see the sky beyond it, only a solid grey. She gathered her blankets up and built a shield against the wind. Her teeth chattered, her hand was still bleeding, and she was very cold.

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All the doors were open now.

Her parents' bathtub was a great porcelain basin mounted on cast iron lion's feet. Pristine except for the dust, Abigail wiped the tub with a cloth and ran the taps. The faucets only offered water as cold as the house. On the white tile next to the tub, she'd put an old propane camp stove she'd found in the pantry. She filled a huge stockpot from the taps and set it to boil on the stove. When the wa-

ter bubbled, she poured it into the stoppered tub and filled the rest from the taps. She tested the water with a hand and disrobed and stepped in.

Grime haloed out around her feet and shins, her thighs, her stomach, her chest, her shoulders. The clear water turned grey and murky. She laid back, and closed her eyes and let the warmth sink into her. She lowered her stinging hand into the water, and red drifted off her palm, swirled into the grey. She cleaned the wound, which was angry and swollen, and thought of gangrene and blood poison. She flipped the hand and counted the blue veins through transparent skin. Tracing the veins up her arms, she came to a stop at her shoulders, which were spotted with dull freckles. She took a rag and scrubbed herself, head to toe, and then drained the wastewater and filled the tub again. After two more rounds in the tub, her skin was bright pink, and her red hair shone with wet. Feeling human again, she drained the tub a final time and wrapped herself in a thick terry towel.

There was a photo on her parents' dresser of when they were young, younger than Abigail was now. They were smiling and happy. Abigail looked like her mother, a hollowed-out version thinner in the cheeks and darker in the eyes, but the resemblance was plain.

In the photo, Abigail's mother wore a dress, fine and emerald colored. Abigail found it in the closet, zipped into a garment bag. She put the dress on. It was loose, but right in the length. Abigail took the photo from the dresser and sat at her mother's vanity table.

She had never shuttered the windows here, and so Abigail did her makeup by sunlight. She held the photo close to find all the right shades. She shadowed her eyes, blushed her cheeks, lined her lashes. Soft red on her lips. She blurred all the hungry lines of her face until she had made a ghost of herself. Her mother was there, in the mirror.

Abigail's throat caught, and she put a hand to her lips. Her mother did the same, a tear streaming down her left cheek. Abigail smiled, to see her mother's smile, and she laughed, a short sound

like something fleeing her chest. She reached out and touched her mother's fingertips, the glass cold.

In a voice much like her own, but higher, in her mother's voice, she said, "I love you Abigail," and then she remembered everything.

It came tumbling in all at once. Abigail slumped in her creaking chair, crushed by the weight of remembering. All the things she'd forced herself to forget, all the things she'd lost, surrounded her like a net drawn tighter and tighter until it pierced her skin. This razor sadness squeezed her lungs of air that exploded from her mouth as huge, heaving sobs. She doubled at the waist and put head to knees and darkened her mother's green silk with her tears.

From a window, a solid block of yellow sunlight cut her in two across the waist, lighting her back and face so that her skin grew warm like the tears spilling from her eyes. Black mascara streaked her cheeks. She looked high and low on her parents' walls and peered beneath their bed and searched for any meaningful trace of them, but she found nothing. It was only a room, deserted. She wept until her body was dry, wringed out.

When she was finished, Abigail felt lighter. Something had crawled off her back. She closed her eyes and felt every inch of her body: The soreness in her bones, resting against the hard floor. The hunger in her stomach, which did not growl but rather gnawed. The aching pulses in her hand. When she opened her eyes, her parents were standing over her, and Catherine stood in the hall, and they were all smiling and reaching out to her, beckoning her. Abigail slammed her eyes shut and opened them again. The ghosts, visions, hallucinations were gone.

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When Abigail turned the tap of the kitchen sink, no water came out. She tried other taps, in the bathrooms and the laundry room, but the result was the same. The water was gone like the food, the power, the life. And so the house was dead.

Abigail paced around the husk, dry mouthed and empty, the last spark of life in its belly. She would pause at times and inspect the flames at the ends of her dwindling candles. They danced and flickered under her breath while the puddles of mottled wax at their bases grew and their time ran out, and she felt a kinship to the flames.

She found herself gravitating to doors and windows, to standing for long whiles before Catherine's broken window. Frigid breezes rolled out of long sky, and she imagined herself free of this ruined house, flying in the cold, her skin hardened to stone so that she couldn't shiver or be broken.

She held her hand now to the wind, and the air cooled her wound, blew away the stink of rot. Already she was losing feeling in her fingers. The hand, the hunger, the thirst, the cold—these were clocks hanging around her neck, and if one rang so would the others.

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She smelled smoke, but not the candle smoke she was used to. The acrid, dense smell made her throat itch. Abigail ran to the steps and found the stairwell filling with a jet cloud that brought stinging water to her eyes. To her right, in her parents' room, were flames gobbling up a set of velvet drapes. Her room was alight, too, and the study. Books on the wall went like kindling, and the long runner carpet in the hall caught an ember. She was surrounded by flame, feeling the heat at her back, and smoke lodged in her lungs so that she was coughing every few seconds. She thought of the broken window, and jumping, but the idea terrified her, and Catherine's room was catching red.

Abigail took a deep breath and charged down the stairs, into the fire. She couldn't see, instead counting the steps as she went until she came halfway down and ran full-on into a blaze. The wall of fire stood immovable at the foot of the stairs, creeping its way up, chewing the floorboards around the front door. Abigail backtracked and struggled over the bannister, and then jumped onto an unburnt spot

below. The kitchen, the dining room, the living room were all lost to flame.

She went low, crawling on her stomach under the smoke. She pulled herself forward with her hands, embers searing her fingertips and chest. Motes of flame slipped down the front of her loose dress and burned her collarbones, her ribs, her empty stomach. Her skin became raw and red, and it sang out in hot pain.

A window broke behind her, at the front of the house. Air rushed in, filling a vacuum, and the backdraft ignited the air. A fireball bloomed, filling the space above Abigail with a deep orange span of destruction. Agony blazed across her calves and back as her skin bubbled from the heat and blistered. She screamed and sucked in smoke and then coughed. Her lungs ached for air.

She felt new flames, lapping at the backs of her thighs. Abigail turned and found her mother's dress alight. She could smell the burning silk, even under the rest of the smoke, strong like scorched hair. Abigail rolled over onto the flame, but it still crept up her legs and back. She pulled her arms out of the dress straps and shoved it down her chest and past her waist and kicked the silk away, into the fire.

The back door wreathed in flame. It was close, but to Abigail the distance stretched eternal. Her thoughts were scattered and strange, strangled by lack of oxygen. She stood, scrambling to her feet, and her head was lost in black smoke. In the cloud, she saw Death's face, an old friend. She stumbled below the black and gasped in soot-sullied air. Abigail limped to the door, burnt legs failing her, and then she was there. She grabbed the handle, and the brass seared her already burned hands, but she pulled the door open and found fire on the other side.

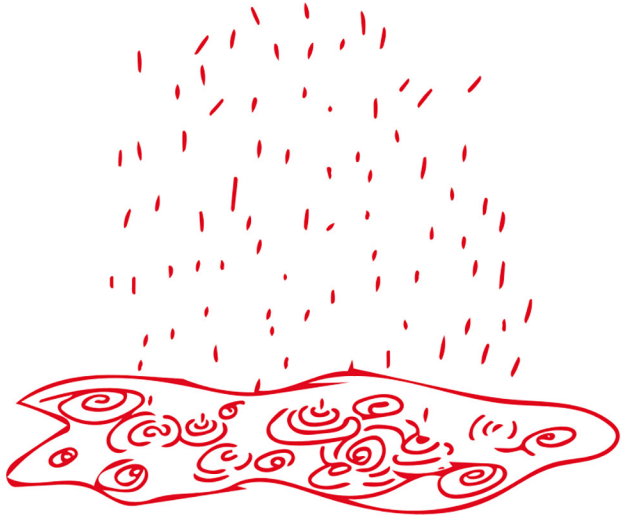
Abigail dove through the fire and landed hard on cold concrete. She pushed off the ground with both hands and put distance between her and the house. Her body cried out in pain, burned and naked to the air. Steam spilled off her. She coughed and hacked and doubled over and then collapsed onto the yard. Winter-yellowed grass filled the gaps between her toes, cool and rough and brittle.

She looked back to the house, through the flames, and saw nothing but the inferno. No Death, no family, followed her into the light. Wood groaned and crackled, and the house's roof slumped and collapsed.

The air was freezing, but the sun shone high over the burning house. Between coughs Abigail breathed deep, swallowing the smoky air like it would end her hunger.

She could hear the world anew, like thick plugs of wax had melted from her ears. From far off, she heard sirens. Voices nearby. Eyes peered over fences, and then full faces emerged. They called out to her, but she didn't know what to say. Abigail had not left the house for a very long time.

– BEST OF HOTHOUSE –



from issue 6

Pitter-Patter

Schandra Abigail Madha

Bricks are not as strong as metaphor lays them. Water carved the Grand Canyon. An office building means little to the rain. But the elements are good for the construction business. Last month, the boss received a contract to reface an old brick and mortar at the university. Today, we'll finish the west wall. Tomorrow morning, we'll start on the grout of the east. Each rust-red side looks much like the last, but I'll miss the view from the west. An architecture professor works in the second story. Her own drafts lay the foundation for ungraded towers of undergraduate essays. Two weeks I passed her pane unnoticed:

Casting light upon the lake
but cannot melt the ice
January sun

Each quitting time there's music in the scaffolding—the clatter-pat-bang of metal upon metal. Heel-toeing steel-toed boots descend five flights of ladder rungs no wider than her wrists, wrists attached to slender fingers going pitter-patter on black plastic keys. The like-clockwork cacophony draws her gaze from the warmth of her screen no more than the melody of afternoon showers on her window:

The crescendo of rainstorms
drown out discordant tears
like falling curtains

Somewhere below, a strand of black hair slips onto her cheek. Up here, the west wall has been refaced. Quitting time. We descend and the drumline starts. Fourth floor. A balding economics professor. Third floor. A well-fed biologist. Second floor. For the last time: her. She draws a pen up to her lips to bite her way through the ache of concentration. I miss the next step and slide down the last ladder like a raindrop too eager to lose itself in the puddle.

– BEST OF HOTHOUSE –

from issue 8

The Too Much Everything

Katie Brown

It's easier, much easier, than doing everything. Sitting on my porch, sitting in my backyard, sitting on my couch, just makes the whole world look like so much. There are, simply, too many goddamn lives to live. They used to be exciting, really fucking exciting. Then I started imagining them. Things went south. That's when I started sitting here, or there, or anywhere, and staring into the too much everything. I got sick the first time. Threw up on my aunt's gardenias and everybody thought I was pregnant or hungover but, no, just the usual starting into the world without a fucking clue as to what to do with all this potential people insist I have. Or could have. If I just listened. If I just applied myself. If I just took one second and considered what I want to be. What I want to be? I already am being.

And though I've now been given one definition, I've still yet to determine what makes for a useless life. In other people's eyes, I mean, because I've learned mine can't be trusted. My eyes turn everything living into something far more beautiful than it actually is. And it's really taken some investigating, some honest-to-god passion, to understand how that all works. In my pursuit of figuring it out, of trying to see what everyone else thinks of as useful, I have begun to question that it means anything all. Which, as with all things, adds to the all-consuming everything. If everything means nothing and we're all just…

No.

Happiness, food, shelter. Love. Family. Those are real. Definite. I've felt them, they're solid. But inside those opaque, complete elements of supposed joy, it has occurred to me, I have considered, that I might not actually be happy. That what everyone else is saying is

true, that when I figure out what I want to do with my life, and when I achieve it, that that's when I will be truly at peace.

Which is why I buy a plane ticket. A plane ticket away from this yellow place. It's the most yellow place ever, not that I've seen too many colors. But there are sunflowers around and everything has butter on it and the school bus, yes, the big yellow school bus, stops at every corner. And, I think, perhaps, it's all this yellow that's stopping me from seeing happiness or the happiness I could already have, perhaps it's being hidden behind rubber duckies and sundresses.

Edinburgh, though, god, Edinburgh. There's no yellow at all. There's snow, something I thought had been missing from my life, which turns out to be just another aspect of the world. And then it turns out to be a not-so-great one at that. But Edinburgh is not white. The snow isn't pretty enough to make it white, not enough, anyway, to beat back the green. Jesus, it's everywhere, in everything, on everyone. I start to think maybe I should have gone to Barcelona or Monaco because, there, at least, I wouldn't be so cold and the language I don't speak would add color to this entirely, shockingly, stupid green place. So consumingly green is it, that, at night, when it finally, finally, falls, my dreams are emerald. The clover and the holiday and even the water is too. Water is supposed to be blue. The people, they even sound green, so green I can hardly understand them. I have to leave. I have to run. I have to fly away from this place because, holy hell, jade is starting to invade my sight and my heart is covered in moss. But there is a boy's number in my hand when I leave, I fly away with a vine sprouting from my soul and inching up my throat.

"Call me, lass," he said and oh, that voice. "Call me and I'll find you."

And his hand felt like the forest in mine and maybe green is, well, a lot, but that might be okay. Could be anyway.

I get back and the huge, frightening, everything has ripped me apart. And now it's green. Leaves are spinning out of me even as I stand on yellow earth and look up at shiny grey buildings and breathe in blue air. I breathe out the sage and it occurs to me that I can't be

here anymore. That I never should have been. Yellow is not my color and green isn't either and I want a rainbow. So I end up in New York because, well, doesn't everyone end up in New York? It's black. Kind of grotesque really, how much midnight it is. But the boy, the boy with the phone number is here and that, to tell the truth, is why I came. He's not green as I'd thought he'd be. I am green now. A little bit. He's purple. Purple Patrick. Are you allowed to be called Patrick and be from Scotland? Should be illegal. But he is purple and he is Patrick and he always wanted to come to New York and now he's here and we both agree, it's the same as any other place, isn't it? But we, when the hell did it become "we," don't leave. Not the moment we come to such a devastating realization. He has to finish school, which is why he's here in the first place, and I have to justify the plane ticket to this dark, rattling metropolis, that sometimes proves why it prevails so strongly in song and story.

"Well, we're here, aren't we?" Patrick says. "We're here and I found you. Let's stay for a while and see if we find something else."

So we get a couch and we get a dog and it all starts to look rather small. Which makes the everything, that whole enormity that makes me sick, seem smaller. Infinitesimal. Because now I have Patrick and now I have Napoleon, who is gold, and I'm starting to get happiness. I'm starting to get how people say the word with such meaning in their hearts and with such hearts in their eyes.

Then he finishes, he graduates and I wish everyone in the world could see that smile. Really, it's not fair that's it's saved just for me, just for me in our tiny apartment that is so small we feel huge and everlasting inside its creaking walls. But next door there is a couple just like us and across the way a couple a few years on. That used to make me sad, used to make me feel lonely, but who gives a damn about originality when you're so bursting with sunshine that your guy, your boyfriend, your whatever-he-is, can hardly bear to be around you without shielding his eyes. Or that's what he says, what he proclaims, every morning when he wraps his scarf around my neck and goes to his boring job with his boring boss who has his own boring

life with his own boring wife. But really they're amazing and colorful themselves and it's almost enough, nearly enough, to make us stop. Not quite there though, not quite yet.

So we go to Moscow and everything, everything, everything, is white. Here the snow is what Edinburough wanted to be. Here is where, I can say with confidence, the world ends. Patrick and I, and not poor Napoleon whom we had to leave in the land of yellow, really laugh, genuinely laugh, at how disastrous it is, at how anyone with a beating heart can live in such a place.

"I will never see another color again," Patrick says. "I can't even breathe."

Tokyo is orange. Bright, bright orange that's pretty at first but nauseating next. And we don't speak the language and it's really kind of embarrassing but no matter what we're adding shades.

"Do they never sleep?" Patrick says. "I can't even ask."

Sometimes he misses the green and sometime I miss the yellow but we're still searching, so far, so deep, that we're falling through pastels in our search for technicolor. We're still laughing, still a "we."

We collect blue in New Zealand.

"So much bloody water," Patrick says. "So many bloody insects."

Red is Madrid.

"The food is too good," Patrick says. "You'll have to drag me away with a forklift."

Brown is the Ivory Coast. Ironic.

"Not as beautiful as I wanted," Patrick says.

And still, still, where is it? Where is that "yes, I am happy, yes I have everything, yes, this is life" feeling?

I throw up on gardenias and this time I really am pregnant and holy fuck, jesus fuck. But when she comes, she, my god there has never been anything more pink, more suffocatingly pink, in the world and how did I live before it, how did I exist in a world without this color?

"Look at her," Patrick says, looking away, for only a brief moment, from our pink little girl. "Look at her."

The so much, the everything, it's begun to spin out of control and everywhere and the colors dance and I am not cool and I am not anything, a nobody, but my frighteningly pink girl, she is someone, she is the world entire. And no one will remember me, no one but her. But that's kind of incredible, and I know, not think, not guess, not suppose, I know there is nothing more innately important, nothing more significant, than this tiny, pink, little thing remembering me. And I look and I search and right here in front of me is a painting I didn't know I was creating. Right here, right here in that mix of big and small, is a girl on a porch thinking and guessing and really not knowing. Except that she was right. She was so right it's actually astonishing. Just being. Never striving for anything at all. Not knowing a thing but the color around her and how to be small, minute, in the face of never-ending reality. And all that is so much but not terrifying not at all. It just is. Wish I had known that before. So glad I know it now, paint dripping from my fingers and onto yellow grass.

"Oh. This is easy," Patrick says, my hand in one of his, my daughter in the other. "This is the easiest thing there is."

The Sheep Roundup

Freyja Catron

It was a Jacob sheep that drew her away. The sheep had four horns and satanic eyes. She pointed it out to the others, but they were engrossed in a conversation about an old school friend who was having a baby. What a terrible mother she'll be, they laughed. Kristjana thought that a person more competent should go after the sheep. They were difficult to get at when they were alone, and this one was up a hill so steep it was almost a cliff. But she caught the eye of the sheep, saw right into its demonic rectangular pupils, and turned her horse up the slope. They didn't notice her leave.

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They had risen before dawn and piled into the four-wheel drives. Her sister, who was practically a teenager now, perched on her knee, grinning. Soon they would reach the foothills of the highlands. It was drizzling and a mist hung over the world. There was only the wet road, shining with the reflection of the headlights. She didn't really notice when the sun rose, but after a while mountains and fields began to appear out of the gloom.

The road grew more narrow and the car much slower, until it stopped at a dry river bed. Here there was the hut where the old man gave them coffee and biscuits. They'll be here in less than an hour, he said. He was a quiet man, there every year, as much a part of the landscape as the heather and the rain. The clouds blew across the hills like damp dragons. There was stillness, broken only by the occasional fuzz of the two-way radio. They readied the horses.

Soon they came from over the hilltops. It began with a slow white dribble, until it was a living, bleating river. Yells ricocheted across the valleys and the river of sheep grew larger and louder.

The mountain air tasted of winter. It stung a little to breathe. But her horse was warm and smelled of earth and hay. Ahead of her on the mountain path, her companions were laughing. It had been almost a year since Kristjana had seen her old friends. Her sister was laughing too; she seemed more comfortable with Kristjana's friends than Kristjana ever had been. The trail was still wide and easygoing; the sheep were well up ahead. Kristjana asked her friends about their lives. Where are you working now? Do you think you'll study? How is your mum?

Into the still and quiet land came the sound of an engine as a four-wheel drive struggled up a muddy bank. The hills echoed with yells and laughter. But not far from the path it remained a world devoid of human life. It was the kind of the landscape that hadn't changed in a thousand years. It was prehistoric, a space where the ghosts of mammoths roamed. But sometimes to the side of the track there would be a small piece of a life lived, once, a long time ago. A grave marker, a cairn, a ruined turf house. The turf houses were barely recognisable as shelters, crumbling back into the ground from which they had come. Sometimes the path would grow steep and difficult and the sheep would spill up the slopes, perching comfortably on impossible angles. The sky sent down tendrils of cloud toward the riders.

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A week earlier she had taken the 5 a.m. bus from Reykjavik to Varmahlid. The volcanic plains, swathed in deep velvet moss were another planet at that time of day. The waves of frozen lava stood against the rising sun, trolls turned to stone. She understood those old folk stories when she looked out at the passing fields. It was a

fuzzy dawn and the sunrise blotched the grey sky with autumn colours. It was good to be heading home.

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There was a sheep, fallen into a shallow stream. Back in Reykjavik, Kristjana's city friends thought of her as a capable person. She had survival skills. If they were to get lost in the wilds, they would joke, if there was a zombie apocalypse, they'd want her on side. But now she felt panicked under the pressure. With their country nonchalance, her old friends grabbed the injured sheep by the horns and threw it over the front of the saddle.

Her old school friends made snide jokes about other old school friends and Kristjana joked along with them, hating herself for it. She could feel them watching; she knew later they would joke about her, too. Kristjana clenched her jaw and looked to the sky as though for condolence. Today the sky hung low, almost accessible.

Kristjana looked to the sky but instead saw the Jacob sheep. It stood high on the tufted slope. The ground was untrustworthy. The hills were made of soft otherworldly moss and heather. But her horse knew the land and seemed to glide over it, never stumbling. The sheep ambled further until it was only a spot on the murky hillside.

As she climbed higher, the mist thickened. Kristjana let her legs hang down so that her feet could swim through the heather. It was so soft. A bullying wind began to blow across the slope, hitting out at anything it could touch, making her eyes water and her lips crack. It roared in her ears and carried with it the sounds of the roundup. Ahead there was a valley between the hills, through which a small stream ran. She entered the valley, the wind stopped. The sounds grew muffled, as though through snow. Soon they ceased and were gone altogether. Cozy and alone, she nestled further into her wool scarf and imagined she was the last person on Earth.

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When she was in Reykjavik she would walk to the ocean, the smoky bay. The sea there was the brooding blue grey of water incredibly deep and cold. The mountains that bordered the bay were snow capped all year long. It was most beautiful in winter. Then, the white expanses would tumble right out of the land and into the North Atlantic sea. Kristjana would use her hands like blinkers, blocking out the footpath and the colorful corrugated-iron buildings that lined the seaside. When she did this she could imagine how it was a thousand years ago, when the first people arrived.

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Most of the time the sheep was swallowed by heather, but occasionally it could be seen, a flash of mottled black and white against the grey and green. It seemed, up in this high and distant world, that they were the only colors that existed, grey and green. On her grey horse, she was a part of that world, like a moth on a tree trunk. The mist became a cloud, great and swirling. It enveloped the hills and reached toward the mountain tops. Her radio had stopped fuzzing. Nothing beyond the cloud existed. In the cloud she could see only the quiet flicking of her horse's ears. She could hear only its footfalls, a sullen, solid squish onto the muddy earth. The rest of the world had fallen away.

Then the sun shone through the haze, streaking it golden, like dust in summer. The mist melted and she could see the whole world. The mountains rolled into hills which became fields, dotted with hay bales casting long evening shadows. She could see as far as the ocean, where waterfalls fell from cliffs onto black sand. There on the few warm days of the year she had licked caramel ice cream with her sister. There on cold evenings she had soaked in the Grettislaug hot springs with her friends. She turned back to the mountains.

Somewhere along the way the ground flattened. The green yellowed and the heather grew more sparse, the earth turned a soft sandy grey. The highlands. Here the land stretched on forever, an alien desert. The grey of the earth met the brilliant blue of the autumn sky and in the distance was the glacier, Hofsjokull. The sheep was gone but Kristjana rode on.

Let Him Eat Cake

Titan Page

"And here the pale pawn hops hurriedly across the battlefield before being promptly pummeled by a black knight. Tragically, your kingdom crumbles one peasant per play as I expand my borders beyond the shadows."

Princess Praline rolled her eyes at her mother's make-believe. "Checkmate," she cheered, casting the queen's obsidian king across the courtyard. She placed her marble pawn upon a stygian square and started skipping away.

"What?" the queen scoffed sarcastically, feigning frustration. "I request a rematch!"

"Maybe in the morning, mummy," Praline pandered as she pirouetted into their palace. The scarlet sun threw stark shadows across the floor, slowly surrounding the preteen princess in darkness as she pranced past her pet's playroom. Pork-Chop's patient purring rumbled through the castle before the enormous lion lumbered toward her, touting his twenty-nine teeth and letting loose a thunderous roar. He stopped short at her humble curtsey and sniffed the gold garnishing her curly chestnut coiffure before licking her face.

"I'll give you your birthday present tomorrow, Pork-Chop," the princess promised. The lion growled with greed and rolled on his back, mashing his mane into his favorite rustic rug. Wind whistled through jagged windows as the sunlight slipped below the horizon. "But right now we should sleep," she whispered, wrapping her frigid, fragile fingers in his paw. The purring Pork-Chop pulled the princess onto his back and bounded off to bed.

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Daylight danced into Praline's room, painting its pink light across the princess's plump cheeks. She crawled out from under her lion's loving embrace and beamed back at the sunlight, still smiling as she donned her favorite dancing dress. Pork-Chop slept soundly as the morning frost flew through an open oriel and filled his fur. A snowflake silently melted on his nose and he snorted, garnering a gleeful giggle from his princess as she twirled through the doorway and into the hall.

She skipped into the castle's kitchen to find the haggard head cook and his sleepy sous chef with dark rings under each eye and golden rings around each finger. They emptied eggs, flour, and sugar from a packed pantry and began blending and baking. Praline perched herself on a tall table and watched them while they worked. After a few silent seconds she inquired, "Is that batter becoming the cake for Pork-Chop's party?"

The chef shared a sideways glance with his assistant. "Pork-Chop does not eat cake, your highness…"

"Maybe he would if you fed it to a pig first," the queen quipped. Her majesty's magnificent mass meandered into the room from the mess hall, and her pompous pout scrunched into her snout as she sniffed the air. A cloud of pale makeup powder floated from her face. "Is that breakfast I smell?"

"No, they're creating a cake for Pork-Chop's party," Praline insisted, to the chagrin of the chefs. Before her mother could ramble out a response, the sous chef screamed and scurried out of the kitchen with the cook. A rat had rifled through the pantry and gorged itself on gouda, frightening them both into fleeing. As it scampered across the grimy ground, the queen caught the cursed creature under her foot. "Don't hurt him!" the princess pleaded.

"Praline my dear, parasites provide their patrons nothing. They take tall towers of our food and return them rotten and rancid. This

rat and its relatives root into our reserves and steal from our savings, starving us if they can. These thieves thrive as we die, and we think nothing of it until they bleed us dry. We must stop such stragglers from stowing away, and kill them before we crumble." The queen crushed the rat into ruddy remains with her closing comments and Praline's eyes welled with tears.

"You must learn these things if you are to be crowned queen," she crooned, cradling her disturbed daughter while scraping her shoe clean. "Difficult decisions dominate life as a leader. Luckily for you, I will live a long, healthy life before you will have to hurt anyone." The queen smiled, but the tearful princess tore herself away and ran to her room while her mother mulled over a sudden craving for cake.

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Praline pushed her face into Pork-Chop's frosty fur and her tears crystallized, clinging to the lion's legs. The dreaming giant lazily lifted his eyelids and nuzzled his nose into his friend, muffling her mourning with his mane while she shivered from a biting breeze blowing through the room. They remained motionless for minutes, listening to the crowd collecting outside the castle, and the anxious murmuring that was muted by the snow.

She rubbed her red eyes dry and kissed her companion's cheek. "I promised you a present, didn't I?" She pulled a paper crown from beneath her bed and brandished it before the beast. He knelt, knowing the princess's purpose, and she placed the present upon his head. A regal resplendence rippled through Pork-Chop as he pushed his chin and chest outward, assuming the role of ruler. He curled his claws into the cracked castle floor. "How handsome," the girl giggled, and he hummed happily in response before a ring resonated around the room, signaling the start of the celebrations. The pair shared a hug and parted to their party positions, the princess to the entrance and Pork-Chop to the courtyard.

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Praline paced prudently as guards with gold gauntlets guided guests into the palace. She found fewer familiar faces each year, all less fair than hers. The peasants fidgeted and fretted among themselves, but as each came to the queen they gave a cordial curtsey or bow. Children chattered restlessly, revelling while their parents panicked.

The princess gawked at the gaunt strangers, staring at the spartan sacks and sheets blanketing their bony bodies. Their sable suntanned skin sunk around forlorn faces, and their hands held years of hardship. The elderly had brittle bones bolstering feeble frames, and even the young appeared aged and aching. A few fortunate families brought gifts of gold, but most entered empty handed, with nothing save for the salt sticking to their tear-streaked cheeks.

The queen commanded the guards to corral the community into the courtyard before bringing them to brunch in the ballroom. Families filed out, and the princess pleaded with her mother to let her play with them, but the queen carried her to the kitchen. "Let Pork-Chop greet the guests," she insisted.

Praline preoccupied herself by cutting the cake with the chef. She took a taste of the saccharine scarlet icing and set aside a sizable slice to bring to the birthday boy. The queen coveted a cut for herself and carried it with her to the table where people had already picked their seats. The princess pranced behind her, passing dozens of deserted chairs. Only the opulent guests occupied the room, and they rested with relief around the refreshments, fussing about their farms and complaining about the cold. As the queen and princess positioned themselves at the head of the table, the townsfolk turned quiet. "To another affluent year!" the queen bellowed and drained her drink. The ravenous crowd cut into croissants and tore into tarts, devouring the feast like vultures vying for scraps.

Each year Praline watched famished farmers fill plates with piles of pastries. She watched them shove and shout and shake with shame, sharing shifty glances as they grumbled and gargled and gulped, their

guts growing and overflowing and bursting at the seams. Their dead eyes grew wide with greed and sprung to life for those short-lived seconds of succulence before succumbing to gluttony and returning to their graves.

Disgusted, the princess slipped away and snuck into the courtyard, clutching Pork-Chop's cake. Her shoes slushed in the snow, slicing through to reveal rust-colored stains on the stone. A musty metallic flavor filled her mouth and her face furrowed in disgust. Glancing across the yard, she saw Pork-Chop guarding a garden of gold, glowing under a silvery sheet of snowfall.

She placed the plate on a pure patch of ice and approached her pet. A growl escaped his gritted teeth as she took a step. "Pork-Chop…" she whispered through weak white lips. The titan tilted his head and his hind legs lowered, preparing to pounce. He leapt, landing on the princess and pinned her to the sodden stone, his hot, rancid breath blanketing her as he took in her scent. He slowly sniffed her head and withdrew, whimpering.

Praline tentatively touched her hand to his paper crown, and she flinched as his fur brushed her fingers. Pork-Chop purred, but his tail twitched uneasily. The fur on his face was brushed with burgundy, and the princess wondered if the chef had snuck him a slice of cake.

The queen careened into the courtyard crying, "My precious Praline!" as she slipped and slumped to the ground. Her gilt tiara tumbled into the stained slush behind her. "Come to me, my darling!" she demanded, flailing her fat arms in the air, her face flushed and speckled with snow.

The princess abided, warily waddling to her mother's aid. She helped the majestic mess to her feet and frowned. "Why is Pork-Chop mad, mummy?" she pressed, steeling her sweet voice with accusation.

The queen leered at the lion from across the lawn and then glanced at the ground. "Some people forgot to bring presents to the party…" She drifted off as the cake caught her eye and she toddled toward it. "Go back inside sweetheart," she suggested and dismissed

her daughter's distress. Praline sighed, still shaking from Pork-Chop's aggression, and plodded past her mother's tarnished tiara on her way into the castle.

Guards girded the barren ballroom as the stuffed crowd shuffled out under stained-glass skylights, their muted muttering the same as it was last year. Praline passed a babbling boy who looked about her age and wondered at his worn sandals and stained smock as she hurried into the hallway. Her crisp crimson gown gleamed in the sunlight seeping through the ceiling.

As the princess plodded to her chambers, Pork-Chop paraded past her. She saw something settled between his teeth and called his name. He hesitated and pawed at the purple light pouring through the windows. The queen's cracked crown creeped out the corner of the lion's mighty maw and Praline gasped. "Mother must be going mad trying to find this!" She swatted Pork-Chop's paw, prompting a subdued snarl. He nudged her knee with his nose, bowing to the little princess in apology.

"I'm sure she wouldn't blame you on your birthday though," she added, noticing crumbs caught in his coat. "Did you like your cake?" she questioned cautiously. "Mum thought you wouldn't." Pork-Chop let out a pleased purr, posing proudly in his pale paper crown, and the sun sunk slowly in the sky, fading from violet to vermilion through painted panes of glass.

ESCAPE FROM MOLE CITY, OR: A REVOLUTION, A GREAT RACE, AND A LOVE STORY

Ike McIntosh

Emma and I had been on three dates before the first movement of the Mole Uprising. We went on another date during the early days of the occupation—people-watching on Sixth Street became even more interesting with the addition of the giant bipedal rodent species hitting up the local establishments. This timing, however, pressed our relationship towards a certain seriousness at a rapid pace. In those days, I liked to take things a day at a time, so when the moles rose up, I was pushed out of my natural, relaxed state of being.

The Race was set to begin fourteen days after the Great Vole and his mole cohorts rose from beneath the earth's crust, along with their First Layer of The Ultimate Wall. The Wall surrounded the Greater Austin metroplex, drawing its borders around Pflugerville to the north, Buda to the south, and cutting through lakeside properties on Lake Travis to the west. No one was sure exactly what neighborhoods lay in the way of the eastern border of The Wall. It was constructed as a perfect circle, made of a strange type of clay, and was fifty feet tall and twenty feet thick. We didn't know how the Mole Society, as they called themselves, erected such a wall underneath our feet without our notice and proceeded to propel it through the Earth's crust, but the people of Austin were nonetheless very impressed.

The Mole Society were a friendly bunch. They generally stood around four feet tall, and walked on their hind legs, like humans. They spoke English well and had enough of a grasp on the Spanish language to get by, though many possessed slight lisps and emphasis

in strange places in their speaking patterns. The Great Vole, who had a strong lisp and stood taller than most other moles, explained through the hijacked television broadcasts (which quickly found its way to a Facebook livestream for those, like my roommates and I, who didn't have TVs) that they had not come to disrupt Austin's way of life, or hurt its denizens, but instead to integrate themselves into the same lifestyle. To do this, they'd constructed The Wall—to retain the local culture, and to prevent government intervention. Most Austin residents found the plan unobjectionable. Preventing change was a cultural staple in Travis County.

But, like any plan, the Great Vole's plan to capture Austin and its residents had its flaws. It was odd for the Great Vole to explain the shortcomings in his own plans on live television, but the large mole was anything but a conventional dictator. The first of these flaws: not all of Austin's denizens wanted to play a role in this new city-state. A few particularly socially active citizens organized marches up and down Guadalupe Street on the second and third days of the rise of The Ultimate Wall. Secondly, the moles, while technologically advanced (their laser guns had no human match) and certainly physically powerful, had a weak point in their own physiology: their complete lack of endurance or stamina. Many humans, especially in Austin, which prides itself as a city in which physical fitness is a priority, could easily outrun the moles. While no physical resistance was anticipated, the Great Vole could never be too sure. So, on the fourth day after The Emergence, the Great Vole announced his self-named Great Race, which would take place ten days later. He announced no further details for The Race other than the starting point (the Texas Capitol at dawn on the fourteenth day) and the length (four thousand Kilocepters, a unit that had little meaning to humans). Those who completed The Race in a timely manner (under three hundred Megalops, an additional unknown metric) would be able to leave New Austin (or Mole City, as some called it) with a guest of their choice. This plan would kill two birds with one mole-patented laser gun—first of all, those who might be capable of resisting the Great Vole

would be removed from the city, and people would feel like they had a choice in their participation in the grand social experiment that was Mole City. Immediately after The Race, the final vulnerabilities in the Ultimate Wall would be sealed as the large clay dome finished construction. Entry and exit from the city would be limited to helicopters and fancy camera drones through a small gap in the apex of the dome.

I knew I would run The Race as soon as it was announced. It was hardly a question. While most of my friends were content with life in Austin, my family lived in Dallas, and my dog Ranger's birthday party was approaching soon. I couldn't miss that. I also possessed a certain level of residual talent from my tenure on the junior varsity cross country squad in high school. Four thousand Kilocepters would certainly be a shorter distance than the 10k races we ran in those days, I figured.

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I took Emma out on our fifth date on the thirteenth day of the occupation and the eve of The Race. We ate pasta with marinara sauce and chicken on the roof of my house in an attempt to carbo load for my big day. We had grown comfortable around each other to the point that I didn't feel the need to fill the silence between us with words, which was convenient as I planned on eating a great quantity of pasta. I gazed upon The Wall in the distance. Once I got over the initial shock of its existence, I admired the gargantuan Wall as a truly remarkable engineering accomplishment. Its smooth brown surface shone, reflecting the sunset, miles away.

"Todd."

I was broken from my appraisal of The Wall. Emma was staring at me. She had probably been waiting for me to notice her for a few moments. I didn't pick up on social cues easily. I finished slurping down a penne noodle and turned my body on the ridge of the roof to face her.

"Have you…"

Emma trailed off. She did that when she wasn't sure about what she had to say. Usually when she ordered food or ice cream. I wish she had more self-confidence. I just keep looking at her. I think she likes it when I play a little mysterious, but it's hard to really know.

"Have you given any thought to who you'll take with you? I mean, if you finish this race thing tomorrow?"

"When, not if."

She grinned. I hadn't noticed her snaggletooth until that moment, as we sat on the roof. It suited her, I thought.

"I really haven't. I'm not sure any of my roommates are wanting to leave, which is a bummer."

Below, a scream followed by a harsh laugh echoed. I knew instinctively that it was Brian, probably jumping from a corner to spook Kyle or Liam. I was one of twelve roommates in our strange labyrinth of a house.

"Why do you ask?"

Emma hesitated. Her gaze shifted towards The Wall.

"I know we've only been…dating? Going out?"

"Going out on dates."

"Going out on dates for a few weeks now…"

"And?"

"Well, I don't want to rush things. But I was thinking about how it'd be nice to at least…y'know, have the option…"

"You want to come with me?"

Emma looked back from The Wall towards me. Her eyes were large and green. A lump formed in my throat. "I think that'd be sick."

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I only realized the consequences of that commitment the next morning, minutes before the Great Vole shot off his laser gun to mark the beginning of The Race. Were Emma and I moving too fast in our relationship, too soon? One day, I ask a girl out to get ice cream, and

a month later, I'm using my Escape Voucher on her? Was I that kind of guy, now? I put the thought out of my head. First, I had to focus on completing The Race. Plus, people did this sort of thing all the time. It was just gentlemanly, like taking her to a concert and buying both tickets.

The Race began without spectacle, like any other race, besides the fact that it was being administered by a small army of moles. We all assumed that it would be the finish that would contain the appropriate celebration for the winners. I estimated that about twenty thousand people showed up to run the race, which seemed to catch the Great Vole by surprise. I don't think he realized the enormity of his captured city's population, and the startling number of people that liked to come to these sort of civil events. We all stood in running attire, except for the few strange souls in chicken outfits.

The Great Vole stood on a wooden platform dug into the side of the Capitol building as the sun rose. He spoke into a baton that had a blue plasma swirling around its core, and the sound of his voice reached through the entire crowd.

"Humans! Thank you for joining me on this beautiful morning!"

He left a gap in his speech, waiting for some reaction. Maybe he wanted us to all proclaim "you're welcome" in unison. Silence prevailed.

"Anyway! Good luck in the race! Remember! You need to finish within three hundred Megalops! If you want to obtain the Escape Vouchers!"

Another gap. Perhaps the Great Vole envisioned himself as some type of stand up comedian, leaving holes for the audience to fill with laughter. Again, no reaction from the crowd. Someone near my starting position yawned loudly. The Great Vole shuffled on his makeshift podium. From my vantage point, he seemed embarrassed, but I wasn't an expert in mole body language so it was hard to be certain.

"Anyway! The Great Race starts now! On your marks—"

The runners at the front of the pack took off towards the north gate of the Capitol building as soon as the Great Vole said "now."

He didn't have time to get his countdown off. In humiliation, he hurriedly drew his laser pistol from his hip and fired it into the air.

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And so we were off. The pack of runners made its way north. I struggled in the first mile to make my way up to the front, where runners would hopefully spread out further than the densely packed human mass that I found myself in at the outset of The Race. At first, we ran only on the street, and since no course maps were published, and the length and qualifying times for The Race were in units unknown to humanity, the crowd assumed The Race would take place only on the street. That assumption was proven wrong. The blue plasma rods that served as course markers diverted at MLK Jr. Boulevard into a enormous cavern that opened at a slight angle into the ground.

A small crowd of spectators had gathered around the hole, which appeared more recently dug than the rest of the holes from which the moles had entered the city fourteen days prior. Among the spectators was my roommate Brian, sitting atop his yellow moped. His face lit up when he saw me through the flurry of runners. I was excited to see him, as well. I couldn't control the motions of my face particularly well, however, because I was deeply focused on the hole I was entering. Brian started his moped engine and drove through the well respected but poorly guarded barrier made up of plasma rods. He rode alongside the pack of runners. I worked my way through the crowd to meet him.

"Todd! How the hell are you!"

He clenched a small map, carefully folded over itself and paper clipped onto a wire across the handlebar console. The map was a street map of Austin, with brown lines drawn over the street map. I guessed this was his handmade map of the new tunnel system.

"Brian! I'm good! Feeling good!" It was challenging for me to formulate words while running, generally.

Brian and I inched closer together as we hurried forward into the tunnel. He extended his right hand in a fist to reach mine, and our fists bumped. He had taken his hand off the throttle to perform the gesture, and the moped stalled out for a moment. He quickly corrected his speed to match mine.

"You're doing great, man! How far along are you?"

At this point, Brian and I were fully submerged in the tunnel. Blue lights hung from the ceiling, and the moped's yellow light stood out in a big way.

"I think a mile? Maybe a bit shorter."

"How many Kilocepters is that?"

I thought about it. I hadn't seen any markings on the course indicating how many kilocepters we'd travelled.

"I'm not sure."

"Hmm." He glanced down at his map. It was glaringly unfinished.

I was glad Brian had come to support me in the race. I'd miss him, for sure. We were direct roommates, as in we shared an actual room, whereas the rest of my roommates could really more accurately be considered housemates. Brian and I shared a set of bunk beds, which fostered a bond that would not easily be broken.

"Did you figure out who you're taking with you?"

"If I make it," I said, panting. I was becoming less certain in my abilities. I hadn't been training as hard as I would have liked, but The Race was held on a shorter notice than most athletic events I partook in.

"When you make it."

Brian winked at me.

"I guess Emma asked me if she could come."

"Woah."

"Yeah, I know, right."

"And? Are you going to take her?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"That's a pretty big step, my man."

He was right. I didn't say anything for a while.

"Well, I gotta go. Me and the guys are gonna explore some more of the tunnels! Stop by the house before you go!"

I nodded. The cavern presented a fork. The runners in front of me took the larger cavern, to the left. Brian veered right. I waved at him as he took off.

"See you soon!" he called out as he drew further away.

I wasn't so sure.

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I ran in silence for a long time. The tunnels all seemed to blend together, but the lights guided the runners in what we assumed was the correct direction of the race. We had run for what felt like at least eight miles, and hopefully many more kilocepters. There was a point in the tunnels in which some moles were conducting a construction project of some sort. They used their large bulldozers to mold the dirt in the corner of the cavern into large spheres—to what end was lost on me. I pulled over towards the moles at a slower, jogging pace.

"How many megalops has it been?"

They just stared at me. They didn't understand the question.

"How many megalops? Since The Race started?"

Recognition.

"Oh! Yes! The Race!"

The mole with the answers looked at a watch on his wrist. It glowed blue and was imprinted with strange runic symbols.

"It's been! Two hundred Megalops! Since The Race!—"

"OK. Is that good?"

"I think! That's a! Great pace!"

I made a mental note. The mole's comments meant I just had to keep steady for less than four more miles, if we had in fact run eight miles to this point and if I remembered math correctly in my weary state.

I picked up the pace and rejoined the pack.

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After what I estimated to be two miles later, the moles made a mistake. Their infrastructure was new, of course, but that didn't excuse the oversights that allowed the enormous mound of trash to block the race course. What was worse was the light peeking through—the light from the end of the tunnel was clearly visible. The stench from the garbage was nauseating, like a combination of rotten eggs and a vat of old, processed syrup. The competitors who had arrived before me stood in front of the garbage pile, inspecting the small mountain while holding their noses so as to prevent the smell from leaking in. I turned towards the single mole who was tasked with cleaning up the garbage. He looked lost.

"How long has it been?"

He turned towards me, plasma shovel in hand.

"TWO HUNDRED! AND FIFTY!"

That meant there were only fifty kilocepters left. The trash wasn't going anywhere. It was time to make a decision.

I dove headfirst into the garbage. I attempted to make a swimming motion, like they instructed us to do in Boy Scouts if we ever got caught in an avalanche. I had never used the technique before, as I had never been in an avalanche. We only camped in Texas, where avalanches were rare.

My confidence about making it through the trash using the swimming method followed a sinusoidal curve. Before embarking on the journey, it seemed like a great idea. High chance of success. Then, in the opening moments, when I first engulfed myself in tin cans, thrown-out food (I picked out the smell of moldy gouda) and plastic, I realized how foolish the entire notion was. You can't reasonably expect to swim through trash, I realized. Thus, the dip in my perceived chances. But somehow, the freestyle motion carried me through. I sustained a few gashes from an encounter with a sharpened, broken can of Dr. Pepper on my left arm, and found my neck strung

through a Walmart bag worn like a poncho. But I began to see the light peeking through the trash once again. I had made it.

I was the first person to make it through the trash. I felt a surge of pride as I caught my breath, and looked back to the trash to see the kingdom I had conquered.

Then, I started running once again.

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I heard the finish line before I saw it. The cheers of the crowd echoed off the sides of the buildings downtown. I emerged at 15th and Trinity, not far from where we initially entered the earth. The course markers were taking me once again towards the Capitol building. I could see it at a few rare points through the tall buildings. I guessed that it was only two hundred kilocepters away, though my estimates could have been off the mark. I had only a vague notion of the details of the measuring unit.

Emma stood on the side of the course, atop her bike as I neared the finish line. She seemed excited to see me. She had a large backpack slung over her shoulder. She must have been confident that I was going to finish.

"You're in first place!"

I was panting heavily at this point. I didn't know how much time I had left. I could barely speak. I couldn't seem to remove the poncho, and blood was dripping from my wound onto my running shoes.

"Had to…swim."

I think only then did she realize the desperate state of my physical condition. Her eyes widened as she began to ride alongside me for the final stretch.

"Dang…you're really beat up."

I nodded, and kept running. Emma's emotional support didn't make the final lengths of the race much easier.

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We soon came to the finish. People and moles alike cheered. Emma broke off the course with the bike before I crossed the finish line, to prevent confusion.

As I crossed, a large timer with red numbers flashed to show my finishing time. According to the timer technicians, I finished in 297 Megalops.

No one else would complete the race in the requisite time frame to leave Mole City.

The Great Vole approached me after I finished the race. I was sitting on the ground. A small mole with a first aid kit was tending to my wound. Emma sat on my other side. The Great Vole was smaller in person than I expected, but still larger than the other moles I had seen. Television appearances made him appear taller, I suppose.

"Todd Barnes! Congratulations! On The Race!" The Great Vole patted his large paw on my shoulder. I swallowed my water. I wondered how he knew my last name. He probably read the race registrar, I thought.

"Thanks, Mr. Great Vole sir."

"I want! To apologize! For the trash! Situation—"

"It's OK," I said. A smaller mole brought me another paper cup filled with water.

"This race! May have! Been a wrongheaded! Undertaking!"

"Yeah, maybe so. It's all right. I can still go, right?" I threw the second cup on the ground.

"Yes! A promise! Is! A promise! Who will you! be taking! with your extra Escape Voucher! Todd?"

I looked to my right. Emma offered a meek smile. She hadn't been in such close proximity with the moles before this moment.

"Her. I guess."

She glared at me, frustrated by my lack of confidence, I assumed. Truthfully, it was challenging to know what she was thinking.

"Very excellent! We will leave! At once!"

I wanted to stop by my house, but I couldn't very well argue the point. This was Emma's and my only chance.

✳✳✳

We departed soon after the mole medic finished bandaging my arm. The moles gave us rides on their motorcycles ("moletorcycles," they joked). Emma and I each rode on the back of a separate bike, with a mole driver for each of us. They instructed us to wrap our arms around the moles' waists, and it felt like grabbing a massive pillow. The drivers might have had fleas, I thought. The Great Vole rode a bike of his own and led the way through the city. The sun stood directly overhead. Moles on The Wall stretching far above us worked to finalize the dome structure to place atop the city, closing Austin off from the outside world.

"Emma."

She looked over at me from her spot on the back of the bike. She grinned. I caught a glimpse of her snaggletooth.

"Are we doing the right thing? By leaving?"

Emma furrowed her brow while she formulated a response. "Well…yeah. I think so, at least. I mean, I want to see my family again," Her parents lived in Houston. "And you, I know you'll miss your family. And I know Ranger's birthday is coming up…"

I nodded. "Yeah, you're right. I guess I'm just gonna miss the guys. I probably won't see them again."

She frowned. "I know it's hard, Todd. But I want you to meet my family too! And I want to meet yours! And Ranger!"

I gulped.

✳✳✳

When we arrived at the designated portion of The Wall, a construction crew of moles loitered, waiting to close the hole they had dug behind us. They wore the same yellow hardhats as the tunnel moles I

witnessed during The Race. The Wall was closed with a large, grated metal gate which sat in a lifted position. This hole was a well maintained secret from the outside world. We got off our motorcycle escorts and walked towards The Wall.

"Emma, you go ahead. I'm gonna talk to the Great Vole."

She skipped ahead, excited by the prospect of life outside The Wall and unaware of my plan, which I had formulated only moments before. I leaned towards the Great Vole and spoke in a whisper.

"I'm having second thoughts about leaving. Can you go ahead and close the gate?"

He looked towards me, surprised.

"Todd! Are you! Sure?"

I watched Emma walking away, through the tunnel. She turned back to look at us after hearing the Great Vole's voice.

"Todd?" she called.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Lower! The gate!"

And the moles did. Emma noticed, but it was too late. She rushed towards the gate. I looked at her.

"Todd! What's going on—"

"Emma, I've really liked going out with you, but—"

"Todd? Are you serious right now?"

"But I think I'm just in a place where I'm not really that serious right now—"

"Oh my god."

"Emma, I'm sorry."

"You're actually serious. Oh my god."

I offered up a wave.

She glared at me. This was the last time I saw Emma. I turned to the Great Vole.

"Can you give me a ride back to my house?"

I sat on the Great Vole's motorcycle as we sped back towards the center of the city. His fur was soft. I didn't think he had fleas—or at least, he probably had less of them than the other moles.

"Todd! That was! Very heroic! Of you!"

"I don't think you under—"

"Can we! Be! Friends?"

I sighed. I could see his beady eyes through the round mirrors attached to the handlebars.

"Sure."

"Ha! Ha! My first! Human friend!" The Great Vole laughed. "Thank you! Todd!" Through the mirror, his face contorted into what could only be the mole equivalent of a smile.

✳✳✳

After an uncomfortable ride, we arrived at my labyrinthian home. I hopped off the moletorcycle. The house looked different with the dome blocking out most of the sun. The Great Vole parked his bike and walked me up to the porch.

Brian sat on the couch, which rested on our porch. He noticed me through the hedges.

"Todd! My man!" Brian hopped off the couch to come meet me as I hobbled towards the front door. I wanted nothing more than to take a nap. "Are you—"

"The Great! Vole! But you! Can call me! HffVrr!" We couldn't decipher the strange noise The Great Vole claimed as his real name.

"We're…friends. I guess," I said.

"So…How'd it go?" Brian said.

"I won."

"I meant with Emma. Y'all leaving soon? I'm gonna miss you, dude."

I didn't say anything. Brian waited for me to fill him in. I figured my silence would tell the story on its own.

"Todd…"

I sighed.

"Seriously? *Again*?"

The Things I Was Too Afraid to Tell You

Anna Piper

It was a cliff like any other, which you may find yourself standing at the edge of. I remember standing there. I often dream of it, of the wind whipping through my hair, of the salty, sickly-sweet scent of the ocean air mixing with the hibiscus bushes behind us. I remember my feet, bare, my toes curling over the rocky edge. It was a cliff. Tall, impossibly tall, too tall for cliff divers. The ocean backed up right into it and waves licked at the bottom where jagged stones rose up out of the water like a mouth full of gnarled, angry teeth. I remember. Your hand was in my hand and you squeezed it. I didn't squeeze back.

Lover's Leap. That's what they called it. A cliff famous for a couple that leapt down into the rocks below, so they could escape the perils of life together because they were never meant to be, and in death they could be together forever and ever and ever and ever and….I always fantasized about doing the same thing, about how romantic it would be to both shuck yourselves of your mortal jackets, of your flesh prisons, and gracefully leap into oblivion. How romantic is it to give up everything, *everything* for the one you love?

I couldn't do it.

Sometimes I roll over at night and find myself silently sobbing, heaving great tears from some deep well that was dug into me some time ago. I'm twenty-one now, almost a full-blown adult, yet I still feel like the fifteen-year-old girl with her toes curled at the edge of a cliff, looking down, getting lost in vertigo fantasies and imaginary sorrows. What deep sorrow can a child possibly know? What struggle?

He was twenty-two and almost unanimously hated in our small oceanside community. He came to the playground behind the middle

school and stood, watching, his fingers laced into the chain-link fence. He would press his face into the links, he would call out to us, one by one. He knew all our names and I don't know why, but I never stopped to question how. It was a small town, I figured. I would go over to him, to his disembodied smile creeping in through the fence. He would tell me jokes and compliment my smile, my hair, my legs. I thought he was nice.

Now I am a college junior and it all seems so fresh, so impossibly recent. I dream of him often. His awful hands grasping at the chain-link fence, his knuckles white, his face hatched across with red lines from pressing his face into the fence for so long, like those you get from napping in one position. Ah, how hopelessly desperate I was, how naïve.

I am majoring in stabbing myself in the heart and bleeding out onto paper. Poetry. I was practically disowned when I told my family. I am the first to go to college out of my entire clan. They think I'm a waste and maybe I am. I told myself, when I applied to school, that I would be learning how to write everything down. All the hurt, fear, anger, mania, depression, disappointment, frustration, inadequacies, guilt….The list goes on for further than I can imagine. I told myself that I owe it to myself to learn how to purge these things and clean my system of it all. Poetry. My therapist always told me it would help. Most days it's just me sitting, staring at a screen, cursor blinking, blinking, blinking, like it is now as I painstakingly transcribe this.

Would it satisfy you all to know I have never gotten an A on anything I've written? My feelings aren't worthy of a perfect mark. My father is turning in his grave, as he has been for the past twelve years, I'm sure. My therapist says I should stop thinking about him, about how he would judge me now. But what am I supposed to do? I feel like he died mid-sentence, and he still has something to tell me. He's like an ominous cloud over the horizon, or that feeling that you can't shake that you forgot to do something really important. I digress. I am a mess, truly, as you can probably tell. I have been pretty much my whole life. Freud would probably call it daddy issues and I would be a

fool if I tried to argue.

I was looking for a father figure, an adolescent girl set loose on the world with no leash, no daddy to teach her what to do, what not to do. My mother tried, I don't blame her for anything. He was that for me, an older man that taught me about the world and all its wonders and horrors. He would wait outside the back of the school for when I was released, face pressed into the chain-link fence. Every day. We would leave together and he would take me to the beach, which was never far, on the back of his beat-up moped. He didn't have a license and in our small town, nobody cared enough to stop him from driving a vehicle so small and so slow. I would wrap my chubby arms around him and press the side of my face into his back. I would imagine he was my father and that we were flying somewhere together up in the clouds because to me, that's where all dead people were, in that one stereotypical vision of heaven. Blank, meaningless cloudscape.

Sometimes I dream of that, too. Just clouds, just the sound of a weak, old engine tutting along, just the vague silhouette of some man that I wrapped myself around until I melded into them and we were just this one entity shooting across the emptiness, looking for any indication that my father was there, that he was watching, that he cared.

My poetry professor, the one I've had the past three semesters, says my work is too neurotic. This isn't even poetry (is it?) and I can already hear him chastising me for not getting to the point, for meandering on all these side-thoughts and tangents. I don't care. I gave him a bad review on ratemyprofessor but I somehow keep getting stuck with him. Once a professor has an idea about your work, they think they know you too, where you come from, what you hold in a cup in your heart, keeping it steady so the contents don't spill over and ruin everything. It often happens anyway.

It happened to me two years ago. Freshman year of college. I felt very Sylvia Plath and thought that if I offed myself in some odd, profound way, people would actually read my poetry and think there was something to it. My roommate found me in our bathtub, trying to will myself to drop her hair dryer in. I can still hear her voice:

"Maaaaaartha, don't be so goddamn melodramatic. Plus I need that hair dryer. If you wanna kill yourself buy your own."

I loved that girl. I haven't talked to her since that semester because she got knocked up and dropped out.

I once wrote a poem about what his body looked like all chewed to chunks at the bottom of the cliff, pieces of him strewn about on the jagged rocks.

"Maaaaaaartha, don't be so morbid," they would say.

I once wrote a poem about being in love with a pedophile.

"Maaaaaaartha, don't be so typical," they would say.

I have resigned. Now my poetry is all mushy love stuff that I have no experience or knowledge of, kind of like how Emily Dickinson wrote about nature but never went outside. I keep my heart locked and shut now, afraid to let any predators in.

My mother wants me to get married. She says she knows plenty of boys from our town who would do it. "Who would do it." Like it's some kind of sacrifice. Taking one for the team. Hey, I don't blame my mother for trying. Damaged goods are hard to sell and are often returned even after being purchased at a discount price.

He was twenty-two and I was fifteen and he would bring me back to his hut on the beach made of bamboo and palm fronds and he would hug his knees to his chest and cry and I had no idea what to do but sit there but sit there but sit there and let his tears fall onto me. He would crack open coconuts and drink the milk and let me have a sip because he thought it was the sweetest taste in the world. He would ask me to stay because the night was cold, and I was warm. I would say yes because I didn't know how to say no.

One night I remember it rained and I laid underneath him, so he could stop the water from falling on me through the spaces in the palm fronds. Sometimes, when I have sleep paralysis, the weight on my chest feels like him and I will myself to sleep to forget the sensation. Because it is more awful than the thought of a demon sitting there. At least a demon has a purpose. At least a demon destroys you utterly and doesn't leave confusing feelings of guilt and love and hate and regret.

I would go to school sandy, vaguely damp, utterly silent.

And there again, after the last bell rang through the school, he would be at the back, face pressed into the links of the fence, haggardly and desperate. And there again, I would go with him without a word and he would take me to the beach on his moped, or we would walk there if he hadn't siphoned any gas. Sometimes I would check out library books and read to him, slowly, so he could savor each word like a bite of food he never got to eat. Sometimes I would just sit there, seized with the fear and dread and uneasiness I felt when I let myself actually see what was going on, where I was, who I was with. Sometimes we would just lay together in that hut, and I would imagine being anywhere else in the world.

Sometimes I wrote poetry about nothing but it's really about him. Sometimes I let myself fall apart just so I can write using the oozing black liquid that seeps out of the recesses of my heart. Sometimes I pretend I am talking to him because maybe he was the only person who ever understood me. Sometimes I swear I am awake, but I find myself standing at that cliff, holding his hand, looking down, ready to jump, wanting to. Sometimes I think that my life would be better off if I did.

He did. He jumped and I fell back on the ground hard, throwing my momentum backward so that he couldn't pull me down with him. I could see the horror on his face as he realized, in that split second, what I had done. Betrayed him. Now he was dying for nothing. Now he was dying alone. In that one horrible second my primal instinct kicked in, the subconscious realization of the abuse I had gone through controlled my actions. Protect yourself. I did.

After watching his body plummet into the sea, being torn apart by the razor rocks and the waves relentlessly pushing his ragdoll body against them, I crawled away and went home, really went home, body and mind, for the first time in weeks, months, had it already been a year? Three. Three years.

Going home was easy. The bed was warm and smelled like me. The old, familiar faces of my stuffed animals stared at me with a blank

comfort. The rain pattered against my window instead of onto me, through me. I was free of salt and sand. Of him. But there was still a weight, a blackness through my veins, thick and sludgy. I was clouded by his scent, the overwhelming feeling I was being watched. I toss myself into the waves again and again. I let my viscera be gnawed apart by the rocks, his hands pulling each molecule to the abyss, the never-ending blackness of the sea.

I'm sick with it. Even now. I wonder if my dad saw what happened. How I was curled up on the top of the cliff, how I couldn't bring myself to call the police, how I shivered, toes bleeding from the gravel spread throughout the grass. They asked me questions, put a blanket around my shoulders, although the shivering came from somewhere the warmth could not touch.

It can't end that way. None of this can end with that. The therapists tell me to write and I do, but the words go in circles and end up back there. End up in his hand, attached to my body. I can't shake it, I can't forget the feel of that hand, that voice, that separate, other world of the beach and being away. I was lost to the world and couldn't find a way back in.

When does it get better?

I can tell you now that there is light sometimes. Through the trees, the leaves, streaming green and new.

But you can't separate the salt from the soup. It's dissolved into the core and become a part of the composition. Bite me and you can taste it, a bitter miasma. If you try to suck out the poison you will suck me dry. I am poison now, poisoning my life, my relationships, my friendships, my work.

It won't end like this. Spurned and burned. Churned up in a vat with a crazy kind of brokenness. On top of a cliff with him. He will forever be there, in truth, in memory.

As for me, I am on my way down.

– BEST OF HOTHOUSE –

from issue 9

The First Computer Had Teeth

Colin Traver

The first computer had teeth. It struggled to turn on, but it had plastic teeth. The teeth bore fangs and were fixed to the monitor. A houseguest placed the teeth there during a loud October night. No one remembers their placement, nor which guest placed them. The teeth simply appeared to the boy two days after their placement. They stayed there for three years.

He sometimes squeezed the teeth when he sat at the computer. He tried to put his fingers down their throat and scraped the back of the throat with his nails until the monitor bore thin, beige abrasions. He slid his thumbs on its dull fangs and play-pretended like blood dripping down his palms and wrists. Once he made his little sister kiss them. He had her open her mouth the same way the teeth gaped open. She yelled and ran to her room and placed finger-sized dinosaurs and neon orange war machines around her bedroom door to protect her.

He kissed them too. He chewed them.

They'd get a second computer, and the teeth went out with the first.

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He played football and avoided playing the piano. He almost avoided playing football, but his older brother and father wouldn't have it. His brother threatened to crush him. His coach talked about what he used to do in a faraway jungle many years ago before the boy was born. How fire fell into the jungle and smelled different from fire anywhere else in the world. How a place like that was damned to

ruins and he may have been the only blessed one out. Some of the boy's teammates from grades above him said the coach had pictures in a box at his house of girls with bloomripe wounds for eyes. They said the girls were tied to rocks. They said the coach invited them to his house to drink beer, and he showed them these pictures and said that this is something you can't have anymore. The coach said school was useless save for football and Church and girls.

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The boy took up her invitation for the first time when he was fourteen. She was only four years older. They snuck between the margin of the fence line and the monolith slate of light descended from her stepmother's kitchen window and shivering indelible on the nighttime driveway as shadow confections of tenants came and went. They held laughter and she crouched down like she'd become some molting preter-shamanic ghoul leading him on a quest between ice shelves. Holding his hand, biding anticipation and voice with little leaps over cracks in the pavement that showed, in his mind, just how small his legs really were if they were so much thinner than a girl's.

In the shed she showed him her cot and lamp and posters of archaeological sites, monuments of once-mammoth proportions now crumbling, humbled by sheave upon sheave of skyscrapers that now shimmer sterling, but they'll far apart too, she said. She said she'd like to help preserve the ancient monuments one day or at least recreate them somewhere far away, somewhere where imitations won't die. She said there would be circular colonies in space, but only statues and art and architectural monuments should be allowed there and no humans, because humans destroy their own monuments in pursuit of new ones. They never want to imitate, but always end up doing so anyway, in some form.

On her cot she had him kiss her tummy and her sides and hug her legs and arms like they were cushiony obelisks and kiss them too. And kiss her armpits and hands and palms and back. She led him in

and said it was ok, it was ok, and that it wouldn't hurt her if he moved like that and he moved like that and collapsed immediately on her as a never-yet-heard signifier summoned his own degree of candela.

For one plush moment he fell within a person.

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As she lay out beside him and repeated that what they did was ok, he said, "Finally."

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The third computer had tinsel and a soulsame eye; he'd be arrested.

Can't Find My Way Home

Elizabeth Werth

Home. Noun. The place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household. A place of residence.

I've lived in Austin for three years—longer than I've stayed anywhere since I was eight years old—but it still doesn't quite feel like home. My apartment is decorated with knickknacks. The walls are covered in my own artwork. I've built shelves, strung up lights, painted the windowsills. I've had time to develop a narrative in a place entirely my own.

But coming home—coming back to my apartment—still feels like trying to fit a puzzle piece into the wrong puzzle. The shapes of the edges are similar enough to almost work. The colors close enough to almost blend in. But no matter how much I try, no matter how much I force the issue, I'm still staring at a picture that I don't quite belong in.

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Home. Noun. The social unit formed by living together.

When nowhere feels like home, everywhere starts to. After four years in divorce courts, four years of enduring threats from my dad's family, my mom moved to Texas when I was twelve. We'd moved houses twice before then. Afraid of losing my childhood friends, I stayed with my dad in Michigan until I graduated, during which period we moved seven times. Visiting my mom on breaks from school, I never could get close enough to either parent to establish an emotional connection to them or the places they'd brought me. With both of them working overtime and picking up strange shifts during

the few-week chunks I resided with them, I would just begin to settle into a routine when I was once again on an airplane, once again saying goodbye. There was a significant period of my childhood where my battered red suitcase—the one broken and taped back together too many times through too many miles traveled—was the only stable element in a life that could be upturned at any moment. The only thing linking one state to another, when even I felt like I'd changed since the last time I had made the fourteen-hundred-mile journey, when I realized that more of my life had been spent in transit than in one place.

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Home. Noun. A familiar or usual setting; a congenial environment.

Summer sunshine filtered through the window of a battered Toyota Yaris bedecked in bumper stickers and a Martini racing stripe. Twenty years old and tucked in the backseat amongst a pile of luggage, I felt a sick feeling of loss mount pressure in the back of my throat, the one that always took residence there as I abandoned one place in search of something new.

From Boston to Indianapolis, Montreal, Toronto, New York City, Pocono, and twice to Watkins Glen chasing adrenaline and dreams around race circuits, that cramped backseat had become a place I looked forward to being almost more than the destination itself. Intimate. More familiar than the return trips to Austin had felt. The Yaris became a stable presence in a summer of living in tents and hostels, in living rooms of friends or spare beds of strangers. I'd left a little bit of myself at each locale, a promise that I'd return one day to the streets and forests and tracks I'd explored, but the Yaris always welcomed me back with open arms at the end of a long, sunburnt weekend.

My last trip of the year, I would be flying back to Austin from September until January. I kept saying I was going home, but there was a familiar feeling telling me that I already somehow was. I was in

transit, moving, establishing myself across the country, always coming back to the same familiar face and the same cloth-covered seat. Always, still, with the ruined red suitcase by my side.

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Home. Adjective. Relating to one's own country.

Eighteen days alone in Paris. Eighteen days wrapped in the syrupy humidity of mid-July France. Eighteen nights with my feet propped up on the railing of the balcony in the fifth-floor apartment I'd rented in the twelfth *arrondissement*, the one smaller than my kitchen in Austin, door flung wide to relieve the top floor from the heat that had accumulated throughout the day. Eighteen mornings of rising with the sun and the scent of fresh-baked croissants from the *boulangerie* five floors below my temporary apartment. Eighteen days I had taken for myself—not to study, not to learn, but because I had eighteen days to waste, the money to spend, an itch under my skin to get away from Austin.

By my last day, I'd developed a routine. I dressed in the watercolor shades of a rose and lavender sunrise. Croissant in hand, I picked a direction and lost my way on my way to the Paroisse Saint-Étienne-du-Mont; I watched the different sections of the city wake up, how they existed so elegantly while I stumbled, awed, through cluttered rows of buildings. I took my lunch in the shade of an unnamed park and filled notebooks with pages of words of the things I'd seen—the Seine, soft French phrases, Bastille Day fireworks, cell phones stolen out of my hands. I tried to describe the beauty of a city seen from above, below, between.

I left on a Monday morning, saying I was going home and feeling like I was leaving one.

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Home. Verb. To return by instinct to one's territory after leaving it.

In 2016, I went home. I had never been to East Lansing before in my life, but I was in Michigan—my birth state, my general area of residence for eighteen years—so it became "home."

East Lansing is one hundred and twenty miles from both the quiet town I grew up in and all the reasons why I hadn't set foot in the state for two years. A two-hour drive if traffic is clear—and it usually is. A two-hour drive from the Indiana border that I'd crossed on the journey.

In Michigan, things never feel like they've changed. I had never driven that particular route before, but there was a sense of recognition. I knew those trees that lined the pothole-ridden streets. I knew the cars eaten by rust, the regional grocery stores, the jumbled Midwestern dialect, the houses with perpetual "for sale" signs tacked in the front lawn, the shops and factories long since abandoned to nature. I knew it all.

But after seven hundred thirty days away, I didn't want to. I didn't want to stop at Kroger to pick up duct tape for my front bumper and know where to go. I didn't want to find Superman ice cream waiting for me in the freezer of my childhood best friend's apartment. I didn't want to hear their voices and fall back into the patterns of speech and turns of phrase I'd spent so long trying to abandon. After drinking in sights and sounds and smells from across the world, I wanted that to feel foreign in its familiarity.

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Home. Noun. A place where something flourishes, where something grows. A place of origin. A native place.

Wisner, Michigan is an unincorporated community of Wisner Township, a region whose total number of residents doesn't exceed seven hundred fifty in forty square miles, a town so small that it's unrecognized by the postal system—all our letters had to be addressed to Akron and forwarded from there. Our claim to fame was the Log Cabin Grocery Store that was, in reality, a Shell gas station

that served mediocre food and stocked postcards from Lake Huron. You'd have to drive ten miles to find the nearest stoplight, forty-two if you wanted a Wal-Mart. To get to the nearest neighbor, you'd have to walk for thirty minutes.

Surrounded by four fields that alternated between corn and sugar beets depending on the year, flanked by three rows of tall pine trees to shield our house from view of the few cars that may pass down the dirt road, was the A-frame house that I grew up calling my home. A two-story nightmare built of knotty wood. It was there that I watched a four-year divorce begin when he was led out in handcuffs, there that the very foundation of my life crumbled beneath me, there that the definitions of words like "home" and "family" stopped matching with the things that I saw around me.

I called it my home long after we'd moved out, long after I'd lived in the equally-barren Bangor, the slightly more populated Rose Island and Sebewaing. We'd lived in that house in Wisner for no more than six years, but moving out felt like a displacement of my entire world. Despite everything, that house forced me out of childhood and into the complicated adolescence that served as the basis for the adult I'd never want to change. I'd hated that two-story A-frame tucked in the woods more than anything, but every time I drove by, I felt wistful.

I don't remember what it looks like inside now. I can't remember if my bedroom walls were white or pale blue. I don't remember how many drawers were in our cupboard, if it was the fourth or the fifth one that held the snacks. I wiped my memory clean when I left, and then spent years trying to recover a place that exists only as a symbol.

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Home. Adverb. To the intended or correct position.

"So, what does this even mean?"

Paintbrush fingers trace the thin black lines that decorate the cavity in my chest where my ribs meet my sternum. Gentle, like warm mid-May breezes dragging the heady scent of lilacs over my skin. A contrast to the aggressive buzzing bees that had filled the hollow of my stomach as the tattoo gun had scarred meaning into my skin over a year before.

"It's Vegvisir," I say. "It's a stave in Icelandic mythology. It literally means "signpost." Way back in the day, it was supposed to be protection for travelers. They'd paint it in blood on their forehead and it'd help them find their way home, even in storms or bad weather or when they couldn't tell where they were going."

"Deep."

"I got it before I went to Europe," I add. It feels at once significant and like I'm undercutting its importance.

"So does it work?" A blunt fingernail scratches ever-so-gently down the line splitting the sigil on my chest in two. Shivers. I lay my hand overtop his and spread his fingers wide, pressing down so that his palm obscures the totality of the tattoo. With it, I've found paths and ways. I've found places. I've found homes that I left behind for other homes. But I'm not sure that's what he's looking for when he asks, "You find your way home?"

His hotel room in Waller, Texas feels a little bit like a home, too, from how many times I've been there. I could tell him that. But I smile.

"Something like that."

POETRY

Sofreye Ma

Afarin Allabakhshizadeh

Maman says to wait until *shaam*
slaps my hand
crumby cookie fingers go limp.
When she leaves, they're back in the *boshgaab*.
Naan berenji isn't my favorite
but anything until dinner.
No *kareh*, *paneer*, *ya sabzi*
for tonight, we eat like *shahs*.
Ceremonial, symmetrical, nothing short of divine.
Essi, *ari*, and *baba* scramble with glasses
plates and clinking silver

for *gordafarid* is coming over *emshab*.
We will handle her *teer* and *kaman* with care
but we will not shower her with *seke* and rosewater
we will not kiss her sandy toes
dood esfand for her safe travels
or decorate her in hyacinths
for we are all lions at the *sofreh*.
Flowers for the center of the table
and rice for every mouth.

After dinner, we sit on the
front steps to get some *hava*
and watch as the *mah* dances
through the jeweled sky.

A Young Revolution

Julio Diaz

I write, speak, and read in English.
Taught to think America first.
I am American.

Born and raised in Texas.
The behemoth in conservatism
& freak weather patterns.
Secede, give me moment's notice.

I read, listen, and talk politics.
Brainwashed to never question.

I didn't question. Just investigated—

I am American.

Born and raised in the vacuum,
The US of A.
The war machine that has no "off" button—
It wasn't always like this—

I write, speak, and read in English.
Taught to think America first.
I am American.
More than you?

(Long-in-(g) mother tongue)
(forgotten motherland last)
(I am worldly)

(deriving from impacting civil war)
(son of fresh tortillas)
(and lover to tamales in banana leaves)
(countries overflow with my brother's blood)

(taken multiculturalism for granted. in facing you)
(how cold I must feel to those who are not around winter, for long)

(daring to ask mi Ma for the details of crossing the border)

(I am without nationalism for you)

(given to suckle on honey that doesn't belong to me)
(the oppressor who wills, acts the victim)
(leaving me to fend with no roots)
(remember somos El Salvador)

(finding mother tongue)
(rekindle the volcano our motherland offers to us)
(I am Centro America)
(mas fuego y sangre que el invierno del norte)

Labarre Drive

Morgan Laird

My grandmother did not choose a good day to fall off the lawn mower. Indeed, her limbs may regret choosing to get trapped beneath the weight of one Mr. John Deer. Her flesh will surely regret ripping like a cheap stocking at the local sock-hop. "We've overstayed our welcome!" Her bones thought, as she wailed on our freshly manicured lawn. Mother cried, "Dial 911!" I'm afraid I've missed the ice cream truck.

There's a lot of regret in Tallulah, Louisiana. And what may be said of it? It may be said that snapdragons brandish their heads each June, defiant against their interminable battles with divine errors, like heat and the human hand. It may be said that regret is often found in dust clumps beneath unsuspecting couches.

Mr. Montgomery regrets clipping an angel during a drive-by, a DUI, or, something involving an eye-for-an-eye.

Mrs. Whitman regrets (in the following order): That perm, her ex-husband, the third Pomeranian, the third child, and the annual diet that had her mouth saying, "I must powder my nose!" while she excused herself to piss blood.

Yesterday, I overheard the following conversation:

"What'd you think about that girl who died last week?"

"I think I'd fuck her."

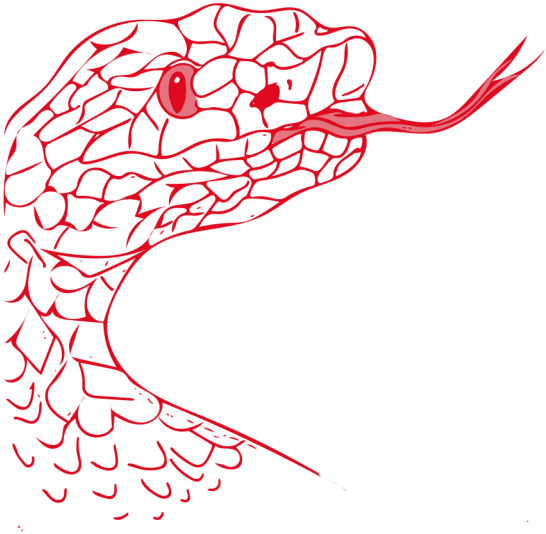
Roses fashioned from pity were discarded at her doorway for the pageantry of it all. Decorative traditions lined the walls bright and cheap like a "Happy Anniversary!" streamer.

The water in our kitchen sink is ancient—brought here by way of a diluvian temper tantrum. My grandmother's hand once

drowned here, and so mother washed ashore and spat me out. A fresh cycle to prune rapidly amongst seaweed and Clorox; producing predetermined wrinkles to suit any and all of my predetermined movements. I have been orchestrated from the remnants of discounted dish soap.

We are thankful for the tainted grass. The ice cream truck crooning down Labarre Drive. The generosity of an unskilled executioner is not to be forgotten.

– BEST OF HOTHOUSE –



Copperhead

Aza Pace

This musky smell
Like perfume or death
Probably came with the rain.
Here the punishment
For being a copperhead on the porch
Is death by guillotine.

Papa has already thrown away the head.
The copper body writhes like a tongue
When prodded, and tries in vain to strike
As Papa begins to skin it.
It's dead, I repeat to myself,
It's already dead and can't really feel it.

Copperhead, like my light brown hair.

There, the skin is off, stretched
And pinned on a board to dry
Next to the others
Like some ghastly moth.

The remnants, all grey muscle
With pink organs peeking through,
Belong to the birds or the ants.
Yes, I'll take him into the woods.
Hand me the shovel, Papa.

Home Improvement

Laura Doan

The Property Brothers make me pant
For marble countertops
To run my Japanese chef knives over.

"They're modeled
After the daggers samurai used to snap—
The arteries hiding behind their stomachs."

I tell Jonathan Scott
What the knife salesman told me,
Because it made me want to spend.

I slice the lower half of my face
Into a smile, slide tomato slosh
Into the esophagus of a garbage can.

"You might say they made
Themselves open concept,"—
A filthy laugh.

"The only thing you're wrong about
—my Property Brother—
Is open concepts."

I like mine walled: skinned.
I want a world's store of marble in my kitchen.
I want nothing left to carve.

Swinging from Janus's Tree

Laura Doan

I am not touching the ground—
Just the tips of my toes roll in dirt.

I worm my fingers into the warm holes
Of the heavy chains that—

Float me where I sit:
The tree's dangling thing.

I wonder if the rolling root is—
The twin of the sunned branch,

If the muscled trunk splinters
Above and below in a harmony—

One end grows parchment-flames,
One end grows white veins.

I swing down and—
A small hand in my palm makes me light.

"My car will run on Fanta in the morning
And cold milk at night."—

With the small hand in mine,
Grace smiles sweeter,

And with more hopeful lustre—
Than pieced clementines.

I dip my nose toward dirt and
Fall to swing from the tree's roots—

With the tether knotted
Next to a worm's nest.

I swing up and I am—
Drained

By too much of myself,
The moonish weight of my own head—

Scared so much my tongue tastes
Deflated as dead soda.

I swing up—
Down.

Higher
Up——down.

I am both trees' dangling thing now—
Every soap-bubble word:
"Purple," "jelly," "cherry," "bunny,"

Is anchored—
By one of the too-black marbles
That slide into the spongy tunnels of my brain.

Heavy when I'm closer—
To the birds.

Lighter when—
Ant kingdoms look large.

But the weight of my body shifts—
As silently as seasons.

Eyes close—
Neck lies down.

Shoulders dip—
Toward the mouth of the spine

I swing up—
Down.

Held between two godly hands
That play with me—

Like the pendant on their necklace.

Aria

Deanna Maria Noriega

I have found you in the story again.

your grandmother's wedding dress
carries me over the threshold,

plops me down like glass hooves;

my teeth's duet
with linoleum

kissing the veined walls
of your knuckles,

gnashing reds
stashed in the fibers
of my sorry blessing.

recovery is thawing in a shoebox
under your bed,

folded into a single owl wing,
pristine as lonely snow.

there was a time when you loved me,
there were several

moons and moons and moons
desperately gulped;

my chest bursting with blue howls,
my legs linked to yours

as we rode into the hearth;
not quick enough

to lick the gold
from your mercurial arches,

dawn's feline squint
caught my jaw,

braided my tongue into antlers;

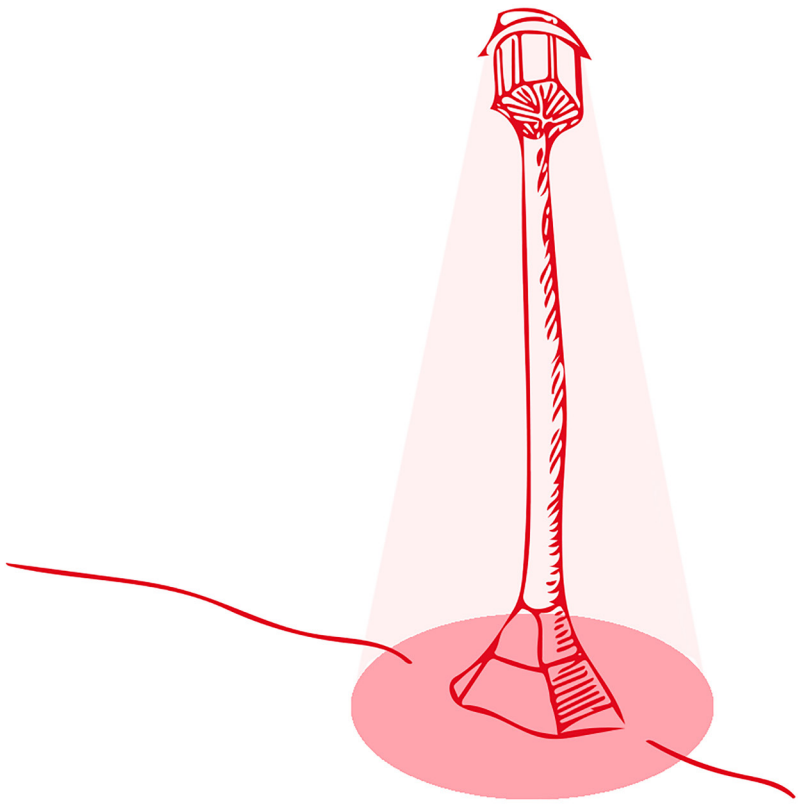
the cankered crucifix flower
left at your altar.

I swallow my pride with a glass of gnats,
chase it down with heirloomed fire.

your ghost gleams like hot dimes.

I keep walking away though it has been an eternity.

– BEST OF HOTHOUSE –



from issue 9

De derrière les fagots

Riley Ratcliff

Not without something unbelievable
about to happen, would I ever consider myself a transient
in your home. New streetlights are posted by the highway,
and I have never seen them above the trees
behind your house. Whatever twilight is
underwater, it doesn't change
the fact that I heard birds
chirping inside the streetlights last night,
under the humble photography of skies
full of rain, unfolding in the wind like taxis
full of scarves like virgins
trapped in latex or the forest-
green heat of it all. It doesn't take much,
once you're home, to check the truth value, to see us all
up from the hum-colored storehouse.

The Autumn After

Matthew Leger

I.

autumn falls on blank eyes this year,
magnolias burn beneath the wretched sun.
there is no relief under dead trees:
winter will reign over ruptured stalks.

and the staircase, soaked in fingerprints
begs for attention—
every nook and cranny of this hushed house
is an ashtray of dust.

the rusting sink, burnt cigarette butts
cans of yams, dirty aprons
and on the fridge beneath the magnets
dated pictures of grinning sons—

this house hasn't felt the sun in months
untouched rooms eclipse communication
(his room still reeks of smoke and wax)
there was never time for forgiveness;
an alarm clock lies by the wall.

II.

this is loss.
the autumn light wrestles
the idle blinds—
this is moving on,
to keep pure the ghosts
of distant sons.

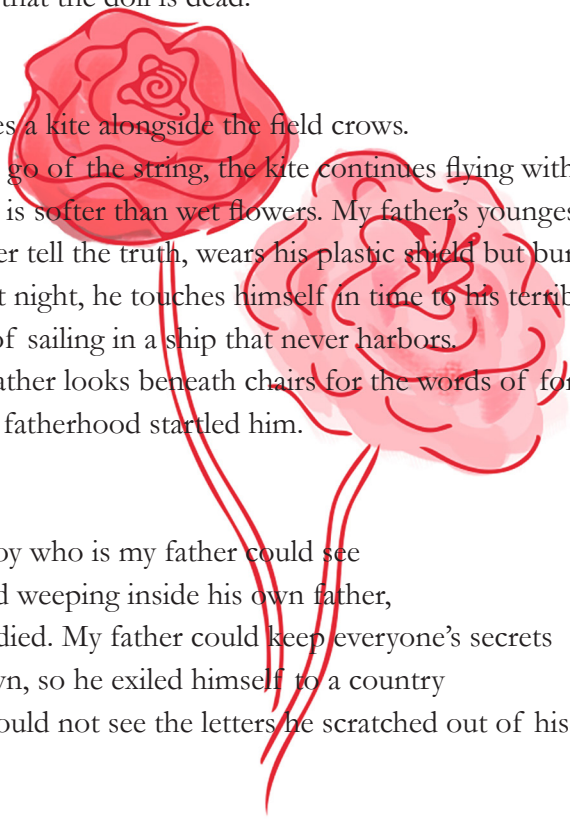
–
in memory of C. M.

from issue 3

Elegy for the Boy Who is My Father

Katherine Noble

I.
The black-haired boy who is my father counts the things he sees
in the world by sevens and collects broken bird eggs.
His mother country cradles him to her blistered breast, while
his mother talks to God with a head full
of wasps and a swollen tongue. My father's sister
gets a doll for her birthday and pushes it down the cracked sidewalk
in a yellow carriage. My father asks her what she will name the doll,
but she cries that the doll is dead.



II.
My father flies a kite alongside the field crows.
When he lets go of the string, the kite continues flying with the birds,
and his smile is softer than wet flowers. My father's youngest brother,
who can never tell the truth, wears his plastic shield but buried
the sword. At night, he touches himself in time to his terrible sobs
and dreams of sailing in a ship that never harbors.
My father's father looks beneath chairs for the words of forgiveness
he lost when fatherhood startled him.

III.
Before the boy who is my father could see
the tired child weeping inside his own father,
the old man died. My father could keep everyone's secrets
except his own, so he exiled himself to a country
where they could not see the letters he scratched out of his name.

from issue 3

Elegy for the Girl Who is My Mother

Katherine Noble

I.
The small girl with crooked teeth who is my mother
pushes a swing toward the sky without ever sitting in it.
Her tenth summer spills across her lap like warm milk.
Two of her brothers carry guns to fire across the ocean.
She writes them letters with her left hand and signs them with love,
But they have forgotten how to spell her name and never reply.
Her youngest brother stays behind and clutches his heart
like an infant in his dirty hands. He sets his teddy bear on fire
and runs to the church. My mother's father who is dead today
but ran fast then, chases after him with his belt. It writhes in his hand
like a snake with no head. My mother cuts the hair off of her dolls,
while her mother, who is dead today, plays music then
but never sings the words.

II.
The older woman who is my mother forgot to close the door
and let the yellow ghosts out of our house. Now she stands
by the stairs without moving, waiting for them to return.
She keeps rubbing her bare wrist where time should be kept
and scratching her white finger where the wedding ring was placed.
My mother's eyes are two windows into a ruined house
whose dining room table is still set for a banquet.

III.
Oh woman, who has abandoned you? A hard wind carries
downhill the voices of my mother's brothers who are lost
in the mountains. My mother says she is cold,
but will not shut the window. At night I can hear her singing
the words of music she never plays. She looks across the yard
to see the black tree where her childhood hangs
like a wind-chime that never stops striking.

Trinity (1945)

Joe Lozano

Start with a bomb in the palm
of your hands blistered by the
atom before the garden was never
ours to call home or before the isotopes
fissile with a flash and you're still not there
to see us to meet us to tell us you're sorry
to tell us we were a mistake.
you made a mistake.
you gave the children lead and gold,
this is your funeral.

there will be no wake.
the final eyes won't have time to see
you or them as shadows on a wall too
late to hold your word or each other
the most devout haunt the pews like
sycophantoms kneeling before dust
on the pulpit where the ash hangs in
the air for only a moment longer.

no one can hear how quiet it can be.
the first trumpet blew the flames and
swallowed every other sound even the
bang! we saw coming across the sky or
from our backyards lying in the grass
thinking how nice it would be to float
or how free the fall would feel if only

the ground was soft.
I never took you for my genie.

end with your fingers breaking
a collision you can't contain
leaks through the cracks of your
skin being torn apart just like us
just like the flesh you swore
never to wear but to keep
for a rainy day and when it pours
you put on your man-suit made of
death metal and wreak havoc.
but there is no more suit, no more man.
just you
disintegrating.

Bedlam Here, Tomorrow Too

Joe Lozano

Listen now, child!
You knew this was coming.
Save your breath for lungs
In need of air, reaching for a hand
To hold. Up ahead,
You will join the others
Locked in arms bracing,
Waiting for blood to run
Back up their skin, listening
For a sound that can resurrect
the waiting.
Amplify staccato-like bullets
In succession and rally
the bones wrapped in
shrapnel under bomb-
blasted brick to rival
the rubble of a road
torn in half over keys
to a holy city robbed
and plundered quick
while bushes smoked
black blinding the sun
out West and the Word
is Death.
Our mother's cry muted
And my dead lift their
Chin for so many sons

And daughters stuck in
Piles, bruised, not
Quite worn and some
Fight left rumbling
Deep beneath the soil
Shifting and rising
Ready on the front lines
With us to wreck the
Wicked down the
River split in oil
Swollen gold,
All on fire.
But we will rebuild.
I give you this hammer.
Make some noise.

NONFICTION

A Thing Done Afterward

Rosa Kim

When I was five years old, I was dragged by the arms and hoisted off the marble floor of Cleveland Hopkins International Airport by a stranger—only, that stranger was my dad.

In 1990, my father had packed his bags and come to Akron, Ohio to get a Ph.D. in polymer engineering. He was the first and only in his family to immigrate to the revered Land of Opportunity. With broken English and uncharted ambition, he had come alone. My mother, pregnant with me at the time of his departure, had stayed in Korea to work at a research center with a master's degree in chemical engineering. In a few years, she would sacrifice her career as a chemist to move to a foreign country and permanently take on another full-time position: mom.

Because the research center was a three-hour drive from my parents' hometowns, my mother could only drive up on the weekends to visit my baby brother and me. Consequently, my father's parents raised us—two wailing toddlers on the aging backs of my grandparents as they bickered about the best way to mitigate the situation over the sounds of our howling.

My father flew back to visit Korea when time allowed, and I enjoyed those precious and rare occasions (at least, that's what it looks like from old photos). Even so, short-term memory loss is an unfortunate side effect of toddlerhood. After my dad finally earned his Ph.D., my mother left behind the world she had known all her life to join him in the United States, a three-year-old in one arm and a five-year-old in another.

And that's how our new life together in America started: my eager and nervous father stood waiting for us in the Cleveland airport

with a mammoth smile between his ears, his large teeth exposed and gleaming in giddy excitement. He was greeted by the defiant screams of his daughter, who didn't recognize him as she rolled around on the airport floor, cantankerous from a fifteen-hour flight and violently resistant to the advances of a strange, smiley man who tried to peel her off the cool marble. It was a fiasco of flailing limbs and curious stares from sympathetic onlookers, far from the long-awaited happy reunion my father had probably imagined.

The months following were a time of patience and adjustment as we tried to make sense of the changes happening around us. My father, who had been living alone for the past five years, now had to share his quiet space with three new residents. My mother, no longer working, acted as a full-time mediator between her husband and her children, who (according to future recounted stories) took a long time warming up to him. We all had to adapt.

That same year, on the crisp November afternoon of a budding Ohio winter, I lost my first tooth. I had been trotting up the creaky stairs to the bedroom I shared with my brother when my foot caught on a step. I fell face first, and upon lifting my head, I saw something small and rigid tangled in the carpet. I tasted blood in my mouth. I panicked, thinking that I had just broken a permanent and integral part of my body. My mom was ecstatic as she stuffed cotton balls in my mouth and told me to bite down, laughing at my blubbering, frenzied state.

"You're growing up! Congratulations!" she said, stuffing in more cotton balls that quickly became soaked in my blood and tears.

I couldn't help but to initially hate the gaping hole that had replaced the space where my bottom left tooth used to be. It felt too wrong, too empty. Like something was missing. I reflected on all the times I had taken my teeth for granted as somberly as a five-year-old could, running my tongue over and over the desolate, slimy abyss.

The value of teeth is oftentimes underrated. The earliest teeth started as nothing more than sharp, conical structures. As mammals came into the evolutionary picture, so did developments in teeth. On

one hand, damaged teeth can be the equivalent of a death sentence by starvation. Like the way a mother bird feeds her helpless young, African wild dogs are known to chew and regurgitate meat for their toothless elders. Teeth not only serve a function that aids in the basic need to survive, but they also play a significant role in various social aspects: Animals bear their teeth in a menacing snarl when they feel threatened or want to assert dominance. We might flash a smile as a result of joy and happiness, or to indicate a demeanor of friendliness and comradeship. Studies have shown the importance of teeth in mate attraction, with people opting for mates with straight, white teeth in the same way people prefer shiny hair or smooth skin. According to evidence from the Indus Valley civilization, the history of human dentistry can be traced back as far as 7000 BC in attempts to treat tooth decay. Teeth are an indicator of possible childhood illnesses, diet, and some genetic disorders. Good teeth indicate good health.

Dr. Michael Novacek, senior Vice President in Pathology at the American Museum of Natural Science in Manhattan, claims that the oldest things in the vertebrate fossil record are teeth, going back 500 million years. The millimeter of enamel that comprises the outermost layer of the tooth is the hardest and most highly mineralized substance in the body, able to outlast an entire skeleton. In any paleontological or historical research, dental records are key clues to new discovery and identity. Artist and educator Muriel Hasbun's photo-based work, the X post facto collection, was developed from her father's archive of dental records. Borrowed from the phrase "ex post facto," which is Latin for "a thing done afterward," the collection engages the viewer in looking retrospectively at x-ray images and remembering the bodies by examining signs, marks, and traces left behind. "This is how the body remembers," explains Hasbun. "It creates crevices and strange fossils. Encrustations and indentations. A sea of sediment upon sediment. A place revealed."

In the years following, I lost many more teeth, each occasion as enticing and uncomfortable as the first. During those years, my

family moved from Ohio to Texas, Texas to California, California back to Texas, and I left behind a trail of baby teeth all across the United States. With every new move came the same fear, anger, and resistance that I had on the day I stepped off of Korean Airlines. It was a harrowing process of packing up memories, friendships, and accomplishments into cardboard boxes and worn suitcases, just to unpack them all again. That's kind of how moving is: I was a tree replanted again and again after new leaves had already started to bud. But along the way, I came to learn that all the experiences I gained from every new place watered my roots with open-mindedness and resilience. And like a replanted tree, that is how a new tooth grows in—stronger and sturdier after all the times it has been uprooted. My father taught me this. Every job promotion he took came with new risk and opportunity, and I learned this with all the things we left behind and all the ways we started anew.

A year after our move to the United States, my grandparents flew from Korea to visit us in our adjusting life in Ohio. My front two teeth were loose at the time, growing more painful with each passing day, the roots extending from the base of my teeth down into my gums ready to give way. Nevertheless, I went to great lengths not to accidentally disturb my wiggling top teeth, horrified by the inevitable prospect of having hideously conspicuous black craters in their place. Besides, I liked my front two teeth. They made me feel closer to my father. My mother used to say that I got them from him. They were larger than the rest of my teeth, appearing even larger due to a slight overbite. She said that my father and I reminded her of two rabbits.

On the first night of my grandparents' arrival, my grandma sat me down on our ratty, handed-down sofa. "Your dad told me about your front teeth. How about I pull them out for you? It will be quick."

I shook my head vehemently, lips tightly clamped shut in a protective line over my teeth, eyes wild with silent protest.

My grandma sighed. A glimmer of kindness crept over her eyes as she said to me in soothing Korean, "You cannot delay what will

happen anyway. It will only cause you longer pain. But the pain of removing them will only be temporary, and it is necessary in order for you to grow stronger teeth. Just imagine how beautiful your smile will be when your new ones come in! New teeth cannot grow if you do not remove the old."

Through still-tight lips, I managed to squeeze out in a robotic voice, "It will feel weird without them. I don't like it. I just want to keep all of my teeth."

My dad, who had been at the kitchen table reviewing notes for a presentation, joined us on the couch. "You'll feel better once they are out. Maybe not at first. But sometimes you need to trust that everything will be okay."

I stared at him with wide, pleading eyes.

He smiled. "I know. It's really scary. Do you remember the day you left Korea? I left before you did. I didn't know what would happen once I left. When I got here, I felt like a part of me was missing. But look! You and Michael and Mom are here now. The fear of the unknown can't stop you from living the best quality life."

That night, I let my grandma remove my front two teeth. I squeezed my eyes shut and pulled back my lips, flinching as I felt her lean forward. She counted down in Korean.

Ha-na.

Dul.

Saet!

She pressed her thumb—hard—into my teeth and I felt (and heard!) the tiny roots crackle under the pressure. There was a flash of pain. Then they popped right out into the wrinkled palm of her open hand.

– BEST OF HOTHOUSE –

from issue 5

On Caffè

Kayla Moses

A study on Italian breakfast, written by an American in Perugia.

In a culture of food—one of *salumi* and *formaggi* and the infamous *pizze*—breakfast is a lost cause. The notoriety of Italian cuisine is in the endless plates of pasta and the clinking of wine glasses, not the morning cup of joe. However, there is something to be said for Italian breakfast: it is an elaborate and deliberate dance, the steps known only to the native (or brave). Growing up on cereal and milk as a beginning to the day, sometimes biscuits and gravy (origins in the South, after all), the notion of an Italian coffee bar is an unsolved mystery to me. The first meal of the day seems like something to be consumed in the blue quiet of an early kitchen, perhaps to the dim sounds of a coffee machine or teapot. Here, it is all in the effort of *la bella figura*. One should be awake, moving, living in the morning, all to the tune of a cappuccino and *cornetto*.

Coffee bars exist at every crumbling crevice of the city, and here in Perugia, I hear them early—turning cups over to dry, restocking the glass cases that sultrily brandish their wares. The bars are as necessary to the city as the morning bells of the cathedral. The beauty is in their universality: in each, you will find two or three *carabinieri*, a handful of businessmen, two or three teenagers (late for classes, ideally), and a mechanized flight of *bariste*, faces clouded behind the steam of an espresso machine. The ritual is the same, with slight variance. At some places, one points—*questo cornetto*—and pays in pocketed change. Others require a ticket for service, payment first, resulting in a tight-fisted arms race akin to a pastry stock market. Still others are simply in the vein of that blue quiet, perhaps tucked in a

sleepier area of town; there, you may order and munch along privately until you dab crumbs from your face. There's no hurry.

Regardless of speed and payment and locale, there is one undeviating truth: the cappuccino. Here there is no Starbucks cardboard madness, no 99¢ truck-stop coffee; there is only the frothy, bitter honesty of a freshly brewed cup. It is delicate, almost feminine, with the ivy designs laced into its head. Even the size is diminutive—a white teacup, most certainly, paired with a saucer and the most elfin of spoons. The coffee itself lurks beneath the cream-capped froth, heady and nearly foresty in flavor. The smell is an extension of its taste, woven and multi-layered as a tapestry. Bars have packets of sugar at the ready, but I have never seen anyone add anything to their cup. The whole presentation is so artful, I fear alterations aside from ingestion could provoke offense. Sip lightly.

Coffee bars at dawn are telephone poles dotted with pigeons, everyone in their grey and black (why did no one tell me Italians only wear two colors?), fluttering their cups to their mouths and swallowing in accord. The whole feat is accomplished standing up. My hypothesis is that the buttery marmalade *cornetti* are in caloric equivalence to this activity, and aided by the surge of espresso. Certainly the urgency of such a meal aids the consistent Italian beauty. If nothing else, to see such a breakfast, the napkin-held pastries from dawn (how they smell of comfort!), and the delicate teacups steaming in voluptuous whorls, is to entirely enforce the Italian notion of food: sensuality first, sensuality second.

The Face of AIDS

Rachel Galvan

I was eight years old when Mom started disappearing on the weekends. She had been attending junior college for a while, pursuing her nursing degree, so we were used to being alone with Dad while she was gone on weekday evenings and holed up with a stack of medical books in the kitchen on weekends. As a result, her being gone on the weekends too was a seamless transition that I barely noticed.

I lived in an imaginary world in my head, a world I remember with utmost clarity, which was a stark contrast to many of the actual events of most of my childhood. The fact-based chronology is vague and hazy, a moth-eaten sweater of holes and missing pieces, but the childhood fantasies and characters are as vivid as if I had lived them recently.

In my head, I was the owner-operator of a large horse ranch located on sprawling green acres that magically fit within the parameters of our small backyard. My prized animal was a hulking black Arabian horse, which I had been introduced to by Walter Farley's *The Black Stallion* and who was portrayed in this production of my imagination by our ten-year-old black lab, Sherry. Sherry was an eager participant and bounded happily next to me as we made circles around my invisible riding arena. Once the sky was draped in dusk, the pestilence of mosquitoes forced us back into the house, where I secured Sherry in a luxurious stable I'd created out of blankets and dreams in a corner of the living room.

"I tried to give him water, but he refused it. He's refusing all treatment," Mom said to someone on the phone, pacing the living room while I rewarded my noble steed with dog treats. It was a rare weekend during which she was home, but she wasn't mentally pres-

ent. While my mind was wrapped up in ranch life, hers was in Washington, D.C., where her father was dying.

In 1991, AIDS awareness was everywhere. The Red Ribbon Project had been launched and the little red ribbons were everywhere: on the tuxedos and sequined gowns of celebrities at the Oscars, on the shirts of all my classmates during Red Ribbon week at school, and accompanying the small American flag pins on the lapels of politicians. Magic Johnson famously announced that he was HIV positive. My mom cried secret tears when Freddie Mercury, the iconic front man of her favorite band, died at age forty-five of AIDS-related illness. The following year, AIDS was declared the number one cause of death for US men ages twenty-five to forty-four. So when my parents mentioned in passing that Grandpa Bill, my maternal grandfather whom I'd only met a handful of times in my life, had AIDS, my young mind registered it as merely an extension of the prolific presence of AIDS awareness.

In spite of all this awareness, I didn't really know what AIDS was. My parents didn't explain it; such was their need to shield my siblings and me from the harrowing realities of such a disease. Regardless, I picked up bits of information in my peripheral consumption of the activity and nature of my mother's words that constantly surrounded me.

"Don't worry, I wore a mask and washed my hands."

"They tested me just to be sure."

"His T-cells were [xx]."

"He's so thin. I don't even recognize him."

And one weekend after she'd returned from one of her trips, Dad handed me a small plastic electronic device that featured sockets on the front and a plug on the back.

"What's this?" I asked, turning it over in my hand.

"It's a Clapper," he said.

A tickled grin stretched across my face. "Clap on! Clap off! Clap on, clap off, the Clapper!" I'd seen the infomercials on TV and had been begging my parents for one. "Where'd you get it?"

"It belonged to Grandpa Bill."

That was how they announced to me that the maternal grandfather I barely knew had died of a disease that had become a nationwide epidemic.

Many of his belongings began to fill our house. In my overactive mind that was chock-full of information about the necessity to cover public toilet seats for fear of picking up the virus, I mulled over the idea that all of these items were somehow infected and I wondered if I shouldn't handle them. But I handled them anyway out of intrigue about this ghost-like family member. Grandpa Bill had a collection of beautiful, old things, particularly books—artfully bound and meticulously preserved copies of ancient-looking, obscure titles. I carefully picked them up and opened them to sniff the pages. For better or for worse, the scent of old books became synonymous in my mind with the grandfather I didn't know and the disease that killed him.

Shortly thereafter, I took the first plane ride I can remember—funded by the life insurance of my dead grandfather—and we arrived in Washington, DC. With my curiosity about this elusive grandparent piqued, I was somewhat dismayed that the casket was closed and concealed with a large, draping cloth. The reasons for this had been uttered in hushed tones by my mom in conversation with her brother, Uncle Bill, and Gram.

"It ate him alive. Nobody wants to see that."

My wild imagination materialized a picture of a sickly green- yellow corpse with gouged holes all over its face and neck, as if AIDS was some kind of flesh-eating bacteria. While that was likely not what Grandpa Bill looked like under the lid of the cloth and floral-covered casket, it was probably not too far off. Only in my adulthood was I given a mental picture of the face of AIDS.

The face of AIDS is a fifty-three-year-old man who falls in his home and is too weak to pick himself up off the floor, remaining prostrate for several days until his lover returns from a trip and rushes him to the hospital. It is a brain tumor behind his eye that ushers in half-blindness. It is dehydration, starvation, and emaciation

increasing at an exponential rate, the result of thrush and the refusal of a feeding tube because he knows it's the end and all he wants is the end. It is having to fill out special paperwork with the funeral home because of the fear and liability of infection. It is a posthaste graveside funeral during which he is buried in a hospital gown and a cardboard box.

The hospital gown and cardboard box were the culmination of a life of rejection on the basis of sexuality. That sexuality had rendered Grandpa Bill the recipient of special treatment from his company, which forced him to undergo psychotherapy to cure him after it surfaced in the mid-1960s that he'd been having homosexual affairs. When the therapy didn't work, they transferred him to New York in 1971, for undisclosed reasons, and all of it resulted in stress and strain that ripped my mother's family apart. He sought comfort and camaraderie in the bathhouses of the city, where he drank to excess and experimented with drugs and promiscuity, calling home frequently to check in, hanging up the phone before swallowing tears and more alcohol. The phone calls were a mainstay over the course of nearly twenty years, and it was during one of these phone calls that he delivered the news that he'd contracted AIDS at some point between the late 1970s and early 1980s.

And in late March 1991, my mother wept quietly and elegantly as she was handed a star-spangled triangle, a small tribute to Grandpa Bill's service in the Air Force. He was lowered into the ground and buried with dark, rich Maryland soil. The plot would eventually be covered by fabricated squares of lush green grass, an aesthetically pleasing symbol of regrowth and new beginnings. In reality, however, the squares of green were merely the latest incarnation of a disguise intended to mask something my family fought against acknowledging or accepting, a fight that would continue well into the next two decades.

– BEST OF HOTHOUSE –

Leftovers

Barry Maxwell

She asks, "What's for dinner?" and I've got nothing planned, but I'm happy to oblige.

"Let me see what I can fix for you," I say, and trot to the kitchen.

I make do with what I've got at hand, aiming for bittersweet, forcing the biting and the bland to cooperate. A two-handed heap of kale wilts from the size of a pillow to a simmering panful, bubbling and briny and dark as seaweed, and baby carrots steam over a bright ginger infusion. I watch patiently as rice swells in a glass pot, and I peek at the chicken in the oven, its skin crackling to peppery brown.

The meal comes together in spite of the dissonant color scheme—orange, green, russet, and white—all done on cue and waiting for plates.

I call to her in the bedroom: "It's dinner!"

She prances into the kitchen barefoot; I offer silverware and she shakes her head. She munches a dripping dill pickle from the jar and says, "Oh, no thanks. I'm not hungry anymore. Looks good, though."

My belly grumbles as I load a plate with more than I want, and I swallow my anger for an appetizer. I keep my mouth shut, and seal my resentment in plastic wrap to mask the sour odor. I sit cross-legged at my desk and eat while I scribble notes on revisions, delete half-hearted drafts, and tap the Back key between bites until my plate is as clean as the sentence I'm cutting—nothing left but juice.

"So there," I mumble.

The Big Bang theme song rings from the bedroom. She coughs on a hit and laughs at those crazy science kids. I set to putting away the leftovers, nibbling savory bits, pinching slippery bites of dark meat from the bottom of the pot. A peppercorn cracks like fireworks in my mouth, and my lips buzz from the piperine.

I grab the chicken barehanded and swing it whole from pot to container—not a drop of broth splatters my clean counter. Carrots and greens I tuck into recycled snap-top tubs, the buttery pot liquor lukewarm and clotting. I tamp clumps of white rice solid into a clear plastic brick. The wooden serving spoon hangs onto a tempting mouthful, and I work it into my mouth like a mannerless street boy. My teeth scrape a neat-rowed hatch across the grain and I lean against the sink and chew the rice with bulging cheeks.

I can't tolerate wasting food. It's pathological and needy, as though every meal might be the last. The undersized fridge is crowded with unfinished dinners, and I slide the milk to the right, roll the cabbage to the back for space. I stow the leftovers like a well-packed moving van, and the load organizes itself until the refrigerator is as full as a suitcase waiting by the door.

The next night I stack containers on the counter and take inventory. Some are too old to trust. They still look edible, but the window of opportunity has closed, and I reluctantly scrape them into the trash. If I could fold myself into a container and snap the top shut over me, or settle with the rest at the bottom of the trashcan, I would, if only to call it to an end.

A meal can be made of what remains—not a good one, but a meal. I spoon up careless portions in a mismatched palette: a dry twist of chicken breast, a muddy assemblage of limp vegetables. Aimless trails of liquid pool in the center of the chipped stoneware.

I put the plates in the oven to warm. I want to throw them cold into the garbage with the rest—leave the mess for someone else to deal with, and walk out for a solitary bite. I want to run my fingers down the menu and taste the entrées through the ink, dine in the booth by the window, and flirt with the waitress while I linger over coffee.

"What's for dinner?" she calls from the bedroom.

I've lost my appetite, and the smell of the reheated food repulses me, but I haven't got the energy to make anything fresh of the night, or less apathetic.

"Nothing," I say quietly, when she asks again. "Leftovers."

Waiting for the Ancients

John Calvin Pierce

At the settling of violet dusk over the woods: the drop of silence. The rest of the forest quiets down for them—the deer and foxes stop their rustling, the dogs their wheezy snorting, the men their hammering. The whole meadow rests, awaiting the start of the opera of disembodied voices, ghosts who all together assert their presence—a drone of clattering throat-valves. Then it comes, in unison, the million crescendo rattles of the cicadas whose soft bodies are hidden behind fans of pine needles where they pause their whirring for a minute just to start it up again as the sky begins to blacken.

It is rare to see the living creatures themselves. Most of a cicada's young life is spent burrowing and feeding underground. At the start of May, a new generation of pubescent nymphs crawl out of their burrows into the sunlight and then run, wingless, to the nearest tree or bush or fencepost, which they scale and latch on to with spindly legs. Overnight the nymphs enlarge and swell, crack open their beige papery skins and abandon them still attached to the limb or branch. The impossibly gigantic cicada then pumps his new limbs and wings full of fluid, stretching them out, taking flight for the higher branches of the treetops to gather with his fresh-born siblings and, waiting for dusk, to start the first verse in his new life of song.

The transformation from wingless nymph to adult happens in a single day; the rotund hollow shells are left teetering on the lowest branches and the rosemary bushes are overwhelmed with the little paper houses. Children pluck them up with gentle fingers and put them on their bookcases, or else like a god they crush them and blow the dead ashes into the breeze. Rarely do you get to see the cicada

himself, fleshy sack of air and liquids. But the infinite disembodied song and disregarded nymph corpses simply reek of magic—for the woods and fields of my home are magical—and in no creature is that magic more apparent than the cicada who morphs from silent groundworm into harbinger of dusk in a single revolution of Earth's axis, who leaves evidence of his miracle for us to marvel at in the light of morning.

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Soon there may come a day when the cicadas no longer emerge from their damp warrens and ascend into the breathy canopy of pine trees. Someday the habitual silence of the forest at dusk, in which the animals halt their scurrying and the birds their calling, will be met with nothing: the song—or, rather, the chant, because their sweeping unison and unbroken drone are the liturgies of Gregorian monks, a primordial and holy syllable repeated and unscathed as it glides over the stones of millennia—will go unsung. Maybe the air was too hot or humid, maybe the birds became too numerous and decimated the population with their greedy beaks, maybe a new lawn fertilizer acidified the soil and in the burrows the frail bodies are dissolving into pools of gelatinous sludge. But the woods still hush, having not yet fully forgotten the memory of the cicada, and wait for the thousand drones to begin.

Then, hearing nothing, the deer and fox and man return each to his labor, unsure of what is missing but sure that something is, a hole in the heart of the forest, and sigh and sweat as dusk settles in over the dying meadow.

ACADEMIC ESSAYS

Animality and Anti-Blackness in Toni Morrison's Beloved

Jacob Lundquist

From Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, black authors have seen violence against animals and violence against black folks as mutually constitutive, historically aligned, and structurally analogous. Black radical thinkers have repeatedly identified and critiqued the relationships between the domination of black slaves by white people and the domination of animals by humans. In its postmodern frame, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* offers a slightly augmented perspective. Rather than analogizing the two oppressions, Morrison's work compares human and animal slavery to explicate and critique the values of liberal humanism. This line of argumentation, however, still tacitly values humanity over animality and misattributes the cause of violence.

Liberal humanism attempts to recognize the humanity of marginalized peoples in order to grant them reprieve from violence. However, pronouncing the supposed value of an intrinsic humanity is not only impossible but also deeply rooted in American anti-blackness. According to Zakiyyah Jackson, blackness is actually central to humanism, not excluded from it, because "the black body is an essential index for the calculation of degree of humanity and the measure of human progress" (96). Reading *Beloved* through Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, Jackson argues that "the process of making the slave relied on the abjection and criminalization of the enslaved's humanity rather than the denial of it," and thus "humanization is not an antidote to slavery's violence; rather, slavery is a technology for producing a kind of human" (96). In short, the recognition of black humanity is not an intrinsically radical project, and in fact has historically served the interests of white supremacy.

These two hierarchies, anthropocentrism and racism, entail "plasticity," the ability of the master to mold, shape, and transform the

slave's temporary position on the ontological hierarchy (or "Chain of Being," or other similar conceptual apparatus), used against slave bodies and psyches to shape them in the white imaginary. In this way, "slavery's technologies were not the denial of humanity but the plasticization of humanity" (Jackson 117). According to Jackson, this is the fundamental logic of slavery: "coerced formlessness as a mode of domination" (118). The condition of the enslaved is not explained through any individual hierarchy; rather, slaves are always subject to change in social location, ontological identity, and hierarchical position. The relative place of the slave is infinitely malleable, molded into human or animal by the master to fit specific ideals and negotiate specific forms of violence through anthropocentrism, racism, and heterosexism. Under liberal humanism, we find that the slave's condition of enslavement is constant precarity.

Toni Morrison's writing often deals with the concurrent processes of humanization and dehumanization as applied to black Americans in the postbellum world. Take, for instance, the character of Paul D in Morrison's *Beloved*. Paul D's traumatic interaction with animality stems from an interaction with a rooster named Mister. When forcibly restrained and made mute by his master in an act of vindictive punishment, Paul D sees Mister freely roaming about. This immediately forces a psychic defense mechanism in Paul D's psyche. Much later, Paul D tells Sethe that Mister "looked so…free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher" (86). He envies Mister's conditions because he symbolizes the androcentric aspects of freedom taught to him—freedom of the body, of sex, and of movement. Mister represents to Paul D the mutability of slave manhood, the fact of its contingency and plasticity. As a response to the fear of being shaped by whiteness, Paul D vilifies and blames Mister. Instead of critiquing liberal humanism, patriarchal norms of autonomy, anthropocentrism, or white-supremacist forced labor, Paul D blames the actionless rooster. This inability to conceive of relative social positions is, in fact, a product of those very systems of oppression.

Paul D's ontology is thereby scripted and overwritten by the peculiar institution of slavery, which forecloses future potentialities and requires constant transformation in the identity of the slave. Paul D remarks that "Mister was allowed to be and stay who he was. But I wasn't […] Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster

named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead" (86). Mister, according to Paul D, would always "be and stay who he was," even beyond death. Paul D, in contradistinction, is at the whim of his master—for identity, for ontology, and for claims to both humanity and animality. Since his master deems Paul D's opinions, freedom of movement, and pain irrelevant, Paul D regards this as a form of ontological destruction—that his ontological state is no longer of interest to whiteness.

Hence, when later ruminating on his status as man, Paul D inevitably brings up his relationship to animals. It is not simply the fact that Mister has a name, but that he has freedoms that Paul D lacks at the moment of their encounter—freedoms of movement and choice. Later, for example, he reflects on past actions when he "had eaten raw meat barely dead" and "crunched through a dove's breast before its heart stopped beating" because "he was a man and a man could do what he would" (148). Paul D also makes this relationship abundantly clear when thinking about Sethe, saying that "she never mentioned or looked at [the bit]. So he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast. Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that" (322). For Paul D, what secures his manhood is not being seen as a "beast" or an animal, and thus the two are deeply connected in their inverse relationship.

Paul D has, like many other marginalized subjects, internalized a twofold set of hierarchies in order to ameliorate his ego's perception of its own condition. On the one hand, he wants to secure his "manhood" through the freedom of movement and choice (doing "what he would"); on the other hand, he establishes his identity through violence against animals (consuming dead animals and murdering dying ones). Under liberal humanism, slaves could be simultaneously incorporated into the realm of the human (by performing violence against animals) and at the same time have their humanity deferred and even denigrated. Paul D's internalization of both patriarchy and anthropocentrism allows him to deal with the trauma that he is put through as a result of white supremacy. In this way, Paul D's acceptance of other hierarchical structures of violence is an ego reaction against the devaluation of his social position. Recognizing his own subhuman condition, Paul D displaces blame onto the rooster instead of the slave master,

largely because violence against the latter is an impossible fantasy.

Jackson writes that Paul D's attempt to embody normative (white) gender roles will bind black people "to a model that can only reinforce black gender as failed or fraudulent," which is "predicated on the projection of animal lack—human and nonhuman—such that the slave will never experience ontologically level relationality with the master without displacing this epistemic premise" (122). Paul D never interrogates the notions of gender and racial hierarchy intrinsic to white supremacy, and thus fails to identify their interrelations with the human-animal dichotomy. Put simply, Paul D sublimates his anger at slavery's effeminizing ability into a socially acceptable anger against animals.

Paul D's misrecognition of the source of his subordination as the rooster, not the slave master, continues well into the end of the novel. When confronted by the specter of monetary exchange, Paul D begins thinking about the prices of each slave. Running through the list of free subjects, Paul D settles on the ghostly image of Mister, "the rooster, smiling as if to say, You ain't seen nothing yet" (270). Then, while talking to another ex-slave about Sethe's act of infanticide and Beloved's subsequent appearance, Paul D shudders, though "he didn't know if it was bad whiskey, nights in the cellar, pig fever, iron bits, smiling roosters" that made him do it (277). Each frightening subject in Paul D's present is oriented through the lens of the rooster, and brings back the painful memory of his simultaneous humanization and beastialization. The substitution of object cause (Mister) for object (slave master) is complete, eclipsing the white patriarch's blame.

The hypocrisy of Paul D's revelatory experience is in its own undoing. In Paul D we see, not a denaturalization of these hierarchies of violence, but instead the internalization of different forms and methods of domination. Liberal humanism, established by the master, set Paul D up for failure from the start. The simultaneous recognition of humanity and inhumanity in the slave forces a psychic response that results in internalized power structures. Rather than feel any sense of comradery with Mister (another similarly vulnerable member of society), Paul D misrecognizes him as the cause of pain, and thus performs perfectly the logic of white supremacy and liberal humanism. Humanism, as we see, did not emancipate slaves from the condi-

tions of their enslavement, but simply naturalized other, pre-existing antagonisms.

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Deceptive Documents in Mina's Mediascapes: Exploring the Presence of Marmion in Bram Stoker's Dracula

Madeleine McQuilling

Dracula represents the story of Mina (Murray) Harker, since it appears as the compilation of documents she transcribed. Her secretarial skills mediate knowledge not only between the vampire hunters, but also between the characters and the reader. In order to read with the grain of Stoker's masterpiece, one must trust Mina to record nothing but the truth. Doing otherwise would disrupt the entire reading experience. But perhaps Stoker intended a disrupted or ambiguous experience, for why else would he reference Sir Walter Scott's *Marmion*? Scott's metrical romance narrates a series of deferred betrayals that center around documents forged by Constance de Beverly, intended to destroy both the reputation and property of Sir de Wilton. While there are several reasons for Stoker to set his tale in Whitby, one wonders why he connected Mina and her documents so overtly to the abbey also featured in *Marmion*. By having Mina write her journal at the location where Constance de Beverly was punished, might Stoker have intended attentive readers to question her honesty, and by extension, the validity of his true crime book? In considering *Dracula*'s emphasis on reliable documents, this paper asks why Stoker chose Whitby Abbey as Mina's favorite seat, and explores how the reference to *Marmion* influences one's understanding and experience of Stoker's classic tale.

Dracula is not presented as a novel, but as a memoir concerned with empirical truths. It absolutely insists that its every page represents an eyewitness account of true events. As the original paratext explains on the first page, "There is throughout no statement of past things wherein memory may err, for all the records chosen are exactly contemporary, given from standpoints and within the range of knowledge of those who made them" (5). The book opens with entries from Jonathan Harker's journal, which accounts daily events as he offers

legal assistance to a Transylvanian count desirous of English property. His visit at the count's remote castle turns to imprisonment, and his congenial host displays some truly demonic characteristics, or so the journal records. After the count departs for England and Jonathan contracts brain fever, the narrative is continued by his fianceè Mina, and her best friend Lucy. The remainder of *Dracula* consists of the letters and journal entries written by these women and their male companions, as well as the newspaper clippings that Mina collects.

These documents are synthesized and typed by Mina, and her remediation represents the only account accessible to characters and readers alike. She takes journals in a variety of forms such as shorthand and audio and types them into a synthesized manuscript. At first, this manuscript is beneficial because not everyone is familiar with the shorthand journals or the mechanics of Seaward's stenographer, but Mina's transcriptions assume a new importance when Dracula burns all of the source materials. In light of this dependence on their validity, one wonders why Stoker chose to have Mina write in the ruins of Whitby Abbey. While Stoker had several good reasons for bringing Dracula to this abbey, his decision to make its graveyard Mina's favorite seat remains less clear.

Whitby is an excellent setting for *Dracula*'s England adventure, but Stoker did not need to explicitly connect Mina's documents with this locale. Some argue that he may have chosen the town for aesthetic qualities described by Ann Mah in an article for *The New York Times*. Mah notes both the picturesque ruins and the sublime seascape that Stoker viewed while writing his masterpiece. Furthermore, she describes an inherently gothic or vampiric ambiance, recalling from her own vacation: "When I turned to look behind me, I saw the setting sun had stained the abbey and its surrounding gravestones as red as blood." Alternatively, a historical reason for this setting is argued by Nina Auerbach and David Skall, who explain in a footnote, "like a domestic reflection of wild Transylvania, Whitby is a vulnerable city that bears the scars of invasion" (Stoker 67). Stoker could have used the setting in such a way as to recall history, aesthetics, and personal sentiment without implying a connection between Mina, the company's avowed documenter, and Whitby Abbey's literary history as the setting for *Marmion*.

Sir Walter Scott's 1808 metrical romance has its own mediascape

and female documentor that look very different from the ideals *Dracula* claims to have achieved. They could even, at first glance, be considered antithetical, as the one depicts a "good" woman conveying truth, and the other a "bad" woman disseminating falsehoods. But Mina seems to feel an affinity towards Constance de Beverley, Scott's unfortunately entombed mediator. Not only does Mina enjoy "the ruin of Whitby Abbey...which is the scene of part of 'Marmion' where the girl was built up in the wall," she connects this space to her mediascape. She notes, "I shall come and sit here very often myself and work. Indeed, I am writing now, with my book on my knee"[1] (Stoker 63). Might this intertextual moment provide a fulcrum with which both Mina and Constance could be inverted? Since Scott uses Constance's false documents to illustrate her alliance with the story's villain, Stoker's reference to that forgery allows for the possibility that Mina might be a willing consort of Dracula.

Both stories explore mediascapes governed by women who can be read either as progressive or transgressive. Scott's poetic tale follows the seemingly gallant Sir Marmion as he rides to and from castles on his way to the battle of Flodden Field. His façade of respectability slips in line 225 when his host Heron wonders "'was that gentle page, in sooth, / a gentle paramour?'" (*Marmion* 1:15). Although a correct surmise, Constance de Beverley is more than a female paramour masquerading as a page boy. This runaway nun instrumentally assists Marmion in ruining a man in order that his betrothed, Clare, would be forced by necessity to accept Marmion's sexual advancements. Bizarrely, she seems to prefigure Dracula's female characters as a nineteenth-century interpretation of a sixteenth-century New Woman.[2]

By conceptualizing Constance de Beverley as a version of the New Woman, one sees that Mina's affinity towards her might extend beyond the shared location. The phrase "New Woman" describes a disparate array of traits that distinguish women or female characters from the Victorian ideals to which they are expected to conform. These generally center around a dismissal of the patriarchal powers

1 This sentiment seems to foreshadow the later connection between documents and motherhood explored in Jonathan's final note.

2 "Perchance you may a marvel deem, / That Marmion's paramour / (For such vile thing she was) should scheme / Her lover's nuptial hour; / But o'er him thus she hoped to gain, / As privy to his honour's stain, / Illimitable power" (*Marmion* 5:23).

or institutions, the portrayal of anything but conventionally subservient femininity, and all aspirations concerning independence (Victorian Web). Although not "number'd with the / dead, / For broken vows, and convent fled," Mina defies the institution of education, rather than that of the church, by acquiring knowledge hitherto inaccessible to her sex—namely a literary knowledge and secretarial skills (*Marmion* 2:20). As someone charged with delivering messages and carrying heraldic banners, might not the page boy represent the medieval secretary? These commonalities between the characters bolster the grounds on which Mina could be inverted in terms of her sympathies. Interestingly in the case of Mina, Charles E. Prescott and Grace A. Giorgio explain that "Reacting against this perceived threat [women existing outside of marriage], conservative writers in the periodical press linked together two disparate figures, the New Woman and the dandy, as potential disruptors of the status quo" (494). Since the only character who might be considered a dandy in the novel is Dracula, this kindred spirit of rebellion might provide the rationale for their possible alliance.

Further linking Mina and Constance, Mrs. Harker has been described as a medieval visionary—both as a lady and as a saint. Eric Brownell identifies a continuity that exists between the medieval and New Woman. He references Brian Murphy's claim that Mina "is no Victorian; she is a medieval lady whose honor and virtue are protected," and argues that Stoker blends conservative or traditional archetypes of medieval femininity with Mina's intimidating technical prowess to "manage...fears of both women's and technology's betrayal of man" (25). This reading of Stoker's tale relies on romantic medievalism to stabilize or support the realism. But if, as Brownell argues, Stoker may have intended Mina to resemble the "pale nun" in Tennyson's *The Holy Grail*, she would be quite close to Scott's runaway nun.

Not only has Mina evidently read *Marmion*, but the character of Constance de Beverley impressed her mind enough to be recalled in passing. This memory indicates that Scott's convoluted poem gave Mina a notable reading experience. Experience, according to Arthur Gordon Melvin, is the aim of all English literature educators. He notes that "If [students] forget the story, well and good, so long as they never forget the mystery of the Palmer or the tragedy of Con-

stance de Beverly" (491). Although this sentence appears in a satirical piece, it strikingly pairs the Palmer and Constance as both the most memorable and most affecting members of the poetic tale. If we read Mina as resembling Constance, then her husband, Jonathan Harker, seems to emerge as the Pilgrim, Friar John. Since Sir de Wilton, *alias* Friar John, suffers directly from the forgeries, it seems that Jonathan's greater distress at the experiences shared by the group might indicate that he suffers more than, even at the hand of, Mina.

Readers are told of Mina's devotion to her husband and the other vampire hunters, but the most sensual passage they are shown occurs between Mina and the Count. After being cautioned by a dying lunatic, the men burst into Mina's room to find a sinister scene playing out in front of the unconscious Mr. Harker: "Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man's bare breast which was shown by his torn-open dress. The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk" (Stoker 247). The bizarre reimagining of the madonna theme highlights the demonic qualities of this image, just as the casting of Mina as an infant questions her innocence. Stoker's language humanizes the Count, while simultaneously animalizing[3] Mina. Later when she retells the scene, she recalls Dracula's assurance that this was "not the first time, or the second, that [her] veins have appeased [his] thirst!" and notes that she "did not want to hinder him" (251). Although the men express surprise at her peril, Dracula's meeting with Mina occurs almost thirty pages after the vampire hunters start casually commenting on her excessive fatigue and "paler than usual" complexion (223). The only part more ridiculous than the men having to be informed of Mina's physical and constitutional changes by an inmate of the asylum is that she herself never noticed the bite marks. Considering the high level of paranoia permeating the small group—not to mention Mina's particular fascination in recording Lucy's bite marks—the apparent fact that she does not look in a mirror between October first and third seems incongruent with her proactive personality. It would appear more likely that she knew of her transient status

3 This might also be read as a reference to le Fanu's Carmilla, a vampire who can turn into a cat.

as human and omitted to inform the vampire hunters.

If the characters are read as parallels, then Constance's aim to destroy de Wilton through false documents in order to gain "illimitable power" over Marmion indicates that false documents of Mina's part would subvert the power from Dracula to herself. While the plot of *Marmion* describes the discovery and punishment of criminally forged documents, Susan Goslee goes a step further and argues that *Marmion* itself represents a metaphor for literary forgery. "*Marmion*'s forgery, is a metaphor not only for the self-indulgence, but for the opportunism involved in the writing of romance fictions, of documents that subvert the verifiability and the ethical responsibilities of history and law" (43). Goslee argues that Scott designed *Marmion* as an anti-romance that "confirm[s] the value of those errant romance structures" by catching and correcting falsehood (43). Alison Lumsden and Ainsley Mcintosh continue the discussion on *Marmion*'s structure, asserting that "Scott's innovation is manifested in the genre-mixing" used in the telling of this tale (41). Just as Stoker experiments with mixed formats and a diverse array of inspirations, Scott frames his cantos around personal letters and draws influence from a variety of poetic traditions found across Europe from antiquity to his own time (41). While, according to Goslee, Scott described realism to illustrate romance, the prevailing viewpoint claims that Stoker narrated realism to portray fiction.

Because of her position as mediator, deconstructing Mina's character necessarily deconstructs *Dracula*. Inversely, to question the accuracy of *Dracula* is to question the accuracy of Mina. In her chapter on deconstructionalism, Deborah Esch explains this literary school as a project that explores the inherent instabilities of a text or institution (375). In other words, the works possess all the means of their own dismantlement, without people adding or reading external considerations into the text. As Derrida puts it, "deconstruction is not an operation that supervenes afterwards, from the outside, one fine day; it is always already at work in the work" (qdt. Esch 375). Even as Stoker builds his case for a true-crime narrative, he embeds within it the means for its unravelment. He crafts his narrative in a way resembling what Derrida calls "*différance*, an economic concept designating the production of differing/deferring" (92). This is because *Dracula*'s true-crime status depends on the reader simultaneously recognizing

that they differ from lived experiences and perceptions of reality, while simultaneously deferring their disbelief. The accounts practice *différance* since, for example, we only know Mina as she differs from the other characters,[4] and in lieu of an omniscient narrator, accounts of her personality and actions are differed from journal entry to journal entry. Just as Derrida saw the subjectivity of *différance* as a disabling yet integral aspect of all language, Stoker explores the subjectivity of the epistolary form, embedding destabilizers while simultaneously demanding its stability.

Stoker continues providing destabilizing passages through the entire novel. He even provides ammunition for the deconstruction of the "happy ending" projected in the endnote, which addresses believability. By connecting document's truth and motherhood (an occupation not possible for Constance), Stoker implies that Mina's character is staked on her child. The incredulity with which their memoir will likely be met does not bother Van Helsing as he comments, "We want no proofs; we ask none to believe us! This boy will someday know what a brave and gallant woman his mother is" (327). At first glance, this ending of *Dracula* reinstates order and confirms everyone's role within the hero-villain binary. It also expresses the manuscript's certainty in its own authenticity so confidently that no outside views will be able to shake this stance. But, as we have already noted, deconstruction occurs from within. The question of truth is only resolved if Mina conforms to Van Helsing's definition of a "brave and gallant woman," and if she is in fact the boy's mother. Christopher Craft illuminates the instability of this ending in his article, "Gender and Inversion in *Dracula*." Frequently read as the "emblem of a restored natural order," Croft argues that Little Quincey does not exactly depict the normative relationship between Jonathan and Mina. For Croft, he actually represents Lucy's posthumous son begotten by all four men via blood transfusions, and "his name, linking the 'little band of men together,' quietly remembers that secret genesis" (459). In this interpretation, he is only a Harker because their conventional marriage

4 Mina and the female vampires are especially defined by their differences from each other: "I am alone in the castle with those awful women. Faugh! Mina is a woman, and there is naught in common. They are devils of the Pit!"

allows him to be viewed as angelic rather than monstrous. In this reading, Little Quincey represents both the cornerstone of the novel's deconstruction, as well as an embodiment of *différance*. If Mina is not the paragon of honesty typically assumed, then readers cannot experience either a true crime (nothing is true) nor a gothic tale (the anxiety is not relieved). In this case, *Dracula*'s vampire hunters and the *Marmion*'s Scottish nobility are not the only people who have been deceived by the documents they hold.

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Contributor Biographies

Afarin Allabakhshizadeh is a fourth-year English student with certificates in Creative Writing, Human Rights & Social Justice, and Business Foundations. She enjoys biking, smelling flowers, and predicting people's life stories based on their natal charts. If she has free time on campus, she is mostly likely shouting at the MEC or GSC.

Samantha Babiak is a third-year English major, pursuing a certificate in Creative Writing. She enjoys the simple things, like the smell of her morning coffee or opening a new book for the first time. There is a lot she wants to do with her life, but most of all, she wants to keep writing.

Katie Brown graduated from The University of Texas in 2016 with a focus in writing every media she could get her hands on. Currently, she is obtaining her M.F.A in Television Writing from Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, CA. When not writing, she enjoys rewatching Gilmore Girls and ceaselessly cleaning her dreamy apartment.

Freyja Catron is on exchange at UT from Melbourne, Australia, where she's majoring in Creative Writing and Philosophy. She has twelve donkeys and she plays the banjo.

Julio Diaz is a third-year English, UTeach, Creative Writing student. Being twenty-one years of age, he is no stranger to desolate nights and slept-in mornings. He is a queer Latinx writer, who dreams in black and white but sees the colors in the world.

Laura Doan is a junior at UT studying Plan II Honors and English, and she has loved writing since she got her first journal at nine—anything from opinion columns to news satire to poetry. When she's

not writing, you'll probably find her watching movies or buying an unhealthy amount of pizzas from Trader Joe's frozen section. Also, Laura is very unpracticed in talking about herself in the third person but can now understand why Kanye and Dwayne The Rock Johnson enjoy it so much.

Rachel Galvan is a senior English and Journalism major. In addition to being a full-time UT student, she is a six-time published novelist, writing under the pseudonym Katherine L. Evans. Her novel, *Rise*, was recognized at CNN's 2017 James W. Foley Freedom Awards for its effort to raise awareness about the perilous work of conflict journalists. When she's not studying, reading, and writing, she devotes her time to the three beloved men in her life: her husband, Joe, her son, Roy, and her yellow lab, Dave.

Rosa Kim is a fourth-year Plan II Honors, English, and History major with minors in Psychology and Korean. She's lived everywhere from South Korea and Texas to Ohio and California, and her hobbies include writing poetry, photography, trying new restaurants, and being a blanket burrito. In her free time, she likes to explore coffee shops, take long drives around town, and spend quality time with her loved ones—a.k.a. her dog, Chewie.

Morgan Laird is a fourth-year Political Communication major. She is currently studying Italian and learning to play the harp. In her free time, she enjoys researching unsolved homicides on the Internet.

Matthew Leger is a third-year English major. He enjoys writing music and poetry, and leftist politics. Some of his favorite writers include Raymond Carver and John Darnielle of the Mountain Goats.

Jacob Lundquist is a junior in the English Honors program. Favorite authors include Leo Tolstoy, Karl Marx, and Sylvia Wynter. Favorite activities include reading (duh), writing (also duh), and listening to music far too loudly.

Schandra Abigail Madha is a chronic student, cross-genre writer on hiatus, and one-half of a double scoop co-host sundae for the monthly I Scream Social feminist reading series. She earned a B.A. in English from the University of Texas at Austin in 2015, during which time she was awarded the Fania Kruger Fellowship for Fiction of Social Vision. She is currently back at UT pursuing a B.S. in microbiology with an eye towards a graduate degree in astrobiology.

Barry Maxwell is a native Austinite, currently nesting in Missoula, MT, in the fiction track of UM's M.F.A. program, with work published in *Split Lip Magazine*, Essay Daily, the Open Bar @ Tin House, *Mud Season Review*, PitheadChapel.com, *Hothouse*, *The Rio Review*, and other venues. Barry is the founder of Street Lit and the Street Lit Authors Club, which provide books and creative writing workshops to Austin's and now Missoula's homeless communities, and he's a fist-waving supporter of the arts in unexpected places, from unexpected sources.

Ike McIntosh is a Radio-Television-Film major with a Creative Writing certificate at UT. As a child, he struggled with basic coordination, like operating a swing set or monkey bars. Now, he struggles to get the point across and in personal relationships.

Kayla Moses still lives in Austin, still feels too much, and still wants to be a writer someday. She did get to go back to Italy. The coffee is just as good, five years later.

Katherine Noble is a writer living in Austin, Texas. She is a third-year poetry fellow at the Michener Center for Writers. She was the 2013 recipient of the Keene Prize in Literature.

Deanna Maria Noriega is a poet, dancer, and occasional actress who loves art collaborations. Majoring in English and pursuing a Creative Writing certificate, she hopes to continue on to graduate

school, publish her own book, and become a Patsy Cline impersonator.

Aza Pace's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Southern Review*, *South Dakota Review,* and *Moon City Review*, among others, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best New Poets. She graduated from UT Austin in 2015, and she is currently in the final year of her poetry M.F.A. program at the University of Houston.

Titan Page is graduating from UT this year and joining the Ph.D. linguistics program at CU Boulder. He has a passion for writing and uses it as a creative exploration of language.

John Calvin Pierce is a senior Liberal Arts Honors English major with a Creative Writing certificate and a German minor who loves to collect plants and bore party guests with unsolicited etymological trivia. He's currently working on the same grad school applications he's been working on for a whole year. Please pray for John Calvin.

Anna Piper is a senior Public Relations major who thinks real life is boring. She likes to write stories and likes it even more when people actually want to read them.

Riley Ratcliff lives in Durham, North Carolina, with their friends, dog, and cat.

Colin Traver is a December 2017 graduate of UT with a B.A. in English. He enjoys art, music, reading, writing, fishing, and swapping good stories with good people.

Elizabeth Werth is a senior English major and Creative Writing Honors student who plans to pursue a dual graduate degree in English and Creative Writing at Arcadia University. She's often found traveling, wearing heart-shaped sunglasses at a motorsport event, and falling in love indiscriminately and with ardor.

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FEATURING PAST CONTRIBUTORS:

Katie Brown
Schandra Madha
Barry Maxwell
Kayla Moses
Katherine Noble
Aza Pace
Riley Ratcliff
Colin Traver