

# THE BELL TOWER

---

Undergraduate Literary Journal



2023 Edition | Purdue University



# The Bell Tower

## *Undergraduate Literary Journal*

### *2023 Edition*

#### **Executive Editorial Staff**

*Head Poetry Editor:* Emma Simes  
*Assistant Poetry Editor:* Olivia Budzevski

*Head Prose Editor:* Olivia DeYoung  
*Assistant Prose Editor:* Erin Walker

#### **General Editorial Staff**

*Poetry Editors:*  
Adrian Calderon, Eden Davis, Marissa Jenkins, Ali Manges,  
Abhiram Saran, Anna Shura, Paul Zellerhoff

*Prose Editors:*  
Eliana Duran, Nate Hood, Avery Kaplan, Leah Moyer,  
Katherine Olberding, Avery Stratton, Eva Voelker

# Special Thanks

Professor Marlo David  
Student Activities and Organizations (SAO)  
The Purdue University English Department  
CopyMat

---

---

## Editors' Note

Within this edition of *The Bell Tower*, there exists a treasure trove of creation. As a reader, you will pass through worlds like your own and other radically different; yet, all will hold the stories, dreams, and whispers of their creators. Know love, know joy, know grief, and know life. All you need to do is turn the page. The editors of *The Bell Tower 2023* welcome you.

---

---

## Trigger Warning

Within this edition of *The Bell Tower*, there will be graphic content, depictions, and themes. Please, read with this warning in mind.

# Table of Contents

<b>Becoming Spring</b> <i>Melanie Clayton</i>	6
<b>Go Pick Some Strawberries</b> <i>Anna Shura</i>	6
<b>Owners of the Coming and Going Door</b> <i>Anna Shura</i>	7
<b>It's Strange</b> <i>Arden Woodall</i>	8
<b>Ballad for Catfish</b> <i>Nate Hood</i>	9
<b>Last and Last</b> <i>Avery Stratton</i>	10
<b>Your Magic Quill</b> <i>Javier Melo</i>	11
<b>The Witching Aria</b> <i>Avery Stratton</i>	12
<b>Ziryxa</b> <i>Bryn Kozuch</i>	19
<b>Prickle</b> <i>Avery Kaplan</i>	22
<b>Sore Muscles</b> <i>Avery Kaplan</i>	22
<b>Crimson Radishes, Crimson Bodies, and Unspoken Words</b> <i>Kat Payne</i>	23
<b>Kitchen Sink</b> <i>Avery Kaplan</i>	25
<b>Chocolate Chips and Peanut Butter</b> <i>Melanie Clayton</i>	26
<b>Lullaby of Your Dream Machine</b> <i>Anna Shura</i>	28
<b>Don Ernesto</b> <i>Javier Melo</i>	28

## **Becoming Spring**

*Melanie Clayton*

March is winter and the promise of spring, when the earth opens its muddy depths and freezes and opens again; when the brook-banks become lined with blocks of ice, like wreckage from a bygone age; I want to climb the stone, explore the ancient world resurfaced; dip my fingers—just the tips—into the rabid currents that at other times of the year burble happily. *The ice will crack, it's too fast, stay back*, I think, and I start to go, but I'm captivated by the sudden rain falling in fat drops, too fast to escape even if I wanted to. Instead I feel each drop hit me, watch them add to the thick slush on the ground and melt the edge of snowbanks and there is nothing else. The wind is strong, alive; warm and cold and spring and winter; I add my voice to the wind, sing loud, strong, confident for once, forgetting the neighbors who can probably hear me. I am consumed, present; I want to run through the woods, dash around like some mad fae creature; I know the air—the March air that promises me spring—will keep me safe from falling branches. *Go home*, my mind says, *get warm, be safe*—but I refuse to hide, because I am strong, and right now I am feeling alive.

## **Go Pick Some Strawberries**

*Anna Shura*

Start by shaking hands with nature's  
least creative color: green. Past  
the strawberries peeping like  
Dorothy's slippers easily spotted, find

Snap peas are summer candy;  
the saltwater taffy of the earth  
with strings curling in ripples,  
tight waves gripping against the trellis.

I will check every row,  
but it's like hugging relatives:  
clingy finger strands pull at my hair  
and weeds whack against my knuckles.

My women's pants have elusive pockets  
for snap pea seconds who turn into hours.  
Leaves flashing grins at me,  
white flowers' beady eyes winking to each other,

They're in on this game—  
the leaves and weeds and stems  
all frolicking in petty pea paradise, but  
my bag is half empty and my satisfaction half full.

## **Owners of the Coming and Going Door**

*Anna Shura*

When I come home and scuff my shoes on the rug, I lean against the door and shrug off my backpack, but my dog-cat is already meowing at me and I love those indignant mews. I scoop him up, cookie dough belly and all, and kiss his whiskers and rub my face against his rumbling form.

I walk around in circles in the pacing way I do when I am on the phone and let my feet fall into the pattern of the rug, the trees that skip and flowers that stain maroon and turquoise. I know them too well as I carry my potato sack cat.

Without too much trouble, he falls asleep in my arms, sheer dead weight, the same weight when he grips my neck in a thunderstorm, the same weight when he tumbles back from his tree branch. My arms will ache without much time, but I'll gladly hold this bundle of kitten so. As we sit together, I will breathe hot breath into his tummy, and he will purr my name. But when I return to the door frame again, a second shadow will follow me.

She, a princess who knows she's a dictator, will eep instead of speak her native tongue. I'll answer her and she understands and swishes her tail in royalty. Her silky coat, plush with confidence, urges me to forget she's the definition of a scaredy cat so often slinking away from the Halloween look-a-likes. As she nuzzles the kibble, jingling in the bowl, I'll sit there with her and only think of her fur.

Yes, I'm on the shoe rubbed rug, on the floor next to the battered door frame gripped one too many times by keys and backpacks and thumbprints. But she, my kitten ink smudge is there with me. When she comes to assume her paper-weight-cat position on my lap, I'll fall back against the wall, my aching neck, and curl with her as she chooses me.

## It's Strange

Arden Woodall

"Love you, Sunshine bird!" Dad said.

Soft bags creased under his eyes as he tried to hide welling tears. Mom had a subtle but proud grin growing under her cheeks and sighed an "I'll miss you so much." My parents leaned against each other, better friends than they ever were spouses, and watched me depart for the biggest trip anyone in our family had ever taken. Next to them, my best friend Albert's mother untucked a hand from her crossed arms and waved goodbye.

We hustled through TSA, tracked down our gate, and boarded the first of our three-flight itinerary to Palma de Mallorca, Spain.

First hurdle: asking for a seat belt extender.

"What if I just buckle the seat belt behind my waist? They won't know," I said.

"Yeah, then when we crash in the middle of the Atlantic, you die," Albert replied.

I laughed then stared outside the jet bridge window wondering how angry Dad would be for letting me go on this trip just to die from not wearing a seat belt.

"Just ask for one," Albert said.

Second hurdle: asking for an extender in Spanish.

I ran it over and over again: ¿Puedo tener un extensor?

And a few more times with Albert out loud to really nail my accent. I thought it'd be less embarrassing if I sounded fluent. I did not. It was not.

After a delay in Atlanta, we finally made it to Mallorca. Because planes get cold, and we knew that the napkin-sized sheets Delta markets as "complementary blankets" offered no real warmth, we had both worn jeans and layered up. But when we disembarked, in the middle of Palma's hottest summer yet, the airport had no air conditioning. We fled to the nearest restrooms and stripped. After we peeled the denim off and slung our sweatshirts through the handles of our suitcases, we booked it to find our host families.

They kissed our cheeks, and I grimaced knowing they were salty kisses because Albert and I were both dripping in sweat. I was visibly more fatigued than my skinny pal, but I was happy to find the program coordinator fanning herself dramatically, lamenting about the heat, and spewing excited Spanish welcomes. I didn't catch most of what she said.

The next week proved equally sweaty. Because of the war in Russia and Ukraine, energy costs were inflated, and the university couldn't afford to air-condition our classrooms until a couple weeks in. But not even two days in, everyone had bought those goofy handheld fans, the ones Flamenco dancers use, to cool themselves off. They flapped their wrists like rabid animals, and I was glad to not be the only one panting and glistening after climbing stairs. Plus, it gave us all something to complain about. It's strange how complaining brings people together.

The first week passed and then the second, and I started getting used to the temperatures. I made sure

to end showers with cold water so my hair wouldn't harbor any heat. I always wore shorts with t-shirts and tank tops with full length pants. And I slept in my underwear, star-fished on the bed to thin out my body heat. I was getting the hang of the physical hurdles of traveling.

Just as I started acclimating to Spain, it was time for Paris. Our weekend agenda was so dense that time became obsolete. One moment, Albert and I were marveling as tourists passed us on marble benches in the Louvre. We personally could not remain interested for nine miles and four floors of art galleries. The next, we were trekking on foot to the Catacombs, too cheap to pay for taxis. We descended and reascended two hundred and forty-three steps to walk through corridors of dead people. To gawk at, but not touch, old bones for hours. Tragedy really intrigues those it doesn't affect. That's strange.

Now, I don't even remember how we got there, but the first night ended at a club called O'Sullivan's. There I scream-sang "Lady Marmalade" with three French Canadians from our hostel and a swarm of Danish buffoons. We were all celebrating different things. The Canadians, graduation. The Danish, a soccer match against France. My friends and I, my twentieth birthday. Each occasion strangely merited the same act of celebration, dancing, and we passed each other around like slimy beach balls. It was only when the tequila started to wear off that we were ready to call it a night.

Though the day had passed in blurs of touristic adrenaline, it left a lasting impression on my body. I'd thought the seatbelt extender would be the most painful part of the trip. You know, my pride and everything. If not that, I'd stroke out or something from the heat eventually. But at the end of my first night in Paris, my body crossed a threshold.

Leaving the club, I stopped my friends and plopped onto a curb. I removed my low top converse like glass slippers, and my face sank when I found massive water and blood blisters bubbling on the balls of my feet, pads of my toes, and backs of my heels. My friends winced as I slowly replaced my socks, and I could feel my heart-beat in the pockets of pain forming all over my feet. More than this throbbing, though, was the drunken hunger groaning in my stomach.

"Wanna get McDonald's?" I looked up at them.

Can't say no to the birthday girl. So, my skin sticky, hair tangled, and feet bleeding, they walked as I hobbled to the latest open McDonalds. We ordered then carried our brown paper bags down the cobblestone streets of Montmartre and filed into the hostel lobby. The concierge ignored us as we silently shared in a strange, drunken communion of M&M McFlurries and large fries.

I laughed picturing my emotional parents at the airport. I wondered how teary-eyed they'd be to know, even halfway across the world, McDonalds is my go-to drunk food.



## **Ballad For Catfish**

*Nate Hood*

Cobblestone streets back alleyways behind  
Temple Bar near that Rock N Roll museum  
I had been meaning to visit  
Fibber Magees served a brilliant Long Island  
So I shared a pitcher with new friends then  
To Mulligan and Haines with a vodka sprite

Heineken and football shined down on us  
Tottenham's upset over City overshadowed by half-empty cups  
And loose joints scattered over benches  
Begging to be relit and smoked for three breaths We  
revisited the gay bar where just a month prior I had  
danced on stage because nobody had reason to judge

We waited in line outside clubs too lavish for sweatpants  
Watching a woman piss in the corner of another club As  
her friend took guard covering  
Like a royal guard outside of Buckingham  
Outside of SPAR while the neon rainbow lights Of the  
George illuminated our drunken shadows on brick

You opted for a night of seclusion  
Drinking from a wine mug decorated  
Ornately with cats and spirits of back alley thrift stores  
Instead of various highball glasses and plastic cups  
Wearing light blue elephant bottoms and your face  
Disappearing into the suffocating dark of your bedroom

The same way husband anticipates wife  
After a day of laboring and hugs her and kisses  
Her on the cheek not before she can even set her bags down  
I too called for your warm smile and kinder  
Green eyes and your brownish-orange hair  
You refuted and refused to believe was orange

I threaded my fingers through your hair like that Purple  
Play-doh I bought for you in Galway and I knew  
Despite my long nights and adventures spent  
Taking the piss in completely identical bars spread  
From Trinity to Parnell that I was  
One LUAS stop away from you

**Last and Last**  
*Avery Stratton*

**I. Varnish**

I saw you in a tile last night  
Portals apart, folded into the angle between the ground and my mind's eye  
Your face scanned into being, one vein at a time  
I had to look again, or else you'd never dissolve

Someone told me once that we only remember when we are remembered,  
But does that not mean that you and I are cursed  
Only to recall each other for one fleeting second  
Memory escaping before it ever lands?  
And does that not mean that you think of me as rarely as I think of you?  
How cruel

You could have told me that last time was the  
*Last* time  
Instead of leading me across the cliff  
And leaving me at the edge  
When it was day for you and night for me  
Your never-whispered dread was that I wouldn't forgive you,  
And it's true, I wouldn't  
But at least I would have known  
And we could lay these jolty refractions to rest

**II. I Am Who, You Are How**

What when where why  
Wh-o  
"I have a 'wh', I'm just like you!"  
It's shaped right, but it sounds wrong  
I know it's broken.  
They're too polite to point it out,  
But they know it's broken

And you, "how" sit with us as well  
Your meaning fits, but not your form  
You bear no semblance to the norm,  
but have you ever noticed  
that your three letters  
are my letters three?

You and I ring different meanings  
But my "wh" is defective  
And your "wh" is severed  
We might belong, but only just.  
you Would Have to squint,  
But it could be seen

We two tore the O in Half  
And we keep it for ourselves  
Our O's don't rhyme  
But we sing to them as if they could.  
An O-ath

If either of us didn't exist  
The other would be the only exception  
But two exceptions make a trend

A subcategory where the 3-D peg is shoved in the 2-D hole  
If you belonged, I could not

Where are you, you who understand how I am?  
Come find me  
Come make me belong

## Your Magic Quill

*Javier Melo*

You have a magic quill, an angel gave you when you were a child.  
This quill can pierce the space between what ought to be, and what never was.  
With but a flick of your wrist, you design the paragraphs of your life.  
You could write upon the willow trees, hazel leaves in winter.  
Or the kiss of a summer breeze, spiraling through your fingers.  
You could leave notes on the side of mountains to flood them with white flowers.  
Or erect castles in the sand, their halls and ceilings secrets.

You could build me a house of poems, if you wanted to keep trying.  
Italicize my windows and hide memoirs in my drawers.  
Try inscribing on the clouds the words closest to your heart.  
The words farthest from your fingers, like the sunrise is your diary.  
You could make a rainbow tell me that you're sorry.  
Or fly back here on a flower.

And even though I haven't moved, your paper airplanes can't find me.  
You know I can't read the cursive quotes on your desires.  
Sketches, serpentine across the night sky.

To make constellations out of flickering light bulbs.  
Yet still recoil when I pull down the blinds.  
To turn candlelit cigarettes into dreams for tomorrow.  
Yet never surrender a tearful goodbye.  
While tales of chivalry are written in every petal of your garden.

The color of the roses you've scribbled on your dress,  
have eroded the blush of your cheek against my palm.  
This tantalizing tarantella you've composed,  
with your magic quill in hand,  
compelling me to stare at your hollow pearly eyes.  
Write a tragedy where the main characters realize,  
it's hard to want something when you have all that ever was.  
It's hard to be  
someone  
if you can censor all your tears,  
or erase all,  
you did not mean to say  
to me.

You have a magic quill,  
an angel gave you when you were a child.  
This quill can't pierce the space between,  
all that you want,  
and all that I want  
to lack.  
Write the new Great-American-Novel  
but make it so that,  
every chapter begins with Gatsby shot in his pool,  
drowned and floating on his back.  
Write yourself a happy ending,  
but keep  
me  
out.

## The Witching Aria

Avery Stratton

One year ago, down to the date, the batteries to the flashlight died. Etta Walez knew that they were the very last functioning ones in the household because she'd sorted through the entire pile of discarded batteries, trying each combination in the compartment for the flashlight, and not a single one worked.

As she fiddled with the pile of lukewarm batteries, Mr. Devlon sang the same two notes over and over at half capacity. *C, D, C, D, C, D*. He whirled his empty pen between his fingers. With finality, he switched to full capacity and sang out loud, "C, D. Etta, write that down. A quarter and an eight- no. Two eights."

"One moment," Etta murmured. She pushed the last remaining battery combination into the slot. She clicked the button to no avail. The basement remained dark.

"They're all dead," Etta announced. Devlon groaned. He began to click and unclick the pen furiously enough that it jumped from his fist onto the floor.

"Get the candles, then," he prescribed.

Etta gathered the unfinished sheet music piled before her. "I don't think it's a wise idea, sir. We won't be able to get any new batteries for another three months. The candles should be conserved for emergencies."

Devlon turned his head to face her, and then swiveled it a bit more so his ear was closest to her. "I'm on the brink of revolution and she wants for wicks," he declared in exasperation to some imaginary audience.

Etta thought a two note interval was hardly on the brink of a decent bar, let alone a revolution. "Can't the revolution wait till sunrise?"

"You don't take this seriously."

She couldn't have taken it more seriously if she tried, which was why she had to be practical about the ordeal. Wasting finite resources that could be as easily replaced with something as free as sunlight wasn't a luxury they could afford. She hardly saw why it mattered where the light came from anyway, since she was the one scribing the notes onto the page. Once, Devlon had told her that composing exclusively after nightfall was the only way to "tap into his muse." Etta suspected it was less about superstition and more to do with the habit of hiding away while he worked on his rebellion. She would have thought it would be a habit he'd be inclined to ditch, seeing that writing by brittle light was what weakened his vision in the first place. He would have no need for her if he'd used his eyes at reasonable hours in the first place.

Mr. Devlon insisted that she ask for new batteries the next time supplies were sent, but Etta knew better than to ask for things they did not need. She told Mr. Devlon she'd sent out for more, but she started weighing her options around the house instead. She kept the curtains open (Devlon preferred them closed). She started waking him up earlier without telling him so that they could work by daylight (Devlon preferred to work in the wee hours of the night). Occasionally, reluctantly, she

broke out the stash of cheap candles from the storage closet (Devlon preferred light via electricity).

The last of these methods was the least practical, so Devlon leaned on it the most. He made as much a fuss as he was capable of- and oh, how capable he was- but Etta was stubborn in a quieter way, and that was how the two had found themselves nearly an entire year later with light sources that should have diminished months ago.

But even Etta could not spin gold of straw forever, and they found themselves with just half a candle left one year after the last of the batteries died. This was no good, since the composer did his best work in the night, loathe Etta was to admit it, and they couldn't get away with scraping by anymore.

It was a miracle they had made it out this long with just the one candle left, and on that day of all the days. Theo was meant to finally come back to the little house that day to deliver the new shipment and send out for more. Etta knew she ought not to be so thrilled for Theo to come as she was. Devlon was woefully mistrusting of the boy tasked with delivering their essentials, what with him technically working for the state.

Etta had never known if there truly was no one like Theo or if Theo was just the only person her age she had interacted with in many years, but either way, her heart went unguarded around him. At first, this was troubling to say the least. Etta knew there was no way to foster any sort of relationship with Theo when she was confined to the house out in the dead center of the desert and he never stayed in one place for more than a day. After all, she only saw him once every three months. So while she couldn't control the way that her thumping blood deafened her each time she saw him, she could force herself to be practical and never let her heart drive her.

That was until he sent the first book.

Before Theo sent her the book, Etta had never spoken to him. The extent to their relationship was her watching him through the front window, him meeting her eyes, and her alarming and darting to the back of the house where he was sure not to see her. It went on this way for nearly a year until one day, instead of dropping the shipment at the doorstep and leaving, he had knocked. This was just interesting enough to convince Etta out of hiding and scurry to the door. Her hand hovered over the knob until he knocked again, and of its own accord, her hand clutched it to throw the door open.

Theo stood in the threshold with all his cargo on the ground, other than a tattered looking book in his hands. The two of them watched each other, wide eyed, before he could think of what to say. Etta kept her hand tentatively on the doorknob.

Theo cleared his throat and said "I thought you must be lonely, holed up in here by yourself."

Etta's heart rattled around her ribs. "Oh, I'm not alone." She winced once it had been said, because obviously Theo would have known that.

Theo frowned. "I feel you might be better off if you

were, frankly. What are you doing all the way out here, anyway? Don't tell me you were exiled like him."

Etta felt a twang of loyalty to Devlon that nearly rivaled the nerves that Theo gave her. "He's an old man. Someone's got to look out for him out here."

"He's just lying in the bed he's made," Theo replied with a shrug. He appeared uneasy at the sight of Etta's growing frown. "But why you?"

"It's my job."

"You weren't here when he arrived."

She wasn't sure how she felt about him noticing that. It was true, she hadn't made it out to Devlon's house until he'd been there for just after a month. It was much more difficult for her to find him all the way out there, because while Devlon had been escorted out of the country by carriage, Etta had to follow his trail just on her own two feet without the faintest clue where he would be taken.

Before she started her journey out to isolation, Etta hadn't thought much of the man who lived next door that worked with her parents. Devlon had always seemed like nothing more than a grumpy old man, albeit one with a livelier vibrato and harsher passion. Either way, he didn't strike her as anyone out of the ordinary, and it came as a shock when her parents asked her to follow him when he was exiled for treason against the state. It had been dreadfully chilly that night, being only a few weeks out till December, but with her parents being Devlons' right hands, Etta knew it would only be a matter of time before they would be taken away or forced into hiding, and then where would she go? Following the mad composer into his exile had been as good a choice as any, and it had seemed so important to her parents that Etta could hardly refuse them. It had been a no-brainer to chase him down.

"What's it that you're alluding to?" Etta asked Theo, growing somewhat impatient.

Theo's smile warped. He stuck his arms out, thrusting the book towards Etta. "I just thought it might help," he explained. Etta took it tentatively out of his hands and glanced at the cover. The paperback was old, clearly used. The spine was cracked ten times over and all the edges and corners were dulled. By the time she looked back up to respond to the gift, Theo was already climbing back into his covered wagon to head back to civilization.

The contents of the book that prompted Etta to fall in love were not the printed words, but the ones scribbled into the margins. Theo had the lousiest penmanship she had ever seen, and his commentary wasn't the most profound, but she could tell just by reading it that he had written the notes specifically for her to read, and as simple as those words were, they were earnest. They came from his heart. It was more than what she could say for anything she ever wrote down, so it was striking.

In the three months between that visit and the next, Etta read the book- and Theo's annotations- five times over. She didn't know it, but a third of the flashlight's batteries went out from her contraband reading habits alone. She was exhilarated and mortified while antic-

ipating his next visit. She knew that it was a danger to Theo to come to the door, since he was risking Devlon's wrath and his own safety, being within earshot. But logic alone was not enough to block a nerve- a feeling.

To Etta's dismay, during Theo's second visit, he didn't knock on the door or stick around and wait for her. By the time she usually expected him to arrive, he was already gone. She was prepared to race off to the boiler room that she'd claimed as her bedroom and sulk just when she saw it: another paperback book bundled in twine tucked between two packages sitting on the doorstep. Before Devlon had time to shout for her to come back to the basement, she rushed to her room and fumbled the strings around until they came loose. When she checked the pages, they were full once again with nearly illegible handwriting. Etta nearly fell over.

That night, after she was done working with Devlon, she ran back up to her room, flashlight in hand, and tore open the invoice that came with that shipment. She tossed the invoice itself to the floor and carefully deconstructed the envelope that it came in. She started to scrawl out her heart's truth in ballpoint pen on the inside, and when she was done, she folded it back into the shape of an envelope. Two months and twenty-nine days later, she stuck it beneath the doormat on the front porch. A day later, a third paperback appeared in its place.

It went on this way for three more books before Etta dropped the pretense and slept on the porch the night before Theo appeared and stayed there all day. From then on, each day Theo arrived was truly a whole day spent together. They would stay out on the porch together for as long as the sun steered clear of the horizon. Then night would fall, and Etta would have to rush in before Devlon started calling to her. After being distracted by two hands on her hips and four lips tied up, she would arrive in the basement with just enough time to not arouse suspicion.

And now, on the day the flashlight went out, Etta was sitting in the windowsill that looked out onto the front lawn. In her mind, she was reciting the list she'd curated of all the things she wanted to talk to Theo about. When you lived in a place where time was a consequence rather than a constraint, it was difficult to come up with so many topics that you couldn't remember them all, but Etta grew resourceful in her time there, so her ability to weave everything from nothing bled into all aspects of her life.

The first sound: footsteps. Present. The second sound: heartbeat. Present. The third sound: doors-a-knockin'. Absent. Absent? That wasn't right. Etta gathered herself up off the windowsill and drifted quietly to the door.

When she threw open the door, sure enough, there was Theo, fixed onto the floorboard. Windswept, but not moving. The packages were unloaded at his feet, with him standing in the middle of them like a scarecrow in a field. He watched Etta with a closed expression.

Etta let out a sigh of relief. She opened the door a bit wider and teased, "What are you waiting for, an invitation?"



Theo shook his head just so. He leaned a bit to the left to look just past Etta's shoulder. Etta turned her head to see what he might be looking at, or looking for, but there was nothing out of the ordinary that she could tell. Nothing ever changed here, not unless Theo himself had delivered it.

"Are you alright? You look like you've seen a ghost." Etta took a step out of the door and onto the porch, bracing her bare feet for the impact of rough pavement. To her relief, Theo didn't step back away from her when she made toward him, but he also didn't move any closer when she pressed the back of her hand to his cheek. She hadn't seen him so standoffish since before they'd ever spoken.

"Here's your invoice," Theo deadpanned. He took her wrist away from his face and slipped the little envelope into her hand.

Etta's concern was growing by the second. "Theo?" she asked.

Theo's face was as if he had aged three years in the three months since she'd seen him. Usually, there was love set into his face when he looked at Etta. Usually, she felt warm just by looking at him behind a window. Now, he studied her without leaving any room for being studied himself- he had concealed all the emotion out of his face. He was blank.

But there was this- A hardback book pulled from his pocket, a hand pressed into her arm, and a promise in his eyes. He nodded resolutely and pulled away from the porch. When Theo left, Etta usually cherished the visual of him riding off into the sunset. That day, the sun sat directly above them, which left only one interpretation to his departure: leaving.

Etta stared at his back, mouth agape. By the time she got her head back on straight, it was too late to call out to him. He was a speck in the distance. She turned her focus to the book he'd left behind. Ever since they started to talk face to face, Theo had stopped bringing books for her, so while it wasn't unprecedented that he'd left her with this one, it felt like it was.

This book was the newest looking one Etta had ever received from Theo. The spine, which was usually bent into oblivion, was left carefully intact. Other than the strange, misaligned pages, it looked like Theo might have purchased it new. Etta turned it in her hands over and over again, trying to decide what to make of it. She flipped to the first page and saw no notes. She skimmed the first few chapters, and still, no notes.

It felt like there was no agency left to her. Etta allowed her legs to carry her to the boiler room, where she placed the book along with the rest. If there were no notes from Theo in it, she didn't really see the point of reading it. Then, before she realized what she was doing, she was putting away all the groceries Theo had left with her. It took the better part of an hour to get them all out of their boxes and into the right places. By the time she was finished, she opened the invoice like she always did so she could take inventory for her own reference. She normally wouldn't do this until later into the night or possibly the next morning, but Theo's

handwritten descriptions of each item was more than anything else he had left for her that day, so she might as well soak up the only familiarity of him that she could get.

She almost missed it. Buried about halfway down the list, right between "batteries" and "flour" was a product listed that wasn't a product at all. Etta's eyes flicked back up to it after registering what she'd seen. She read it five times over to make sure she was reading it right.

There, on the page, written in Theo's untidy script, was the word "Truth."

Heart fluttering, Etta dropped the invoice and quickly snatched it back up. She raced to retrieve the new book again. Before she opened it, she jammed the new batteries into the compartment and clicked it on so that she could shut the door and still read without the natural light getting through.

Etta sat down in the corner with the book sprawled on her lap. She intended to waste no time: she scoured each page individually, spending an extra second on each one even when she could see no additions written down.

Just about halfway through the book, Etta found the first annotation. No words were written; all that was added onto the page was a little arrow in the margin on the far right side, pointing to the next page. Etta flipped it over. There, she found another arrow, in the far left margin this time, pointing back at the page she had just turned. Etta frowned. What was she supposed to make of this? She flipped the page back and forth. She decided to skip over it and come back. Maybe there would be more clues later on.

Etta got to the back cover without finding a single other sign. She was beginning to get uneasy. It wasn't like Theo to be cryptic in any way. He was the sort to wear his heart on his sleeve and say what he believed, even if he knew Etta wouldn't like it. He was always asking her things he knew she wouldn't do- she had lost track of how many times he'd asked her by then to leave with him and never return to the little ranch house in the desert. ("You're not the one in exile. It's unjust." "I'm not gonna tell you again why I can't. Just drop it.") This request annoyed Etta every time, but she sort of admired him for asking. He would risk peeving her if it meant he was doing what he believed was right.

So now, surrounded by slivers of hints, thrust into helplessness, Etta was starting to feel like maybe she hardly knew what Theo was like at all. She opened the book to the page with the arrow on either side and held it so close to her eye that she could see the fibers of the paper. She didn't think it would help much, but it did ground her.

The light from the flashlight flickered. It bounced the shadow of the book along the wall. Etta watched this little projection carefully, and then moved the flashlight back and forth behind the book to watch it dance along the wall. It was then, staring at the shadow, that she realized what she hadn't before. The page with the arrows along it was much thicker than any other page in the

book. It was so dark in the boiler room that she hadn't noticed it before.

Etta ran her hand along the edge of the page, just out of reach from the age to ensure that she didn't cut her finger on it. It was stiff and unpaperlike. She carefully pinched the top of the page and started running her fingers opposite each other. Sure enough, the one page drifted apart into two. A seam revealed itself around the perimeter that showed where the two pages had been glued together. Before Etta saw what was written on these two pages, a loose sheet that was stuffed between them fell out and onto her lap. She picked up the page and shone the flashlight right onto it.

*"My Sharp Etta,-"*

This part, Etta scanned over and over again before she kept on reading. She was senselessly thrilled that Theo knew her well enough to know that this was how she would want to be described.

*"I'm sorry for the coldness I will have to greet you with when I give you this message. It's only that I didn't want him to hear what I had to tell you, but I needed to be sure you'd know how serious this matter is. You're clever enough that I know you must be reading this someplace where he cannot see you. I know his eyesight is poor, but whatever you do, do not let him see any of this. Not the book, not my letter, and certainly not the sheet music.*

*"I know you don't have any desire to leave, and I respect your choice and your loyalty, but I hope that you will forgive my concerned curiosity. I spend every minute apart from you worried, and every minute with you doubly so. To you, Mr. Devlon was the leader of a just rebellion, but to me, he was a treasonous threat that nearly left my city in ruins.*

*"In my concern, I began to talk about the town with those who knew him well. Naturally, most of the people who fall into that category were those who consorted in his rebellion, so I had to tread lightly, both to find them in their hiding, and to avoid suspicion myself. I only wanted to know if he was a character that was entirely safe to be around, for your sake. I found enough of them that I feel even more confident in my mistrust. Many of the rebels I spoke with recoiled even at the name Devlon. At first I thought this was simply a reaction to being caught again, but I realized soon that this was not the case. They were all in a haze. Talking about Devlon would only further confuse them. At first they seemed happy, and then frustrated, and then fearful, with the last of these emotions seemingly the strongest.*

*"I've never heard any of his enchantments for myself, but I've heard enough about them from you and from his victims that my suspicion grew from these interactions. I can't be sure, but it seemed to me that all the rebels I spoke with were experiencing the effects of a curse now fading at last.*

*"One of the rebels still had a small collection of Devlon's arrangements. He allowed me to file through them, and that's where I found the sheet*

*music attached in this message. As I'm sure you can tell from the title, it's not to be taken lightly.*

*"You must see the situation this puts me in. I trust your judgement, but I fear for you. I long to take you away, but I know it is not my fare to pay. I implore you to take my findings into consideration, although I know you will be resistant. I plan to return in a week's time, and I will be subtle about it. If you think I'm mad, I'll take on that diagnosis and we can leave this behind, if that's really what you want. But if you think there's any chance at all that I might be right, I pray you'll run with me and we'll never come back. I'll stop five miles out due west from the ranch house. Should things be more dire than even I thought, come find me there. I'll be waiting.*

*"Please remain fearless,*

*"Your Theo"*

What to make of this? The points Theo made in his letter were all the ones he had ever made before, only now he had facts with which to ground them. What was he thinking, going around, searching for the lost supporters of Devlon in the scraps of the city? Her protective disapproval was quickly morphed into something else, a mortifying thought: had he found her parents? Did he discover them getting by somewhere civilization could not see? Imagining such an encounter was not a thought that sat easy.

Etta turned her attention to the music referenced in the letter. Pasted onto the glued pages that had concealed the letter were two leaves of sheet music written in familiar scrawl. It was Devlon's work, which meant it must have been written many years ago when his vision was still perfectly intact. The piece was entitled "Duress in D Minor." Etta read through the music and hummed it under her breath. She had worked enough with Devlon to recognize the chord progression as that of a curse of persuasion. Performed with the right instrument, anyone listening to it would be under the whims of the performer.

Devlon had emphasized many times that curses of persuasion were not to be taken lightly. They were always written to be performed in ensembles to ensure that it was unanimous among an informed group that the audience should need to be coerced against their will. They were also arranged for a rare set of instruments, and ones that would not typically be played together. Etta and Devlon had once arranged one that was to be played on harpsichord, mandolin, snare drum, and the water glasses. She couldn't even begin to fathom what it would sound like or even how this small band was to be acquired inconspicuously, but she supposed that was the point. They were not meant to be easy to perform.

That was why this particular arrangement stuck out to Etta. Scribbled into the margins where Devlon always wrote down further information about the piece, it was listed as an aria: a song to be sung solo. There was no line of music for accompaniment of any kind, which meant that the song was to be sung by one person alone. So where was the rest of it? Devlon never



arranged curses of persuasion to be performed by one person alone, especially a vocal one which required no musical prowess past the ability to read sheet music and sing on pitch. It was far too much power for anyone to wield.

Etta tried to peel the sheets back to see if there was a possible accompaniment written down on another page, or perhaps the back, but the only additional paper to be found was a handwritten invoice on a small square of yellowing paper:

*“Duress Aria”: sent out for delivery on November the seventeenth to Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Walez. Expected arrival on November the eighteenth. PRIORITY DELIVERY.”*

In pulling it closer to her face for further examination, Etta nearly tore the invoice in two. She hastily threw her thin quilt over the book and all its contents and scrambled out of the boiler room. She raced as quietly as she could to the backdoor in the sparse little kitchen at the back of the house. Next to the doorframe was a loose floorboard that Etta and Devlon had discovered together. It was crammed full of all the sheet music that had ever been written in the ranch house in order of scription. It started with a stack of sloppily written sheet music that Devlon had created in the time between he was sentenced to isolation and Etta had arrived to meet him. All of those arrangements had been frantically written from his own memory of the ones he had already composed in the past and found success in. Neither he nor Etta knew whether these copies were successful since they didn't have the people or the instruments to perform them. The only instrument in the entire house was a crude little piccolo that Etta had fashioned using the end of a broomstick and a steak knife. Whenever Devlon finished composing a piece, Etta would play it back to him on the piccolo to ensure all the notes sounded as they ought to. It was well and safe with just one instrument playing each part one at a time, and it was all the same since Devlon did not care for the piccolo and rarely wrote it into any of his compositions, so there was never much potential for Etta to accidentally enact a part of the curses they created.

Etta pulled the bundle of Devlon's copies out of the floorboards and untied the twine that contained them. She had seen these sheets before but had never played close enough attention to them to suspect there was anything off about them. Now that she rifled through the selection of them, she felt foolish not to have noticed the peculiarities that these arrangements shared. Each one was written for only one instrument, although none of them said which one. Before, Etta would have chalked this up to Devlon not remembering more than one part for each composition, or possibly writing them all down separately before intending to combine them together to see how the harmonies aligned. Now, she wasn't sure of anything.

Etta selected a short arrangement from the list. Only a page and a half, entitled “The Ballad of Balance.” Its chord progression indicated a curse of parallelism, another variety that she had worked on with the composer

a few times before. She grabbed the piccolo, which was also stuffed into the shallow floorboard, and stepped out onto the back porch, making sure the door was securely shut behind her.

Reliably, a little black songbird sat on the clothes line that stretched out behind the ranch house. Etta stared it right in the eyes before turning her head down to the music. She secured it underneath the toe of her shoe so that it wouldn't blow away in the wind.

Any other bird would have scared off by the sound of music beginning to play, but the songbirds that lived in the desert had all grown accustomed, possibly even fond, of Devlon and his music. He had amicably made friends with all of them by singing to them on the back porch in his first month before Etta had arrived, and now many of them flocked back eagerly to await a song to hear. By the time Etta piccolo-ed all the way through the ballad, the bird squawked for an encore.

Tentatively, Etta set down the piccolo on the ground beside her and stood back up straight again. If the curse had worked, the bird should mirror her actions back to her in real time. She took a deep breath and waved her arm in a grandiose arch above her head. The bird did nothing but stare back at her and tilt its head a few degrees.

Etta picked the music up. A chill dropped down her back. She cleared her throat and now sang the ballad in a shaking voice to the bird. Before she could even set the sheet music back down after finishing, the bird held its wings up by its beak, as if it was holding an invisible paper in its nonexistent fingertips. It took a step back on the wire just as Etta stepped back in surprise. She opened her mouth to speak, and the bird's beak dropped open.

Etta was not sure if the bird was close enough to the house to be able to follow her through the door, and she did not stick around to find out. She ran inside as fast she could and slammed the screen door, then the real one, and locked them tight lest she accidentally make the bird capable of opening it.

“What's all that slamming around for?” Devlon's muffled voice yelled from the basement.

Etta gathered her crescendoing breath. All she managed to reply was a loud “Sorry!”

“Come down here!” Devlon called again. “And bring the candle! I believe I've worked out the sonata!”

Etta rushed back to the boiler room while shouting whatever could come to mind. “We ought to save the candle, Mr. Devlon!” If she could get him to hold out a little longer, she might be able to gather her thoughts and form an opinion. She just needed time.

There was no time. Devlon was insisting loudly, and it was getting in the way of her attempt to list out the facts in her head. Devlon had composed singers' solos before Etta had arrived despite saying that he hadn't. A very easily performed persuasion curse was sent to her parents only a day before shit hit the fan. Her parents had never involved her in any rebellion affairs before sending her after the composer: fact- or was it? That had always seemed like a fact to her when it wasn't a

thought she directly confronted, but now that she was pointing her attention at it, it seemed fuzzy, like a light hidden behind a veil. The truth was too murky to properly make out.

What Etta did know was that she never made decisions without listing out facts like this, and she had not tried to make any pros or cons after being asked to chase down Devlon.

For all his theatrics and intimidation, Etta had never really been scared to be alone in the ranch house with Devlon until this moment. Devlon was certainly not someone to mess with, but they were on the same side. Anyone in his rebellion against the state could be guaranteed that the fearful parts of Devlon were working to protect them and could therefore be seen not at all as something to be afraid of. Many years of unyielding doubtlessness were so easily unraveled now, and all by a single truth: *I do not know this man.*

"Etta!" Devlon boomed. Etta jumped. She clapped a hand to her heart, begging it to slow. She took one last glance at the book Theo left her before thinking better of it and leaving it in her room with the quilt laid over it. She took the last candle and the lighter off the shelf and made her way down to the basement.

Devlon was sprawled out on his uncomfortable cot with his hand twirling in his fingers. His thin legs squirmed restlessly.

"Took you long enough," he complained when he heard Etta step onto the floor of the unfinished basement. He sat up straight and tossed the second pen towards Etta's usual spot on the floor where the unfinished sheet music still laid from the night before.

Etta stilled at the sight of the paper on the ground. "How many times have I told you to put those away during the day?" she asked, heart beating thunderously.

Devlon waved a dismissive hand around. "Nobody's going to see it."

"You don't know that. You don't know when they might come."

"It's a simple ascending minor for the rest of the bars," Devlon diverted. "C, D, D sharp--"

"Slow down." Etta lit the candle and sat down on the floor. She clicked the pen open with her shaking hand and tried to move as she always did.

For the rest of the song that she dutifully wrote down, she was able to get away with silence. She pondered everything that Devlon had ever told her about his cursed compositions. Etta had never heard or witnessed any of them being performed before, she'd only heard about them recounted from others after they had been employed around the city. Devlon told her time and time again how he operated on principle and only arranged music that had to be given great thought before being played. Only several experienced players working together had the ability to enact his curses. Etta thought back to that sheet of his copies in the floorboards. There wasn't a single one, not one among them, that hadn't been a solo. Were there ever group arrangements before Etta had been there? If she asked him plainly, would she even be able to trust his answer?

"Go fetch the piccolo," Devlon instructed when the arrangement was finished.

Etta drew in her breath just slightly. She tore quietly as she could through the house and back outside where the piccolo lied discarded on the porch beside the black songbird. When Etta bent over to pick the piccolo up, she nearly jumped when the bird outstretched its wing to do the same. She pulled her hand back instinctively and observed the bird. She didn't know how long it would take a curse of parallelism to wear off, or if it ever would at all. She reached again and tried to grab it quickly, but it was no use. The bird's movement was set in exact tandem with her own.

"Let go!" said Etta and the bird. Etta grabbed onto the piccolo and retreated backwards toward the door, still crouching. The bird clung onto it just as she did. There was clearly no use, so she managed somehow to awkwardly cross her arms about herself while pushing the bird back just long enough to get the door closed, miraculously.

Luckily for Etta, she was a quick thinker. As she prodded back down the stairs, she called out, "The head joint is busted! I'll fix it tomorrow before the sun goes down."

Devlon groaned impatiently as a way of response.

Though Etta did indeed have a quick mind, her mouth was apparently quicker. Before she had time to properly think out this first step in her plan, she was acting it out. "I could sing it."

Devlon's fidgeting stopped abruptly for a fraction of a second before methodically picking back up. "Can you even sing? I haven't heard you do it before."

Etta was sure this was quite untrue, but she couldn't inconspicuously call him out on it. "It doesn't have to be any good," she replied quickly. "But I can read music and keep a pitch."

Devlon hummed agreeably. "Well, go on. Before I die of old age."

Through the whole song, Etta's vision swayed. She struggled to keep the beat at the same pace. All the same, the notes came out correct, and Devlon seemed pleased enough.

"That'll do, I suppose. Assuming the instruments don't struggle to hold a note as much as you do." Devlon got up off his cot and took a step towards the window with the cellar leading above ground. He brushed his knuckle back and forth across the glass. "Fitting that the first song I'd hear sung in years would have to come out of a screeching owl like yourself."

If Etta could be daring without thinking, then she could consciously be the same. "Did you ever compose anything just for vocalists?" she asked.

Devlon turned quickly and deliberately to face her. It wasn't that his old face suddenly appeared young, it was more that Etta could suddenly very easily picture what he might have looked like young.

"I've told you before, Etta. That's too much power in one man's hands."

"Not even a choir, then?" she asked teasingly.

Devlon did not even hint at a smile. "Not even then."

His eyes stared so severe that Etta couldn't bring herself not to believe him. She knew he likely wouldn't see it, but she nodded slightly.

"I do believe that's enough inspiration for one night." Devlon cleared his throat and lowered himself back onto his cot. He waved his hand towards the stairs. "You may as well go to bed early. Give yourself time to fix that head joint tomorrow."

Etta didn't have to be told twice. She gathered the candle and the new arrangement and dismissed herself up to bed after stuffing the paper beneath the floorboard with the others. She couldn't get herself into her makeshift blanket-pile soon enough.

As she laid there that night, Etta replayed her encounter with Devlon over and over again. She couldn't remember him ever being so serious as he was then. He denied her question as if it had been an accusation. He was so insistent. It made anything else he'd ever told her seem less important by proxy.

And that realization was the final nail in the coffin. It was the acknowledgement that one puzzle piece was wrongly placed. When had Devlon ever answered something so seriously? When did he not brush off anything Etta said with prickly arrogance? When had he made her any promise that didn't involve preserving his own image?

There Etta was thinking he didn't have a tell. Devlon's tell was telling. Flat out, no pretenses.

Throughout the rest of the night, she must have walked every inch of the boiler room. She packed a bag, and unpacked it, and packed it again. She had fewer belongings than she had when she arrived at the ranch house in the first place, so all this rearranging didn't take up very much time. She piled her books from Theo in and out. She reread old notes of his. She analyzed "Duress in D Minor." She tried to remember what the song had sounded like when her parents had sung it to her.

About an hour before the sun rose, Etta quietly slid back onto the back porch. The songbird sat beside her on the step. Etta held up the book where the curse of persuasion was pasted in, and quietly, she began to sing. As her melody broke the air, the bird watched, enthralled. Its pupils shrank and grew and shrank and grew. When it was over, the two of them stared at each other for a heavy moment.

Etta's breath rattled when she instructed, "Have your own movements."

The bird flew far away opposite of the sun.

By the time the sun was fully exposed in the sky, the bird was long out of sight. Etta waited until it was concealed again before she took confident steps down the stairs to the basement again.

"I hope you've gotten that damn thing back on straight again," Devlon said.

Etta brandished the piccolo in one hand and set the candle close to it to ensure that Devlon would see it.

"Good. Now let's get working. I've got something in mind that could really help them back home."

Etta set the candle down on the ground. "First, I need to sing you the song from last night again."

Devlon flashed her an annoyed gaze. "Don't tell me you mean to subject me to that torment again."

"A few of the notes accidentally got smudged. I need to sing them back to you so I know how to correct them."

There was really no need for Devlon's suffering sigh that seemed to just keep going. "What good even are you? I'd be better off spilling ink over the paper and hoping it hits the right marks."

"Do you want me to fix it or don't you?"

"Go on. Get it over with."

Etta did not let her breath waver as she sat down on the floor and set out the pages that she had torn from the book onto the floor. As she warbled them, she thought she had never sung something so precisely in all her life. During the most familiar parts of the song, she chanced a glance over Devlon and saw his fuzzy pupils dilating.

Just as Etta sang out the last note of the aria, the last of the candles burned out.

**Ziryxa**  
*Bryn Kozuch*

Zirina ran through her town just before sunset. The wind whipped the young woman's long, dark hair behind her. It blew into her face, reddening her cheeks. A few of the townspeople watched her sprint past; some of them even called out greetings. She would yell a quick response, but she never slowed down. Her boots pounded into the soft earth.

The air still held the chill of winter, but most of the ground had thawed. If she hadn't shortened the hem of her dress to just below her knees rather than at her ankles, the pink fabric would probably be as mudcaked as her boots. She stopped just outside the temple and carefully removed her shoes. If she got any mud in the building, the priestesses would never let her hear the end of it. The stone felt like ice through her stockings. Hopefully, it would be warmer inside.

"There you are." Elena sighed with relief. "Lyla only just arrived as well. I was hoping you wouldn't be late."

"Of course not." She smiled reassuringly, knowing she nearly had been. "You know I would never let you down."

Zirina almost seemed to tower over the priestess as they walked further into the temple; she was taller than most women in the town, and Elena's sandals did little to make their wearer any less short. Not to be worn outside the temple, the sandals were part of their uniform, if only because they made the hard floors feel somewhat less harsh.

The more noticeable parts of the uniform were the mask and the dress. The mask was a thin piece of black fabric that covered all of their neck and face below their eyes yet was far too sheer to conceal anything. The bottom of the fabric was hidden within the crimson dress. It was long and light but with tight sleeves stopping at the wrist; loose fabric would have been too dangerous around the flames.

Zirina fidgeted with her own dress. As an initiate, she was permitted to wear pink, but only priestesses could wear the sacred color of their goddess, Lyxa. The pale hue almost appeared orange in the light cast by the torches, despite having been clearly pink outside. In any bit of sunlight, it still could have seemed pink, but the only light in the harsh stone building came from fire. Even so, she would have been proud of wearing even the weakest shades of red.

They walked into a large chamber. A statue of Lyxa dominated the back of the room with a pyre at her feet. The priestesses made sure always to keep it lit. Kara knelt there now, tending to the flames. It cast a soft orange glow on the white marble of the statue. A very skilled sculptor had worked to perfect every detail of the piece. Her dress looked like real cloth, and Zirina could make out countless strands of hair forming a braided crown. She could even see the lines of the goddess's hand, raised palm out as if telling someone to stop. The most haunting detail was the eyes, perfectly angled to reflect the fire's light as she looked down on them.

Two priestesses stood beside the statue, Sara and Lyla's mentor, Ella. Sara, who, as the eldest, would be leading the initiation, stood slightly in front of the others. A wooden circlet sat atop her head, signifying her role in today's ceremony. Elena fell into line as Zirina took her place across from them beside Lyla. No one else looked at the statue, so Zirina forced her gaze away, settling on Lyla instead.

The slightly younger girl had pulled her pretty brown hair back into a smooth braid. Her green eyes stared at the fire; its light reflected in their visible whites. She had her soft hands neatly folded in front of her, and her posture was pin straight. Despite growing up as a farmer's daughter, everything about her was prim and proper.

Zirina felt almost self-conscious beside her. She was always confident, but the other girl was far more put together than her. She hadn't even thought about tying back her hair which had become tangled by the run and the wind and stuck out wildly. Her own hands were somewhat calloused, and her back had a bit of a slouch. Both had come from occasionally helping her father with his metalwork. She thought about it for a moment longer, about the fires she had always spent her days around, and stood a bit taller.

Only a moment later, Sara began the ritual. "You are both gathered here to devote your lives in service of our goddess. Lyxa is the Mistress of Fire; she is heat and light. She is the Hearth to which we and our families flock in times of comfort and need. She is our Protector, the one who will guard us from all harm. We three have already taken our oaths. Will you now do the same?"

The two initiates nodded their heads in unison.

"State your name, and repeat after me. I, initiate."

"I, Lyla."

"I, Zirina."

"Swear to honor and uphold."

They continued together, "Swear to honor and uphold."

"The values of my goddess."

"The values of my goddess."

"I swear to protect those who honor her."

"I swear to protect those who honor her." Their words echoed throughout the chamber.

They multiplied after them like the ghosts of countless predecessors vowing alongside them. The hair on the initiates' arms raised at their mutual thought, but they didn't falter as they swore.

"And guide others into her light."

"And guide others into her light."

"I swear to devote myself fully to her will."

Zirina noticed Lyla's hand beginning to shake and took it in her own to steady it. She gripped it tightly, and both spoke confidently. "I swear to devote myself fully to her will."

"No matter what may be asked of me."

"No matter what may be asked of me."

Sara's nod signaled the end of the oath. Elena and Ella each crouched near the pyre and brushed their hand on the ground next to the fire. They lifted ash-



covered fingers and approached their mentees. Zirina released Lyla's hand as she balanced her gaze with her sister's; Lyla did the same with her own mentor.

"Good job," Elena whispered as she rubbed ash onto her younger sister's brow.

Zirina only silently smiled in response.

"For the final part of your initiation," Sara told them, "you will tend to every fire in this temple. The priestess shelter is separate from the temple itself, so you will not be responsible for those flames. If even one fire goes out by morning, you will have failed. These flames are in honor of our goddess, I should not need to explain to you how important it is that they remain alit. You will also fail if you fall asleep. The goddess will be there to guide you if you begin to feel weak.

To ensure success, do not, at any point, leave the temple. You will be unsupervised, so it is your decision to remain honest. I will see you in the morning."

All four priestesses filed out of the room. Worried that it was now untended, both initiates ran to the sacred pyre. Nevertheless, the fire burned as strongly as ever.

"We did it," Zirina sighed her relief.

"Not yet," Lyla watched the flames. "We may still fail."

"We've gone through months of tests. One night tending to a few fires will not be enough to stop us. We should split up but intermittently check on this pyre. Any of the others going out means we fail, but this one would be an affront to the goddess herself."

"How often should we check on it?" Lyla fidgeted with a plain ring on her finger. It had been a congratulations gift from her parents for becoming a priestess. Even with the little money they had, they wanted to make sure their daughter was as happy as possible.

"Use your own judgment, but assume the other won't have checked. If we both think the other has done it by a certain point, it may have had enough time to go out."

"That's smart. Good luck, Zirina."

"You, too. I look forward to being a priestess with you."

Zirina left the main chamber while Lyla checked the fires within. Between the torches and lamps and hearths, the temple held countless flames, and they were responsible for each and every one of them. Neither wanted to fail, and with Lyla's perfectionism and Zirina's eagerness, neither believed they would. The latter zigzagged through the temple, checking every fire she saw and making sure there weren't any she had missed. She darted back to the main pyre less often than she would have preferred, but each time, the flames burned strong and bright.

It was shortly after midnight when fatigue began to wear her down. As she knelt in front of a small hearth and turned the coals, she whispered a small prayer to Lyxa before returning to her task. Sara had said Lyxa would guide her, so she prayed for strength. She had more than enough willpower, but sometimes the body simply cannot keep up with the will of the mind. Even so, that will was insignificant to the will of the goddess.

She continued for a few hours longer, but her energy

was fading rapidly. She hoped Lyla was faring better. Aside from occasionally passing each other, they had almost no contact; they were too focused on their duty to hesitate. Moments later, the pair both checked on the central pyre. Neither spoke, but each offered a reassuring smile.

Zirina was the first to resume checking the other fires, sure Lyla had the main pyre under control. With as many fires as there were, they couldn't bear to both stop for long. She also understood why the entirety of the ancient building was stone. Even a few stray sparks could ignite the whole temple if it were at all flammable. It had been built hundreds of years ago, long before the town had any inhabitants, yet it still looked as pristine as it had just after construction.

Only minutes after she left the main chamber, she heard a scream. She assumed it was Lyla's, but the hallways had too much of an echo for her to be able to tell where it came from.

"Lyxa," she called upon the closest flame, a torch. "Show me how I can help."

The fire flared up, burning white. Another torch down the hallway did the same. She hadn't expected the goddess to respond so obviously, but no one else could have done such a thing. She raced toward the white flame, continuing as she spotted more and more. Lyxa guided her into a room, and the initiate knelt at the hearth for a message. Her body began to feel unnaturally heavy, so she gently lowered herself and fell asleep on the warm ground.

She slept undisturbed until midday. Unaware of the time, she jolted awake. The fire had shrunk to embers. She had wholly and utterly failed. With her head bowed in shame, she walked through the hallway without noticing that each torch had been extinguished. Before the statue of Lyxa, the pyre burned white hot, far brighter than she had ever seen it. Her thoughts were still hazy, but she took the fire to be a good sign. She may have failed the initiation, but they had not insulted the goddess.

She walked outside to tell her shortcomings to Sara and Elena. She had no idea what to say to her sister, but she didn't want to delay the news. They needed to know. As soon as she stepped out of the building, however, she noticed the sunlight. The priestesses were supposed to have returned to the temple at dawn, yet the sun was high overhead. She hadn't been near the main chamber, but surely, she hadn't been hidden enough for them not to be able to find her. Her failure should have been discovered hours ago.

Fear sparked within her. Something had to be deeply wrong. She raced away from the temple and into town. Mud and grime soaked through her stockings, but she ignored the chill and kept running. Every single building had been reduced to ash. The town square held the most horror.

Countless burnt corpses had been carelessly tossed onto a pile. Next to them, a few pyres still burned. Slowed by her terror, Zirina forced herself

to approach them. A priestess was tied to each, including Lyla and her own sister.

She threw up as revulsion overtook her. Everyone she had ever known or loved was dead, nothing but ash. Gone were her parents and friends. Gone was Lyla with her pretty golden ring.

Gone was Sara, her head marred by where she still wore the wooden circlet, trying to claim divine protection. Zirina looked around the ruins of her home and fell to the ground in front of Elena's pyre in tears. She screamed and sobbed until her throat was too hoarse to make a sound.

"Hello, my child," a woman's voice sounded behind her. It was smooth and airy. She didn't recognize it, but there was something immediately comforting and trustworthy about it, even in just those few words.

Zirina looked to face her but remained kneeling. She felt too weak to stand.

The woman's bright red hair flowed, unbound, behind her, encouraged by the wind.

Something about her face seemed alarmingly familiar, but she struggled to place it. "A great tragedy has occurred here. You, my dear, are the sole survivor. A shame, I know, but this is not the end."

"Lyxa." She recognized her eyes. "Goddess, why?"

"Why? Why what? Why was your home destroyed? Why is everyone dead? Why do you live?"

"All of it," she managed. Tears still streamed down her face.

"Many miles to the north are a tribe of conquerors. They've been traveling for years, destroying every village they've come across. They recently expanded to a village not far from here. Your town was simply next on their path."

"You were supposed to protect us," she cried as loudly as she could.

"Shh," the goddess guided smoke into her lungs; instead of hurting, it began to soothe the young woman's strained throat. "You'll find I'm not supposed to do anything. I do whatever I choose. Unlike the others, I believed you were worthy of saving."

"But I failed my initiation! I am worse than those who have succeeded, who devoted their lives to you. My sister devoted her life to you."

"I know, child; you needn't tell me these things. Those who claimed to worship me did not understand me. Fire is not meant to burn in pyres, killing itself without aid from others. It is not meant to be contained by metal and stone. Fire is all-consuming. Fire is freedom. You run and shorten your hems and leave your hair unbound. You've never cared about what you're told to do without believing in it. You understand what it is to be free."

"But my initiation—"

"Was ended by me," she finished for her. "Had I not intervened, you would have carried on, and they would have found and killed you. I guided you to safety and kept you there until you'd be ready."

"Ready to what?"

"Ready to burn. Fire is light and freedom and

vengeance. Already, I can feel that passion and anger in your soul. You mourn, yes, but you crave revenge. You want those who did this to suffer. You prayed for strength, remember? I will give you the strength to strike back against those who have hurt you and any others you wish to punish."

"I didn't ask for this."

"No, but it is what I chose for you. The conquerors were going to come. I simply found you worthy of keeping safe. Did you not promise to devote yourself to my will only hours ago?"

"This isn't what I thought I was signing up for."

"No, you thought you were to be a sweet little priestess, hiding in a temple for the rest of your days."

"I didn't want to hide."

"No? Do you mean to say you weren't fleeing your father? You didn't want to have an irrefutable reason to avoid the boys you rejected. You weren't trying to find yourself a life that your people would accept without being forced into having a job and family you knew was wrong for you."

"I wanted to help people."

"The two aren't mutually exclusive. No one can help your village, but if you unleash your wrath, you can help countless others."

She knew the goddess was right. Anger burned in her; she had tried to drown it with her tears, but that hadn't been enough. Her eyes were dry now, but they almost glowed with the light of her soul's fire. She would destroy the conquerors. She would burn every single one of them until they knew how she had felt.

The goddess smiled her approval. "Rise, Zirixa."

She slowly stood. "My name is Zirina."

"No, your name was Zirina. That girl died with her people. Like a phoenix, you have risen from the ashes. Your enemies will only know you as Zirixa, the burning light."

Zirixa smiled. She would mourn no longer. The conquerors would know who she was, who they had made her become. With Lyxa's blessing, she would get revenge for herself and so many others. When the last conqueror was dead, she would move on until everyone was safe and free. She had been burned, and the world would burn next.

## **Prickle**

*Avery Kaplan*

Cold edge of the bathtub indents the fat of my thighs,  
sink barren save for an occasional dripping  
blood from my pores turns to rivulets of wine,

my leg skin prickled with hair from days of unwash,  
deviance in what is coarse  
ing through my veins to then seep slow from my body,

to saturate soil and fertilize  
what is swelling with judgment until bursting  
large as life between my legs and through my teeth,

rotten as ichor apple stems, roots pushing  
up through skin barriers to breathe an exhale  
of relief without the punishment of a razor.

clotted with hair. Bent over twin sinks  
- his and hers - linked in holy matrimony,  
sallow flush reflected in rose glass.

Drawing primordial fluid across a scarlet  
second pulse, sustained by my very anatomy,  
a body that is strained skinny and hungry as a womb.

Sharp, tiny fingers like needles that prick flesh,  
slash through stomach tissue and wilt,  
drawing blood fresh as domestic rose bushes,

a thorn in the side of my mind,  
a stitch for my husband.

## **Sore Muscles**

*Avery Kaplan*

I don't think my hand existed  
until you held it, like how you  
forget your body exists  
until it causes you pain - until

it flushes and cries - until my dad  
makes a blood sugar prick  
on my finger pad. Did I ever  
have a finger before that?

I know that you exist, at least  
in my mind, because I have  
a groove in my brain where  
my finger keeps chasing around

and around, falling into the indent  
over and over like a limp in my step.  
I know that you have touched me  
because I have a little oval bruise

on my jaw, like a sweet opal  
birthmark, like an egg  
cracked over the stove  
and scrambled just for me.

I feel  
your heat  
set to a  
simmer

slowly boiling me in lethal  
warmth, heart hurting with new use  
like a sore muscle, did I ever have  
a heart before this?

## **Crimson Radishes, Crimson Bodies, and Unspoken Words**

*Kat Payne*

On the final day Svetlana enjoyed her parents' presence, the sky was ashen and the snow drifted from it like feathery clumps of cotton. Svetlana was twelve years old and returning from her winter harvest; the path back to the family cabin was blanketed in soft snow, but its frequent usage allowed it to be easily followed. She bounded along, the heavy and worn basket banging against her hip; its rough material clung to her thin cotton gloves and scratched at her raggedy coat. The old thing was nearly overflowing with root vegetables such as radishes and potatoes, some of the only crops they could grow during those unforgiving, unrelenting Russian winters, the winters that'd carved holes into the stubborn soil in which her mother and father would reside in well before they were supposed to.

Earlier that morning, while Svetlana had been bundling up to head over to their small farm up the path, her father had said, "After today's harvest, we should have enough radishes to make borsch for dinner." Svetlana's head jerked up at that, her eyes widening to crystalline marbles and her soft brown locks sweeping away from her face. She hobbled over to him, still tugging on a fleece-lined boot.

"Really?" She asked. Svetlana's father smiled at her; her hair always reminded him of oak bark. He was seated on a wooden bench next to the dining room table. The brunette man grabbed the wool hat from his young daughter's hands and gently placed it on her head, tugging it over her ears.

"Yes, really," he replied through his smile; it emitted as much warmth as the fire blazing in the red brick fireplace behind him. The flames outlined his silhouette in a kaleidoscope of crimson and gold.

Svetlana, invigorated by a newfound excitement, turned on her heel with a smug grin and swayed over to the kitchen counter. She snatched the basket up and turned toward the front door.

"Svetlana," her father called. He stood up from the creaky bench. Her mother had carved it from a fir tree a few years after she'd given birth to their only child. It was barely holding together, and her mother hadn't felt like whittling a new one; she hadn't felt like doing much of anything that winter. Or the previous one. He leaned down to match his daughter's short stature and placed a rough, scabbed palm on her shoulder. His smile momentarily let her forget how cold she was, despite the numerous layers she wore.

"I appreciate you helping out with the harvest"—her father's smile flickered as he glanced over his shoulder, at his wife who rested next to the fire—"and if you need help, just let me know, okay?" Svetlana nodded. "And that goes for anything, not just harvesting." His smile returned to its normal wattage. "I'm always here if you need anything." Her father's palm felt like afternoon sunlight on a cloudless day. He gave her shoulder a brief squeeze.

Svetlana had simply smiled up at him, and though he didn't say it at that moment, she knew he loved her.

Now, as she neared the cabin, returning from the farm, she felt her chest lighten with excitement. Her mouth salivated thinking about the borsch her father would cook them for supper. Her left arm was sore from carrying the basket, but the thought subdued the pain, if only just a little. However, as she neared their lone cabin, her swift steps slowed and the flighty anticipation dissolved into a heavy weight of dread.

The front door to their cabin was slightly ajar.

The young girl bit her chapped bottom lip and stopped dead in her tracks. She was in a shaken snow globe, the snow swirling around her, everything else still as death. The biting cold and fear made her limbs numb, but eventually she swallowed and pressed forward, slowly. She felt each heart beat pounding against the prison of her rib cage, and her body was slicked in a frigid sweat. Each shaky breath was a puff of white steam. Svetlana didn't know how long she was gone, but her father hadn't told her he'd be going anywhere; he always told her. And her mother never departed from the confines of their cabin. Her paranoia combined with her father's strategic caution ensured their front door was never left open. Everything about the scenario was a red flag; still, Svetlana crept toward the door like a feral animal. Hesitantly, she reached forward and pushed the door open with her fingertips. It released a horrendous creak like the howling of a predator, and allowed bitter, stale light to leak into the room. Then, after it was open enough, a large, heavy brick fell from atop the doorframe.

It missed Svetlana by a hair and shattered into huge chunks on the wooden floor, but Svetlana didn't hear it; she barely noticed how close she'd danced with death, how—if she'd been any closer—her skull would've been cracked clean open. Instead, she was gaping at the dozens of fresh stab wounds that pelted her father's chest. He was laid out like a starfish, resting in a crimson ocean. Silent and stoic, he gazed up at their roof like any second he might glance over at Svetlana and smile at her with that same warm smile from earlier that morning. Any second he might apologize for daydreaming about a new recipe he wanted to try. Any second he might ask how many radishes she'd harvested and she'd see his barren eyes light up when she showed him the overflowing basket of root vegetables and she'd say how they were only slightly bruised and how she couldn't wait for the borsch—

Any second now.

Any second.

The hefty basket slipped from her grasp. It thumped to the ground and its contents slithered across the ground until their entire cabin was a minefield and one of the vegetables thumped against her mother's still body.

Svetlana dragged her gaze over to her. There was a single wound to her abdomen. Her fingers were still wrapped around the knife's wooden handle. It was her father's favorite kitchen knife. He'd just used it two nights ago to chop up potatoes. Now, it lingered in her mother's unmoving body. She was slumped forward, her



black hair hung like heavy curtains around her slacked jaw and glossy eyes. Her parents' bodies laid still and frigid like whispers lost on the wind. Her mother had never been much of a cook.

But that entire week, Svetlana had caught her sneaking long glances at her father's collection of kitchen knives.



"Lana?" Svetlana—Lana—blinked away her blurred vision. She wasn't some terrified twelve year old girl, standing in the doorframe of her childhood home with her dead parents at her feet. No, she was twenty-two, and seated across from her boyfriend in an illustrious Eastern European restaurant in Seattle. Her boyfriend, Octavio, who's thick eyebrows were pinched together in worry, pursed his lips at her. Lana shifted her gaze away from him, blinking rapidly.

"Sorry, my contacts are just being annoying," Lana lied. Octavio chewed the inside of his cheek, but before he could respond, their waiter arrived with their food. The young waiter's hair was slicked back with so much gel that Lana wondered if he'd used up the entire jar of product.

He delicately placed a glimmering, pearly-white dish of lagman in front of Octavio. The scent of stir fried goat, beef, lamb, and vegetables wafted over to Lana who sighed with hunger. Octavio wasn't looking at the Kazakh dish, though; he was still staring at Lana, who was sparkling underneath the chandelier lighting. The dress she wore adorned her body like a river of clouds, and her hair flowed like a milk chocolate waterfall over her shoulders. His girlfriend turned and smiled up at their waiter, thanking him as he placed a steaming bowl in front of her. After ensuring Lana and Octavio didn't require anything further, the waiter nodded and swayed over to another table. Then, Lana turned her shimmering smile over to her boyfriend, who's heart caught in his throat.

"That"—Lana nodded at the dish in front of him—"is called 'lagman.'" Lana leaned forward and picked up Octavio's fork. She stabbed a pile of thick noodles and vegetables and started lifting it toward Octavio's mouth. But before he could react, the fork made a U-turn toward Lana.

"Hey!" her boyfriend chuckled, reaching for her hand, but she popped his food into her mouth and sighed.

"And it's delicious," she said with her mouth full. "You know, you should really try some." Octavio's cheeks were sore from smiling. The brown-eyed girl returned to her boyfriend's plate and picked up an even larger pile of lagman. This time she raised it to his mouth, and he took a bite.

"Oh my gosh, you were right," Octavio said whilst chewing. He picked up his napkin—which had been folded into a neat swan—and pawed at his mouth. "That was delicious." The noodles were thick but soft, and the stir fried meat and vegetables added a swift, salty sensation. Lana smiled smugly at him and twirled the fork around in her fingers. The restaurant was

relatively quiet, but everyone was focused on their tables. And Octavio was focused on Lana.

He glanced down at her bowl of maroon liquid and asked, "What did you say you ordered again?" Lana stopped weaving the fork around. She replaced it next to his plate and looked down at her food.

"It's called borsch," she said, eventually. Her reflection wavered in its crimson surface. Her light brown eyes and spray of pale freckles across her nose and cheeks were from her father. Her thick, dark eyebrows were from her mother. She'd plucked them thin.

"Borsch?" Octavio repeated. "It looks awesome; you should try some—since you're so keen on eating my food." He smirked, but Lana hesitated before reaching for the soup spoon. When she finally reached for it, it felt cold and heavy in her hand, like it was crafted from icy silver. It suddenly felt like a frigid hand had punched its way through Lana's chest and was squeezing her lungs. Tight. She swallowed nothing and her breath came in a hitch. She couldn't look away from the soup. The bowl of crimson where someone stared back at her. They looked exactly like her, but at the same time, nothing at all.

"Lana?" She glanced up at him and got the impression he'd already called her name a few times. "It's just soup, it's not gonna bite you." He said it lightheartedly, but Lana could tell from Octavio's uneasy grin and creased brow that he was anxious. She studied him. He was a spontaneous, laidback, and humorous chatterbox. But when it came to her, he was thoughtful, observant, and patient. He peered through her like she was made of glass.

He leaned forward and delicately, so, so softly, placed a hand on her shoulder. His palm felt like afternoon sunlight on a cloudless day.

"Hey." Octavio whispered, and leaned a few centimeters closer to her. "I'm always here if you need anything."

And he didn't pry, and he said nothing more, and Lana lifted her spoon—it felt just a tad lighter in her hand—and dipped it into the soup. The silver overflowed with red.

Octavio's hand retreated; he placed an elbow on the table and rested his cheek against his fingers and knuckles.

Lana lifted the soup-filled spoon to her mouth, and after a decade, she finally tasted her borsch.

Octavio watched his sparkling girlfriend start to shatter, but held her together with his emerald-eyes. Lana looked up at him through blurred vision. He was gazing at her with every ounce of attention a person could have. Lana couldn't tell if he even noticed he was smiling, or that his eyebrows had finally shaken away their worries and anxiety, and that the way his cheek creased against his knuckles made her want to reach across the table and smooth it out, and that his eyes were the purest shade of green she'd ever seen.

"You were right," Lana croaked, her eyes and throat burned with subdued tears. "That was awesome." His smile grew even brighter, and for a few seconds, all she could see was the chandeliers reflected in the green pools of his eyes.

And though he didn't say it at that moment,

she knew he loved her.

## **Kitchen Sink**

*Avery Kaplan*

The stillness of the kitchen resounds  
through the bones of your house.

Stained-glass windchime stagnant over the kitchen sink,  
piled with dishes and food scraps.

Window framed in chipped baby blue,  
to border fractured light over fruit-printed tiles.

This is the place where we used to make cookies  
from scratch, and watch them turn thin and flat

in the oven that later fell into crushed glass  
on the carpet, a voice raised against a patriarch.

Through the kitchen window, cobweb-clotted vinyl  
siding shields you from sunlight.

Where ivy twines around silos to suffocate,  
and white, frothy dandelion weeds sprout from the grass.

Like your head when the hair turned milky and your mind  
feathered to cotton, too soft to hold a chicken noodle soup bowl.

That's the last time I saw you.

I was once wrapped in the sheer, rose-embroidered  
drapes of my childhood, days spent enveloped in floral

armchairs where your gently turning fingers spun  
crochet yarn like spider silk. This is the place

where I forked peanut butter pancakes into a prepubescent  
mouth, syrup dripping stickily, as I watched - in a dream -

as navy sparrows papering the walls fly south for warmth  
like my two-hour drive home to you

but I'm driving towards something cold.

Cold as the linoleum where my sorrow spilled and  
the metal seat of the handicapped shower stall where

I drew my knees to my chest and saw you like a porcelain  
lawn ornament, tucked under a blanket of sympathy

flowers, your garden beds forever staled,  
scavengers kneeling by their casketsides,

crying out the worst sound I've ever heard, guttural  
as it twists the face of my little sister.

Three months later the weight settles on me like a quilt,  
delayed like something thrown, like hands reaching out

but only clutching air.

## **Chocolate Chips and Peanut Butter**

*Melanie Clayton*

I believe in intuitive eating, I told my counselor, but all my body wants is chocolate chips and peanut butter and that can't be right. She told me not to worry about it because worry would make it worse, and asked how it made me feel when I ate.

I told her the chocolate helped, and it did. It brought a momentary sense of stability, a solid comfort in my gut that muffled the anxiety. It was the beginning of a slow mental breakdown. My family blamed the pandemic, but it had been coming for a long time. It wasn't the fear, because I wasn't afraid, so much as the alone that swallowed me.

My companion made smoothies with exactly one third of a banana and a generous helping of spinach, which she insisted was delicious. She tracked her calories on an app to make sure she was eating enough. For Easter, she made her family's special lemon cake because it couldn't be Easter without it. Eating sugar made her feel guilty, and it was a cake I couldn't eat, so she pawned some off on friends and froze the rest and slowly, slowly ate it.

On my sister's 16th birthday, we had cake made of Styrofoam. Pictures show her standing by it, sixteen candles shoved into the plastic and a smile topping her skinny body. She was starving and no one could tell her why. She went to hospitals and ate radioactive oatmeal and visited a Reiki healer once a week for months, and still it hurt her to eat, still she could wear her 9-year-old sister's jeans, still she didn't know what was wrong. Eventually she found another healer, one who was true to his title and started her on a path of recovery. She was grateful to feel strong again, but as the weight came back she missed being able to fit into everything. I was that skinny once, I can do it again, she said, and didn't remember how sick she'd been.

In elementary school, my best friend and I formed the Pot Belly Club. We were both round and knew it, and we'd play drums on our bare bellies and giggle at the fleshy plat plat plat. In fifth grade another best friend told me her mom had commented that I was looking slimmer. I didn't believe her but it stuck in my brain anyway. I hated the little bulge of my belly right above my hips.

For a while in high school I didn't eat ketchup because it had too much sugar. No sugar, no grains, no starchy root vegetables, and a large dose of cod liver oil with every meal. The point was not weight loss, it was healing, but Wii Fit proudly told me my weight was finally healthy and that was exciting to me.

I forgot my lunch one day and was forced to buy pizza at school, the kind with thick, mealy crust and little pools of grease resting on top of rubber mozzarella. After eating I went to the library to help out, like normal, and I made a small mistake and suddenly my world was over. A weight filled my stomach and I knew the librarian would never trust me to do anything ever again, I was a failure, incapable of anything, a disappointment

to all who knew me and to all who ever would know me. I wanted to throw up but couldn't.

At this point, I realized two things. One, this was a very familiar, very normal feeling. Two, I hadn't felt that level of stress for a while—not since the start of my diet. I knew then that something was wrong and that it was gluten, like it was for my mom, and I couldn't do that to myself anymore.

I have an unasked for connection to my mother and hers, a piece of heritage I could do without: my body is attacking my thyroid. It answers questions but now I'm afraid I'll be like my mom, whose body fights her more each year. She has to be careful what she eats and nothing is safe. She loves sun-soaked, raw tomatoes that smell like summer, but they quickly make her sick even though she worked hard to grow them. Most days now I don't think I'm fat but I'm worried, and I worry the food I eat will slowly destroy me like it has her.

I scoop myself a wad of crunchy natural peanut butter, cold from the fridge, into one of the small glass bowls I bought at Goodwill and used to hold succulents at my wedding reception. I press my dairy-free 60% dark chocolate chips into it, accidentally but not accidentally spilling more than I meant to into the bowl, and even now I wish I could stop thinking about food and just eat it.

## **Lullaby of Your Dream Machine**

*Anna Shura*

*From the chapter titles of Can You See What I See? Dream Machine by Walter Wick*

Let yourself lull into pillow capped waves,  
board the ship bedtime, and forget your  
map. Dim your nightlight to leave the day:  
no more re-runs of shoelace trips nor lost teddy bear questions.

Dreamtime is abound and known by  
the Magical Moon as she spins over your anxieties.  
You have boarded a trip at daylight's end,  
float now and rise with the hairs on your neck.

Sloshing orange water drench your head,  
Thirteen O'Clock blinks in the center of the steering wheel,  
and the vessel flies, more used to pixie dust than your ankles,  
her belly bubbles over the pearled floor to a halt.

Your slippered steps bounce from sea to sky,  
and you settle into the cockpit as your Rocket Motors roar.  
Patient in a seat of dragon skin, comets buff your flight's nose:  
only the Full Service for visitors of Dream City

where aluminum abodes stand on blue streets.  
Don't question the upside-down birdies ablaze with light  
or the domino benches so impossibly large.  
Follow the Moon as she floats above your hair

To find the nurse of ideas where the sign glitters: Welcome to Sky High!  
Fly in your rocket to Central Command  
where a panel of buttons offer answers to  
your returned friendship bracelet and missing stomach of your piggy bank.

Open the ceiling's trap door to your Dream Machine where  
here in the head, forced past fact,  
grass is pink and sugared.  
Look around, see the tigers with wings?

**Don Ernesto**  
*Javier Melo*

*Las palomas grises del Parque Colón,  
lo vieron más allá del pan destrozado.  
Infiltrando el distraído refugio carbón,  
que nada en sus ojos dorados.*

I met Don Ernesto as the Sun shook awake.  
I remember him as short, and stout,  
I recall he seemed stern beyond his age.  
It showed its vestiges in hardened wrinkles,  
trenched underneath wandering eyes,  
which escaped the confines of his gaze.  
His face seemed set in a petrified frown.  
The fading night drowned in impossibility,  
praying for the betrayal of his smile.  
But it appeared only to rear it's elusive warmth,  
upon the gentler seasons of his whittling memory,  
only to then dissolve into the ground.

*Las monjas más jóvenes del convento,  
inundaron de oraciones el sagrado grial.  
Tratan de coserle su fé al viento,  
pues han visto su sombra a través del vitral.*

Don Ernesto would abandon me sometimes.  
His sentences would slowly fall asleep,  
and he would turn forlornly towards the sea.  
I think he'd flee into an oaken vault,  
hidden between his heart and his head,  
which his grimaces confine.  
He stood up quickly and looked at the sky.  
The rum and twilight were holding his hand,  
and divinizing his infinite features.  
He stared at a constellation of seagulls,  
as they circled above, stagnantly free,  
and told me he knew how to fly.

*Lágrimas descenden las mejillas famélicas,  
pero pausan su invasión de los charcos grises.*

*Las semillas sepultadas en colinas rojas,  
oyen su llamado a través de la tierra.  
Lo sienten a pesar de los insectos y las hojas,  
y se imaginan su figura floreciendo en las estrellas.*

I tried my best not to believe him.  
To focus instead, on the toll of his years,  
on the poison they laid on his head and his heart.  
For a lampost goes dark, and a wandering fly,  
alive only in the drone of its wings,  
abandons its quest to conquer the dim.  
His answers gave me no relief.  
He asked why the whispers of roses,  
always seem so hard to believe.  
He asked me why we assume,  
we know which way people are pulled,  
by the gravity of grief.

*Ayer lo escuche cantándole a la Luna,  
me rescató del regazo de mi almohada.  
Adornaba cada rincón abandonado,  
de la noche inoportuna.  
A la Luna le rogaba.*

I said he sounded like a child.  
They fall, as their tears, which glide down their arms,  
until they harden around their wrists into salty shackles.  
He said my problem was that I thought,  
tears were much too heavy to carry into the sky,  
and that smiles can't return once a heart's been defiled.

It should have come as no surprise.  
When he flew like Orion, chasing the Pleiades across the night sky,  
thrust upon the air by the strength of a thousand sighs.  
Sailing the trail of comets and plummeting back down,  
nestled amongst a nest of warm memories,  
And eternal goodbyes.

*Que nunca volviera a privarle  
su lugar en el cielo.*

