

# THE BELL TOWER

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Undergraduate Literary Journal



2024 Edition | Purdue University

**Cover Art (Front and Back):** Mitchell Fister

# The Bell Tower

## *Undergraduate Literary Journal*

### *2024 Edition*

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## Editors' Note

The editors of *The Bell Tower 2024* invite you to open your heart and mind as you explore an array of creative works full of carefully crafted worlds and thought-provoking ideas. Each piece has been designed and placed upon the page with you, our reader, in mind. This book is a celebration of the talented student writers and English enthusiasts on our campus. May we continue to breathe life into the pursuit of our passions.

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## Content Warning

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

Asterisks in the Table of Contents indicate pieces with potentially triggering materials. Visit the **Full Content Warning Index** on **page 46** to see notes on individual pieces.

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## **The Sun Sets over Utah**

*Sam Nowiski*

From up above, washing me and you and everything  
in an orange hue,  
the sun bids a silent goodbye to each  
tree, bush, rock, and man.  
In its final act, it illuminates the land,  
reaching out to every crevice it can find,  
erasing every outline.

The first to fade into the background are the trees;  
before, they stood tall, lustrous  
in the sunbeams. But with the sun obstructed  
by the canyon, the trees will vanish  
as the long, dangling branches brandish.

Next come the bushes in browns and green turning  
slowly into tangerine.  
The sun pans down the tops, then down the stalks,  
Descending, leaving the rocks  
and ground level things with every color  
in all their brightness, finally,  
with nothing.

I remember looking at the vastness with you,  
the snow sitting atop the land  
like fondant laid over a cake—  
thinking about you too much makes me  
ache. Your face aglow in tupelo  
honey I remember your face but not  
your name, it's funny  
that things come and they go the way  
nature intends because I know  
the sun will come again,  
but as I wait for you, I can only  
ask, *When?*

## **When Magnolias Last In the Moonlight Bloomed**

*Mitchell Fister*

When magnolias last in the moonlight bloomed,  
Fresh dew-soaked petals reflected silver beams  
In a misty pink metallic glow,  
Perfuming the calm night citrus sweet:  
I was in too big a rush to notice,  
And listen to the sound of silence.  
*Ichi-go ichi-e*

**A Wingless Moth tries to climb a tree**

*Audrey Pink*

A wingless moth tries to climb the bark of a tree  
Its little legs aren't supposed to support its weight for long  
But every moth tells it that this is where it's supposed to go  
They plead for it to follow them, promising life amongst the leaves  
Amid bright candlelit stars  
But it's so tired  
They warn of terrible dangers waiting below the brush  
Eventual starvation as you wither into a shell  
Or the brutal clamp of a beak, breaking your body in half  
Slowly devouring it until you're nothing but an oozing paste  
But the moth can't conceptualize these things  
It's scared and alone  
The ground and the sky look the same distance away  
If the moth had its way, neither would exist  
Maybe it wouldn't exist either  
No direction brings joy to its eyes  
All it knows is that its friends wait for it in one  
And so it climbs

**candle spot**

*Zachary Hodges*

where the heat pools,  
under melting wax,  
twin flames picking at  
each other's wicks,  
easing into the white  
wood, the linen, the warmth.

radiating comfort. sinking into foam.  
clean sheets, incomplete but trying  
our best to be  
whole.

**picking at our book sleeves**

*Zachary Hodges*

low lighting and r&b— you and me, shadows and breeze.  
us gliding down the trail of line breaks and stanzas,  
hunting morals in the spruce gardens of southern indiana,  
the rolling hills which glaciers refused to touch.

upholstered, soft— plush terracotta, legs deeply brown. we sit  
in a coffee shop and drown in rich lumber.

the coffee machine goes from the corner, rushing brown water down the rocks into  
an iced latte, like a creek, painting our forest with the sounds of a stream. we skip rocks over  
the water. i always hated chewing ice alone.



## Death and Other Adventures

Jillian Kelley

All things considered; Professor Harold Davis was perfectly happy to be dead. The actual act of dying had been far less painful than he had imagined. One moment he was conducting a synthesis reaction in his lab, and the next he was looking at his own body, slumped over the bench. Quick and painless, as good a death as anyone could hope for.

More troubling than the physical reality of dying, had been his realization that he was, indeed, a ghost. As a man of science, Harold dealt in tangible facts and empirical evidence, so what came after death was not something that concerned him in life. Still, on the rare occasion that he did wonder about what would happen after he died, becoming a ghost had not been high on his list of possibilities.

Living (well, perhaps not exactly “living”) as a ghost was not at all like it was portrayed in the movies. He wasn’t simply a gray outline of the body that he’d inhabited while he was alive, instead, he existed as some sort of amorphous blob.

With nothing else to do but watch his own body grow cold, he let his mind wander over the events of the night before that had led him to this point.

Harold and one of his Ph.D. students had been on the precipice of completing the synthesis of an insecticide that had been evading organic chemists for years. He’d been brushing his teeth when he’d suddenly had an epiphany about a reaction. A way to link those two pesky carbons that have been holding him back.

If Harold had been sensible, he would have waited until Monday to come into lab or at least until the morning to attempt it. But a tenured position and one-track mind spurred him to drive the five minutes it took to arrive at the chemistry building. His thoughts had been only of the compound as he donned gloves and feverishly prepared the reagents necessary to perform the reaction. He hadn’t even stopped to put goggles or a lab coat on but instead stood in his pajamas attention solely on the beaker in his hand.

Something had been wrong with the beaker. Whatever it was had been instant poison because it sent him straight to the ground gasping for breath before he’d even realized anything was amiss. As the beaker shattered and its contents leaked out onto the floor, so too did Harold’s soul leak from his body. He felt his essence stretch and spread thin, until he had no idea where he ended, and the rest of the world began.

With only his own lifeless body to keep him company his mind doubled back to one thought. What had been wrong with that beaker? The contamination must have been intentional, someone who would have understood what combination of reagents could be deadly. Someone who had a grudge against him.

There was only one person he knew who fit that description.

Bernadette.

A stillness settled over him. His new sense of purpose was knitting him back together.

As he grew surer and surer that his hunch was correct, he felt himself becoming solid once more. At that moment he would have staked anything on the realization.

He’d been murdered. And Bernadette was the one who had killed him.



The first time Harold met Bernadette was at a faculty dinner. He’d just been promoted from assistant to associate professor, so he had a permanent smile on his face. It was still early enough in his career that he hadn’t yet tired of the endless dinners and luncheons put on by the chemistry department. So, as he floated into the new faculty welcome dinner, he felt that there was nothing that could bring him down.

Harold and Bernadette were not destined to be enemies, in fact, throughout the years many of their colleagues had remarked on how much they had in common or tried to introduce them as if they’d never met before. After all, were both passionate synthetic chemists, both researched presides, and both had virtually no social life outside of work.

But from the first moment they laid eyes on each other, they each felt an inexplicable sense of annoyance.

Bernadette, a freshly hired professor, clung to her only acquaintance, George Caruso, head of the chemistry department. George and Harold happened to be good friends, so naturally he wanted to introduce them. When Harold arrived, several minutes late as usual, George waved him over to the open seat next to Bernadette. She was immediately disturbed by Harold’s appearance. His clothes tittered on the edge of being appropriate for a work event, a polo shirt, and khaki shorts with a pair of blue nitrile gloves dangling from his back pocket. She cringed to think of showing up so casually and in such clear violation of PPE policy.

The feeling was mutual. Everything from Bernadette’s pressed pencil skirt to her subtly made-up face made Harold want to scoff. The only part of her that was not perfectly polished was a bun of dark curls threatening to escape from their clasp. She reminded him instantly of his Ph.D. advisor, and the ridiculous color-coding system he’d adhered to.

George, unaware of the tension already developing between the two, turned to Bernadette and clapped Harold on the back, “Bernadette, I want you to meet Harold Davis.

He’s doing some great work on retrosynthesis. That’s your area of interest if I’m not mistaken?”

Harold, bolstered by compliments and intrigued by the presence of someone else inserted in retrosynthesis, put his first impression aside and extended his hand to Bernadette.

“It’s nice to meet someone else in retrosynthesis,” Bernadette similarly tried to start anew, “what is your lab working on now?”

Harold launched into an explanation of the projects his lab was exploring. He was usually met with glossy

eyes and slow nods, even from his colleagues in the chemistry department, but Bernadette was attentive, eyebrows raised so they disappeared behind her wispy bangs until the moment he trailed off into silence.

She considered what he'd explained. It was impressive chemistry, but it lacked practical application, or at least practical applications that Bernadette considered worthwhile.

"So," she broached the subject carefully, "how exactly will that be of use outside of the university?"

Harold was taken aback, and a little offended by her question. It was the same question peer reviewer always pestered him to articulate more clearly in his introduction.

Bernadette had struck a sore spot bringing it up, and the second chance Harold had given her was gone in an instant.

Finally picking up on the tension, George chose that moment to stand and offer a welcome toast. Harold was spared from replying to Bernadette.

This was a fundamental difference that divided Harold and Bernadette, a gap they would never really manage to bridge. Harold found Bernadette's insistence that her research had some grander purpose behind it insufferable and Bernadette thought Harold's philosophy of discovery for discovery's sake was unforgivably wasteful.

What started simply as annoyance was fostered into bitter rivalry by proximity and constant competition for grant money and departmental resources.

There was a general lack of understanding of why they disliked each other so much by their friends and colleagues. Exhausted by the constant complaints their refrain was, "Why can't you just get along?" Their differences seemed so trivial, if anything they should both have been grateful to have found someone else interested in the same niche topic.

The odd reality was, although they were perpetually at odds, they were also the only two people in the world who could truly understand each other. Of course, neither of them would ever consciously acknowledge that fact.

It had mostly been pettiness when they were young. Bernadette took the last of the coffee in the faculty lounge, Harold "tripped" and shattered one of Bernadette's Erlenmeyer flasks. Passive aggressive remarks were thrown around at faculty meetings. As they grew older and were both offered tenure the battles became fierce.

Once, while dropping off a piece of borrowed equipment in Harold's lab Bernadette, horrified by the disorganization, had snapped a picture of Harold's lab bench. She'd then printed it, drawn a huge red line through it, and put it on her wall as a warning to her students.

A few months later one of the undergraduates from Bernadette's lab had timidly shown her the load of dishes covered with a greasy film rendering them unusable. After assuring the student that it wasn't her fault, Bernadette closed the door to her office and

ripped the grant proposal she had just printed out to shreds. It was obvious Harold had been the one to do it, his lab had to use a special soap to treat their glassware and if not washed out properly, it would become corrosive, and toxic if exposed to certain materials. Clearly, he'd slipped some into a load of her dishes.

After the department had to spend a large amount of money replacing Bernadette's glassware, George was finally forced to call a sit-down meeting between the three of them. So, Harold and Bernadette called a truce.

Things were quieter after that. The hostility didn't stop, it just changed shapes. Eventually, George retired, Harold and Bernadette rose through the ranks in the department, and old habits crept back in.

By the time Harold keeled over dead in his lab, his rivalry with Bernadette had escalated to its most tense point. Unreasonable as it seemed, it was only an inch outside of the realm of possibilities for their feud to take a homicidal turn.

Even so, when Harold concluded that Bernadette had killed him, he was overlooking several key pieces of information. First, Bernadette currently had the upper hand in their feud. Victoria, a first-year Ph.D. student who'd done rotations in both of their labs, had just chosen to do her research in Bernadette's lab instead of Harold's. For her to murder Harold after such a big "win" didn't make much sense.

Second, Harold had failed to consider that their rivalry was built on Bernadette's strong principles. Anyone who knew her well would be quick to dismiss the theory. She was intense and pushed herself to her limits to get ahead at work, but she wouldn't cross the boundary of becoming a murderer.

None of this crossed Harold's mind though. Especially, as his physical form seemed to solidify along with his certainty in this theory. He didn't feel pulled to the earth the same way he had when was alive, but he no longer felt like he was dissipating into space. He had some control over his body again, he at least had managed to shift his gaze from point to point around the room.

Harold passed the early hours of Monday morning trying to master the art of exiting the lab. It wasn't as simple as the movies would have led him to believe. He couldn't just move towards the wall and slip through. Nor could he open the door. He lingered near the threshold for a while, trying and failing to leave, until to his surprise, the handle turned, and the door swung open.

For a long moment, he thought he'd somehow made it happen until the shimmering form of something else began to take shape. It rippled until it solidified into the translucent outline of a man with a deeply wrinkled face and a vibrant, multi-colored bow tie almost glowing against a stark white button-down.

"I wondered when we'd get another faculty member! I should have known one day it would be one of you chemistry people." the other ghost said.

Harold struggled to make a reply. His thoughts were so clear in his head, but when he tried to speak, they

all seemed to slam into a wall and trip over each other until they were too tangled to be reconciled.

"You've only just died, no need to try to speak," The ghost gave him a jovial smile, "All of that will come with time. Let me introduce myself, I'm Dr. Henry O'Loughlin."

He drifted closer to Harold, and he noticed that Henry's features were not a perfect image of what he must have looked like when he was alive. They flickered from one expression to another, like an image on a television screen that buffered and skipped from pose to pose too quickly.

Many ghosts had passed through Epiphany's halls, but none had stayed so long as Henry O'Loughlin. A professor of philosophy at Epiphany until his death at eighty-six, there was no place he would rather spend his afterlife. Even in death, he wanted nothing more than to answer life's big questions.

Although, he had to admit trying to answer those questions from beyond the grave was proving challenging.

He rambled for several minutes about his excitement about having another like-minded ghost around to talk to. (In fact, Harold hated philosophy but was still unable to interject to correct Henry on this.) Eventually, even Henry couldn't continue his one-sided rant, and he trailed off.

Henry sized Harold up, "So, how did you die?"

At that, the floodgate of his thoughts burst and every sentiment he'd wanted to express since he'd died poured from his mouth in an almost painful cacophony.

Henry chuckled as he watched Harold spew nonsense, "That's right. Get it all out."

After a few more seconds Harold got a hold of himself again, "I was murdered."

Henry's shifting features seemed to stand still for a moment, "Murdered?"

"By Bernadette Marin."

Henry darted out into the hallway and then quickly back in, "The proprietor of that lovely lab across the hall?"

Harold did his best to scowl, "Yes,"

Henry drifted closer to Harold, and he got the impression that, in life, Henry had not been the kind of person who had a good grasp on the concept of a personal bubble.

"So, how did she murder you?"

Tact, also, had never been one of Henry's strong suits.

"I don't know exactly," Harold replied, affronted by the comment, "The beaker I was working with must have been tampered with."

Henry drifted over to look at the stack of beakers that cluttered the lab bench, "How do you know she was the one who did it?"

"I just know," he replied, his tone indicative that this was the end of discussion. Harold decided to shift the conversation in a more productive direction, "So, is this it, then? This is the afterlife?"

"Well, I suppose that's the question, isn't it?"

Henry was particularly salivating at the chance to discuss this, and Harold suddenly remembered why he hated his introduction to philosophy class so much.

"I mean, are we just stuck here for the rest of time?" He tried to clarify his question.

"Not necessarily, I've met many ghosts who just...slip away one day. I have never managed to accomplish that."

To Henry, who had spent his life contemplating the afterlife, it seemed a cruel joke that he hadn't found them even in death. In some ways, the plane of existence he'd found himself in was even more mysterious than the one he'd left when he died. At least that one seemed to abide by some consistent laws. It seemed that being a ghost was a little different for each person, the longer he was a ghost he found it seemed to change for him too.

"So, there is a way to move on from this," asked Harold. Henry nodded, "Indeed."

"What's keeping us here then?" Harold asked.

"I have some theories. In fact, I think you can help me with that." Henry said, and Harold had a suspicion they'd stumbled into the conversation Henry had come here for.

"How exactly could I do that?"

"I try to interview every ghost I meet about what brought them here, to try to figure out the purpose of why we're all here. In exchange for your help, I can offer my assistance in solving your murder." Henry pitched.

Harold considered this. It wasn't exactly how he'd imagined spending his afterlife, but Henry's help could be an asset, and it wasn't like he had anything better to do anymore.

"Let's do it." He replied.

"Well, we can't exactly shake on it, but it's a deal," he proclaimed, "you can start by telling me more about this Bernadette."



Henry's office had been occupied by two other professors in the years since his death.

The latter of whom he greatly preferred, as she also preferred cozy string lights to the sterile, florescent lights that had always given Henry a headache. It was in this office that Harold spent the better part of a week getting used to the mechanics of being a ghost.

The week played out like this: Henry spent a few hours observing Harold trying to master the skills of moving, speaking, and not fading into the abyss. They would then return to the subject of Harold's death, go over the events that led it to it, or return to the lab and comb through it for any signs of foul play. Then came Harold's least favorite part, the several hours he spent answering Henry's unceasing and ridiculous questions.

"What did you think was going to happen to you after you died?" and "Do you believe in a higher power?" and "What got you out of bed in the morning when you were alive?" and what felt like thousands more permutations of questions that didn't seem to matter at all.

As much as Harold was annoyed by the questions, Henry was annoyed by his answers. They were brief and non-committal. When he asked whether Harold

believed in free will, he'd just shrugged his shoulders and said, "Does it even matter?"

Henry was affronted by the response. Harold's indifference to the subject he'd devoted his entire life to studying was almost as painful as outright disdain.

Eventually, they came to the point where neither of them could take it anymore, they would spend the rest of the day telling stories about Epiphany. Harold filled Henry in on all the latest university politics. ("They're expecting us to just give out A's now!") and Henry revealed the secrets he'd learned from the ghost of various Epiphany legends. (As it turned out the widely liked and recently deceased academic dean had been embezzling money from the university). Henry assured Harold that the former dean had seen the error of his ways in the end.

About a week after Harold's death, the chemistry building slowly began to come back to life. In recognition of Harold's passing the entire department had been given the week off, but one after another professor began to trickle back in, and by the next Monday the department was operational once again.

A week spent exclusively with Harold had left Henry uncertain if he'd been murdered at all. If Bernadette was truly as unhinged as Harold seemed to think she was, Henry highly doubted she could have maintained a position as such an accomplished researcher. Even so, the death of a healthy man in his fifties did seem suspicious.

With the chemistry department bustling once again, Henry decided it was time for him to meet Bernadette for himself. Much to Harold's dismay, he'd insisted on going alone.

When Henry arrived, Bernadette was alone in her lab. She was deep in thought, staring through the window at nothing. She certainly didn't have the appearance of a murder. Everything about her was perfectly schooled, even her cloud of dark curls had been smoothed and tucked beneath a maroon bandana.

Henry had to admit, though, her lab had a sort of violent cleanliness about it. Each beaker was placed neatly inside its designated circle of masking tape and labeled with a particular color in a system that Henry didn't quite understand. Safety posters and sticky notes lined the wall, as well as pictures and bios of the members of the lab and their research interests. A whiteboard mounted on the back of the door read "Welcome, Ramona!" although who Ramona was remained a mystery to Henry.

The phone on the wall rang and Bernadette sprung across the room to answer it, "Hello?"

Bernadette muttered an affirmation and furrowed her brow, "No, no, I just got back from Seattle this morning."

Henry heard a muffled voice from the other end of a phone and then, "That's right, two of my graduate students were there with me."

"Sure, I'd be happy to," more of the muffled voice and then, "Great, I'll talk to you later."

The phone clicked back onto the receiver, and Bernadette sighed. She leaned her head against the

wall, eyes fluttering shut for a moment before she pushed herself off again and strode out of the room, the door slamming shut behind her.

Henry trailed her to the faculty parking lot, where she slid into her car, and drove into the woods that lined the campus where Henry couldn't follow.

Henry mulled over the conversation as he drifted back towards the chemistry building, if his interpretation was correct it sounded like Bernadette had a pretty good alibi for Harold's death. It's difficult to poison someone when you are three states away.

Nevertheless, if he was going to convince Harold of Bernadette's innocence, he was going to need something rock solid, so off to the chemistry building he went.

Harold's lab couldn't have been more opposite to Bernadette's. The white of the lab benches was invisible under scattered papers, pipette tips, and what seemed like a year's worth of built-up clutter. Henry spotted the beaker Harold had been holding when he died, it was still half full and covered in a greasy film. The greasy film was noticeably absent from the beakers on the top of the shelf, and Henry remembered a story Harold had told him. A story about how he'd once ruined a batch of Bernadette's beakers with a reagent from his lab. Henry glanced around and two haphazardly labeled baskets caught his eye. One labeled clean, had shining beakers, and the other, labeled dirty, was filled with greasy beakers.

The pieces of what had happened to Harold began to click together, and Henry suddenly realized he would have to be the one to break it to Harold.

Lucky for him, he found Harold right where he left him. Harold was hovering near the window of Henry's old office, gazing out at the students hurrying past below. He was irked at Henry for casting him off earlier that morning, but glad that some actual investigation into his murder was finally being done.

When Henry got back Harold could sense that something had changed.

"Harold," Henry tried to tread lightly, "have you considered that perhaps you weren't murdered at all?"

"That's ridiculous, you saw the beaker, it was spiked with something." Harold snapped.

Harold believed that he had been murdered just as deeply as he believed the sky was blue. It would have been easier for him to admit defeat here and now, the look on Henry's face was evidence enough, but the assumption was baked so deeply into his reality that being wrong about it seemed far less likely than whatever work around his brain scrambled to present him with.

Harold's uncertainty was reflected, as his physical form shimmered and shifted rapidly. The sensation of hearing Henry through water that Harold had felt when they'd first met came crashing back over him.

Henry watched the transformation, and he realized that the only way that he was going to change Harold's mind was to show him proof that he couldn't dispute.

"I need to show you something."

Henry didn't wait for Harold to reply but instead drifted out the door hoping Harold would follow. He did.

Back in his lab Harold's felt more solid. The wave of uncertainty that had overwhelmed him was no longer crippling. There was a calm that cloaked him as he moved towards Henry, who floated next to a stack of beakers.

"What is this?" Harold asked.

"Take a look at these beakers and compare them with the one you used on the night you died," Henry replied.

Dread gripped Harold as he came to the same realization Henry had that very morning. He scrambled to try to catch the falling pieces of his reality and put them back together. He turned to Harold to protest, but when he tried to speak, he couldn't find the words.

"There's more," Henry nodded to the door where a fresh white sheet of paper had been tapped up, "they just put that up this afternoon."

Something prompted him to go to the door, the sense of calm that he'd felt when he'd first entered the room blanketed him once again.

*Dr. Davis' death has been ruled accidental by police. The contents of the beaker found next to him contained the precipitate of a common cleaning agent and the chemical he was testing, which when combined formed a noxious gas. Following are some words from his colleague, Bernadette Marin, "There are many matters on which Dr. Davis and I didn't see eye to eye. However, what I hope we both agreed on, is the importance of organic chemistry. I hope that we can all strive to be as devoted to the field as Dr. Davis was."*

"Don't sound like the words of a murder, do they?" asked Henry.

"I think I've been wrong," Harold suddenly found it difficult to form words, "about more than just this."

"Well, that's certainly true." Henry smiled.

"I'm slipping away, aren't I?" Harold managed to ask, and as he did, he knew it was the truth.

"Until we meet again, Harold."

## **A Financial Appeal to Your Hubris**

*Nadra Dunston*

We've all heard the lies:  
You're too loud. Too quiet.  
Too big. Too small.  
Too boring.  
Too wild.

Too.  
Much.

Well, we've heard enough.

Time to flip the script.  
We're doing things a little differently this year.

We're done holding back. Aren't you?  
Time to turn off the noise and unleash the authentic you.

Join the crusade of move makers, ground shakers, and boundary breakers;  
People who do their own thing for their own satisfaction.

Breathe easy and let the true you through.  
Choose boldness - undefined by expectations.

We are dedicated to seeing you shine,  
Do what makes you glow.

You are beauty, strength, resilience, perfection.  
You are divine and your glory is a gift to the world.

So, strut your stuff  
And watch the earth quake.

Magnify yourself  
With Deify: all-day allergy relief.

## **Podcast**

*Nadra Dunston*

I'm really glad you brought that up  
I mean, at the end of the day—  
Well, it's a complex topic.  
It's a nuanced realm of conversation,  
Which is interesting  
Because we simplify it so often.

Let me ask you this:  
Have you ever thought about—  
I mean, rarely anyone does.  
Rarely do we really think about it,  
Which is unfortunate  
Because this conversation is so important.

If you understand:  
This is just my take—  
Well, you've heard the dialogue  
We've all heard the debates surrounding it in  
Which we create this false dichotomy  
Because it's uncomfortable to address the true issue.

And that's the thing, right?  
If I can speak about this for a minute—  
I mean, this was life-altering.  
When I heard it, it changed everything,  
Which is the reality we face  
Because we need to create more space for these conversations.

Let me put it this way:  
You can't force me to pick a side,  
Because I have nothing.  
I have nothing to add to this discussion.  
And it's unfortunate  
That I've been taught to speak regardless.

**five isaiah's & a zacharias walk into a bar.**

*Jonelle Penin*

i lied. mormons don't drink. five isaiah's  
& a zacharias walk into a  
barn. there, that's better. five isaiah's &  
a zacharias walk into a barn

& fall to their knees. prayer is good for  
the soul says one of the isaiah's. i  
just like kneeling in the loose hay says  
another. you cannot tell one from any

other besides by their demeanor. one  
looks at you like an object that he must  
break to understand the inner workings,  
the unseen mechanisms churning inside

you. another seems to look through you  
altogether. zacharias still sits  
at the bar top we've since abandoned.  
another zacharias reads aloud

from a bible; no one knows where this  
zacharias has come from, we thought we  
only had one. a third isaiah is  
burning bibles outside the barn while the

fourth is putting them out. a fifth isaiah  
is already planning how to put you  
back together when the first is done with  
you. he lays out his tools, his blueprints, he's

got you all figured out & he didn't  
even have to take you apart; when did  
you become so transparent? the second  
isaiah says *you've been that way awhile.*

**Dear Antiquity,**  
*Annie Bonnett*

Dear Antiquity,

I'm sorry for reading your diary.

It's just that  
our brothers and sisters are choking  
on ash again  
and I thought of you.

It's just that  
I invoked your name today  
marching, staggering under the weight  
of my pitchfork  
and I thought of you  
doing the same while children huddled, freezing  
amongst wreckage where we promised safety.  
I thought of you marching and wondered:

Did you wear layers and fight the cold,  
straining to hear your leaders  
Did you give gloves to your friend, another  
dumb kid in the street  
who forgot to dress for the weather  
beseeching men with matches and singed ears

pleading to walls, screaming at passerby who  
hurl vitriol and wield empathy like bombs

Did you, too, crave the warmth of your  
bed, long to retreat to the sanctum  
where travesty can melt into fiction, miles away  
from the narrow scope of your vision

Did you loathe your brothers and sisters who did?

Yours,

A cowardly time traveler



## **Grave Robbing Memory Lane**

*Annie Bonnett*

On rotten nights, I hold Michelangelo's crucifix hostage,  
seeking my own perverse Siren's call. The pang  
of being forgotten is carved delicately

into glassy eyes, unseeing and unattainably blue. Fragile  
children sleep in the six feet beneath my doll house,  
a hair's width from womanhood.

Soil does not know the selfishness of girls with too-dark hair  
and foreign tongues. Growing bodies decompose – the worms  
will feast tonight – and clay crumbles into my lungs, painting  
my organs a grassy hue, clinging to the underside of blunt nails  
too stubborn even for Mom's tired hands.

What is the difference between a gravestone and a shrine? Both are  
a desperate attempt to immortalize the dead. Limp hands  
join this despicable tug-of-war and I am a Frankenstein in love  
with his own foolhardy arrogance.

Soil is blind to the cruelty of innocence. *Come here, honey,*  
she whispers, and blankets every last, wretched body.

It does not take much to slip out of a child's memory, evasive  
as mist, swift like water in your hands. *Don't leave.* I am on my  
hands and knees, but only the living whisper back.

## Towards the Water

Javier Melo

The moonlight sneaking through the curtains descends upon the round pearl sitting atop the bedside table. It's smaller than a pebble, but Rico's eyes find it instantly; the glistening gem paralyzes him in the threshold of his room. His weathered features: the faded sparkle of his brown eyes, his thinning strands of graying hairs and every wrinkle outlining the cliffs and ridges of his face, for a moment, stand still. The ghosts of recognition break his trance, and he instinctively looks down, looking for her tracks. He finds rows of carpet stains and dried footprints emerging from his swiveling chair and wandering into his study. Rico follows the footprints into his dim workplace, noticing how the wet markings stain the wooden floor more intensely near his mounted painting of a red palmchat resting on the branches of a palm tree. The footprints are scattered along the rest of Rico's apartment, disappearing near his kitchen window.

The curtains are stained with the patterns of two slender, muddy palms, and Rico sighs: a deep, tortured noise betraying vestiges of yearning. He returns to his study and recovers a briefcase brimming with brushes and colors. He digs out a brown notebook from underneath a stack of unfinished paintings, near the corner overseen by the red palmchat, and quickly shoves it into his briefcase. Against the current of the footprints, he heads back into his room and takes the round pearl, rubbing his digits against its surface before slipping it into his pocket. Rico forgets to close the door of his apartment as he sets out into the night, walking into the middle of an empty street.

He looks up at Indiana's starless sky, holding his voice and his breath, trying to hold time itself from stuttering too far back. But he doesn't need to worry. The first whispers she wove into the breeze lift his face by the chin, setting his gaze on the swaying horizon of the dark Wabash River.



The first time he'd seen her, he must have been around nine years old. Back then, he still lived amongst the warmth and the salt, half a mile away from the white beaches of Puerto Plata, with his grandmother Dolores. Rico's mother had passed away, I want to say, two years before this; she had drowned in the shallows of a gray river up the Pico Duarte trail.

The Pico Duarte is the highest peak in the Caribbean, but if you stand near the summit—by the statue of Juan Pablo Duarte himself—it seems like the hills right over are slightly closer to the sky. Rico's mother, Ingrid, never made it to the statue, or to the second hut at the feet of the final stretch. She wandered off somewhere beyond the first fork on the road, the torn brushes and shattered sticks outlining her journey into the unmarked woods. They had to bring two mules down the steps of broken logs and pits of cold mud to find her. For an hour, they replayed her final, wandering steps. When the riders heard the trickling of the nearby

stream, and saw her footprints take flight off a mossy stone, they shook their heads, faces obscured by the wide shadows of their hats. Rico's name was never mentioned in the letter stuffed into her pocket.

Rico's father was a fantasy: an abstract creature with a dynamic countenance composed of crayon scratches and marker doodles. But his grandmother refused to surrender him to loneliness. Dolores drove into the high mountains slumbering within the middle of the country, where the stinging cold floats as a paradox to the tropical dome which surrounds it. She wrapped the shivering child in a purple towel, spotted with variegated stains of dry watercolor streaks, and she took him home.

He spent his time doodling seashells and gray birds, or helping Dolores around the house. She was a short, boisterous woman who always insisted—despite no one raising any arguments to the contrary—that she had been gifted with divination. She claimed an inscrutable understanding of the future, which would descend upon her in vague, shallow blurs out of the corner of her eyes, or in translucent apparitions parading through her dreams.

A year after Rico had moved to Puerto Plata with her, his grandmother told him that she had felt her mother's passing from all the way there, in the north of the island. She told Rico that she had been painting the picture of a hidden pond within a labyrinth of trees, that glistened with a white glow brighter than the descending starlight. Within this pond, she said, she felt compelled to paint all sorts of creatures: frogs, bugs, worms and butterflies. Dolores's scowl betrayed a peculiar combination of melancholy and confusion as she explained, in disbelief of her own words, that she felt like the pond's beauty would be wasted without life. But the black paint she used to outline the jittering figures swarming the white pond began to corrode the surrounding colors. They spread in circles around one another and then linked themselves like black spider webs across her canvas. Dolores dropped her brush and palette and stared at the invasion, overcome with the understanding that something terrible had happened. Though he didn't want to push his grandma, who seemed to be at the verge of shattering, Rico felt compelled to ask:

"How did you know it was her?"

Dolores closed her eyes and softened her brow. She let out a long, torturous sigh that

Rico would hopelessly inherit, and after a while she admitted not to know. Perhaps the sinkhole in her soul was just too wide to go unnoticed. Though Dolores and her daughter had become estranged over the years, it was clear that the hate between them was nothing more than the ignorant perseverance of their love. But, as Dolores would continuously remind Rico until her last day alive, Ingrid had forgotten to keep her feet pointed at the water. So she had wandered off.

Rico eventually understood to ignore his grandma's more outlandish features, and instead focused on allowing her to teach him how to paint. Dolores was a

fantastic artist: prophetic or not, her art captured the sunny vitality of everything around her in a swiveling trance of strokes and colors. It became easier to disregard her sudden illuminations when he could see himself improving under her tutelage, and thankfully, her visions seemed rarely involved. At best, he'd be warned he's about to catch a cold, which didn't require a lot of divine foresight.

One morning, however, a shriek of delight exploded into the hallway from Dolores' room, and Rico rushed to investigate it. He found his grandma staring at a painting—a white pearl sitting atop a jagged rock. It seemed to be perched in perfect balance on the sharpest edge of the stone's peak, imperiled by the briefest visit of the breeze. Dolores turned towards her grandson, her shaking hands clutching a tumbling color palette, and requested that she be delivered a gem just like it.

"Go down to the beach, and walk until you run into *this*." She waved her hand over the painting, nearly grazing the wet colors. "It's waiting for you along the shore."

Rico protested, clutching his brown notebook brimming with shells and birds closer to his chest, but his qualms fell to deaf ears as she prepared a couple of small sandals for his journey. While he enjoyed walking to the beach, he had been ripped away from an intricate sketch of a yellow butterfly perched on his windowsill, and he wasn't in the mood to indulge in his grandmother's frivolities. It was all to no avail, however, but the frustration of this undesired mission was overshadowed by Rico's surprise upon noticing his grandmother return to her room after giving him his shoes. Rico had never left the house by himself, and he wasn't particularly fond of being alone. It made him feel jittery and small, ever since Pico Duarte.

"You're not coming?"

"No" She was already back to her colors, her distant voice further muffled by the strokes upon her canvas. "And remember: keep your toes pointed at the water!"

Rico walked along the highway road which slowly crept into the coast, until it disappeared into the water. The street gave way to spotted spurts of rocks and foliage which transformed into the beach, the gray lining of the asphalt being overcome by the light caramel of the sand. Rico's small sandals floated comfortably above every sandy hill as he made his way further away from the road. He scanned his surroundings for any odd figure or glistening color that might catch his eye, but he struggled to find anything more than a torn coral or fading seashell littering the coast. He had unsuccessfully walked up and down his familiar stretch of the beach six times, and was about to return in defeat, when something stopped him in his tracks.

Rico began to notice a noise.

It was a very peculiar sound. It hid behind and within the orchestra of the beach; a subtle melody below the chirping of seagulls or the distant roars of the motorbikes in the highway. It visited the space

between his ears and his dark, curly hair, only to melt into the rhythmic drone of waves slamming against the shore. Rico started to look around, trying to find its source. The song grew stronger towards a distant corner of the shore, one littered with dangerous rocks piercing the incoming waves. Rico had never walked in that direction, discouraged by Dolores from leaving the entrance to the beach too far behind. But Rico was alone that day, so he decided to follow these whispers woven in the wind through the tattered trail they marked into the beach, past the familiar stretch where people usually flooded the sand with towels and beach chairs. He followed the inquisitive, innocent glimpses of a voice that with every step grew louder and more colorful, even if it refused to reveal any semblance of actual meaning.

Eventually, he reached an area where the shore became a treacherous ridge of foaming rocks keeping the infinity of the ocean away—a small bay shielded from the rest of the world by high-rising stones and wide spans of yellow leaves. There was no sand, and the flickers of saltwater made every surface slippery and treacherous. Just beyond this stone shore, the waters beat with their same intensity, adorned by the source of the curious sound Rico had been following. He saw her there, standing on the rocking waves, and he's never seen anything half as beautiful since.

She was a small girl who seemed around his age, and her eyes were large, dark spots which reflected every single strand of light cast from the Sun. She wore a white, silky gown that gracefully swayed along the breeze, sticking to her limbs to reveal how slender she was. Her skin was the color of coffee and milk, and every flicker of the wind that passed in front of his face as he observed her was adorned with the tones of Bayahibe roses. Her streams of black hair, which blossomed into springs of dark curls, reached all the way down to her small ankles, where the white foam of the ocean obscured his vision. Her voice, mellow and bubbling, stopped producing the song that had called Rico there when her dark eyes noticed him standing on the shore. She began to approach him.

She seemed to glide above the water, the parting of the waves outlining her approach, until she reached the stone shore near Rico and gracefully leapt atop the rocks. She was simply light, like the wing of a bat resting atop the breeze. Standing fully in front of him, Rico noticed her feet for the first time, and gasped. They were slender and worn, perfectly normal safe for one striking detail. Both of them were turned backwards: her calloused heels faced ahead and her sandy toes pointed behind her.

His glossy eyes, reddened by the splashes of salty waves, rested on this curious sight. Old fairy tales slithered their way out of his memory: The Ciguapas, the women with backward feet.

Dolores had mentioned them a couple of different times. These were the spirits that roamed the cool mountains and muddy ridges near the middle of the island, occupying the same caves and lakes hidden near

his mother's final resting place. Sometimes farmers up in the mountains would hear their soft melodies beckoning them forward, calling them someplace dangerous. They would claim that a Ciguapa killed their farmdog, or led their mules astray down a dangerous ridge. But the only evidence of their existence, save the haunting impressions they left on those who claimed to have seen them, were the rows of footprints that always led towards the water.

But the Ciguapa was right there, standing in the moist rocks, far away from where she should have been. Rico forced himself to raise his gaze, meeting her eyes, which now peered at him with flickering confusion and fascination. He opened his mouth, but he didn't manage more than a squeaky whimper. And perhaps it was the fact that she looked so much like any other girl, or the fact that Rico wasn't terribly scared of anything by now... anything but being alone.

But he didn't turn around and run; instead, he quickly covered his lips, embarrassment defeating his wariness, and was surprised to hear a soft chuckle emerge from the Ciguapa's mouth. He locked eyes with her again. Her laugh was playful and melodic, and despite the nature of the situation, a shy smile began to crawl into his face.

He took a step, his orange sandals gripping faithfully onto the wet surface below. He approached her carefully, with respect and trepidation. She began to take graceful, small steps towards him, every footprint plastered upon the rocks facing the lulling waves behind her. When they met in the middle of the stone shore, their silence seemed eternal. Rico stood still, awaiting a sign on what exactly he was supposed to do. And luckily for him, the Ciguapa seemed to have been expecting the young boy on the stone shore. She produced a small, round pearl from the pocket of her white gown and, rolling it slowly between her fingers, she grinned at Rico and said:

"This was looking for you."



He presses onward, towards the Wabash River. Rico's white tennis shoes are invaded by spurts of muddy streaks, but he presses on regardless. His legs are heavy with the toll of sixty-five years walking towards brighter colors, and trudging through the muddied waters of his own mind. He knows that there is little practical use in going forward now, in fulfilling his promise to Dolores. But the unfinished canvas he carries with him is about to burn a hole straight through the leather of his briefcase. The strands of sunlight that used to glisten off the rocks scattered above her stone coast penetrate his mind again.

He has not lived an unsatisfying life.

He had married, he had worked, and he had loved and prospered in America. He still hasn't managed to bring himself to return to Puerto Plata again, ever since he left all those years ago. But shame didn't bind him... it only muted his watercolors. It only strips the arcane away from the notes of burgundy and turquoise. It only shrinks his color palette to match the softer blush of

the flowers around him. Not even there—or perhaps particularly not there—has he managed to find the appropriate colors to fill that empty space in the middle of his canvas.

He keeps marching onwards, following the black, deserted road, and the familiar melodies swimming through the trees. The voice beckons him further into the alien foliage contained by the long black streets and high traffic bridges. It leads him down a shadowed path littered with crunchy leaves and dry twigs. Before he can hear the rocking waves against the river, or smell the waste resting on The Wabash, he knows that he is walking towards the water.



When the Sun went down after that first day, Rico didn't want to go home. His paintings, his errand for Dolores, even his house... they all seemed small and unimportant compared to talking with the Ciguapa. She told him that she would find him; that she would leave something from her home where he could see, so that he could know when to return. Certain days, he would smell the beach escaping into the city, melting into every breath, and he would know that when he got home, he'd find a faded seashell, or a rusted bottle cap sitting atop his desk: her way of summoning him to the rocky shore.

Rico wasn't completely irresponsible regarding his promise, however. After he grew comfortable enough meeting the Ciguapa's playful gaze, he asked her to give him the glistening pearl his grandmother had painted after her revelation. The Ciguapa, as if knowing and expecting this request, slyly shook her head, and turned around. The shock of her backwards feet was still fresh.

"You have the smile of an artist." She spoke above her shoulder, turned towards the sea.

"I'll give you the pearl if you paint me a portrait."

"Why do you want me to paint you?"

"I have..." She turned towards him again, her dark hair moving like a sheet of metal in front of her.

"No idea how I'm supposed to look." She didn't say these words with sadness, but rather a nearly-absurd assertion of disbelief.

"I could give you a mirror."

"But then how am I supposed to know how you look at me?"

So the next time Rico found a trinket from the ocean waiting atop his desk, he grabbed his colors and his brushes before heading to the coast. The Ciguapa's dark eyes widened once she noticed him approaching with his tools, and she leapt out of the water and into the rocky shore. He asked her to stand still, on her backward feet, facing the setting Sun. But the second

Rico's brush touched the page, his mind went straight to the high mountains of Pico Duarte, as if his fingers yearned to design nothing more than the dilapidated outline of his mother's body floating in the shallows. Her image was the first and only answer his head would provide when searching for ways to capture the Ciguapa's features, and this haunting vision would return every time he attempted the portrait

after that, and eventually he gave up. But after a while, the painful distraction of trying to paint the Ciguapa became irrelevant in the face of how much Rico loved spending time with her. Though he never told anyone about her, or brought anyone else to their hidden bay, it was evident that the backwards feet and the water-walking started to bother him less and less, until he only remembered their differences when he noticed the opposite shapes of their wet footprints on the floor. With every visit to the stony shore, with every floating page of scrapped paper, they bloomed beneath the changing skies.

When they were still young, they would chase each other around the rocky grounds, stumbling into fumbling heaps of laughter. They would talk about the birds and the crabs and the turtles, struggling to find a moment to grow tired of each other's company. The Ciguapa would talk about the long, serpentine routes beneath the valleys and the rivers, and the many different ways that each stream leads into another. The way she described the movement of the water, you could swear that every drop was holding each other's hands. He, in turn, told her about his home, about his grandmother scraping together coins, and his dream of painting in the U.S. He didn't tell her about his mom. And though Rico couldn't paint the Ciguapa, he still showed her other portraits of things beyond the stony shore, like the yellow flowers that only grow by the side of the road, or a red palmchat resting on a twig. Rico didn't know if palmchats could even be red; he doubted it, as a matter of fact, but the Ciguapa's smile showed no hesitation. As the years passed and Rico's ambitions grew, his dream of painting in the U.S became a constant reminder of his final destination: something he would always reference or mention whenever he saw the Ciguapa.

Once—he must have been about fourteen—she asked him why he wanted to leave. It took a few seconds of staring into her frown for him to realize what she meant. Rico always sighed at the setting Sun, marking his departure from the stony shore... but why, if he yearned to leave forever? It was difficult to remember, in that liminal space between their faces, how the potholes and the blackouts tattered the fabric of his future. It was impossible to invoke the ghost of reason to arrive and explain why the Dominican Republic wasn't enough, even if every inch of his being yearned for it to be.

Not even the warmth of her salty breaths could completely quell that tingle of flight which tugged at his throat. Her smile began to fight the instinct which beckoned him to reach for the sky. Staring into the endless abyss of her obsidian eyes, he realized that despite every desire within him yearning to leave, his heart would not remain untested once he had to let go.



He reaches the shore of the river, and sees the dancing constellations blinking in and out of the gray, streaming surface. The breeze is now silent, and in its stead he can only hear the march of the water and his

own measured breaths. His eyes traverse the entire length of the snaking river, searching every smooth rock within sight. His right thumb rubs the round pearl inside his pocket.



After Dolores passed away, he saw the Ciguapa for what he thought was the last time. He was twenty-one, and it had been two years since he'd been called to the stone shore. His throat had dropped like an anvil crashing into a hammer when he'd seen the moist bottle-cap on top of his desk, staining an acceptance letter from the art department of Indiana University.

She didn't recognize him at first. It frightened him, the brief emptiness behind her gaze as her eyes darted to his straight hair, his plain shirt, his blue jeans and his white sneakers. Even after approaching him, feeling his face and recognizing his hands, she still glanced at him with wariness and mystery, like she was looking at a ghost. He in turn, began to feel a strange pull of melancholy in the veins around his heart every time he saw her face. After a while, their conversation became so mutually unbearable that he requested he attempt to finish her portrait, one last time. He produced his brown notebook and an array of colors and brushes as she silently sat, small and nearly transparent.

That evening, every star plastered in the night sky, every stream of moonlight, and every crevice on the stony shore made its way inside his brown notebook. But at the center of his sketch, absorbing the dark tones surrounding it, was the blank outline of a sitting girl, the white shadows of her feet pointed the opposite direction.



Rico stands on the quiet shore of the Wabash river. A shadow begins to emerge from the middle of the running waters, slowly rising above the bubbling foam tracing its currents. The river clings to each strand of her hair, until it peels off into scattered teardrops bombarding the waves below. She rises with her eyes closed, and only opens them when she stands firmly atop the swaying surface. Her eyes are the first difference he notices: they are hollow, and lack the sparkle of flaming obsidian which he could swear he remembers. She wears a tattered, white gown, and she seems pale and famished. Her hair is straight, exploding into frizzy tufts near her battered, bony ankles. Her feet, still facing away from him, pace weakly upon the waves.

For a brief, eternal second, they ponder what to say.

But the moonlight bears heavily on her glistening, ransacked hair, and there only seems to be one thing left to do. He flips through the pages of his old brown notebook, skipping through forgotten chapters of birds and seashells rusting in the back of his mind. He skims through countless ripped pages, until he finds an empty evening in the stony shore. The white wound in the middle of the page seems inviting for the very first time. It seems galaxies away from the shallows of Pico Duarte. Brush in hand, he stares at her fragile figure for a long time, before sighing, and closing his eyes.

Towards the darkness upon him, he bleeds every smile he can remember the Ciguapa's lips betraying, and lays them gently on his brown notebook. He carves, in gentle strokes, the endless stillness of her dark eyes, and the warmth of every moment decorated by her laughter. He allows the brush to follow the convoluted tracks trodden over his heart, whatever direction they may follow. They flourish in the whimsical tones of bright watercolors he thought he'd never see again. When he opens his eyes, he recognizes the part of himself left behind, somewhere along the thousand miles which separates him from the coast made of glistening rocks. In his brown notebook, she doesn't look as lost and lonely as she does, standing on the Wabash. She looks exactly like he remembers her, all those years ago. Their love is preserved in the amber of his watercolors.

When he lowers his notebook, he finds her standing right in front of him, as if she had glided out of the river and into the pebbles. She stands so close, that if he moved quickly enough, he might be able to hold her. But before he can do so—before he can even blink, or remember all he missed—she evaporates into a bubbling cloud of white mist, which floats, almost ascending, to the navy skies above. It does not take long for her to melt into the clouds.

Where she stood, he sees the trail of wet footprints outlining her journey out of the Wabash. Silver glimmers echo every single backward step, coating the pebbles littering the ground. He glances behind him, and realizes that his footsteps too have seeped into the ground, ending where hers take flight, joining their tracks into a single file of footprints facing the same direction. Some of them are scattered wider apart; some of them go under logs or around running streams. Some of them get washed away by the rising tides, or buried under falling leaves.

But for every footprint—regardless of how far away it may be from the shore—their toes will always stay pointed towards the water.

## Coastal Monuments

Paul Zellerhoff

Like disparate thoughts the salty waves  
Brush along the sandbar's face  
They lick the sky and flick the shore  
Liberate its dusty ore

A sudden crash of tidal foam  
Washed the limestone cracks of loam  
And caused the cliff to spit its fang  
Upon the banks where waters sang

This rugged pillar beamed and stood  
And saline jets, and dry whisp would  
Chisel, sculpt, and sideways spray  
Coloring its earthy gray

Boldly standing, night and day  
To moons it hummed, to suns proclaimed  
Its rare and vibrant silty stain

A droplet sailed, light and candid  
Unto its face alighted and  
fell  
through the air  
to the swirling depths below.  
The resplendent monolith was  
evaporated.  
A mirage.

Salty spray and still fills the air  
And sediments fly here and there  
And in our minds these marveled spires  
Still stand,  
Nonexistent.

## R.M.S. Titanic

Eric Cobos

Your eyes are like the ocean  
And your smile's like the breeze;  
While your curly hair is flowing  
Sun kissed color at the beach.  
But you're staring in the distance  
Toward the vastness of the sea.  
Relaxing in the sand behind  
Your sunglasses, are dreams.

Sea mist sparkles on your face  
And sand softens your touch;  
I'd ask you for your hand to dance  
But silence says enough.  
So I do not ask you for your hand  
While sand slips through my clutch,  
I'm in love with your laughter  
Though I do not hear it much.

I'd go out to the waters  
But the ocean's awfully cold,  
And the sun can only grace the face  
With superficial gold.  
But I think of the Titanic,  
Far beneath the sea.  
I've never liked the ocean-  
*What a lonely place to be.*

I could see you're lost in thought  
Just through the countenance you wore,  
Unfazed with grace your face unchanged  
Each wave that hits the shore.  
I can't tell if you're happy but  
I hope for moments more,  
And I know the day will go away  
Just like each time before.

I feel the time fleeting  
And I know it cannot stay.  
Your presence is my sunset,  
It's the best part of the day.  
Then the sun flows over the ocean  
Which is vast and coldly furled,  
The Titanic's not gigantic  
In the waters of the world.  
But you move your glasses to your head  
And I fear you'll turn around;  
I'll get lost in your ocean eyes  
Of loneliness,

and drown.

## **Loneliness is an albatross**

*Amanda Petty*

I am writing to try and understand you.  
Coughing up chunks of prose and metaphors to make a window  
out  
of  
all  
your  
fragments.

I am writing up all the words I wish I could say to you in my messiest handwriting.  
So I can read them back and pretend  
you wrote them for me.

I am writing to make sense of this confusing mess of life.  
I am wandering too far

alone  
and diving in the ocean in December to feel the  
cold  
shock  
in  
my  
blood.

Each time I choke under a wave  
Remember  
there is

no one  
waiting  
on  
shore.

I am not writing to understand you.

Coughing up bits  
of  
sand  
and  
water

to make an oxygen mask out of this salty air.  
I am writing my life preserve and my compass.  
I am not drowning and

I  
am  
not  
lost.

I am making sense of my own confusing mess of a body.

A transformation where I have shed my skin

I am not dead around your neck.

There is no more left to read because I cannot  
make words with wings.

And I am

never  
coming  
back  
to  
shore.



### **Alone Together**

*Audrey Pink*

The cold burns more than the fire  
Smoke rises and fades into the clouds  
I look amongst former friends and allies but  
None of them meet my gaze as they all  
Stare into the flames that destroyed everything we had  
And now we'll destroy what is left  
It's hard to remember a time before this  
When the deep blues that choke our surroundings  
Were once passive and green  
When we showed our teeth for more than just eating  
Though our smile back then never reached our eyes  
There were times before then,  
I can't remember them now  
But in the back of my head, I hear its faint whisper  
My breath catches trying to hold back the laughter  
And I'm overcome with the inescapable feeling of drowning  
With nothing to fill our souls but the accidental  
Swallow of frigid water, greedily consuming the air  
With nothing around we can only cling to each other  
And I fear who we'll use to try and stay afloat

### **rekindling**

*Zachary Hodges*

my tote bag dropped on my  
bed, nestled inside a toothbrush  
and socks— the essentials for  
spending a night away—  
sat dusky in my shaded room,  
morn bloated by sleeplessness  
and kisses under renewal and  
bedsheets i had never seen you in.  
white walls and furniture, my  
beloved pink mirror and subtle purple bed—  
what i would give to leave it all  
behind for the forest,  
letting the leaves brush my hair  
and the grasses scratch my feet.

switchgrass— little ebbs of thread  
and chlorophyll painting the cuts  
on the small of my left foot with  
aching and pain. the bittersweet  
touch of a cutting thread, of a grass  
that catches my wool sweater by  
the waist and pulls it back,  
and then up, and then off  
into the foliage of carpet and  
lamp shadow.

brushfire, nourishment— feeding  
the trees what they are owed once  
in a millennia, when nature runs its  
course, when the desire to feel warmth  
is overcome by the desire to live and  
they succumb to their yearnings of  
flame and destined regret, for fire  
is a feeling more than it is pain.

such a necessity in the way  
the forest lights itself on fire— such a  
finality in the way your tire tracks  
scratch my pavement. such a  
hatred in the way i dry into  
unnatural colors.

## Falling and Afraid

*Teah Good*

Once I break out of the mundane of my everyday life, I think things will feel different. I need them to feel different. I need an escape from what my life has become and the people in it. Of course, I didn't tell *him* that.

When I said I wanted to get away, this is not what I meant.

He thought it would be great to take a little vacation in the woods, where his uncle's cabin has been slowly withering away. I think that it's not far enough, and it's cold and rainy there. The yellow and brown leaves slowly disintegrate from the rain. I've seen the cabin in photos he used to show me, and it resembles an abandoned shed that hasn't had fresh paint in twenty years, and hasn't seen the light of life in far too long. It's just rotten wood, left to disappear, alone, without a sound.

It's fine, it's been that way for years and nothing bad has happened to it. He tried to reassure me that it wouldn't collapse on us.

Even if it does, at least we have each other and we can figure out anything together.

Not true. Is what I wanted to say, not that I hadn't believed that before, but this time I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure about anything. I couldn't tell him.

Sure, let's go. Hopefully the weather stays nice enough, in fall.

Oh, I'm sure it'll be fine. It's not November yet.

The mornings and evenings are already getting colder though, shivering is not what I call an escape from everyday life.

We'll just have to keep each other warm. Like we did in the winter. Besides, I don't think it'll be that bad this weekend. It's supposed to be sunny.

That's when I became afraid that he noticed I wasn't myself, like I hadn't thought about sleeping close to him to keep warm, although I prayed he hadn't noticed. I was hopeful that this trip could bring us closer, emotionally. Why did he never shed a tear or laugh with his whole body, like I did almost every time he made a dumb joke?

What?

Did I say that out loud? How crazy, I just was thinking about that joke you said yesterday.

I don't know what I said out loud and what remained floating in my mind just then, but that moment changed him.

Later that night, we begin packing our things for a weekend "getaway" to his uncle's cabin. Why was I nervous about this trip? Was it the cabin, or was it that I'd be alone in the woods with him? I hate myself for feeling this way. I want to make things right but I... but if I... talk about how I've been feeling, I'm afraid of what he'll say.

Are you ready? Have everything you need?

Yes, at least I think so. Oh right, how long is the drive again? We may want snacks during the drive.

It's about 4 to 5 hours, is that all right?

Oh, okay, I'm definitely bringing snacks and extra water.

I'm not looking forward to this drive tomorrow. Now that I'm thinking about this trip, I'm not even sure if he's ever seen me without makeup. We've only stayed the night together a couple of times and we've only been dating for almost a year. Is this trip worth the risk? This kind of trip with someone I feel like I barely know. Why am I scared? I could cancel, say that some work came up, even though I really hate work. The people in my office have been so annoying lately. They keep asking about my love life and I don't want to talk about my life at work. I've never thought about staying at this job for very long, and I'm not about to spill my life story to these people.

I don't want to go now. I'm scared of how we'll be all alone together for the weekend.

Why do I feel like I don't know him? Is it that I feel like he's never showing me his true emotions?

Thanks for packing snacks. You're the best babe. I got to head home to get the rest of my things and I'll pick you up tomorrow morning. What time works for you?

Uh, nine works. But did I just hear you right? You said "babe" didn't you? Since when do you say, babe?

Why not? I thought you liked that kind of thing, thought I'd mix it up. But if you don't like it, I can stop. Sorry for trying something new.

No no, it's not bad. I just wasn't expecting to ever hear you say that.

No, it's all right I won't say it again, I'm sorry.

I never said I didn't like it. Why are you avoiding this? I liked it alright! Is that what you needed to hear?

I'm gonna go back now. See you tomorrow.

Hey! Wait!

He closed the door behind him.

What the heck was that all about? I'm so confused, was he actually trying to show that he cares about me for a change? How much of my thoughts did that man hear? I'm so nervous about tomorrow.

All I wanted was time alone to think about what I've been doing with my life. I think I do love him, but he's been so weird lately that I'm just not sure what's going to happen after that dumb fight. Was it a fight?

CS

She hates me, I just know it. I've never been good at sharing my thoughts or expressing my feelings well with her. I just want her to know that I care about her, but I've just been so... empty lately. Like I can't feel anything.

I got really excited when she brought up how she wanted to get away for a while, and I thought that we could make a weekend of it together. I want to show her I love her. I've not said it before and actually meant it like I want to mean it, tomorrow.

The first time one of us ever said "I love you," it never felt right. I think she felt obligated to say it after six months of being together before we even decided to sleep together. Maybe she said it so that we could. Was that all she wanted? Does she just want someone to be close with, and am I ready for that? I don't even

know what kind of relationship this is. We've called each other boyfriend and girlfriend, maybe twice in the context of talking with family and friends. Did we ever actually feel that way though? Are we exclusive? I'm not saying that I've not been, but I don't know about her. I've never asked because I've never felt like I wanted to keep her to myself, until now.

I'm going to make this right. I'm going to clear things up this weekend, I'm going to tell her I love her and mean it, maybe. I know it's not the most luxurious place to bring someone you want to grow closer to, but it's free and I'm just barely scraping by as it is. She knows that, so I'm not sure why she hates the idea of going to the cabin. She knows I can't afford anything else.

I get that it looks run down, but it's been there for so long that I've grown to like it. Ugh, all I ever do is "like" things. Why am I so emotionless?

I wanted to stay and clear up what I said that night, but I knew if I stayed I'd just want to give her all of me. I wasn't sure if I was ready for that yet, but I'm ready today, I think. It looks like she has doubts too, which makes me more nervous and scared for tonight. If I make a move, will she be okay with that?

I drove over to pick her up for our trip. She's waiting outside on the porch with her things next to her, looking at her phone. Avery always reads when she's nervous about something. Like learning more about random things on the internet will calm her down. I could see that she was nervous too. Did she even want to come this weekend? I just want to make us a real couple, go on trips together, and spend time together without struggling to think of conversation topics. I'm changing this weekend. I want to feel her... body, heart, and soul.



Why was he waiting in the car? Was he going to get out and help me carry my things? Or am I supposed to just bring my stuff and hop in the car? Put my stuff in the trunk and open the door for myself... like he was picking me up for work? I swear he doesn't know how to be a gentleman. I'm just going to wait here and see what he does.

Hey! As he slams the car door. Want to get going? He's holding my bags, about to kiss me.

Yeah? Why are you so energetic this early in the morning?

He kisses my cheek. I'm stunned. Frozen in place. Are my cheeks red? I started to feel tingly, what the heck?

Are you coming?

He just put my stuff in the car, he's looking at me with a deeper gaze than I've ever seen him wear before.

Uhm... uh huh. I mumbled, still in shock.

He comes back over to grab my hand.

Are you alright? Too much huh? I'm sorry, I'll go slower for you. But I'm not sure I can promise that once we're alone tonight.

What? Are you okay? Such a puzzling change for you...

Yeah, I'm just really happy to spend time with you and only you this weekend. A whole weekend, just us.

That's nice and all, but I think I need to say that I'm a little bit nervous and scared. So, can you slow down?

Of course, sorry. We've still got a long drive ahead of us. There's a lot I want to say.

I have a lot to say too.

Then, let's go.

I can't.

Why?

My legs won't move, and I'm going to be honest. I thought I was going to spend the weekend alone to think things through. I'm not sure if I should go with you. I'm sorry, I just feel like you've been holding back ever since I said that I loved you.

I know. I've noticed you've been a bit more reserved and you look sad sometimes. I'm sorry, I've been holding back too because I was afraid. I wasn't feeling anything for a while. I thought if we finally tried to make what we had into more of a relationship, I would be happy.

Turns out I needed time to work through my issues and I thought we could try to this weekend. I want to tell you more about me that I've never said before.

Oh, okay. I'm sorry I've never let you have time to think and work through things.

It's not your fault, I've just been putting all my emotions in a box. That's not okay and I want to share everything with you. For real, this time. So, can we please go?

Yeah, I'm still a little surprised is all.

Want me to carry you?

Uh, I don't...

He picked me up, his hands felt warm, his arms strong and secure, and the smell of his cologne drew me in.



I picked her up. Without letting her finish, something came over me. All I wanted was to hug her, but I picked her up for the first time instead. It was kind of electric, amazing, she was so light. Her face glowed a red I'd never seen. I wanted to kiss her for real, but the look of her shocked face was a moment I wanted to be in forever.



Hey! You can't just —

What? You don't like this? You look like you do.

What! That's not fair. How come you can tease me while looking all accomplished?

Because I made you blush. And your surprised face is so cute. Your lips look pink, and your nose is red too.

That's cause it's cold outside, can we get in the car now?

Arms crossed, face scrunched, like a little kid—embarrassed.

Why did I let myself become so easily encapsulated by him?

We started driving, and all of a sudden, an intense dark, and eerie feeling took over the air. Did I change, or is he acting weird? Why did the air feel so cold and why was he looking at me with empty eyes?

Did I make a mistake? I'm terrified now, we're starting to pull over onto a deserted dead-end road I've never seen. This was not the way he talked about taking

to the cabin. Was he pulling over to make out with me or something else?

Hey. Why don't you take your seatbelt off?

Um, no? I thought we were going to the cabin?

Trust me, it'll be fine. It's good to get out and stretch your legs.

I'm fine though.

**Get out of the car now.**

That's the first time he's ever raised his voice like that. He was so warm and caring right before we got in the car. Was that to lure me in? Just ten minutes after we got in, he went silent and cold. I've never been so horrified.

Okay, sorry.

That's good... just come with me.

Sure.

We started walking in the woods, the sunlight peeking through the colorful trees, he left the car on while we walked further in. Why did he leave the car on? Should I start making traces of myself on our way? I want to be found after whatever is going on here. How do I let people know I've been here? Is he about to do something totally unforgivable?

Where are we going?

Just a bit further alright!

Okay.

He stops. I can see his hands shaking, and I just noticed what looked to be a knife in his pocket as he turned around to face me.

You're really scaring me now.

Come on Avery, what do you think I'm going to do?

Staring me in the eyes, I stare back into a soulless void in his eyes. I'm on the verge of tears, ripping my hair out, frantically trying to get myself out of this, replaying scenarios in my head . . .

### **Narcolepsy: A Haiku**

*Rachel Labi*

Eyes sway to slumber  
Gossip engulfed by forced rest  
Raspy murmurs Cease

## Toll

Amanda Wolf

Day of days dawns, and is commanded to fall  
Out upon the world overdrawn  
In faith—

Now Gabriel, forth he does strike  
The fury horn—  
*Horn, first chair; proud state ribbon—*  
But  
Archdemon hooligans next door—  
The rebel kid's old band cohort—they

The call to end it all  
Stolen,

Dad does not quite believe his ears.  
He'll put his foot down right this morn—

And the end can wait another day.  
Tonight, the table

Much the same.

And he hears snatches he dares not  
Hope.  
Voices last heard back  
When they were whole, and they would play  
Out after school, on drive and lawn  
With ball and bike and time and space—

And all was music to his ears  
As up in his lofty office he would work

Dad misses 'em, even those  
Who up and flew the nest just so—  
But he cannot help

That he knows best—  
But with the dinner bell he goes to call,

But Apollyon,  
Apollyon leaves not the pit.  
He gets a call, but won't submit;  
Day after many damned days,  
He'd tunneled long  
The other way,  
With only the faith of an American kid  
In the sandbox, and  
Found China yesterday  
And stayed.  
He does not come when dad demands.

Join  
With saxophone,  
And bass, and more,

Transformed,  
Till streets run with blood  
Just pumping. None drawn.

And he puts it down  
And down again,  
And without himself taps  
His red right hand—

Silent

But the song outside; it's  
Unashamed,

All together, all those years,

Away.  
Sometimes they asked him to come play.

He thinks

He thinks

Just maybe another day.  
But he keeps up the toll today.

He can join them in this way.

And his sons, they don't return at all.

He prays

### **Clay**

*Abi Bruno*

You told me I could be anything. If anything equaled a vase.  
To carry flowers and nothing more. You told me it would not be hard.

Softened clay. Fingers poking and prying. Not yet hardened  
Clay, crumbling and dismembered, laid on the hard table.

You forced your hand further, I evolved into the imprint of your touch.  
Your embrace fractured my sides and was always too hard.

Dismayed by the nail-markings, your hands squeezed until clay  
Gushed from your fingers' crevices. You were cruel, but I was not hardened.

Succumb to the fire. Flames twirl and dance a fiery symphony,  
The music played for an audience of one. To be without you was not hard.

Your fingers caressed my fired cracks and fingerprints.  
Why is it that you are gentle when I am hardened?

Tenderly delivering me to the shelf I would inhabit.  
Recognizing the hand that carried me was too hard.

Your softness does not spare my hardness.  
The flame has won, is it too hard to understand?

The stolen years of being strong when I was young  
Would not be returned to me. Forever hardened.

## **seven poems**

*Annie Bonnett*

for valentine's day in a thrifted little chest  
(that made suspicious bumps like an animal was hurling  
its body against wooden walls)  
one for the tea shop; your room;  
my sister's space; a communal one, too; one for  
the kitchen where intimacy bloomed behind my eyelids;  
one for your car where I clutched alligator hands like  
I didn't already know what I was;  
one for my place of work where my coworker washed dishes  
in the back so we could beg the clocks to cheat just this once.  
my friend asked why the melancholia – should valentine's poems  
not be born-again sonnets, compare the softness of your cheek to a  
rose petal or immortalize the snowflakes melting in your ever-changing hair  
a baby paradox, I didn't have the language to tell her  
each was a piece of myself surrendered to you, so instead I pointed  
at the titles: shrines to our hiding spots.  
roses don't grow in the shadows, old friend  
only tenderized red knuckles, hearts beating themselves to death  
in a losing fight with a cage  
and an adolescent, gratuitous comparison  
of a boy to his sun  
(never mind that the latter swallowed the former whole).

## **Ten Lines for Her**

*Sam Nowiski*

There is something aching inside me  
that's begging me to tell you how I want  
you: it claws and scratches me so  
I keep it on a leash so you don't go.

“Anything that's ever left me has had  
claw marks on it,” somebody once said to me.  
But what—or who—has left me bears no marks.  
I text you every day and that hurts more,  
leaves more damage than any  
claw marks could.

## **A Letter to Tiger**

*Sarah Zhao*

My heart only takes a day to heal.

The proof is still here a decade later, wrapped in a fuzzy orange butt and round amber eyes that seem a little brown under the sun. “Happy,” I call, and he lifts his head and meeps once. Always just once, unless I have his favorite tuna canned food.

Then, maybe twice.

Happy doesn’t live up to his name, you see. He’s always got a disgruntled look to him—only exacerbated by his thick white eyebrows, prominent ever since he was a kitten at the pound. He hisses quite a bit, especially at strangers or family members visiting from college after months of time away. If someone tries to pick him up, he squirms, but never bites.

His name was decided the day we brought him home. Back then, I was the selfish little kid you knew, with selfish little reasoning. The kitten in the carrier beside me in the backseat of the car had made me happy. Nothing could be a simpler fact. (My family gave in to my pleas for his name after a short while.)

But in the weeks after, I’d find myself sitting blankly in my room with tears sitting just behind my eyes, unresponsive as the new kitten continued to headbutt my hand.

I couldn’t accept that his fur was orange, not brown. He was the wrong cat. Red stripes, not black. Too small.

Back then, at least. Now, he’s nice and chunky.

I love to kiss his paws, and tickle the pads until his claws slide out. You share the same white paws, like little white socks.

But I don’t believe in replacements.

The red string between you is fraying. When will I hold a piece in each hand, and wonder why I have two pieces?

That is the day my heart will finally reconcile, my dear Tiger.



**how to keep being your mother's mother when you'd rather drown yourself in a bathtub.**

*Jonelle Penin*

she's slamming her hands against the window, ripping at the door handle, screaming that you're trying to force her to go, saying IT WAS MY IDEA, IT WAS MY IDEA, LET ME OUT. you fail to ignore the bitter reminder of everything it took to get her in. there is a five hour interval between the time you arrive at your mother's house to help her pack for rehab & when you finally get her in the car. this time is filled completing an absolutely unnecessary & equally never-ending list of tasks produced with the sole intent of prolonging the time between now & when you reach the facility. five hours of labor & painstaking persistence just for her to pick a fight over a goddamn joint as you're finally backing out of the driveway. you will eventually learn that believing your mother's word is the ultimate act of faith, one that most often goes unrewarded, if not altogether punished, but not today, because now you're both getting out & she's tearing her things out of the car as you walk to your own. you get in & just breathe. in. out. in again. then you scream & you cry & you slam your fists against the steering wheel, the ceiling, the window, again & again & again & again until you're tired of feeling like your mother, until there's nothing left in you to feel at all. you wonder how much of her resides inside you, how many pieces you can pull out of yourself if you just keep pushing at them like loose teeth. you wonder how the heartstrings that always make you pick up the phone when she calls are still strung, how taut they'll have to become before they snap. you think about how it's always slamming doors, it's always I CAN'T HELP YOU RIGHT NOW and YOU NEVER COULD, MOM, YOU NEVER COULD. she slides into your passenger seat now, teary-eyed & needing a favor, always needing a favor: your mother, your daughter, your burden, your burden, your burden. she never fails to remind you that these arms were made for holding her, that this body was made to be your mother's mother. she's talking & you're just staring through the windshield. she's talking & you're staring right through her face. you sit very still & you think about a pair of scissors, pliers, a circular saw; you think about cutting your arms off at the shoulder, clipping the heartstrings, pulling the teeth out one by one. you sit very still & you think about every brutal way you could pull yourself apart, every means in which you might shatter yourself over & over again & when you imagine the moment of death you do not let yourself flinch. you force yourself to look right at it until it feels real, because that is the only way to convince yourself you don't want it. she's still talking & you're still sitting very, very still. you force the thought away, spit it out with the blood that you are certain you taste in your mouth. you're not sure why, but you wish the saliva didn't come out clear.

**god created the world & man created physics to cope.**

*Jonelle Penin*

i never remember learning, only knowing; i was too busy for awe & too good for frustration. i'm sitting at my friend's kitchen table, trying to teach him how to find the greatest common factor. the GCF of 24 & 36 is 12; my mother & i's is a certain neurosis that will kick in around the time i'm learning the pythagorean theorem. we cut the world up & then we cut it up again, pieces upon pieces upon pieces of predictability. our discomfort with the softness of this world developed into cold, hard calculations, an inescapable lack of doubt. a man tells me that humans are severely lacking in the visual field, that most other species can see more than us. sight works because light bounces off of things & reflects back into our eyes. i learn that electrons are too small to catch the light, too small to see. my roommate hates the idea of schrodinger's cat because she cannot fathom how something can be both dead & alive. the same man tells me to try and take a picture of an electron, he says *try, try, you can't, can you?* i do not know enough about physics to question the theory, but i also wonder how something can be everything & nothing all at once. i sometimes think i, too, may be dead & alive, everything & nothing. i sometimes think i, too, may be too small to catch the light, too small to see. i think i must have cultivated this trait from my mother. my faith in her challenges religion & my skepticism rivals science; there is no contemporary explanation that will satisfy my inclination to fix her. i learn quickly that learning isn't always enough. i'd like to meet the version of myself that can experience uncertainty without crumbling. i'd like to take a picture of her.

## Apogee

Amanda Wolf

So ask the sun just what it's like, eclipse—  
From the other side.  
*Commit you enough identity*  
*To no more than watching over me*  
That when something steps between your view,  
You forget your size, and might, and separateness;  
You lose me—  
And you lose you?  
Not just I, but you too blind,  
With'ring as it prolongs,  
'Cause any day I might just slip away—  
Me, from your orbit; you, my mind?

*I light up and hold it out to*  
Nobody. *I—let the wind smoke it for me, and*  
No. And sorry.  
I'm a good kid. *You* first said.  
Think it my one more bad habit, then,  
Invoking rumoredly more potent things  
To wring more out of mundanity;  
I think some would whine it, "feel something."  
I feel, at least, the irony.

So I roll up myself in paper and pass out myself instead.  
Sun, if you see this, fuck off;  
Take not this cup. It's all I've got.  
I cannot stay and be. I'd rather see me  
Cold n' dead,  
Long-gone longshot, flawed and free  
Than a world without end;  
Amen.  
Orbits aren't held up by loyalty.

One day, I'm asked if I'll come home.  
I am not asked *to*.  
Yet I: back. Not 'cause it's beautiful.

It's warm, I think I'll say;  
Come summer, come up with another line  
Of something else not sick'ning at the time;  
*I come back for the—chill? Goddamn.*  
But. It does *not* burn. Do not lie.

You're just simply  
Not the  
Sun.

But  
I, I  
Am no god.

That's why I can  
Come back at all.  
You, earthly enough for me to survive you;  
I, mortal enough to come back round.  
Forgive us pull ourselves together from,  
And hold it together

Together among,  
A world beset by flippant  
Inescapability  
Of thermodynamics  
And "you.  
And me."

## Bitter Coffee for a Girl Made Out of Glass

Kat Payne

Ophelia awoke at six A.M. every weekday to prepare for school; at the latest, she'd fall asleep by midnight. Charlotte, on the other hand, patted herself on the back if she was conscious before noon; she often fell asleep a few hours before Ophelia would be waking up for school. Unlike other seventeen-year-old girls, Charlotte didn't have to worry about her senior year since she'd dropped out halfway through high school. It was last summer, the summer before their junior year, when Charlotte's mother had tasked her with signing herself up for school, and Charlotte just... didn't. Ophelia had shrieked—literally *shrieked*—when Charlotte had told her she wasn't coming back to school. Still, it's not like they weren't ever going to see each other again; they lived one street over. It wasn't a big deal. It would always be Ophelia and Charlotte, Charlotte and Ophelia.

Charlotte didn't have to worry about school, and she didn't work, either. She was an asshole, really, but she wasn't an asshole to Ophelia, which was what mattered. Because of her completely open schedule, she'd become nocturnal. So, it wasn't unusual when Ophelia awoke one frigid December Monday morning—right at six A.M.—to an audio message from her best friend, sent at 4:26 A.M. The two girls spoke almost exclusively in audio messages. Her iPhone screen singed her eyes as she attempted to blink the blurriness away. She placed her phone back on the white side table and got to work making her bed. She smoothed her cherry blossom pink bedding over the full-sized mattress, fluffing the pillows and lining them along the white headrest; she straightened her Squishmallow collection to appear somewhat orderly. Ophelia did this basked in darkness, underneath the dim yellow light emanating from the moon. It was a thick, strange shade of yellow, like light filtered through a jar of honey. It shimmered across the fresh snow smothering everything outside. She plucked her phone off its charger, then headed up the hallway toward the bathroom.

She heard the television right when she opened her bedroom door. It was a quiet hum wafting up the hallway from the living room; she couldn't decipher what was being said. Her socked-feet made her footsteps fall silent on the wooden flooring.

She'd almost made it to the bathroom when her mother called, "Good morning, Ophelia." She stopped, peeking around the corner.

"Morning, mom." Her mother was curled up on the end of their L-shaped couch. She heard the bubbling of the coffee machine from the kitchen, the bitter smell of it becoming more pronounced. Ophelia wrinkled her nose at the stench. A newspaper was open on her mother's lap.

"If you need me to set up the space heater in your room, let me know; I know it gets cold in there this time of year."

"I will, mom." Ophelia tried to slide into the bathroom to conclude the conversation because she knew what was coming, but her mother got to it before she could escape.

"Don't forget you know what!" Her mother called from her seat on the couch. "Those college applications aren't going to complete themselves, and they're due soon!"

"I got it," Ophelia said, and shut the bathroom door. She turned the lock and sucked in a deep breath through her nose. Then, she propped her phone on the granite countertop and listened to Charlotte's audio message while she brushed her teeth with her little sister's sparkly razzle-dazzle toothpaste.

The first portion of the audio message was Charlotte apologizing for being distant lately; for not responding as quickly as usual; for not responding in as much detail as usual. Ophelia had noticed her best friend gradually distancing herself, but she never questioned it. She knew she was Charlotte's best friend—her number one—and Charlotte knew the same. It was an unspoken understanding between them; well, sometimes it was spoken. Ophelia loved being Charlotte's number one person. It was a bond not many people had, and she felt it was extra special with Charlotte since she didn't really like anyone else—except for the few online friends she had. Plus, this was something Charlotte did every now and then; it'd become routine. Charlotte spent her copious amount of freetime on social media; thus, she'd met plenty of online friends. They'd come and go. The relationships consisted of excessive love-bombing from either side, burning fresh and hot but quickly dwindling down after a few months. During the "burning stages" of these friendships, Charlotte's random messages to Ophelia would dwindle until Ophelia was always the one reaching out, and Charlotte would only respond with pixelated memes. Still, Ophelia didn't mind, because she knew where she stood with her best friend.

Ophelia spit a glob of blue foam into the rectangular sink basin; it dripped toward the silver drain like a melted marshmallow. She switched on the faucet and watched it swirl away. Then, she poured herself a cap-full of berry blast mouthwash from under the sink and started swishing it while Charlotte's audio message continued.

"Anyway," her best friend was saying, "Sorry for my communication being lame lately. But, you remember that guy I've been telling you about? Jack?" Ophelia nodded with her mouthful as if Charlotte could actually see her nodding. "So, basically, we're dating."

Ophelia stopped swishing the mouthwash. It'd turned bland, like an over-chewed piece of gum. Her heart shuddered through her rib cage, crashing into her hollow stomach cavity; it felt heavy. Her stomach turned itself inside out, and she got the immediate urge to spit out the mouthwash. The mouthwash exploded from her lips in a spray of purple, splattering the white sink basin. Ophelia jerked the faucet on and rinsed her mouth only once and took a seat on the closed lid of the toilet next to the sink. The audio message was still

playing in the background, somewhere. It sounded like a conversation heard from the other side of a wall; she caught only bits and pieces.

“He drove up here over the weekend, which was why I wasn’t on my phone, and took me out to dinner.”

“We watched through, like, two seasons of Parks and Rec in only two days.”

“He got me that Squishmallow I really wanted—the one I mentioned like a month ago, I think?”

Ophelia knew the exact Squishmallow she was talking about. It was this sickly-green colored slug named Florence. It was disgusting, and Charlotte loved it for that. She always loved disgusting things. Ophelia remembered Florence. Why hadn’t she gotten it for Charlotte? She had enough money for it. Now that she thought about it, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d given a random gift to Charlotte, one that wasn’t for a special occasion or a holiday. Ophelia balled her hands into fists on top of her thighs and dug her pearl-painted nails into her palms. Both of them were obsessed with Squishmallows and had a collection of them in their bedrooms, and Ophelia knew how much Charlotte loved them. Why hadn’t she gotten her that one?

“Anyway, you’re the first person I’m telling. Sorry for taking so long to tell you about it; it’s just...” she paused, like she was searching for the right word. “Very fresh.” Then Ophelia’s phone went silent from where it sat on the dark granite counter. The audio message was over. Ophelia was left in the silence of dawn. She sat on the closed toilet seat for a solid four seconds in that insufferable and suffocating silence before her arm flashed across the counter and snatched her phone from the counter. She tapped on the audio message button before she lost her nerve. Ophelia sent an audio message in reply in an even brighter and chirpier voice than usual, full of “OMGs!” and “No ways!” and “This is so crazys!” She sent it. Then slowly replaced her phone, screen facing down, onto the counter. She sat in the bathroom. It was silent except for the scratching of branches against the bathroom window in the chilly breeze. Ophelia never bothered to switch on the lights—to save her eyeballs from burning, for one—and because she enjoyed the natural light that filtered in from the little window near the ceiling. But today, the light felt cold, like silvery winter fingers along her olive skin.

It’d always been Ophelia and Charlotte; Charlotte and Ophelia. Now what was it? Ophelia and Charlotte and... Jack? A breath shot out of her sinuses; she felt her lungs constrict and flatten.

It felt like when Breanna—this insanely tall and muscular girl in their grade who’d hit puberty sooner than, like, anyone in the entire middle school—launched a soccer ball that’d smacked Ophelia right in the chest, knocking the air out of her. She’d flung backwards, her feet flying out first somehow, and landed on her back. Her and Charlotte were cursed with first period gym in middle school, and the sun was too low to see it while she stared up at the blue sky. Even the grass was still coated in a thin layer of condensation

from the air cooling overnight. It tickled her skin, and Ophelia remembered that was what reminded her to breathe. She sucked in a breath; it came slow. She remembered everyone’s heads poking their way into her vision, blocking the sky from her view. Footsteps fell on the grass; Ophelia assumed they belonged to their gym teacher’s. But then the footfalls stopped, and Charlotte’s face appeared so close to her that she could feel the heat of her breath on her cheeks, the smell of peanut butter on her lips; she’d always eaten bread and peanut butter for breakfast.

“Ophelia! Are you good?” Her eyebrows were knitted together in concern, brown hair pulled into a loose ponytail for gym; that was before she started dying it a different color every other month.

Ophelia opened her mouth to say she was fine, but nothing came out. She tried again, but it was like all the oxygen in her body had been excavated, leaving her hollow. Instead, she slowly nodded. Her body seemed to be lagging.

Charlotte’s shoulders slumped in relief, and then she squared them and her eyebrows lowered. She stood over Ophelia’s flattened body and said, “The *fuck* is wrong with you?” She watched Charlotte place her palms on Breanna’s shoulders and shove her backward. The other girl stumbled back, despite being half a foot taller than Charlotte. “Were you confused about where the goal was? Can’t see straight or something?” She widened her brown eyes to emphasize the point. They were so dark, it was like the blackness of her pupils blended into the brown of her irises so they were just two oily pools.

“What? You think I was *trying* to hit her?” Breanna scoffed. “If I actually meant to hit someone, I’d hit you—not the only friend your sorry ass has.”

Breanna crumpled onto the grass next to Ophelia in a flash of knuckles and a furious growl from Charlotte. A whistle shuddered through the chilly air, and the gym teacher sprinted over to them after finally noticing what was going on. Charlotte was always like that. She had the temper of a feline; perfectly content one moment and then the next, she’d be drawing blood with her fangs and claws. But she never did that to Ophelia. Charlotte always joked about how if she hadn’t dropped out, she probably would’ve gotten kicked out. Ophelia shuddered out a laugh at the memory. She allowed herself a whole minute to sit on the toilet seat and let herself feel; it was a whole minute more than she’d allowed herself in... she couldn’t remember. And then she busied herself.

She washed her face with an avocado-scented foaming cleanser that was the lightest shade of green she’d ever seen, and then slathered on a moisturizer that smelled like the mixed berry fruit snacks they always had in their pantry. Ophelia flicked black mascara onto her lashes, filled in her eyebrows—they were always too light; a dirty blond like her hair—and patted blush and highlighter over her complexion. Then, she focused on curling her hair into tight coils. She brushed out her curls with her hairbrush she’d

gotten when she was her little sister's age—it had a giant bedazzled “O” on it in little silver jewels. She really needed a new hairbrush. The dirty blond curls fell slightly past her shoulders and then she loaded it with hairspray, coughing a bit as she did it. Perfect. She looked perfect, just like every morning. Now she just needed an outfit.

She opened the bathroom door and immediately heard the high-pitched wine of the coffee machine spitting out liquid dirt into one of her mother's mugs. Ophelia wrinkled her nose at the smell. Charlotte loved coffee; her favorite was—

Ophelia hurried to her bedroom and flung open her closet. Her closet held an assortment of pastel-colored garments with numerous floral and polka-dot patterns and light-washed jeans hanging at equal lengths from one another. She decided on her favorite pair of jeans, the high-waisted pair with three silver buttons instead of a zipper. They were straight legs without any rips in them, to keep her legs warm during the winter. She also decided on a corset top with lots of beige strings and long sleeves with an intricate floral pattern adorning them. Ophelia posed in the full-length mirror on the back of her door. She looked good. Real good. *I should send a picture to Charlotte*, she thought and then felt a wave of frustration wash over her. Then she caught the eye of one of her Squishmallows. It reminded her of Florence. Which reminded her of Charlotte. Which reminded her it wasn't only her and Charlotte anymore. It was her and Charlotte and—

“Ophelia!” Her mother called from the kitchen. Her voice wafted up the hallway and sounded muffled against the wood of her bedroom door. “Come get breakfast!”

Ophelia glared at her outfit in the mirror. It was cute and it would keep her warm. December would be coming to an end soon. She brushed her tongue atop the roof of her mouth, thinking of the college applications that waited, unfinished, on her MacBook. Well, she had all of the applications completed; all she had to do was click submit. She felt the heavy fingers of the unknown squeezing her shoulders. Her senior year was halfway over already. Before she knew it, she'd be in a new place, at a new school, without her mother and little sister—without Charlotte.

Ophelia shuddered and swung open her bedroom door. Her sister's bedroom door was open, her bed empty, and the bathroom door was closed when she drifted past it; she heard the sink's faucet running. When she reached the threshold between the living room and the kitchen, her mother turned and looked up at her, a low whistle escaping her lips from where she sat.

“Wow, you look great, as always,” her mother chuckled and lifted her coffee mug, steam rising from it in heaps. It was the mug her mother had gotten from her college days, when she went to study abroad. It was plain, a classic tourist item, really. Two words adorned its surface in big, blocky letters in green, red, and white.

Florence, Italy.

Ophelia leaned against the wall and frowned at her mother's mug. A mug she knew she'd just picked at random from the cabinet above the coffee machine, where they all lived. Her bottom lip quivered. She averted her eyes and bit her lip, hard.

“Geez, I know you hate coffee, but you don't have to make that face at me,” she said light-heartedly, and then, “Ophelia? Sweetie, you're bleeding.” Ophelia could taste the sickly sour tang of fresh blood on her tongue. It tasted warped with the hints of sweet blue raspberry. She heard her mother's wooden chair scrape across the kitchen tile. Her socks made her footfalls silent as she approached her with a napkin. She said, “Let me see,” and gently lifted her daughter's chin.

For some reason, seeing her mother's face made Ophelia feel like she was a glass statue. And then when her mother's shoulders slumped and her gaze softened and she realized there was much, much more wrong with her daughter than a bleeding bottom lip, it made Ophelia feel even worse, like a soccer ball had hit her in the chest and shattered her into a million, disgusting pieces of glass in vibrant shades of envy, jealousy, fear, possessiveness. Disgusting pieces Charlotte loved; disgusting pieces that her mother held together in their warm, coffee-scented kitchen on a Monday morning.

**dying is beautiful in the fall**

*Olivia DeYoung*

dying is beautiful in the fall  
life promised to return  
after enduring slushy misery months  
but what happens when death comes in summer?

it must have been his internal clock that broke first  
told his bones to start storing up for the winter  
in the middle of a heatwave  
—critical error—  
corrupted bones and panicked blood  
in the middle of july

i didn't understand how fall could come in the middle of the summer  
it was too soon for his skin to turn purple and black and yellow  
too soon for him to tumble onto concrete  
too soon for him to get swept up in a flurry of red wails  
too soon for him to shrivel into a fragile collection of breaking bones and failing blood  
body to be abandoned and composted

last night i dreamed of him  
alive again  
but when i woke i remembered  
his body would never spring to life again

my body shook in reality  
while i focused on the fading green leaves  
beautifully dying before nineteen-year-old eyes

## **Botany**

*Paul Zellerhoff*

Rose-colored marbles roll in the grooves of my mind  
Occasionally, they escape, and shatter on the tile  
And the smell of ash reminds me—

But I'll gather the fragments and pack them tight and plant it deep in the earth  
A pregnant bulb carries the hopes of a generation  
But the salt they spat follows the soil  
A twisted, screaming sapling emerges  
With two emerald eyes  
Astounded, I inquire

“What do you know of the cruelties of the world?”

It tells me

“The cold is an old friend  
When I meet her in the street I remember  
The first time I caught her like a sparkle in a stranger's eye  
Below the ancient street lamps  
The thousands of twinkling yellow stars  
Hung above the cobblestones  
The sounds of mirth echoing in the storied chambers of the city's heart  
When she crept down my back  
And crawled in my ear and whispered:

“Do not trust the man behind the tinted glass  
Who's face is shrouded  
And who does not ask your fare  
When he knows you have not paid  
There is no man there.  
You are waiting alone at the station.

The street swirls around you and  
An invisible void lurks beyond your periphery.  
You do not know how long you have been waiting  
And when the bus arrives, you do not know where it is going.  
You look in the door and the outline of a man  
Does not beckon or call to you.  
He is not concerned  
Whether you will board.  
It is up to you  
To know where this bus is going.  
And as you step—”

The shriveled creature shrieks as I pierce it with my spade  
Its frame collapses into a shrunken husk  
And I wipe a quicksilver tear from my cheek  
As I move to the next row  
To plant another seed  
And so it goes

And so it goes



**FLYWHEEL**  
*Paul Zellerhoff*

Above and below and in every direction confined to the bathyal abyss  
The cumbersome drumming of limbs hitting nothing and flailing in ceaseless roil  
Bubbles spill out and like marbles that trickle down tracks they race to escape  
Torn grey flesh naked and skewered spread eagle and in no cence burnished  
Is in a sense pardoned the burden of care or cognition  
The cryptic schematics dictated this sterile de face ment  
Dissected body contorted to kinetic fodder  
Surgically pierced like a quill through the script letter 't'  
Shot lead through then led through the deep endless waters  
Dependless on impulse as torpor enfolds  
Dull pulsing rhythm that sends all to rest  
Once sent to rest and thus ever set  
The goddess inertia invites  
Her endless loving embrace  
And so here I linger  
A human flywheel  
Of flesh and bone  
Momentum  
Grinding  
To  
a  
halt.

**Interview with Bonnie Jo Campbell,  
author of *American Salvage* and *The Waters***

*Conducted by Olivia Budzevski and Olivia DeYoung*

**Olivia Budzevski (OB):** Was there anything or anyone in particular that inspired you to start writing?

**Bonnie Jo Campbell (BJC):** Maybe it was my middle school and high school teachers. I worked for the newspaper in high school, and that was really important. I think high school newspapers are really an awesome place to figure that stuff out. I always liked writing personal essays. I had a personal column in the newspaper, and then I was the editor. So yeah, I think it probably was my teachers who were the most encouraging.

When I went to college, I thought I'd go into journalism. But then I ended up at the University of Chicago where they didn't have journalism.

I was not very organized as a young person, and nobody really helped me. I just had adults around me that would shrug and say, "I don't we don't know. Have another cigarette," or "Have another drink." Nobody really knew anything. I was trying to puzzle it out.

First I went to the University of Southern California to go as far away as I could. I didn't know you're supposed to apply for financial aid, so I flew out there with no money. Once I got there, they felt sorry for me because they realized I was a smart kid, and they did help me get some financial aid and some loans. I think they had a good journalism program, and I wanted to write. Then I realized "I gotta get out of here" because I was surrounded by rich kids and didn't have any money, and California was so far away from Michigan.

Then, I applied to the University of Chicago, which is a smarty pants school. I got in, so I thought, "Okay, I'll go there." Then I got there and realized they didn't have journalism. So I decided to study philosophy.

I got discouraged from writing fiction because I took a fiction class, and the professor—I always forget his name on principle—was really mean. He said, "Your work epitomizes all that's wrong with fiction today." So I was like, "Okay, well screw this. I'm not going to do this writing thing, and I just stuck to philosophy."

I decided, naturally, to do mathematics as a second career after graduating in philosophy. I got as far away from creative writing as I could. I started hanging out with mathematicians, and I found out I wanted to study math. I took as much math as I could. Every Friday they had "math tea," a little party, and I thought, "This is a great department. They have parties." So I went to graduate school in mathematics.

Meanwhile, I was writing, and I couldn't stop writing. I did write a novel when I was in college—I don't think it was very good—but I wrote it. If you're a writer in your soul, you will keep writing no matter what discouragement you get. Even if you tried to discourage yourself, you will keep on writing.

I was gonna get a PhD in math, but I was just crying all the time. I found the more I worked on math, I was just sad. Finally, my math PhD advisor said, "Maybe you should go take a writing class." I didn't want to because I had such a bad one, and he's like, "Go try again." Then, I had a writing teacher who was good. Her name is Jamie Gordon, and she later won the National Award. She told me that I was good, and I was like, "Really? I thought I was bad." And she said, "No, you're good. If you really like it, maybe you should leave your math program and come over here." So I joined an MFA program and wrote like crazy, worked as hard as I could. I still didn't think I could make a living at it or make a life out of it, so I also got my certification to teach math and English in a high school.

But then my writing sort of took off. I would say I didn't look back, but I did because when you have a writing career, it goes up and down. I had a book that did well, and then I got another book published by Simon and Schuster. After that, my agent told me that the books I wrote were bad. She dropped me, and I was like, "Okay, I'll go back and teach math and English, but before I do that, I'll publish this one last book." I published this "one last book" from a little press, Wayne State University Press, and then that book was a finalist for the National Book Award. That started me in any career of writing.

That's where I am now so far, but I could go down again, though. The frightening thing about writing is even if you're a good writer, you can write a really bad book. You can write a bad story. There's no guarantee that just because you write one good thing you can write another good thing, and that's what makes writing so scary.

**Olivia DeYoung (ODY):** That's really good advice. I can tell that you've been a writer for a long time since you're like, "Oh, yes, writing can be easy and fun, but sometimes it's not." I appreciate that realism.

**BJC:** If you want to write, you should just keep writing no matter what goes on in the world around you. Whether it's people discouraging you, whether it's people encouraging you, whether you feel tight for time. Just write a little bit. If you're busy working a busy job, still make a little time to write. Just because the world is not is not rewarding you, it doesn't mean that you aren't still a writer and that you shouldn't keep on writing.

**OB:** That's so true. When I was listening to your story, it sounded very similar to my own experiences going into high school and joining the newspaper and thinking I liked journalism then not going that route but still continuing to write.

**BJC:** Yeah, maybe then your way of writing was journalism. I used to have on my website that I would never write poetry. All of a sudden, I got to a point in my life where I had to write poetry. All writers should keep their minds open about what they might be writing next. There might be a time in your life where stories don't come. It happened to me where I had a

long period where stories just weren't coming to me, and yet, I had a lot to say. Suddenly poetry made more sense to me. Stories need a beginning, a middle, and an end, and I wasn't getting that. But I had all this stuff inside me that needed to be put down on paper. Some people can just write in their journals and be satisfied, but I haven't been much of a journal writer. I need to make it into something that's packaged. For me, the fun of poetry was that you can put it down and mess with it, move it around and change the shape of it. I could actually finish it.

I don't know if you guys have been in that situation where you just can't finish the story. The story has a mind of its own, and you don't have a year to work on this one story. Once in my life, I worked on a short story for 24 years. I worked on other things as well, but I had a story that I just couldn't finish. Finally, I was publishing my third book, which was a book of short stories. I sent it to a magazine, and it won a prize. I was just like, "Finally!"

Writing is so weird. If you don't give up on it, it will eventually reward you, as long as you're not hit by a bus and die. You have to keep writing in order to get the rewards. Be patient and keep on your project.

Some people write a book a year. Not very many people write a book that I would be proud of after a year, but some are able to do it. Do you know who Terry Pratchett is? He wrote some 42 novels. I think he was just so in the groove, and I think he also had a premonition he wasn't going to live long because he died at age 66. A lot of us writers, we're counting on living to be 90 to write the books we want. It really does take time.

The rewards of writing are also not connected. The world will not always reward you for your writing. You need to devise a writing life where the rewards come not just from that outside world. You have to become somebody who can identify the good things about your writing, even when the rest of the world doesn't. It's a hard thing to do. That's why I always advise people to make sure you've got a writing community you can share the work with and find some joy there, even before those things are ready to write. Sometimes you need to find rewards and satisfactions along the way in the writing.

**ODY:** I didn't know that you had written poetry too, but I knew that you had published collections of short stories and longer novels. What draws each of those forms?

**BJC:** I sometimes joke—and I'm not sure it's really a joke—that my novels are my failed short stories that wouldn't wrap up. In a short story, you have some characters you're interested in, and you introduce a world that's kind of a mess that you move toward making sense of. Usually, that takes between 12 and 25 pages. Sometimes, it's not wrapping up, and you start writing and things get more complicated, instead of less. When that happens, and you realize, "Oh, no, I'm gonna be here for a few years," and you know you're in trouble. You can say that you failed to write a short story.

What I like about the short story is I can use real life in my short stories. My short stories are mostly that I'm pondering some situation—in the world, in my life, in my community—that really bothers me.

An example from the news and from my community is that there were a lot of stories about young women going to a party and waking up the next day and realizing they have been violated. Even thinking about it now, I get a weird uneasiness in my body. I don't know about you guys, but I feel this kind of story in my body, like the horror. A sexual violation is always a horrifying thing, but to not even remember it and not even really know what happened, that feels even worse to me. You don't know who witnessed it, you don't know where, or how on earth you let it happen, so you have feelings of guilt, shame, and confusion. So I was hearing these stories, and I was looking around me in my community and seeing uneasiness about

.....  
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● **you feel tight for time. Just write**  
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● **doesn't mean that you aren't still**  
● **a writer and that you shouldn't**  
● **keep on writing.”**  
● .....  
● young women who were  
● drinking too much.  
● So I wrote a story  
● in my third collection  
● called “The Playhouse.”  
● It was about a girl who  
● goes to her brother's  
● house to talk to him.  
● The reason she's going  
● there is that she's felt  
● sick since she was at a  
● party at his house, and  
● she doesn't know why.  
● Only as she's with her  
● brother does she realize  
● what happened because  
● he says, “Oh, yeah, you  
● had a good time at  
● the party,” She's like,  
● “Wait a minute, I don't  
● remember that,” and so  
● he's telling her a little  
● bit and then a little bit

comes back to her. These things were in the news, and they bothered me. Still, it took me a couple of years to get a first draft because I didn't know how I wanted to tell the story. I didn't know what was the best form.

For me, fiction is the hardest thing to write. I really enjoy writing essays and profiles, and I can write those much quicker than I can write a fictional story. But, I find the most meaning in writing fiction because I can get into a thing and I can change any of the parameters

in order to make the situation more extreme, to make the situation more meaningful. Ideally, I like to do both.

I have one story in my second collection called "King Cole's American Salvage" that started as a nonfiction piece about this tow truck driver in my community.

Everybody knew this guy. He wasn't your sharpest guy in the world, but everybody liked him. Some people in the community beat him up and almost killed him to take his money. He's one of those guys who doesn't trust banks, so he kept his money on him or hidden in his house. So these guys beat him up, and he was supposed to die. My sister works at the hospital. She came home and said, "He's on life support, he's not going to live," but he lived! He refused physical therapy and left the hospital without permission. He laughed, and said he could hardly talk. He said he had brain damage, but he was there driving his truck. I was fascinated by the story, so I went to his junkyard and rode in the truck with him. It turned out he had been beat up before, and I followed his whole story and learned they found the guys who did it. There was a court trial, so I got hold of the court tapes and videos. I wrote this nonfiction story, and I thought it was good. Then, I started thinking, putting the guys who beat him up in an even closer relationship to him. Who would beat this guy up and why would he do it? I fictionalized the situation, and this process took many years of doing. I do feel very proud of both the nonfiction piece and the fictionalized story that came out of it. I also wrote poetry about it.

**OB:** What would you say is the most memorable or rewarding moment for you in your career?

**BJC:** The rewards are different at different times. It has been nice when I had official recognition, like being a National Book Award finalist with my book *American Salvage*. But to be honest, at those times when I'm getting rewarded by the outside world, it's made me a little crazy. I don't know how to explain it, but my mental health has been challenged at those times. I don't understand why that is. It's a huge reward when something really nice happens like when I win an award or when a book is published.

Recently, *The Waters* got chosen by the Read with Jenna book club, and that was a big honor. She's really a thoughtful person. I didn't know much about her, yet I met her and she is really a soulful person and a really careful reader of fiction. I can't say, though, that I liked being on TV. It's all this rush and then it's all over in seven minutes.

I think maybe the most rewarding time is when I finish a story or a book and feel like I put everything into it that I had. It's really satisfying. Even writing a poem

now—if I really feel like I nailed that poem—I have a very good day.

It's funny how the big things aren't always the most rewarding. I looked back at my journals when my previous two books were published, and I found that

**“Writing is so weird. If you don't give up on it, it will eventually reward you, as long as you're not hit by a bus and die. You have to keep writing in order to get the rewards. Be patient and keep on your project.”**

I felt confused, even though they were a success in the world. I felt like I didn't know what I was doing. Right now, I'm having a lot of success with *The Waters*. It's now a national bestseller. But I don't feel good because I'm not writing, I'm running around.

So I think the most rewarding thing of all, now that I've had some success, is when I have a really good day of writing.

**OB:** I feel like you can just tell when a person is writing for the recognition versus just for love of writing itself.

**BJC:** If they're doing it for the recognition, they're not going to keep up with it. That hope of recognition can't sustain you. Maybe once in your life you'll have a book come easily to you. Then the next book is harder and doesn't go as well. I think it's good that my first books were really hard. I'm waiting for that easy one. When it comes, I won't take it for granted.

I have some friends right now who had their first book do really well, and they got good money for it. Now, they are getting published without money, which is normal. It's normal to not get money for your books. It's normal to just have a small publisher, and you're happy with it because you're grateful that your book is getting out in the world. But if you're a person who started out at the top, and now that's where you are, it doesn't feel good. Whereas I started out low down so I can be happy either way.

**ODY:** You've touched on this a little already, but how does Michigan inspire you? Why do you keep coming back to what you know and what's close to you?

**BJC:** I'm really a Michigan writer in the sense that all my work takes place in Michigan, with the exception of one story that takes place in Romania. I really like writing about Michigan, and it's because I am a writer of landscapes. We're very much about nature writing in America. The American imagination lies in the countryside. I think it's something to do with manifest destiny. We have our wonderful city books, but I think when you look for the books that really capture the imagination of America all around, they're often rural books.

The way that I write is I allow my characters' lives to be reflected in natural landscapes. Because of that, it often makes more sense to me to set my stories in a rural environment, and I want to use a rural environment that

I know really well. I can go to that environment, and I can pull out of it anything I need. I can find everything I need in the Michigan rural landscape.

Occasionally, people include me with the Western writers. I get invited to submit to Western magazines, and I think that's why because I write about landscapes. The other group that I'm associated with are the Southern writers like Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor because they're very much writing about their crazy communities. There's a little bit of a slap in the face about Midwesterners that we're flyover people. It's like what you care about doesn't matter, and sometimes we sometimes don't get the dignity of the West or the South. That's just crazy. The Midwest is every bit as rich an environment.

**OB:** How would you describe the type of stories that you are keen on bringing to life?

**BJC:** I write stories that explore the things I worry about. In my new novel, *The Waters*, I'm very worried about what's happening to women right now in our communities and in the country. What I'm seeing is that we are in a hyper-masculine world right now. We're told, "Make everything simple. If it's not simple, it's not valuable." As women we know, that's not true. All the most valuable things are complicated. There's a kind of masculinity that is saying, "War is good. Using resources is good. Preserving nature is weak." They're saying something about femininity, that femininity is not valuable.

Men used to live in a society where they had to be a tough, manly man, and now they live in a different society. I think a lot of men don't know what to do. They're not comfortable, and they don't feel valuable. They're not adjusting to the new way. I think you can see it even in the way people are hostile on the road.

I'm trying to explore where that hostility and this problem masculinity is appearing in the world. It appears in marriages. It appears in families. It appears in communities. I'm exploring that all in one community in my new novel, *The Waters*. There's a group of women who live on an island and want to be left alone, but all the forces outside of them are pushing in on them. In the book, I'm trying to find a way that men and women can get along in a new way, without women feeling bullied.

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