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Authors and Works  
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**Untitled (Back Cover)** María José Cobos

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If I chose the biggest black hole to jump into, it would be more comfortable.  
*Anna Shura*

If I chose the biggest black hole to jump into,  
it would be more comfortable.

Space strings stardust through my hair  
as I thank her for her hospitality and start  
spaghettified spinning in spacious black holes,

a far healthier activity than  
slurping pasta with a person  
who chews my thoughts too loudly  
and ruins a dish of conversation with heavy  
pinches of doubt and disinterest.

I wish I didn't make homegrown tomato sauce for you.

Red Giants grow in the warmth of my garden and glow in her  
sky illuminating humid and human evenings  
next to constellations and cats and crying and cocoa  
everything I hold against my palms when  
I leap

across the threshold, past the event horizon  
where sloping downwards in my personal  
singularity  
I recognize a recipe for self-care caught on a  
comet: Page through *Potter* and *Penderwicks*  
Smile at Space  
Pet a kitten  
    keep petting  
Blend brownie batter and nestle into nooks  
to make me smile and laugh and *feel*  
the way I want.

Comfortable.

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San Juan Aubade

*Peter Gawecki*

I wake to soft  
thrumming and chilled  
fiberglass that sinks  
into my cheek.

The cockpit is covered in canvas and  
dew from the penumbral eye.  
Here, I would watch lights ignite

the summer night against islands  
with silhouettes like sleeping  
giants in a sea of sheets  
and bristled heads.

A fresh breeze breaks the fog  
and the last wisps of night. Our lungs  
are filled with salt and coffee.  
We shear off our fast. The world

starts moving. A squeaking  
dock warns of expiration,  
slowly rocking to the beat.  
A chorus of gulls picks up the tune.

I would lie here,  
scuffing the tops  
of my shoes, leaning over my reflection  
shattered  
and reaching for creatures beneath.

Whispering tides guide loose

kelp ashore, while the voiceless  
buoy speaks its mind  
against the variable pull.

Winds grow slowly stronger into the day,  
an irresistible gale  
takes me to a new destination.  
I don't know  
if I'll ever be back.

---

i am sober  
*Ali Manges*

my mind is the color of hallucinogens on a thursday afternoon  
uncomfortable and unnecessary  
the fuzz inside permeates the room  
makes different the light

i wonder if i dream vividly and that spills over into my life  
or maybe i feel like i need an excuse  
for when i

i am not real,  
maybe

once a good friend and i stood on a pier on a warm july night  
the moons light vibrated depending on the squinting of my eyes  
when i told him this  
he couldn't see it  
the moon had a soft glow he said  
nothing more  
funny how we were looking at the same thing but  
it wasn't the same at all

other days it is different differently

i am,  
too much

this time becomes music  
which bangs on the keys of my psyche  
the melodies are too loud  
the melodies

they bleed

another day long ago in a childhood classroom late fall  
sick sweet notes floated towards me from across the hall

do you hear that? i asked a classmate wide eyed  
hear what? they said  
nothing  
i lied

---

Red  
*Charlotte Yeung*

i used to peel away the buttery paper stuck to the walls, revealing the scarlet flesh beneath. *red is good*, my father would say, as he stuck a stamp wet with his saliva to an envelope. *it means love after all*. the red walls were the color of the stuffed envelopes he would give me-a time that still brings a smile to my face. i hid those envelopes in a little hole in the wall, tucked away from the ominous bangs and gunshots that sounded just outside my peeled room.  
father, where are you now?  
do you remember the stripped room? do you remember me? or do you know it all and fear me? when you died, you spit blood on the walls the color of your envelopes. i took the money you gave me and ran and they never found me but i wonder if you saw what i did to them before i left. do you watch over me now, a ghost in the red that surrounds me? i once returned to our old home and peered into my hole where i saw the shiny scarlet envelopes, right where  
i left  
them.

---

Mama I am Big Man  
*Charlotte Yeung*

i once held the dying embers of mourning close to my chest as white scraps of paper flew around me, charred edges sparks of flame in my despair. when I returned to the cement jungle, i felt the chasm within me deepen as i embraced the shadows and raggedy slums while the mist trailed cold fingers along their cracked artifices. i slipped into mama's noodle shop and breathed in the flour and oil covering the undercurrent of decay and cooling dreams. the Big Man came that day and he slurped a bowl of beef noodles, guards lurking in the corners of the shop scaring mama. he drank the watery broth and left a stack of cash on the cracked table as thanks. i remember him: the musk of his cologne, and the snap of his leather gloves long after he was found dead, shot in the street. mama will you forgive me? i heard his slurps when i shot my first man. i never realized until then how frail we were-bags of flesh and blood ready to burst and bodies just waiting to happen. to the girl i was: do you look up to me? i feel his thirst and your's when i prowl the cement jungle for my payment. to those who love me: do you remember him? i see him around me as we exchange fire and crack. i see his reflection in my eyes when i leave a fat stack of bills for a small plate of cake on  
another  
cracked  
table.

---

Once Again, Beginnings  
*Madelyn LaPointe*

One book later, nestled in a colorless chapter, there is one foot up, and one foot down. This is ascension on a line of cement; cement that has tendrils running through it, empty tendrils, and inevitably, your tendrils.

If they're not yours then they belong to something adjacent to you. Look around, look with your vision shifted to the left or to the right, and let it show you a timeline —

No beginnings, no messy beginnings. No ugly beginnings. No ungovernable beginnings. You — meaning something parallel to you, or something parallel to something parallel — stop and catch yourself.

The conversation that followed was empty and hollow and better off in the dirt. You bury it and move on.

The dead had a way of rising.

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Flashlight

*Garrett Rodgers*

It's been years since  
I'd accept anything from my father  
a kiss  
food  
comfort  
or love itself.  
Yet the bones still stand  
in the form of an olive-green  
flashlight which sits on my nightstand  
untouched, asking.  
I don't listen to it  
I cover my ears, turn on my side  
and snap the light switch into place  
letting the dark invade  
my room, defenseless  
against the silhouette whose steps  
match my own.  
The flashlight sits  
in its eerie still  
lake of dust  
                  calling.

Do you remember  
when you were afraid  
of the wrong shadows? it asks. I kept  
you safe then, it says.

but safe is not here, safe  
is nowhere to be found. My father

has left me alone in the dark. I no  
longer hold tight to the metal haven  
before I go outside at night. I am naked –

the fog that once wavered  
in front of the flashlight's bright  
beam now touches my bare face  
the chilling darkness of it raising  
my skin into hard armor  
goosebumps that thread across my  
chest and belly

I have no weapon now  
my sword, my brick wall of  
warmth has disappeared into the  
night  
and I wander, searching  
for him  
by the light  
of the moon

---

Legacy  
*Jacob Lopez*

is the armor of Achilles causing a tragedy over a contest,  
Oedipus being remembered for Freud's complex and not the sphinx, Medea  
being evil for having a cheating husband and sparing her children.

Keeping souls alive in graveyards on holidays,  
or maybe keeping the great heroes and tyrants away from rest,  
but most likely, it's just a ritual for those alive who still share the memory.

A lottery we don't pay to enter,  
Plath, Kafka, Dickinson, Poe, read after they couldn't write because this is the same world  
that let the Mayan Codices, Nalanda, and Library of Alexandria burn.

A philosophy of mortality past mortality,  
the question of our existence past expiration, but a fool's errand,  
the effort to extend my fifteen minutes to twenty no matter how epic or terrible.

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Seashell

*Garrett Rodgers*

if there's one thing i won't forget  
about jersey it's the smell of cold  
saltwater licking the air  
even when the skyline was made of  
food trucks, phone poles, & plastic  
bags caught in the wind

& the sound  
oh, that sound, that lonely choir  
the city rested at the sloped  
bottom of a seashell  
the ocean did not crash beside us  
but around us

& i wish, i pray, i dream  
to still remember the ocean itself  
but instead i have this feeling  
of looking to the sky

& not knowing where it ends

being lost in an all-consuming  
roar bathing in cold

leaving the others with their toes in the sand  
& holding desperately to waves with my  
cupped hands, saying  
take me with you, out into the great alone

but the waves slide away & i  
wade back to shore slipping on  
sand

that sticks to my skin

back at home  
i found a seashell

held in the edge of my dresser  
drawer thought *what the hell*  
and rested it next to my ear salty tears  
came to my eyes  
the ocean cried

*endless, endless*

In a box of komorebi red leaves, peacefully rumbling.

Dormant deformities in the fetish of words  
Bewitched, prolix, greedy ribs, into the leather

Of the driver's seat, i didn't know what to do  
But pull over and let my bones lean on their breaks.

In the freezerburnt field, I see the dead lying, the dying  
Writhing: decapitated sunflowers have learned how to live.

Crystalline grass, hugged by chicken-wire, reconciling animal  
Bodies with cold disease; the wisest scream, a fox teems red light

Jade grass, shadows, a cleft in the woods, a tanuki barks after  
The sea of silhouettes layering pawprints like dirt, new bone

Dust-coarse coats laid over cellophane sharp as the dying hair  
Blowing over my face—they disappear like a glance, calling

To each other: *Too slow, Goro-goro, as always—and you talk  
Too much, Moya—That's why I can't stop running. Quickly now*

Seeing myself in the distance: runt calf running stunted  
After mother, nuzzling her with muddy nose, and so this is

Life, this is learning to live with the afterimages  
of myself reflected as the earthen, dead wisteria tunnel

Winters, the end of time blooming again and again and  
Every petal weighs alike, every snowflake's lacy like the clouds

Gummed to my shoes, every animal i am every animal i see  
Becomes me—packed with munition, fruition, attrition, the war-  
Dog coiled in woodland trenches howling at the moon as it turns its back again.

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Divine Speech: A Pantoum  
*Rachel Labi*

My tongue slips like moonlit slivers,  
With biting insults and mental wounds.  
The puppetry of my speech at ease,  
A vortex of holy and horrid alike.

With biting insults and mental wounds,  
Lovely words in a verbal world.

A vortex of holy and horrid alike,  
Freedom of speech is rather divine.

Lovely words in a verbal world.  
A virtuous mouth of an impure mind?  
Freedom of speech is rather divine;  
The brashness of my words at peak.

A virtuous mouth of an impure mind?  
My tongue slips like moonlit slivers.  
The brashness of my words at peak,  
The puppetry of my speech at ease.

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To Shatter Me  
*Javier Melo*

Philip Amberly would tell you that he was a very observant man, yet he was the very last to notice that his wife was turning into glass. Most people that were there would say that, at a certain point, it became a bit obvious. Esmeralda was like a flower, floating about in warm colors and short dresses, so the gradual transition into long-sleeves and draping scarves did not go unnoticed. How do you ignore a light suddenly being put out in a room? But the clothes were only the beginning: she stopped waltzing into rooms and singing silly songs, she stopped giving shapes to the clouds and making up constellations in the night sky. She became quiet and thin, and with every breath, more fragile. If you watched her sitting still in the corner of the room, her clothes hiding all the glass as she tries to keep herself together, you would think she was a beautiful sculpture.

But the truth is, Philip Amberly wasn't a very observant man. His lack of perception was, as a matter of fact, the reason why he and Esmeralda met. Philip was supposed to be on the third floor of a certain building, to discuss a potential new partnership in his office. Instead, he wound up in the second-floor bar, where he spent four hours flirting with the bartender. She had big, brown eyes that were softly captivating, like a whispered compliment. Her hair was silk obsidian until struck by a rogue ray of light, revealing a cascade of caramel. And she had a wonderful smile, contagious and warm. Philip lay still in the counter chair until her shift was over, praying silently in his head, that this girl would give him a chance. Unbeknownst to him, he had nothing to worry about. The bartender had taken note of his scruffy blonde hair, scrawny frame, and bad posture. She softly giggled when she saw his ears turn red after teasing him a little, and she adored his meek laugh and dropped eyes when he was embarrassed.

They went to a restaurant, then to a bar, and then to a whirlwind of other places. They found themselves holding hands beneath a starry night, lying cozily in a patch of grass outside Philip's house. Esmeralda was trying to find a constellation that looked like Philip, and Philip was trying not to cry. She fell silent and turned her head towards him, her eyes sporting streaks of starlight. Her voice was soft and gentle when she asked him a question.

"Can we do this forever?"

Esmeralda and Philip dated for two years and got married on the third. He glances at their wedding pictures now, perhaps to remind himself of better times, perhaps to determine where it

started to go wrong. He runs his hand through the old photos of bright smiles and happy eyes, stopping to admire a painting of the two of them, in casual clothes, relaxed and content. They had commissioned the portrait from a street painter with a silly hat that promised them he would be done in ten minutes but spent half an hour toiling away at his canvas until he captured their memory in a single grinning frame. Afterward, they spent the night exploring the rest of a small festival, Esmeralda laughing over the smell of cotton candy and the sound of children playing, while Philip smiled at his shoes and held her hand tighter. They passed by a white tent that drew their attention: it was filled with glass toys and trinkets that glistened like small pearls reflecting the candlelit space. There was even a small glass horse. "I don't understand," said Philip, "The point of playing with glass. You can't really do anything fun with it."

"You can look at it, and appreciate how beautiful it is." Esmeralda's eyes were innocently mischievous. "You can probably toss it around a bit if you're careful."

"Why would you play with it?" Philip adopted an inquisitive tone, ready to receive Esmeralda's teasing, but genuinely curious about what she had to say, "Glass is like a painting. It captures a single moment, and it stays like that forever. If you try to make any changes after the heat is settled, you're going to shatter it."

"Well maybe shattering it is part of the fun?" She gave him a harmless shove and then immediately pulled him back, to cling to him like a blanket protecting a newborn child. "They're cute, let's buy one."

Philip Amberly began walking again, his movement toiled and heavy, once he realized he had spent five minutes staring at an old painting. Things weren't like that anymore, there were no spontaneous dates or random flowers. There was no breakfast in bed or sleepy Sunday afternoons, there were no surprise hugs from the back and pining eyes from across the room. There was only cold; a sharp, stinging cold haunting the halls of the house, with no more laughter and joy to keep it from corroding every corner. Once the first strand of glass appeared on Esmeralda's arm, nothing was ever the same. Philip just wishes he could remember what came first: the glass, or the cold.

As he made his way down a long hall, his eyes were drawn to different moments within his life, masquerading as mundane objects and framed pictures. He remembered their trip to Europe, and the first time he met her parents, his feelings plastified in small boxes and flower vases, displayed across his hall like a museum of emotions. He pocketed a particular trinket, which made soft, striking noises within his pockets. He walked out of the hall and into the living room, before noticing through the windows that his wife was outside, sitting on a patch of grass. His eyes instinctively wandered towards his regular chair in the corner, as they usually did. The chair lay comfortably between two massive bookcases, and the ground around it was littered with graded papers and spilled coffee stains. Philip was immediately brought back to the year before when he was looking up at a furious Esmeralda as she screamed at him, her face red and wrinkled: "How could you not even consider it!?"

"We're not moving, it's absolutely not happening. My job is here, all of our friends are here, it's perfect." He was failing to keep his voice down.

"The fact that you won't even think about it pisses me off! You're not even considering making a sacrifice for me."

"You don't need this."

"Your job is here, your friends are here! This is your town, your city... I'm literally only your wife here. That's all I am."

He looked up at her bloodshot eyes as she disintegrated, crying herself into a broken puddle of whimpers and tears. He nearly started sobbing when he said, "I thought that was enough for you."

The next morning, the glass had started to creep into her face, paralyzing her features. Her pretended smile once he said “good morning” was translucent and hollow. That’s when Philip Amberly realized his wife was turning into glass. Once she was unable to feign happiness anymore.

His eyes were burning once he mustered up the strength to turn away from his chair in the corner. He walked into the kitchen, burdened by the weight of his hurtful words. His gaze sauntered the path towards the backyard door, grasping at every distraction, desperately trying to forget themselves in something else. And they succeeded, once Philip laid eyes on the round, marble clock that hung atop the cutlery cabinet, parallel to paintings of flowers and fields. Until now, he hadn’t noticed the metallic straining of each ticking second as the clock struggled to keep the time, burdened by many unsuccessful repairs. It stood out like a rotten flower amongst a variegated field, and Philip considered, for the first time in his life, Esmeralda’s advice to replace it with something new. “No,” he had told her then, “I can fix it, why get a new one?”

“Because a new one won’t screech like a dying cat every time it strikes an hour. Let’s get a new one, and take better care of it.”

It seemed like a pointless idea back then: the clock, flawed as it was, was such a prominent part of the room. Replacing it would transform everything around it, it would shine a different light onto every corner of the kitchen, and Philip hated transformation. He would rather pick up every stray gear, every missing piece, and force the clock to continue ticking, ordering the amalgamation of duct tape and loose screws to give him more time. He was like that with everything: leaking pipes, creaking floorboards, he would allow nothing to ever change.

Esmeralda, however, held very different beliefs when it came to dysfunction and hardship, or at least she pretended to do so. Upon noticing the slightest blemish upon the most insignificant thing, she would propose a change, and it was always a replacement. To get a new car, to get a new couch, a new house. But when it came to replacing these broken things, she always seemed to have better things to do. Perhaps she shared Philip’s terror of transformation, hidden beneath a facade of hypocrisy. Or perhaps she simply lacked initiative. But unlike her husband, and rarely despite her efforts to the contrary, she allowed things to break, to shatter, when their time came.

Philip opened the backyard door and braced a subtle chill of perfumed, autumn winds. Esmeralda lay, sitting on the patch of grass, her glass hair flowing softly upon the wind. She wore warm colors and a short dress, her arms and legs tenderly reflecting the setting sun, clouding his vision with flashes of candid orange. She didn’t turn to look at him when he sat, heavy and defeated, in the small space next to her. She didn’t turn to look at him when he tried to caress her transparent cheek, or when he failed to muster an apology for a lifetime of trouble. She only nudged, ever so slightly, when he produced a small object from his pocket and set it on the space between them, which felt like an infinite stretch of silent sighs. The toy, which had the same glassy conception as Philip’s wife, was a broken glass horse, unsuccessfully held together by two meek strands of tape.

Esmeralda was made of glass, and thus, she was fragile and unmoving. Her chest barely lifted when she took a breath, and her body had a particular way of masquerading against the moving backdrop of swaying grass and sauntering clouds. Her big brown eyes had faded into translucent pearls; her hair like silk obsidian became a curtain of sharp, clear strands. Her laughter and her joy, a solemn whimper of measured breaths. Such frailty demanded space and delicacy, it demanded care and distance. And like a beautiful, framed painting; it needed to be left alone, and admired from afar. Perhaps remembered and yearned for, but never touched again. But as a shimmering, quiet tear of liquid glass slid down her crystalline cheek, Philip decided he couldn’t let her go.

When the clock upon the kitchen wall struck the hour, letting out a horrible shriek, he embraced his wife, holding her tight into his chest. He desperately buried his face into her cold,

limpid features, squeezing his arms around her body, trying to bring her closer still. He held her hard and long as if he could pull her close enough to defeat the horrible, abysmal distance between the two of them. Atop the patch of grass that had brought them together, Philip Amberly whimpered the words that had filled an indescribable void in his heart years before. He implored his glass wife: “Let’s do this forever.”

That was when Esmeralda shattered, like a horrible, haunting scream. She shattered like a premature explosion. She shattered like a foretold, apocalyptic catastrophe: understood and expected, yet destructive nevertheless. She shattered like a broken heart.

On her stead lay a broken mess of shards that cut and diced Philip’s arms and legs. They dug into him with the same intensity with which he had tried to hold her closer, the same desperation he had employed in triumphing over unforgivable mistakes. As Philip Amberly bled and sobbed on the crimson patch of glass, adorned with sparkling specks of ruby, his mind flickered between flashes of glass horses and lonely chairs, broken clocks, and still memories. And he finally realized, amid blood and glass, that some things are never meant to be repaired, only remembered.

---

*[tick]*  
*Gözde İloğlu*

gotta pull up my –

my head, my

chin, my broken

broken lungs. got to

save myself,

my cocoon, my

snail, my

[redacted]

before it turns into a butterfly.

–threads and rise (the worst mistake of a perfectly good youngster)

this is not a –

this is a manifesto.

not a manifesto

a big plate of

tortellini pesto

–scheduled drill for the one we call life

I was not to have –  
gray hair,  
moldy air,  
this is not fair.  
it's a party, it's a fair  
the century old affair  
for the ones who were never meant to be the pair.  
–this redemption, this Ark

and I –  
mumble, rumble, grumble.  
never was the one to gamble  
I can't control who I am, what  
I am.  
but I know what I am not  
not much, no not at all but,  
enough to manage  
–need to be excused from this conversation

---

倫敦の夏目漱石 // Sōseki in London  
*Jonathon Groom*

i don't  
look away  
but everyone  
appears to see it  
differently when  
the sky opens  
into a great wound  
unfamiliar  
indefinitely,  
digging  
into itself  
the sun-gutted  
belly of everything  
that frames so beautifully  
when i am not in the picture,

perhaps one day  
i will learn to coexist  
with violence

---

A Mother in Waiting  
*Andrea Untama*

I see your glossy grey eyes sinking deeper  
And further into your skin.  
With every puff from the cigarette you hold in your hand,  
You try to forget.

But deep down, you know,  
You'll always remember.

The day they came for her,  
The day they took her away from you,  
The day she became a lost child.

And now, what was life?  
Another wrinkle here, another there?  
Feeling like there was no way at all to recover?

Sagging skin and stretch marks,  
You feel gravity's relentless pull.  
And sitting there all alone,  
You wonder when you'll see her again:

The one you call your daughter.

---

Man's World  
*Kristen Szaller*

long before it was a perfume, it was a legend of love  
a story told from behind the beauty counter  
where beautiful young ideas begin

“come on into the sunshine”

“clairol is going to make someone beautiful today”

“brush the cobwebs from your beauty”

“the most unforgettable women in the world wear Revlon”

“with all you have to remember, shouldn't you have a bra you can put on and forget?”

but dear, you can't forget to have the voice with a smile,  
something special in the air that lingers about you

nobody does it like sara lee and  
it wouldn't be america without wonder bread  
one calorie... just for the taste of it

we take your pictures seriously  
but consider the shape you want to be in  
we never forget you have a choice  
we're slightly ahead of our time... just slightly

you can't just reach out and touch someone  
though fifty million people take comfort in it  
it gives a man a new outlook  
power in the hands of the few  
the fragrance men love

a man wants to smell like a man  
setting new standards of performance

built for the human race  
behold the power of reason  
just let us protect the world  
anything you can do we can do over  
(and better, of course)

follow your impulse  
ask dad- he knows!  
he works hard for your money

you've come a long way, baby  
you're going to like us  
twice a day and before every date  
does not harm the heart  
comfort fit for a man

one giant step for womankind  
it's where the girl ends and the woman begins

helping keep the face of america beautiful

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Man's World Ad Slogans

*Kristen Szaller*

Long before it was a perfume, it was a legend of love (Chloe)

Come on into the sunshine (Downy)

Clairol is going to make someone beautiful today

Brush the cobwebs from your beauty (Kent Brushes)

The most unforgettable women in the world wear Revlon

Where beautiful young ideas begin (Helene Curtis)

With all you have to remember, shouldn't you have a bra you can put on and forget? (My Favorite Bra)

The voice with a smile (Bell System)

Something special in the air (American Airlines)

Nobody does it like Sara Lee (Sara Lee)

It wouldn't be America without Wonder Bread (Wonder Bread)

One calorie... Just for the taste of it (Diet Coke)

Reach out and touch someone (Bell system)

Fifty million people take comfort in it (Trane Air Conditioning)

It gives a man a new outlook (Cadillac)

Follow your impulse (Isuzu Impulse)

Ask Dad- he knows! (Sweet Caporal Cigarettes)

Comfort fit for a man (Levi's action slacks)

Setting new standards of performance (Dodge Aries)

A man wants to smell like a man (Aqua Velva)

We take your pictures seriously (Polaroid)

We never forget you have a choice (British Caledonian Airways)

Just slightly ahead of our time (Panasonic)

You've come a long way, baby (Virginia Slims)

The shape you want to be in (Mercury Merkur)

You're going to like us (TWA)

Twice a day and before every date (Colgate Ribbon Dental Cream)

Does not harm the heart (Bayer Aspirin)

It's where the girl ends and the woman begins (Seventeen)

Helping keep the face of America beautiful (Avon)

Power in the hands of the few (Alfa-Romeo)

The fragrance men love (Cashmere Bouquet)

Built for the human race (Nissan)

Behold the power of reason (Mitsubishi station turbo)

Let us protect the world (Hartford insurance group)

Anything you can do we can do over (Liquid Paper Correction Fluid)

He works hard for your money (Dutchboy Paints)  
One giant step for womankind (Enzo Angiolini Shoes)

---

Adam & Eve  
*Garrett Rodgers*

bled joint, fractured globe,  
rib crushed to splintered pieces.

i gave you this, i  
never asked you to outgrow rigid harsh hiding marrow.

now take this seed and plant it and  
sow your garden over the bone that aches inside you.

i evaded pain, you  
did not fear it, you

danced along its fragile  
backbone, light and pale and

moonlike, you held your breath  
and swam into its crevices,

you found a million yous  
inside me and drew them

out like nectar, ate forbidden  
fruit and loved the taste, held

your glow against me and pretended  
away disdain. i am made of rough

angles, angry jagged edges. one missing.  
you are here, gasping,

my thorn caught in your side.

---

for the girl who makes miniature paper boats  
*Khushi Duggal*

my fingers fold up pages feverishly,  
memories crashing like the waves of the sea,  
grand books now float like wrecked paper boats,  
i cannot quite remember who I used to be.

i do not want to grasp onto each page,  
or every tide that crashes high and low,  
only for them to rot and drown my mind,  
The paper boats must come and go.  
one folded crisp as another one unwinds,  
bringing pleasure or bringing pain,  
some wounds septic and some cuts healed,  
some boats revolutionary and some sailors vain.  
the river of time continues its journey,  
every battle of remembrance will eventually cease;  
the paper boats will not stay afloat forever.  
in their barren remains we will find our peace.

---

I've never been / the one to hold your hand / like you held mine  
*Gözde İloğlu*

*I tether at your edge  
I twitch and I switch, and I hope  
it doesn't end me  
lest it be a tragedy*

A melodramatic opera at the local theater  
surprises you with a sudden giggle.  
Who would think the curtains  
would close so suddenly?  
Paid full price just to feel this empty.

*if I could, I'd cry  
you a pool, an ocean  
but you never liked being  
deep in the water  
now it's all part of the cumulus  
the memories and hills  
I will scream it the loudest so  
that nobody can wonder  
how I'm feeling, with our past  
and nobody can part us  
once more*

Sonnets and plays written after you,  
a song composed to feel the morning dew.  
A broken twig under your heart  
couldn't ever be loud enough to fill the silence,  
yet quiet enough to disturb the serenity.

*and the scenes, the dreams  
I had in my head  
they all crumble, thunder  
over your bed  
of the night, the day  
that never shines - no more  
childhood is left anymore*

The safe cocoon that was once your arms  
braided with whispers in my ears. Oh how  
gentle was your touch in my heart.  
The eternal fire burning for the one second I may need  
so I can light up my torch and face the deep caves  
of living alone without the stew, the two, the cued tissue  
And I cannot have, cannot hear, cannot feel  
you.

*sovereignty left me hanging  
barely standing on one leg, one fake  
continuous face in my eyes  
ringing in my ears and my hands  
can't feel my heartbeat in your fingers  
you were holding my blood  
my veins had your love  
flowing, floating. free  
is not the choice I made -  
I would bury myself in the prison  
that holds your body if I knew how  
to find you now*

---

Dementia

*Beks Freeman*

“Tell me your story, Peepa, I want to hear more.”

I ask my grandfather

The ash of his cigarette still smokes in the trash can, My dad  
frantically putting it out before our house burns down.

My grandfather leans back,  
climbing the 142 staircases  
into his silent memory castle.

His blue-sky eyes don't know me anymore,  
reflecting charcoal stumps of a mind's

forest fire.  
His tales something  
I will only hear through the  
fog,  
brushstrokes of my mother's voice.

On the tree-branch bridge of thoughts, he sits  
And waits  
For words  
That will never come

---

Family History that Only Exists in Memory  
*Sofia Naranjo*

The cemetery crowded  
with white weathered saints  
and angels, hands open,  
offering

The smell of the dusty sun  
settling incandescently  
on the mountain  
of a sleeping woman

I try to fill the open spaces  
in my mind with mangoes  
and apricots, the taste of  
almond ice cream

*Late morning, we are called over to eat, we run out  
stomachs rumbling, and we bring it back to the pink  
plastic table and say we are in a restaurant*

I wonder about the house  
on the slanted hill  
abandoned and blue  
shooing away the bugs, sweeping away dust

I wonder about the comforting  
coldness of stone and trees  
clustered outside in the warm rain  
of one sleepy afternoon

And I wonder about the room  
dedicated to fabric, squares and squares shoved  
inside canvas bags awaiting  
their next patchwork

---

eat your feelings

*Gözde İloğlu*

deep inside even you know  
how it will all go down.  
first, we will eat dinner.  
something homemade, something that takes hours to prepare,  
then to cook, and to cool  
only to be devoured in mere minutes.  
and we will both remember it,  
how it burns on the first bite  
the temptation  
too strong to care for your own well-being.  
the stolen blows, the desire to have the craze  
and beat it too.  
after a musical sequence of the hissing heat on your tongue  
and lips, eager to capture their prey  
followed by the honeymoon.  
the perfect bite over and over again.  
you are young, and have a taste  
for the new, the unknown, the unexplored  
by your tastebuds.  
but it only lasts so long.  
soon, you're done, you've moved on,  
and all that's left of your journey is a stained plate  
and a slight sweet aftertaste  
in your desensitized mouth.  
next, water will be served

to wash down all your questions.  
and there will be no dessert.  
no, there will be no need for it  
nor will there be the desire.  
not a pie, a cake, not even  
the cherry on top.  
because you know, deep down  
that too will end.  
and finally, we will leave  
our hard work to be broken down  
by soap,  
and water.

---

Where Did Miss Kitty Go?

*Emily Wray*

*MALE SEEKING FEMALE: Caucasian Male, 37, looking for woman seen at the Pollack County Post Office on June 26th. He has your driver's license. You have his heart. Direct inquiries to [dbphillips@quikmail.com](mailto:dbphillips@quikmail.com).*

“You’ve got to read this,” my best friend, Marcy cried as she shot out from Aisle 7, knocking over approximately six boxes of Kleenex as she went.

The summer I turned seventeen, Marcy and I started working at Lincoln Street Corner Store, the combination pharmacy-convenience shop owned by my mother’s newest eternal flame, Jack Hendricks III. By the time Marcy and I had met in the fifth grade, my mother had already been married twice, and her record as Pollack County’s most notorious serial dater was further substantiated by two more trips to the altar and subsequent divorces by the time my peers and I had started high school. Then, she met Jack, the new pharmacist who had taken over Mr. and Mrs. Hudson’s corner shop, and thus began her typical seduction routine again, complete with push-up bras from QVC and pungent, flowery body spray. He fell hook, line and sinker. I manned the register so the three of us could pretend

to be a nuclear family. Marcy stocked shelves to save up for a car. On particularly dull mornings, we'd scan the classifieds in the papers from the grimy, white, metal newsstand by the store's front entrance. On the Monday after the Fourth of July, Marcy discovered something remarkable.

I was chipping my nail polish off with the edge of a ruler I found behind my station when she slapped a newspaper down on the counter. "Penny, look at this," Marcy demanded with her usual overdramatic flair.

"Give me a minute," I said, but I didn't give any consideration to her outburst. Instead, my eyes followed the peeled flecks of paint as they fluttered and fell downward, catching in the grooves of the register's keyboard.

"Penny, if you don't read this right now, I'm literally going to hold you down and pour an entire bottle of Windex in your eyes."

It was probably nothing. "Hold on."

She grabbed the ruler out of my hand and slapped its square edge on the bottom right corner of the page she had set in front of me. "This guy met a girl at the post office and she stole her driver's license so she'd have to meet up with him. Isn't that so creepy?"

This was far from the first time Marcy had introduced an outlandish story like this, and it wouldn't be the last. Just the week before, she had animatedly explained how she was certain that her recently-deceased sixteen year-old cat hadn't been killed by a coyote or vicious raccoon, but in the crossfire of gang warfare. Before that, she had spent a month and a half vigorously researching her theory that the massive, all-consuming fire at Holy Trinity Presbyterian Church on Queen Avenue hadn't stemmed from a tragic heating system malfunction, as Sheriff Carter had announced, but from arson on behalf of the rivaling St. John the Baptist Presbyterian Church on Pullman Street. This would surely just be another phase before she discovered the next rumor to investigate. I reached over the counter to grab the ruler back, but she pulled it away again.

"What if she just dropped it?" I asked unenthusiastically.

“No way. Your address is on your driver’s license, right? So he would have just sent it back.

This is a power play. He’s definitely a serial killer.”

I looked back at the ad, now crinkled from the amount of times Marcy had poked it.

“Why would he put his email in the ad, then? Wouldn’t someone report that?”

Marcy leaned forward on the counter, her putrid orange “Lincoln Street Corner Store” polo catching on a scratched edge of the laminate tabletop. “It has to be a burner. Do you think it would even work if you emailed him?”

“I’m not justifying that with a response,” I retorted.

“Then leave that to me.” She turned head and marched off towards the pharmacy area without a second glance in my direction.

I knew exactly where she was headed. The only desktop computer in the store was back in my stepfather’s drive-thru pharmacy, right next to the cabinets and containers that held the largest assortment of pills I had ever come into contact with. In a town this small, my stepfather played God during business hours—no wonder my mother was so stuck on him. Why retreat to the world of us commoners when you could leave hickeys on the most powerful, pasty, white neck on Lincoln Street? Her taste had certainly evolved over the time we spent together. Instead of flirting with my teachers, as she had in sixth and seventh grade, she had moved on to prizes with a higher net worth. My orthodontist asked about her every time I stepped foot in his office, and I’ll never forget the day my mother brought me in for an evaluation and he rubbed her inner thigh while flipping through my x-rays on the screen. I had migraines every time I thought of our town’s old mayor, Pete Lindbergh, a widower who announced at a press conference that he was stepping down from his position to endow my mother with a diamond ring and a promise of eternity under God. The marriage lasted one hundred and ninety-two days, and I haven’t seen him since he ventured off to pursue a new calling: real estate. This revolving door of supporting characters was never meant to offer *real* husbands and fathers, no matter how they tried to tell me they were. I just wished my mother would come out and say that they were paychecks, and that they didn’t have to fill the void that my father had left us with, because they didn’t.

She had been a teller at a local credit union for as long as I could remember, and whenever she needed to stretch her legs on a lunch break, she'd stop by the shop for a performative family bonding visit. I'd gape as she would strut right past me without a second glance and head to the back of the store, by the greeting cards and office supplies, and watch on the monitor for the security cameras in the front as my stepfather wrapped his arms around her, whispering sweet nothings or grabbing her ass, until I couldn't take it anymore. On her way out, she'd pick a few things to take— chips, cigarettes, condoms, or whatever she had to have that day— and bring them up to the counter. Our encounters on those summer days usually went something like this:

“Hi, Penny.”

“Hi, Mom.” *Her buttons were done wrong. Did they hook up in the back?*

“Jack said I can take these, so you don't need to ring up anything.”

“I know.” *She was staring at my nose, I could feel it. She had a dainty, perfect nose. I had my father's.*

“Are you coming home tonight?”

“I usually do.” *She probably didn't want me to be there. She was probably going to have sex in my bed or something. I really hope she hadn't ever had sex in my bed. That would be disgusting and it's only a twin and I don't like it when people touch my things.*

“Alright. I'm making chili. Could you bring home some of those microwave dinner rolls when you leave?”

“Sure. The crescent rolls or the biscuits?” *Chili for Jack, again. Electrifying.* “Crescent.

We've had the biscuits a lot lately. Are you riding home with Marcy?”

“Not sure yet.” *I'm not riding home with Jack. His truck smells like garlic.*

“It would probably be easier to ride home with Jack.”

“We'll see.” *You conniving little bitch.*

“I have to head out. I'll see you at home, okay?”

“Okay.” *Maybe one day you won’t.*

She’d turn once more and stand on the tips of her toes. “Bye, Jack!” she’d call out, in the same tone of voice you’d use when speaking to a Golden Retriever puppy, before turning back and flinging the door open and sashaying away.

I never heard my mother use that tone when my father was still around. Most of the time, they spoke softly to each other— as if they were glass figurines, like the ones my grandmother collected and decked the shelves in her living room with. The only times I can remember when my father raised his voice were when he was galavanting around the house on weekends whenever we’d watch movies in the evenings. He loved movies, especially Westerns, and had seen every one I’d ever heard of.

He’d stand in the doorway of the bathroom when I was brushing my teeth before bed and stiffen his arms at his sides. “You’re not welcome in this saloon,” he’d yell over his shoulder to my mother in a hokey Texas drawl. “You better watch out, before the sheriff finds out you’ve been around these parts.”

Then he’d turn to me and mime a motion like tipping a cowboy hat. “I’m sorry, Miss Kitty. Didn’t mean to scare off your business.”

I’d giggle, toothpaste dripping at the corners of my mouth, as he’d go around like this, our family’s amateur John Wayne impersonator. Even if my mother was tired or in the middle of doing the dishes, he’d rope her in, galloping around her until she dropped the sponge and assumed her role— a bounty hunter blown in from out of town, or a deputy with less than noble intentions, whatever my father’s taunting called for. He would call me Miss Kitty in these moments of madness, and that’s who I’d be: the damsel in distress and wrinkled pajamas, feigning shock and dismay as cowboys with pea shooters fought to the death right before my eyes. If he hadn’t liked those movies, I would have turned my nose to them every time.

It wasn’t that Marcy and I didn’t discuss my mother’s romantic escapades. In fact, we had made a habit of doing so when I slept at her house, where we’d sit on the carpet of the room she shared with her sister, our backs up against the frame at the side of her bed with an open box of pizza with

pepperoni and mushrooms. But we never talked about Dad, because she didn't know enough about him, and that was intentional. On an April evening when I was nine, the rain drizzled against my window as he tucked me in and kissed my forehead, right at the spot my hairline started. I had wriggled out of his reach because his stubble scratched the skin above my eyebrows and I laughed until my sides hurt. My top lip curled up in a smile to display the tooth I had lost four days prior. He was still wearing his work suit. Why hadn't he changed yet?

He was gone the next morning when I stumbled out of bed. My mother hadn't woken me up for school that day, and when I crept to the bottom of the stairs, I saw her sitting at the kitchen table, her eyes shut so tightly you'd think they'd never open again. When she heard my feet hit the tile floor, she jumped and stared at me like I had appeared out of thin air. She nervously ushered me into the car and tried to explain, haphazardly, why I wasn't in school that day as she drove to the Dunkin' Donuts four blocks away. *You didn't need to go today. Your teachers said you didn't have school. They called before you woke up.* I didn't know she had lied until Marcy told me a few years later that I was the only one absent that day.

My mother told me over a box of donut holes that my father had been seeing another woman and had moved eight hours away to be with her. I cried so hard I choked on my own spit.

Marcy didn't need to know that. She'd probably tell half our class about it before I could blink an eyelash. She was a natural gossip, as long as it benefited her. "You know, if you ever wanted Adderall or anything like that, I could probably get it for you. Penny's stepdad's a pharmacist," Marcy would tell Todd Wilkes, the lumbering, gawky fry cook at Iverson's Bar and Grille around the corner on Pointer Street. He'd offered to give us a ride home from work each day because Marcy had given him a handjob at Angie Walker's graduation party.

"Why would he want that?" I said from the backseat, with a twinge of disdain. Todd had a peanut-shaped head and thick chest hair like Jack's, darker than fresh tar in the sun. Marcy could do better.

“Oh, you know,” she giggled.

Marcy had horrible instincts. When she set her eyes set on something, she would have it, no matter how remarkably stupid it would turn out to be. She was like my mother in that regard. I wasn’t surprised when she arrived back up at the counter an hour and a half later, parading a piece of computer paper like it was the goddamn Mona Lisa.

“Here,” she announced, handing me the sheet. “Now, we’ll figure out who wrote the ad.”

“You— I— you can’t be serious,” I stuttered out, gaping the message.

“Well, what do you think of it? Should we use a different alias than “Cupid?” I thought it was kind of clever at first, but now it sounds stupid. And—”

“We’re not sending this,” I huffed. “If you’re right about him, we’d be in serious danger. If you’re wrong, we’ll have put him through hell. He’s just searching for someone he’s lost.”

Marcy was incredulous. “If someone’s lost, we can probably find them. If he’s at all suspicious, we’ll call the police. We always do such boring things. I swear, if someone asks me to go get a slushie with them one more time this summer, I’ll tear my own hair out.”

I was usually the one to ask to get slushies. “Please, don’t send it.”

“What if I already did?”

My ears felt hot as I backed up, hitting the back of my leg on the stool I had set behind the counter. It felt like my heart was bouncing off the walls of my chest and back, swelling and contracting, gasping and sputtering. “You’re treating him like some sort of zoo animal,” I finally stammered. “He just wants to find this girl. Is it hard to believe that when people lose each other, they’d want to try to find each other again?”

“Well, what if he’s trying to kill her?”

“Well, what if he’s not? You always assume the worst of people, and you always assume they’re thinking the worst of you. Nobody wants to kill you, Marcy. Nobody cares enough to do it. They have their own lives, and you don’t get to be a part of every one of them.” I blinked and, without warning, I

felt tears well up, which only made me angrier. This is something that didn't even matter, and I was going to cry here at work about it. Jack would tell my mother, and I would have to explain that nothing happened, and that sometimes I cried for no reason at all. She never cried anymore. I thought about the man at the other end of that ad and pictured him sitting in a kitchen table, sipping coffee so strong it was practically mud and refreshing his email screen. Every December, my father would send a Christmas card for me and my mother. When I was younger, I'd press my nose to the picture window in our living room every time the postman came, and eventually, it would come, a photo of his family out there on cardstock with a message on the back. His handwriting was always neater than mine or my mother's, if it was even his. He'd say how I needed to come and visit the family, meet his wife and three sons with wavy dark hair like his. He'd say how he missed me and that he loved the pictures he saw on my Mom's Facebook. He's day he loved me.

"This isn't about me. Why are you being such a bitch about this?" Marcy demanded, grabbing the paper back from me. My lungs felt as if they were stuck in the machine by the pharmacy station that checked your blood pressure. I shut my eyes hard to try to stop myself, but I felt a tear roll down my left cheek. Then another, and another.

"He just wants to talk to her," I all but blubbered. "He just wants things to be the way they were before."

Before Marcy could interject, I made a beeline for the only restroom we had, trying my best to cover my face and duck into aisles where no one could see me. When I stepped in and locked the door, I let myself sink to the floor.

For the first few years after he left, I waited for that Christmas card as if he was coming home to see me himself. I sent him letters about once a month, chicken scratch in gel pens or colored pencils. When I was twelve, I ditched stationary and my mother helped me set up an email account. I sent him messages whenever I was upset or bored or missed him. I never heard from him outside the cards each December. I sent him report cards, even the schedule for my tennis tournaments when Marcy made me

join the team with her in seventh grade. I asked him when I could come out there. I told him I missed him too, that I loved him too, that I wanted to see him again. No extra notes came in, and my emails never saw a reply. Instead of birthday cards, my mom would present an envelope with three crisp twenty dollar bills each year with a smile and announce, “this is from your Dad.” I fell for that trick until I was fifteen, when I overheard her complaining about the whole ordeal over the phone. I was supposed to be out raking the yard, but I came back in to grab something to tie my hair back with. I had barely stepped in the front door when I noticed her practically shaking in rage, leaning over the sink with the phone pressed so hard to her ear that it looked superglued. “I’m tired of pretending that your husband still loves our daughter just because you have a hero complex,” she shrieked. “And I’m tired of shelling out sixty dollars every year to keep up the act!”

After I had sneakily grabbed a scrunchie and crept back outside, I turned the stereo up as loud as it could go and grabbed the rake I had left on the ground. I didn’t waste my time with correspondence after that, but on the days where I felt the most hollow, I pictured my father at his kitchen table, sipping coffee so strong it was practically mud. His wife was frying bacon at the stove behind him, and his boys were huddled around the television screen in the next room over, fighting over video game controllers. The postman would come, or his email would chime, and he’d sip his coffee and forget I was even there.

I wanted him to write me an ad in the paper. I wanted him to tell me that he had been shipwrecked and deserted on an island in the middle of the Pacific and that he couldn’t email me because he didn’t have service, or that he was kidnapped by masked men and they wouldn’t give him paper to write to me with. I wanted something horrible to happen to him. I wanted something so awful to happen that he’d come home and we’d leave Pollack County and watch every western he wanted. I wanted my mother to stop masquerading as the local easy bag and talk to me about how much his absence hurt, because I couldn’t have been the only one nursing wounds. I wanted her to stop lying about the sneaky phone arguments and start galloping around the house, and I wanted to be Miss Kitty

again. If I could've been eight years old again, standing in my pajamas with toothpaste on my chin, nothing would hurt anymore.

I sat on the floor until I felt numb. The air conditioning was blaring, and the hairs on my arms had been practically frozen in place. I thought about them standing straight up like they did in those Looney Tunes shorts, and that was at least a little funny. I tilted my head up and forced myself to open my eyes as far as my eyelids would extend. The veins in my face stretched back like a tight rubber band, and I felt as if I'd coated my eyelids with potato chip crumbs. When I stood up, I stared at my reflection, a caricature with lips puffy from sniveling on the grimy tile floor. The collar of my polo was dotted with snot. I splashed water on my face and didn't leave for another ten minutes or so, when a middle-aged woman knocked on the door. "It can't possibly take you half an hour to pee," she announced. "Some of us actually have to go."

I slowly pushed open the door and she was there, with a sharp bob haircut and a grimace like she was passing a kidney stone. I darted out of her sight and kept my head down until I pushed open the "Employees Only" door in the very back of the store. And although I wanted to walk to the ends of the Earth, to wander until my stomach stopped sloshing around and my chest stopped shuddering, I spent the rest of the shift on the curb by the parking lot behind the pharmacy, right out of view of the drive-up window. I pictured Jack sitting in the back, flipping through a Reader's Digest as Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers blared on his favorite radio station. He didn't ask questions when I came back into the shop without a word and grabbed a tube of microwave dinner biscuits. Jack and I listened to the same station in his truck on the way home where, for the most part, he drove us home in silence. Marcy had left before I could apologize—I had watched her as she hopped into Todd Wilkes's Jeep, where she'd divulge how Penny had broken down at work and caused a disturbance like no other. I grasped the biscuit tube my mother had asked me to bring home and held on to it like I was being dragged along on a waterski. I was lucky it didn't explode in my hands.

The only time Jack did speak came when the station went to commercial. He stretched his neck back and rolled it until we both heard bones crack beneath the surface. When he stopped at the stop light on the corner of Pullman Street, he turned to look at me.

“Did anything fun happen today?” he inquired, with a hazy, plastered-on smile and thinly disguised indifference.

I should’ve just opened the passenger door, unbuckled my seatbelt and leapt into moving traffic, but then he would have had to tell my mother about it. She’d complain about the biscuits. I wouldn’t come in the next day, and Marcy would start a rumor that I had been killed in a professional hit. I would’ve had to watch, from the afterlife, as my father carted his kids off to soccer practice or watched them in their school production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. I thought back to my time on the bathroom floor and realized, for the first time, that maybe I didn’t want to take him from the family he had chosen, because there’s no prize for being born first, just being born most important. My mom had been chosen—chosen by every man she batted her eyelashes at. Marcy, Jack, the woman from the ad, and even Todd Wilkes were chosen every day to be someone’s joy, to be the reason they got up in the morning. I wanted to be chosen. If I stopped complaining, maybe someone would pick me.

“Just an ordinary day,” I lied.

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A Mistake I Make Within a Minute in the Target  
*Jacob Lopez*

I bought licorice at the Target.  
I don’t know why I bought licorice, in hindsight.  
I was warm. I should be dieting.  
I had that scratchy feeling on my back.

It was probably not anxiety.  
It was cold outside but inside I was warm with a coat on.  
It was anxiety, in hindsight.  
It was probably the reason I bought licorice.

The licorice isn’t good.  
The anxiety isn’t either, but I didn’t choose to buy it.

The taste is stale to me.  
The thing replaces dessert for me too.

Both the anxiety and the licorice I mean.  
Both make my stomach feel off, which is worse than hungry.  
Both, I think would be better in the garbage.  
Both are just there, in my room, where I act like I hide them well.

---

Skin

*Charlotte Yeung*

i once wore the skin of a human when i was chased out of my burrow. i wandered through the streets, wobbly legs stumbling over the old cobblestone streets and falling onto hot sidewalk that skinned my supple knees a raw, bloody brown. someone found me and gave me a name and words to voice my thoughts and some money and food to survive. who are you? they ask as if i could say i am their enemy. i am one of you, i reply. they call me ‘rehabilitated’ but i never feel that way. how can i be whole if i don’t have a home? wandering here and there-I’m in a new world now but i sometimes close my eyes and hear the calls of the forest clasp my heart and draw me out of my stupor. i lay on this foreign couch, my youthful legs stretched out before me and my little sausage fingers clasped over my hairless belly but i don’t feel right. perhaps i should have found another burrow for i feel like i will break

Out

Of

My

Skin.

---

Drywall

*Madelyn LaPointe*

There’s a man in a vestment and a muzzle; he’s standing at a podium, widening his wingspan to a sycophantic audience.

The truth is, there’s not enough space inside of him.

Besides, it gets old. It does. This wheel, over and over. This wheel that rusts and squeaks and spins in turn to the brown-nosed yes-men that run a tight schedule – rapport was only viable for one hour every week, and it was all wool anyway.

He’s telling some kind of story. Whether it’s fiction or fact is irrelevant, because there’s a point a punchline, a general idea and it’s emerging – only it trips over its feet and falls flat. The audience runs with it until they hit the murals.

They reach inside and find drywall. Beneath the drywall, more drywall. Outside the drywall, more drywall, inevitably. Drywall at every turn.

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A Fishy Situation

*Kristen Szaller*

I saw him on the side of the road with his thumb pointed at the sky. He was walking in the opposite direction with the hope that some kind stranger would take refuge and give him a lift. The streets were empty, and the afternoon was frigid and dreamlike. The snow was far too bright to look at and everything smelled new. It was winter break, and most teens my age were on some fantastic vacation to somewhere much warmer and more pleasant than Indiana. I was driving down Main St. on my way home from the library. My back seat was filled with stacks of books that I would never have the chance to finish. I told myself that they would keep me busy for the next week with my parents gone. With each turn, the jumble of Stephen King and R.L. Stine tumbled further under my seats until they were no longer visible.

“Shit,” I said aloud to no one at all.

I looked back at the road and noticed the stranger’s eyes first. They were light blue, almost lemur-like. His frayed winter coat was covered in a thin layer of snow, apparently not enough to be worth the trouble of brushing it off. His beat-up black shoes walked confidently, despite his seemingly dire situation. I slowly came to a stop on the side of the road. “Hey, do you need help?” I yelled out of my car window.

He stared at me, scanning every inch of my face.

“Yes, why thank you. Could you give me a lift?”

“Okay, hop in!”

He carefully opened the passenger door and got in. He didn’t have a bag or any belongings, it seemed. We sat in silence for a minute until I built up the courage to speak up. “So, what’s your name? What’s your story?”

“Well, my name’s Christopher, but you can just call me Chris. I don’t have a vehicle and I was hoping that some kind stranger like you would help me. I’ve been walking around the past week and stopping in the McDonalds when I need a soda pop or gotta wizz.”

I didn’t know what to do. My parents always said never to pick up hitchhikers, but what do they know? They weren’t there, so what they didn’t know wouldn’t kill them. Besides, it was too late now. I just felt so bad for him. He looked miserable walking down the snowy street in his destroyed sneakers. His lips looked in need of some extra strength Carmex. Though he seemed calm and comfortable, his brow was still furrowed with concern. Up close, he looked to be about 35.

“Is there anywhere specific that you’d like me to drive you to?”

“Can we stop at Long John Silver’s? I have a hankering for some fish right now.” I unlocked my phone and started my route to the closest LJS, about 15 minutes away.

“Long John Silver’s? I’ve never been there before. I didn’t know that anyone even eats there anymore. Are you sure that you don’t want to go somewhere closer? There’s a McDonald’s right around the corner we could stop at instead,” I tried to convince him. “I would never eat anything from McDonalds. Long John Silver’s is so much better. I can’t believe you’ve never been there! It’s my favorite place on earth! Would you be a darlin’ and make a pit stop there,” he replied.

I tried my hardest to make more small talk, but things fell flat. He didn’t seem interested in keeping the conversation going. He just stared out the window at the passing restaurants and pharmacies, as though he didn’t recognize any of his surroundings. After what seemed like deadly silence, we arrived in the fishy parking lot.

“I’ll be right back. I’ll just place my order to go. You can just stay put and I’ll be back in a jiffy!”

He walked inside and as he opened the door to the restaurant, I noticed that under his jacket was a bright blue shirt. The parking lot was empty except for the two cars in the employee parking spots.

While I waited for Chris to place his order, I dug around in my back seat for one of my library books. Stephen King's *Misery* was the first contender that I could grasp. I passed the time by reading. I got so engrossed in the novel that I got to page 100 before I looked at the clock: almost an entire hour had passed since Mr. Fishy entered the building. I decided to head into the restaurant and see what was taking so long. I couldn't just leave him there. I felt indebted to him for some reason, like I had to ensure that he was happy. Besides, I had promised that I would wait for him. As soon as I opened the door, I heard the ring of a bell and was greeted by the obnoxious yellow and blue fish decor. There were signs that read "Make the world your hushpuppy!" and "Oh my cod!" The floor was covered in batter crumbs sticky with grease. It was no wonder that they made fast food workers wear non-slip shoes. One wrong step and my neck would be broken with these floors. Did they even mop there? The strong seafood odor overloaded my senses. It was everywhere. The dingy blue booths were all empty. There was no one at the front counter, not an employee to be seen. The only thing I could hear was Long John Silver's original song Jingle Shells faintly playing.

"Jingle shells, jingle shells, dinners on the way. Fish is here to bring some cheer, delicious every day."

I could see why I had never decided to go to Long John Silver's before then. Everything looked outdated and depressing. It's the place where fish and people go to die. I had even heard that everything on the entire menu was on lists of the unhealthiest fast food. I didn't even realize that they still existed. I thought that only middle-aged men and ancient Catholic ladies would flock to the place during Lent. I didn't know how they even stayed in business. I have never known anyone my age to go there.

"On the 12th day of Fishmas, Long John Silver's gave to me..."

"What kind of cult is this? Why the fuck does Long John Silver's have their own music," I whispered to myself.

I looked up at the menu board. The first item on the menu read “Fish & Chips for \$1.09” and was followed by “Drinks for \$0.15 or \$0.20 for a large.” How were things so cheap? I guess I could see the appeal to stopping by if it was *that* good of a deal.

“Hello,” I called out. The only response was the whirring of a filter machine. After looking around to make sure that no one was there, I reluctantly made my way around the counter. There were fish still sizzling in the fryer, oil bubbling everywhere. There were metal pans full of batter mix spilled all over the floor and seeping into the grimy tiled floor. Tongs were thrown haphazardly on to the floor. Fries were in their basket with about thirty seconds left on the handheld timer. There was something off about the kitchen area. Everything looked prehistoric. There were no electronic screens with orders, but instead hundreds of handwritten tickets clung to every surface.

I was interrupted by a loud thump at the drive-through. An enraged bald guy pounded on the window. His suit looked as wrinkled as the creases of his forehead, no doubt caused by the disgruntled look on his face. His bald sunburnt head leaned out of his 1969 cherry red Plymouth Roadrunner as far as it could reach. He had a certain look to him: the timeless aura of an entitled businessman. I ignored the man and headed into the back room.

As I stepped through the doors, I first found a desk tucked in the corner of the tiny back room. There was a binder titled “Manager’s Book” laying on the desk. There was a note taped to the front that said “Anna: Read me.” I flipped through it and found receipts dated between August and December of 1970. There were handwritten instructions that explained the dos and don’ts of being a part of LJS. Rule number 1 read: “Trust each other! There is no stronger bond than being a part of the fishy family!” Rule number 2 followed with “Always wear a smile and be cheerful! If you have a smile, you will be happy!” I shuddered, closed the book, and tossed it back on the desk. I found a newspaper clipping framed on the wall. My eyes immediately scanned the image. The black and white photo showed Chris standing with his hands on his hips in front of a Long John Silver’s sign.

“Long John Silver’s on its opening day on August 12th, 1970, was a huge success. Businessman Christopher Jenkins opened the first of the restaurant’s chains in Indiana. Cars lined up around the block for delicious fish and chips,” I repeated aloud.

It didn’t make sense, I had to make sense of it all. Above the desk I found a calendar hanging. Just below the image of many cartoon fish, seventeen days were crossed off: it was December 18th, 1970.

“Chris! Where are you,” I called out in a panic.

From the freezer, Chris stepped out all decked out in his bright blue polo with a fish embroidered on it. His nametag read “Chris J: Manager.”

“Welcome to Long John Silver’s! We’re so excited to have you here to join our fishy family!”

“What are you talking about? I dropped you off so you could get food...since when have you worked here?”

“You were so kind to pick me up on the side of the road today! It’s just a little silly test that I do when recruiting new employees! I want only the kindest and most selfless workers to join our fishy family!”

“Well, I don’t want to work here. This is the weirdest fucking job recruitment I have ever seen, but I am *not* interested.”

“Just give it a chance! Let me go grab you a uniform from the back. You have many choices! Would you like to be a customer or a worker?”

I stood in stunned silence.

“Um... what do you me-”

“You look like you’d be better as a worker. You were so helpful today! We are a bit understaffed. There are just *so* many customers that come back every day, we can barely keep up! I’ll go grab that uniform, and I’ll be back in a jiffy!”

I heard shuffling from the other side of the room. A lanky-looking girl with the name tag Sandra stood in the corner. Her dingy golden shirt was an eyesore. It reminded me of the color of dark urine when you haven't peed for hours. Intriguing, yet quite alarming. "What's going on," I asked her.

"I started out like you, but you'll get used to it! I now love my LJS family! I couldn't imagine my life without it," she said as she smiled wildly.

"I don't get it. Why am I working here? I didn't sign up for this," I angrily replied. "No one *chooses* to go to Long John Silvers or work there; we're assigned to do so. My cousin dared me to stop here for lunch in 1987, and I've been here ever since! We get the privilege to wear these spunky uniforms!"

"Can't you just go home?"

"No one can go home. That's how we stay in business. You choose to be either a customer or a worker. They're so nice to give us choices! Some lucky fellas get to change roles, but most of the time you get what you get, and you don't throw a fit."

Chris came back with my matching urine-shirt.

"We'll have to get you some dark black pants to go with the uniform. Also, some nonslip shoes. You could get seriously hurt! That would be a doozy for the company," he giggled. I ran out into the dining room. I tried each of the doors, but neither would budge. The restaurant was now filled with customers, most dressed in their Sunday best. Every table was filled with people of all ages. There were Eleanors sitting with Chads, and Karens sitting with Gertrudes. They all laughed and joked with one another; the restaurant was filled with Fishmas music and chomping noises. Old ladies guzzled down their 20-cent diet Cokes. Middle school boys and girls inhaled their hushpuppies while their pirate hats sailed atop their vacant heads. They looked happy, but their body language said otherwise. Everyone just looked pleasant but empty. One customer rang the bell near the exit door, and the employees all cried out, "Thank you!!"

I turned and cautiously sprinted to the bathroom, careful to watch out for the sticky floors. I clutched the shirt in my hands and looked in the mirror. My brain told me know, but my hands began to remove my blouse. I couldn't help but at least try my uniform on. My eyes began to twinkle as the urine shirt and I became one. I turned to look at my side view. I did look pretty good in the uniform. It fit me like a glove. I was in a trance. I glanced down to look at my flip-flopped feet, but they had already been replaced by black socks and work shoes. Weird, but I didn't question it. My jeans had disappeared from my legs and in their place were black dress pants. A hair tie appeared on my wrist. I pulled my hair back and grinned in the mirror. All my worries melted away.

I left the bathroom and stopped by the tables of munching customers.

"How is everything? Is there anything that I can get you," I asked with a smile. "No thanks, I'm good."

"Okay, great! Let me know if you need anything!"

I turned and headed behind the counter. Before me, I saw a land of opportunity, a land of minimum wage glory. The cozy fryers needed attending to, like stoking a roaring campfire. The beautiful floors needed to be mopped. The creamy coleslaw needed to be cupped so that our customers could enjoy it! Sauces needed to be restocked and reorganized. There were so many amazing things that I could choose to do, and so much time to do it!

I heard a bell ring at the front counter. An elderly woman in a green floral dress rolled her eyes and stood with her arms crossed. The nickels and dimes from her Vera Bradley change purse were sprawled out on the counter. I rushed over to the register and assumed my role. It was my time to shine if I wanted any shot at employee of the month!

"Welcome to Long John Silver's! My name is Anna. Would you like to try our tasty fish and chips or our scrumdiddlyumptious crab cakes today," I asked with a smile.

---

i am not the moon  
*Kristen Szaller*

i am not the moon.  
i will never be so  
bright and  
illuminating  
but I will settle for  
being even the tiniest star in the galaxy.

i'll just be chilling amongst  
the other beautiful cosmic  
constellations and  
greeting my  
celestial aunts and uncles

*"hey mars, how's the family?"*  
*"saturn, wow your ring is so beautiful, how*  
*much did he pay for it? congrats by the way!"*  
*"oh pluto, poor pluto. i heard you got demoted. i'm sure*  
*you'll work your way back up eventually... (maybe)."*

if i were a planet, i'd  
be uranus.  
*ha ha, i know, i said "ur anus".*

uranus is ridiculed for its un-  
fortunate name, turned into the butt  
of the joke,

but have you ever actually looked  
up a picture of it? have  
you ever taken one small minute  
of your day to look at that  
brilliant milky blue beauty?

*no, i bet you haven't.*  
*even dark matter has feelings.*

in a world full of ecliptic moons,  
i am inferior uranus

---

Spring Rolls We Made for Halloween  
*Sofia Naranjo*

My fingertips stained with the scent of garlic,  
the tango between knife and board,

a metronome of clack clack clack

Steam from cooked carrots  
flirting with the cabinet above, cucumbers  
chopped up, divided in two neat columns

The crackle of tofu frying,  
oil sinking deep into paper towel,  
sticking together

Recipe written in ballpoint pen,  
a mix of Vietnamese and English stirred together  
hanging sideways by a magnet

Taste testing the three ingredient sauce,  
*too much peanut butter? more rice vinegar?*  
adding two drops of soy sauce for good measure

Pinky dip into the spatula, the  
experimental roll, messily wrapped,  
everything tasting good

Because we made it,  
despite this being the first time,  
using rice paper, using too much

Filling, adding avocados last minute when  
we remember someone hates mushrooms  
stacking, sticking rolls onto

Three plates in total,  
too big, too clumsy  
hands busy and

Hearing the giggle when I use my head  
to knock, the door opening as wide as everyone's smile  
saying, *trick or treat!*

---

Practice makes perfect  
*Amanda Petty*

I do not know kindness as I know a lover.  
Kindness does not hold my hand and spill out my tongue.  
I have no advice or soft words to tell you.

Too often I am mean; harsh words that cut the inside of my mouth,  
leaving me choking on my apologies like blood.

But I decided long ago there is too much cruelty in this world,  
too many bloody mouths.

So I taught kindness to myself like an instrument, practice and dedication. I locked my mouth shut  
from harsh jokes, practiced kind words until they felt less crooked.

Kindness does not come easy to me so instead I do this.

A boy I don't know too well goes through a breakup,  
so I leave his messages on read and walk 20 minutes in the cold to give him homemade latkes.

I have no words to offer you, but I have these hands. Let me bake for you. Let me clean for you.  
Kindness is still a foreign language to me, but its action is familiar. At least I hope so.

---

Buck Knife and a kitchenware

*Junoh Seo*

Of the two knives that exist within this little place,  
One's a fang of sleek silver, adorned with black Bakelite.  
Bought from an impulse, mantelpiece that gleams in light  
But never saw the insides of cake or steak, its mirror clear blade.  
The other's spine is thinner, built from cheap, foggy stainless  
Sits side by side with siblings not as sharp, such as spoons  
And forks and butter knives and even the young teaspoon,  
Where it works three shifts every day, where much patience  
Is of great necessity to endure the grinding stones,  
An agony the knife on lacquered stand has never known –  
For it needed no sharpening, it was loved for shape alone.  
And though the less fortunate knife thought itself thick skinned  
At times it wondered - if my body too was mirror clear and chrome trimmed  
Then would I get a lacquered stand too, to rest my weary bone some day?

---

brewing benevolence

*Rachel Rosen*

stumbling to the kitchen i  
switch on the lights and flinch  
expectations and promises glaring down  
at me from above

red swollen eyes from

long nights of sharing  
tears with my shower head  
so i reach for the glass

to drown  
out my sorrows  
as they like to say not  
with alcohol, but with coffee

the sweet aroma of my  
drug that emits brewing benevolence filling  
my cup to save  
my empty soul

neither hot nor cold yet  
when you are lukewarm  
God spits you out for you  
have no purpose

the fix while only  
temporary prepares me  
for the performance ready  
to act in my life of imitation

so i sip my concoction  
pretending to like  
the flavor of this drink  
we call life

---

Pandemonium  
*Khushi Duggal*

I look up at the sky sometimes,  
My eyes full to the brim with wonder.  
The wind dancing in drunken madness,  
The pandemonium of the thunder,  
As it shrieks and wails at mankind,  
Horrifying beauty of the night.  
The stillness and equanimity regained,  
As the darkness is trumped by the light  
Of the first ray of sunshine,  
As I prepare my morning cup of tea,  
Flashbacks of the violent tempest,  
Of the night for me to see.  
Stirring the water and brewing the storm,  
With the power vested in my palm,  
Feeling the warmth kiss my trembling fingers,  
And I regain my sense of calm.

Hypnotised by the spiralling waters,  
Peace and passion in the midst.  
A cup of brazen realisation-  
How strange and wonderous it is to exist.

---

Fiction Jam  
*Beks Freeman*

Stories crash  
inside my idea factory that never sleeps,  
always one bolt away  
from Eureka and forgetting.

Now my sci-fi is tangled  
in my fantasy  
and even I don't know  
which way is unicorn.

My whodunits stole  
my high school melodrama  
as Sherlock High students  
smoke out the detective who leaked the exam.

My western faces off  
in a quick draw with romance  
And oh, boy,  
are hearts going to burst.

Somehow my children's books  
found my philosophy lectures,  
and Plato Jr.  
keeps hiding talking trucks in caves.

Aliens abducted my historical fiction,  
and now Paul Revere  
is lost in a crop circle  
with Blackbeard.

Laser bayonets flash  
against my first... Gothic horror?  
Urban fantasy??  
*What was I writing, again???*

I chase my thoughts around memory storage.

Tick, tock, the lightbulb rings. And  
my neural assembly line *happily-ever-after's* my confusion. Help.

---

Mondays at Moore's  
*Rachel Rosen*

I've been anticipating her arrival for the past fifteen minutes. Sitting at my tiny table in the corner of Moore's Café, I look around the room to pass the time while I wait. Moore's is a charming, little coffee shop with whimsically adorned walls and tables and a yellow glow emitting from various light fixtures throughout the room – no two are the same. The smell of freshly brewed coffee wafts through the air and almost sits on your tongue with the anticipation of having a Moore's cup of coffee. It's a true hidden gem; often occupied by familiar faces where the barista, Pete, knows your name and coffee order by heart – always doing his best to make you feel at home.

I look to my left to see the old man at the table next to me. He always brings the day's paper with him to read the news and enjoy the crossword puzzle while he sips a coffee with just cream. Across the café in a booth towards the back are the two love-struck college kids, always ordering americanos or cappuccinos, that come every week to study (although they usually study each other more than their actual work). A few tables to my right is a woman who brings her young baby to watch while she attempts to get work done. She can never seem to get enough of her vanilla latté.

And then there's her. When she finally arrives, the front door swings open and my eyes immediately glue onto her, following her every step as she approaches the barista at the front. "Hi, Annie," Pete says as she approaches the counter, "Would you like your usual today?"

"Yes, please!" I hear her say. She has one of those polite voices – the kind that seems to sing when she says "Please" and "Thank you." The kind of voice that is always followed by a smile.

He hands over her cup of coffee, "Enjoy your reading!"

She's here every Monday, as am I, and she's always reading – one week it's *House of Leaves* and the next it's *Murder on the Orient Express*. She seems like the kind of girl who loves to go to the bookstore just to peruse the books and pick up every one she can, never wanting to favor one over the other, never wanting to judge a book by its cover, but wanting to know what potential story lies inside.

After getting her coffee, I watch her as she takes her seat a few tables away from my own. Her hands are balanced around the cup to ensure she doesn't spill it or make a mess. She sits down at her table, reaches into her bag, and pulls out her newest read.

Her hair, demanding to be noticed with its bright red color, hangs down around her face as it hits the tops of her shoulders and frames her delicate features. The wire-rimmed glasses balanced on her nose, adjusted every few minutes or so, make her blue eyes seem all the more noticeable from my tiny table in the corner of the café. I watch her rest her cheek, freckled of course, into the palm of her hand – ordained by silver rings on almost every finger – as she flips the page in her book and takes a sip of her coffee.

She looks up and sees me staring at her. We make eye contact and she smiles, but I quickly look back down at the coffee I'm nervously holding in my hands. "*Hi! Do you mind if I sit here?*"

*Startled, I look up to see her set down her coffee and book and start to pull out the chair across from me. Before I can even utter my reply, she sits down.*

*I gesture towards her book, "Little Women?"*

*“Yes! I’m almost done, but it’s my third time reading it, and I still can’t believe that Jo is going to turn down Laurie’s proposal! I mean why would she do that? He seems so perfect.” “Well –” I begin.*

*“I mean some authors amaze me!” she continues, “They just want to keep you on your toes as much as possible, I suppose. Well gosh, you’re a writer, what are your thoughts?” She stares at me with those bright eyes, rendering me speechless for a second, before I remember she asked me a question.*

*“How did you know I was a writer?” I ask.*

*She lets out a little laugh, “You sit here every week with your laptop and cup after cup of coffee. What else would you be doing?”*

*I shrug my shoulders a bit sheepishly, “Mondays at Moore’s is really the only time I get to write.”*

*“Why is that?” she asks, appearing to be genuinely curious in my response. “Well I –” I hesitate before continuing, “I’m usually busy when I’m home because I help take care of my mother. She’s not quite been the same since she fell ill three years ago...” I trail off, embarrassed that I just said all that to a complete stranger.*

*She stares at me with a sadness in her eyes I hope to never see again. I continue on in the hopes of lightening the mood, “She always does her best though to keep her Mondays free so I can come here to write.”*

*She lets out a nervous laugh, “Well I’m glad she does, because seeing as I’m a reader and you’re a writer, I think we should get to know each other.” She reaches her hand out, “I’m Annie. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”*

Suddenly a big crash jolts me from my daze, as I realize in my stupor I accidentally dropped my coffee cup. Broken pieces of glass and spilled coffee splatter across the floor around my feet. I quickly start picking up the pieces of my broken cup, glancing up to see that almost everyone is looking at me – including Annie.

Pete rushes over from behind the counter and hands me a rag, “Don’t worry about it, man” he says reassuringly, “It happens more than you’d think. Let me get you a fresh cup.” I finish wiping up the spill and try my best to compose myself. I quickly glance around the room again to see that no one is looking at me anymore. I take a deep breath and open up my laptop so that I can start writing. That is what I’m here to do, after all.

I lift my eyes over my computer to catch a glimpse of Annie. I watch as she comes to the end of her book. She closes the cover and stares at it a moment, taking in her accomplishment. She reaches into her bag and pulls out a little journal and begins to write in it. *I get out of my seat and wander over near her table.*

*“Is that a book journal?” I ask.*

*She looks up and gives me a once over before replying, “Yes, it is. Do you write about your books after finishing them, too?” She asks with excitement radiating through her voice. “Every time,” I reply, “I never want to forget the way any book made me feel.” She smiles knowingly and pulls out her next read – The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini. “This is what I’m reading next. Have you read it?” she asks.*

*I shake my head.*

*“Really?” she asks, sounding disappointed.*

*I shake my head, “No, but based on what else I’ve seen you read, I know you have a good taste in books.”*

*She laughs, “I guess you could say that.” She gestures to the seat across from her. I pull out the chair, excited to join her, as she begins to explain, “It’s actually quite a sad story, but one I feel that everyone should read. It explores the guilt and forgiveness between two friends after a tragic event occurs. I do think it’s best to go into most books blind though, so I won’t tell you any more than that.”*

*I nod my head, "I can understand that. I'm hoping to write a novel like that someday. One that will make people emotional but will help them learn or reveal something new about themselves they didn't know before."*

*"Are you currently writing a novel?" she asks. "I see you working on your laptop a lot when I'm here."*

*I blush at the idea that she's been watching me a bit, too. "Yes, but I'm not a published author or anything, I just sort of write for fun."*

*"Maybe you should change that."*

My phone starts to ring, pulling me out of my daydream. I look at the caller ID to see that it's my mom calling. I let it ring four times before deciding I'm not going to answer it. If it's an emergency, she'll call again. I wait two minutes and check to see that she has not called again but has instead sent me a text.

The first message simply reads, "robertgraham@peanutbutterpublishing.com." It is then shortly followed by another, "Just email him, please."

My mom knows this publisher from her college years and has been trying to get me to email him for weeks now. I keep insisting that my manuscript isn't even close to being done and that I need to wait longer, but she will not hear the end of it. I decide to just ignore it for now. I need to focus on my story if I ever want to send anything in, and I can't keep getting distracted. I put my phone away in my bag and focus my attention back on my writing. I read through what I've written so far today. All I've done is add two paragraphs that probably will end up being deleted and worked on flushing out the main character. I can't decide how I want to end the story though, and I think it's hindering me from moving any farther with it. Some people can just write until the ending comes to them, but I need to thoroughly plan out my plot, or I'll never reach the end. I'll just keep avoiding it, hoping that eventually inspiration will strike.

*"Writer's block got you down?"*

I look up to see Pete coming over with the pitcher to refill my coffee. "It seems like you've been staring at that screen all morning without much typing involved," he adds. I nod my head, "It's been a pretty dry week in terms of progress."

Pete nods his head knowingly, "Don't worry, champ, you're going to figure it out. I've seen many writers come through my café, and inspiration always strikes eventually. My favorite moment to witness is when the thought finally strikes them, and you can immediately see and hear their fingers start to fly away on the keys as they finally find the piece that's been missing all along. They just get this true gleam in their eyes that you can't see anywhere else."

He finishes filling up my coffee, smiles at me, and returns to the front of the café to fill another order. I roll my eyes a little. If only a gleam in my eye could solve all my problems.

*"Writer's block got you down?" Annie asks.*

*I sigh and nod my head, "It's been a rough writing week.*

*"I've always heard that you should write what you know," she says.*

*"That's good in theory," I reply, "but my life is pretty dull. I don't think many people would want to read any story that remotely resembled it."*

*She gives me a look that tells me she clearly doesn't believe me. "Write about your mom."*

*"My mom?"*

*"She means a lot to you, doesn't she?" Annie asks.*

*"I suppose," I reply skeptically. "I just already spend so much time with her, I'm not sure I want to spend my only time alone here at Moore's with her, too." I wince at how harsh my words sound.*

*She gives me another knowing look.*

*"I just don't know how I would even incorporate her into a story," I continue. "Are you sure it doesn't have to do with you not wanting people to know you still live with her?"*

*"No, why would you think that?" I suddenly hear myself saying out loud. The old man sitting closest to me looks up from his paper and gives me a questioning look. "You okay there, sunny?"*

I nod, embarrassed that I got so far into my own head that I'm now having verbal outbursts. I know I live at home because I want to help take care of my mom, but I can't help but feel self-conscious about my lack of progress in my writing. Being stuck at home every day, with Mondays at Moore's to write, should have been plenty enough time to have at least some manuscript to show for myself by now – something at least to show that my life hasn't been a complete waste thus far. But every time I'm here I just find myself distracted by not only the people around me but by everything going on in my head.

Regardless of this realization, it doesn't keep me from looking over to check on Annie. I see her writing in a different journal this time. Her head is tilted ever so slightly to the side as she writes with a smooth stroke to her pen. I notice that she holds it properly, with a concentration in her eyes that isn't seen very often anymore. Most people don't pay attention to the small details, and instead, live life in whatever way is most convenient for them. But I bet she notices those little overlooked things and gives them the attention they deserve. I bet she loves to paint, but likes to color the sky pink, instead of blue, because pink skies promise days of delight. Maybe she waits to cross the street until the walk signal turns on, even if no cars are coming, out of respect for the men who spent time installing it for her safety. Perhaps if I introduced myself she wouldn't sigh or complain about being interrupted, but rather, she would smile at the opportunity to meet someone new.

*"Don't say it," she laughs at me.*

*"Don't say what?" I can't help myself from laughing in return.*

*"I know what you're thinking, 'Oh Annie, you're just not like other girls.'" She laughs at the absurdity of the statement. "You're a writer! You should know better than to use such meaningless clichés."*

*"But I can't help it!" I reply, still laughing. "You just bring out the cheesy romance writer side of me that I didn't even know existed." I clear my throat and begin to dramatically recite, "Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?"*

*My Shakespearean voice makes her laugh even more, but then a thought seems to come to her, and she suddenly stops laughing. "Then why haven't you asked me out yet? Or at least come over and introduced yourself?"*

*Her sudden confrontation stops my laughter, too. I shrug my shoulders. "I don't know," I mutter in reply. "I guess I'm just scared you'd say 'no.'"*

*She shakes her head. "No, that's not it. I mean it's part of it, sure, but I know there's more."*

*I sigh and collect my thoughts before continuing, "I'm just – just scared that you'd actually say, 'yes.'"*

*"Why?" she prompts.*

*"Because," I cover my face with my hands in embarrassment and then slowly start to look at her again, "You're one of the most beautiful people I have ever seen, and I'm an unsuccessful writer who still lives at home with his mom. What could I possibly have to offer?"*

Annie looks up from her book, catches my eye, and smiles at me. I give her a shy smile before a sudden *bang* startles both of us. We both turn to see that the woman's baby at the table across the room has thrown his bowl of cheerios and sent cereal flying everywhere. I'm glad to see I'm not the only one spilling stuff today. But then again, it's probably not a good sign that I just compared myself to a baby.

I watch as Annie gets out of her chair and goes over to ask if the woman needs help. She adamantly nods her head and thanks Annie for her kindness. I look back down at my computer. If I hide behind the comfort of this unfinished manuscript for the rest of my life, am I going to miss out? Maybe my writing could help someone else discover their love for reading? Or what about the chance to move out of my mom's house and start a life of my own?

*"If you could do anything with your life, what would you do?" she asks me. I stare at her, feeling defeated, "You know the answer to that."*

*"You're right, I do," she says, "But I think you should say it anyway."*

*"Why?" I say defensively, "I can't just speak it into existence."*

*“No, you can’t,” she agrees, “But admitting it to yourself is the first part of finally accepting that you need to start taking steps towards achieving it. You can’t just sit here week by week, staring at me with no intention of even introducing yourself, and staring at your computer screen without any substantial work being done on your manuscript, and just blaming your lack of success on everyone but yourself. Stop fantasizing about the things you wish would happen and just go make them happen.”*

*She pauses to let that sink in before continuing, “So what are you going to do?”* I look at my laptop screen once again. The blinking cursor taunts me, mocks me, and challenges me to start somewhere. I don’t have to write the next *New York Times* bestseller, or move out and start a completely new life. I just have to start somewhere.

I take a deep breath, close my computer screen, and slip it into my bag. I collect the rest of my belongings and stand up from my table. I bring my empty coffee cup to the front of the café.

“Heading out for the day?” Pete asks me, grabbing my cup.

I nod. “Thanks for helping me clean up earlier.” I slip a few dollars into the tip jar. “I’ll see you next week?” he asks.

I smile, “Of course.”

I start to walk away, but Pete calls out once more, “Hey!”

I turn back to face him, “Yeah?”

“That’s a nice gleam in your eyes.”

I smile at him and turn back to face the door. Annie sits at her table, still invested in her book. I watch her tuck her hair behind her ear and then flip to the next page. I take a deep breath and start to make my way out of Moore’s. But before I can head home to finally email that publisher, I have to make a quick stop.

“Hi,” I say as I approach her table. “I know we don’t really know each other, but that’s one of my favorite books that you’re reading, and I’d love to talk about it sometime.” I take two shaky breaths as she takes two beats too long to respond before smiling and replying, “I’m Annie. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

---

125.01 SHU

*Anna Shura*

How do I buy a castle for my mind?  
My lifetime of thoughts trapped in my head  
at the very least, deserve a turret or two.

Start shopping for chateaus, slick ballroom floors for  
questions to tango to the tip of my tongue where I spit  
out the lock and key and release quandaries  
in the palace for my mind to grow old.  
As a young princess, dancing between  
tapestries woven from aspirations and  
careers carved on doorframes,  
I’d furnish my favorite room:

The Library.

Only a castle is large enough to house  
a lifetime of human’s mental books.  
Too many adventures to reread

conversations to quote,  
tragedies to remember,

The Library is not Alexandria  
because a part of it will burn continuously  
but live  
with flames lapping along the shelves holding  
existentialism, jealousy, loneliness, and regrets.

To build a mental library, hammer bedtime stories  
and fairytales into steps of a ladder stretching to  
see shelves scratching the surface of stars.  
Memories meander middle rows,  
dreams drift under a moon chandelier,  
I'm still searching

for the future section.  
Reaching through bookshelves to  
windowsills grown over in crumpled paper:  
scraps of pity and torn grief,  
bite evening worries until

I bleed bookmarks of insecurities.  
Interests are checked out,  
shamefully scribbled over  
or tucked behind maturity.  
Library cards are given to minds I  
trust enough to loan a favorite memory;

If a book is lost,  
I'll ache

as the only librarian with book  
logs lodged in my skull, trying to prevent  
signatures from seeping down to my heart.  
Everything I love rests atop souls  
of shelves accessible by illness and creativity

Let me browse amongst ideas and read  
from a window nook woven from the fabric of my mind.

---

Jack Jumped for a Reason  
*Madelyn LaPointe*

In the distance,  
Athens —  
burning, burned.

This is the issue  
with candlelight,  
with a taste,  
with dead air —

It does not rage back.

It does not sweep, devastate.  
It does not burn cities.

So light the candle,  
do it, stand still  
and go to the zoo,

And I'll do the laundry  
with the washer that always  
breaks.

Write me a meaningless postcard under the  
candlelight.

---

Tire/d  
*Jacob Lopez*

(noun)

- a wheel, not attached to a vehicle; a rolling pile of moving rubber going nowhere, a perfect piece of engineering reduced to a pollutant
- a crowd of workers like a murder of crows but less noticeable; drones having existential breakdowns in bathrooms while their CEO is in space
- a tree without a cambium layer, a thing that is alive but has no chance of growing, something waiting to die

(adj)

- in need of sleep or rest, weary, like half or more of the world at any given moment
- bored, uninterested, defeated with reality but reluctantly a part of it like a self-aware sitcom character
- no longer fresh or of salvageable condition, like excess bread bowls, or like the insides of a rotting corpse, or the American dream

(verb)

- to wear out the patience of; calling and receiving no answer from a suicide hotline

- the capacity for violence evolving; As Einstein said after the first A-Bomb test “we thus drift towards unparalleled catastrophe”; the creation of refugees, orphans, corpses
  - to do nothing, to write poetry about problems, that is to be unlikely to change anything; the acknowledgement of a lack of agency
- 

Musings on Delinquency  
*Emily Wray*

Caleb flashed me a televangelist grin  
and the first cigarette I'd ever seen.

He displayed it like first grade's Howard Carter, if the  
unearthed sarcophagus was a dilapidated Marlboro and  
King Tut the imminent threat of noxious carcinogens, or,  
worse— bed without dinner.

My feet couldn't even touch the floor of the bus.

I wouldn't be caught holding it,  
resting my flushed forehead against the frosted window,  
locking my eyes on the muck behind my fingernails as he  
bragged about snatching it from his brother's bookbag. He  
didn't even have a lighter,

or a knife, an outstanding warrant

or a musty basement with a desktop computer, but as  
he fiddled the tube between his fingers, I pictured two  
tall officers with mustaches and badges, shinier than  
quarters or the buttons on my coat, storming into Mrs.

Holcroft's room

and dragging us away from our spots on the alphabet rug.

he'd go to whatever prison they put seven-year-olds in,

and I'd be trapped with him.

On the Edge of the East Highland Roller Rink During Free Skate  
*Emily Wray*

Darling, I can't help but stare,  
following the back of your head  
and the glossy halo the Christmas lights leave  
when you whip your head back,  
gripped at your core by laughter,  
teeth coated in Dr. Pepper.  
I wish I had kissed you  
instead of the wood paneling.

Did you mean it back in homeroom  
that you loved my muddy high-tops,  
double-knotted and redder  
than your mom's civic  
(or the goose egg on my elbow)?  
I didn't think they'd mind  
if I traded them for skates  
just for tonight.

And everything's fuzzy now  
because I'm trying to follow your head  
as you dart around like an embroidery needle  
and because this ice pack is practically useless  
and because my knees buckled

the moment you grabbed my hand.

---

Lovemaking  
*Amanda Petty*

We are curled in each other's arms and she asks me  
"What does love mean to you?"

I laugh.

"Oh, that's easy. Love is baking bread."

Love is every part of baking bread.

Love is jotting down the recipe on a scrap of paper and browsing the aisles looking for sugar. Love is kneading and rising and shaping and waiting.

The budding yeast has to be warmed and cared for

Just like love.

Love is work,

Not like a chore or occupation.

Love is work like making bread is work.

It takes planning and time and some parts are more fun than others.

When your arms are sore from mixing,

The aggravation when you make a mistake.

That's still love.

After you've put in the time, you must let it rest so it will rise.

You have to be gentle with dough, and you have to be gentle with love. Since without love, what is bread making?

There is the final satisfaction of watching it rise and bake.

But bread is not just made in the oven, it's all the steps before it.

"What is love?" She asks.

It's after hours of work, letting someone else have the first bite.

It's saying,

"Please, try a piece."

I made it with love.

---

The angel  
*Amanda Petty*

The air is a thing that crawls up your legs and dances on your chest.

She is a playful creature, fiddling with your hair, braiding it in twists.

She leaves blue kisses on your throat, on your hands, and they tingle, turning numb before you can process anything but pleasure.

When she sings, you bleed.  
When she laughs, you die.  
When she cries you come back, gasping, praying.

You can't complain though.  
You gave her the red that stains her throat, her hands.  
You dug into the beating mass in your chest,  
snapping your own ribs and dug,  
until you held it in your hands.

It didn't bleed like a wound,  
it bled like a promise.

You pressed it to her chest;  
she was blue and snow  
and  
you were red and gold.

Take it.  
Take it.

But the air does not know pain in the same language as you,  
and you were left shivering,  
holding a dying star close  
as if you weren't the one that killed it.

---

Here's the Thing  
*Sofia Naranjo*

It's embarrassing to say out loud what I truly feel  
That I imagine a future with you in it

And it feels as solid as the palm of my hand  
We'll have a kitchen, and I will cook our friends

Pasta and pozole, chilaquiles and mole  
I will learn to horribly hoard recipes in messy handwriting,

As my mother did, and bake at three in the morning  
Perhaps shortbread if I miss her or ginger snaps if you miss yours,

And the cat will surely get in the way  
The cat? You'll ask

Of course, the cat, I'll say, the black one or the tortoise-shelled one,  
Whichever comes first, and he will surely get in the way while

We prepare for someone's twenty-fifth birthday, and everyone  
Will arrive too late because they always do

And maybe I'd consider bunk beds to save space  
Since we giggled about that six months ago, but I wouldn't

Entertain the idea too much, because we both know  
I like my space, and I like retreating into myself

But silence doesn't bother us, we've grown up since we were  
Twelve, and we no longer hate each other the way we used to

It's embarrassing to say out loud, because, well  
It doesn't need to be said out loud when I can tell by the way

You agree over the phone to watch that one show when I come back to SF  
Defrosted in december where we will once again argue over who's buying

---

Love Triangle: Button, Thimble, and Needle

*Anna Shura*

Can you see what a thimble sees? Between the streets of mendable cloth, two sisters wait for a fingertip. My sister Chenille would never be lost in a haystack. Lay back for rural slumber and you'll get her needled backstab. But I have a heart as soft as tin. Remember when I first met Stud burrowed in the snowman's belly? I admired his handsome work against the ice, but Chenille's eye studied his glinting wink of gold. I watched from the ground as she slunk across moonbeams to steal him. Balloons can't deal with her jabs, but I can. My sister caught him, fastening his eyes on her in a whip stich—Did she forget we steel sisters come as a pair? Stud didn't care for her slim waist and rich thread. He noticed the way he and I gleam gold under the sun, and our steely exteriors melt into 1:00 am conversations. We talk about the pockets we traveled in, how I like his glasses shine and he likes my round hips. He fastens fabric woven from our laughter around us, and tipped on a finger, I hold him.

---

a poem about hope

*Khushi Duggal*

the skies cried tears of joy today,  
I dipped my body into its honey light,

Saw the whites split up into a myriad of colours,  
And it inspired me to reminisce and write.

You'll always have flowers and rocking chairs,  
Canvas paints and banana bread,  
Grass under your toes and your favourite song,  
Healthy limbs and a roof above your head.

The moon comes out to kiss you good night,  
The breeze still makes it way through the gloom.  
The birds sing of hope in the dark,  
And you still let the sunlight into your room.

We have butterflies that bring us joy,  
Purple mosaic sunsets to ease the pain,  
We can skip down the streets and name the clouds,  
Or crunch the leaves and dance in the rain.

You have a warm heart that feels love,  
Your tears flow through the words you can't say.  
There is a part of you that's soft and tender,  
Don't shut it out. Don't numb it away.

The universe is vast and you're just a speck,  
Although your purpose isn't yet clear,  
Your dog still wags his tail when you come home,  
And you deserve to be here.



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