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Concept picks with small hairs

MCM

like Coconut in the palm— milk and breasts mothers eggs— crack it with ur hand and you have milk— breast implants can feel like coconuts— concepts can get greasy(oil) it's just natural to fall—

making mistakes is critical— and stains the napkin which pats the doughy pizza— but napkins are comparable to currency— and a great debate on the nature of currency— textile wisdom, object or material— chooses pineapple—

it welcomes the absence of grease as it feels like it's gained potency will get you closer to coconut essence— on your head money looks like guess who(Heads up!)— would you welcome the guest or not trust them— pineapples have a very transparent etymology—

still their flesh eats your— but you're quicker so will you have them just to feel better about yourself— on many levels yes— but the tiers could be flattened and all for just health— flat health line and worm concepts— is dying the pause between understanding my next concept—

or is it a great concert where I finally go deaf— but I guess I can still feel the ground shake— some concepts you might not get

yet— but it's ok

small hairs will split ends and then— enter the multiverse

ode to a sarah lawrence fuckboi

tova g.

a joint of
overpriced california
weed parts your
chapped lips in a
partially amused (partially constipated)
smile.

“good shit. 60 bucks for an eighth,” you brag (nonchalantly).

“that’s a crap deal,” i reply.

“your face reminds me of mona lisa’s,” you whisper. “soft. mysterious.
misunderstood. i love you because you’re different.”

“your face reminds me of a picasso painting,” i whisper back.

your performative
activism glows through
your white vineyard vines.

you smell like kombucha,
organic piss cologne, &
songs that white boys
shouldn’t rap.

“you should read my poetry...

i try to replicate the film aesthetics of hitchcock via a kerouac-like stream of consciousness...

i identify with the madness of hunter thompson,” you finish (with a flourish).

your hair drips
grease outside of
your beanie.
a lesbian’s flannel is tied
around your waist

(“wanna fuck?”)

Tomatoes and Radio Wires

Anna Schechter

We're eating tomato mayo sandwiches on squishy, dark wheat bread, Anne and I. It is summer, and all is red and white seersucker, wicker baskets, and scabbing mosquito bites. We're sitting on a dock jutting into a green lake, my knees butterflying midair, her bare feet dangling over the edge. Her saddle shoes and ruffled socks are discarded by her side. I'm still in my Sunday shoes.

Midbite, a tomato slides out the back of her sandwich and on to her thigh. She picks the slice off with two fingers and dangles it in front of me. I bite it from her teasing grip. She rubs her sticky fingers on the side of her dress. There are still a few watery seeds on her leg.

We'd ducked out of service early, during a transition hymn. We were hungry and not particularly devout. I want to ask her to marry me today, though we've scarcely kissed. There's no ring, not yet.

"—how strange it is." She says. "Don't you think?" Her pale fingernail pressing a golden seed into the soft shiny skin of her leg.

"Yes. Strange." I say.

But what does that mean? I'm always missing things with her. She seems to be in on everything, aware of everything, thinking of everything. I'm still staring at her leg. She hands me one of her crusts, ribbed by her perfect round bite.

"Thank you," I say, stuffing half of it in my mouth.

I've already finished mine. I have a terrible habit of devouring everything presented to me. She'd given me a radio for my birthday last Tuesday. She cried after I unwrapped it. I think I unwrapped it too fast. I look at her as she uses the second half of her sandwich as a cover over her mouth as she chews. She looks at me too, stops chewing.

Around a mouthful, "What? Have I done something?" Her free hand covering her lips, a swallow.

"No, no!" I say and push my hair from my eyes. It's gotten light this summer. Lighter than ever.

She scrunches her face and returns to nibble on her sandwich, and I am confused, as I often am with her. Later, we go for milkshakes. I don't ask her to marry me, not yet. She has a tomato seed between her teeth. Can't she feel it wedged in there?

The Moon Makes Me Miss You

Hannah Morelli

I.

We probably looked like idiots,
standing between those brown buildings after work,
chapped mouths opened painfully wide, an attempt
to wrap our lips around the juicy waxing gibbous moon.

It's like a peeled orange, I want to eat it,

I told the sky as you shook your upturned head.

We stumbled, barely escaping broken ankles
and gravel torn wrists as we stared anywhere but down.

Our boss had let us leave after three hours of voicemails
so we settled behind Andrews Court, my neck curving
around your thigh, moon sitting snug between two trees.

Don't make me leave, I whispered to the sporadic branches
twisting over us. You didn't speak

so I listened to the beat of your teeth

until the sky morphed into a polluted purple
and the streetlamp moon blended into the cream clouds.

At 9:30 it rained. We didn't move.

II.

Isn't the moon supposed to be... pink or something tonight?

my mother asks before sliding her sock covered toes
into flip flops. I say yes and meet her across the street,
my first time outside in nearly a week.

It's pretty, I say, wondering if it looks different in New York
right now--I know it doesn't, of course; the phase
won't change over a few thousand miles.

Sometimes in the Arctic the moon won't rise
above the horizon for days. I used to ponder
if I would miss it during those nights
as I do when Oregon fog smothers the stars.

I miss you most when the sky looks like nothing.

If I lived in the Arctic I could only stare

into the large arch of darkness and wait
for the sky to seem less empty.

Cyclone

Chloe Fontenot

EXT. THEME PARK - DAY

A sweltering summer day. Tired families filter into an overcrowded theme park. At the center is THE MILLER FAMILY: MR. MILLER, MRS.MILLER, daughters ABIGAIL, LUCY, and the youngest QUINN.

PRESENT DAY - INT. HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

A line of students dressed in matching CAP and GOWNS, emotionless and processing toward their diplomas.

A stand of parents, faces covered by CELLPHONES and CAMCORDERS.

Quinn Miller, eighteen and bright-eyed is bouncing with excitement as she accepts her diploma.

The Miller Family is phone-less and out of place in the stands. Cheering as if watching a winning touchdown.

Quinn sticks out her tongue in celebration.

The Miller family cheers even louder.

EXT. CYCLONE ROLLER COASTER - DAY

A ROLLER COASTER CART almost to the top of the track.

A line of overheated amusement park patrons, emotionless and waiting in the roller coaster's queue.

CHILD QUINN, eight and bright-eyed, is bouncing with excitement in front of the "THIS TALL TO RIDE" SIGN. She aligns perfectly with the pointed finger.

Quinn's family cheers.

PRESENT DAY - INT. RED ROBIN

Still in her cap and gown Quinn sits at the head of the table. She's surrounded by her family and baskets of bottomless fries.

It's loud and chaotic, everyone's talking and Quinn is content observing.

ABIGAIL

Ew, they put pickles!

FADE IN:

LUCY

Just pick them off!

MRS. MILLER

Give me the pickles Abby,
I'll eat them.

ABIGAIL

Now the whole burger is plagued
by the essence of pickles!

LUCY

My whole life's been plagued by
the essence of you.

MR. MILLER

Abigail, you're twenty-two years
old and still are afraid of pickles?

MRS. MILLER

Lucy you're twenty-two years old
and still act like a child?

Quinn's smiling.

INT. STATION WAGON - DAY

A car crowded with luggage and gas station snacks. Child Quinn sandwiched between the fighting Abigail and Lucy.

LUCY
Mom can you pass the AUX cord?

ABIGAIL
It's my turn!

MRS. MILLER
Both of you are missing an important word..

LUCY & ABIGAIL
Please!

ABIGAIL
Pretty please.

LUCY
Kiss ass.

ABIGAIL
Attention whore.

QUINN
Dad, what's a whore?

MR. MILLER
A prostitute, sweet pea.

QUINN

Oh.

Quinn furrows her brow in thought.

MRS. MILLER
Keep talking to your sister that
way and no one will get the aux cord

MR. MILLER
Or worse, I'll get the aux cord.

Abigail and Lucy groan.

ABIGAIL

(reluctantly)
Just give Lucy the aux.

A moment of silence is interrupted by the opening bars of a Taylor Swift song:

ABIGAIL
OH HELL NO!

Abigail and Lucy start fighting again. Mrs. Miller turns off the radio.

MRS. MILLER
THAT'S IT! No music.

Quinn relaxes her brow.

QUINN
Dad, what's a prostitute?

PRESENT DAY - INT. QUINN'S CHILDHOOD BEDROOM

Surrounded by her childhood belongings, Eighteen year-old Quinn sits on her stripped mattress folding the remainder of her clothes.

Something's off but Quinn can't pinpoint it.

EXT. CYCLONE ROLLER COASTER - DAY

A roller coaster cart almost to the top of the track, eight year-old Quinn scrunches her face in anticipation.

EXT. MOTEL - DAY

The car pulls up outside of a Motel. The pool's already occupied by a handful of splashing children. The Miller family piles out the car, exhausted.

LUCY
Can we go swimming?

ABIGAIL

Can we?

Mr.Miller mocking disbelief, turns to his wife:

MR.MILLER

Am I hearing this right or are
our children... agreeing?

Mrs.Miller is unamused and exhausted. She examines the pool:

MRS. MILLER

That's a cesspool for brain
eating diseases.

ABIGAIL

We don't care!

QUINN

What's a cesspool?

MR. MILLER

A place with a lot of germs.

Quinn's eyes twitch in horror.

LUCY

Yeah, we don't care

QUINN

I care!

EXT. MOTEL POOL - DAY

Amanda and Lucy cannon-balling while Quinn's watching,
terrified.

CUT TO:

PRESENT DAY - EXT. SUBURBAN HOUSE

Quinn's parents stands on their lawn with a melancholy that Quinn is unaware of.

Mr.Miller loads the car, Mrs.Miller paces the driveway:

MRS. MILLER
Do you have your phone charger?

QUINN

Yes.

MRS. MILLER
Enough snacks?

QUINN

Yes.

MRS. MILLER
Do you have the directions I printed?

QUINN

Yes.

MRS. MILLER
I'll text them to you just in case.

QUINN

Okay.

Quinn's father closes the now full trunk.

MR. MILLER
Did you pack the flamethrower I left
out on your bed?

Quinn rolls her eyes and Quinn's mom glares. Quinn mimicking a kid playing grown-up:

QUINN
I got this.

Quinn's mom holds Quinn's face, kissing both cheeks.

MRS. MILLER
My baby.

Quinn squirms away and escapes into the passenger seat.

QUINN
Love you Mom!

MRS. MILLER
Do you know what to do if you spill
coffee on wool?

The car begins driving away.

QUINN
I'll google it!

Quinn watches Mrs. Miller disappear in the rear view mirror, her smile being replaced by a fake one.

EXT. CYCLONE ROLLER COASTER - DAY

The coaster's cart begins to descend. Mrs. Miller puts her arm out like a bar in front of Quinn's body. Quinn wiggles away.

EXT. SOMEWHERE IN MIDDLE AMERICA- DAY

The Miller's station wagon is broken down on the side of the road. Abigail and Lucy sit on the curb with Mrs. Miller in a rare moment of silence.

Quinn examines the FLAT TIRE with Mr. Miller.

QUINN
Are we ever going to get there?

PRESENT DAY - INT. STATION WAGON - NIGHT

Mr. Miller shaking Quinn awake.

MR. MILLER
Sweet Pea, we're here.

PRESENT DAY - EXT. MOTEL - NIGHT

Quinn and her dad stand outside a motel, it's late and there's no one else outside.

Mr. Miller goes to check in and Quinn sits alone at the edge of the pool. Something is off but Quinn can't pinpoint it.

Quinn remembers:

Amanda and Lucy fighting over the REMOTE,
The clunking of a breaking WASHING MACHINE,
Mrs.Miller laugh after Mr.Miller tells a joke,
The sizzling of Sunday morning PANCAKES,
Eight year-old Quinn crying over a scraped knee,
Quinn blowing an EYELASH off Mr.Miller's finger,
The wind roaring from an unrolled car window,
A roller coaster cart going down the drop.

PRESENT DAY - EXT. MOTEL - NIGHT

CUT TO:

Mr. Miller walking up to Quinn at the edge of the pool.Quinn is beginning to cry:

QUINN
Dad, what's next?

Mr. Miller puts his hand on Quinn's head.

MR. MILLER
I don't know sweet pea.

QUINN
Everything is so...

She hesitates to find the right word.

EXT. CYCLONE ROLLER COASTER - DAY

The roller coaster is pulling back into the loading zone.
Quinn's smile fades as she realizes she has to get off.

PRESENT DAY - EXT. MOTEL - NIGHT

QUINN
Still.

FADE OUT:

Five Weeks in the Flute of *N. attenboroughii*

o. captain

note: *Nepenthes attenboroughii*, or Attenborough's pitcher plant, is the largest known carnivorous plant, with a height up to 4.9 feet, and a pitcher diameter of 30 centimeters. It can digest rodents and other small animals. "Flute" is another term for the pitcher, where digestion takes place.

Week One: The Extremities

I wound up fetal and maternal all at once, curled like a ball python around the brilliant feathers of my sister's escaped parakeet. My skin was stinging, everywhere except for my hands and feet, which were submerged in the digestive fluid too far past the wrists and ankles for comfort. I told her to close the cage tight, that Audrey (the parakeet) was too curious for her own good, that she would wind up in a place like this. They say the same thing to little girls, too. But they don't mean a stomach, not often, at least.

Week Two: The Limbs

The rubbery feeling wasn't something I expected. I thought I would be liquified. Absorbed. But bones take longer, I guess. Harder to work through for those more used to invertebrate feasts. When I took my soft fingertips to touch my tibia they both give way to one another, sliding like stiff jello. As the gelatin remains of my bones lost their composure I tried to name them all, but that slid too, frictionless. Ironing my brain smooth.

Week Three: The Parakeet

Once it got to Audrey, it hit me that I was going to die. It hit me that I was in the process of dying, and my first thought in response to that one was: *shouldn't this hurt more?* And wasn't that a funny thing to think? Audrey didn't think it was funny, but maybe that was because I was watching her turn into soup in front of my eyes. It wasn't dark in there, by any means. The sunlight shines through the vegetal womb, casting everything in an eerie green, reminding you both of the world outside and the imminence of your departure. Audrey shook, and the ripples sent feathers up into the remains of my hair.

Week Four: The Head

Birth in reverse. The feeling of fluid around you. A narrowing pocket of air. The rest of me didn't feel anything, but now, now there is pressure, like being deep underground, deep in the ocean. The acid feels like a thousand tiny fish, teething gently under my eyes, behind my ears. My neck.

Deeper, under the skin, the whisper of touch on my rapidly decohering skull. I feel it split along the same spots where it fused as I grew up, and then--no thought, and no sensation.

Week Five: The Torso

It no longer moves. It had been twitching all the while, two hearts beating, then one. And soon no more. The torso has the most mass, and so it's saved for last. A feast, for when the times are hard. Last weeks before winter. Big game hunting. Skin, then flesh, then bone, then organs (flesh, again). A fullness that seeps through. Not gnawing but permeating. Saturating. It doesn't even shudder. The ribs. The heart. And nothing left.

Being In My Body

Tess Cronin

Curls that look best right before they're washed, or immediately after they air-dry, but before they've been slept on.

A bald spot on the crown of your head from when you used to pull your hair out as child.

Constant headaches, two Advil almost every day.

Blue-green eyes: for a long time the only thing you liked about yourself.

Ears that hear a ringing that isn't real, a popped drum on the right side.

Acne that you thought would go away as an adult, but you're 23 now and it's worse than before.

Both of your parent's round faces, cheeks that get red after two minutes in the sun.

The familial bump on the profile of your nose.

Teeth that are starting to get crooked again, from a retainer lost 5 years ago.

A witch's hair on your chin that shows up a few days before your period.

Fading and forgotten teenage ink on the back of your neck.

Your mothers freckled shoulders.

Fat insecure upper arms.

Small wrists that you're a little too proud of, the left one with an ugly tattoo.

A bump on your right index finger, you've never held a pencil correctly.

Tits with uneven nipples that a stripper once called "really nice": too big to go without a bra, but too small to really want one.

A stomach that talks to you, but you never seem to listen.

Round hips with small dips, as nature intended.

A pussy that has been called “normal”, whatever that means.

Stretch mark maps on your ass.

Middle school scars on your upper thighs.

Hairy legs that make you feel slightly too masculine but keep you warm in the winter.

Cankles: one marred with a stick and poke triangle that you passed out getting.

A 5 month bruise under the nail of your left big toe.

Round little nubs for both pinky toes, curled up and hiding.

Missing Person Poster

Elise Esquibel

Missing

I cringe as I tape the light orange paper to the streetlight. This is probably a horrible idea. Even if you are out there somewhere, you'll probably never see this, and I'll get dozens of calls from random perverts. But after a tedious dinner with my parents, where they asked too many questions and I had too much to drink, I decided I would do whatever I could to find you.

Brunette, aged 18 to 26, around 5'7

I don't have a picture of you, but you looked kind of like that girl from *Twilight*— just way less awkward. Your hair was definitely brown, but when the sunlight hit it from a certain angle, I could make out streaks of red. I'm not sure how old you are, but you are definitely around my age because you were using a reusable grocery bag as a purse. When I bent over to tie my shoe, I could see your wallet, a book, tampons, a pre-packaged chocolate muffin, and a pair of ballet flats.

Last Seen: On the Upper East Side.

You had discovered an antique chair on the sidewalk and were waiting for your friend, Harris, to help you bring it home. It's funny how I remember Harris's name over yours; I'm not even sure if Harris is his first or last name. Since our meeting, I've wondered what your relationship with Harris is like. Are you related or dating? Are you close friends or did he just lose an office bet? Are you simply neighbors with undeniable chemistry? It's been swirling around my brain, like flies over a dumpster.

Regardless of your relationship, Harris was taking forever, and you were starting to lose faith in him and his crappy car. I was on my way home from work, and I saw you falling asleep in that velvety green armchair.

Normally I would have kept walking, but you didn't look like the type of person to pass out on a street corner. I figured the right thing to do was to nudge you awake, before someone grabbed your gigantic bag. When I poked your shoulder, you immediately tensed and sat up straight, staring at me with your large brown eyes.

I felt like you were scolding me for waking you up, but you hadn't even opened your mouth. When you finally did, you simply asked if you could help me with anything. I thought that was funny because that's something a concierge at a fancy hotel would say to a fabulously wealthy guest, but we were just two strangers on a street corner. I said no, and asked about the green armchair and the mid-day nap.

You told me the whole story: the eviction notice on your door, the aggressively sweet macaron you spent your last five dollars on, your bitch of a boss, and finally spotting the chair all alone. You told me how the orange and yellow leaves descending from the heavens, combined with the golden hour sunlight, convinced you that this chair was a gift from the city.

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I just nodded. I was afraid to point out that this wasn't a gift, it was an inheritance. Some poor souls probably decided they couldn't handle city living any longer and were riding an LAX-bound plane as we spoke. You just kept talking, telling me how you were able to carry the chair for four blocks before your arms gave out. Sweaty and sore, you decided to sit for a minute and people-watch. Dog walkers and nannies walked their tiny creatures to the park, teenagers headed downtown for an afterschool snack, and elderly couples strolled aimlessly while holding hands. It made you feel better, the fact that even though your life seemed fast and loud there were quiet, picturesque moments all around.

You wanted to stay in that moment forever, but you knew if you stayed too long something would go wrong and the moment would be ruined. The elderly man would begin to complain of pain in his arm and then collapse against a honey locust tree. One of the dogs would break away from the pack and run straight into traffic, one of the prep school brats would start rebuking their overworked nanny, or two teenage girls would get into a slap fight. I remember you said that quiet moments in the city are rare, and I said just like parking spots, and you laughed really hard, and I wished I hadn't said anything. I wished that we had just been quiet and let your words hang in the air and watched them disappear. I wonder if your words would have floated away like bubbles or evaporated like cigarette smoke.

Instead, I made a dumb joke. You apologized for being so pretentious and said that being evicted made you feel philosophical. Oh well, quiet moments in the city are rare.

Last Seen Wearing: White button-down skirt, black slacks, orange Vans, and a really cool vintage fringe jacket

I asked where your apartment was and you sheepishly grinned and said that information was classified. I just made some weird noise of acknowledgment; I had forgotten we were strangers. I told you I was going to offer to help you move the chair, and you said thank you but your friend Harris was already on his way. I was going to ask if you wanted me to wait with you until he got here, since it was getting dark, but you were already beginning a new story.

After you finished people-watching, you dropped your purse into the seat cushion and attempted to lift the chair again. This time you tried lifting with your knees, the way the construction men outside your building lifted cinder blocks and steel beams. You wrapped your arms around the legs of the chairs, and as you started to rise, you heard an almost cartoonish rip. You dropped the chair and fell backward onto the concrete, and watched your tampons slowly roll out of your reusable grocery bag purse. A group of teenage boys laughed at your torn slacks as they passed by. One of them loudly complimented your green panties, he added that they were his favorite color.

It sounded like a hellish afternoon, but you seemed to be flattered. The kid had great comedic timing, at least. You never liked those pants anyways, you had been staunchly opposed to uniforms ever since you attended a Catholic high school in Oregon. You were irritated that you had to spend your

own money on an ill-fitting pair of pants before you could start waiting tables and earning tips. Anyways, you couldn't leave this corner without exposing your green underwear to the whole city, so you called Harris to pick you up. You added that you called him over two hours ago.

Last Seen On: October 8th, 2019

You pulled the chocolate muffin from your purse and asked if I wanted any. I realized I hadn't eaten since this morning, when I ate the last of my roommate's cereal and put the box back in the cabinet. I nodded and you tore the muffin in two, wiping the excess chocolate on your ruined work pants. We ate in silence until Harris pulled up in his ridiculous mini-van. I had never met a Harris before, yet I knew who he was the minute he parked. He had thick blond hair and an inexplicably dark tan. He was also wearing Birkenstocks in October, and that's all I have to say about him. You jumped out of the chair and into his arms as I watched, my mouth still full of chocolate bread. He threw his head back and laughed when he saw the tear in your pants, and you animatedly motioned to the green armchair. He said it was awesome and super cool.

We locked eyes, and Harris asked who your new friend was. You looked back at me with widened eyes and immediately apologized for not introducing me. Then you blushed and admitted that you never got my name, and I said it was Charlie. You took my hand and you told me your name, only I couldn't hear you. When you held my hand, blood started pounding in my ears. I was a zoo animal, helplessly watching your lips move through a glass wall. Then you let me go and said it was nice meeting me. Harris took your chair and put it in the back of his van, and you hopped into the passenger seat. You waved back at me as you drove away, and I watched the fringe on your jacket flutter, like sails at sea.

If seen, call 212-587-9566

I feel like I learned so much about you that day, but I still have so many questions. What is your name? Again, is Harris your boyfriend? Did you ever make rent? Did you find a new apartment or did you go home to Portland? Did you buy new work pants or did you pay an old lady in your building to patch them up? Did that green armchair tie your whole apartment together?

As I hang the last poster, I allow myself to hope. I hope that you'll see this poster and call me. I hope that you've found a cheap but comfortable apartment. I hope that our conversation wasn't just one of those rare quiet moments. Most of all, I hope that I never walk down the street and see that green armchair, waiting to be inherited.

A Guide To Navigating The Unknown

Snow Li

Sit at your table. Sit for as long as it takes for you to forget time. or lay by your bed. but lay there for as much as you possibly can. Don't go. Don't move. Stay still. Don't talk. Don't ask. Don't say any words. Hold your questions behind. Close your eyes. Count your breaths. Conceive your heart beats in your mind. And I will be there before my presence makes you blind. Insist on your fear. Insist on your fear that you've felt for the first time. Insist on your fear that you've felt for the first time you found yourself a dark crime. Do not cry. Do not whine. Do not tell me you aren't fine. Cry but cry only in pieces. Whine but whine in slices. Speak but speak only to the skin behind silent faces. Move your thoughts. Move your senses. Move your memories. Like silk. Like water. Like clouds. Let it go but don't let it go. Hold onto it but you won't. Try to feel but you can't. Don't wait up but be patient. Don't give up but be suspicious. Don't ask, for you'll never know.

Continuation (After *Crossing* by Brian Komei Dempster)

Ash Freeman

We are half-outside of what we see,
my lover and I. Outside the car window,
the world is a blur. She turns
to me, eyes frothy from sleep, and says
this road makes her body feel bumpy

and bloated like unmixed cake batter.

I see cherry orchards warp
into an angry nest, an owl perching
in a pine tree, a dead raccoon: dirt
coated and brown blooded.

My lover, left fist clenched
and right hand reaching for mine,
looks opaque in the makeshift moonlight
of the streetlamps. The sun settles
as we pass through the seams of the freeway.

I half-dream and stay awake.

My lover talks in her sleep.
She says my name then lists the different species
of birds in Northern Michigan. I linger in the orchards
and suck in the cold air; it holds different here.

When my lover wakes up I'll ask her
about the birds (bluejay, whitebreasted
nuthatch, pileated woodpecker),
but for now I'll rake my teeth
like leaves with my tongue

and believe everything tastes
like cherry whisky and victory.

grocery list you forgot when you go to the store then find crumpled in your pocket nine months later:

Brig

- the friend request from my ex's cousin that has been sitting in purgatory for eight weeks because it came in twenty minutes after we broke up
- Tom Brady's last throw as a Patriot: a pick 6
- unused packs of birth control because I stopped taking them and didn't know how to tell my mom-- afraid of crushing some sort of "dream" (that I definitely crushed when i was four and refused to wear a dress to Christmas)
- the pile of really really nice lingerie that I just can't wear anymore. That I want to wear. That used to make me feel so beautiful, that now feels like my *own* shattered dreams... growing pains
- the feeling of reading *Ulysses* (a novel about wandering a heavily populated city) when the idea of standing shoulder to shoulder in a crowded subway is unthinkable and life threatening
- the profound sadness and longing I feel when I see a picture of two people touching-- hugging, holding hands, brushing shoulders, standing next to each other in line
- the love I feel for my mother's unborn children-- the longing I feel for the younger brothers they should have been (the older brothers they should have been for my sister) the loss of someone to tackle and bully and play video games with, and I didn't even *know* them. We *never* even knew them.
- James Joyce's last words: "does nobody understand?"
- unfinished spotify playlists (I started them for her, but leave them for me)

Burning

Hannah Morelli

Did I miss my alarm? An orange glow squeezed through my closed blinds as I checked the time. It should have still been dim outside but my brain couldn't stop believing it was already afternoon. I wedged my fingers between the shutters, sliding my eyes to be level with a glowing gap; I squinted at my fuzzy front yard. Orange. That's all it was--like a tinted film was placed over the smudged glass. I grabbed my glasses and made it to the living room, gaining my vision in time to take in each window. Orange. I texted my friends, *the sky is orange*. Ash told me it's like that all the time in Florida. Air pollution. *This is different*, I replied, but couldn't explain why. Why? Well, it just is. I sent pictures and videos but even then, what I saw on the screen didn't sit in my stomach the same way. *I don't think I'll ever be able to explain to you how I'm feeling right now.*

There was something apocalyptic about walking outside into the haze. It didn't feel like the daytime, but it wasn't dark enough to be night. The only other moment that felt even the smallest bit similar was during the lunar eclipse the summer before my Junior year. There were a limited number of locations where it would be a full eclipse, and somehow Dallas, Oregon fell under that list. So I sat in the middle of my road wearing those obnoxious tinted sunglasses and watched as the moon shielded the sun. It was like the world went on mute for five minutes. Besides the crickets, who started chirping as the light dimmed. I can't explain the feeling of it being dark, but not fully dark, in the middle of the day. Even being surrounded by a large amount of people, I felt the same nervousness as when I walk home alone after dusk. Those minutes passed as quickly as my thoughts, the moon moving past and the sun exuding its light. The orange didn't leave so soon.

"It's raining ashes," my mother told me on the fourth day. "And the sun was red earlier, you should have seen it." By this time our house smelled like a campsite, even with the too expensive air purifier my father bought the day before. The orange had faded to a warm yellow but it still felt weird. Like I was on another planet. Or I was the protagonist of a dystopian YA series. It was supposed to rain the next day--actual rain, not ashes--so we waited. I don't know how many days later it was when we were able to see blue again.

By that time our backyard became home for a consistently increasing number of birds. I didn't notice until my mother asked me if I had seen the bluejays. At that point I realized how little I had been actively looking outside. Maybe sometimes I feel like my backyard hasn't changed since, what, 2006? I know there's one less tree and one more birdbath. Sometimes the guy in the house behind us trims the hedge too short and we can see his wife smoking in the afternoons. Now I watch those two blue jays chase each other through the pine tree branches, disappearing behind the leaves. My mother mentioned the abundance of birds could be some sort of relocation. They lost their homes, and we're close, yet far enough from the flames. That's what my father kept telling us when we talked about

evacuations. “We should have a plan, but don’t worry.” Every night I fell asleep planning what I would shove into my backpack if I got an alert. *Computer, photos of Jayda, Grandma’s china, journal, emergency cash. Is that all?*

I’d never realized how much the light affects my mood. That week, or however long it was, never felt right. Not just because I couldn’t go outside and my throat burned every time I spoke. I sat in the same room as I do every day, lights off, windows open, but the walls were orange, like I was stuck inside a strand of halloween lights. Every time I looked up from the blue glow of my computer, all I saw was orange. It was draining. I don’t think there was a time that I wasn’t tired for those two weeks, (or however long it was.) I looked outside. Orange. I closed my eyes. Orange. Blinked. Burned. Orange. Something was wrong. Like leaving the house without your phone and feeling “naked.” Or knowing someone’s having a rough time but they deny it. I can’t fully describe how it felt because I, myself, can’t comprehend it completely. Usually Oregon is a fairly dreary state; the fall and winter months filled with mainly grey days and endless rain. I don’t think it’s ever impacted me like those orange days did. Maybe it’s just a matter of being used to it.

Jenna Meets Death (And He Looks Like Elton John)

Sophia Baldassari

FADE IN: INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

JENNA, an eighteen year old girl sits on the floor in her black bathrobe. She has been crying, but she has a big smile, as if she just accomplished something.

There is a swooshing noise and a flapping cape. Enter DEATH, fabulous, over-the-top, and flamboyant. Death looks around Jenna's room. Jenna is surprised by Death's appearance.

DEATH

Is this 2083 Retro drive?

Jenna does not respond.

DEATH

Oh sweetie, sweetie. Those curtains are tragic.

JENNA

(terrified)

Who are you?

DEATH

Who am I? Who am I? I'm Death. Fear me.

JENNA

You look like the guy who wrote The Lion King. You know, plays the piano....?

DEATH

I am here to collect an eternal soul. So let's continue with this eternal soul collecting.

JENNA

Liberace. You look like Liberace.

DEATH

First of all, I'm offended you got Elton John and Liberace confused. Two

completely different performing personalities. It's really comparing apples and oranges here. Oh, and secondly, I'M THE GRIM REAPER!

JENNA

You don't look like it.

DEATH

(sarcastic)

I left the grim reaper outfit at home. Pardon me, may I borrow your scythe?

JENNA

A scythe? This isn't Children Of The Corn!

DEATH

Ughhhhh. Great.

JENNA

Are you wearing makeup?

DEATH

No!

There is a beat.

DEATH

Fine, some lightweight BB cream and highlighter. It's the price of self esteem. Now, where is this eternal soul?

JENNA

Um....here. I'm dead.

DEATH

But...you don't look dead.

JENNA

And you don't look like the grim reaper either.

DEATH

Honestly.....you do not look dead.

Young, healthy, no visible signs of sickness or trauma. I wouldn't have pegged you for a dead person.

JENNA

Well, in the shower earlier, I slipped and boom. Dead.

DEATH

(genuinely sorry)

Oh. That's sad.

DEATH

(changing his tone)

Let's go now. I want to make it back downstairs before nine. It's Taco Tuesday!

JENNA

Mmmm...

Jenna follows Death almost out of the room when he stops her.

DEATH

Don't you want to make a list of people to say goodbye to?

JENNA

Nope.

DEATH

Nobody?

Jenna shakes her head. After a long pause, Jenna starts to confess something quietly.

JENNA

Death?

DEATH

Yeah?

JENNA

What if I wanted to die? Everybody says it's this final thing and you'll miss everything about Earth....But what if I'm fine with it? It's

something new, and different!

DEATH

It's death. You're going to the afterlife. For eternity. And never coming back.

JENNA

But what if nobody notices if I'm gone? Or what if they're happy I'm dead?

DEATH

Sweetie, take a seat, take a seat. Tell Death what's going on. In fact, you can call me a nickname. Deat a.....Dea.....Deat....How about just Death?

JENNA

Death is an awful name.

DEATH

That says a lot coming from a...

DEATH (CONT.)

(disgusted)

Jenna. Eeeuch!

JENNA

It's short for Genesis. The first book in the Bible. I like it, Genesis is a much better name than "Death"!

DEATH

Yeesh. Whatever, your funeral. Ha, get it?

JENNA

Can I ask you a question?

DEATH

Yep.

JENNA

Why do you care?

DEATH

Maybe we're a little bit more alike
than it seems.

This angers Jenna, maybe to release her anger, she goes off
on him.

JENNA

No, no! You live in heaven! Your life
is simple...and, and...plain and easy
compared to...

DEATH

Stop!

JENNA

I don't have friends. I eat my lunch
in the bathroom. Nobody ever calls me.
But now I'm dead! Which is exactly
what I want to be. And everywhere I
go, people are annoyed and I know deep
down in their hearts that they
wouldn't notice or care if I were
gone. And it's like I hate being alone
but I'm still alone and I wish I
weren't but nothing is going to change
that cycle. Everything sucks. Take my
soul or whatever, please.

DEATH

Jenna! That is not true!

JENNA

Why care! Why be the one person when
nobody else does! Because they have to
be doing something right. You're
wrong!

DEATH

Okay, assume all you want. Assume
I...wear makeup everyday, which is
true.... or I read Shakespeare just to
make obscure references and sound
smart, also true. Or... or assume

whatever but don't assume my life is easy! Do you think I like it how nobody takes me seriously? Ever! I am a God! Everybody should be kneeling at my feet but they laugh at me! Like I'm supposed to be there to entertain them.

JENNA

I'm sorry! I shouldn't have said that... and I wouldn't have said anything if I had known! I may deserve to be dead but that doesn't mean you should be...wishing you were.

DEATH

That is the nicest thing anybody has said to me for the past hundred years.

JENNA

My neighbor has an Elton John CD in his basement, if that will make you feel better. I just assume with the clothes...you must be influenced by him.

DEATH

Nah, I hate his music. It's too sappy and emotional. But his clothes however...

JENNA

You have spectacular clothes. In fact, all those other gods in heaven should be begging you for fashion advice. I know I certainly would. And if they laugh, who cares? I know if I saw somebody being made fun of...that I'd try to reach out.

DEATH

Thanks. You have a nice name by the way, what was it short for again?

JENNA

Genesis. It means "Beginning".

DEATH
And rebirth?

JENNA
Maybe.

An overwhelming amount of sadness crosses Death's face. This is something he strongly does not want to say, and this pain is exhibited on his face.

DEATH
You have to go back.

JENNA
What?

DEATH
You shouldn't be dead. It's a mistake.

JENNA
It's not a mistake! I died twenty minutes ago.

DEATH
You don't deserve to be dead when you are better suited for life! Suicide is a permanent solution to problems that...every single one is temporary. There are big plans for your future, and a lot of them that you need to live out. Today. Why die now? Goodbye Jenna. Hopefully I won't be seeing you soon.

Death makes his swooshing exit. This time, a lot more somber and tragic.

JENNA
(hoping Death will hear)
What the hell? Ha, that was funny! Get it?

Jenna gets the urge to scream in her loneliness.

JENNA
You can't just leave me alone! I want

to be with you! Not my parents, or
friends..or family. You! And I'm never
going to be happy alive!

Jenna begins to break out into tears. She slams her hand on
the ground, then finds a white paper napkin under her hand.

JENNA

Huh?

Jenna flips the napkin open, it reads "Bye Felicia." in
purple glitter. She cracks a smile then uses the napkin to
wipe her tears.

CUT TO BLACK.

swamp angel, not even a little brackish

Colette Chien

i am not a salted girl. pour on me gallons of fresh water / i'll soak heavy & shake like a fed dog. i let my skin hang loose most times.

i do things everybody does but alkaline. imagine being ready to swallow pitcher plants & avoiding saline sponges overrun, while

texting mom. i am what your dry mouth thinks of in the morning. bitter, sweet / the patches of shimmer on any lake wished they'd

float as easy as me / the egret call wakes them when the sky turns from grey to a white, she sounds like she's crying when she belts

her morning bleats, keeps 'em tired & sinking deep. i try to live without a vein of toxicity / you know / all i need is electrolytes

from quenched thirst (& a light belief in karma), to keep on. i move like sand turning to glass or relentless wind in a flat place,

in a place with no buildings & no trees. the only time acidity ever fixed me was after ingesting botched pasta sauce. i don't need that

element. i am stained enough without it. i don't need to heat up, break down, tear apart for a pastime activity. from what i hear

that leaves you hollow. i want to be full of blossom & bud, carefully hand-fed from my spotless liver & revived from a midday wake.

My friend the other day

Ashley Cheak

called me a philosopher
while studying the movement of a poem.
After all, movement
is saying something in open space
embodying words, creating a rhythm
in open time; Why wouldn't I
want to philosophize
electromagnetism, movement
towards another soul, towards
words, feeling the vibrations
of their energy as they
move and em-body
their own language?

The Mailman

Cassandra Traina

SEPT 14 // THE MAILMAN

It's 2020, September 14.

It's midday and the air, suddenly cool, which I've been waiting for,
for months, feels suddenly

like a lack;

which is what desire is after all.

Napping on the couch with the house open at all sides,
the mailman delivers me the books I've also been waiting for
and he sees me and I, him.

without a word, he turns to go.

SEPT 21 // THE MAILMAN II

He asks for water, please, with such urgency I wonder who has denied him
before: what door may have shut up on his thirst.

With, honestly, a surge of panic, I rush inside.

I pour a glass from the faucet, not the fridge, so as to be quick about it.

The harsh flow gives way to a kind of dull, cool drink, perfect for gulping.

Clumsily I give up the dripping offering.

He clings to the lip of the cup with his own--

jaw clenched and inseparable. He drains it easily.

Given the situation, I am prepared to lose the glass
rather than take the contaminated thing back into the house,
which now feels like a silent audience.

He smiles and puts his mask back on,
me realizing I haven't been wearing one all the while.

I sit back on the white wicker chair, where he found me dumbly lounging.

He's back in 3 minutes with a final, forgotten package.

And I feel embarrassingly (here).

SEPT 30 // THE MAILMAN III

Sometimes when he comes I feel suddenly taken upon,
and interrupted.

Other times, I am almost waiting for him,
hanging around the weathered garden furniture set.
Hoping to get a glance.

He is the only stranger I see every day.

These are the things about him:

He is shy.

He prefers a head nod to a wave.

He wears a mustache.

He wears his bag straight down on the right side of his body
rather than slung diagonally across his figure, as is the fashion of most mailmen.

He has a bent sort of figure and carries himself like an unfurrowing armadillo:
curious and ready to ball up again.

These are the things I don't know about him:

-His name.

-What he goes home to after a long day.

-When he will be back again.

I Think I've Said This Before

Greer McAllister

giving in, I cut my hair short last night. my roommate cut my
hair, in truth. finding sheers in the drugstore,
feeling the dead weight of long hair,
sitting at the kitchen table, watching it fall
on the old wood floor.

*

my palms are full of shimmering green beetles. my sister and I
pulled and plucked them from the rose bushes out front,
whole petals coming off with them.
we held them tightly in our fists,
for they didn't deserve to consume the beautiful things.
we ran to the washroom, dropped them in the sink as quickly as we could,
watching them spin and struggle down.
my palms are full of beetles, rose petals, and cut hair.

*

reading in the too dark living room this afternoon, my roommate comes
home from a day at the sea, pockets full of shells, talking
excitedly about finding them deep in the sand.
She holds up the largest one to her ear to hear the sound of the ocean
once more. The blood in her eardrum crashes loud against the shore and
she drops it on the hardwood, shattering.

*

I am running my hands through my hair. I feel how short
it is. my roommate shuts her door quietly, and for a long time
I am sweeping up green beetles, rose petals,
cut hair, and broken bits of shell.

on the end of my second relationship

TM

It's six months later, and you're sitting in your dorm. The air tastes different here, and the buildings crumble in a different way. You sometimes worry that you will forget the path back home, from the green line taxi stand, that traces its way down the road, up the mountain and eventually carries you home. Maybe you will forget how to get to the city, or maybe you've already forgotten where the city is. . . You definitely don't forget the drive to his house. The hour long trek that you were willing to make every single time, but you never complained because you loved him *that* much. Or, maybe you thought you did. How you would listen to music on the way, and dream about the way he would pay attention to you this time. Maybe he finally figured out how to mend your relationship, whatever was missing, or whatever he would say. The drive carries you across the bridge, overlooking the water that is an extremely rare shade of blue. You used to tell him that it looked like Avatar water, and he thought you were funny, he thought you were creative. The trees along the path are shaped like upside down L's from the double decker buses running through. He pointed this out the first time he brought you home to meet his mother, and you never stopped noticing.

At his apartment, he answers the door with his dog trailing behind him. His dog is scruffy and brown, and looks a bit like him, but he gets annoyed when you point this out. You ask him how his classes are going. The only reason you are over is to help him write his theatre paper for the play he is directing. He only took this class to get an easy A. You read over his short paragraphs, and he shows you the set he designed. You sit on his knee and look back and forth between the paper and the screen. You realise how bad his grammar is, how terrible his prose is, how awful of a writer he is. This turns you off somewhat, because you always liked smart guys. That doesn't mean he isn't smart of course, and maybe it's a terrible judgement of character. He's good at science, you tell yourself (but you still got better grades). You write a paragraph bullshitting stage lighting for his concept. He writes about a group of teenagers who get lost in the forest, and eventually lose their shit and maybe become

cannibals? You don't know, you just kinda skimmed over it. He comes back and holds you, thanking you for helping him and that you two can finally get dinner, or whatever you were planning on doing. He isn't being very nice with your time. Once you even confronted him about it. But, were you really pissed that he was late? Was that even what you argued about? You don't recall very clearly, but what you do remember is that you said "sometimes I feel like I'm not even dating anyone."

At your graduation, you waltz on stage and flip off the audience. Your parents don't think this is very funny, but you see him smile in the audience. Your diploma is a bit smudged, but you didn't really like your name anyways. You're taking pictures with your cap and tassel when he comes over and holds your waist, and asks for a picture with you. You wonder why he would ever want to memorialise this moment, he wasn't even planning on coming. But, you smile anyways. You almost look happy together.

The streets of the nightclubs were slicked with oil and rain. It was kind of disgusting. So, you drink. You drink a lot. This is something you do now. You drink when you're happy, you drink when you're sad, but mostly, you drink when you're alone. You don't remember what you ordered, but it tastes a little bit orange-y. A man walks over to you at the bar and he compliments your body, or something to that effect. Your boyfriend doesn't really notice. Instead, he strikes a conversation with the man, and compliments his watch. The two talk about music for about an hour and a half. You grow tired of watching him grow tired of you, so you step outside for a smoke. This is also something you do now. Something about the toxins in your body, make you feel able to be around him. You never told him about your illness, but he always talks about how he wants to *trip* with you.

You remember the last time he took acid, and how he told you he would do anything for you, and that you can talk to him about anything. . . You later learn this is utter bullshit.

You leave the bar with the drinks you didn't pay for. Stumbling on the cobblestone, in your heels, you make a turn and he asks you to sit on the bench with him. He is high, he is drunk, he is how you're supposed to be on graduation night. As the others scatter off to god-knows-what nightclubs, he holds

your hand for the first time in weeks, and asks you to stay with him. You rest his head on your knees, and stroke his hair. You look down at your drunk boyfriend, and he looks back at you through half opened eyes. After a while, he sits up, he says you should probably go home, it's 5 am. You agree. It's raining like a motherfucker, though, and you're shivering. He looks at you. Like, he *actually* looks at you. He carries you to the taxi stand and makes sure you go home first.

You don't talk for weeks after that, not properly anyways. He checks in with you, every once in a while, but you almost never text back. You're hurt.

Your friends ask you to go to hang out with them, and on behalf of you, he says yes, he says you're excited. So, sure, you're excited. You go sailing, you've never sailed before. That's exciting, right? You rent boats and take them out on the water. Your friends are laughing and smiling because it's sunny and beautiful and they are in love. You sit in a boat together, and slowly float away from the group. He says he knows what he's doing, he always does, but you know he doesn't know what he's doing. He tells you

that he can't wait to travel with you someday, and that you can do anything together. You smile at him, and he says he likes drifting off with you anyways, and the wind will eventually carry you back. But, because you're smart, and listen to your sailor friends talk about their sailor things, you pull the mainsail and tack, and the wind finally pulls you back to safety.

At dinner, you eat until you simply can't stomach anymore. He always makes fun of how little you eat, and usually finishes off the rest for you. You think this is sweet. Your friends sit around you, playing with the house cat. He is orange and has a strange Swedish name you can't pronounce. Tur-ay? Tur-eh? Tur-ah? Whatever. You're contemplating the cat's name, when you feel his hand slide down your thigh. He leans in close to you, and asks if you want to watch a movie later. You don't. You're tired. Your shoes are full of salt, and your muscles are tired from directing a boat all day. But there's something indelible about the way he looks at you, and you haven't felt wanted in a long time, so you sneak him home anyways, and you have sex.

Three days before your birthday, he calls you. He mutters something about how something is missing, and that you lost the spark you had when you met. He says he didn't know that you were this depressed, but he feels bad because he can't handle you. You didn't think you were *that* bad. He says he can't sleep because he thinks about you, and he wants to help you but he can't. You say you want to work on yourself, and you promise you will get help. You say you'll try and see things from his side.

You remember the time you had sex, and afterwards you lied down under the full moon outside his window. He held you, and he said "I love you", and you said "doesn't feel like it".

Maybe you shouldn't have said that, but it was the truth, and he hated dishonesty. He probably didn't mean brutal honesty, so you tell him you love him too but you don't know what to do with it. You've run out of places to go with it. You're different people, but not in the way that you balance each other out, or bring out the best in one another. In the way that he never went to your art shows, but you learned how to climb for him. In the way that you yelled at him when he was high. In the way that he made fun of you for how little you ate, but you had an eating disorder. Different in the way that he taught you how to cook, while yelling at you and you cut yourself. Or maybe in the way that he broke up with you three days before your birthday, and showed up to your party anyways, because he still loved you. In the way that he left early because being around you was too hard. In the way that he called you when you moved to New York because he wanted to make sure you were okay.

In that way, you are different people.

Live The Dead

Snow Li

i live because

 i know how to breath
into the words of

 the dead. it did not
matter who came

 before me or whom i
came ahead; for the

 ticking clock
was never made to count

 my cry: four& three& two& one. i would
leave the counting

 behind and walk away
the difference of time. i dawdled

 with the invisibly
visible

 and the visibly
invisible; for both

 have visited the inside
of my womb since

 the day they were taken
away. i may as well

 let them live in
my Mind

 for another lifetime
unmeasured by any

 unprepared End.

In An Hour of No Consequence

Rebecca N Frankel

To have just one hour to engage with the Triad of Sad Girls. To sit at a round table, in room with one grand window--view to nothing but stars and time. To have Virginia at my side (hairpins loose). Sylvia too, to watch her shaky hands. To know Emily, to know Emily to sit upstairs, to look at the white wall, to write on flowers and God. To be an anachronism. To look for beauty. To watch Virginia gesticulate wildness, wilderness. To room in a room with breakdowns in miniature. To drink tea, to hand around the silver platter, to pour Irish Breakfast in Virginia's cup for purpose of vague politic. To chatter, to begin a little fearfully. To doubt myself among their brilliance. To ask the two of their respective husbands. To know Emily to listen on the landing. To curse Ted post-mortem, to suspend time in a tea bag.

To talk of God. To talk of loss. To avoid the topic of suicide. To drink to Virginia's success, to drink to the facsimile of Ariel, to drink to Emily's secrets and to know her to sit on the landing upstairs, with notebook and fascicle to render. To never rest, to never have a "rest cure". To see Sylvia's sly smile. To watch the laugh of Virginia, to ignore her three lost teeth. To be young among those who died too young. To be kin, to be close, to build the tentative between us. To tell the three, to call to Emily on the landing, to say "I were nothing without you all". To run on sentence, to assert the poetic in the prosaic, to note Virginia's work as type of poetry. To eat in ways that we were told not to eat. To be in translation and not to know the Greek having been spoken by birds aloft. To be new, to give them free. To not know men.

To live, to love, to have, to hold, to know, to want, to wish, to laugh, to linger, to become, to build, to begin, to end, to grin, to ghost, to sing, to stand, to still, to shake, to fly, to forget, to bite, to make conjecture, to imbibe, to drink, to philosophize, to be to be to be to *BE*. To always be, to exist forever in the sadness of girls. To mean it all. To hang in time, in a room, in our room, to party in perpetuity. To keep them from the masses, to hoard them for myself. To know them, to learn them, to want them. To always need. To know that I need. For them to know that they have saved. To know their meaning. To tell them, they have been mine. To scream-- "Fly. Be. Write once again, in one hour of no consequence."

My Year of Consequences

Rebecca N. Frankel

I sold a mouthful of teeth for breath reek, for rot, and for wreckage

For a set of ribs and a rate of exchange.

This was the conversion:

patience (substitute for suffering) is equal to lbs lost.

I dealt in irregular heartbeats for a stomach I could

Bounce a quarter from.

Bartered a year of sugars, starches, stillness

For black coffee and bloodletting.

Months in the toilet with an acid spatter smile.

Punch the clock, hour fast by hour fast I was getting holier

Because I bought into the give and take of girls, of men:

The tears, the circumvention, and the currency of need.

I played roulette, I shorted the supermarket.

People have sold their souls for sillier reasons.

Now, they tell me that this was a crime. They tell me that I'm paying.

One year of penance for one year of pride.

Drill a tooth for every pound lost, every glance gained.

After all, I did some petty crime.

I used myself as collateral, slipped the noose of the "set point".

And now, you all get to sit in judgement, critiquing my methodology.

Disavow my avarice all you want. Shake your heads all you wish.

I have but one defense:

The devil is a broker with an unbalanced scale and I was just

Trying to underweigh a feather.

(welcome to) an eternity of chronically symphonic, sonically tectonic uncertainties
alternatively titled: not even a xanax could unmanic this flight's antics

tova g.

(please stow your luggage properly in the overhead compartments.
please remain seated until told otherwise.
please fasten your seatbelts.)

today my therapist told me that with my self loathing i've subconsciously checkmated myself; as my heart rate quickens i berate & negate any positive trait; i continually conflate narcissism & self love; wish i could perform an exorcism of the anachronisms in my head, have the pope envelop me & pull a 'great schism' between invalidation & causation & end it neatly with a citation in mla, instead there's only criticism / i'm trying to write this in 4/4 time & rhyme like sondheim, inverting wharton with an age of dissonance; be a vigilant revisionist abolitionist with an opposition towards major cs (essentially be a music theory tease) / i apologize in advance for my unconventional wordplay & scheme; i'm steadying myself on a balance beam of vowels & consonants to redeem my lack of self-esteem / this frustration for the inflation of flaws facilitates this oration; sanity is currently on probation (maybe on its way to christianity's damnation(?)) / i'm hopelessly devoted to unrealistic expectations; words are stuck in my throat; i can't emote or find an antidote; i'm constantly rhyming & losing the timing & climbing serifs in stanzas, inventing propaganda about myself at random / i've never been taught how to communicate; let's just say actions were never adequate so i had to overcompensate & demonstrate my worth instead; look ahead now i'm sitting in bed completely misled trying to thread thoughts together with frayed existential dread / forgive the litotes but now i can't not do what's expected of me; yet again a dejected dissected gen z mind never respected or protected / now i ask you why can't i break from this verse curse (?); i guess it's because i've been pre-cast & coerced into rehearsing this role--

(we will be starting our descent shortly.
thank you for flying with delta airlines.
have a good day.)

Nectar on Top

Keila Marie Torres

I have on more than one occasion
mistaken streetlamps for the moon—
so, it should be no surprise to me
that I mistook loneliness for loving you.
I wonder what it is that makes me partial to weak men.
I am a strong woman
(bred to survive by tooth and nail,
to flower in artificial light),
stronger for having loved you
in the lonely of long ago.
Raw time has taught me hardness
and warmth.
Yet,
*I wish it were fall
when first I loved you,
wish I could ball-up
all that long-past sweetness,
feed off it
like nectar on tap
in the mouths of butterflies.*

Antidote

Ash Freeman

Magnolia woke up every morning and fell apart. She had theories it depended on the weather, like on rainy days her knees would unhinge and teeter on the edge of the bed. Other days she blamed her dreams: a long night of tossing and turning from a monster chase was sure to detach her arms from their sockets. Out of all the superpowers she could've had, she never would've wished for a weird body. She couldn't shapeshift into a hamster, she couldn't get rid of acne on a whim, but she could detach her wrist from her arm to scratch a hard to reach itch on her back. But mostly, her body changed accidentally and this pissed her off. Magnolia felt like a puzzle piece that had to be put back together every day and stepped around carefully.

Brennan sauntered into her room without knocking, he had a terrible habit of this. What If I'm Changing, she'd tell him. Nothing I Haven't Put Together Before, he'd say.

"Your mom let me in, she said you'd probably be up. Need any help today?"

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Just because I needed your help with my tongue once doesn't mean I'm not capable of piecing myself together, thank you very much."

He flopped down on her bed and she watched him. "Weirdo." He held out his hand for hers, which she took gingerly, though he knew better than to pull. Everything in place. "It smelled like your mom was making blueberry pancakes, wanna come get some before I eat them all?"

"I'm not really hungry."

"Did your arm wake up on the wrong side of bed again?"

He pouted and kissed her cheek, which gave her enough leverage to push him off the bed. She wiggled her fingers to make sure nothing had shifted. When she was done examining, she crouched on the ground next to him.

"Now you owe me two pancakes."

+

There were worse things than going to school for Magnolia. For one, she hated the doctor. They always poked and prodded at her and would say “This might hurt a bit” but it never really hurt. She’d say Ouch and wince for good measure. Dentists were worse. They’d scrape at her enamel and her tooth would pop right out. She’d tell them, her mouth stuffed with gloved fingers and metal tools and a bit of blood from inflamed gums, “Thif is norhamal, juf puff it bawk in” and they’d tell her That’s Enough For One Day, Your Teeth Look...Fine. Don’t even get her started on bowling, that was a disaster.

No, school was definitely not the worst. Easy, even. Sit down, everything in place. Pull out pens (don’t have to press as hard as pencils) and if a finger pops out, pop it back in. No one needs to notice. Not that they’d freak out anymore, they’ve seen it happen before. The P.E. teacher nearly had a heart attack during a dodgeball game. Some kid took the game too seriously and hit Magnolia straight in her chest. Her torso went flying to the basketball post while her limbs folded violently into a pile on the ground. That was the first time she realized she could wiggle her fingers when they were away from her body.

People were nice enough. Sometimes they’d ask her if she could take her eyeballs out. She’d say no, she’d never tried and it never happened before and no, she wouldn’t try it in front of them. Usually, they’d ask her for a pencil. She never had any.

+

Magnolia tried having sex once, though it didn’t go anywhere, mostly kissing and melting. It was her senior year and there was a girl named Iris. Brennan said it was perfect because they both had flower names and couldn’t handle their alcohol. After two spritzers Iris would throw herself against a wall thinking it was her soulmate. For Magnolia, after drinking half of a hard cider her tongue would pop out and she’d have to hide it in her pocket until she could sober up or find Brennan.

That night, Magnolia’s mom forced her to go to a football game, she assumed that by getting her daughter *out there* she would fit in. It was easy to fit anywhere for Magnolia, she could remove her

arms. Magnolia didn't mind, she liked to imagine what would happen if she played sports. She could throw the ball across the field and her arm would take off with it. The other team would be so spooked they wouldn't want to touch it and her team would win. Everyone in Gadsen was used to Magnolia's weird body, they'd have no problem piecing her back together. Plus, Iris was a cheerleader.

Brennan was always excited to go places with Magnolia. Most days she was content sitting at home watching HGTV reruns and Brennan was happy to accompany her, but he wanted more. A football game with his best friend was like an early birthday present. Every time a team scored, whether it was their team or the opposing team, he would stand up and cheer. Brennan was the loudest boy on the bleachers, this meant Iris knew where they were sitting. She looked up every few minutes and winked at them and Magnolia would blow it off.

"Mags, she's flirting with you!" Brennan nudged her and she almost fell off the edge of the bench.

Magnolia straightened her shoulders. "She's probably winking at you."

He rolled his eyes. "You're so oblivious, you know that?"

Magnolia was pretty enough. She had hair the color of a honey jar in sunlight and her cheeks always had a slight blush to them that hid the sweat her hairline held. But Brennan was radiant.

After the game, Iris bounced up to Magnolia and Brennan. It was still early autumn so the sun was far from setting. Seduction is much harder in daylight.

"Brennan, you know you're only supposed to cheer for our team, right?" She bounced on her toes and Magnolia couldn't help but think of her as a fairy. "Are y'all coming to the party at Ethan's house tonight? Whenever our team loses his parents let him throw a party at their house and buy him cheap beer that tastes more like moldy apples than anything else."

Magnolia opens her mouth to decline the offer but Brennan jumps in. "We were planning on it!"

"Magnolia?" Iris looks up at her. Magnolia couldn't tell if she had a natural pout or if that's how pretty people always look.

She shrugs. "I guess."

Iris drove Magnolia and Brennan in her birthday present (a Cadillac? Magnolia didn't recognize the emblem) to Ethan's house. The ride was all failed small talk. *Isn't the weather great? My parents call it Indian summer. Yeah, it's a bummer about the game but it's expected, ever since Matthew graduated they haven't found a good quarterback. You okay there, Magnolia? Sorry, I mean Mag. Mags? Just wanted to know which you prefer. I guess I know Ethan well. Not in that way.*

Magnolia was relieved when they arrived.

"Let me get you some beers," Iris said and twirled around. She was still wearing her cheer costume, it was an obnoxious yellow but it looked pretty against her dark features.

As soon as she disappeared, Brennan whispered in Magnolia's ear. "Dude, I'm telling you she likes you."

"She hasn't talked to me the whole time."

"Because she *likes* you. You never flirt, you wouldn't get it." Brennan put his hands on Magnolia's shoulders. "Keep your back straight, Mags, it'll make you look more confident and keep anything from falling out of place."

She muttered something like *I flirt* but knew he was right and squeezed his hand. "Love you."

Magnolia roamed throughout the house which was filled with clouds of smoke and her classmates grinding against each other. She smiled to herself imagining what would happen if she tried that. She spotted Iris on her toes by the kitchen trying to see over the crowd of dancers. Magnolia pushed through to get to her then checked to make sure nothing shifted in transit.

"Looking for someone?" Magnolia asked.

"Yes. You." Iris smiled and handed her a beer. She took it and thought of the times Brennan had to piece her back together after just a few sips. She clinked her bottle against Iris' and used the bottle opener laying on the counter.

"The weather is nice." Magnolia stared at her feet, unsure what to say.

"You're not exactly who I'd expect to see at Ethan's party." The weather topic may have been exhausted in the car.

"I'm trying to get out there more."

“C’mon I’ll show you around.” Iris grabbed her hand and pulled her upstairs. She didn’t know to be gentle with Magnolia and she could feel a couple fingers start to pull out of place, but she knew better than to stop in her tracks. Iris wouldn’t know to stop with her. So Magnolia caught up and they walked side by side holding hands. She might’ve even caught Iris smiling.

They ended up in a bedroom and by the looks of it, it wasn’t Ethan’s. There were flowers on the wall (gladiolus, maybe, but they were royal blue) and the bed had a canopy around it.

“Are we allowed to be here?” Magnolia asked.

“I don’t see why not.” Iris set her bottle down. Magnolia had already finished hers and she had yet to swallow her tongue.

Iris looked at Magnolia like she was something whole and it made her squirm. There was something comfortable about consistently falling apart and she wasn’t sure what to do since it temporarily stopped. Stop Looking At Me Like That. Magnolia closed her eyes. She felt around her body: her knuckles, her shoulders, her knees, her teeth. She kept dreaming that all her teeth fell out and she couldn’t put them back in. Everything in place.

Matters progressed. Iris pressed down on Magnolia’s shoulders and they threatened to leave but stayed in place. She bit at her skin (Magnolia had never had a problem with skin, nothing ever hurt or moved out of place. Even papercuts healed instantly) and pulled at her hair. Everything in place. And Iris kept whispering *Mag Mag Magnolia, Mag Mag Magnolia*. It echoed in the room and Magnolia wrapped her arms around Iris. That’s when her forearm disconnected from the rest of her. Iris didn’t seem to notice and Magnolia didn’t know how to say *My Arm Is On The Floor*.

With every kiss against Magnolia’s neck, a new joint thudded softly against the bed or rolled onto the floor. First her fingers, then the rest of her arm followed after. As if they were trying to put Magnolia back together in the absence of Brennan. Iris was oblivious. *Mag Mag Magnolia*. When there was nothing left to tear from her, Iris came up for air.

“I was wondering when this would happen.”

Magnolia still had her tongue, but even that had the tingly feeling of escape. That, or the fermentation of the beer made the inside of her mouth feel strange. “What? This doesn’t freak you out?”

Iris took out her phone. “I have to tell Angie.”

Magnolia couldn’t pull herself up but at least Iris had the decency to not take a picture. “Get Brennan.”

Iris pressed her lips together and piled Magnolia’s limbs on the bed. “I think a finger may have fallen under the bed.”

+

When Magnolia was born she came out in pieces. The nurse almost had a stroke thinking she had already killed the poor kid but the doctor said he’d seen it happen once before. He popped her arms and legs right into place before swaddling the quiet child and placing her in her mother’s arms. Her parents naturally had many questions. Her dad said he needed to go get diapers, for it would be their luck that her shit would come out in pieces too. The nurse almost opened her mouth to tell him *Actually, That’s How Shit Works Should We Do An Emergency Colonoscopy?* but he walked out and didn’t come back. Her mother named her Magnolia because that was the one name he hated.

+

Sometimes Magnolia wondered if she could have kids or if they would come apart in her belly. Little broken parts of a rusty machine. In all honesty, she had no idea what the inside of her body looked like. For all she knew, everything was working just fine. She still had her appendix, she never had any stomach issues except for that time she had a mock trial in her government class, and her head had yet to detach from her neck. Magnolia never had a reason to understand her body. Not one.

+

“Do you ever think about how you’re going to die?” Magnolia asked Brennan. It was summer, so it always felt like mid-afternoon.

“Easy. I get diagnosed at seventy-two with some shitty illness, take thirteen shots of spiced whisky and jump in front of a moving car.”

“But then somebody else is responsible for your death. They’re gonna have to clean it up and they’ll live with that guilt forever, thinking it was an accident. Also, you’re a lightweight, you’d never make it to the highway with that much whisky sloshing around in your stomach.”

“Okay fine, I have time to fine tune it. How would you die?” he asked.

“Honestly, I don’t know if I can. It’s not like I’ve tried, but I’m just going off of experience here. Remember when I fell off my bike and gashed my knee? It bled for like, three seconds before healing up and scarring. And I’d like to think any disease festering inside me would fall apart, too.”

Brennan sat for a second and pulled at blades of grass poking up around their blanket. “Getting a casket would be easy though. They could take you apart like Ikea furniture and fit you into something child sized.” He paused. “Is that too morbid, can I say that?”

+

After Magnolia was born her mother prayed every night. That she was hallucinating, that the doctors were wrong, that this was just a stupid baby phase and one day her daughter would wake up in one piece. The doctor said he’d seen it once before and so had she. Three years prior she met Magnolia’s dad, a boy with long greasy hair and thin wrists. She pinned him against the bed because she had gotten into a phase of wanting to dominate men she just met. She took off her belt and tied it around his wrists and shut her eyes. She didn’t hear a crack but a *thunk* and she opened her eyes to see one of his wrists rolling on the ground.

She didn't have the heart to scream, there was no blood and he was tied up. It's a shame, he could've taught her so much about how to care for a breaking girl.

negentropy antidote / unravel with me little birds

Colette Chien

never did i feel the weight of death as much as most. one day dirt or
ash will contain my bones, organs, eyelids / the grave's engraved

with someone else's words. i'll be okay if specks of me spin up into
space, if i seep down into hades' deluge, i'd refuse the fruit anyway

/ no need for sweet juice, being nothing is to crave not, & oh do i
hate all my things. just to float, sink, remain beautifully still /

entropy as the work of the 'verse. i won't, call upon some gods to
find me, suture me up with ardor & strife. i can breathe as moss, an

insect, a raven's tiny eyeball / you will light the match as with the
millions before. i say, i'll be gone before tonic goes flat or warm,

which is first to come last. oh you / can't expect this spectrum
forever / candle wax may drip on your altar, not sure i'd be bothered

if it lacked. drawn curtains, sky black / leave me to fertilize your
petunias or some other meaningless task. keats sang to me outside

hannaford's & i sang back. just wrap me in lace & leave me alone,
think of me in a cat's yawn or maybe a branch's eerie upcurve.

Hand and Foot

Anna Schechter

She was there when they needed her. Chapstick, a pair of gloves for the cold, her bus pass if they were running late, half her pasta if they were hungry too. No biggie.

If they had an issue needing solving, she brought pen, paper, tissues, open ears. To a fight, she supplied calm words and mediation by the book, “I feel” statements.

On their birthdays: decor, cake, hand-wrapped presents, hand-folded cards. If they were apart, a card arrived in the mail with stickers galore.

In rain: an umbrella, that bus pass again, a dry shirt.

In turmoil: a shoulder.

In exhaustion: sheets drawn, warm chocolate in a mug, a candle lit, the door closed soft.

A pretty rock, a small houseplant, balsamic vinegar, the tea kettle, and pizza to share.

They were glad to have a car to borrow, a number to call, a log of memories, a database of answers, a hand and a foot.

One day it vanished, nothing there, and they wondered who’d supplied it all in the first place, whose hoodie had been draped over them, whose vegetable oil they had siphoned, whose hand it was they were trying now to grab. They wondered, was someone missing? No, they were all accounted for, but who was going to bring the extra sunglasses, the leftovers, the bandaids, a flashlight?

Painted Lady

Sophie Edwards

I live on the wall of a vegan restaurant, among other women who are like me. The restaurant is owned by two women who kiss like my father and his wife used to kiss. I have never kissed. My father painted me like this; naked, bent over my embroidery with swollen breasts, sixteen and pure. The women created by men's minds are always virgins. I'd really like to kiss. Now the paper at my edges is yellowing, but I am demure still, innocent, naked as ever. I peer at the patrons and the painted rugs through my glass, pondering if they have kissed, if they have fucked, how many.

Selma and Noel bought me at a yard sale on Grasmere, where I lived in the basement of a three family home. Selma found me. Baby look at this one. What's she doing? Sewing? But is that the message we want to convey? I like her anyway, we have to save her. They laughed. I felt safe in Selma's canvas bag, nestled between a pair of glass candlesticks and a ceramic statue of a robin that looked like he'd been frozen mid-song. They nailed me to the wall beside a fleet of women also trapped in frames. At first, I tried to communicate with the other women. What are your names? Where are you from? Are you scared? I don't think they got my messages. I quickly learned what a restaurant was, a vegan, a lesbian, a feminist. Things were different in that time. Things were different now.

When my father first hung me on his wall, his wife and the other women who visited wore long dresses and curled their hair elaborately. I was facing the fireplace and a ratty green armchair that I came to hate. My father didn't like it when his wife spoke too much.

In the restaurant, women wore tiny shirts with thin straps so their breasts and their bellies bulged pleasantly. Their nakedness made me feel held. They spoke loudly and freely and ate fragrant food prepared by a group of women who spent their days behind a wooden counter. All

of the pictures on the walls were women, I was the only naked one. Every year there were more. Selma and Noel dusted my frame on Sundays.

I was positioned on the furthest corner of the wall, shrouded in shadow. Once a family sat at the table beneath me, and a little boy kept pointing at me and laughing, mouthing “titties” with a mouth full of spit into his sister’s ear. I think Noel heard, because she upcharged them. Being in the corner meant I got lots of the couples; people with blue hair and blonde hair and no hair squeezing hands under the oaken tables. My favorite was when they got drinks. They were in a good mood. Two glasses of local wine and they’d inch closer. A couple of indiscerable gender discussed places they’d fucked and places they wanted to fuck, a friend who’d developed a fake accent, the ethical implications of tofu, something to do with metaphysics. One girl, with tears in her eyes, told the boy she was with she was scared she’d never be able to love anyone as much as they seemed able to love her. They kissed passionately. I’d never been allowed wine, but from the smell I imagine it tastes like feet.

Once, a robin got in. It made a piercing sound, fluttering frantically off the rugs hanging from the rafters until it came to rest on my frame. It’s claws dug deep in the wood, peeling and scratching. My body vibrated with sensation. Selma screamed. The FDA had been hard on them last year about the dust and the pasteurization, the bird was bad for business. It squawked, rocking my abode gently on its nail. How are you? Where are you from? I called. It cawed. Selma chased it out with a broom.

Brahma's Garden

Ashley Cheak

I don't know what day it is, I simply
feel overwhelmed by the beauty
of everything-
The beauty of language,
of creating, pulling together reality's
fabric between vedic palms, the creases
I need to find time to iron out!
Every emotion
ever-occurring in existence; it's all pictured
in my mind as Brahma breathes into trees,
throughout their leaves, making the vibration of
cells carry oxygen to each human organ.
I've only graced the flutter of blue cranes'
wingspans gliding through the air. Felt the deep
pulse of human heart when I move with love.
I've witnessed the tremble of baby rabbits'
feet hop in the spring grass. Brahma
exists as the form of all life,
between all life,
and through all life,
every new passion aroused by
any be-ing's desire! Created the colors
of music notes bending with the frequency's
chords. Created decomposition, the side of
a mountain no one sees except the sky, the coordination
involved with the forms that each being becomes, the texture
of a flower's petal. Being the reason that there ever is reason.
I'm still amazed to create a thing
That has no clear ending
Or beginning.

Falling in Love With Simone de Beauvoir

Greer McAllister

seeing omens from the balcony: seven pale yellow
butterflies, three black cats (the same cat, but seen thrice),
and a single bumblebee, cleaning its face and wings.

people and people walking by— I whip my head
back and forth to see each one: a child, a child,
an elderly woman pushing a dog in a stroller,
a man in a hoodie, and a college student, their bag heavy with books.

I am reading Beauvoir, the second volume
of her life, of mine, of ours.

the omens never stop, words, symbols, bounding
across my eyes: change, change, change,
change, change, change, change,
death, death, death, soft luck.

Simone would scold me for believing in such things.
she is much more practical than I.

hunger for so many things— to touch another, to see them as a symbol,
the symbol that I would build myself upon, draw in margins, on my arms,
paint in alleyways, place carefully on my tongue.

I am surprised when I stop seeing the butterflies, although the cat
is sleeping quietly at my feet, and the bee is humbly dead.
then it is only her, her gin fizzes, and my hand gently around
the back of her neck.

queer theory and the death drive

Brig

being queer necessitates understanding
how poetic your own death would be: staring
in the mirror at a pair of new found
biceps, understanding that if i were still
in high school i would finally be able to fight
back. as if the difference really was to just
eat more protein and put your body through
regimented hell 6 out of 7 days a week. want
your personhood to not sit on your shoulder like
an albatross of a death threat, eat more protein,
gain some muscle... I know this is untrue, but am
i wrong to hope? (I started lifting weights because i liked
thinking that if she was on top of me again this
time i could throw her off, as if it would have
been hard to do that the first five times, again
as if the difference was anything but understanding
my own capacity to resist... i should say non existent)
queer strength is resistance, queer joy is resistance,
queer love is resistance... queer love is commodified
queer death is romanticized... queer love only exists
next to queer death and queer heartbreak and
the girls who stared at me and smiled '*call me by
your name* is the most beautiful film i have ever
seen' dated men who stared at me with angry
eyes that screamed *i might just beat the shit
out of you* and we all lived and walked and breathed
in trump's america... where everything and nothing was
Ok.

The Gardener

Keila Marie Torres

I have put my bones through a meat grinder,
draped flesh over bone dust,
evicted vital organs like tenants who cannot make the rent
In the last 48 hours, I have hollowed out my body.
I learned long ago that I am not safe inside of it.
My emotions are vagabonds raging on street corners against an absent god.
Body imbalanced, body betrayal, body on fire:
I keep a lighter in my rib cage,
covert arsonist,
but there is more than spark wheel and fuel space.
I know that there is magma beneath the skin,
that clenched teeth hold back an eruption,
that flesh conceals a thinly veiled volcano.
I am so afraid of letting my lover
inside my body, a concealed third-degree wound.
I cannot keep from *burning*
and sometimes the gentlest touch can feel like kerosene,
sometimes your words are as fuel to the fire,
and I prefer gnarled, ashen bark to flourishing forests.
My thumbs are soot-covered, and I am no gardener,
but green is his favorite color and sometimes I think
that if he could wrestle the matches from my hand
I might let something grow.

Sweet Oranges Do Not Grow Here

Naomi Rottman

The sun does not shine here anymore and it does not rain. The skies are never blue and the grass is no longer green. It is not the valley that I knew. It is ugly. The valley is poisoning us. The valley had us hooked on sunshine and the nourishment of sugary fruit juices dripping down our fingertips. The valley has abandoned us and we are so lost.

The newspapers say it began with the death of the elementary school nurse. She could be heard wailing for days before the silence hit her. Her daughter drove in from the city one night, unpacked her luggage, and handled the funeral with grace. She wore an ill-fitted suit and a chain that was once her father's. She did not shed a single tear and I may have been the only one that noticed. The lawyer's secretary, who lived next door to the school nurse, fell down a tall staircase in her home soon after. Her daughter performed the eulogy and organized the flowers for the viewing. The next month, the pastor's wife was found clutching the cross she wore around her neck. Her daughter never came to say goodbye.

A few months later, Lauren came back. She was a pretty blonde a few years older than me. She had lived just down the street and left for Chicago when she finished high school. She had babysat me a few times. That Christmas, no one recognized her. Something inside her had shifted. The neighbors said it was that city water, others claimed it was the liberal scene in the city, but my mother said it was the lack of fresh fruit that had turned her sour, and I nodded along and pretended to believe her.

When Lauren's mother died, everyone knew why.

The newspapers could not keep up with the obituaries and the cemeteries were jacking up the prices of plots. The valley was inconsolable with grief. Enough tears were shed to replenish the drought, if things had worked that way. The children in the schoolyard wondered when it would be their mother. The young men on the football team wrung their wrists anxiously and called their older sisters daily. The girls who left the valley could not escape the eye of the authorities when they came home to visit. Somehow the police, despite their best efforts, did not save a single mother.

My mother and I used to spend the evenings in our little blue house cracking peanut shells. They came in a large sack or a bag with a rough, heavy texture. The TV was always warm and static. We watched romantic comedies from the 1990's together after school, while the salted pasta water was simmering on the stove, and our favorite was *Sleepless in Seattle*. She spoke in unforgiving tones and scolded more often than she soothed. Her skin smelled of heavy lotions and her breath of garlic.

There was always so much fruit. One summer, there were rows of blueberries high on a hill and 80 bushes were my mother's responsibility to weed. The afternoon cobbler was obnoxiously sweet and I liked how it turned my teeth blue. We lived near the orchards, and the road was always dirty; there were always goatheads in our tires and wedged in the bottom of our shoes. My brothers and I grew darker in

the sunlight, running down the rows of apples, unripe pears, and buckets, dirt quickly filing our sandals and sweat dripping from our brows. The apples were crisp and the gunk of it stuck in between our teeth.

Our fruitbowl community was made up of four different types of people. There were the vineyard people, and these were mainly older couples with white hair and dusty bottles of wine in their cellars. They were kind and wealthy, they went to church on Sundays and they hosted Christmas parties, and their children grew up to be doctors and “homemakers” and alcoholics. They probably owned the apple orchards. The apple people were more genuine than the vineyard people. They were hard workers and they liked wearing plaid probably too much. They were gruff and honest and they carried guns, and that is all. Then there were the berry lovers, and those were the mothers, bakers, artisans, and grandmothers not rich enough to belong with the vineyard grandmothers. They were stern, their voices were harsh, but they were good at braiding hair and they showed me how to fold the crust of a pie just right.

The oranges, those are the people I loved. The oranges were the leftovers, I think. Like my father, who listened to classical music on the radio and worked hard, and did not own a gun because his words were his strongest weapon, he was an orange. The girl who worked at the fruit stand was also an orange, because she was kind and wore big crystal earrings. She had a soft voice and sometimes she messed up when counting out the change, but no one was ever mad at her. I think I was also an orange, because I was not very good at paying attention in church and I did not particularly enjoy picking blueberries at six in the morning. The oranges did not belong in the valley, oranges were never one of our crops, and therefore the oranges were very hard to find.

In New York, there was no fruit at all. This surprised me very much when I moved there for University. No fruit, not really. There were dry apples, smaller than your hand (which is a size apples should not be), there were bananas (which are far too large to finish), and there were plums (which have been in the fridge for weeks). The only people I found there were oranges, even the wealthy elderly and the stay-at-home-mothers. Everyone shopped at Trader Joes, everyone listened to NPR, no one had guns, and if someone had a garden it was purely for sustainability, not for the way the apples would make the land smell sweet.

I soon gave up on college. This was a mistake, or that’s what I thought for a long time. I had let down the valley that had so much faith in me.

Moving back into the blue house made the time pass slower and the conversations more passive. I felt as though I was watching myself regress. My mother noticed. She said things like, “You need to get out of the house more,” and then when I did, it was, “That girl you’re with stays out too late, what must her mother think,” even though we were adults by then and I doubt her mother cared as much as mine. She asked lots of questions. She wanted to know why I didn’t like watching romantic comedies

with her anymore, why I was ordering a salad instead of a steak, why I didn't have a boyfriend, and why I lived like a hermit, locked inside my room in the dark. I didn't have any answers.

My mother grew to like me less and less as time went on. She was not the one to blame. After the drought hit our valley, she stopped talking to me entirely. Maybe it was the lack of sunshine, or the fact that the blueberry bushes were brown, or that she knew deep down her only daughter had no interest in the young men who came by the house with sunflowers every summer's eve. One night, I asked if she wanted to pick the shells off peanuts and eat them in front of the TV. She said no, that she didn't buy those in bulk anymore. I found the old bags tossed in the closet while I was searching for her heels to give the undertaker. After her funeral, there was always heavy tension hanging in the house. It was too much for my older brother, and he left us soon after. He followed a pretty girl and a herd of ruckus to the nearest city. My younger brothers stopped asking about him eventually, because he never bothers to call. That is fine. We have gotten better at being alone.

There have been no mothers for three years now. Maybe four. The expecting women moved to the city and the fathers have taken to call-girls. The children used to wail at night, but they don't anymore. I don't know if anybody cries. We remain fresh out of tears.

I do the dishes and I make the beds and I pack the lunches and I play housewife. On laundry day, I avoid the gaze of the girls hanging their khakis on the lines. In the supermarket, we don't say a word to each other. There is tension hanging in the airwaves if a young woman calls on the phone. Because we all know who is responsible. We all know now, even if we didn't before. So we play mothers and we care for the children. We play wives in the bedroom and we pretend to know what we're doing while we're in their pants. Some move away to escape the whole mess of it. The ones that stay are overwhelmed with a heavy guilt from morning to dusk.

The vineyards become our sanctuary. The dirt is soft and the grape leaves provide solace from any rain. We run to them at sunset. We carry baskets of bread, cheese, and sparkling cider that will make our stomachs bubble and our lips curl. We leave our guilt at home with the scripts of the roles we now play. I brush and braid my hair, I put gloss on my lips and I smell like the strawberries I have yet to taste. I am one of them and I run as fast as I can. It does not matter what I am wearing or bringing or doing or saying, nothing matters because it is our secret and nothing lives beyond these vast green vines. We do not bother the people who own this sacred land. The vineyard people are old, they eat a few almonds at four in the afternoon and call it dinner, and they move swiftly to bed no later than seven. Then the trellises are full of women, none of us mothers, all of us good at being quiet all day long, some of us finally ready to feel whole again.

It is a meeting of tortured spirits. There is whiskey for the pain, there are candles so we can gaze upon our conspirators, and there are stray buckets for our tears. We confess our thoughts and our worries and our shared misery and we pray that our mothers above cannot see past the leaves under which we sit. The darkness always tends to wear off, no matter how serious the circumstance. Then,

there is music, quietly hummed until one of us is bold enough to bring a guitar. Then, we meet monthly and we bake as if it were a book club. Innocent and educational. Which it is, sometimes. The vineyards become a safe place to exist, the only place we can escape the gaze of the grieving community, where we can go to push the responsibility off of our delicate shoulders. A secret place for the guilty. A place to speak.

We ask each other if we look like the poison the press writes so much about. Gathered under the moonlight, we don't look like criminals at all. We look beautiful and we look innocent. Can the way we live and the soft forms we love be responsible for the deaths of the women who made us from seeds? For a while, I think it must be. This is not an opinion we all share. We sit and we lay together, dirt making its way underneath our fingernails as the crickets fill the silence. The grapes grow from buds to plump violet orbs in the meantime.

We begin to form attachments, and this is fine. One woman with short dark hair starts a game with me, she tosses the growing grapes in my mouth from across the field to see if I can catch them. "As far as you can," she shouts to me, smiling, and I take off running in the opposite direction. The wind whips the cold night air around me until I'm shivering at the end of the vineyard. She picks a few from the indigo bunch in her hand, and always pitches them a foot or so farther than I can run. Bentley would be an apple person if it weren't for the fact that her mother is also dead. Her mother named her after a British car because she hoped her daughter would be pretty and polite, which she is, and so that she would be reliable and strong, which she also is. She didn't seem like the kind of mother who would have lived in our valley. Bentley has rough hands because she works in the orchards, and a bright smile because she does not have a father or brothers who expect her to pay penance for her sins in the form of household chores. She calls my hands "buttery soft," and when I am sad, she holds my face in the palm of her hand and speaks to me, all quiet and sweet and unlike her, until she feels that I'm okay again. We get along very well in the vineyard. She asks me questions until the wick of the candles are too small to light and we can no longer see each other's smiles.

I go to the supermarket on Wednesday afternoons. I walk to the fruit stand and the girl with the handmade earrings is usually behind the counter. I buy mangos for my father, pears for my brothers, sweet corn for supper, and a perfectly ripe orange for Bentley. Then I go home, I put in the wash, I unpack the lunches, I make the dinner, I wash the dishes, I help with the homework, I race to the vineyard, I run into her arms, I bury my face in her hair, she puts her hands around my waist, and we fall into the toiled earth. She is my soft place to land.

She whispers to me about leaving the valley. She tells me that the oranges grow sweet in California. The trees have big green leaves, or that's how I imagine them when she describes how there is too much sun for there to ever be shadows. There, the girls run unrestrained in long, flowing skirts, and the mothers don't turn away their heads when the skirts are tousled and tossed in the fields. The girls climb the trees of the plentiful orchards and they walk hand in hand picking delicate wildflowers. The

mothers display them in the center of the table. There, the mothers do not have heart attacks when their daughters are found with purple on their necks from the hours spent hidden in the hay of the barns. The mothers are loving and they are kind, and they help them sew white gowns of silk and lace. Bentley and I do not have mothers anymore but we have each other. And it is not a trade either of us would have made, but it is good.

It is almost winter again, and that means soon we will no longer be able to flee to the vineyards at nightfall. The earth will become hard and the air will be too cold to warm each other up. Winter is the loneliest season for this reason. We have our last night of the harvest together beneath the vines. I lay my head in Bentley's lap and she runs her fingers through my hair. She speaks to me softly, her voice like tough cotton that is worn until it is delicate. Susanna builds a fire, Genevieve brings blankets, and Rosie does most of the talking. Then, Lauren with the long blonde hair tells me a secret. She crawls over to my blanket, pushes my hair aside, and whispers in my ear, "I'm going to have a baby." Lauren is smiling, so I smile in return, fiddling with the blanket in my fingertips. I ask if she's going to leave, and she says she loves the father. He lives here, he's a high school dropout, he's a banker, and she loves him. I didn't know it worked like that. I didn't know your mother could die if you could still love a man. I ask Bentley for the wine, and later she walks me all the way home in the dark. Lauren is going to be a mother.

It was raining the day that Bentley left. It hadn't rained in a long time, and I think I would have been very happy about that, if not for her leaving. She packed a single suitcase and got on a bus, then a plane, and then who knows where. I like to think she went to California, like we had always talked about. She asked me to go with her but I wasn't ready. I'm not going to lie about it, I wanted her to stay with me. I did. I would have kissed her differently if I had known it was gonna be the last one.

I spend more time with my father now. He is very quiet most days, we have that in common. He makes himself a cappuccino in the mornings, and one for me with oat milk instead of whole. Then he reads the paper, which is new, because for a long time he did not. He spent a few hours one day training the puppy to fetch it from the driveway at dawn. I wonder if the fathers blame us for the deaths of their wives. Maybe they also have a secret sanctuary they slip off to when the sun sets, maybe they grieve together under the apple trees or in the abandoned car lots, maybe they reminisce and talk each other out of killing their own daughters. But even if they do, something tells me they do the majority of their mourning alone.

The winter is tedious and passes me by in a dull, beige flurry. There is the holiday season, when we slip each other small gifts and tokens of love in the grocery stores; stale apple cookies leftover in January; a letter from Bentley in February, which I will not allow myself to open; the fourth anniversary of my mother's death in March, for which I wear a dress she would have liked; we return to the vineyards in April; it rains for the first week in May; the girl with the crystal earrings quits her job at

the farmstand in June, and in July, Lauren has her baby and dies on the table wearing a hospital gown. That night, the vineyard burns.

I see the smoke billowing over the hills. It starts at dusk. The wood upholding the vineyard is dry and cracked from lack of rain and it catches, eager for some change. It is a slow, overpowering mass of grey that surrounds the acres entirely. There are crystal red sparks and the air smells like ashen grapes and the burned cedar of the trellis. The fire is fast and the vines fall up into the air like swallow feathers pouncing into the shade of clouds. There is no saving it.

I race outside with hatred in my eyes and if I had more fight in me, I would have ran there one last time. Instead, my knees hit the grass and the tears stream down my red cheeks and I rip fistfuls of hair out of my head.

I sit and I watch it burn through blurred eyes. It is hours before my heart stops pounding and my lungs stop wailing my horrors to the deaf ears above. Is this what a broken heart feels like? Is this what losing my mother has brought upon me, have I become so close to hell that I am one with the serpents burrowed in the earth? My nails are too fucking short to be filled with blood but if they were longer I know I'd have torn up my skin. I want to be anywhere but here. I want to be with her.

I breathe and I sleep so many days away and I sip tea and I realize many things. My hair gets longer and I get very good at making sandwiches with a poker face.

I miss my mother most of all.

mycologists are really fun to have at parties, trust me
o. captain

(WARNINGS: body horror, gore, worms, cannibalism)

Looks like nematodes, she tells me. Beneath her gaze
my arm festers, bone-flayed, blood-worms writhing
like capillaries come alive. They have been here
since I came back from the dead. My lover,

the mycologist, breathes spores into my skin,
jealous that my passengers are not her
favored guests. The nematodes persist, but mushrooms grow, too,
mycelia lancing through osteocytes, pervading marrow.

My arm across my eyes. The nematodes descend,
finding soft purchase on my white sclera, staining red
with ulnal blood. They bring the mushrooms with them.
In the morning, the mycologist is at my wrist, vampiric,

biting, tearing. Nematode and hyphae in her teeth.
Gore-grinning at my wormy, threaded eyes, her mouth
approaching, gentle pressure as she tears them
from the optic nerves. It is not a painful sensation.

She knows, as we pass *Aminata* back and forth
between our tongues, I won't again be poisoned,
so she pushes at the limit of my undead immortality,
gnaws at my still-warm bones, feeds me

to her fungal colonies. She says to me, *my wife,*
the incubator. The mycologist mollified, my nematodes
get closer to my heart, racing her hyphae, chasing
iron-heavy hemocytes back to their source.

My lover, the mycologist, admits defeat, but I will not

let her withdraw from my smooth ribs, I keep
murmuring, *stay*, as second death approaches.
She tells me, *it will be so odd, to see your body still.*