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The Great Lake Review
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Growth
Liam Sullivan
His tongue circles the top of your mouth 
tracing the layout of your bones 
causing 
your teeth to fall out.

His mouth is a vacuum 
that is stuck on mode high 
sucking your face dry.

You try to endure it 
because there’s a 
baby sleeping soundly 
just a few doors down 
from your impromptu jaw incision.

So, you contemplate, 
if letting a banshee cry 
escape 
your vocal cords 
and allowing the baby to combust 
would be better than having 
his tongue down your throat
reaching for the acid walls of your stomach.
Finally,
he pulls his tongue out,
and you mistake your sudden nakedness
for relief,
only to realize that
you’re a fish
gasping for air
on dry concrete
and your saving grace
is the very person
that pulled you out of the water
filling your stomach
with a river of spit.

Then, slowly,
he picks you off the ground
laying you flatly so your gut presses
against a soft bed,
and with his long nails
he marks a V against your skin
slowly penetrating your dermis layer
until he reaches your spine.

And like a fillet fish
he removes your backbone and
replaces it with an iron rod.

Once he’s finished
rewiring the rest of your body,
he leaves you to your own demise.

And,
from afar,
he watches
as your frame
slowly melts under
his bed sheets.
In a muffle voice
he lets a chuckle out
when you
use your fallen teeth
to tear up your skin
and nods when you
allow bacteria to consume
what remains of your
lifeless
anatomy.
Not all doors were meant to be opened. This is something I, in all my arrogance and curiosity, failed to understand. Not all doors are meant to be opened, not all keys are to be used. Not all locks are meant to be unlocked, not all secrets are meant to be unearthed.

I don’t know who my family is. Not really. My parents died when I was young, and I was sent to live with my dad’s aunt and uncle. It was obvious they didn’t want me, but took me in all the same for ‘propriety’s sake’ or something. My mother’s family was a mystery. The only living proof of it was my grandmother, but she was in hospice, old and frail and not all there. I used to visit her, sit beside her bed and listen to her rambling tales. Her hair was fine and white and wispy, and her skin thin and papery, blue veins stark against its paleness. I didn’t really understand too much of what she talked about. Something about a grandfather of mine, her husband. He had designed his own home back in 1908, shortly after they got married. It had a lab in the basement, a place for him to conduct his experiments and research. He wanted to change the world. But in the early ‘20s, they had to leave it behind. Grandmother never said why, but it has sat untouched behind a tall iron fence ever since. When my grandmother passed, I was the only heir. I would gain the keys and deed to that mysterious house when I turned 18.

Before she died, grandmother begged me not to go in, not to pass the iron wrought gate that now bled with rust, to not cross the unkempt lawn, to not take down the boards from the grand entrance, to not explore that place. She wanted to get rid of it, to burn it to the ground, but she didn’t. She said she couldn’t. Instead, the home remained behind a large fence, windows and doors boarded up, a home meant to be forgotten to time.

Yet here I stand, past the bleeding fence, through the tall grass, before the torn down boards, best friend at my side. I turned 18 a few months ago, and me and Bobby graduated high school a few weeks back. It’s summer, our first free from the chains of the public education system. I turned to face him, grinning.

“You ready?” I asked him.

“Why are we doing this again?”
I sighed. “Adventure, remember? Mysterious abandoned house I was warned not to enter, mad scientist grandfather, family secrets to be discovered.”

“And?”

“And I wish for a home to call my own. My aunt and uncle are getting pretty sick of me living with them. This gives me a place to stay.”

I headed through the door. He followed me, his steps more hesitant than mine. I heard him coughing behind me, the air filled with stirred up dust. Our flashlights illuminated the hall before us, and it looked so boringly ordinary. I expected something more bizarre from an abandoned home, but all I got was a dusty once floral floor runner, some cobwebbed hooks with the odd coat thrown on, and pictures on the walls too dust coated to see clearly. I took a few steps in, and noticed something glinting in the light. A door, at the end of the hall. Dark wood, six giant locks, a weird vibe coming from it. Probably led to the basement, to his lab. I walked towards it, ghosting my fingers on the wood, shocked at the warmth. I pulled out the key ring, and got to work. Behind me, I could hear Bobby moving around some, could vaguely see him flickering his light here and there.

It opened with a small click, revealing a steep staircase going down. I descended, Bobby at my heels, the stairs narrow and steep and creaking. When I got to the bottom and flashed my light around, it looked like a basement; stone walls and floors and a musty smell. The little passageway we were in lead to a larger room that had these rough wooden tables that were covered in glass bottles and flasks and metal instruments. I didn’t understand half the stuff in there. There were also bookshelves lining the walls, weighed down and sagging in the middle with books. I kinda expected things to be dustier, but it was relatively clean for having been abandoned for over three decades.

I got distracted by a notebook sprawled open on one of the tables. It had notes in code and weird diagrams that I couldn’t understand. I heard the scuffling of shoes on stone to my left but ignored it. I wished to know my family, and the journal could be key. When I looked up a minute later, I was alone. To my left where I heard the scuffle there was another passageway.

“Really Bobby? Ditching me? So mature.”
I huffed and headed down the passageway, trying to catch up with him while maintaining a leisurely speed. I passed by some pretty weird rooms. Shredded cots on the floor and chains attached to the wall, metal cages and crates, an assortment of weird looking tools. I kept walking, and then I heard it. A hum, of sorts, mechanical or electrical in sound. I kept walking, and it got louder, and then I saw a pale light that was not from my flashlight. I flicked it off and crept forward, slowly entering the chamber. Standing in the middle of the room was a man. A living, breathing man. He looked relatively young, maybe early thirties, and he had dark hair and hungry eyes. The man smiled at me and it looked like he was sizing me up, from my scuffed saddle shoes to my dust covered bluejeans and blouse. It made all my hairs stand on end and a chill race down my spine.

“Who are you?” I asked. I was trying not to panic. Stranger in my grandfather’s locked basement was probably not a good thing. “You’re - you’re trespassing.”

He kept grinning. “How nice it is to meet you at last, Thelma Emery. I am Jacob Merx. I worked closely with your grandfather for many years.”

“Excuse me?”

“We were partners in crime, doing our research and experiments to give the US an advantage in the Great War. Him departing was a setback, but now that you are here we can pick up where we left off.”

“Can - can you tell me about him? About my family? I know so little.”

“I can tell you everything. Why they abandoned this place, what your grandparents were like, why your parents died. All of it. Even better, he can tell you himself.”

Emerging from nothingness and shadow, my grandfather appeared. He looked wrong, different. Looked like on occasion, he flickered and his skin was too pale. But other than that, he was of the pictures I’d seen. Portly, short, harsh eyes, severe beard. “He’s dead.”

“True, he is. His spirit, however, lingered. Attached itself here, with me and our work.”

I was about to ask what exactly their work was, when I finally heard snarling over the hum. Turning, I saw four creatures chained up against a wall. They weren’t human, yet were made of human bits. Hunched, sallow, sagging skin, missing hair, scars, implanted claws
on their hands and feet. They had their teeth bared, and had their noses in the air, sniffing like a dog or wolf would.

“Would you like to hear about us, Thelma? Hear of me and your grandmother; stories of your mother’s childhood, how she met your father. How and why they met their untimely demise?” asked a voice I did not recognize yet knew intimately all the same. The voice of my grandfather.

“Yes,” I said. “I would want nothing more.”

My ghostly grandfather smiled at me, but said nothing more.

“All you have to do is one little thing first,” said Jacob. “Think of it as a favor. A rite of passage. An initiation into our world. Then, we’ll share our memories with you.”

“Anything. Just say the word. This means too much to me.”

Jacob smiled again, but it wasn’t the kind smile of my grandfather. It was cold and hungry. My grandfather disappeared, returning a moment later with a gurney before him. Restrained by thick leather straps and struggling was Bobby. My best friend. He was looking at me with wide eyes, and my grandfather was next to him, holding the gurney still. On a metal table nearby the gurney surgical tools and saws.

Jacob held a scalpel out towards me, handle first. “We’ll guide you through it. Human attachments will only hold you back.”

I looked at the scalpel, then at Jacob’s piercing eyes, then at Bobby. At the time, I didn’t ponder logistics. I didn’t ponder why my grandfather’s ghost was there, how he could’ve known about my parents death which occurred a decade after his own, how Jacob looked so young despite working with my grandfather thirty years before, how Jacob was alive after living so long in a basement locked from the outside. All I thought of was how these men held the key to my past.

I looked at Bobby one last time.

“I’m sorry.”

I grabbed the scalpel.
You’re in the boat and the fish is bleeding. Like bleeding-bleeding. Not, a scratch that might stop hurting in a few minutes. No, there’s a hook stuck in it’s body that Dad can’t remove. It doesn’t help that it’s out of the lake, and this fish would probably appreciate being able to breathe. Your Uncle’s unphased as Dad grabs a pair of pliers to wrench it out, but you start to cry. It’s not like this hasn’t happened before.

When you were a Girl Scout, one of the counselors at summer camp led a fishing expedition on the shores of Song Lake and you caught a yellow carp. Unfortunately instead of it being solely your favorite color, its sides were stained red from catching it at just the right angle. The counselor said she couldn’t get the hook out, and you were just seven years old so what help would you be? So, she threw it back in the water. Years later, you realized that she left it to die.

But still, this fish, it still has time. Or so you hope. Dad probably knows better; but he’s too busy trying to extract the metal barb that this fish just can’t spit out. You still cry, you’re watching him die in Dad’s hands. Dad tells you to stop because he can fix it, in fact in Dad’s eyes he can fix anything. You look anywhere but at the fish, you don’t believe him. Sure, he’s repaired the lawnmower and patched up the pool. But he can’t stitch up the scales in the fish’s side. So, you wipe at your eyes and try not to recall what a dead fish looks like.

Nothing short of a miracle, Dad finally releases the hook and drops
the fish back into the water in a cloud of blood. It swims away, and for Dad and your Uncle, this is the end. But you're too emotional to keep driving them, so you take a seat in the back of the boat.

You don’t remember what the fish looks like in a few days, let alone a few years. All that remains is the memory of it being left to be eaten by another lake dweller or die, whether it be in the next few minutes or hours. Perhaps your recollection is a seventeen-year-old girl’s overdramatization and it could actually survive for days. Regardless, there’s other fish in the lake. They may get caught on a fisherman’s line. Maybe not. All you know is that the boat surges forward and so do you.
VI - The Lovers
Leighann McPartland
Flower
Kayla Elfers

(Lights up on PERCY playing with a wilted Carnation in a flower shop. She puts it down and turns on the radio. PERCY happy dances” to the music as DEMITRA enters with shopping bags on her arms.)

DEMITRA
Percy, can you help me with the bags? Percy? What are you doing? PERCY! Oh my God, is she having a seizure? (DEMITRA drops her bags and walks over to PERCY. PERCY finally sees her. PERCY shuts off the music.)

DEMITRA (CONT’D)
What the hell were you just doing?

PERCY
I um-- yeah, I’m not even gonna try explaining that. So... How was shopping today?

DEMITRA
I got us new foam, balloons and a whole bunch of stuff. How was the store?

PERCY
Oh, the store was good, I--

DEMITRA
Any customers?

PERCY
No.
(PERCY leans on the counter.)
DEMITRA
What’s that number doing on your arm then? You know you can get/
It happens to people every day.

PERCY
Ink poisoning./ I know, I know.

DEMITRA
So, that number? Whose is it?

PERCY
I guess you can say he was a customer.

DEMITRA
What do you mean “I guess”? Are you lying to me?

PERCY
I’m not lying, I just didn’t think he counted as a customer
because he didn’t buy anything, that’s all Mom.

DEMITRA
So a random man came in here, gave you his number, and left?

PERCY
He also left me a carnation.
(PERCY grabs the wilted flower from the counter
and shows DEMITRA.)

DEMITRA
Throw it out.

PERCY
Why?

DEMITRA
Wash his number off your arm, too.

PERCY
But I don’t want to.
DEMITRA
What did you just say?

PERCY
(Audaciously)
I said, no.

DEMITRA
I know you want attention because you are a young girl but/
You're going for the wrong attention.

PERCY
Young girl? Attention?/ I'm EIGHTEEN.

DEMITRA
That means nothing to me. (Beat) So you're gonna make poor
decisions now? Is that what I'm hearing?

PERCY
How did you get that from “I’m eighteen”?

DEMITRA
You’re gonna go out with this man just so he can rape you and
torture you and murder you and ship your parts to China for all
I know and--

PERCY
And what? AND AND AND can you just SHUT THE FUCK UP
ALREADY.

DEMITRA
(Brokenly)
Never once did I ever think you would be the one to disrespect
me like that.
(DEMITRA walks over to grab her bags and leave.
PERCY stops her.)

PERCY
I’m sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to--
DEMITRA
But you did.

PERCY
I just meant... “vita” ... You gave me this, don’t you remember? You wanted me to live a life worth living. (Touches necklace.)

PERCY (CONT’D)
I am eighteen and I want to see what he could bring to my life.

DEMITRA
I want you to live your life but safely, safely. How is life worth living if you’re murdered? A man who gives you a dead flower means he wants to take advantage of you. And that’s not living life now is it?

(PERCY looks at the wilted flower.)
PERCY
It’s just a flower.

DEMITRA
If it’s just a flower to you, why don’t you throw it out? (PERCY hesitates then throws the flower out.)

PERCY
It’s just a dying flower. (DEMITRA hugs PERCY. DEMITRA quickly releases.)

DEMITRA (CONT’D)
Oh shit, I forgot floral tape! What time is it?

PERCY
Nine.

DEMITRA
Okay, the dollar store should have some, right?
PERCY
I think so.

DEMITRA
I'm gonna go get that and when I'm home, I want that number washed off, okay? We can watch a movie or something. I'll be right back!

(DEMITRA hugs PERCY then exits. PERCY takes the wilted flower out of the trash)

PERCY
It's just a dying flower.

(PERCY looks at her arm and then the Telephone. She moves towards the phone. Lights down.)
Breaking News
Amber Holt

Now at participating McDonald’s, enjoy 15% off of the permanent damages of institutional discrimination

A hurricane that lasts the duration of a nation broadcasting the last breath of faithful press

To empower the people or the profit
Gilded prophets seize your rent deposit

Shorter wages lead to ages lived in cages
Mugshots dismiss their stories and their faces

Breaking News: The crew won’t interview victims of policies and laws, but if you review
your visit by completing this survey, you can win a new decade of difficult access to adequate care

Is it fair when sirens blare for unpaid transit fares?
Don't ask, don’t act, just send them thoughts and prayers

Value menu and promotional pricing not valid for the unsafe, tired, and frustrated, the ones who find no justice, no peace

The hundreds of protesters against the police
The brutality against them they fight to cease

There’s no room for their voices or the sorrows they clad
Others have it worse, their lives can’t be that bad

Would you like to fill this space with an ad?
oblivious \ə-ˈblī-vē-əs\ adj. I. The insignificance of an empty wooden dinghy tumbling cyclically over a waterfall / chewing on red meat as the word cascades into chaos, / wiping the remnants off your teeth. / A doe-eyed child staring blankly into a screen while its father sits sulking at the dinner table. 2. Thirteen measly points in a game of Scrabble. / The blood that creeps out of unaddressed wounds. / Writing a message of desperation, / shoving it down the neck of unwilling glass, / wishing it farewell from the shoreline. / “How do things get caught up in whirlpools, anyways?” / A midnight bicycle ride into the fog, / the unapologetic nature of raised concrete, / whiplash, / asphalt embedded in ankles. / A kettle screaming steam as flames lick copper with lustful thoughts / The stove only swallows more greased metal than dare look up to see.
“Eating Together“
Anthony Mirarcki

I never enjoy seafood night at camp.
The smell of the clams
grosses me out,
I’m pretty sure lobsters
are just giant sea-bugs
and in order to eat them
everyone uses so much butter
that everything is greasy for days.

Watching the way the shells
break apart in your teeth,
how many drinks was that again?
And maybe the sides taste okay,
Nana’s smashed potatoes, corn,
and home-made camp fries
that melt in your mouth,
but it is difficult to smile
when you start to pound the table.
Maybe a shot of Jack
isn’t the best call right now?

And I could have dealt with all the yelling
if we had just got the chance
to kick back and try not to
get brain-freeze while devouring
Papa’s world-famous sundaes,
I even would have been fine
with eating a bowl of cereal—

Either one of those things
would have made seafood night
just a little more bearable,
but I swear these sea-bugs smell
way worse while I watch
flaky pieces of their flesh flying from your mouth, all while you go around the table, person by person telling us exactly how you would—and easily could—kill us each with your bare hands. Even Grandma Jean, who’s 165.

But I will admit, watching Papa drag you from the house in your drunken tantrum while I made Pop-Tarts helped to make the smell a little less bad.
The B46 was clothed in narrow evening lights.
I was on my way to bring Ms. Madeline
some dasheen, yam, and cassava my mother had made.
Mother’s orders,
go straight there,
come straight back.
The evening sight was the usual,
people leaving work,
people buying dinner,
kids leaving afterschool,
people transferring from bus to train,
and from train to bus.

We reached St. Johns.
Three people boarded the semi-vacant bus.
A man with wrinkles lightly pressed against his face
sat next to me.
A friend he wanted.
My friend was the pepper spray jacketed in leather in my purse.
I became fearful of “friendly” men in the after hours
since last year.

I tried to let my discomfort speak for me,
as I bowed my head and my brown hood
cast a shadow over my face.
My name he wanted,
my name I didn’t give.
He told me of his granddaughter

who was “like me.”
“Beautiful, sweet, and 16.”
My age I did not give.
I felt the weight of his stare sinking me into the seat.
I pressed the stop button one stop earlier than the usual.
When I got off through the front,
I saw him walk out from the back.
I remembered mother’s orders.
I sped down to Ms. Madeline’s street.

I buzzed the front door,
I ran into the elevator,
I reached her apartment and rang her doorbell,
I caught my breath.

Her door opened,
it was her, Ms. Madeline.
“Reya, my girl! So long I eh see you,”
she said with an embrace.
“Come say hi to my friend.”
When I walked in to say hello,
I saw that her friend
was the friend I did not want.
The grass grew around the bodies, each blade bending towards one another, covering their limbs. Yellow dandelions, vibrant blues of the Scorpion grasses, deep purples of the wood sorrels mixed with the green, hues which could only be found in nature. Serenity hung in the air, but no one felt it but them. No one would ever feel it but them. Peace enveloped them. It was stronger than they could have ever imagined. Never would they ever find a better place, or a better time, or a better reason, to do what they’d intended, together.

Day one, they were left alone. All the animals were too fearful. Their previous run-ins with these creatures never ended well. They looked on from afar, leaving all but one curious raccoon to refrain from approaching. The raccoon found no movement, nothing to fear, but took no interest in what they had to offer. He scurried away, towards the moon, leaving them how they’d hoped to be.

Day two, the insects began their sortie. Ants, spiders, beetles, and the like, all came to defend their ground. After realizing the bodies were not the enemy, they provided no threat, not even a retaliation to this attack, the bugs found them to be a resource. They would let the beetles do the hard work and take their leftovers. Of course, once the maggots heard of the feast, they came quick to the scene.

On day three, it rained. Soil turned to mud, worms joined the beetles and the maggots. The bodies grew dirty, hair clumped, skin fouled, bodies drenched. They couldn’t feel a thing. Once the shower ceased, day turned to dusk, and the foxes awoke from their slumber. A new scent filled their nostrils. Three of them, in their small skulk, followed the smell to their new meal. Aside from the damage the insects had done, they could feed for quite some time on this alone.

Day four brought the raccoons back. During the sunlit hours, the bugs were the only inhabitants. Fearful that their food would be stolen, the foxes woke early to feed before anyone else could get there. If the bodies themselves weren’t in such a deep, tranquil sleep, they would be glad they could provide so much to so many beautiful creatures. Before their slumber, that was what they’d hoped for. The
raccoons watched the foxes from afar, snickering to one another once they took the red canids’ spots.

The previous rainfall did the plants some good. The weeds and grass grew long and tall. By day five, the flora peaked between their limp legs, near the curves of their necks, in the space between his right arm and her left. The deer became less intimidated; they grazed as if the plants were alone. Their hooves were so gentle. Aside from the resistless plantlife, everything stayed the same. The bodies lay on the soft ground, still, placid, contented, together. Never had they slept so well. In their mind lasted the image of dawn, of their beautiful sunrise. They’d dream of its colors for eternity.

Day six, they were cold. They were blue. Bluer than they’d been before. Perfect for the crows, the vultures, and the ravens. Vultures were few and far between, so the crows and the ravens were left to duel over them. The fowl frightened the fauna they’d previously nourished, with their harsh caws, sharp screeches, piercing claws, and pointed beaks. They exposed the flesh of the bodies, as clothing had been gnawed through and skin torn. They got the scraps.

In the very early hours of the final day, before a human’s morning, the stench and absence of birds brought the raccoons back. Though displeased with their selection, they consumed what they could. Even with how well the bodies fostered the land, they weren’t unrecognizable. Their decomposition and morphing with the earth would have continued if not for the dog. The dog lapped at their flesh, its prideful parent shouting in fear and scolding once discovering what exactly it fed on.

Blue and red lights tinted the bodies, overpowering the luminescence of the moon on their limbs. The officer’s right fingertips touched his forehead, his chest, his left shoulder, then his right shoulder. The daughter of a friend. In a town as small as theirs, everyone was a daughter of a friend, a son of a friend, a daughter of a daughter or a son of a son. She would be mourned, corpse either displayed gruesomely or burned and scattered somewhere she’d never want it scattered. He would be blamed for the circumstance, because no one knew him. An outsider, from a city no one had ever been to; he was the reason she was trapped in eternal slumber. No one seemed to notice their purple fingers laced together.
Citrus Maxima
Liam Morgenstern
You’re tired.
Unable to sleep, you toss and turn all night, fighting to keep the smile off your lips. You’re excited, you’ve been waiting for this day since your mom told you about it three weeks ago. You even bragged to your first grade teacher how you get to miss a whole day of school. You don’t get to see your dad a lot, and you treat it as a privilege. The trunk being slammed is muffled as you shut your eyes and dream of green.

Gray. Your bleary eyes blink open and you stare out at storm clouds. Hours have passed. It feels like every year the car rides get longer and longer. You don’t recognize this as a problem, why should you? It gives you more time to sleep, so you can use all your energy to play with your dad. You turn to your mom, “How much longer?” you ask, rubbing your eyes. She smiles at you.

“Not too long.”
Satisfied with the response, the one that placates you every time, you close your eyes and bob your head to the music on the car radio.

There’s crackling on the man in blue’s radio. His hands search you and your mom, makes you take off your jackets and shoes, and you almost feel like crying. Your mom looks annoyed, then turns to you and immediately cups your cheek.

“It’s okay, baby,” she whispers, and you feel yourself taking a shuddering breath to calm down.

“Why do we need to do this to see daddy?” you ask, just as quiet.

“Because...” she starts, then pauses. “Daddy’s castle needs to be protected from bad guys! These guards are just doing their job.”

Your bad mood is gone in a snap, and you grin happily. You don’t see your mother’s grimace, but you take her hand in yours and squeeze. There’s a beep and a green light, and the guards let you pass and go into a common room, different from the last. You bounce in a chair, legs kicking as men in khaki jumpsuits pile out.
When you take your seat, your feet finally touch the floor this time. Your dad doesn't comment on it.

Your dad smiles at you, taking the seat across from you. You manage a half smile back. Your mom sits next to him, her hands firmly clasped in her lap.

He touches your knee, bringing your attention back to him. “How’s your last year of middle school?” he asks.

“It’s okay, but I don’t really wanna talk about school,” you say. You finally take in his appearance fully, frowning at the orange. He’s always wearing khaki. “What’s up with the new look?”

“I got put in the hole,” he explains. Your mom rolls her eyes, and you frown. It’s prison terminology, something a twelve year old probably shouldn’t know but your mom couldn’t hide it any longer. Especially when you started telling kids in your class that your dad lived in a tall castle with other men and barbed fences. That was awkward for her during the parent-teacher conference.

You don’t want to know why he was put in the “hole.” You almost miss your blissful ignorance, but you don’t want to ruin the visit with him this year. Now he’s in Ohio, miles away from little old Queens and your mom doesn’t want to make the trips anymore.

“Hey, let’s go get a Twix.” Your dad stands with a grin, and you smile in return as you take his hand. The common room of the prison always has candy for visitors, and your mom lets you splurge.

He lets you push in the buttons on the vending machine, and you watch as it drops to the bottom with a thud. He reaches in to grab it, then opens the wrapper.

“Left or right?” he asks.

You pretend to think about it. “Right.”

He hands it to you, and you both take a bite.

“When will you be home?” you ask, after the silence of chewing.

“Soon,” he promises.

Mom promised to take you to visit dad this year, but then he got moved to Texas. Your mom mentioned to your grandma something about fighting, but you’re angry with both of them.
Your mom officially divorced your dad, which you should've seen coming from the influx of paperwork, the hushed conversations she shared with your grandma, how she never smiled during visits.

“I wish I could see you,” your dad says through the phone.

“Your mom sent me pictures, you’ve gotten so big.”

“Whatever. I guess you have to wait till you’re home, whenever that is,” you mutter. You’re graduating high school in a few months, and it’s just another reminder of how many things he’s missed out on in your life. And will continue to miss.

He sighs. There’s silence on the line.

Minutes pass, and you wait for him to speak. To hear his excuse this time. Instead, you hear the familiar double beep. His fifteen minutes are almost up.

“I’ll be home before you know it, angel.”

You say nothing. The phone call cuts off, and the dial tone fills the silence.

You’re tired.
FADE IN:

INT. OFFICE BUILDING - NIGHT

DIANA, late 20’s, is idly walking through rows of empty cubicles. It is dark in the office, the only light is being provided from a couple exit signs on the walls.

She murmurs to herself under her breath as she zigzags along.

She twirls keys around her bare ring finger.

Diana passes empty desks. Happy faces smile at her as her eyes fall over countless photos. Some are taped to cubicle walls, some are framed perfectly sitting on dustless desktops.

Faces of children holding onto their parents’ legs as they stand in a well-groomed yard. The shutters on the houses bringing out the colors in their matching outfits.

The keys JINGLE against the silence as they twirl around her finger.

She pauses at the next desk. There are BOXES surrounding it with “James” written on them.

From a box, she retrieves a photo of a smiling MAN (upper 30’s), this is JAMES. He stands with a beautiful WOMAN wrapped in his arms. Her BELLY STICKS OUT, hanging over her waistline.

The sun highlights her face, matching the glow of the RING on her finger.

Diana swallows hard.

She takes a couple steps forward, stopping at the next
cubicle. She plops down into the seat and stares at the name plate that reads: Diana Porter.
A cell phone DINGS.

Diana sucks in a breath. She fumbles, retrieving her phone from her pocket.

DAD (TEXT)
Where are you?!

Diana shoves her phone back into her pocket. She slams her elbows onto the desk, her face in her palms.

Letting out a few shaky breaths, she picks her head up, black smudge on her palms. She pans to the single framed photo on her desk.

Pictured in the photo is a young girl dressed in a graduation gown and hat, the tassel framing her beaming face.

She holds a diploma reading: Summa Cum Laude.

Delirious with anger, Diana stands up from the seat. Diana scans the room, her eyes peer over the cubicle at a room off to the side.

The sign on its door reads: CEO.

Picking up the name plate off of her desk, she beelines for the door. She tries to open it. Locked. Frantic, she begins trying key after key.

CLICK. It opens.

A sneer creeps onto Diana’s face.

INT. OFFICE BUILDING - CEO’S OFFICE - NIGHT

Diana steps into the office, locking the door behind her. Slowly, she takes in her surroundings.

The office is half packed into BOXES, with paperwork still sitting on the grand looking desk that is nestled in the back.
Diana sets down her name plate on the desk. She gives it a good look, cocks her head to the side, and adjusts it a little. Just right.

FADE IN:

INT. OFFICE BUILDING - NIGHT

DIANA, late 20's, is idly walking through rows of empty cubicles. It is dark in the office, the only light is being provided from a couple exit signs on the walls.

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She sits in the plush chair and rocks back and forth. It CREAKS with every motion.

She stares into space. A smile on her face that doesn’t reach her eyes.

A cell phone DINGS. She ignores it.

The CREAK of the chair picks up as she rocks faster.

The DINGS continue, falling in rhythm with the CREAKS of the chair.

A loud KNOCK at the door interrupts the noise.

DIANA
(dazed)
Yeah?

MAN’S VOICE (O.S.)
Diana what on earth are you doing in my office!? Where are my keys!?

DIANA
No worries, dad. Everything is as it should be.

Diana’s dead smile intensifies.

DIANA’S FATHER (O.S.)
Oh yeah? Why don’t you get over yourself and take a look at your phone?

Diana flares her nostrils and squeezes the arms of the chair. A moment passes, she takes out her phone.

Endless missed calls from Dad.
A text from James.

Diana opens the text message. A picture of a familiar woman laying in a hospital bed, an infant lays against her chest.

JAMES (TEXT)
Diana, I know things are hard between us right now and you think my promotion should be yours. I hope we can put this mess aside.

Diana raises a shaky hand to her mouth, a tear rolls down her face.

JAMES (CONT’D)
I want you to meet your niece, Joan Diana Porter.

FADE OUT.
Their conversation is far away and muffled. With puppeteer strings I force my mouth to curl to the rhythm of their laughs and yells...

I’m here, I’m listening. Yeah you met her at that bar and you, you went where again? Oh okay, right. Yes, I’m listening.

Metal forks scrape plates and glasses thud on the smooth cold table, their arms are flailing in excitement. Greasy yellow fries pop into their mouths while meaningless words fly out.

But my friend’s voice cuts the veil that separated me from them the deep tone - the icy blade that propels me back into the middle of that street:

His eyes were drunken red, glassy and wide, his spit flew onto my face as he screamed my name, and fuck, and slut, and he inched closer and closer and closer to me but I wasn’t

Listening, again, to my friend’s story; I’m sorry, Can you repeat that?
Music rolls into the ether of
ceiling hung wreaths and ribbons
red and felt. Tween note
and neurogenesis the Grand’s
fingers twitch a sentence
of music savory conversation. The man
listening looms over the grand
as if posing for a portrait
(Napoleon on an oily black horse)
legs crossed, elbow holding
his balancing weight.

The Grand listens with reticent
little nods, blinks crowned by
the heathy brambles of aging
eyebrows.

He ignores his music sheets,
playing from the synaptic holds
of habit: left hand forte boom,
right hand mezzopiano roll
up
and
up

thumb sneaking past ring
cutting off pinky, finding the
heavenly high octaves
taking the highway lane
up the ivories and downtown where
they growl like denned lions.

Two spectators, fallen to the couch,
keep a mutual silence leaving their watch-donned hands in the lint-swallowing black holes of khaki pockets. Their legs, crossed over the knee, keep time, nodding like spring tree limbs. Perpetually pressing the left pedal down to lessen
the sound, the Grand keeps quiet, 
dialoguing through hammer 
headaches on metal strings.

He bears a crooked smile, teeth 
perched on chapped, diaphanous lips 
to the man requesting songs from 
the all-you-can-play jukebox. 
The Grand’s hair, white as the 
lacquered tile floor, is combed into a 
wispy cowlick while his feet 
tap the rhythm of 
\begin{align*} 
&\text{pause} \\
\quad &\text{& hold} \\
\quad &\text{& beat} \\
\quad &\text{& roll} \\
\text{(rest and repeat).} 
\end{align*} 
The grand 
the glacé hue of night 
utters the ineffable, evolving emotion 
into strands of notation. The man 
listening notes the virtue 
of the standards 
the Grand speaks mild, tempered 
by jazz gentle fingers 
wafting his left hand down the clean, 
gleaming teeth, bouncing with finality 
on the low throaty F 
(with a smirk, muttering) 
\textit{nice to meet you as well.}
A Taphobic’s Roulette
Madeline Weisbeck

The ever-gliding portrait,
slick and chill—Alice engages
with refractions. Pills,

a shade of plum, tipped
back against her gullet.
Dizzy she is, oh ho-hum,

she’s gone and chased
the white hare—falling
like sequin snow.

Trapped in hushed
silence, except for thump.
An interlude of

chimes—ghastly pale,
for the door extends
no hand. Locked in

her own casket, hare
jaunts rapid rounds,
unaware of space.

Two coins placed firm
over her eyes, bounce
back towards the earth’s

floor. Alice throttles
coffin’s timber hatch,
quicken pleas break

from her cracked, sunken
face. A dirt filled spade
overpowers her crescendo.
Memories of chrysanthemums wilted, dried, tucked in-between *North and South*. Before plum pills replaced literature, after Dinah's death. Smiles of Cheshire Cat shadowed Alice. Her black ribbon bow pushed back tangles of wheat, cowering away from the Cat, in fits of a bad trip. Emaciated thoughts. *Now* her breath slows, no more air to draw from. No more the hare runs, he falls down dead.
Opinions
Liam Morgenstern
You’ve shoved something in the gap
but a furl of teal cloth has vomited
onto the hardwood, spewing fuzzy shafts of light into the hall.

“Come on, open the door;”

You’ve turned the shower on, though you came home damp
and smelling of shampoo. Above the white noise of water, a cross
between muffled sneeze and wet cough.

“Honey,” I bang my palm against the door. Eyes burn
a bright cheery yellow, dancing bubblegum pink, before the
pressure valve
begins to leak.

You’ve dropped it. The spoon, coated thick with acid, white bubbles
sliding over the edge. I hear the silvery clatter as it bounces
off our Moroccan tiles.

“Unlock the door;”

“Ten more pounds.” Your voice is raw.

“Honey, no, you can’t,” They just made you lose twenty-five over the
off-season, that wasn’t enough?

“I have to.” Your words are wet. “I have to by Friday.”

I hear you slump against the vanity, your thick muscles scraping
the wood. Chest bare. The way you were when you slunk
out of bed and locked the bathroom door.

And to think how I smiled watching you eat a full meal...
How low can the club stoop? Forcing their best defensemen to drop
ten pounds in a week or lose his contract? Doesn’t Roy care what this is doing to him?
I slide down the door, head resting on bent knees.
“Please, let me in,”

You’re crying now, a baby seal’s bark, gasping from the effort of staying quiet.

“Ten more pounds, then everything will be okay.”

So this is how it’s going to be now for every game with fast-skating D’s?

You shift, back against the door. I can almost feel your heat in the blackened hallway until grey dawn twists the knob.
You bend down — slowly to scoop me off the chilled floor.
Lay me down gently in our bed, kiss my hair.

Stay with me.

You whisper something before pulling the door closed, before padding downstairs to the gym where you will run and run
and run

until your lungs give out.
When the highway crests the top of the hill, the city appears, nestled in the valley below. The orange glow of the city lights fights back against the darkness that blankets the land surrounding, its inky blackness threatening to rush in if the lights should fail. The lights are warm despite the cold, and the city sleeps, silent and still save for the wind and the Earth’s perpetual rotation.

The highway runs through native land, forgotten by all except those who lost it long ago. We’ve heard the stories – passed down through the centuries – of shapeshifters and other phantoms that stalk the land at night, but the drive is peaceful.

The screen on the dashboard fills the cabin with blue light. It’s silent in the cabin, except for the hum of the wheels against the road below us. There’s peace and comfort in this silence; we’ve made this trip many times before. You sleep in the passenger seat, your body curled up and facing the passenger door. We pass the cell towers that reach toward the heavens, their blinking red lights imitating the pulsating glow of ancient stars that will someday blink out of existence with the fading of the universe.

We’re in the city now, and it too sleeps, like you. We travel on the viaduct that cuts through what were once neighborhoods,
appropriated without hesitation or regret, splitting generations and histories in two while completely eradicating others. They’re still there, in the concrete, but most have no memory of them. The world has moved on since then.

    I get the vague feeling that none of us are supposed to be here.
I See You
Taylor Volkert

Feet swinging, fingers following the slopes and curves of the table’s grain, eyes locked on the strips of cured meat. It was a dark stain on my day, blossoming red and rotten. I had to eat it to leave. My fork would dance across the plate—a child crashing through pillows and blankets swerving from couch cushion to ottoman, heart set on avoidance or death by lava.

For years I would sink into the couch and absorb commercial after commercial of teeth submerging into burgers with sponge-like buns and glistening meat, but I never understood. I too would dig my teeth into the familiar substance, but my face would squirm as the scent invaded my nostrils, my shoulders would grow taut, and my face curl into itself.

It was Thanksgiving. My family was scattered about, discarded plates sat listless, buttons burst open and bellies up as they took in the calming ambiance of familial conversation. I was stalking the buffet table for seconds, perusing the aisles, plate in hand ready for its next offering when my younger cousin appeared.

“What are you doing?” She said it between bites of speared steak, wooden rod clenched between her fingers, teeth snapping meat from skewer.

“I’m still hungry but I don’t know what I want.”

“Try this, it’s really good.” It was in my face now. Broken flesh peeling away from its crucified post.

“You know, you don’t eat a lot of meat. That’s weird. I love meat…” She continued to praise its soft texture and sweet taste, but all I could hear was my pounding pulse. I watched as her rod danced through the air punctuating every syllable. She was conducting a symphony to the rhythm of the beef, and I wanted a refund.

***

Years went by and dinner conversations changed into:

“Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot. Can’t you just eat the buns?”

“Eat around it?”

“Do you want a turkey burger instead?”

“But you eat fish right?”
“Oh. You’re not one of those people are you?”

***

It was the end of the school year. All my friends were gathered together for dinner and a ritualistic burning of homework.
“Dinner’s ready!” We all swarmed the kitchen anxious to fill our plates.
“Oo I love chicken nuggets!” I looked down at my feet. My friend hosting gently tapped my arm, eyebrows raised playfully, fork in hand.
“My mom also made her famous tofu.”
The Girl In The Dress
Anthony Mirarcki
INT. GIA’S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT
GIA, mid 20s is annoyed and wears nursing scrubs. She is sitting in a circle of chairs that are unoccupied other than the seat next to her, where JILL, mid 20s is content and relaxing in her grocery cashier smock. Both women have the same book in their hands.

GIA
It was nice of you to finally show up.

JILL
I thought this week we said 8:15.

GIA
Every Wednesday for the past month it’s been at eight.

JILL
There’s no need for that tone.

GIA
I don’t know what you’re referring to, Jill.

JILL
That thing you’re doing with your voice. Based on all the books we’ve read, you should know what that means.

GIA
I know what it means, Jill, considering that I’m the one who plans book club.

JILL
I’ve been working until nine lately, Gia.
GIA
I work the night shift on weekends.

JILL
Is that supposed to mean something to me?

GIA
Yes, I’m actually going something.

JILL
I do something.

GIA
But you’re not working the night shift. You don’t watch people die or lose their loved ones.

JILL
Yes, but I...

GIA
Sometimes you put the eggs in the bottom of my bags and break them even after having this job for a year. So don’t you tell me you don’t have time to plan book club.

JILL
I still...

GIA
Don’t say you don’t remember when we meet because if anyone should be forgetting when we should meet it’s me, Jill. Do you know why?

JILL
Personally...
GIA
Weekends.

JILL
I understand, but...

GIA
I don’t have the luxury of
forgetting how to bag eggs. You do,
Jill.

JILL
I put up some flyers at the rec
center.

GIA
And who misspelled “book,” Jill?

JILL
I did.

GIA
It is not a “bok” club. We most
certainly aren’t chicken, we’re
women who appreciate fine
literature.

JILL
I’m sorry.

GIA
“I’m sorry” doesn’t expand our club
to more than two members or return
my wasted money on those posters,
Jill.

JILL
I can pay you...
GIA
We’re still a club with two people in it, we should be called a book pair. Do you bag the pears correctly, Jill?

JILL
Yeah, I do.

GIA
Shocker, Jill. A shocker.

JILL
I think you mean a “bok-er.” Do you know what, Gia?

GIA
What?

JILL
I know you’re not really a nurse, Gia. You have the night shift on weekends at Chicken-Go off East Seventh. I really wanted this to work but even my love for books isn’t enough to make up for the fact that the only truth you’ve told me is that you make the discussion plans. But guess what, Gia? I know you’ve been using Spark Notes. I may not have proofread those posters, but unlike you, I know there is no “f” in anaphora, Gia. I’m through with book club. And it’s a damn good thing I saw that carton in your fridge, which I only put in the bottom of your bag during my first week of training, so Gia, you better get ready to clean the eggs off your house.

(FADE TO BLACK.)
To Atlas
David Moore

As a boy I would grip the holds of my father’s shoulders. My bony, energetic body sticking to him like cellophane. He would feign the innocence of not knowing where I was: leaning against a wall, flattening my fragile frame. My fingertips turned white, bones inverting, the broad freckled mapping of his back surrounding my view. The air squeezed out my lungs like a punctured tire. I’d stay strapped on, looking at the world from upper deck seating, my legs holstered to his hips, arms slowly choking him, the gold crucifix flopping around his furry chest. And I hold on still, when the night is devastatingly dark—when he ignores a militant 11 o’ clock bedtime to watch Jeopardy’s closing questions. I hold tight to those aged shoulders. He carries my weight the same—somehow—as if forgetting I’m there.
To Rosaries of Anxious Thoughts

Molly Sullivan

My passport is in my backpack.
These words plead through my brain like a nervous catholic in confessional.
Repeated time and again
until the words become burned across my lips.
Like surround sound my condemning words echo,
off of brain matter and liquid,
this hymn supposedly a saving grace.
My attempt to absolve myself of sin.

My passport is in my backpack and I cling
to this information like a nun to her rosaries.
Hoping that this slip of paper will keep me safe,
only if it is run through my fingertips enough times
that this smooth surface will become a cushion
with the means to guard me from
pins of the present, that leave me always
bleeding for a hint of a different world
oftentimes only pointed to in fiction.

A world where when I breathe my chest doesn’t immediately
become filled with dread that clouds
my abilities to interact with those I love.
To not stop myself from sharing my life because
it seems like a mere splash of water compared to the
tsunamis they have endured.

A world where eyes don’t seem glued to an appearance.
Where my Sunday’s best does not have to be shadowed over
by what you believe is proper for
the deity of your mind.
Making me slouch into myself ashamed
believing that I can never be accepted
for how they made me

My passport is now in my hand
as the warm eyes that meet mine terrify me
rooting me to a place I wish
I could only see in the distance.
Made up of small rectangular puzzle pieces
of green and brown
that I will never have to touch again
as they become shrouded over
by the clouds.
My passport is in my backpack and yet
I can’t seem to get myself to leave.
Dreadful Morty
Liam Sullivan
On Hypocrisy
David Moore

Between heaps of letters
evenly severed at the head
Halyomorpha halys
an especially ugly stinkbug
with convertible wings.
creeps, buzzing like a live wire.
Sifting through the murk of dust
and inedible material, finding
scrumptious crumbs of week old food.
His scum-green jowls
delight at the piquant
delights, perfect for
the agitating bug’s palette.
I let my pancake sponge the remaining
syrup, cringing at the
imbecilic insect crawling
next to me—
its warty frame & dangling
antennae: You disgust me.
I moan, inhaling my fourth pancake
slumping in slippers
that smell like dog
before brushing,
before deodorizing.
Dance to De Riddim
Kari Henry

It’s been two weeks since I
danced around my room.
I danced to the voice of Beres Hammond
and to the riddim of Reggae.

The heart thumping sound of the bass
reminds me of a younger Kiki
who heard these songs around her
apartment on East 94th Street.
A signal for cleaning.
She and her brother would trade the
GameCube controllers for the broom and dustpan.
A signal for her mother to destress,
from long days of taking care of other
people’s children, and
returning to take care of her own.
Her mother had dreads of strength
that reached above her bottom.
She wrapped them up in scarves,
and wore her crown. A Nubian queen.

The songs were a reminder of her father.
The riddims were his specialty
as a famous local St. Lucian DJ.
A bullet of silver was his group.
She and her sister were known
as “Baza’s daughters.”
When he wasn’t roughing up his hands
to make houses for people,
he was massaging them for his mastery,
the turntables.

Hammond’s songs were songs that made
you rock away.
Whenever they came on at a party
the whole place calmed and swayed in unison,
with their fingers pointing to the air.
The Caribbean molded her into me.
The taste, the humor, the language,
the folklore, the music. The music.
The music of her childhood, her parents’ prime.
They came here for a better life
and they wanted their kids
to have the opportunities
they weren't given when they were youths.
An Ode to Christendom
Darby Faublas

Rules made by man
placed on paper and burned
into our minds since birth.

Then blamed fell on Him when
war waged on
because it was under His name that
many died by the sword
on the battlefields
Where souls were destroyed
and spirits hanged.

An ode to my belief
because You don’t have rules
at least not the ones placed
by religious zealous
behind their golden door
on their golden chair.

An ode because Your name
is now associated with evil,
when pride takes men too long to realize that their beds are filled with poison, cultivated by their own actions that stick to their skin and destroy their hearts.

Ode to a belief that is now filled with the thorns of roses in a brown garden where ravens sing songs of death,

but the Dove flies over while the sun follows at His feet bringing in New life in the dawn of time.
Neil sat in the driveway wondering if this was a good idea. Something about being around Alex always made him say and do the stupidest things and Neil wasn’t sure if he could keep it together for just one night. He stared at his hands, gripping the steering wheel tightly, thinking about what he was going to say when Alex answered the door. Over and over he repeated the words, knowing he was going to mess them up anyways. Maybe he should leave. No. Neil got out of the car quickly, before he could change his mind and drive away.

The whole ten steps to Alex’s door felt heavy and his hands were sweating as he knocked. He almost wished Alex wasn’t there or that he was sleeping, but he knew the boy wasn’t. He never was. Alex was there immediately, as if he was waiting at the door. He smiled when their eyes met and he tried pulling Neil inside.

“I was actually thinking we could uh...” Neil coughed a bit, struggling to get the words out, “we could go out, or something? Now. Not like a date or anything, I mean, unless you want it to be but I mean…”

Alex crossed his arms, thinking on it, before saying, “Yeah, sure. I’ve got a craving for milkshakes.”

Neil froze and looked at Alex. He could feel himself heating up as he said too much. “What?”

Milkshakes & Confessions
Kyra Rage Sobiegraj
“Come on then. There’s nothing to do here anyway.” Alex pushed Neil out of the way and locked the door before walking over to Neil’s car, leaving Neil on the doorstep. “Are you coming?”

Neil jumped and scrambled to catch up to Alex. If his walk to the door was hard, this was Hell. Neil could barely focus and he walked right into the hood of his car, ramming his hip. He winced and held onto the hood the rest of the way around, trying not to bump it again. He could hear Alex’s laughs from inside the car though and Neil almost fell when he finally let go of the hood to open his own door.

“Oh whatever. Laugh it up,” Neil muttered as he turned the engine and put the radio on in hopes that he couldn’t embarrass himself any more. The music was soft between them and the night seemed empty. The only lights seemed to be from the street lamps that blanketed the darkness. They didn’t speak as Neil drove, only stealing glances at each other.

They pulled up to the diner near the edge of the neighborhood, just before town started. Neil cut the engine and sat for a moment, unsure of what to do. He hadn’t planned on getting this far. Alex poked him, pulling him out of his thoughts. “Oh, uh yeah.
So... milkshakes?”

“Pffft, duh.” Alex was already climbing out of his seat, swinging open the car door. He swung the door shut when Neil finally moved out himself. Neil followed Alex in, still not quite believing this wasn’t a dream. They took a booth a few in from the door against the window. Alex was talking, but Neil couldn’t catch what he was saying. He could barely focus on Alex as he began to think of everything that could go wrong right now.

A waitress in a plain blue dress with a white apron came up to them, asking what she could get for them. Neil smiled at her sweetly and asked for a chocolate milkshake. Alex said vanilla. She winked before walking off again, now with a little bounce in her step.

“Someone has a crush on you,” Alex teased.

“What?” Neil whipped his head up and stared at Alex.

“What?” Neil whipped his head up and stared at Alex.

“Come on Neil, it’s pretty obvious she has a thing for you. Didn’t help the way you smiled at her.” Neil thought he heard some jealousy in Alex’s tone, but he wasn’t sure. He shrugged before saying something about how she wasn’t his type. Alex scoffed at him, kicking him under the table, “She is completely your type, what do you mean?”

“I can promise you she isn’t.” In all honesty, Neil hadn’t even looked too hard at her. He only knew what she was wearing because it was uniform.

“Don’t give me that! She’s blond, she’s short, she’s got
dimples when she smiles and she obviously has no problems with playing dumb.” Alex was counting these off on his fingers as he spoke and Neil couldn’t look up from them. “What part of that isn’t your type?”

Neil wanted so badly to say ‘she’ that he had to bite his lips together. He took a moment before saying, “What makes you think that’s my type?” It was his type, but there was no way to say that without outing himself. There was no way to make it sound like he didn’t have it bad for Alex, who also hit all those boxes.

“You know what? I don’t even know why I bother with you.”

Neil looked up and smirked, “Because I’m irresistible.”

“Haha.” It sounded like he was mocking Neil, but Alex smiled all the same and Neil couldn’t help feeling like putty again. His smirk turned into a smile and he was about to say something, but before he could the milkshakes were being placed in front of them. The moment was gone.

“Anything else?” She was smiling at Neil and her voice was too sweet. It took everything in Neil to smile and politely say no. Neil turned back to Alex, who quickly looked down at his milkshake as if ashamed that he was looking at Neil. Neil lightly kicked him under
the table, raising his eyebrow in question. Alex only looked up, unsure, and then over Neil’s shoulder. The waitress was still there.

“What?” It came out meaner than Neil meant, but what the fuck. He no longer could keep up the fake smile. She jumped, squeaking a little in surprise before turning around and running back to the counter. Neil sighed and turned back around. Alex was smirking into his milkshake. “And what about you?”

Alex’s eyes darted up quickly and he shook his head. “Just you.”

Before Neil could ask what that meant, Alex had his spoon in Neil’s milkshake and was digging for all his whipped cream. “Hey!” Neil made a grab for Alex’s hand, but he was too slow and Alex was laughing as he shoved it in his mouth. “That’s not fair,” Neil said, now grabbing his own spoon. Alex seemed to know what he was thinking though and he grabbed his own milkshake, standing up suddenly and shoveling his own whipped cream into his mouth.

“You won’t tou’ing my ‘ream!” Alex said through all the cream in his mouth. He had to look up though to keep it all in, and Neil started laughing. Alex also started to laugh and he had to put a hand over his mouth to keep from spitting it all out all over the table and himself. He coughed it down between laughs and sat back down. He was still coughing.

“Was that really worth it?” Neil asked.
Alex stopped coughing and looked up at Neil, dead serious. “Yes.” A moment passed and they were laughing again.

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Neil wasn’t sure how the milkshakes were so quickly gone, as it seemed the two of them never really stopped laughing, but sure enough, when he went to drink again he was met only with a mouthful of air bubbles, gurgling their way up the straw.

Neil watched as the waitress, still trying to catch Neil’s eye, skipped over to the table. She made sure to lean down as she plopped the check on the table and quickly skipped back. Neil scowled at the thing and Alex ended up picking it up. Alex made a face before tossing it Neil’s way.

“I told you she was into you.” There was a phone number and a heart under the total. Her name was Beverly. Neil scoffed and grabbed the receipt, getting up quickly. He didn’t check to see if Alex was following him as he walked up to the register. Beverly was waiting there, a smile on her face, but it shrunk when she looked up at Neil. He slammed the receipt down with a ten. The ten barely covered the milkshakes, but Neil wasn’t too concerned about a tip
right now. She grabbed the bill and when she saw that Neil wasn't taking the number back, she looked upset, trying to slide it back across the counter:

“You can keep that.” Her eyes widened, as if shocked to having been rejected, but Neil didn’t care. He turned on his foot, and grabbed Alex’s hand, who had apparently been standing right behind him, guiding them out of the place. Alex spun quickly back to her before they went out the door, but Neil didn’t catch what he did.

He didn’t let go of Alex until they got to the car. He stopped them right next to the passenger’s door and let go of Alex’s hand, sighing and leaning against the car. He brushed his hands through his hair. He had his eyes closed and was facing the sky. It was a minute before Alex also leaned against the car, reaching over for Neil’s hand. Neil looked down at Alex, who was smiling down at their hands.

“What?”

Alex looked up at Neil and quickly moved in, placing a quick kiss on Neil’s lips, before moving right back to where he was. Neil just dropped his jaw and stared at Alex.

Alex laughed and looked away, out towards the road. “I knew, Neil. For a while. I’ve been waiting for you to make a move for forever now. I got sick of waiting. Although...” Alex looked back over to Neil smirking, “it was a little funny watching you squirm in there.”

“Wait.” Neil heard Alex, but the words just seemed to float around, going into space rather than his mind. “You knew?” Alex
shook his head. “And you liked me back?” Now Alex was smiling, but he still nodded. Now it really hit Neil. He knew he should be excited, but now Neil was focusing back to the diner.

Alex grabbed his face, making Neil look back over to him. “I’m over here you know.” He was smiling and any anger Neil might have been feeling drained away. Alex moved his hands away and Neil immediately swooped down, bringing Alex into another kiss. “Man,” Alex said, breaking away. “I should have made you buy me milkshakes sooner.”
Death of Truie
Liam Sullivan
This year, I am considering driving to campus and sitting in empty classrooms just to protest the state of our union, which, at this point, seems a misnomer.

I see division everywhere except in math class. Have you seen the way we teach children arithmetic these days?

Pictograms of dots and hypotheticals; I point to the page and say illegible, I say, why make it difficult, I say, we used to do it like this and whip out base ten. I say, just do it like this. I say things that probably reveal biases of cognitive processes.
Is comfort the enemy of progress?
   (Yes.)
Is common good?
   (—Debatable.)
Then why are we celebrating going backwards with red hats?
   (Probably has something to do with the common comfort of our division.)

When I say core
do you think apples
or abdomens
or the center of one’s consciousness?

When do we say this is not the way we teach our children?
Later in the day when the sun begins to float back down towards the earth, there is a theatre that stands still in darkness. The only illumination comes from a ghost light centered stage. You’ll find an old man wrapping up his day at work. Last task of the day: coiling up a 50 foot sound cable. Some might say it is an intimidating job (especially working in audio) but it is his only moment to recollect on his day. His worn hands work the stretched elastic tie over his hair, wrapping it as tight as it could go without popping back at him. It is time to finish up.

With a simple toss, the cable ripples through the air and lands in a never-ending path before him. Swiftly, the man begins to wrap the wire loosely around his hand. The journey begins.

Four minutes into coiling the man’s mind wanders. Thoughts begin to messily bubble over. The theatre. Truly a second home to the old man. Looking out into a sea of empty chairs he can envision the life that once ran threw the place. All of his students from all walks of life fill the room with rambunctious energies, laughter can be heard from the catwalks, the feet of dozens stampeding around the stage creates a heartbeat within the theater. That theater was everyone’s home with that old man as everyone’s safe haven.
Around 20 feet of wire, the black rubber coating begins to redden the old man’s calloused hand. His eyes begin to droop, coiling is a less intriguing event than any person expect it to be especially doing it on your lonesome. Oh, how he wished he did not put the task so far on the back burner, missing the possibility of having an extra hand to fasten the process. In actuality, he doesn’t need the extra hand, working in the field for over 30 years gives you the amazing talent of having your body repeat an action without being there mentally. Staring at the remaining pile of cables that seemed to snake around the stages for miles leaves him yearning for a distraction, any! Maybe his phone will ring with his scattered wife checking on when he would be finished so that he could pick up his son from his needed tutoring session. Maybe one of his beloved students would barge through the worn double doors searching for something that was forgotten before. They could sit at the edge of the stage feet swinging just above the house speakers catching up on life. He would use this as the perfect opportunity to untie the student’s shoes in an act of pure mischief. The student would attempt to retaliate but fail. Maybe, one of his colleagues would rush through the theatre full with eagerness to reach him. They hold a binder spewing with marked-up papers and a rainbow of sticky notes. It is play season and there is always a light cue to fix or blueprints for set designs to go over. Or simply, the janitor will come and disrupt the deafening silence with
the muffled hum from his headphones and the scrapping sound of his broom brushing the carpet of the aisles. The old man can pass some time trying to guess the melody. What era it’s from, who sung the words, if this was the janitor’s favorite song.

There is nothing. No missed calls or messages on his phone. No one trying to disturb him. No one trying to reach him. The old man is left with himself and the shell of the theater. What is this feeling that is arising in him? Is it unsatisfaction with having no one in need of his presence? Is it the feeling of loneliness from being stuck on an abandoned stage with only the walls to talk to. Or maybe it’s simply the sadness of having a great length of wire left to coil up before he can escape back into the world outside of the realm of the theatre. A deep and weary sigh escapes from his mouth. The deep wrinkles within his temples soften as he is brought back to reality. With 30 feet left, his hand begins to wrap the wire around the formed loop in his hand. Over and over and over again until his mind begins to wonder.
“We can start it right now, if you’re ready,” says the doctor.

“Like, now, now?”

“Unless you have somewhere you need to be.”

“No, no! Let’s do it.”

You might cry. You’ve been wanting this for years. It took you ages to find the help you needed. Because you spent so much time waiting, you had assumed the prescription wasn’t going to be given to you the same day as your consultation. The shock of being told you can start injections today nearly knocks you off the exam table. You wrestle with your emotions for a moment while the doctor taps away at her laptop. She tells you to go to the pharmacy next door and pick everything up.

While the pharmacist processes your insurance and prepares what you need, you are unable to contain your excitement. You’re rapidly texting your friends about the good news. They flood your messages with congratulations and cheer. You take a picture of your prescription paper and white out your dead name, then post it to your Snapchat story. The pharmacy isn’t big enough to dance in, so you rock back and forth on your heels.
Seven dollars later, you’re clutching a plastic bag full of supplies. You hurry back into the clinic where a nurse in turquoise scrubs waits. He leads you to a cramped room that is more exam table than floor. You put the bag on the counter and sit. The crinkling paper beneath you feels distant. You kick your feet anxiously, red Converse bouncing against the drawers.

“Have you ever done anything like this before?” asks the nurse.

“No,” you say. “I don’t like needles.”

He chuckles and says you’ll have to start getting used to them. He secures his hands in white latex gloves and explains the process.

Roll up your cargo shorts, no need to remove them. Feel your thigh, pressing your fingers into the skin. Find where there is more muscle than fat. That is where you will penetrate. Now, rub the alcohol wipe over the area. While it dries, pick up the vial. Poke the big needle through the rubber seal and into the clear liquid. Fill the syringe to .25mL. Take out the needle, and make sure you get all the fluid into the syringe. Twist the big needle off and replace it with the smaller one. Push on the syringe until you see a small drop of liquid come out at the top. Take off the cap. Make sure your gauze is at the ready, balanced on your other leg.

Push the needle into your thigh.
You hesitate at this step, as most people do. The nurse tells you to take your time, and you want to. You stare at the needle hovering over your pale skin. You inhale deeply, feeling the pressure from your binder on your chest. It won’t be that bad, you think. It certainly won’t be worse than all the blood tests you suffered through to get here. Feeling woozy is a small price to pay for the euphoria that will follow. You did not come this far to give up. With your left hand, you pinch part of your thigh. With your right hand, you pierce the skin with the needle. It goes in faster than you expected. You relax your left hand and push the liquid from the syringe down. It’s like forcing syrup into your body. Once it’s all in your thigh, you slowly remove the needle. A small pool of the clear substance leaks out of the puncture wound, followed by blood.

The gauze stops the bleeding. You press down hard while the nurse tosses your used needle into the sharps box and preps your band-aid. He puts it over the little red hole in your leg. Feeling exhausted, you take an enormous gulp from your water bottle.

The nurse watches you with the smile of a proud parent. “That was impressive,” he says. “I’ve never seen someone do it so fast before.”
Better than Bae
Natalie Archibee
EXT. DOCK - NIGHT
JOSIE STONE (late 20s) stares over the water. She is dressed formally and her hair is pulled back neatly. She is biting on her nails, which are trimmed short.

Beside her stands DOUG STONE (mid 60s). He has a massive mustache and his face is carefully blank. He is wearing an outfit that he probably thinks is formal.

There is a small table with a full glass of whiskey and a glass of wine.

The silence between them is a heavy one.

DOUG
No you’re not.

Josie turns to stare at him. This was not the response she was expecting.

JOSIE
What?

DOUG
You’re not.

There is another ent of silence.

JOSIE
I am.

DOUG
You’re not. This is your sister’s wedding, for fuck’s sake.

JOSIE
What does that have to do with anything?

Doug’s blank facade finally cracks. He is full of cold fury.

DOUG
This isn't about you. This is her night, and you have the nerve to come to me and tell me, what? That you're gay?

After a slight pause, Josie nods and looks at her feet.

DOUG (CONT'D)
Typical. It always has to be about you.

JOSIE
It just came out.

DOUG
I asked why you didn't have a date. You didn't have to say you were gay. Just say no one was interested. You don't have to bullshit me.

JOSIE
I'm not lying! I didn't have a date to my sisters wedding because I can't be myself around my own family because of my stubborn, bastard father.

DOUG
You'd better be. Josie is confused.

JOSIE
Better be what?
DOUG
Lying.

JOSIE
Why does it matter to you?

DOUG
If you’re gay, you’re out.

Doug waves a dismissive hand at her and turns to walk back inside. Josie is done playing nice. When Josie speaks, Doug doesn’t turn.

JOSIE
Out of what?!

DOUG
The family.

JOSIE
Why?!

Doug whips around and starts back towards her.

DOUG
Because I won’t have you running around and fucking with your sister’s marriage! I won’t have you ruining the family!

Doug is getting more angry. He stands up straight and puts down his drink.

JOSIE
I would ruin the family?!

DOUG
Yeah, you would!

JOSIE
Marley doesn’t even give a shit!
She’s happy for me. She told me to come out to you today.

DOUG
You’re not gay.

JOSIE
Yeah, I’m lying because this conversation is so delightful.

Doug steps into her space.

DOUG
I’m not having this conversation with you. If you wanna be queer, you can go right ahead.

Doug points a finger at her, practically snarling.

DOUG (CONT’D)
But I don’t want to hear from you. I don’t want to talk to you. And most importantly, you stay away from my daughter.

He reaches past her to pick up his drink. She flinches. He turns from her and walks back inside. Josie is doing a bad job of hiding her tears. She is shaking and stomps her foot. She screams at him.

JOSIE
So it’s my sister when you want me to change my mind, but now it’s your daughter?! She’s as related to me as she is to you, asshole!

Doug stops in his tracks. Josie looks like she’s regretting her anger, but she presses on.
JOSIE (CONT’D)
You might hate me now for reasons out of my control, but you aren’t dragging Marley with you. I’m gay. Marley doesn’t care. She’s known for months! You’re the one with a problem.

Doug stops walking.

JOSIE (CONT’D)
I tried being nice to you. I tried to wait, or in a better mind or whatever, and this is the thanks I get for that.

Josie pauses to take a breath.

JOSIE (CONT’D)
I’m a huge lesbian. A massive one.

Josie laughs, a little hysterical. Doug whips around.

JOSIE (CONT’D)
And you hating me isn’t going to stop me. It’s taken me a long time to accept myself, and you’re not taking that from me.

She picks up her glass of white wine and dumps it into the lake. She wipes tears from her face as she passes her father. Doug watches her go, but makes no move to stop her.

JOSIE (CONT’D)
You can call me with an apology if you change you’re mind. Don’t expect to hear from me.

Josie walks up the lawn, leaving Doug on the dock alone.
being in books gave me
the only spine I’d ever had.
so afraid to live some of my poems,
and so afraid to live others again
kept me, for most of my life,
not realizing I was the beauty
I’d spent most of my time trying to be,
walking around in glints and lightning
but believing what I’d been told:
that I was ugly and shadow
and the curse of both.
when I set down the weight,
knew the grudge I carried
was only against myself,
I learned to sew alchemy:
leaden sails into feather—
moving toward the horizon
of my bones.
Gio
Liam Morgenstern
Manic Thoughts on An Empty Radio Station
Benn Deslisle

It’s probably raining outside.

I’m always so lonely,
Unless I’m in a library.

Something about used books, and
Dead people—
Barbed wire cuts the skin,

But only if you think it can.
Blue things always resonate with me:
Immobile sadness and a
Bitter unwillingness to be anything

More than blue.
I think I’m going to get a tattoo.
Probably something like a watch,
So I will finally be able to remember
The time.

Ghosts are just commentary
About how we want to scare ourselves.
I don’t know if it’s me
Or moldy bread on the ceiling,
But something smells.
Maybe I should take a shower,

But then again, the weatherman
Said it was going to drizzle
Today. I’ll just wait
Until the next forecast.
So that’s all for this broadcast.
Reporting live from deep inside your
Grandmother’s coat closet.
“You keep saying you have all this guidance. From who tho? And how long will your support last?”

- The Father

We were enjoying the soft heat of the bonfire before you came along. Three glowing embers danced through rising smoke. You leaned over to kiss her cheek, pressing your cold palm against her stomach, uncaring of what laid beneath her skin. You missed her strained smile. “Nice to see you again.” You sounded civil. Calm as the stars hanging above us, hardly visible through the glow of the fire. Your eyes betrayed you.

“What are you going to do about the baby?” You didn’t like that question. You didn’t expect me to ask.

“I’m thinking about it.” Your arm uncoiled from my sister’s waist, a bitter hand releasing my niece.

“The baby is going to be born.” I tell you the obvious, what she has told you again and again, what led you to turn away from the fire, ignoring the crackle of dry wood breaking beneath the flames.

“I know. I’m thinking about it.”

I knew your answer. “Think harder.”

You didn’t. She now knows your answer, too. I wonder if you miss that night, feigning uncertainty, suspending conversations,
spending weeks crafting ice sculptures of excuses
and claiming they match the height of glaciers.

You are stagnant, frozen,
only able to watch us move forward.

We will take turns holding her as we walk the path you warned us of.
The path that costs money and time and sleep
and work and school and sacrifice.
The same path lined with milkweed fields
that glisten gold when the sun catches.
Our laughter will carry us through the nights,
a guiding flame revealing the ground beneath our feet.
We will climb the mountains you told her she didn’t have the gear for,
and at each peak we will stop and watch
the sun melting into the horizon.
We’ll teach her the colors of the sky,
teach her that our sunset would be duller
without the soft touch of lilac.
Softer than thousands of petals dancing in the summer breeze.
You may hear of the life blooming around us and
wonder where the lilacs are, or why the sun
hasn’t risen to kiss your brittle milkweed stems,
unaware that this land only serves those who
can rise from the ashes
of every obstacle and use it to fertilize everything in sight.
Our roots will grow beneath rich soil,
bringing forth new life, a kindled love.

Her support is an army of phoenixes.
I am the bonfire.
She is the sun.
Your daughter will be something even brighter;
flames licking at her heels with every step,
spreading warmth and beauty and hope.

I take my sister’s hand.
We can already see the sky changing colors.
A soft touch of lilac.
We start walking without you.
to k.g.

I am nonaction in motion.
I am raw, unadulterated mechability.
I am unequivocal self-control.
I am restraint incarnate.

You are a whirlwind of intention.
You are fierce, limitless passion.
You are indulgent eloquence.
You are a catalyst event.

My stoicism belies my fragility.
My stolid shell shrouds insatiability.

Your confidence is a cloak of armor.
Your contagion is multivalent and carceral.

I could figure you out at the molecular level,
dissect your mind and gift and steal away
the last thing that makes you, you.

You could wrap me around your finger,
bend me to your will while I lose myself
trying to become everything you need me to be.

We could only ever be safely viewed at a distance.
The police want to shut the park down because of the murders. Too many people have gone missing only to be found dead in the woods. Strangled to death. The leaflitter crunches under your boot as you walk through the park, snapping you from your thoughts.

You've been a park ranger here for a while, you could do the math and figure it out if you wanted, but right now, you have other things on your mind. What will you do if they shut the park down? This is your job, and you fought to even get it, and now it's at risk? No, of course not, and of course you argued with police and the park managers and directors and whoever else would listen. Nothing's set in stone, they'd said. It's still up in the air.

That's when a report came in. Several hikers and park guests got together and reported a strange man in the woods. Caucasian male, maybe in his thirties, anywhere from five and half feet to six feet tall, dark hair, brown eyes. They'd all seen him, but couldn't agree on what he was wearing. A white t-shirt and blue jeans? No, he was wearing a black hoodie. No, it was definitely a white shirt!

Since he wasn't doing anything more suspicious than walking around, you'd been sent to investigate. Reports like these are part of the job, and usually righted themselves, but with the murderer on the loose, everyone has been quick to report, just in case. It's good for you. It meant job security, since they'd need people to go out and investigate. It also means more work for you, more patrols, more walks.

You hope they don't close the park. You like the forest, you like patrolling it and cleaning up garbage and seeing what crossed your path. Just last week you saw some young fox kits wrestling before they spotted you and they disappeared into their dens. Yesterday you saw a buck by the pond in the forest and counted six prongs on his antlers. Luckily, you never had to use the bear spray you were required to carry on you. You're required to carry more things than you've ever had to use, but it's nice to have it all the
same. You once thought the rope was useless, but you’ve found it surprisingly handy, like the time you had used it to pull a child who was stuck in the marsh.

As you near the pond, a part of you hopes to see the buck again. You don’t, but there is something there. A man in a white t-shirt, a black sweatshirt tied around his waist, kneeling and looking out at the pond. Your nose alerts you to the cigarette in his mouth before you see it.

You take a step, making sure to snap a twig under your foot to announce yourself. No need to antagonize anyone, but you are well equipped to defend yourself if needed.

The man looks over his shoulder and stands. “Oh, I’m sorry,” he says, his voice is soft and shakes around the cigarette. His eyes dart around in their sockets as he removes the cigarette from his mouth and holds it between two dirty fingers.

“Everything alright?” You ask, taking in the man’s tall, almost lanky appearance. He tenses as you speak, as if he could feel your words on his skin.

“Yes, I’m sorry. Is somethin’ wrong?” He isn’t looking at you. “Are we not allowed to smoke?”

“I received some reports of a suspicious individual. Can you tell me anything about this?” You always tried to give people the benefit of the doubt, less trouble that way. This man certainly seemed strange, and if locals are on the look out for suspicious people, it’s little wonder why they reported him.

“Ah, did they mean me? I’m sorry,” an apologetic smile crosses the man’s face. “I’m new to the area, so I thought I’d try do a little explorin’.” He runs a quick hand through his hair and the smile fades. “That so?” you ask, nodding along to his story.

“Yeah, I’m from a big city, you know? I don’t know much
about, um, stuff like this.” He waves his hand, motioning to the pond and the trees and the forest around you. His voice shakes harder now, rattling like teeth in Winter, despite the warmth from his cigarette.

“Are you lost?” Sometimes people aren’t keen to admit that, but you see the signs.

“I think so.” He scratches the tip of his nose.

“Why didn’t you ask someone for help? People saw you.”

“I – I got scared,” he stammers. “I kept seein’ people, but I wanted to avoid ‘em. I kept hearin’ about a serial killer. A-Any one of them could be it, you know?”

Oh, you know. You’re very well aware of that as you stand before this man. “Of course,” you say with a nod. “Here, let me show you the way out.”

“Thanks!” His face relaxes into a smile. His dark eyes make contact with yours but then dart away like the young fox running home to its den. He takes a deep inhale from the cigarette. You hate the smell.

You’re supposed to radio in when something like this happens, but that can wait until after you let this poor man out of the forest. Besides, you don’t want to freak him out too much.

You walk the winding trails with the man following behind you. The light filtering through the leaves is shifting with the approach of dusk. The park will be closing soon, and soon after that, waits the end of your shift.

The man is behind you. You’re keenly aware of his footsteps. He’s inexperienced, and you can hear when he stumbles over a root you gracefully avoided. You can’t help but smirk a little at the thought that people were actually afraid of this man. You’re certainly not.

“Is this the right way?” His voice trembles.

“Yes, of course.” You feel your chest tighten. You can’t wait to get home, maybe phone your folks back home, maybe watch a good movie, take a hot shower, anything.

The forest quiets. The deer have walked on to other parts of the park. The songbirds have given up for the day. Even the squirrels seem to follow the silent agreement to avoid this part of the park in this moment. You wonder if the man’s trampling and smoking scared
even the wildlife away. First they want to kick you from your job, and now this idiot city boy is scaring away everything you love about your job. You can't wait for today to end.

Your head hurts. You hear him blow out some smoke and then it hits you. It’s risky for him to smoke in the forest. It’s risky for you too, but you’ll do it. No one is watching. Your hand reaches for the rope on your belt. You’ll tell them you didn’t find anyone. That the man had already left by the time you arrived. That there was no one suspicious.

He was a nobody, a drifter from far away.

He didn’t even fight as hard as the others. After you finish, you stomp out the cigarette. Somehow, that didn’t make it any less satisfying.
Blue markers on the wall left by kids who wanted to explore the world

Those same kids jumped in the middle of traffic while frantic mother’s ran after them like a big musical number.

In an overcrowded classroom filled with astronauts and aliens

Lice made their way up my hair, settling their self-down after the market crash on wall street
They seem to enjoy the property on my dome. They can see the ocean in my tears.

Tears that were caused by Claudia because she decided to pull my hair on the playground on a Friday afternoon.

I hate you Claudia.

I like the word hue because it reminds me that the sun will go up one day and settle itself on my shoulders as I looked into the eyes of a red dolphin, but I never know how to permanently implant it in my heart to help my teeth grow like trees.

I’ve never been stung by a bee nor really had to deal with constant rings in my ears after
Almost drowning into a pool of water.

But I’ve heard the cry of a bullet in the middle of night that sent my parents and I into our safe chambers.

In America, snow fell from the sky resting on the tip of my pink tongue. Swallowing it feels like having the galaxy inside my stomach, storming around like a military parade and singing “old McDonald had a farm” but in German.

In the middle of the night, when the mouse’s in the walls laid bare, my bed grows legs and settles in front of Death’s stairs, waiting for its turn to toss me out like an old skeleton.
I've never been in love, just infatuated by the thought of eating a dozen donut while high on acid.

If cliché was a person, I’d probably want to talk to him about my friend’s foot fetish. Then about Hollywood’s secret sex cult, wouldn’t that be a fun thanksgiving discussion.

By the way mom, I yelled, Epstein didn’t kill himself, but who cares, the government already killed our motivation to care.
Soft Reveal
Lynne Rhys
It was an unidentifiable time in the middle of the night, so late you could argue it was early morning. I sat squished against a wall taking in the gradual decline of JFK foot traffic. The floor felt firmer where I sat, the wall stiffer. Perhaps my body was still reeling from the close confines of the plane I’d just departed.

To my left sat my mother, surrounded by our luggage. My younger brothers were scattered about, heads titled and glued against the wall, eyes numb and falling shut. My father stood somewhere outside the airport doors, feet firmly planted on the sidewalk as he tried to find a large enough taxi at such an odd hour.

With my head slipping against my shoulder, eyes falling shut to the rhythm of the subdued atmosphere, I watched workers mill about, preparing to close up their stores, minutely aware of the soft grumble in my abdomen.

“Hey mommy, I’m hungry.” I quietly spoke up, breaking the soft tension.

She carefully peeled herself off the wall and searched the area in a daze, scanning for any remaining stores. When she spotted the fading orange light in the distance, she fished a couple of crumpled dollars from her pocket, placed them in my hand, and nodded. I followed her eyes to the far off Dunkin’ Donuts where a solitary worker stood, their eyes on the clock.

“Boys, go get food with your sister.” I began to unfold myself and the two followed suit.

The three of us were greeted by a work-worn teenager, barely old enough to be up this late. Standing on my tippy toes I leaned over the counter to see the menu behind them.

“What do you guys want?” I asked the boys, they could hardly
see over the counter. I let them call out their orders and listened as our list of items grew and grew. While the worker prepared the food I squinted at the small green number on the register then glanced down to the pile of change in my palm.

“Actually!” I called out to her back, body stretched to be heard, “Can I just have two drinks instead of three and no donut?” “What are you doing?” my youngest brothers asked.

“Changed my mind. I’m not that hungry.” My stomach grumbled in protest. When the food was ready I passed the bags back to my brother who trifled through its contents.

“Here’s your food!” one of my brothers called out to me. I looked down at his round flushed face and the donut and drink in his outstretched hands.

I held up the items in question and looked over to the worker for answers. She just smiled, gave me a nod, and finished closing up.
Never love a writer — no, I’m serious. I know I sound like a hypocrite, writing this to you, proclaiming myself among the others who put word to paper and telling you to listen to me when I’m really saying you should stay away from us. But you should. If you ever find yourself falling for a writer, run far, far away. Start a new life and leave this one behind, because that is what we are best at — giving life to things that otherwise don’t have it. We are actors and liars at heart, every single one of us. We are good at telling stories and selling them to you with all that heartache, horror, tragedy, shock, romance, and drama. We are experts at destroying a good thing and telling you it is “character development.” If you find yourself wanting a writer, realize they will one day write about you, both as that ethereal being and the demon who comes to ruin them. If you object to our endings, we will tell you about story progression and how your conclusion has to wrap up your story in a way both satisfying to the reader but that still leaves them with lingering questions. If you ever try to ask us about what those lingering questions are, we will spin you another tale. It will never end, because neither do our stories. We tell ourselves them everyday in our own heads, hoping they’ll stick and mean something, meanwhile you will eventually be written out in favor of a better revision. Never love a writer. We will always love our writing more.
The middle seat
divides us like
river tongues.
Your hand

on my lap
won't buy anything
tonight

when words from
the pale light
of your phone
burns my eyes

the caricature
you drew of me has
a big nose

and deficiency in respect
(welcome to life in
a funhouse mirror).
There’s poison on

your fingertips
when they tick
on your screen.

The
little voodoo doll
you made
of me

feels a pinprick
in the heart.
Leave my lips longing

finger my ribs
but leave my heart alone.
I thought I was

the joy on the tip of your tongue:
I was the hangnail

you wanted to cry about.
Pyre
Liam Sullivan
FADE IN:

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

An 8 year old LITTLE GIRL with pigtails and a cute yellow sun dress is alone outside playing hopscotch.

The Little Girl jumps on the tenth square and sighs. She grabs a few crayons, a piece of candy, a green A.A chip, and a crinkly piece of paper from out of her pocket.

SHE LIES ON THE GROUND AND DRAWS A PICTURE.

After finishing her drawing, she puts the paper and the crayons back in her pocket.

She holds up the A.A chip then flips it off her thumb--catching it with her palm and then puts it back in her pocket.

She picks up the piece of candy and eats it.

She hears a noise from the back of the yard. She quietly creeps over to it and notices...

HER FATHER SITTING IN MULCH, SURROUNDED BY EMPTY BEER CANS.

The Little Girl depressingly takes out the green A.A chip and tries to give it to him.

Her FATHER takes the chip and throws it into the neighbor’s yard, laughing hysterically.
The Little Girl takes out her drawing and shows him the drawing of her and him...

WITH A CAPTION THAT READS, “I’M PROUD OF MY DAD.” SHE RIPS THE DRAWING APART AND RUNS INSIDE THE HOUSE.

Her Father continues to laugh in his drunken state and plays with the ripped pieces of paper.
I am a dyke with a boat.
I am a dyke with a pontoon.
I am a dyke with a pontoon and a dock.
I am a dyke with a dock.
I am a dyke with a dock and a tree in the closet.
I am a dyke with a dock and a tree in the closet so large that there is no room for me.
I am a dyke with a dock and a tree and no closet space.
I am a dyke with no closet space.
I am a dyke with no closet space and a gate at the front.
I am a dyke with a gate at the front with a big chain.
I am a dyke with a big chain on the gate to keep you out.
I am a dyke with a big chain.
I am a dyke with a big chain and a lawn.
I am a dyke with a big chain and a lawn you can mow.
I am a dyke with a chain and a lawn but no mower.
I am a mowerless dyke.
I am a mowerless dyke with a hot tub.
I am a mowerless dyke with a girl in the hot tub.
I am a mowerless dyke with a hot girl in the tub.
I am a mowerless dyke who writes predictable poetry.
I Wasn’t Ready For My First Kiss
Jamie Thompson

But Chloe Tyler was.

Chloe was my best friend for a summer. We’d gone to school together for a while, but never spoke until we started Christian day camp. We ended up sharing a desk after our counselor put all of the girls on one side of a tiny room. “You shouldn’t be thinking about boys,” she said.

Segregation didn’t stop me from glancing at Josh while our class recited “The Lord’s Prayer”. It didn’t stop Chloe either. We both liked him, but she was blonde and thin, and I had watched enough Disney Channel to know that that was better than anything I had to offer. So, I made her promise not to confess her feelings.

Josh always sat six rows ahead of us on the school bus, giving us room to pine over him. We admired the loose brown curls that covered the back of his head and waited for him to turn to the right, so we could get a glimpse of his other warm features. He was, in every way, beyond our reach.

One day, Chloe got the idea to bring him a little closer to us. “We should kiss,” she said casually.

“I don’t want to kiss you,” I replied. I didn’t want to kiss anyone. My grandmother had told me that kissing caused diseases and I didn’t want to get sick.

“Come on,” she pleaded, “We would both pretend to be Josh, so we would be kissing him.” She didn’t budge. She must have really liked that boy.

I don’t remember if I was convinced or just too afraid to say no, but I do remember kissing Chloe. First, we said our wedding vows. We needed a reason to kiss. Then, she put her tongue in my mouth “the way they do it on TV.” I wanted to ask her what kind of TV shows she watched. Instead, I closed my eyes and tried to ignore my mother’s words swirling around in my head, “You kids never want to brush your teeth.”

She pulled away and grinned at me, satisfied. She had committed herself to the boy she liked. I, on the other hand, had kissed a girl with unusually thick saliva.
On The Run
Natalie Archibee
I’ll disclose some truth,
The presence of an artistic form is applied with the right amount of
tender pressure to the frothy milk that’s carefully tucked in,
spooning the smooth pour of espresso into the bedding of
the eco-friendly grande sized, extremely hot cautioned
cup the greedy consumer masses drool over
every morning at 6A.M.
“Can you make it bone dry?”
“Do you sell oat milk?”
“My latte is more than HALF steamed milk!”
The arbitrary law that stalks you like a silhouette at dawn will
pounce if you don’t lose limbs for
capitalism.
The constant bickering plunges to my skull, contorting
my defenses and suddenly I
confront the lingering shadow that hovers over
like ominous cumulonimbus on a summer’s most
humid afternoon
   creeping off the horizon.
Who will take my Associates now?
YOU-nique Edition

We’re nice people.