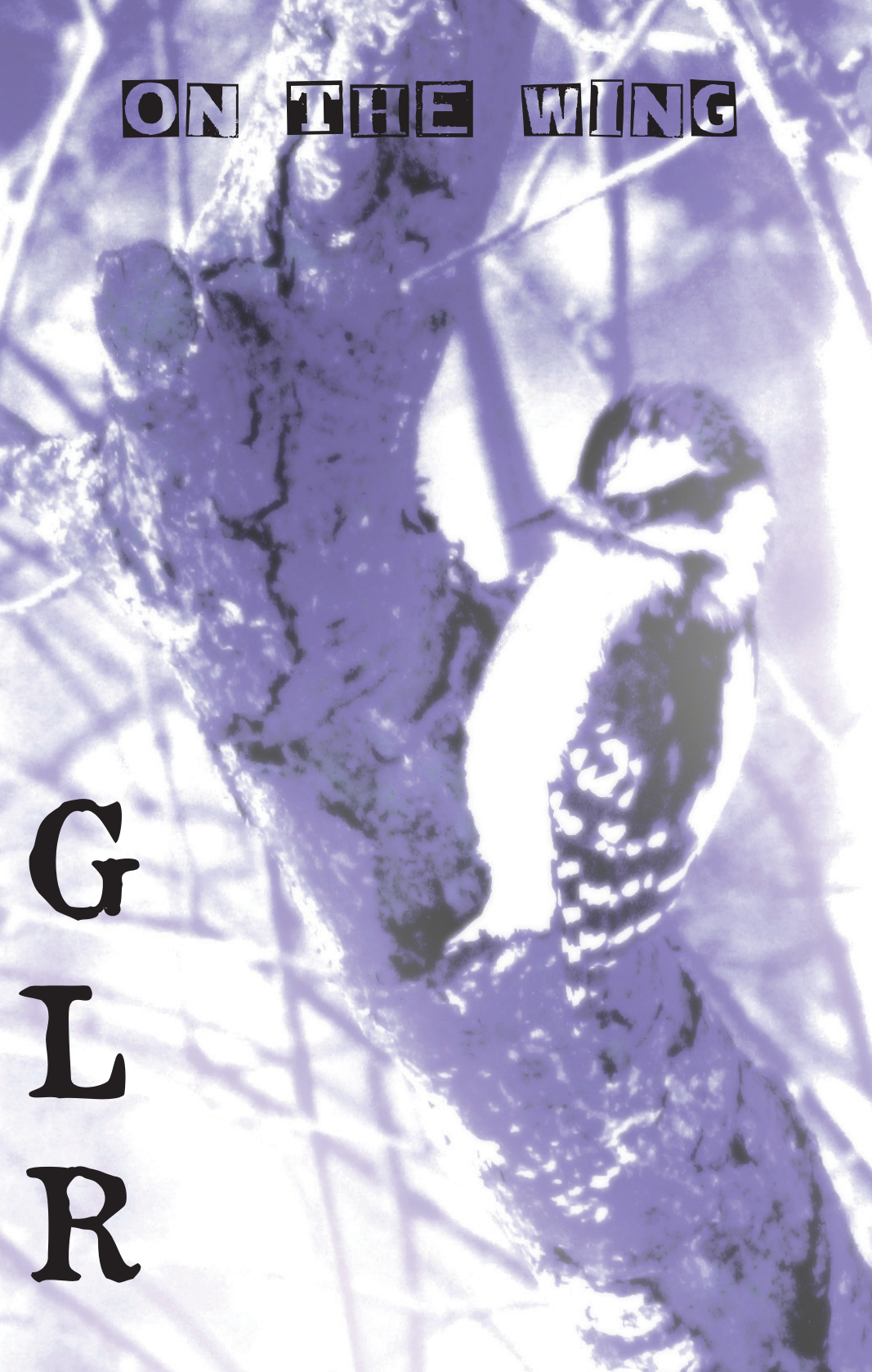


**ON THE WING**

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# GREAT LAKE REVIEW

SUNY OSWEGO'S  
STUDENT LITERARY MAGAZINE

94<sup>TH</sup> EDITION

ON THE WING

SPRING 2023



# GREAT LAKE REVIEW

## SPRING 2023

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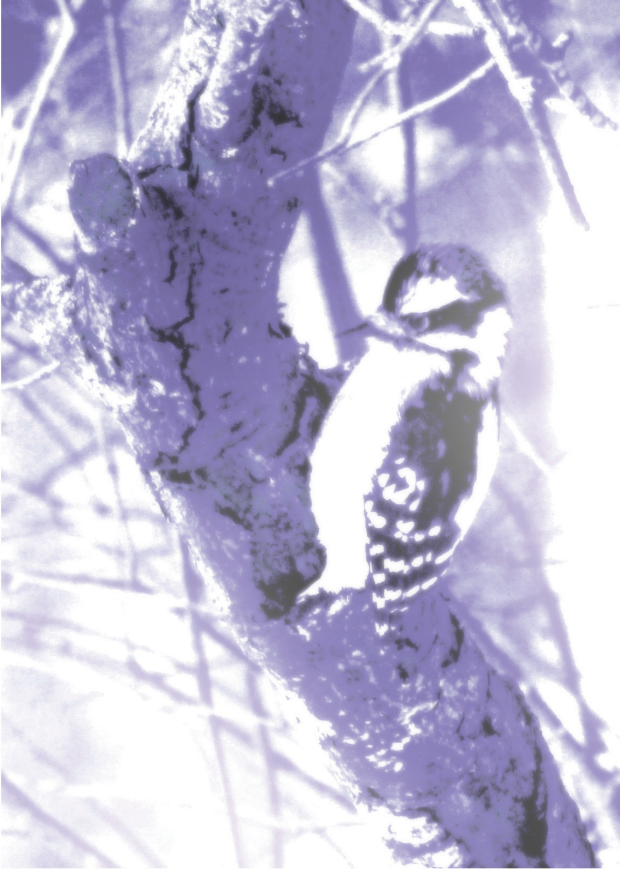
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## DOWNY WOODPECKER

BY KIERA PRIZEL

Located at 19 W. Bridge Street in downtown Oswego, the river's end bookstore is GLR's off-campus home. Every year the river's end holds the release events for our fall and spring issues.

All of us at GLR would like to extend a special thank you to everyone at our favorite independent bookstore.

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SAGUARO NATIONAL PARK  
CAITLIN MARX



Red-Tailed Hawk  
*Buteo jamaicensis*

Harris's Hawk  
*Parabuteo unicinctus*

Great Horned Owl  
*Bubo virginianus*

White-Winged Dove  
*Zenaida asiatica*

Gila Woodpecker  
*Melanerpes uropygialis*

The Birds of  
SAGUARO  
National Park

REMINISCING ABOUT MADELINE  
LILY PADDOCK

My lips curl at the taste of honey whiskey  
Light from venetian blinds casts silhouettes on manila folders  
Thinking of the lines on Madeline's tights going up her skirt as she went  
out through the frosted glass door

Light from venetian blinds casts my silhouette on manila folders  
The frame creaks like a crow's groan as I go  
out through the frosted glass door  
My collar is flipped and I tighten my hat,

the frame creaks like a crow's groan  
War drum rain beats on the roof of the taxi  
My collar is flipped and I tighten my hat,  
a thin line of smoke rises from my cigarette

War drum rain beats on the roof of the taxi,  
a symphony with neon lights buzzing  
A thin line of smoke rises from my cigarette  
*All these diners are the same*

A symphony with neon lights buzzing,  
the red flame dies out on the ground with a sizzle  
*All these diners are the same,*  
*a chalked outline of a body on the floor*

The red flame died out on the ground with a sizzle,  
the policeman told me she was a ginger just like Madeline  
*A chalked outline of a body on the floor,*  
*these streets aren't what they used to be*

The policeman told me she was a ginger just like Madeline  
My lips curl at the taste of honey whiskey  
*These streets aren't what they used to be*  
Thinking of the lines on Madeline's tights going up her skirt as she went

THE COLOR  
ROWAN VALENTINO

A clear day in the sky.  
A shade of ocean as the waves echo in your mind. The feeling when one hurts you  
    breaks your heart and leaves it to rot.  
The calm before the storm in troubled waters.  
An echo of jazz found in Harlem's trebles.  
Singers of old singing about their troubles and sorrows.  
Freshly painted walls in a newborn child's room.  
One's eyes or hair dye.  
A whale bigger than any other singing through the sea.  
One part of the rainbow that many forget to see.  
A shade one may find within an art palette.  
You may think of it often  
    yet forget its power in our lives.

*PORN ADDICTION*  
TATUM CAPODIFERRO

I ask you about your type, and you tell me  
that you don't necessarily have one,  
just the one who will listen and speak  
in a softer tone than your father did.

But as your hands cradle my plumped hip bones  
you tell me that I'd look good with abs,  
carved calves; tighter ass.

I smile and nod, because you're not  
as mean as the boy that put his hands on me,  
or turned me into a taxidermy reminder.

My body is fraudulent, almost always incomplete,  
it'll never be reminiscent of the girls on your phone  
screen; their hollow moans and macabre stares.

I'll fill the empty hole with shaky hands and clumps  
of thinned hair, picked out with yellowed fingernails  
and bile-soaked teeth.

I want to be skin and bone,  
I want to be a plague; a different excuse to leave  
my haunted head.

I want to become something peaceful;  
nothing.

## INSIDE UNIT No.9

OLIVIA EPPICH AND KAITLYN KOWALSKI

Congratulations, you've inherited unit number nine  
A space you must share with a total of five

Clear your debts that have you in a bind  
Nothing can prepare you for what you might find

His hands are much too sticky  
What don't we know about our friend Ricky?

In 1995, the day of the crime  
You left a diamond behind

No, it's not a ring  
You're not a Queen's King

You haven't a friend like Beau  
But, here's what I know.

An unfair lover,  
You rushed to another

Forever unwed  
You left them for dead

Oh, lil' Willow  
You didn't just stuff a pillow

The animals you hold dear  
Now shiver in fear

Packed away they lay,  
Never to see the light of day.

Ismene, you know as much as I,  
Our secrets will never die.

Look out my five in Number Nine,  
Not all that's inside is mine.

Knowledge is power  
Now is the final hour

You're in for a wild ride  
Time to find what's inside

There's one you all share  
None of you care.

A shared hate  
That sealed their fate.

One of you realized,  
You heard the troubled cries

The other fantasized,  
Of their friend's demise.

Oh how tense,  
All of you here in suspense.

I bet you all thought,  
You'd never be caught.

Yet, here you are  
Rehashing old scars.

Proven to tear,  
What a love affair?!

A couple in crime,  
A true *Bonnie and Clyde*.

One alive, one mummified.  
Is he the Jekyll to your Hyde?

Avenge him you fool!  
You've all been too cruel.

Oh Beau, do you like what you see?  
A rope and a mirror...the reflection of me

Upholstered with cotton  
All their insides forgotten.

Soaked with borax  
She completed the task.

At night with a glass of wine  
She sews with a fishing line.

Your knowledge will drive you insane  
So, put good use to your brain

With the flick of a knife  
You took someone's life.

If that's not scary  
Look who you could've married.

The chances were slim,  
Aren't you glad it wasn't a whim?

So, now that I've got everyone talkin'  
Let's take a look inside the coffin.

Eyes that are black  
Rolled all the way back.

Preserved like an animal's carcass  
Who would've done this?

Willow, Beau, Ricky, and Ismene,  
Have you caught on to who is missing?

A boy from 1995  
Kept safe for more than 20 years' time

I've been gone a while,  
And you're all just as vile.

How long can you keep the theme?  
You must put an end to this wicked scheme.

Time to confess your sins,  
You've all done twisted things.

Glance at my body you have seen it before,  
Before you betrayed me with that little whore.

Surround the sarcophagus, come closer,  
I can see you have grown a little bit older.

Still none the wiser,  
I started the fire.

You've trapped it in your cage,  
Now, it's a rage.

I have been crossed  
Sincerely, your friend Chris Gras



SEASONS OF THE MIND  
JESSIKAH RUSSELL

Small and adventurous  
The sun smiles down  
The world seems generous  
With all these people around  
The flocks of birds  
And flowers galore  
A big hand that guides  
Is near evermore  
The world is bright  
Full of flowers of wonder  
Small, yet riddled with contrite  
Storms always have thunder  
Madness follows the hand that guides  
Summer is over and autumn arrives

Beautiful but dying  
The earth fades to a gray  
Comforting green turns to red crying  
And the fields are in disarray  
People are leaving  
There's no one to trust  
As the leaves are receding  
Everything reduces to rust  
It's too hard to think  
And my bonds have all sundered  
As if in one blink  
My life is all but blundered  
As the earth withers away  
I can tell that winter is on its way

Somber and barren  
The cold welcomes no one  
Nothing around not even a heron  
Chronophobia has just begun  
And time stands to a still  
The wind shakes my very core  
Emotions build up, ready to spill  
Loneliness approaches evermore  
Everyone is gone  
Even the hand that guides  
I just need to make it to dawn  
Even if it causes divides  
As I beg for the sun to rise  
Spring tickles the horizon as it arrives

As the warmth settles in  
The flowers come back  
The fresh pollen brings me a grin  
And I feel I'm on the right track  
Green overtakes the sullen gray  
Birds chirp to their arrival  
Happiness is finally on display  
And the loneliness all but stifles  
My meadow is at last in bloom  
All of my hard work  
Has lifted me from deep gloom  
And it all but makes me smirk  
To say this journey is all but laughable  
The seasons of the mind are finally affable

*VOICEMAIL*  
TATUM CAPODIFERRO

*[Beep]*

Hey,

I know it's three AM and you're probably sleeping,  
with her collected between your biceps, and your soft snores  
breaching through the strands of her ginger hair,  
but my only friends are the sliver of road between headlights,  
the static of FM radio, and the mirage of you that still  
appears in the passenger seat of my car,  
even though it's been one year and four months since you  
were last there, I can still hear your laughter over the obnoxious  
heating system, so I can't believe we've surrendered ourselves  
to a checkup call every few months in some odd form of selfish  
redemption when you still exist here,  
and I can't stop thinking about how you said  
you didn't want to hear my eulogy while a cigarette dangled from  
your lips, in response,  
I had told you I stopped drinking as if it wasn't salvation, but failed to tell you  
about  
the emergency beer I keep hidden underneath my bed  
for when the moths with their feather antennae tickle my windpipe,  
and their legs clog up the jagged interior,  
I can still taste your fingers pushing my tongue down,  
to let them escape towards the only light they've known,  
because I told you that I couldn't love anyone else, the town I left still has  
your name listed on every street sign, and you calling my name is the  
tornado siren that always blares at the wrong time,  
right person, wrong time, is what you told me, over and over again,  
your own mantra into believing that you could love something as selfish as me,  
so, I'll expect your returned call in a few months time,  
when the summer breeze smells like my hair,  
and you remember that my bra is still stuck underneath your driver's seat.

MAPLE DRIVE  
LILY PADDOCK

i.

swirling children  
in the violet wind

my brother and I  
on slick saucers

like blue lazy susans  
skidding down

toward the moonlit road  
we built big ridges

we begged dad to twirl us again  
down our paths in the snow

ii.

grape hyacinths  
like tiny candies

pinched in my fingers  
dandelion babies

cling to my body  
mom will put them

in dixie cups  
by the kitchen window

above the sink  
I was bathed in

iii.

water drops still cling  
to my eyebrows

the hose dipped in  
the blue plastic pool

like a hand testing  
the rhubarb stalks

were green and pink  
they have been growing

there since grandma  
lived in the house

iv.

the wind encouraged  
brown leaves to journey

to somewhere  
they have never touched

in my hand  
a wooly bear inched

and told me the winter  
would be long and cold

HUSH  
LEILHANA ABU-SBAIH

hush, my darling,  
for i am forthcoming.

may you wither and  
weep before the burgeoning  
of my imminence

i will not let you  
water your garden with tears  
steeped within my veins

hollow bones whistle  
while i thread the roots much like  
harsh embroidery

hush, my darling,  
for i am forever.

MY 13TH LABOR  
JOHN RILEY

A battle of prides.  
Of David and Goliath proportions,  
Yet now David wasn't so small.  
Where anger and revenge, beat down fear and torment.  
A 13th labor for an unaware hercules

Where blood was nothing more,  
Then the droplets on the ground.  
It held no meaning, no merit, no connection  
In truth it never had.

No longer a terrified cub.  
The son swung at the monster, the demon  
who was meant to protect them, but didn't.  
In his fists he carried the memories of the beatings, of shattered promises.  
His anger, his hate, the armor and the weapon at his disposal.

The chains that held him prisoner,  
the cage in which he had been thrown  
had grown weak with time.  
The lock had broken, blasted apart by righteous fury.

The titanic boulders, that were the monster's fists  
No longer looked like mountains,  
instead they were smaller. Roughly the size of his own.  
Without fear, they were almost powerless.

Gone was the colossus, the Giant of their nightmares  
What was left was a man, and barely even that.  
That cub had grown into a lion  
and the giant into a lamb.

The blows fell like rain on both sides  
For each he received, he gave two back  
He must protect the others from those blows,  
there is no one else. No savior to arrive,  
to protect them,  
protect him.

No, he must be their shield,  
The brick wall the monster can't break through.  
An unmovable object against  
what once was an unstoppable force.

To his siblings this was a battle between titans  
A hero and a villain and not a fight  
Between a father and a son.  
On that day, the monster was vanquished,  
his facade of unyielding strength and control  
shattered and desolate.

Beaten out of existence by the one he tormented  
On the ground laid a broken man, bruised and battered  
Powerless and quiet, glaring at the victor,  
Who led his siblings away, grinning despite the pain, the bruises  
Free of the fear and suffering, that had held them for so long  
In its cold, unforgiving grip



## GARDEN OF EDEN

### ROWAN VALENTINO

Floral scents of nature envelop you. Cicadas hum in your ears. The buzzing of bees greets you with a pinch to the skin before that blur of black and yellow flies away. Your hair ruffles in the crisp, cool breeze as the light of the dawn slowly rises, warming Nana's own Garden of Eden. God's creatures from the insects that crawl the stems of her plants to the snake that slithers in the grass, greet you in this peaceful garden. Little feet wiggle their toes into the cool, damp soil of Earth. The hum of the woman whose gray hair shines from the rising sun drifts through the wind to your ears. Strands of hair cover her eyes, but her smile is as clear as the song of the wind chimes through the screen that divides you that Sunday morning. Hands wrinkled from time caress one of the Lord's rainbow creations. She prepares to return it to the Earth it came, whispering a prayer to the God she adores. Her summer smile warms your body as she beckons you to join her. You rise, the delicate sound of your feet pitter-patter to the older woman before you drink the cool, sweet liquid of her homemade tea. The sun finally rises and the old southern bell laughs as she passes you, leaving you dreaming, content and safe in her Garden of Eden.

GHAZAL FOR VALLEY GIRLS  
LILY PADDOCK

Your hip length hair, your ditzy floral, your wrinkled nose, beauty like  
a window reflection, I love your high rising terminal, like

how you hold the floor with your heels, how you find your friend in a crowd.  
I love how you kiss her a hundred times on the cheek- like

she was crying but you took her tears under your nails.  
You walk with the girls, you take them in the bathroom with you, like

you share your cardigans and little notes and a few dollars- "Girl, don't worry about it," -  
I love that you'll hold her hair back while telling her she's beautiful, like

Oh My God, you're watching pieces of scallion and acid meat drip into a sink drain, but  
the curve of her spine is shaped like a heart, and that's all your eyes like.

Your hip length hair, your ditzy floral, your wrinkled nose, I saw you  
in the window reflection and I thought we looked alike.

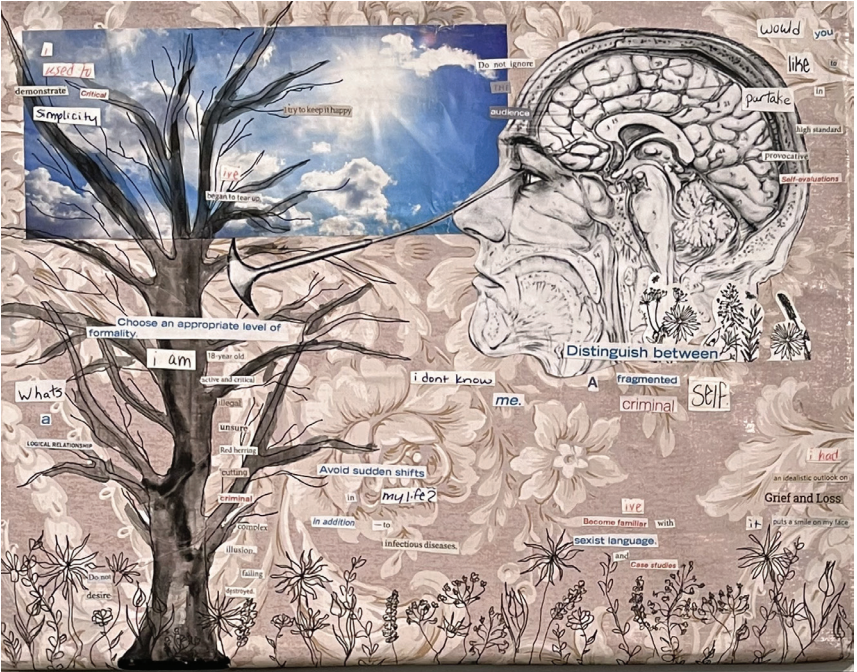
CLAYMORE  
HEAVEN SANTIAGO

*after Christian Hans Anderson*

*It*  
*was made of clay*  
*In the shape of a*  
Claymore, threatening  
To dissect her ideal  
Future, part by part  
As if it didn't belong  
To her, as if this  
Foreign substance was  
Throwing her organs  
Off homeostasis as if  
It was malicious  
Growth that needed  
Extracting as if it  
were causing her  
Chambers to close up  
As if she needs a blood  
Transfusion to clean  
The stream into  
A pristine blank slate  
As if there weren't cures  
For this and as if  
Uncertainty would  
certify the death of her  
And indecisiveness  
Is a knife that slits  
Her esophagus wide  
Like sliced bread loaf,  
Assaults her anxious  
Body bundled in  
Bed on misery  
Begging for  
Clear-  
ness

# AS ABOVE SO BELOW

LEENA CAPTAIN



REFLECTING  
CAITLIN MARX



SECOND SKIN  
CAITLIN MARX



ENTROPY  
LEENA CAPTAIN



GEORGIA  
QUINNLYN COX

Coming home feels like drowning. Like I'm suffocating myself so they only see the parts of me that they like. Maybe it says something that I feel more at ease in my beat up car on neverending unfamiliar roads than I do in the house that raised me. But at least once a year, I drive down to Georgia to visit my Gramma and Aunt Dot. And when I'm there I tell them half truths to appease them and try to ignore all the crosses and crucifixes that hang from every wall, staring at me. At night I sleep in my childhood bedroom that used to be my mom's childhood bedroom, and listen to the sound of the window fan drowning out the crickets. I eye the peeling floral wallpaper, the once white carpet that's now beige, the bible verses on the wall done in my Aunt Dot's careful cross stitch.

I put on one of the dresses my Gramma leaves for me in the closet and go with them to church. I still know many of the hymns and psalms by heart. I take communion. I sit and sweat in the pews, but I don't fidget. And after I let my Gramma take me around to all her church friends and give more half truths about what I do when I'm away.

I ignore it, every time I hear someone say, "She's just like her mother."

I ignore when someone usually responds with, "At least she comes back sometimes." I do chores, depending on the season. I cut down the kudzu that climbs the house. I mow the lawn. Sometimes I install new screen windows, or replace lightbulbs. I stay for a few days, greeting any old friends that are there as well. Most just never left. And then I leave again, with a tupperware of Aunt Dot's potato salad in the cooler beside me along with a pecan pie and other treats. Aunt Dot gets misty eyed when we say our goodbyes, where Gramma just grunts and says that she'll be seeing me soon.

And then I'm back on the road, and I can breathe again.



# THE COLOR HOUSE

SEAN GREEN

Nov. 20th, '64

When Marbrand, the Leroy's novel painter and then, the main source of their income, told me about how he came to become rapidly disillusioned with his position while his love for his craft swelled behind a placid face, we were seated in the basement of the mansion—observing his grandfather's paintings. His ancestry laid before him stirred and bubbled his recollection of recent events to the surface and let them flow onto me, and with such vivacity did they! It was apparent to me, in the emotion in his voice and the way his face twisted and flattened to the respective feelings the event procured, that this all welled in him so fiercely that to let it all explode must've been a great relief.

I'm no artist. I've never been no artist, only the Leroy's butler and "old boy" such they referred to me. I stand as little imposing as the overly-patterned dichromatic wallpaper that lined every wall not barren to let the smooth mahogany shimmer from the oil lanterns. I'd lived with the Leroy's for no less than sixty or so years, now walking about and tending to the other servants that Mr. Leroy orders me to order as if I were their superior. That's silliness. Some of them are paler than milk after all, so big-bellied Mr. Leroy's aging mind must wander from his preconceptions. Either that or time's finally come for him to need those bifocals he denies so often upon mention from the missus. A long time coming, I say! I thank that fellow above every day for my sight, as if it were to fail me my place in the Leroy's would lose its magic. You see, I take four positives from my place at the Leroy's no matter how often they make me want to scoff so hard my feet could lift from the ground: I eat good, I stay warm during the brutal Boston cold, the honies in the kitchen love (or loved, I guess my skin's gone wrinkly some) a fellow like me, and most importantly I have first-hand privilege to see the best art in the country.

Like I said, I'm no artist, and neither am I no critic, but that doesn't mean I can't take a look at what Marbrand, his daddy, granddaddy, even great-granddaddy make. It's like magic to me, as I plum don't understand how it's done. One time Mr. Leroy caught me looking long and hard.

"Pretty, isn't it?" He asked. I believe I nodded, to which he asked, "only, how keen can a boy like you look? Meaning no offense." I winced, and I just smiled, unaware myself if it was his great-granddaddy speaking through him or just his own modern stupidity. Oh, well, he wandered off muttering something to himself, and I stood looking—standing in the same place I now sat in a thick wooden chair, listening to Marbrand. We stared at his great-granddaddy's last piece as he talked, a painting which never received a title. It was far too abstract for me to pull any meaning from it—I could sure smile at it, though.

I never spoke to Marbrand before this meeting—he came down with a look of joy on his face, like a man that had seen the sun after living in a cave his whole life. When he saw me staring at the painting—a gray tarp rested on top

and flowed down to the easel tucked behind the canvas like an old woman whose hair just never quit—he pulled up a chair and let out a deep sigh. I always thought him a bit egocentric—the *obsessed artist*—but with that intense look of levity on his face, my presumption dropped like the many tarps he’s ripped from his own paintings at the “reveal dinners” when he’d finished what would substantiate the Leroy’s ever-growing wealth. He talked, I listened, and I learned exactly who Marbrand Florentino Duran III was.

Walking into the auction hall—a room dimly lit other than the stage which had the lighting of a play...dramatic, supreme; something that demanded respect, attention, and your undeniable awe—Marbrand sleuthed to the back where the darkness discerned not the hues of your clothes or the amazement in your eyes. He always enjoyed sitting in the back, something like a nosebleed, to get a sense of how these people saw the work on the stage—you know, the stage that demanded respect, attention... Beside him were some young lads with scruffy beards and even scruffier hair yet dressed in fine clothes. Marbrand wondered what they were even doing here.

*Oh!* He snapped his fingers in his mind, he said he did. *They’re art students, here to be inspired!* Or, he thought in a much more sordid tone, *they’re here to do much more than be inspired. They’re here to...copy. Not practice... copy.* His father had him practice copying the styles of other painters, “a common practice” as he was told, but even as a kid he disliked the idea. He always preferred to simply look, for no action was needed; no practice was needed other than making his own pieces. He differed from most painters—artists—and certainly these two. He thought all this without letting his face become twisted into a pile of olive-colored grump, two low and thick black caterpillars for eyebrows to seal the deal—a skill he’d learned in this house. Never let your thoughts materialize into something that a mirror can be held up to.

Not that it’d even matter, naturally. It was so damn dark, and he so damn darker than these pale Bostonites, he must’ve blended right into the chair with the sequin-silk seat cover. The seats were made for gallery seating—not auction seating—Marbrand certainly thought them far too uncomfortable. These auctions were once galleries, then pieces were bid—now, they’re just bid on. The appreciation and awe replaced with shock and awe. So, these seats were to be sat on for a quick moment, then the viewers would stand and waltz around, taking in every stroke of the paintbrush...to lean in and see what each and every one of their pennies would be placed faith of beauty. No longer. They now *sit* for a time as paddles raise—and Marbrand *sat* back in the darkest place with the late-arrivers. But he wanted to be seen. Seen, but not recognized. He often spiraled over his wants and desires, most often he didn’t even know what he wanted and rarely came to conclusions.

*Ah. Let them try to copy,* Marbrand thought. *Either they’ll get a passing grade or be expelled for plagiarism.* That was how universities ran, wasn’t it? He didn’t know—he never attended one. His professor was his father, really. Whichever the case, it didn’t matter to Marbrand. He knew if they weren’t merely

here to oblige the demand of respect, attention, and to undeniably gape in awe, then their copies would be less than copies.

*Oh, you two...don't you realize such a piece is more than just lines, yellow and red and blue and white and black in different ratios to service those lines? More than taking your pencil and letting the graphite crumb off as it leads right? Leads left? Down? Up? It's the history, the emotion, the mental state, the hopes, the values, the tendons in the hand jittering just ever so perfectly to make that line jagged, and that line smooth. It's the part of the canvas left intentionally blank not because of boredom but because sometimes something left unsaid is more powerful than the dull words to explain. When, on that white canvas, do you answer or ask a question? So, copy away. I hope you learn something from the outcome!*

The auctioneer, muttering as fast as a hummingbird's flapping wings, went from paddle to paddle raising the number he muttered every half-millisecond.

"Sold!" He exclaimed, a curious bob in his moustache as he slammed his gavel on the stand. "Sold, to the man in the—with the highest bid, it's darn dark out there, folks!" A studious laughter followed. Just then, a girl beside the two college boys asked in a hush:

"Would either of you have bid on that were I to want it?" Marbrand looked forward, even though he was certain he was just about invisible.

"Of course," one said.

"If I weren't in college, broke," the one nearest to Marbrand said. "I'd buy all the cruddy paintings you'd like."

"What makes you think it's cruddy?" Marbrand asked suddenly, his face blankening.

*They can't quite see you, but still. Never let a mirror be held up to you.*

The trio of college students glanced over at him as he stared straight, watching as the painting was carried off stage. He figured it could've been handled with some more care.

"Why? Sir. Why, sir?" Asked the one furthest, wearing a patchy flat-cap too big for him—he just made it out.

"Why do I ask?" Marbrand inquired.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm a critic. You're the youth, I ought to service, to hear out not just the rich old folk bidding on these pieces." He knew this was a lie, but when your face is untethered to your thoughts, so too is your vocal cords, throat and tongue—they were none the wiser.

"It's just awfully colorful," the one nearest Marbrand said. The one with the patchy flat cap nodded.

"Blindingly colorful."

"I could say Rembrandt's portraits lacking imagination. Or Dali's just the opposite. Perhaps Michelangelo should've devised something far less intricate because my eyes dart 'round too often. Or, perhaps, what this man meant in his exuberance with color was not to blind you, but to enliven your eyes, dull to the

smog of everyday life to something that is there, but not true to what we call *reality*.”

The two boys left without a second thought; a look of devastatingly tired eyes on their faces. They tugged on the girl’s hand as they evacuated. But the girl stayed, ogling Marbrand’s profile.

“What is it, girl?” Marbrand asked.

“*That was beautiful, mister,*” she whispered as the next piece was (forcibly) rolled on stage. Marbrand smiled warmly—the mirror not to be held was for negative manners, naturally—and felt a sense of gratitude fill his head. Then, she moved closer with lulling large blue eyes, asking, “would you mind if I used that in my dissertation?”

The next piece rolled onto stage, the fifth and final one for the night. This one was Marbrand’s favorite—an oil of a tall, thin, sitting mahogany man overlooking a lake in all directions. His head looks north, west, east, south—white-fire eyes threatening to burn himself to the ground. So, he sits in the crystal-blue lake in a valley, cherry-blossom trees at the shoreline, waiting to see if first he’ll be burnt or if his wooden person will soak up the lake’s water, which rushes from every direction. A very action-oriented piece, something that’d enliven a study and induce a sense of stress-free urgency.

Marbrand had moved a bit closer just to get a good look at the beauty. Fond memories flooded to him...when he first closed his him...when he first closed his eyes and saw what was there, but couldn’t be seen conventionally, thick blades of grass beneath him—to putting on the rags, to first taking the 2H pencil to the canvas, to mixing the paints not knowing where to begin. But that was a good thing.

The auctioneer with his peculiar moustache held his hands at his side as Bertram Leroy IV, the man of the house came up to announce Marbrand’s last but *certainly not least* piece. Mr. Leroy, as Marbrand must refer to him, was the fourth of his family to take claim to the Leroy estate and enjoyed these auctions as a glimpse into how the Leroy name has extended its tendrils into the homes of every rich sap in Boston and across the country. Dressed in a fine black woolen suit, a bowtie and cleanly-shaven so that you’d think the lower half of his face was dying and gray, yet terribly smooth. The lighting of the stage was far nicer to Marbrand’s painting than to Mr. Leroy’s mug.

As he introduced the final piece, Marbrand noticed Mr. Leroy’s expression was not dissimilar to that of the night Marbrand had unveiled the piece at dinner...

They ate pork sirloin with asparagus, mashed yams and then the sixteen other entrees to satiate wondering hunger. Marbrand never dined with the family. Reason being, he wasn’t allowed as well as he never wanted to. When his Papa, the Leroy’s painter before him, was educating him on what it meant to be the artist of the house, he said you serve one purpose: “Making the house interesting.” Of course, his Papa never said this to the family, only ever to his son.

He's the same person who taught him how to untether his face from his mind. He was a good student to his father—but he never wanted to just make the house interesting. The whole world needed *interestification*.

Marbrand stood in loose rags splattered with every color imaginable. He even got some on his flat cap. Standing next to a canvas sheathed in a light tarp, he stood blank-faced as the family chewed with anticipation.

"I'm awful excited to see what's taken so long," Mr. Leroy said with a smirk.

"Yes," Mrs. Leroy said, clearing her throat. She was a woman long past her years of beauty holding on with disillusioned yet iron grip. "Maybe we could save this one?" She asked of her husband. "Our bedroom walls are so bare."

"Nonsense," Mr. Leroy spat.

Their son, Collin, a disinterested and uninteresting young man of sixteen, ate with some nonchalance as Marbrand waited to be seen by his whole audience. It was the one thing he asked of the Leroy's other than what was given—food, a home, a job. Collin's disinterest bothered Marbrand but there was absolutely no chance this fact would be seen. The servants crept their heads from the halls to the kitchens with deep reverence to Marbrand's work. His art was meant to represent the Leroy house, the name, the pride—everyone may enjoy it, though. Sometimes he thought the servants looked with a keener eye, but it's not customary for him to converse with them, to hear their ideas. Everyone has their niche, and Marbrand enjoyed that which he fit into like a silk glove.

"Marbrand's great-grandfather lines our walls. Plentiful."

"We've got some of his grandfather's, too, no?" Mrs. Leroy asked.

"The one that never sold—"

"Is in the storage basement," she finished his sentence.

Marbrand's grandfather died when he was seven. He had memories of him, but they were distant and furrowed deep in his unconscious.

"Enough of the chatter!" Mr. Leroy exclaimed with some enthusiasm.

"Come, Marbrand, how we're intrigued!" He tapped the table rhythmically and Marbrand's mouth twisted into a calculated smile.

*Thwoof!* He tore the tarp up and off the canvas and revealed the piece. Neatly, he folded the thing into a small bouncy pile as they looked on with darting eyes.

"The colors!" Mrs. Leroy proclaimed, peppered with want and irritation that she couldn't save the piece for herself. "You've—certainly outdone yourself." This minute detail in her voice brought Marbrand great joy. Collin raised his brows slightly and lowered, returning to his meal and occasionally glancing at it as the comments came. Every time he unveiled his latest project, Marbrand wondered if they'd ask *what it was* and that was a sure sign they thought it too abstract—after explaining post-dinner, the few times he spoke to either of them one-on-one, Marbrand asked for faith and if given, soon the piece is rolled on stage and faith is rewarded with multiple bidders warring against each other.

The reception was highly positive—endorphins surging in Marbrand's

brain so profoundly he thought someone might've stabbed him with morphine.

"It is a bit colorful."

"But sublime."

"This man...he is...well, clearly, he is tradition. The lake is modernity?"

"How many heads are there?"

"What grace those churning tangerine clouds exude."

The more they talked, the more morphine filled Marbrand's bloodstream, tingling his pores and soothing his aching fingers and forearms, his knotted neck and sore shoulders.

Mr. Leroy intertwined his fingers and sat hunched over an empty plate of food—with a napkin hanging from an extended thumb, he wiped his lower lip and let it fall to the table, studying the piece in the sudden silence. The final moment. The end of the exhibition. Away went the servants peering heads, off to assemble the clean-up crew because it was one final question, one final answer, and the night had finished.

"Highly intriguing work, Marbrand. I have some comments, but we can discuss it later. Now—" he released his fingers and pointed right at the painting with vivacity, "what's this one's name?"

Marbrand glanced at the painting once more, then back to his audience.

"This painting is called..."

"*Scrutiny*," Mr. Leroy announced, gesturing at the piece. "Perfect for your study or your gallery, or anywhere you can admire it, for it sure deserved to be admired! Now I'll hand it back to our wonderful auctioneer..." He took the mic and announced the starting bid:

"Bidding begins at two-hundred thousand, do we have any takers?"

But something was wrong. Marbrand saw no paddles.

*Perhaps, he thought, oh, well, the dark of the back obscures some bidders!*

Marbrand turned to look where he once stood. No highlights gave the impression of a raised paddle. It seemed as though everyone had been struck with a horrid case of amnesia, looking around for someone they knew, and Marbrand was the only one who'd retained his memory.

In the milliseconds without a new bid, Marbrand's stomach flew to the ground in conjunction with his head rising above the sea of people like he was decapitated, all eyes looking at him, the only person any of them knew. The auctioneer repeated his statement, destroying any doubt in Marbrand's mind that this was actually reality.

*No bidders? No bidders?! This is the event of the night! Has everyone gone blind?*

*Have they gone blind?*

Marbrand stood idly in front of an empty canvas, the cold white shine of morning sun beamed through wandering dust particles to just barely scratch the back of the easel.

*Inspiration*, Marbrand pondered. *Some flow of ideas. Where do these ideas come from? The brain?* Inspiration. Ideas. To Marbrand, they were entities attaching themselves to our brain receptors from another level of consciousness

like an endorphin to a dendrite—something Marbrand certainly lacked at the time.

Like his senses had all filtered into picking up vibrations—he didn't hear a sound, he doesn't think—Marbrand turned at the approaching figure of Mr. Leroy with a not-too-impressed look on his face. This didn't faze Marbrand, though, he didn't have a lick of worry in him. He didn't shove his tail between his legs and quiver, after all, why would he? This sort of thing happens. Pieces don't sell.

"I'll just cut through the fat and ask," the man of the house said, "what was that yesterday?"

"Hm?"

"Scrutiny sold like sand in the Sahara," he said vindictively.

"I suppose it just wasn't well-received," said Marbrand.

"You don't say!"

"Perhaps Scrutiny didn't sell," Marbrand pondered, "yet the rest did. Five of six pieces sold." Mr. Leroy shook his head as Marbrand settled his means of creation on the shelf. Mr. Leroy looked at a tarped couch and did an exasperated double take.

"Can I?" He asked with an incredibly wrinkled face—something told Marbrand he'd sit even if he said no. Marbrand nodded anyway. Letting out tired huff, he tore the tarp and sat, flattening out the thighs of his pants. "You don't understand," he said with fingertips pressed together. "Scrutiny was the final piece. The final *piece*, Marbrand. Finishing an auction with a puff of smoke, rather than a fiery explosion of paddles, it—well, *ensures*—the decline of a house." He brought his thumb to his wrinkled chin. "Everyone from California to New York City will yap. My company will go under. Two generations from now and this room, this house will be empty! Cobwebs, dust, rats! Rats! They'll scurry looking for crumbs the maids haven't cleaned from the corners of the rooms." Marbrand's mind challenged his face, but he held steadfast, his voice screaming in his head through befuddled confusion:

*Don't let him hold a mirror up to you.*

"Why do you think the piece did not sell, Mr. Leroy?"

To this he spoke every word short, and few and far between, staccato-like.

"It—just—wasn't—the—right—painting." He grumbled, standing and going to leave. At the door, Mr. Leroy said with a dismissive gesture, "you could stand to ease up on the colors a bit, too, Marbrand. Maybe we could actually stay afloat."

Throughout that entire conversation, Marbrand had not let one thought surface to his brain, his responses purely instinctual; for those minutes he let it collect behind a dam and it'd slowly release into the river by small increments of thought as this sort of stress always occurs. This time, though, the break in the dam was damn small. His head pounded.

*Ease up on the colors. Ease up on the colors! Should I also paint the entire mansion black, so the trees don't look as vibrant during the day?*

He didn't pick his brush back up. He had wandered outside, figuring that his tradition of "divine inspiration," as he thought it, would certainly help him through this block. For the first time, Marbrand felt not a creative block, but some other sort of block he couldn't place his finger on.

The mansion was built near, and nearly beneath trees, like they were engulfing the mansion. Fortunately, the Leroy's have always enjoyed the presence of nature...maybe not the livelier aspects of it...but it did differentiate this house from others. It's said that the women of the house more often than not wore bug-repellant, not perfume.

The trees had to constantly be trimmed to keep the branches from tapping the windows at night.

*Not good for the labor-force, wonderful for me!* Marbrand thought with some glee as he noticed the leaves of the oak trees began to sway and become a greener green. This is how Marbrand saw the world—maybe not always with his eyes—but his soul. Feeling the coarseness of a thin sapling, deficient in sunlight because of the shadow cast by the nearby thick, bushy oak.

*How can a tree so thin be so rough?*

It seemed nearly impossible, but a surge of empathy for the undernourished sapling reverberated throughout him—he nodded and left, walking through the thick forest, a trail he often travels. Up a hill, he sat at the overlook of a small lake, a big pond really, little hills sparse with trees lining the edges.

He thought of the story of Van Gogh; how he shot himself in the chest with a revolver, dying two days later, no one knowing his name.

Intense anxiety shot through Marbrand as he sunk his elbows and feet into the ground, being pulled into his grave. The taste of dirt in his mouth. Crumbing over his eyes. Deafening silence. Soon, not even emotion.

Amidst the blackness, he saw a kaleidoscope of indistinct color—some unnatural color, like a radial tearing into another universe with a different spectrum of light—and the way it wasn't something he could see, never describe, but feel. It felt like his grandfather. He sat on his grandfather's lap; a memory so distant but vivid. Vivid as a waking dream! He could smell the aftershave on his grandfather's smooth face as he watched him put brush to canvas. He could taste the aroma of paint. He could hear his low voice, speaking a mix of Spanish and English. He could see the painting his grandfather put the finishing touches on:

A bright blue and teal gradient of a background, strobes of bright green, red, a glowing orange-brown darting from corner to corner to side to side. It was a tree. In the least populated region of the piece, a black figure with just barely discernable anatomy played on a detached swing. It looked like the person had been flung rather than dropped—even then, at six, Marbrand picked up on the sense of motion in his grandfather's art.

"You can't force a thing," he'd said, his booming voice said above Marbrand. "What they see comes from within—*el alma*, the soul. The soul darn long. You let it drip out over periods of time. Sometimes the valve is closed,"



he dipped the tip of his brush in a dirty cup of water, “sometimes it’s open. *Nuestras almas* are vibrant, *coloridas*. You must always let that show.” He dragged the damp brush along the swing’s ropes, suave curving indicating a ghost of the rope’s past movement. “Ah,” he said with a huff, placing a thick hand on Marbrand’s belly.

“Pretty colors,” Marbrand said in a sweetly high-pitched voice.

“The colors are the most important part, *niño*. The Leroy’s don’t make this the famous *Color House*. I did. *Tu papá* does now. And, in time, so will you. There is no Color House without us.” His grandfather smiled down at him. “Well, since your father is the house’s painter, now, this one stays.”

“Can I have it?” Marbrand asked. His grandfather chuckled, saying with his finger pointed at the figure on the swing:

“Can you have it? Ay. Don’t you know that’s you?”

Something had grabbed him by the chest, cast in some sort of net, and dragged him above ground, to the indistinct sight of a massive lake surrounded by lush cherry blossom valleys, a figure of burning wood in the center.

Then, he remembered Van Gogh’s mother lived to see her son become world-renowned.

He opened his eyes and was comforted by the sight of the big pond, just now realizing he’d been smiling widely the entire time he was outside.

“Taxi!” Marbrand shouted, stumbling off the gravel ditch that lined each side of the Leroy’s paved driveway. It was beginning to sprinkle—swirling gray clouds above spoke of a coming torrent. He frantically waved as the taxi sped up, acting as if it would pass; as if it weren’t going to stop. But it screeched to a halt; Marbrand assumed the driver did a double take on the residence, relinquishing to stop as he’d likely get a quick and easy shakedown. This thought puzzled Marbrand, though, and he surrendered the angry, jaded feeling he had for the driver he never met.

Jumping into the car, wiping his clothes of wetness in vain, Marbrand told the driver his desired destination.

The drive seemed much longer than it ought to, maybe because Marbrand hadn’t been in the city in a long time. He spent dawn till dusk, sometimes dusk till dusk slaving on his paintings, most importantly *Scrutiny*, which had cost Marbrand his shoulder and upper back comfort most days. It was a long time that the piece had been laden with Marbrand’s free-flowing love, and the thought of its reception stung his memory bank with anxiety and anger.

Rain pelted the windows of the cab, making that distinct pitter-pattering sound that only glass can procure. The city and all the way to the borough he headed toward was glossy and reflective from the rain. There was a long red light where, trying his best to ignore his cab driver’s yelling, he examined the way the barber’s pole reflected in a puddle beneath it. The longer he stared, the longer it seemed like the pole in the puddle was realer than the one in the shop. Just as the light turned green, he noticed the bum sitting on the edge of the alleyway, tucked underneath the building’s overhang to avoid the rain which only increased in its

intensity. Marbrand wanted to look longer...longer at this man with his unkept face, sullen cheeks and rags for clothes...longer at his sad face. He forced himself to swallow pangs of fear, but they were as sudden as they were short lived; he was approaching his destination.

The brakes screeched as the taxi struggled to stop on the roads lined with mini rivers, rushing down into muck-covered drains. Marbrand looked up at the apartment complex, up at the upper-most left window—his mother’s apartment.

Marbrand did not tell me the specifics of his meeting with his mama. When I asked him why, he simply looked deeply into my eyes, smiled, and said, “you know what they say—an artist should never reveal his secrets. In this case—*her* secrets. My mama is an artist with her words, and they were meant for her son.”

I didn’t press—in fact, it wasn’t what was said that mattered to me, as I saw the difference in his face. His brows were lifted a bit higher, his mouth was upturned a bit more at each end, even the darkness beneath his eyes lightened some, like his mother had done make up on her boy. I did ask if this was true, and we shared a hearty laugh!

The canvas was shifting like a stereograph, flipping from painting to painting. “Young at Heart” played on the radio in the corner of the room. Half of Marbrand’s dinner sat on the cabinet behind him.

Suddenly, Mr. and Mrs. Leroy came rushing in, highly excitable but kept their usual withheld composure—Mrs. Leroy walked as if not to make a creak in the floorboards.

“Marbrand! We have wonderful news,” Mrs. Leroy flashed with her fingers, returning them to clasping with an ugly smile on her prepped face. “Just great news.” It was clear by their attire and the layering of her makeup that they were heading out for the night—much to the help’s joy.

“Why, it’s true. Better than wonderful news, a right miracle!” Mr. Leroy gleamed near-smugly. “Word’s been going around that the painting was intentionally an eye-sore, and that tomorrow there’ll be another auction. Rumor is, Marbrand, *‘the house’s artist will section the piece, quartering it.’*” He repeated what the latest articles said in the “arts” section of the Boston Globe. “They say you knew it to be too vibrant! That by quartering it, a fourth the color is true by technical means. Rumors spurred from Harvard, supposedly. God, they’re going buck-wild in the paper!” He bellowed out laughter, his wife placing one hand on his shoulder and another on her unshapely hip. “The hiccup turns out to be a speedbump, and now we’re—” he became serious some bit, “only going faster from here.” The Leroy’s stared at Marbrand, waiting for a response.

*Don’t let them hold a mirror up to you.*

“What he means to say,” Mrs. Leroy said, ending in pursed lips, “is thank you.”

*Don’t let them hold a mirror up to you.*

“I’m certain of it!” Mr. Leroy announced.

Marbrand stood with a blank-minded smile on his face, staring at the two as they waited eagerly for a response—a slight lean of the head forward, eyebrows raised.

Marbrand thought:

*Don't let them hold a mirror up to—*

*No. Mi alma es colorida!*

Marbrand's face melted into a heap of disappointment.

I went back to the basement to sit in some quiet in a very still house. Mrs. and Mr. Leroy were still at the theater, and while they were away the help, including myself, indulged in a whole lot of nothing. A ring of the bell would alert us that they were on their way back, but I could be without stirring for quite a while longer, so I sat in the same chair as I did before, next to a vacant chair of the same kind. The house was far less loud in spirit, though this certainly was not due to the Leroy's absence—no, not them. I assumed, initially, this loss of spirit would cause me to feel some sort of heart-ache, though as I sat there, listening to the raging of the storm above and away, a rather *loud* peace washed over me, a sort of empathetic vibration, and I settled deep in my chair as I stared at an empty easel.

Now, my old fingers have begun to ache. I suppose it's time I set down my pen and close up my notebook. I think I'll stare at this empty easel and its hair for a while longer...

# RAPUNSEL

## LUCAS SMITH

Once upon a time there was a prince named Richard. He really wanted a girlfriend.

So, he put on his finest boots, cape, and feathered hat and set out to the countryside to find a beautiful lady.

After a few days of wandering, Richard saw a tall, tall tower in the middle of a forest.

“Aha!” said Richard. “Ladies who live in the middle of forests away from all other people love meeting strangers!”

He walked around the tower and saw there was no door.

“Aha!” said Richard. “She must love visitors!”

At last, he found a small mailbox with the name Rapunsel written with golden letters.

“Rapunsel. RAPUNSEL!”

“What do you want?” a voice answered. It sounded annoyed, but Richard did not notice. He shouted up to the window near the top of the tower.

“How can I see you? There’s no way inside!”

“Go away, you cabbagehead.”

Suddenly, Richard realized something. Rapunsel could lower something for him to climb up!

“Rapunsel! Rapunsel! Let down your hair!”

Rapunsel threw down her hare. It was a snowshoe hare and it kicked Richard in the nose and ran off into the woods.

Richard rubbed his nose. Rapunsel must have misunderstood him! He thought of another word for hair.

“Rapunsel! Rapunsel! Let down your locks!”

Rapunsel pelted him with a set of combination locks and gave Richard two black eyes.

“Let down your curls!”

A set of dumbbells hit Richard’s foot.

“Let down your plaits!”

Rapunsel threw plates like frisbees at his knees.

“Let down your a-keratin!”

There was a pause as Rapunsel searched through her cupboards, and then a tin of carrots fell out of the tower and hit Richard’s head.

Richard sat down to think. Rapunsel wasn’t very good at listening! No matter how hard he tried she just didn’t get the message!

Then he had an epiphany.

“Rapunsel must be a prisoner! There is an evil witch up there who keeps throwing things at me! I must drive the witch away to save Rapunsel from all of this peace and solitude!”

Richard drew his sword.

“Do not fear, Rapunsel! I will save you from the witch!”

Suddenly, a long strand of hair fluttered down from the high window. Richard was overjoyed.

“Now I can finally have a girlfriend!”

Hand over hand he pulled himself up the beautiful, silky hair. He noticed that the hair was travelling up into the air with him, as if Rapunsel were pulling him up as he climbed.

“Girls love having their hair pulled!” thought Richard to himself.

At last Richard pulled himself over the window ledge and straightened his boots, cape, and feathered hat. He looked around excitedly. No one was there. The end of the hair that he was holding slipped out of his hand, across the floor, and down through another window on the other end of the tower. Rapunsel had used his weight to lower herself out.

“Hey!” cried Richard. “How am I supposed to get down!?”

A voice rang out from the forest.

“Use your nose hairs, boogerbrain!”

The End.

# THE BOX

ESFIR PIEVSKAYA

Each of us is full of emotions. Often people do not keep them to themselves, sharing their happiness and unhappiness with others, without even thinking whether they want it. We are all books that are easy to read if you know the title and the author. But there are people who keep their emotions deep in themselves, they have to be read between the lines, and when there are too many sensations, thoughts, and feelings, they create a box. A box of emotions.

One such person overloaded his box so much that it began to fall, sinking deeper and deeper until it hit the bottom of his head. It seemed to the person that he had swallowed a hefty pill when there was still an obnoxious tingle in the larynx but did not pay attention to it. The box does not take away emotions, it only stores them, if you wish, you can get them out one at a time or all at once. Although I don't remember that at least someone did this, because it's too much work. Some people have so many of these boxes that they no longer remember which one stores what. Because of this, people sometimes react inappropriately. That person was not special - ordinary problems and thoughts, but he did something incredible - he lost the box. His emotions dulled, and his face automatically, according to muscle memory, gave out some emotions so that no one would notice the substitution, but the person no longer felt them, he did not understand what he was feeling. When he was asked about his well-being, he sincerely did not know what to answer. The word seemed to spin around on the tongue, and as soon as he opened his mouth to answer, it disappeared, perhaps going in search of a box.

The person was already accustomed to this state of affairs, problems did not bother him, however, even small joys did not bring pleasure. He tried to explain what was happening to him, but the words seemed to refuse to obey. He worked for a long time to bring the box back, although, in the beginning, he tried to pretend that everything was fine without it.

After many months, maybe years, he took out the box, feeling like an archaeologist who found something so ancient that no one even remembers its existence. For a while he just observed it, then he decided to open it because it seemed to him that emotions would change his world. So they did.

The world was no longer gray, not even black and white, everything became colorful and bright, like a miracle, his own little miracle. But the man did not rejoice for too long, along with the joy of the returned emotions came the memory of why he abandoned them.

Each event seemed to him hypertrophied, so bright that the word "frightening" would be better suited. Often people give up some emotions that are too heavy, but for him, everyone was like that. Each thing caused such a collapse inside him that he was on the verge of drowning in it.

Therefore, the man created a new box, but more durable, the previous one was wooden with pretty patterns, and it seemed utterly harmless, but this one was iron and large, it's even scary to approach such one. The metal was

special, it was unbreakable. This time he put it on the shelf, more for a reminder rather than from some other principle.

Day after day, he walked past it, reliving what he had to go through, and the oppressive feeling of understatement did not leave. And one of the many sleepless nights, he got out of bed, took his box, got into a car, and drove off. He felt like an inferior, a degenerate of society, a chameleon, and a deceiver.

The man drove for several hours without stopping along deserted roads, where there was only him, the wind, and his box. He arrived at the right place by dawn.

Looking at the canyon without end, he tried to gather his courage. Two sides fought in his heart, the one that wanted to keep the box, and the second part, which had not yet distinguished itself from the wounds inflicted by all the emotions experienced. The second one was stronger and louder. He extended his arm forward and relaxed it, feeling how light it felt after being freed from such a weight.

The man had already begun to walk toward the car, thinking he had done something incredibly clever, unique, if a little crazy, when he heard the sound. It was the sound of metal on metal, not ordinary, but the most durable. It was the sound of a grave, a burial of emotions.

No, he was not the only one.

GORTYS  
CAMBRIA GORDON

“It’s just you and I, Agent Reigns,” the agent said to me. But she was wrong, we were not alone. Her notebook was filled with her notes that only she could understand. The room was mostly dark, the only source of light was coming from the lamp on the dusty metal table.

It’s just not just me and her. I didn’t want her to hear the hard truth that this thing in me can possibly kill her. It liked to kill.

I turned my head to the right to see my complexion and the agent across from me in the mirror. I looked at my right arm to see it in an arm sling. I looked down to see my left arm cuffed to the metal bar connected to the metal table. I would usually be the one on the other side doing the interrogation and the suspect’s arm is chained to the metal bar. But now I’m the one who is chained. I’m the criminal.

“I just need to know what happened to you and your partner in the Amazon Forest. We have been here for two hours. I just want to help you,” she said.

“You can’t help me.... No one can,” I said, looking down at my arms to see if it was making its appearance again. Thankfully it was not. I couldn’t imagine what it would do to the agent.

She touched my arm and exclaimed, “We can help you, Jason, we have a facility that helps with that problem that you have. I promise.”

Her touch felt soft, easy to dig my fingernails through her skin. The thought made me flinch, making her quickly remove her hands from my arms.

“Okay, I will tell you. Just don’t touch me again,” I said, trying to calm myself down.

“Okay Agent Reigns, I won’t.”

It all started when my partner, Maya Sosa, and I were told to investigate the whereabouts of a former agent named Lucas Fields at the CIA. He was missing for one month and was believed to be dead. We weren’t told much about the details of the mission that Agent Fields was on but all I know is that they said when we find him to call Director Jones immediately. We were dropped at the last known location of Lucas Field in the Amazon Forest by the government helicopter.

As we walked deeper into the forest we noticed a toucan sprawled on the ground, dead. At first, we thought nothing of it, but we saw an orange substance coming out of its body.

“That’s weird,” Maya said, getting a closer look at the toucan’s body, “There’s a gunshot wound.”

“That is weird,” I said, getting a closer look as well, “I guess Agent Fields got scared of a little toucan and shot it dead.”

“Maybe,” Maya chuckled.

I looked down an open path and saw a trail of droplets of the same orange substance that was coming out of the toucan.



“Maya, look over there...” I said, pointing to the droplets of the glowing orange substance.

Maya and I walked over there cautiously. I bent down to the droplet and touched it. It felt hot, almost like it was on fire. I knew we were in a hot climate, but with all the rain in the amazon forest and how decayed the toucan looked, I assumed it would be cold. I wiped off the goo on my pants and said to Maya, “Scan it on the portable spectrophotometer so we can know what this thing is and what species it is or what it belongs to.”

Maya put her bag on the ground and rummaged through it. She took out the portable spectrophotometer and took a sample of the droplet of the orange goo. The spectrophotometer hummed for a few seconds and an error message came up.

Maya hit the spectrophotometer, hoping that the message would change. I looked down into the woods and saw a trace of the glowing orange substance.

“Maya look,” I said, tapping her shoulder to stop hitting the device.

She looked to where the trail is and started walking towards it, “Well hopefully it leads us to Agent Fields and we get to go home.”

I trailed after her, confident we would find something.

As we continued walking we found Agent Fields CIA badge, hoping that he was not dead. But a foot away from the badge was the dead body of Lucas Fields. His cold body was braced on a tree with dried blood on his hands, face, and clothes. But something about him didn't seem right. We saw the knife in his head. I picked up his arm to see cuts on his wrist, I moved his head around to see his throat cut.

What was strange about Lucas was that he wasn't bleeding actual blood, instead, there was the orange glowing substance that we were tracking the whole time trickling down where the wounds were. I looked around his body to see if there was anything to help us understand what happened.

I eventually spotted a phone and walked over to it to see if we could find anything that proves what happened to him. The phone didn't have a password, which I thought was weird. I unlock the phone to see if he contacted someone or left a video or voice record. I found a video of him that was made a week ago. I showed it to Maya so we could both watch it and finally figure out why he died. We see the video starting with the phone away from him while he is sitting near the tree where he lies dead now.

*To anyone who is seeing this, my name is Lucas Kenneth Fields. I am working for the military and came to the amazon forest to investigate some mysterious object called the Gortys. I went to investigate it with a friend of mine in the Amazon forest. Where you may possibly see my body right now.*

He started to open his eyes fully and crawled quickly toward the phone and picked it up, bringing it close to his face.

*I need you to hear this. I don't think Gortys is an object of some sort. It's some weird goopy shit, that I've never seen before. It affected a toucan and drove it crazy. I saw it for myself. The eyes of the bird were not normal, they were bright orange, the weird part was that the body was glowing orange. It wasn't acting*

*like a normal toucan would. The wings of the toucan were clawing all its victims. I had to kill the toucan so it would stop hurting the other animals and I needed to bring this back to the US so they could investigate more into it. But something happened, I went to pick up the toucan and I started to feel my body turning cold. I think that Gortys got inside me. I don't know how it did, but it affected me.*

Lucas started to cry.

*I couldn't control myself. It was affecting me fast. Franky... he was trying to help me.... I didn't want to hurt him. He was my best friend. It made me do it. GORTYS MADE ME KILL HIM! I KNOW IT! I had no control over my body, I only saw what happened. I saw myself clawing his body with my hands, ripping his sensitive skin. I heard his screams telling me to stop..... but I couldn't. I HAD NO CONTROL OVER MY BODY!*

*I'm not a murderer, Gortys is. I have the blood of everyone and things that Gortys killed. My veins are bright orange instead of their usual color. He only feeds when he's hungry. If you are seeing this, I pray that you don't touch me. And make sure you are not around someone you care about. I can't allow it to affect other people. It wouldn't allow me to get into contact with the base, it's smart. I can't live with myself anymore knowing the things I did. I'm sorry, I failed.* The video cut out, knowing what happened to Lucas was tragic. We knew that he killed himself to protect others.

"Wait, Jason, didn't you touch the body?" Maya said, walking away from me. I looked at her realizing that I'm fucked.

"Fuck! Talk to the base, before it's too late. If what he is saying is true, this thing can start to affect me. She nodded to me and immediately started to talk on her radio. "This is agent Maya Sosa, we found Lucas Fields and we need to get out of here ASAP. Something happened to agent Jason Reigns. We need to get him to care fast." Then I started to feel something pulsing through me. I felt coldness going through my veins.

"Sosa, I think it's starting to affect me. I don't think I am going to make it." I said to her walking away making sure I won't hurt her.

"Shut up Jason, you are going to be fine. They should be coming soon." Maya said, putting her hands out trying to calm me down. We heard the helicopter closing near our location. I looked down at my arms and saw the same bright orange substance moving through my regular blue veins until I couldn't see any more of my regular veins.

"Jason, what's wrong?" I looked at her, but not as my friend, but like she was food. She looked so tasty.

"What is wrong with me," I thought to myself. "That's my partner and friend. But the meat on her bones is just so divine."

"Maya, I need you to run away from me," I said to her in panic, I knew what I was going to do to her. She looked at me with concern on her face and immediately started to run away and I started to chase after her. She was usually faster than me, but this time she wasn't. I wish she would've just shot me, why didn't she?

The more I was chasing her, the more I wanted to feast on her. I didn't want her to die, not like this. I caught up to her and pulled her by her ponytail. She fell on her back looking at me in panic. All I could think about was stopping myself from hurting her. I tried to move my arms to stop him, but I couldn't because he was in control. She started screaming telling me not to do it. Tears were forming down her face. I couldn't even tell her I'm sorry, or that I can't control Gortys.

Gortys dug my fingers into her eyes and scratched them out, her blood was gushing out of her face. It went down to her chest and continued to dig into her body. It kept on going, over and over. Her blood was all over my face and uniform.

"Stop right there Reigns!" I heard from behind me. Gortys made me turn around so it can spot its next victims. Four of my coworkers I see, all pointing guns at me and Gortys. I was praying that they would just shoot me. Gortys ran towards one of my brothers and started to dig my nails into his body. Next thing I knew I heard a shot go off and I woke up in this room. The agent looks at me with concern on her face, making me feel uneasy.

"I'm sorry about your partner," she says.

Tears started forming in my eyes, "She was like a sister to me. I couldn't stop it... couldn't stop it..... I couldn't stop it." I repeat over.

"I understand Mr. Reigns, I am here to help you." She says looking at me with pity in her eyes. I smile at her response; I'm glad she doesn't think I'm a murderer. "We are going to take you to an experimental room so we can try to extract... Gortys from your body." She looks at the mirror and nods. The door opens and I see the same men that were in the Amazon forest outside of the door.

"They are going to take you to the room so the scientist can get Gortys out of you and you can go home." The agent says getting up from the chair. The officers started walking inside the room, uncuffed me, and lifted me up out of my seat. They walk me towards the door, but the agent stops them, "You will be safe here, I promise. You won't hurt anyone." I smile feeling reassurance. Her skin looks immaculate, so easy to devour.

## SINKING ICARUS

ESFIR PIEVSKAYA

One day, two children decided to create a paper airplane. They worked hard on it for several days so that it was the most beautiful one, each time reworking it because it seemed to them that it could be even more lovely. Going through their room, you could smell glue and paints, hear emotional debates about the color of the future airplane or what music they should listen to right now, or any other small things that are so valid.

“It should be pink, it’s my favorite color.”

“No, we are not children anymore, we have to choose something mature like grey.”

“But it’s boring. Listen.”

“No!”

“Stop it, I’m right. You’re such a jerk.”

“Mooooom! She started it again.”

“Shut up! It’s not true, mommy. He lies as always.”

After many attempts, they were finally more than satisfied with the result, their work was unsurpassed. The Airplane was so graceful that It seemed to be made by forest fairies. It was a small miracle.

Eventually, they made It blue because “it looks like a sky and a sea at the same time” and “it’s so mature”. Each side wasn’t the same as the previous one, all of them had their own reliefs that were copying either some kind of flowers or various butterflies. Some of the images were so realistic as if you could feel this saccharine smell of lavender or hear a flutter of wings. Obviously, It had a handful of different types of tinsel and glitters since “It has to shine like a north star”. To be honest, It wasn’t the best paper airplane that was ever created but when you saw small fingerprints from paints on its wings and places where glue looked like a puddle, and some teeny-tiny flaws there appeared this stabbing feeling of passing childhood. That’s the reason why this “art object” was successful.

Every day all kinds of people came to take a glance at It. The Airplane liked that everyone admired him but very quickly It got tired of just standing, being an object without any aim besides being a decorative one. It looked at birds through the small window, being confident that It didn’t belong to this place. The children did not want to launch the Airplane, what if suddenly It would break down, and they worked on It for so long. They were so careful as if It was not an ordinary paper airplane but an infant and they should be like nurses.

Soon they got bored of the toy, and they put It on a shelf near the window, as their trophy, not knowing what pain it brought to It - looking at such free birds for the rest of this short and pointless life, every day more and more losing hope of ever getting out of this imprisonment.

After a few months, summer began, and windows were constantly left open to ventilate the room. And the Airplane got the hope of liberation, It picked up the moment when no one would be at home and jumped off. Without any

hesitations, It flew out of the window and, finally, understood what freedom is in all Its glory.

It soared in the sky, seeing Its former home, Its creators, and all that lonely night on the shelf. The airplane shouted to them: “Thank you for the creation” and disappeared.

It felt right to fly next to birds, who looked at this miracle in bewilderment. It could finally feel the wind flowing into Its entire interior. Eventually, life started to have a point.

But very quickly the Airplane realized that he had absolutely no flying skills. It could see the wicked irony that It was created as beautiful and useless. Its wings did not have a sufficient span, and the abundance of glitter and paint pulled It towards the ground. It was at a loss, not knowing what to do. This feeling of freedom just went away, replaced by anxiety. Even though there was a chance to go back and be safe, the Airplane decided that a short flight with a predetermined end was better than a slightly longer life on a shelf with achievements.

After all, one way or another, It is just an object, a fleeting childish fad, and will be spoiled, whether it be an unsuccessful landing or the rough hands of the parents of the creators, who decided that Its time had come and that a trash bin was tired of waiting. It's common knowledge that the reason why paper airplanes are made from paper is that they are not meant to last too long.

Very soon It began to approach the water incredibly quickly, over which It flew, although not at will. Instead of being rueful about it, the Airplane was enjoying the views and every moment of flying. It just thought about how lucky It is since It could see a sunset that was bright to goosebumps. Gradually, It began to feel how the water and Its body began a duel. The winner was already known, this was the fight bribed by mother nature itself. It was becoming infeasible to understand what gives this salty taste when inhaling. The sequins, like the armor of a fallen warrior, began to fall off, the paint lost its former color, and the body atrophied and became heavy as if It was a real plane.

In the moment before sinking to the bottom, the Airplane recollected Its short but bright life, especially that day. It became like Icarus, who came too close to his dream. The Airplane did not regret anything, It saw and felt everything It had ever wanted and was grateful. It learned a price of freedom for those to whom it was not originally given. Taking the last breath, It sank under the water, looking at the beautiful sky, like Itself not so long ago, and rejoicing in Itself, It hummed in Its head a song that It heard from its creators who worked so hard on it.

“This song is so bad. Change it. Faster, faster...”

“Faster, faster... No, I like it, if you do not, it's not my business. You just can't understand, dumbo. Just listen.”

“Noooo! Change it. Faster. It's my turn to play something. We always listen to your music.”

“It's not true. But..okay, just because I like you.”

“Thank you, dumbo.”

It couldn't remember the words of this song correctly, however, this conversation could repeat easily.

BALBOA PARK, SAN DIEGO  
CAITLIN MARX



LUSH  
KIERA PRIZEL





ABSTRACTION  
TESSA McCAIN



GOODBYE GREY SPACE  
LEENA CAPTAIN



# PUSS IN BOOTS AND THE DOCTOR GOOSE SUPPORT GROUP

DIANA MACMORRIS

## SCENE ONE.

*Five seats are lined at the front of the stage.*

*In enters MUFFET, timid and tired, she scans one of the seats, paranoid. Looks behind it, under it, then sits down.*

*Next, PUSS enters, and so does BO PEEP. They stare at each other briefly — they know each other, and they're not happy about it.*

*PUSS takes a seat, an empty chair next to him.*

*BO PEEP goes for hers, but HUMPTY enters, swoops in, and takes it from her. BO PEEP turns to MUFFET and waits for her to move. MUFFET feels BO PEEP's anger and jumps to the other seat next to PUSS.*

*BO PEEP turns the chair around and sits, enjoying her cigarette, and stares down PUSS.*

*Finally, GOOSE enters and takes the seat in the middle. Mellow and zen, they gently begins their introduction.*

GOOSE

Hello, everyone. Friends. It's good to have you all here today. I want to take this moment to our first group meeting. My name is Doctor Goose and I am here not just to get to know you. But to help you. Today we will work hard to run some exercises, but first, as always, let's start off by going around the room and introducing ourselves. From the sign up, I know who all of you are, but please, go around, tell us why you are here today. And remember, this is a safe place. Does anyone want to start?

*A SILENCE.*

GOOSE

Anyone?

*PUSS stands up.*

PUSS

Yeah, what's up? I'm Puss in Boots.

GROUP

Hi Puss.

PUSS

...Yeah. Some of you may already know, I'm... I'm down to my last cat life.

*The room "Awws," except BO PEEP.*

PUSS

Yeah, thank you. Things have been rough coming to terms with that, but um...

GOOSE

How does that make you feel?

PUSS

How's that make me feel?

GOOSE

Yes.

PUSS

...Like I'm on my last cat life. Ya know, I'm not anxious, like at all. Wife is doing good, kids are good. I'm fine.

GOOSE

Well, we're all here for you Puss. Remember this is a safe space. Wife is doing good, kids are good. I'm fine.

GOOSE

Well, we're all here for you Puss. Remember this is a safe space.

PUSS

Yeah, I could tell.

*BO PEEP raises her hand.*

GOOSE

Oh, yes. Um —

BO PEEP  
(to Puss)

You have kids?

PUSS

Yes.

BO PEEP

Huh.

*ANOTHER SILENCE.*

GOOSE

How many kids do you have Puss?

PUSS

I got five. They're with their mom right now. Best agreement we could come up with was some visitation, but uh, sometimes you have to crack a few eggs to make an omelette, ya know?

*HUMPTY starts to weep.*

PUSS

Oh, shit. What — did I do something?

GOOSE

Are you alright?

HUMPTY

I'm okay. I'm okay.

GOOSE

He didn't mean anything by it. Remember this is a —

PUSS

Yeah, safe space, dude. I think we all... know that.

*HUMPTY composes himself and stands.*

HUMPTY

Yes. Hello, my name is Hubert Dumperton.

*PUSS SNICKERS.*

HUMPTY

What's funny?

PUSS

Nothing —

HUMPTY

You sniveled.

PUSS

No, it's called laughing.

HUMPTY

So you admit it — ?

GOOSE

Mr. Puss, please.

PUSS

I didn't — I'm sorry. I thought. I thought your name was *Humpty Dumpty*?

HUMPTY

(dramatic)

Humpty. Dumpty. My stage name. Yes, I'm well known I'm afraid. I was the most famous good egg in all the land. Did a few movies, invested in some stocks. I was known for my good looks and glamor, on my way to the top when suddenly... I cracked. All it took was one fall and, and... there I was... known for having a great fall. It took all the King's horses and all the King's men to put me back together again... with plastic surgery. At King's hospital. After my accident I have become changed. My life scrambled. And now I'm here, asking will I ever get what I had back? Will the fame be the same? How could it be? When I never will be. No. I will be remembered as is the dumbass egg who fell off the wall.

PUSS

Yeah, why would you sit on the wall?

HUMPTY

Excuse you?

GOOSE

Puss, is there something you'd like to challenge Hubert about?

PUSS

I mean, you're an egg. Why would you sit on a flat surface, when you're gonna roll?

HUMPTY

I know I'm an egg. Are you calling me stupid for not knowing I'm an egg?

PUSS

You called yourself a dumbass.

GOOSE

Okay. We don't judge others by their mistakes here and that's why you've all come here today, isn't it? To not be judged, but to seek guidance. Some companionship.

*BO PEEP scoffs. GOOSE looks to her.*

GOOSE

Why not introduce yourself next?

*BO PEEP stands —*

Little Bo Peep.

— *and sits back down.*

GOOSE

And what brings you here today?

BO PEEP

I came here to get away from my shitty problems, and to not have my shitty problems come here and sit across from me.

*The group follows BO PEEP's gaze over at  
PUSS.*

PUSS

I don't like what's going on here.

BO PEEP

Oh, you don't.

HUMPTY

What is going on here?

PUSS

Maybe we should get on with the next person.

BO PEEP

How fucking rude are you, Puss, when it's my turn?

GOOSE

Sorry, did I miss something?

PUSS

(to Bo Peep)

What are you even doing here?

BO PEEP

What about you? Came to talk about what broke your marriage — ?

HUMPTY

Wait a Hickory Dickory Doc second. You two?

GOOSE

Alright, rewind. Puss, what do you not like?

PUSS

This. The fact that she's here. I don't like how me — everyone here is trying to do our best, when she's been wanting to stick that cigarette in my face since we got here.

BO PEEP

That's true, I admit I want to, because you do nothing but sit, lick your paws, and act like a prick —

PUSS

Oh, please —

GOOSE

Okay, okay. Let's try using "I feel".

BO PEEP

I feel like he's a prick.

PUSS

I think we need to go to the next person.

MUFFET

Yeah, hi, I'm Miss Muffet... and I kind of agree with Bo Peep.

PUSS

As I said, let's ignore going to the next person and —

BO PEEP

You are so good at deflecting.

HUMPTY

Yes, I agree with that too. You talk about us doing our best, when your best is not facing what's right in front of you.

GOOSE

And Puss how does that make you feel?

PUSS

(to Humpty)

Shut up Egghead.

GOOSE

I see.

HUMPTY

Wuss Puss.



GOOSE

I see.

HUMPTY

Wuss Puss.

PUSS

What was that? You call me a Wuss Puss?

HUMPTY

That's what you are.

PUSS

You listen Dump-a-ton.

HUMPTY

Dumperton. Hubert Dumperton.

*PUSS pulls out his sword.*

PUSS

You wanna go? Let's go you rotten egg! LET'S GO!

*The room erupts in chaos and the group ramble over each other. PUSS hisses and aims his sword. BO PEEP points out her cigarett, enjoying every second.*

GOOSE

Let's sit back down. Use your words.

(then)

HONK! HONK! HONK!

The group settles down, GOOSE clears their throat, regaining composure.

GOOSE

Now. We will use our words. Not our swords.

(to Bo Peep)

Bo Peep.

BO PEEP

I'll use my words. Better, I'll use some rhymes. Boo-hoo. Miss Muffet sat on her tuffet eating her feelings away, along came her demon who frightened Miss Muffet away. Little Bo Peep lost her sheep, who the fuck cares? I don't get the point of any of this when we're too washed up to be anything. Like... Peter, Peter,

Pumpkin Eater turned out to be a *sleazy cheater*. Old Mac Donald had a farm, EH-EY EH-EY OH SHIT, it burned down. And let's not forget Goldilocks and the murder of those three freakin bears. A new Netflix documentary if I'm not mistaken.

HUMPTY

I think she did it.

MUFFET

Really? 'Cuz I heard there was evidence against —

BO PEEP

REGARDLESS. No one cares about us anymore. Kids don't listen to nursery rhymes. They listen to TikTok.

*BO PEEP puffs a smoke. The group, and GOOSE take this in. After a moment, MUFFET raises her hand.*

GOOSE

What is it Muffet?

MUFFET

If no one's gonna listen to us, maybe we can start with each other?

GOOSE

Fuck it.

*GOOSE takes the cigarette from BO PEEP.*

GOOSE

I used to be Mother Goose. The *Mother Fucking Goose*. Now look at me. I'm a doctor... counseling you losers.

PUSS

(to Bo Peep)

You didn't break my marriage. *I did*. And I lied. I'm not down to my last life. It's more like my seventh life. But it's still scary, you know. Like one day I'll be down to the ninth then after that... I got noneth.

GOOSE

Yeah, we're all gonna get to that ninth one day...

MUFFET

Until then...?

GOOSE

One two, buckle my shoe. Three, four, let's get the hell out the door and get a drink.

*BLACKOUT.*

DROWNING UNDER THE UNPAVED PAYMENT  
CAMBRIA GORDON

FADE IN:

INT. JOHNSON'S HOUSE - NAYA'S ROOM - DAY

The sun shines in between the shades of the painted lilac walls covered with paintings and crafts that look like it was made by 12 year old and posters of her favorite artists and bands.

We see NAYA MARIE JOHNSON (15 years old, black female, sophomore, soft-spoken, and anxious) listening to *"On Top of the World"* by Imagine Dragons laying on her back, fully dressed for school.

She is tapping her toes to the music and bumping her head to the beat while mouthing the lyrics of the song and texting her significant other Jac.

Naya smiles and chuckles while she is typing on her phone.

MICHAEL (O.S.)

Who gotchu smiling like that, Nay?

Naya snaps out of her trance and looks over to see her older brother, MICHAEL EMMANUEL JOHNSON (17 year old senior, black male, varsity football star, popular, energetic) at her door wearing his #55 football jersey carrying his book bag on his back.

NAYA  
(rolls eyes)  
Not you.

MICHAEL  
Yeah, it's probably one of yo boyfriends.

Naya scoffs and pelts her pillow at Michael but she misses. MICHAEL (CONT'D)  
Wow, just terrible aim.

Naya sticks up her middle finger at Michael.

NAYA  
Leave me alone. MICHAEL (CONT'D)  
Wow, just terrible aim.

Naya sticks up her middle finger at Michael.

NAYA  
Leave me alone.

Michael grabs the pillow off the floor and tosses it to Naya. She gets off the bed and fixes it up.

MICHAEL  
You ready to go?

NAYA  
Bruh, I've been ready. I'm not the one who takes 10 years to get ready and than sweat it all out in like 30 minutes.

MICHAEL  
I'm just tryna smell nice for my girl. You should try smelling nice, maybe someone would actually date you.

NAYA  
(rolls eyes)  
I actually hate you. Let's just go.

INT. JOHNSON'S HOUSE - HALLWAY - DAY

Naya pushes Michael out of her way. He chuckles and walks behind her, exiting the house.

INT./EXT. MICHAEL'S CAR - DAY

Michael is driving in the car while Naya is looking out the window. The streets have many potholes and construction that looks like it hasn't been finished for a while. Loose garbage drifts on the sidewalks, into the streets.

We see the MTA bus pass by them, ELEMENTARY KIDS hugging their PARENTS goodbye like it is the last time they are going to see them.

MIDDLE SCHOOL and HIGH SCHOOL KIDS being rambunctious around the Deli. There are many cars in the street, causing traffic and DRIVERS HONKING or cursing at the cars in front and behind them.

MICHAEL  
You know, I'm really going to miss

this place.

NAYA

Eww why? This place is terrible and dirty.

MICHAEL

I mean, yeah it's mad dirty and busted, but like I'm just gonna miss the neighborhood and the people.

NAYA

(under breath)

I wouldn't.

(to Michael)

Did you decide on what school you wanna go to?

MICHAEL

I mean kinda. Still looking.

NAYA

Well... Are you thinking about staying in Queens? Or even New York?

MICHAEL

Nah, I'm striving to go to Georgia State. If I get a scholarship.

NAYA

Mike, you know you're gonna get a scholarship. I mean you're great at football, and somewhat smart.

Michael laughs sarcastically.

MICHAEL

Yeah, hopefully.

Naya feels her phone vibrate in her pocket. She takes it out and sees a text from her best friend, Riley saying, "Bruh where you at? Hurry up!"

Naya laughs at her text. She shows it to Michael, but Michael doesn't glance at it.

MICHAEL

Yeah, hopefully.

Naya feels her phone vibrate in her pocket. She takes it out and sees a text from her best friend, Riley saying, “Bruh where you at? Hurry up!”

Naya laughs at her text. She shows it to Michael, but Michael doesn’t glance at it.

NAYA

You see, you took so long that even  
Riley is texting me.

Michael takes a quick glance at her phone and laughs.

MICHAEL

Your friend is just impatient and  
she wishes they could be like me.

NAYA

Nobody wants to be like you.

Michael pulls into a parking spot in the parking lot at the high school. He puts the car in park and takes the key out, turning off ignition. They both get out of the car, slamming the doors behind them.

EXT. RIEDFIELD HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

Michael and Naya walk up towards the main entrance of the school. There is a linen sign above the door, slanted, with strings tied around the pillars that are on each side of the main entrance.

It says on the linen sign in colorful paint that is handwritten, “Welcome Back Students!”

Naya looks at it and rolls her eyes, as they both continue to walk into the building.

INT. RIEDFIELD HIGH SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY

STUDENTS are walking around in the hallway. We see TWO FRIENDS hugging each other, as if they haven’t seen each other in a long time.

FRESHMAN STUDENTS look at their schedule on a piece of paper running around to find their classes.

The hallway is loud with many Students having different conversations.

Naya and Michael go to their separate ways to their respective locker.

Michael opens up his locker and puts his book from his book bag into his locker until his vision suddenly becomes dark..

(O.S.)

Guess who?

MICHAEL

(sarcastically)

Justin, man I told you we only do  
this at night.

The woman's hands uncovers Michael's eyes and he turns around to see VERONICA RODRIGUEZ (17 year old senior, hispanic female, popular, fashionista, and caring) folding her arms and looking at Michael with a dead stare.

She slaps Michael on the arm lightly.

VERONICA

(chuckling)

Shut yo gay ass up, Mike.

Michael laughs and grabs her from the waist and pulls her into him. He leans his lips close to her ear.

MICHAEL

(whispering, seductively)

You know this body is only for you  
Mrs. Johnson.

VERONICA

(whispering flirtatiously)

Mhhhh. I would hope so Mister  
Captain of the Football team.

Veronica and Michael lean into each other, about to kiss, until they get interrupted by Michael's best friend JUSTIN ROSE (16 years old, black male, senior, quarterback, immature) and the rest of the FOOTBALL TEAM.

JUSTIN

(loudly)

Ayyyyooooo! Keep that shit in the  
bedroom!



Veronica and Michael let go of their steamy embrace and Michael laughs as he dabs up Justin and the rest of the Football Team.

MICHAEL  
Man fuck y'all.  
(beat)  
What's up though?

Veronica leans into Michael and he puts his arms around her waist.

JUSTIN  
Coach said that we gotta go on the field after school. You would know that if you wasn't out here trying to cop a feel before homeroom in the damn hallway.

The Football Team, Justin, and Michael laugh as Veronica rolls her eyes and sticks the middle finger at Justin.

VERONICA  
You're just mad that you can't get any action.

The Football Team say their "Oohs" after hearing her comeback.

JUSTIN  
Damn Rodriguez. Why you gotta be so brutal?

VERONICA  
Why do you have to be a dumbass?  
The Football Team snickers at Justin.

MICHAEL  
(chuckling)  
Alright guys chill.

FOOTBALL PLAYER #1  
Damn nigga, just leave. You not helping yourself right now.

VERONICA  
I gotta go anyways, I have to meet up with Dionna and Kelcee. I will

see you later babe.

She gives Michael a quick kiss on the cheek and walks away from the Football Team.

JUSTIN

I gotta talk to my boy real quick.

The Football Team stand there looking around.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)

(louder)

I need to talk to my boy.

The Football Team quickly move away from Michael and Justin.

JUSTIN

What's up?

MICHAEL

So you know your sister, Naya?

MICHAEL

Bro, what kinda dumb question is that? Of course I know my own sister.

JUSTIN

(taken aback)

Alright... alright. I just wanted to know if your sister is single?

Michael eyes widen.

MICHAEL

(concerned)

Yeah, I think so.

JUSTIN

Okay, well since you are her brother and we homies, I wanted to know if I can. You know... take Naya out.

Michael makes a stink face.

MICHAEL

You must be out yo got damn mind if  
you think I'm gonna have you take  
my little sister out on a date.

JUSTIN

Man, c'mon. I really like her dude.  
She's smart and I think we are a  
perfect match. We clicked in  
Geometry class last year.

MICHAEL

I don't know man. I don't want you  
hurting Nay.

JUSTIN

Bruh, I promise I won't... okay. If  
you want, we can go on those double  
dates that people be doing.

Michael takes a beat to think about it.

MICHAEL

(reluctantly)

Fine. But good luck asking her.

JUSTIN

Actually... can you do it?

MICHAEL

Absolutely not, dude. I'm not going  
on the date with my sister. That's  
on you b.

JUSTIN

Come on man, I'm begging here. You  
know I can't face rejection.

MICHAEL

(reluctantly)

Damn fine. I will ask her.

JUSTIN

Thank you!.

Justin dabs up Michael.

JUSTIN (CONT'D)  
I really appreciate it.

MICHAEL  
I'm not promising anything. Cause,  
she can always say no.

JUSTIN  
A'ight. But I gotta go, I'll catch  
you on the field.

Justin dabs up Michael one final time and steps away from him. Michael closes his locker and goes to his respective class.

INT. RIEDFIELD HIGH SCHOOL - WOMEN'S RESTROOM - DAY

HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS are standing in front of mirrors in the bathroom doing their make up and checking each other out. Naya is sitting on the window sill, checking her phone feeling anxious being around beautiful women.

The women's bathroom door opens to reveal, JAC GREEN (15 years old, white, non-binary, expressive) walking in.

Naya looks over and smiles at them. Jac runs to Naya and they give each other a very warm embrace. Jac tries to go in for a kiss but Naya quickly moves her away from them. Making the tension between them awkward.

NAYA  
(awkwardly)  
God, I've missed you so much Jac.

JAC  
I've missed you too babes!

The Girls start to exit the restroom, leaving Naya and Jac alone. Naya smiles and pulls in Jac and kisses them passionately.

JAC (CONT'D)  
God, how I miss your kisses.

NAYA  
(smiles)  
And I miss yours.

They go back into kissing until the door opens again. They immediately stop and

stand there awkwardly adjusting themselves.

RILEY (15 years old, stubborn, geeky, and childlike) struts into the restroom.

RILEY

Oop, I didn't mean to interrupt  
y'all couple time. Sorry.

NAYA

Nah it's fine Rye. Don't worry  
about it.

Jac rolls her eyes.

RILEY

(excitingly)

I mean it doesn't matter anyways.  
You guys are always here. This is  
y'all make out spot.

Naya slaps Riley on the arm while Jac chuckles.

RILEY (CONT'D)

Ow!

(winces)

Riley rubs the area that Naya slapped.

RILEY (CONT'D)

Anyways, are you guys ready for our sophomore year? It's going to be  
lit!

JAC

Yes! We are gonna make sophomore  
year our bitch!

NAYA

I mean, we gotta see what happens.  
I'm not tryna be too hopeful or anything.

RILEY

Why are you always so depressing.  
Be happy, damn.

JAC

Seriously, our freshman year was

great, you met me, Riley and Jayden and we had fun. We have nothing to look but up.

RILEY

I'm not sure that's how it goes.

NAYA

(sarcastically)

It is, Jac knows what they are talking about.

RILEY

Ugh, why do you choose them over me. I've known you longer.

NAYA

(laughing)

Yeah... by a week.

RILEY

That's still longer babes!

Naya chuckles.

NAYA

(rolls eyes)

Whatever Rye, love you too.

Naya gives Riley a hug and a kiss on the forehead.

Jac chuckles awkwardly. Riley sarcastically blushes from the exchange, making Naya laugh.

The bell RINGS, interrupting their laughter.

RILEY

Shit, I gotta go on the other side of the school. I will catch y'all at lunch.

NAYA

Alright, see ya Rye.

Riley runs out of the restroom to get to class.

NAYA (CONT'D)

See you at lunch?

JAC

(sadly)

Yeah of course.

Naya gives Jac quick peck and leaves the bathroom. Jac looks at Naya sadly leaving the restroom.

COOPER'S HAWK FRONTAL  
JAY D'AGOSTINO





COOPER'S HAWK  
JAY D'AGOSTINO



FEMALE MERSANGER  
JAY D'AGOSTINO



MALE MERSANGER  
JAY D'AGOSTINO



BIRDSONG  
HAILEY TREDO

“You don’t know how to love,” She whispers to me, light from a passing car illuminating the upturn of her lips. The sound of my heartbeat fills the silence and I wonder if She can hear it splintering into tiny pieces. While I’m counting backwards from one hundred in my head, Her breathing grows softer and evens out, arm wrapping gently around my waist as She falls asleep.

I don’t know how to love.

The birds try to teach me, in the mornings before the sun comes up, singing their songs through saccharine beaks. The ladybug on my windowsill tries to teach me, in the afternoons before the sun starts to set, when the glow of the golden hour casts a halo around its fluttering wings. The stars try to teach me, at night when the quiet is deafening, primordial messages encoded in constellations that surely hold the answer. If Saturn could speak she would tell me that a ring doesn’t mean love. Emotion sealed in silver and gold may as well be ice and rock.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand and She stirs slightly. The arm around my waist squeezes tighter and She groans, “Turn it off.” But I can’t do that because seven months ago I promised my friend I’d always leave it on in case he needed someone to talk to.

I don’t know how to love.

Claude Monet tries to teach me when I’m ten years old and enamored with *Sunset in Venice*, the beauty of the world captured in pigments. I start to view the people I care about as portraits, imagining what carefully placed brushstrokes would make them a masterpiece. Mary Oliver tries to teach me when I’m fifteen years old and carry around *A Thousand Mornings* with me everywhere I go. I begin to think of those close to me as metaphors: A flower growing through the cracks in the concrete, a ship captain lost at sea, a guiding light in the dark. Taika Waititi tries to teach me when I’m twenty-one years old and watch *Jojo Rabbit* for the first time. I decide that those closest to me are worth living for.

The television puts itself into sleep mode and She sighs, pressing the length of Her body against mine. I stiffen at first, uncomfortable with the amount of physical contact, but relax into it because She told me that She gets nightmares if we sleep apart.

I don’t know how to love.

David Bowie tries to teach me when he dies and the stars look wrong and Planet Earth is blue. I cry for days, tears mixing with paint, as I delicately lay down the

brushstrokes of a masterpiece. My cousin tries to teach me when he grips my hand in the car on the way to treatment. I sit in the parking lot listening to the song he showed me when we were younger for a full hour afterwards, musing about muddy shoes and tire swings. My sister tries to teach me when she tells me she wants to be me. Stunned into silence I shake my head at her – who would want to be me? – and frown. I think she's perfect exactly how she is.

The watch attached to the wrist wrapped around my waist says 4:38am and I can feel Her light breaths on the back of my neck. My cat tries to join us on the bed but there isn't enough room. I move my legs up tight to my chest and smile fondly at her as she curls into a ball where my feet just were.

I don't know how to love.

My niece teaches me when she FaceTimes me to show me how she can do a peace sign just like her Aunt Hailey does in all her pictures. I've never met her in person. She was born during the pandemic. My best friend teaches me when I call him after two years and choke out a raspy sorry. He tells me it's okay. He never blamed me for any of it. My cat teaches me when she passes away. I wipe her nose with my sleeve after she's asleep. I gently kiss her forehead before I go, realizing that there will always be a hole in my heart.

The sun is about to come up and I slip out of bed, leaving a pillow in my place, draping Her arm around that instead. I go to the kitchen and put a pot of coffee on to boil, smiling at the aroma that fills the apartment. I water the plant that a kind old woman gave me, running my fingers along its delicate leaves and humming in pleasant surprise at the first purple flower that's begun to bloom. I pour my cup of coffee and make my way to the windowsill to watch the sunrise.

It's transient; the fluttering of wings, the life of a star, the feeling of a brush on canvas, a really good poem, the credits of a film rolling, a day everyone in the world mourns together, the duration of a song, a hushed conversation with a sibling, the innocent joy of a child, a reunion with a friend, staying by someone's side in their final moments. It's never any one single object or act.

The birds begin to sing, soft and sweet.

I know how to love.

## BOUND IN FLAMES

JESSIKAH RUSSELL

Fire is an enigmatic thing for me—a fix for everything that I need to purge from my life. I can release all of my burdens into angry purgatory in a glorious stream of reds and oranges. The warmth has been there to comfort and hold me each time I needed to expel all my pent-up struggles and worries. Its addictive grasp has had an iron-like grip on me and still does to this day.

When I was 16 my group of friends and I decided to band together and liberate all of our pent-up anger and other emotions that we kept bottled up. Whether it was crippling anger toward a bully or complete resentment toward an ex-friend, we all wanted them to just go away so we could move on. All of us just wanted to reach serenity again so that we could live life without being held back by exhausting emotions. We just wanted a fix, whether that be temporary or permanent; it didn't matter to us. As a collective, we decided our best option was to write everything we wanted to discard, no matter how small, and burn it all.

As a group, my friends and I have been through a lot together. They're the sole reason why I still have hope for meeting and creating new friendships with other people. Since I was younger I've made friends but they never seemed to stick with me for much time. From the small drama-filled girl group in middle school to the tight-knit trio I had in 8th grade, they all seemed to drift from me within a span of a year. I'd put it off as them wanting to find new people to spend their time with but regardless, it instilled a deep routed fear of abandonment in me.

The night my friends and I decided to purge our unwanted emotions we spent hours writing every little detail of each experience we wanted to move on from. To get the full experience for myself I decided to write a letter to each person I resented for besmirching or throwing my life into disarray, that way, I could say everything I wanted without having to speak a word to them. By the time I was finished, I had about two pages full for each person I wanted out of my mind and each of my friends had their own fill as well. Puffy-eyed and drained, my friends and I hugged each other for a while that night.

The following morning we all decided that the best place to perform the "ritual", or what we liked to call it, was at our usual hangout spot: a small clearing near the woods of my backyard. With a small picnic table and blacktop surrounding it all, it was the best place to burn all of our unwanted burdens. The weather that day was nothing special—cloudy and on the colder side, but it added the ideal atmosphere for what we were planning on doing.

The walk up to our spot was just about silent. The distant rustle of leaves and the periodical chirping of birds were all that kept it from being mind-numbingly quiet. I could feel my heart racing as I was prepping myself to let everything I'd been holding in for years out. As a casual breeze flew by us every so often, our papers that were clutched in our hands would rustle and remind us that our hard work would be paid off soon. Each step leading up to the familiar blacktop sent waves up my legs, I couldn't wait to let all of this out with the

closest people I had in my life.

Once we reached our spot each of us sat down on top of the picnic table and held out our papers, all taking a collective deep breath. Not knowing who should go first we all looked at each other until I volunteered to read everything I wrote aloud. While doing so I stood up and faced my friends and read every last word I wrote on the small stack of papers I held. Everything washed out of me like a swarm of bees buzzing away from a broken hive. All the hatred, regret, and sorrow I had to endure over the years were being disposed of and I could feel warm tears trickle down my cheeks as I read every last word. I will never forget the look my friends had on their faces when I finished reading everything, the look of utter shock and dejection. At that moment we all knew that this event was what was going to hold our group together for the rest of our lives.

Journaling has been a therapeutic coping mechanism for me for as long as I can remember. Writing down everything that has bothered me or just anything I needed to process some more gave me so much release. However, I never knew how much communicating anything like that to close, trusted people in my life would relieve me. Being able to dispel anything that I'd bottled is a phenomenal feeling, but being able to process it with the people I care about is something I'll never disregard again.

After all of us finished reading everything we wrote we were all deduced to a puddle on the side of the road. We all just ripped ourselves open for each other and as a collective spoke everything that was unspoken prior to today. The crushing atmosphere that once was was lifted and all of us were reaching mental peace like we sought to do. The only thing left to do was rip our papers to shreds and burn them.

The ritual that my friends and I performed that day was the one thing that has stuck with me for this long. It taught me the importance of moving forward with my life without holding grudges over people or things that I've been through. Although, yes, hardships happen, if you can move past that and continue to see through the fog on the window you'll be able to see the luminosity that life has to offer.

As I was shuffling all of our paper scraps into a pile, I picked up one of them and held it up above the pile. When the piece was lit I dropped it into the pile and we all stood around to watch it all light up. As the fire spread across each of the scraps the flame shot up like a fountain of yellows and oranges. While we all felt the warmth from the flame we huddled together and watched the paper diminish to ash. We all took a sigh of relief as we realized our group was now bound together for life. Bound in flames with the ash of our past finally behind us.

# THE VERY END OF THE TABLE

EVAN YOUNGS

A brief pause after nothing to begin with.

“All these salads are making me crazy,” Aidan says. He diverts his eyes to my tray. “There’s regular salad, but then there’s potato salad, macaroni salad. There’s no leaves in those!” The girl next to him looks playfully confused. “Salad doesn’t have to have leaves in it.” I think her name is Alexa, but it is not.

“Why not just call potato salad ‘mashed potatoes’ and call macaroni salad ‘mac and cheese?’” Aidan is now making direct eye contact with me over something we both know neither of us actually care about.

“Well,” I look down at my plate. “They’re not really mashed. It’s more like they’re cut.”

“Sliced,” Not-Alexa says.

For the rest of dinner I wordlessly eat my potato salad. The sounds of friend groups congregated in the dining hall collect into a single swarm. Noise. Ambience. The words fade into buzzes. Indistinguishable. The experience is not layers of voices but a swarm of conversations that surround me. The swarm fills the dining hall, armed with stingers like “Oh that’s nice” and “Cool” and “Really?” I initially sat at the elevated tables next to the windows, but Aidan noticed me and invited me to sit, even if they were just about to leave.

So I am sitting at the very end of the table, which is very convenient for me. The very end of the table is safe from the obligation of small talk, or so I think. The very end of the table does not place me between anyone. Small talk does fly around me but adjacent to me. Or so I think, hence the semantic ponderings of my potato not-really-a-salad.

I do not despise small talk despite how much it attacks me. I engage in it myself, but only to call attention away from its absence. It induces guilt. I consider questions to be either sincere or insincere covers for a latently sincere question. I ask the guy I just met about the NYFD T-shirt he is wearing because it genuinely interests me to see someone that young but posh in the fire department; I ask what he was doing at the bar he met the firefighters who recruited him, not because I can not tell that he faked his age to get in, but because I want to know his level of self-awareness about his drinking. I can not just ask him that.

Small talk surpasses this game of honesty by playing a game of dishonesty. Every response to “How has it been?” is some variant of “Doing good.” (Never “doing well,” to the dismay of grammar pedants.) “Thriving” is a newer response. The meaning is the same but the connotation is closer to “I will not make you uncomfortable by venting to you in this public dining area, but I will let you know that I am dealing with enough stress that falsely saying ‘I’m doing good’ will add to it.” Small talk, according to linguists, is phatic communication: language that has no working function other than building social relationships. But the “Doing good, how ‘bout you?” ritual is so automatic and consistent that its socializing function is only clear in its absence. The



awkward silence. Unpossessed time.

I sit across from somebody, anybody, with nothing to say. No updates, no confusion, no present needs. Am I exposing my uselessness? “What are your plans today?” I ask. My mother recurrently asks me a similar question but more snidely. She emphasizes the word “plans.” She gives it a second meaning, like not having any plans does not make you free or stressless but lethargic and lame. Away from my mother, the response “Not much” or “Nothing much” or “Nothing really” or “Nothing” does not carry embarrassment. Unless you have something to invite them to, that segment of the conversation is over. It is small talk, just small talk, and it is exhausting.

He is a talker but not a small-talker. This does not make him a big-talker, though he is certainly a long-talker, short as he is. I tap a domino like “What is it like at home?” and he somehow ends his sentence with a graphic description of goat birth. The “talking stage” is more of a listening exercise for me, an exercise that never feels exhausting when I force eye contact into his pretty eyes. He finishes with this smile that said he knows he talks a lot but that I listen to him says enough about me.

I can not small-talk to him for long. There is only so long I can pretend to be sincere about little things until it becomes actually sincere and I fall madly in love with a guy I just met. He starts noticing the eye contact and uses the word “flustered” a lot.

So we stop. No more social etiquette. On the bay of Lake Ontario, we search for a slimeless place to sit on frigid shoreline, next to moss and spiders and weed clouds and, most of all, stars. We do not look into each other’s eyes because we do not need to prove we love each other, we know. The space between our words is a silence full of not awkwardness but love. What we do comment—the enormity of the sky, the vastness of the lake, all the things our friends take for granted before they leave us alone—are not puzzles but facts, not ideas to bounce around in a verbal game but stones to toss into the lake in front of us and admire each other’s ripples. I paraphrase that quote from *Pulp Fiction* about shutting the fuck up and comfortably sharing silence.

As much as I hate him now, I admit that I loved a talker. He was my one love, the one person who for a brief period I could listen to for hours about his pregnant goats, his pseudo-anarchism, and our shared uncomfortable relationships with our families. He was the one person who I could talk to as if I were talking to myself. That might have been what broke us apart—I saw too much of myself in him. Those nights on the shoreline transformed him into a prettier and transparent version of myself. Prettier *but* transparent—somebody whose honesty made him an idol, not a person but an idealized object. Those memories of evading the pretense of “How’ve you been?” and “I’ve been alright, how ‘bout you?” and instead just embracing the comfortable silence, those memories haunt me. It is very rare that you meet someone who is truly your kind, the type of person who you do not need to spend pages of dialogue chiseling them down to their honest self.

The truth is that I do not hate small talk but small talk does hate me. I push myself to play the conversation game with friends and strangers because otherwise I feel parasitic, like I am mooching off of someone else's social prowess.

Before all this, before the boyfriend, before the swarms of voices, before the voice-less expanse of Lake Ontario, before Aidan's attempt at voicing the semantics of potato salad: at my graduation party, I sit alone at the very end of a table. I am intentionally Carpenter. My mother scolds me for not being sociable with her guests. They have money in those cards, she whispers to me. Mr. Carpenter turns to me and softly explains, "It's just one of those things that you have to do."

Unfortunately he is right. Human interaction is not just soulless people-pleasing, but if it feels like it then I might as well suck it up. I help elderly Eunice from her car to the backyard. "How was Jeanette's birthday party?" I ask, and I repeat since she does not respond. She is on the phone, actually, but the math does not line up for me. Her face gets agitated and she quickly concludes her call.

"It went fine."

Maybe it is not the universal structure of human conversation that is wrong, I now think. Maybe it is me.

# LIAR LIAR

## GABRIELLA TRIPPI

How do we know if someone is lying to us? A question I was asked on my first day of college in English class. “Easily,” I had written. “Body language. People tend to not face directly towards you when they lie. They fidget a lot and look uncomfortable.” I became a good liar simply because I know what to look for when someone is lying.

Jason shuffles his five inebriated best friends off the couch of the crowded frat house to head for the door. Julia and Jeremy were the first to leave the overflowing entryway, and I follow not so close behind. I push open the heavy wooden door, leaving it wide open as I trip down the concrete steps. I didn’t realize the scorching temperature of the house until I stumble onto the sidewalk.

“Shut the fucking door on your way out!” a fraternal voice yelled to me. *If I didn’t feel like I was about to empty the contents of my stomach onto the floor, I would take that to heart.*

The early September air blew past, almost glacial against my warm glossy skin, chilling me to the bone. After a few seconds of standing alone on an unfamiliar sidewalk, I spot Julia crouching next to a small oak tree sparsely littered with dead leaves. Jeremy was looking over her, gently rubbing her back for comfort as she hunches over and clutches her stomach. I glance back at the door and I see Jason, Rachel, and her boyfriend Josh stagger out of the house. Rachel ran over to me, stumbling on her own feet. I grab onto her shoulders and push her upright. Her arms develop goosebumps quickly from the sudden temperature change.

I’ve lied a lot. I’ve lied to my parents, my friends, my co-workers, and myself. The key is to get caught in a bad lie, and then everyone thinks you’re a bad liar. Once everyone is convinced, you’re set to lie to your heart’s content. If you play the victim, you’re able to gain the sympathy of others, and you’re able to take advantage.

“You guys alright?” Jason yells to Julia and Jeremy, still crouching over by the tree.

“She’s good, I think,” Jeremy calls back.

A thirty-minute walk home sounds dreadful, and I’m not prepared to carry Julia home. She suddenly hops up from the ground, grabs my hand, and starts pulling me down the sidewalk. Josh speeds past us, walking quite quickly for someone so intoxicated. Everyone follows as we walk down the street back to campus.

Julia lets go of my hand to hold Rachel’s, as she’s struggling to walk straight. I look over at Jeremy, watching him stumble over an overgrown tree root growing through the gray pavement. *I don’t feel like either of us should walk alone.* I reach over and interlock our fingers. *Jeremy makes me feel safe.* Keeping each other steady, we continue to follow Josh down the street.

Trust was another word I was assigned to define in class. “Trust is a

complicated thing,” I had written. “Trust is not an indefinite thing. Trust can be gained over many years but can be lost quite quickly. You can love someone and not trust them, and you can trust someone but not have a deep connection with them. It’s so intense that it cannot be defined in a few words, it’s everchanging and flexible.”

Walking down the pavement, we observe multiple other houses with flashing neon lights and music loud enough to get noise complaints from the neighbors. *I can’t believe people do this every weekend.*

We make it to a semi-busy intersection and wait for Jason to catch up to tell us where to go.

“Act sober guys, there are cops everywhere.” He instructs us.

“I am sober.” I joked, slurring my words. Jason laughed, in the “I’m annoyed but that was actually kind of funny” way.

We walk across the striped asphalt and make our way back to the sidewalk. We pass a large parking lot with a lone traffic cone, and I remember that Rachel always takes a picture with that cone on her head whenever she goes out.

“Rach! The cone!” I exclaim as I turn around to see her already running over to the neon orange cone. She picks it up and smacks it onto her head like a hat, laughing hysterically. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I take a blurry Snapchat picture of her with her cone, eyes glazed over, cheeks red, the strap of her tanktop slipping down her shoulder. It’s the perfect picture to describe our night; cloudy and unorganized, but so happy. I save the photo to my camera roll as she set the cone down, and makes her way back to Julia and Jason. I interlock my fingers with Jeremy’s again and we all continue down the pavement.

After reading my definition of trust, my professor asked me if I trusted *him*. “Trust is a complicated word for me,” I told him. “I don’t really know you. I trust that you know how to teach us, and from what I can see you’re quite nice, but I don’t know you. I mean, I don’t think you ever really know anyone. I give trust and take it back when someone does me wrong. I’m willing to give people the benefit of the doubt. I trust you as a professor, but as a person, I’m not yet sure.”

“I have to pee,” Jeremy says aloud.

“Go piss girl,” I reply as he’s already walking off the sidewalk and vanishing into a field of trees.

“I’m gonna nap here while he pees,” Rachel says as she collapses onto the damp grass.

“It’s just a little further, Rach. Come on, stand up.” I reply, offering her my hand; she weakly grabs onto me, and I pull her to her feet. Jeremy stumbles out from behind the curtain of trees, giving us a thumbs up and laughing to himself.

We make it back to Rachel’s dorm and stand in front of the entrance waiting for her to fish her ID out of her pocket. When we finally enter her room, we pile in and collapse on all the furniture. Jules tosses me a bottle of Advil and tells me I will thank myself in the morning if I take a few right now. I pop two

pills into my mouth, guzzle them down with an old bottle of water, and lay down on Rachel's bed. Jason and Josh bid us goodnight and leave for their dorm room, not saying goodbye to Rachel as she is already passed out on the floor.

Jeremy lays down on the floor next to Rachel between the beds, and Julia jumps onto Rachel's roommate's bed and lies down. I try closing my eyes to sleep, but my body is floating and bobbing like a boat in the Atlantic. I look to the floor and see Jeremy staring at Rachel, weird, but the waves in my head make it hard to care.

I used to work at a pizza shop, and one day I took a delivery for a customer. They ordered chocolate milk with their pizza, and I set the milk in my car cupholder to not forget it. After the delivery, I returned to the shop and realized the milk was still in my car. I walked inside and my co-worker told me the customer had just called and said I forgot their drink. I lied right through my teeth and told this elaborate story about how I almost forgot it and put it in the bag with their order when I know for a fact that I never gave it to them.

"Julia, wanna come to the bathroom with me?" I ask, not wanting to navigate the foreign housing unit alone.

"Yeah. Let's go." She says as she gets off the bed, making sure she doesn't step on Jeremy or Rach in the process. We leave the room and walk down the hall. I push open the heavy metal bathroom door and enter one of the stalls.

Leaving the bathroom after a few minutes, we walk back to the room. Opening the door, I see Jeremy for a split second crouching over Rachel, basically straddling her, looking directly at her closed eyes. She's been out cold for a while now; *Jeremy is so sweet for taking care of her and making sure she's alright while we were gone, this is why he's my best friend.* I close the door behind Julia and go back to Rachel's bed, Julia climbs back onto the other bed, and Jeremy lays back down next to Rachel.

I drift off to sleep eventually, still floating, but on gentle waves this time.

I slightly wake up when a hand brushes over mine. Opening my eyes, I see Rachel heading for the door, going to the bathroom I presume. *I'm glad she woke up; I was a little worried about her since she passed out so suddenly.*

"Where's she going?" Jeremy asks, sitting up and looking at me with wide eyes.

"Probably to the bathroom. Relax." I say as I close my eyes again, falling asleep quicker this time.

I wake up the second time to the sound of people talking. I open my eyes and see Jeremy sitting up on the floor, with Josh standing over him. My head is buzzing like a hive of ferocious honey bees, and I can't understand what they're saying. Josh's brows are pinched together, his fists clenched and his face red, Jeremy is looking at him with a dazed look of bewilderment. I rub my head to ease the pounding a bit and finally hear Josh for the first time since he'd been in here.

"Why is my girlfriend in my room crying right now?"

...

Why did I lie about the chocolate milk? Was I afraid I would get in trouble? I could've said 'Oh shit' and simply drove back and gave the customer their drink, but I didn't. I drank the milk on my way home after that shift, the once smooth chocolaty treat tasted bitter and spoiled in my mouth. Maybe that's what I got for lying, maybe the universe punished me for my actions.

"Don't act stupid. Tell me what happened. Why is my girlfriend crying?" Josh keeps repeating. His voice rang in my disoriented ears.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Jeremy persists, fidgeting with his hands. I look over at Julia who was awake as well, her eyes flipping between me and the boys.

Josh realizes we're awake, "Let's take this outside, so we don't bother the girls." Jeremy reluctantly stands up, dragging his feet while leaving the room with Josh, slamming the door on their way out.

Julia and I sat up and looked at each other in unison, utterly confused glances pass between us and the door where the boys just exited. "What the fuck is going on?" We whisper to each other. My mind spins in thousands of directions. *Was Rachel hurt? Did Jeremy have something to do with her crying? Did she look distressed when she left the room? I can't remember. She touched my hand, was that a sign for me to follow her? Why is Josh so upset? I need to see Rachel; I need to know what happened.*

"Should I text Jason?" Julia asks after a few excruciating long minutes.

"Yeah, ask Jason what the fuck is going on," I tell her.

We wait for a response, the clock above the door ticking agonizingly slowly.

"He said don't worry about it," Julia says immediately after getting the text. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know. I'm so confused." She replies.

I saw Jeremy staring at her before we went to sleep, I saw him crouched over her, basically straddling her body when we came back from the bathroom, scanning her face intently.

He wasn't taking care of her, was he? Why else would Josh be so mad? Why would Rachel hurry out of the room and immediately go to Josh's room?

"Do you think... he hurt her?" As the words leave my mouth, I cover them with my palm to muffle any potential sobs that were bound to slip out. Tears threaten my eyes, as I choke back the vial contents of my stomach. Julia stares at me with heavy, drooping eyes. I don't know if she believes me, or doesn't want to believe me. *What kind of fucked up nightmare was this? Am I still wasted? Is this really happening?* "It wouldn't be the first time." Jules breathed out.

I look at her, pinching my brows and tilting my head.

"You remember Megan's grad party? The one you didn't go to?"

I nod.

"Well," she continues, "I got blackout drunk, and Jeremy was there taking care of me. He was drunk too, but not really. I was laying down on the couch with my legs over his. I didn't know it really happened, I thought I imagined it."

*What is she trying to say?*

Like she could read my thoughts, she blurts out, “He assaulted me when I was passed out drunk. He did it to me too, but I didn’t know it at the time. I know it now, he just did it again.” My throat tightens.

Nothing was in my head. No thoughts were forming.

I felt like I needed to throw up, to rid my body of the information that is embedded in my brain. I clenched my fists tight, my fingernails digging into my palms. The pinch of my nails helps remind me I’m able to feel, although the rest of my numb body begs to differ. I look at my hands, small red indentations litter my palms.

*My hands, the hands that held the same tennis racquet he held months ago, the same hands that grabbed energy drinks out of his to share, his DNA still on the can, coating my lips and esophagus. My own hands held viciously tight to his the entire walk back, trusting he would bring me home safely. I feel polluted by his hands. His hands took advantage of his friends when they were unable to defend themselves. His hands defiled the people I was closest to, and I had no idea. His hands caressed my thumb gently, calming me from the spiking alcohol in my circulatory system. He was always so respectful, so kind, and honest, I felt so comfortable around him. I changed clothes, went to the bathroom, had sleepovers, and got fucked up with him because I trusted him with everything I had.*

I watched a Ted Bundy documentary recently, and one of his quotes struck me hard. “How could anyone live in a society where people they liked, loved, lived with, worked with, and admired, could the next day turn out to be the most demonic people imaginable?” He was right. Why is it that the people we trust the most turn out to be monsters? We all think we can identify these people, but the truth is, we can’t. They’re normal people. They walk the streets, live next to us, say hi to us in the morning, and are even related to us. There is no way to know until it happens.

“I didn’t do it. How could I have done that and not remembered it?”

Jeremy breathlessly rambles on after coming back into the room. He starts pacing around, pulling on his hair while hot tears drip from his eyes. *Everything he’s doing is trying to convince himself he didn’t know what he did. He isn’t only lying to us; he’s trying to lie to himself.* Julia and I sit on the twin-sized dorm room beds, backs pushed against the wall.

Suddenly, the door bursts open and Rachel’s roommate, Erica, waltzes in. The three of us stare with wide eyes as she excitedly shouted, “Hey guys, what the FUCK is up,” oblivious to the situation at hand. She drunkenly kicks off her shoes and looks Jeremy up and down.

“Hey, get out so I can change.” She says to him. He puts his head down and walks through the door.

Silently thanking her for finally getting him out of the room, Julia hops off Erica’s bed and climbs onto mine, laying her head down in my lap. After what felt like years, we both start to drift off, hoping to wake up and realize this was all a fucked-up nightmare and not our reality.

I've lied a lot, but my lies are nothing like his lies. I've never hurt anyone with my lies, but he defiled two of his best friends and blamed it on alcohol. He did it once, carried on with his life, not ever facing the guilt and shame of his actions, and went on to do it again. Why did my milk taste rotten, but his tasted sweet? Why did the universe punish me for my lie, and reward him for his? Why was he able to live his life after hurting someone, and feel no remorse for it, when I think about the milk every day? That's what separates me from him. I'm able to feel guilt for my actions, all he has is apathy.



STONE SOUP  
JUSTIN CHARSKY



SELF-CONTROL  
MADISON WARRINER



SELF PORTRAIT  
DIANA MACMORRIS



PYRRHARTIA  
LEENA CAPTAIN



ROAD TO WHERE  
DIANA MACMORRIS



## A NOTE FROM OUR EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

I would first like to thank everyone that made this edition possible: my peers for trusting us with their work, the Creative Writing Department for their support and encouraging their students to submit to us, and all of our officers and editors who come together to curate each edition, with a special shoutout to Kirsten and Ally for their hard work in the formatting of this edition. I would also like to again thank river's end for our valued relationship and most importantly Upstate Printing—specifically Linda—for their patience and flexibility when publishing our journal.

In the process of creating this edition, I realized that what I love most about the Great Lake Review is the variety and character that each edition possesses. We did a lot of digging into our archives this year, and we found joy in being transported to a different era through the unique style of each edition. We wanted to honor our roots by creating an aesthetic that reflects that of the 90s and early 2000s, as we were drawn to those editions again and again. From the ordering of the pieces down to the cover's font, we utilized creative freedom to make a statement. We wanted to create a book that would highlight what makes our journal special: the ability to be bold and make waves, to surprise people with the way we look at the world, to combine all of these unique pieces together to create something unified, yet complex.

We are open for submissions throughout the year, and publish biannually at the end of each Fall and Spring semester. Please submit your fiction, non-fiction, drama, poetry, and art pieces as an attachment to [glr@oswego.edu](mailto:glr@oswego.edu). Check out our website ([www.greatlakereview.com](http://www.greatlakereview.com)) for more information about how to submit, and while you're there take a look at our archives to get an idea of what we have published in the past!

Signing off and passing the torch,  
Kiley Kerns



# Great Lake Review

## 94<sup>th</sup> Edition

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