

Off Center



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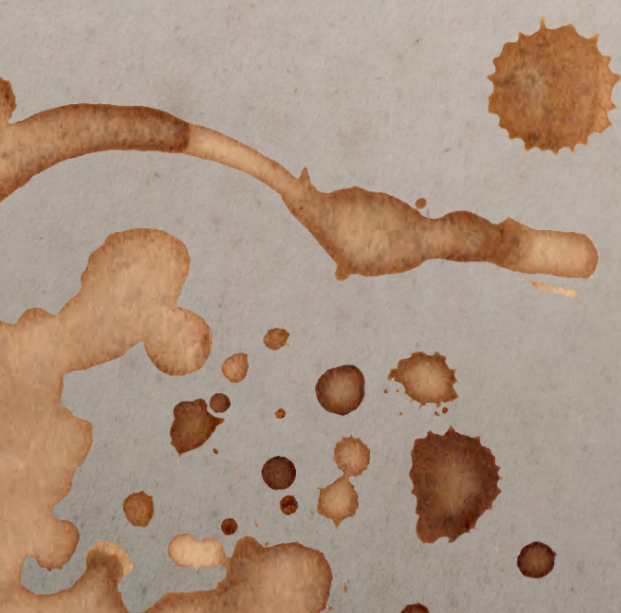
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A LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

As you scroll through the pages of the 2020 issue of *Off Center*, we hope you acknowledge and appreciate the collective relativity of the MTSU community. In this issue, we aimed to uphold the magazine's mission of "foster[ing] appreciation for the creative process" through an inclusion of diverse genres and voices. We want to thank all of the authors for their submissions and the artists for their design work. We hope you enjoy this issue of *Off Center*!

Your Editors



Connor

Allie

Bethany

Bugs

The sky spits occasional drops
at the feet of the sun
in an unresolved conflict from way back
and a car swishes past
an important man in a suit with wet spots
who does not know everyone
is free with nowhere to go
but has a reason to smile as the young
redhead
gives a flash of leg in the back door of a
yellow hack...
she wonders how she'll handle herself
today in that low gray building
where a hundred people handle
themselves
well enough to pay the rent and keep the
water running
in apartments with limp sheets on unmade
beds...
the cabby asks, "Where?" and flips the
meter on,
punches his way into the road
and thinks about the bath
he had no time to take this morning,
shifts a little to the left in a greasy wife-
beater
and grunts at the horn from too close
behind,
stomps the brakes for a cheap pedestrian



who stares wild-eyed through the
windshield on his way to
the diner where he always eats
breakfast...
poached eggs on rye toast, a side of
sausage
and five refills of coffee, as the thought of
Sylvia
gnaws at the back of his head
he takes two aspirin for the pain,
leaves a small tip for Mack
to wipe up with the crumbs
then look at the two coins a slow minute,
drop them into his apron pocket with the
cigarettes
and rumped matchbook
before he shuffles into the back room for a
swig of Mad Dog
the tired woman slid under the bars at him
in the liquor store
behind her heavy lids, she thinks the day is
so heavy
bits of it keep falling out of the sky as
water
spit at the feet of the sun
in an unresolved conflict older than
sin.

[7]

VOL LINDSEY

Defeated

I left your bed because
the sun erupted red
to yellow through the purple,
and, I, an early voyeur,
watched from the porch
as a thin sheet of fog
nestled over the pasture,
stirring like I do when I wake,
cold. The house behind this wall
lies quiet, unaware that I've come
out here in a conscious effort
to capture just a moment of peace,
or beauty as fleeting as smoke
in the morning breeze.
My night ended too soon;
I have much to do today.

Detached

I spent some time this summer
with a shovel and have the remains
of blisters as testament. My tee shirts
are stained with sweat, and two
of my best jeans have premature holes,
from my grandfather back, men
did these things all the time.

Lucy's tribe huddled skin to skin
by the fire under a mysterious sky.

The horizon was virginal, and
kept us terrified.

Until just now,
we worshiped the ground because
it taught us the nature of God and death.
We laughed and danced to cave the skull
and peel the skin of our dinner.
We dug the dirt to bury our weak
or plant the seeds of tomorrow's bread.

But we have lost our
roots, our food has traveled a
thousand miles, and our bread
is white as cancer. God has washed
his hands, so in our hungry multitude
no one matters. I think I know you, but it's
just your name, and when you are gone,
someone will use a machine to
dig your grave.



Imaginary Ghosts

I spent the first thirteen years of my life believing in ghosts. Who could blame me? I grew up in Brazos County where, according to every old-timer and all of my schoolmates, there were spirits, specters, and ghouls in every shed and behind every tree. Even my own grandmother, Mamó, was convinced that we lived in the most haunted stretch of land in all of East Texas.

“Don’t stay out too late, now,” she’d say to me as I walked out the door, on my way to one activity or another. “The ghost of old Brit Bailey might snatch you instead of that whiskey jug he’s looking for.”

While Mamó was a devout Presbyterian, she was first and foremost a highly superstitious Scotswoman. She had moved from St. Andrews to Houston when she was twenty-one, where she married my Granddaddy. After Granddaddy died, she came to live with Daddy and me and my older brother, Jim. So, I grew up listening to tales about Scottish Wulvers, the haunted Weems house down in East Colombia, Texas, and verses from Psalms and Proverbs.

On heady Saturday evenings, Jim and I would drape ourselves over the rough burlap-covered arms of the living room couch and listen to Mamó’s stories. Her voice was quiet, barely above a whisper at times, but there was something firm and steady in her warm, Scottish burr, tinged with a Texan drawl. Then, every Sunday morning Daddy drove us all to church in his ‘56 Buick, wearing shirtsleeves and a fedora—he wasn’t a ten-gallon hat kind of fella. Daddy was a horse breeder, but he preferred the books and business to the manual labor.

I spent my springs and summers poking at crawdads in Oyster Creek and biking into downtown Brazoria for malt shakes. Year-round I helped Jimmy muck out stalls and lead horses to the field to graze, but generally Daddy’s workers, Miguel and Jesse, took care of the horses.

My favorite time of year was fall, because the air was no longer heavy and humid, and the county fair took place in October. The fair had been going on as long as I could remember. It featured a parade with horses and beauty queens, booths for games, and food stands selling roasted corn and fat slices of pumpkin pie. All the kids in the county showed up; it was probably the most interesting event during the school year because we got to show off our riding skills.

It was the October right after my thirteenth birthday. I was a teenager now, so I was finally old enough to participate in the parade with my brother and all the other older kids. Daddy generally didn't get excited about much, but I think it made him happy to see me all fired up about the parade. He bought me a new, brown felt cowgirl hat, and a pair of white boots. I tried them on over and over again, examining them in front of the vanity mirror in my bedroom.

"Very bonnie," Mamó commented, only bolstering my ego, as she watched me tip my hat to myself in the bathroom mirror. "Like your Momma was."

Momma had been out of the picture since before I was one year old. Not even Jimmy, two years my senior, could remember her face or her voice. Daddy talked about Momma in the abstract, and from the way Mamó spoke about her, you'd think Momma was dead. Truth is, she ran off to Oklahoma with some bastard named McHenry, a rancher from one county over. Not once did she try to get into contact with us after that, not even with me or Jim. It was easier to pretend that she was dead. I found myself pretending to talk to Momma's ghost at night—not the real Momma, the one living comfortably somewhere else, but a version of her that had died tragically during childbirth, or in some unfortunate accident, or something along those lines. Anyways, the way I sometimes imagined it had happened was never really important, just that it meant she hadn't chosen to leave me.

As Daddy was a horse breeder, Jimmy and I had a lot of fine animals to choose from to ride in the parade. But since it was my first time participating, Daddy told me to take a horse named Dappler. He was an older, gentler horse that was used to all the sights and smells and people in town.

Almost all the other schoolgirls lived in town; I was all alone in the boonies, with only my brother and his reckless friends for company. When you're the only girl in a group of kids, you have to be ten times sharper, ten times braver, ten times more foolish to be considered one of them. The day before the parade, I went with Jimmy to the barn to check out our steeds. The barn was the biggest structure on our property, bigger than our house even. It was long, with twelve stalls on each side, and was kept clean, though it perpetually smelled of manure and musty straw. Miguel was filling the troughs when Jimmy and I walked inside.

“Already come to look at the new horse that was shipped in this morning?” he asked with a wide smile. I told him no, but Jim insisted that we take a look. The new horse’s name was Ford. He was a big, nervous stallion. He was mighty fine to look at, handsome and all sleek and shiny brown. Miguel ran a firm, gentle hand over the horse’s flank and gave his withers a scratch. Miguel fixed us sternly with his warm brown eyes.

“Mijo y mija, your father doesn’t want you to take this horse out without his supervision, you got it?”

“We got it!” Jim replied, offering the horse a few bits of hay. I nodded and Miguel smiled, satisfied. After a few minutes he left us to admire the creature. I was content to simply admire him, but older brothers are always trying to get their sisters into trouble.

“Evie, just think how swell you’d look at the parade tomorrow if you rode a horse like that,” Jim said, his hands on his hips as he glanced at me sidelong, as if challenging me. If I took that horse out, I knew Daddy and Mamó would be furious. But I couldn’t help but picture myself in my brand new, wide-brim hat and white boots, sitting tall on Ford’s back and waving to the crowds watching the parade. I thought a whooping from Mamó might just be worth it.

Every year, on the first day of the fair, it was tradition for the youngsters to start their own parade on horseback five miles out of town, before joining the big one around the square. Jim and I packed jerky and tomato sandwiches and then left home after sunrise to meet all the other teenagers from school. That morning, Ford was antsy, but I’d managed to saddle him and sneak him out of the barn with Jim’s help, without the horse bolting or Daddy seeing us. I handled the horse well to the meeting place, and I was beginning to think he’d do alright through the whole trail-ride and parade.

Jim comfortably greeted all the other kids, amiably slapping the boys on the back and smiling charmingly at the girls. There was almost no one else there my age, so I hung back from the group. I didn’t know a lot of the people in the group, and the ones that I did know were Jim’s obnoxious friends. I tried to enjoy myself anyways. I admired the golden fields and dazzling blue sky overhead and thought about how fun it would be once we got into town.

All was fine until we came up to a stretch of the trail called Culver's Road. Now, the story went that a man named Robert Culver made some bad investments, and in doing so lost everything, from his house to his wife and his kids. Folks say he was so distressed at this turn of events that he hung himself from the tallest oak tree on the road. Daddy said it wasn't true—there was no record of anyone named Culver owning land in Brazoria County. But people in the valley love their ghost stories, so the legend stuck around.

We were passing the road when the horses started balking and braying. Ford's hooves stomped against the ground, and I could feel him shift and twitch anxiously beneath me. His ears swiveled back and forth wildly.

"What's going on with the horses?" one of the boys in Jim's class asked nervously. "Them's acting strange." I could see his hand grab the reins so hard his knuckles were turning white.

"They're acting funny 'cause we're so close to Culver's Road," a girl replied with a snicker. "The horses can sense spirits, y'know?" Mamó had said the same thing about a hundred times.

"Ooh! Y'think we'll see a ghost?" another girl asked.

"Maybe," Jim's friend, Paul, replied. "Or maybe we'll find a rotting corpse instead!" He rode up next to the girls and made a gruesome face, his tongue sticking out of his mouth and his eyes rolled back into his head. The girls giggled but looked less enthusiastic.

"Wouldn't that be something!" exclaimed one, her voice faltering.

It was difficult to press forward, past the road. Both the horses and their riders were feeling jittery. Something in the air had shifted. Jim maneuvered his horse next to mine.

"You keep a hold of Ford, y'hear? Dad'll skin me alive if you get thrown and break your neck."

"Should've thought of that before you convinced me to do something so stupid," I growled between clenched teeth. I didn't want to look childish in front of the other kids.

"Hey! No one made you do anything," Jim sniffed. "You wanted to ride Ford."

As if on cue to hearing his name, Ford suddenly bucked. I yelped in surprise and gripped the horse's mane.

“Dammit, what’d I just say?” Jim cried, but Ford bucked again, and again, kicking his legs out behind him. It was all I could do to shut my eyes and squeeze Ford’s sides as tightly as I could with my knees.

“Hold on tight, Evelyn!” someone cried out. I felt dizzy. I imagined that the world would be spinning if I opened my eyes. According to Jimmy, he was reaching for the reins on Ford’s bridle when the horse bolted straight down the trail towards Culver’s Road, like hellfire got his tail.

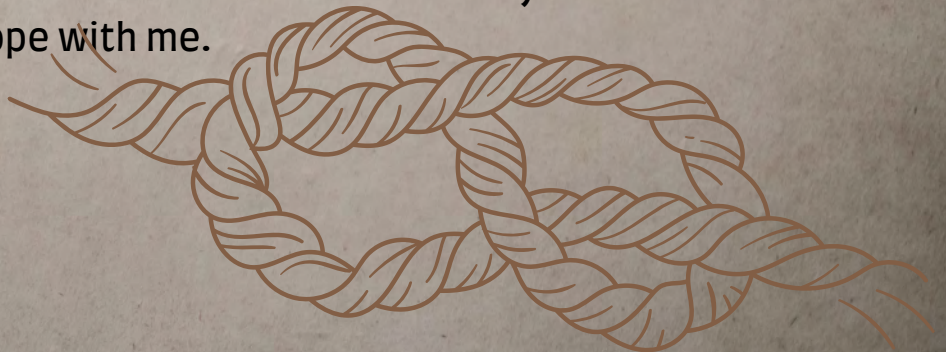
I continued to hold on with my eyes closed, but after a few moments, Ford slowed down. I was finally able to pull him to a halt. His flanks heaved and spit dripped from his open mouth as he huffed. I examined my surroundings. There was nothing special about the way Culver’s Road looked, particularly in the daylight. It was abandoned—all dirt and overgrown with bushes and vines and scraggly trees bending over it from either side. For the most part, it looked like all the other overgrown, abandoned dirt roads in Brazoria. But as I slid from Ford’s back, my feet slipping in the decaying leaves covering the ground, feeling a cool October breeze prickle down my neck, I felt my chest tighten up, like there was an invisible hand reaching around my heart, squeezing it.

Realizing that I was turned around, I did my best to ignore the chill and went on down the road, despite my unease, leading Ford by his bridle. Ford remained distressed but had calmed down some; he kept softly snuffling at my ear, making nervous whinnies.

As we passed under the bough of a great oak tree, the stallion craned his long, glossy neck upwards so that he could nibble on the end of something hanging from the tree branch. I glanced up to see that he had the end of a frayed rope in his mouth. The rope was old, all grey and covered in dried lichen.

As I examined it, the sound of hooves trampling the groundcover and the hoots of the other kids began to grow in the distance. It was just then that I remembered old Farmer Culver and his noose. I felt cold and still all the sudden. Jim had dismounted and had come to peer up at the rope with me.

“What’s that?” he asked.



I ignored him as my eyes wandered towards the ground beneath the broken rope. The leaves and dirt had been churned up by Ford's hooves and my boots. I didn't examine the brownish-white bits I saw piled there amid the dead leaves very long. For the second time that day, my eyes squeezed shut.

"Shit!" one of the older boys exclaimed excitedly. "Aw shit, shit, would you look at that—aw Jesus!" He sounded like something shocking had just made his day.

"Are those...bones?" Jim asked, gulping between words.

"Shit..."

"Old Culver's bones!" a girl squealed. I didn't understand why she was so elated.

"Hey, Jim, pick one up," someone said.

"Let's all take one!" someone else suggested.

"That's not—" Jim was interrupted.

"Think what everyone else will say when they see we actually found his bones! Damn!"

I was shoved aside. I heard rustling in the leaves. They were actually taking them!

"Leave them alone!" I cried. I'm not sure exactly why I suddenly felt so strongly about them. It wasn't that they were gross, or that they were dirty, still covered in corpse matter. It was something else, something I wouldn't understand until later.

Kids were grappling with each other for bone bits (for that was all that was left), snatching them and stuffing them into their vest and jean pockets—a fingerbone here, a shard of femur there.

"Stop!" I screamed, pulling someone back by their shirt. They shrugged me off roughly. I looked to Jim for help. He simply stood there, stunned into silence. I tried once more until I was pushed hard enough that I fell to the ground among the roots of the tree. My palm landed on something hard and sharp, and I felt a sudden pain in my hand as it was sliced open. I glanced down into the dried bits of leaves covering the lumpy roots, now mingled with a few droplets of my blood. There were the remnants of a pocket watch, bent and rusted, slightly buried inside one of the roots.

I grasped it with my hand, slippery with blood, and wiggled it back and forth and pulled until it came loose. My fist closed around it as Jim tugged me upward by my elbow and dragged me towards Ford.

“We’re going home,” he said quietly, fearfully. The frenzy over the bones continued.

I lay in bed that night, my wound properly cleansed and bandaged, my eyes wide open and staring at the slats of moonlight cast against the ceiling. Jimmy and I had skipped the parade downtown. We came home without a word, unsaddled the horses, and went straight into our rooms.

Mamó seemed vexed when we wouldn’t explain ourselves. Daddy returned from the parade, knocking on each of our doors, asking what on earth had happened to us. Jim lied and said I’d cut my hand on a piece of metal in the creek when we stopped there for lunch. I was glad he hadn’t said anything about Ford or the bones. News of the bones would spread like ragweed around the county anyhow. I laughed bitterly, thinking about it and thinking about my imaginary dead mother. Had I once been that hungry for the spectacle of death? Hungry for the romance, the drama, the excitement of it?

The most hysterical part of it all was that those weren’t even Robert Culver’s bones. They belonged to someone named Charles Davis. After washing the casing of the pocket watch in the bathroom sink, I’d been able to distinguish a message etched onto the inside. It was from “Magnolia Davis” to “Charles Davis, the love of my life.”

I continued to stare blankly upward, wondering who Charles Davis had been. How long had he been gone? Had anyone noticed when he disappeared from this Earth forever? I could envision his phantom coming to stand next to me.

“Put them back,” I imagined him saying. But there would be nothing particularly terrifying or eerie about his voice. When I thought I heard his voice, he merely sounded tired, like a burnt-out match struck vainly, repeatedly against the side of its box.

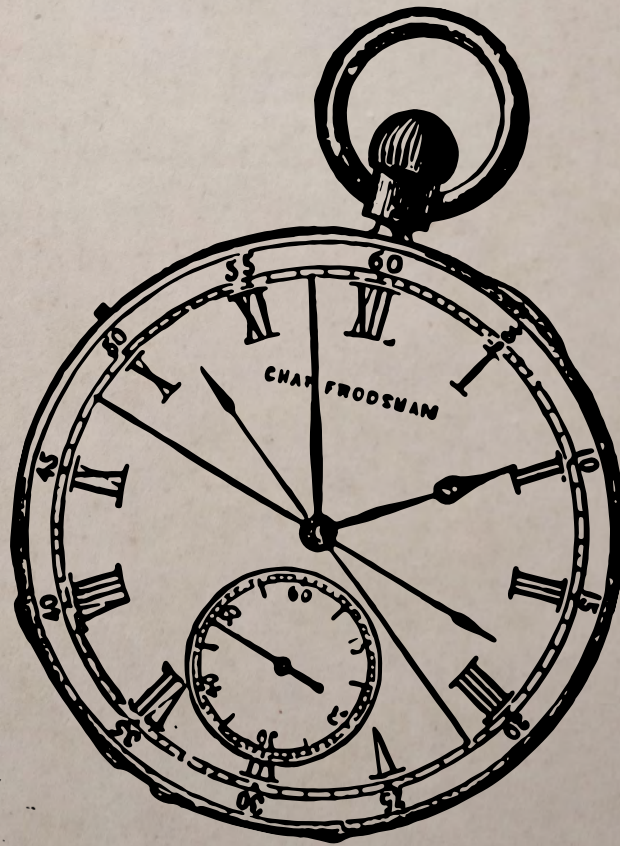
“Please, put them back.” But it wasn’t up to me, was it?

And then I thought of Magnolia, and suddenly felt ridiculous. For surely, after all this time, she too had finally died. They would be together now. There would be no reason for his spirit to return to this plane. What would that accomplish? I then thought of my mother, and all those times that I wished she had died instead of leaving, because of how lovely it would have been to be properly motherless. And I was ashamed, ashamed for ever thinking that the death of someone else should ever benefit me. Besides, if she had died, I doubted whether her ghost would have ever

visited me. Wouldn't she instead be waiting on the other side for her loved ones, whoever they may be?

I glanced at the pocket watch. It glinted in the soft evening light, as it rested on my vanity, nothing haunting about it in the least. No, the only ghosts in this world were the ones we created, the ones we made up to scare ourselves into giddy mania, the ones fashioned to make a joke out of the suffering of other people. Even in death, there are those who don't ever seem to get any peace.

But tomorrow, I thought, I will put it back anyways.



A New Brood

Summer birds
Cease to stir
The tiger's caught
With aging fur
Frost gathers
Smug and thick
Turns all roots
To feeble sticks

Winter broods
Her menial swarms
Smuggled through
Her pasty charms
Winter's troops
Pale and strange
Fearing all
Subtle change

Lingering near
My bolted door
With snarls of wind
And hooves of ice



All is Now the Same

I

Two men alone conspire.
 One a preacher and one a student.
 One a father. The other alone.
 Both dream of judgment,
 Fire in the gullies,
 A voice in the mountains.
 From this, an era does end
 And soon enters the looming hand.

The father looks at his hands,
 "There are lines now deep in my skin."
 All is now the same.

II

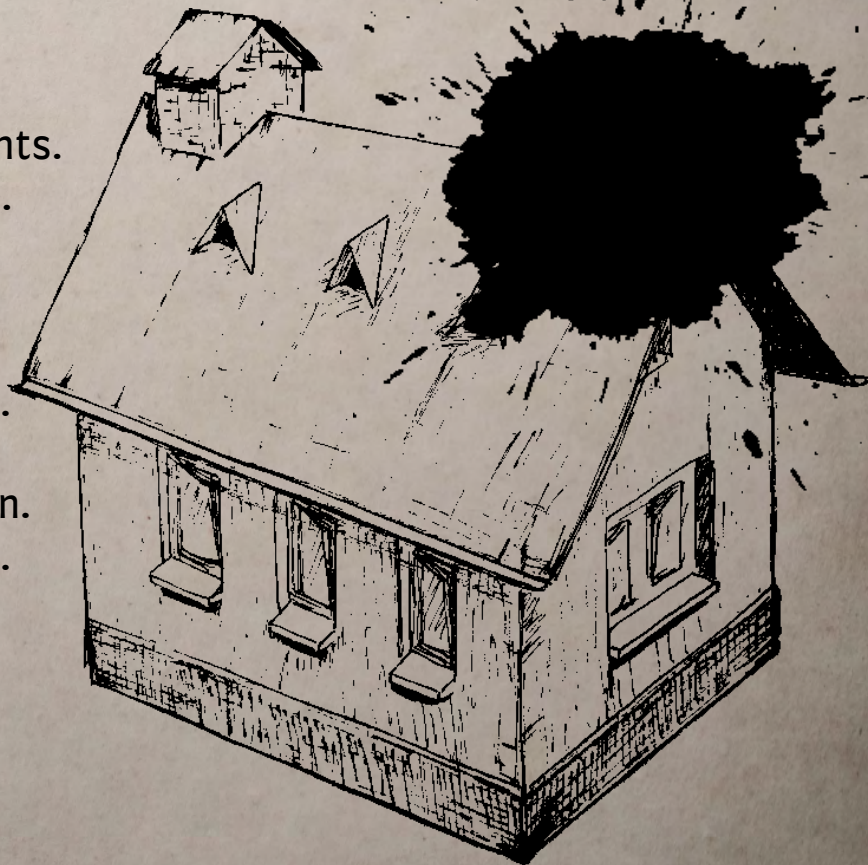
Two men alone conspire.
 Slow mad talk of women, love, and life.
 Of dark hidden beasts and sleepless nights.
 "One of these days, I will cease to be me.
 How can I go on today?"

Both tire of talk and gloom.
 They laugh madly over smokes and wine.
 Fervent cries fill the room.
 Two brothers laughing in the evening sun.
 Something nearby has rustled the wires.

Far off a body returns.
 An ocean welcomes it home.
 All is now the same.

III

Across the street, a bird has perched.
 An experienced listener can hear it sing.
 It cries of daydreams and marigolds
 And the loving arms of early spring.
 A past remembered, no doubt.
 It detects a coming rain.
 It would leave if allowed.
 All is now the same.



Lips Yet Moving: A Sestina

Luminous light rides soft on rippled blue 1
 Dark depths of ocean, mirror to the moon 2
 The ocean dances blithely on her waves 3
 Unthinking of the sleep beneath her shadows 4
 Attuned alone to footsteps that near whisper – 5
 Woman waits her lover on the shore 6

The woman trusts herself upon the shore 6
 Here, where secrets dance beneath the blue 1
 Her tryst is safe; the sea will guard each whisper 5
 Within her vault, nor will the slivered moon 2
 Expose their love to censure, only shadows 4
 Shall witness that which passes by the waves 3

She dreams of him, tempestuous as the waves 3
 Looks for his angled figure on their shore 6
 Perceives him in the swaying palm trees' shadows 4
 Now shaded darkly in the ocean's blue 1
 And as the minutes tiptoe past the moon 2
 Hears from its cratered form a baleful whisper 5

Will he appear? her heart takes up the whisper 5
 Its doubt reechoed from the pounding waves 3
 Their tryst, no longer sanctioned of the moon, 2
 Is threatened and she shivers, pinned to shore 6
 Unable to defend their love in blue 1
 Bound tightly up in hard, impassive shadows 4

Harsh truth, too late, asserts her heavy shadows 4
 And lover's welcome tapers to a whisper 5
 On lips yet moving, silent – faded, blue 1
 Upon which sorrow shatters in dark waves 3
 As on the bleak and unforgiving shore – 6
 The woman finds no consort but the moon 2

And so ascends the visage of the moon	2
Its midnight play a shunting forth of shadow	4
Dark ghosts of palms now dance upon the shore	6
Which, fringed in blackness, narrows to a whisper	5
Luminous strip of sand; the aching waves	3
Seek to subsume; to tint from white to blue	1

And so the moon commands his sultry shadows	2, 4
No child of blue is safe upon his shore	1, 6
As silent on the waves love's whisper fades.	3, 5

I wrote "Lips Yet Moving: A Sestina" between 7:00 - 10:00 p.m. on Friday, October 18, 2019. I had been planning to write this poem for several weeks - from the moment my Seminar in Teaching Composition Professor challenged me and my classmates each to choose an activity we believed we would fail at, fail at it, and then write about what it felt like to fail at it. I selected my challenge - writing this poem - early in the semester, but was so busy that I didn't have time to actually do it until the fateful night already mentioned, when the Wi-Fi cut out at my apartment, effectively eliminating all possibility of completing research for my other projects. I accordingly cooked a bowl of ramen, set the timer on my phone for three hours, and dove in.

Choosing to write a poem as a failure project may seem a little melodramatic - after all, they're not that hard to write. However, I hope you noticed that this particular poem was unusual - that rather than feature rhyming words at the ends of its lines, it instead featured the same set of six words, which appeared in a complex pattern at the end of each of the six lines of each of the six stanzas (and again in the triplet / envoi for good measure). Writing this poetic form, which is called the sestina, is unlike writing any other type of poem for a number of reasons.

First, because the sestina is a set length, the author must pick a topic or narrative they believe they can sustain for the full thirty-nine lines. Second, they must choose six words that are related to their topic, but that are nuanced enough to yield multiple definitions so their use doesn't become too repetitive throughout the poem. Finally - and this one's especially trippy - it's basically impossible to write this type of poem from beginning to end. Because the end words are determined by a pattern, once you've written one verse it determines the word pattern for the entire poem. However, sometimes the fall of the words makes writing an additional verse impossible, and you must return to the lines you've already written, searching for a way to displace, rearrange, or even rewrite lines. In short, writing a sestina is an extremely recursive process.

In the time that I spent writing this poem, I underwent the full range of emotions that most writers experience during the course of bringing a composition from conception to completion. Excitement, despair, curiosity, belief, self-doubt, insanity... all in three hours. What those three hours produced was a poem that is unlike my typical pieces, but of which I am nevertheless strangely proud. Where my poems are usually distilled, minimalist slices of existential emotion or shifting reality, this piece is an impassioned, dramatic, and yearning tragedy. It does not doubt the nature of reality; instead it begins with a Romantic vision of humankind at one with Nature and ends with a Realist depiction of Nature as an antagonistic force. It is, truly, a singularity amongst my thoughtfully offspring.

However, in the spirit of science, I decided to do no further editing to the poem - it stands now exactly as it did at 10:00 pm on Friday, October 18, 2019. It is flawed, but mark ye this - it is finished. Which, yes, does mean I failed at my failure project... oops.

How to Prepare Tea



Fill a kettle with water



Put the kettle on high heat



Prepare a cup and saucer with preferred tea(s)



Avoid biting your nails while waiting for water to boil.



Pour boiling water into cup (don't fill completely)



I ignore that. It's not real.



Let steep for 5-10 min.



Add sweetener of choice and stir



Relax. Everything is fine.

I made this for an in-class art assignment where we had to illustrate a step-by-step process while using a limited 3-color palette. I decided to get creative by including a character of mine, Jonathan Aster, a rather anxious fellow who really doesn't want anyone to know he sometimes sees things that aren't there. The whole strip was made from start to finish in the span of 1 to 2 hours.

The Secret Life of Garden Gnomes

We are the sentinels, the watchers, the seers of omens.
Our eyes, framed in ageless wrinkles, are always open.

The morning breeze rustles the sage, portent of a coming storm.
There is always a coming storm. Poison ivy twines
with honeysuckle around the trunk of the silver poplar.
There is a yellow jacket nest in its roots. We are mute.
It is necessary to listen. Listen! You can hear the thunder
thousands of miles away. We are mute and smiling.

The breaking sun reveals in the dew-stained grass
a field of glistening cobwebs and diamonds. A rabbit
hops warily from stump to bush, always on the lookout.
Rabbits know their place in the food chain, as does the apple
on the lowest branch, which the rabbit stretches up to nibble.
We are mute, and we are smiling, and we are perfectly still.

It is necessary to feel the caress of drifting pollen, the shift
and twirl and slide of the Earth below one's feet as it careens
through the universe, the flutter of the butterfly's wings,
two beats up, then gliding down to rest among the violets.
Yes, it is a sign, as are the patterns of the stars at night,
and the absence of hummingbirds this year.

We do not know where they have gone. There is only one
capable of comprehending the simultaneous everything,
and the one has chosen to remain silent. It makes it interesting
for the rest of us, mute and still and smiling, those who know
there is only one truth—there is always a coming storm. Listen!
You can hear the thunder rumbling thousands of lightyears away.

I Have Reconsidered My Decision

I have reconsidered
my decision to be cremated.
Instead, I would like to be taxidermied—
well, sort of. I do not want to be stuffed,
but skinned, hollowed out and stitched back together,
sealed and pumped full of helium,
that amazing party gas of youth's balloon
which transforms all of us
into cartoon caricatures of ourselves.
Released from my back porch,
I will float, slowly,
toward heaven,
my arm waving a limp goodbye,
my head lolling side to side
with the rhythm of the breeze,
lifting to tumble among the clouds
until I catch a Jetstream eastward.
During the day I will warm and rise
to an eagle's eyes view of all I've left behind,
cooling and sinking at night to glide
above the treetops and mountaintops
and rooftops of some seaboard metropolis
where club-goers will see me, pointing
and declaring, "Look! It's a bird! It's a plane!
It's a naked guy!" and I will wave hello, goodbye,
continue my journey east into the coming sunrise
where perhaps I'll become the perch, the temporary refuge
of some wayward albatross, before eventually I will begin to leak
and, like so many shooting stars,
fall into the sea.

I've been writing poems for, well, a very long time, and my approach to poetry has gone through many transformations. Only one thing has remained typically consistent: poems happen, usually when I am mostly preoccupied with another, rather mindless task, such as mowing the lawn or doing dishes or making the drive to work along long-familiar two-lane highways, where, like road signs emerging from the fog, poems rise from the subconscious. Unlike road signs, however, the paths they mark tend to resemble twisted trees clinging to clouds.

"I Have Reconsidered My Decision" is one of those poems that developed on the road to work. Over the course of a few days, random musings on seemingly unrelated notions found connections and then language for expression, which was rehearsed again and again until, when I finally wrote it down, it was very nearly complete. Only the lineation has changed since I scrawled it out on the back of a class handout in the parking lot of a church beside Highway 96 near Prosperity, Tennessee. Although the subject matter might seem a bit grim to some, I find the basic premise quite amusing.

The humor in "The Secret Life of Garden Gnomes" may be more difficult to detect, for there are no specifically funny "gags" like the Superman allusion in "I Have Reconsidered My Decision." Instead, the humor here is in the attitude of the gnomes, who, without naming us, mock humans' propensity for worrying about that which we can't control. Yes, I do have garden gnomes, several in fact. This poem took shape as I worked in my yard, and many of the images in it are based on simple observation. It too took several days to form fully and, though I still tweak an occasional phrase for clarity, was first recorded almost complete.




MYRA

[24]

(Empty)SU//Fall Semester

Everyday is the same run
The finish line seems to walk from me
I know I can jump over obstacles, overcome
Crunch time, my muscles shake
But I would like to sit
Shove out paper after paper
A deadline that's not for me, but for you
Can I reap the rewards from exhaustion?
No time to worry, to overthink
Got another chapter to read
Push, Push, APA format, Push
Double spaced between me and who I want
to be
I can't let myself down



I miss reading for pleasure
Graduation caps sit heavy on my shoulders
Tassels keep my back straight
Backpack full of dreams
I miss writing for fun
Sacrifice now for tomorrow
Live in the moment with espresso shots
Push, Push, Push for just a B+
What a price for a piece of paper
What a toll to pay the gatekeeper in Blue
The sun keeps her distance in the fall
semester
An expensive exercise for one to do

Waking Up to the Sun//Spring Semester

Pink in the sky
The sun smiles all day
Bright, warm, without a reason why
Gratitude fills my chest
While light shines on the rest
What a time to be alive

Polyglot

The Obama Steaks should be delivered today, just leave them
 on the fountain. *I could put them in the freezer if you want.*
 No. Just cleave them there. The dry lice will keep them old 'til I get home.
 And Willie and Waylon were scrapping last night, would you give them
 Some of that tea and flick medication. It's in the third
 underwear under, dangit—
 in the same place where
 I keep the twiggerettes and cyst-eyes.

I haven't drivel since the last time we left the country for groceries—
 you know how when city folk say they're "out of towels"
 when they aren't at home,
 well I want purple to say I'm "out of the country."
 So I took the car out to the keys last week and to make sure
 the battery hadn't denied.

When we go to ground I need to pick up my...well hell,
 what is that thing the doctor gives you when
 you leave his offal

The bill? No. *Plavix?* It's the word for the paper on the bottle.

I don't know. The description! *Are you talking*
about the prescription?

I don't know.

I appreciate you cleaning the playgroomed. The dogs had
 made it downright fecund, no felicit—no. Foot!
 It's icky.

Now when Bess, I mean Lynn-Lee-leave-in...
 When Mindy brings coma-wait...mine...heat...
 Cole! he can play on the floor.

You're welcome. *By the way, it was fecal.*
 What is that?

Nevermind.

Author's Note: This poem arose from various conversations the author had with a grandparent that had experienced a mini-stroke. The recovery of their previously wide and easily accessed vocabulary took months and the conversations that ensued took a certain amount of translation but also provided a great deal of bittersweet laughter.

A Body to Hide the Soul

Stricken by illnesses both mental and physical, an obsessive voyeur will confront the object of his desire - or whatever has replaced her.

EXT. SUBURBAN CUL-DE-SAC. DAY.

Midday sun coats a small cul-de-sac. Bland houses with vinyl siding line the street, each surrounded by unpainted wooden fences.

Beyond them, acres of woodland mingle with piles of dirt and unmanned construction equipment.

INT. EDWARD'S BEDROOM. DAY.

A room in near complete darkness, interrupted by a thin stream of light cutting through a gap between black-out curtains.

EDWARD peers through the break, a skeleton wrapped in pale skin, color found only in the yellow of his eyelids.

He sits in a large computer chair, mindlessly fiddling with an empty prescription bottle. He stares out his second-story window to his neighbor's yard below.

THROUGH THE WINDOW

CAROLINE, a woman in sunglasses and a white bikini, lies on a reclined lounge chair in her front lawn. On a small table beside her, bottles of sunscreen and tanning oil bookend a portable speaker blasting a dull POP BEAT.

A handsome YOUNG MAN walks down the street and waves to her as he passes. She waves back and watches him go, hiding a smile.

EDWARD

scowls at the sight of him. He squeezes the bottle until it cracks, then tosses it aside. The music reaches him as a muffled, steady march of bass hits.

A KNOCK at his door breaks him from his trance. He pushes away from the window.

The door creaks open, light from the hallway spilling in to reveal barren walls and a carpet covered in stains.

EDWARD'S MOTHER enters carrying a plate of food and a glass of water.

She crosses the room and sets his lunch on the desk beside him. She collects an untouched plate of toast, then studies him for a moment.

EDWARD'S MOTHER

Try to eat something, alright?

Edward nods. She rubs his shoulder.

EDWARD'S MOTHER (CONT)

Need anything?

He shakes his head. She exits, and the room returns to black as the door closes.

Edward looks over the plate. He lifts a piece of soggy pita bread, then freezes; the pounding bass has stopped.

He peers out the window, then shuffles to the front of his desk where a bulky laptop rests by his food. He opens it. The screen illuminates his gaunt face.

ON EDWARD'S SCREEN

A program opens titled "BlackRoid," a simple interface with a layout reminiscent of a file manager. A row of icons sits at the top where a navigation bar would be. He selects an object titled "Caroline."

A second window opens, empty for a moment, then coming to life as a flood of white quickly subsides to reveal Caroline in her living room as seen through her laptop's webcam.

She taps a few keys, then steps back, now in a robe and hair tied into a ponytail. She brings a smoothie to her lips.

EDWARD

sighs, relieved. He takes a bottle of ACE inhibitors, shakes a few pills into his hand and tosses them back. He raises the glass of water to her.

EXT. SUBURBAN CUL-DE-SAC. DAY.

The sun sinks behind the horizon, the last faint remnants of its orange glow still hanging in the sky.

INT. EDWARD'S BEDROOM. DAY.

Edward lies in his bed, laptop before him. He takes a syringe from his nightstand, loads it with a clear liquid, and injects it into his thigh.

ON EDWARD'S SCREEN

Caroline sits on her couch. The sounds of a SITCOM play, slightly distorted. A LAUGH TRACK roars, Caroline joins in.

EDWARD

traces her smile with his fingertips. The laughter fades. A high-pitched SQUEAL cuts through the campy dialogue. Edward tries to sit up, but a pain in his side keeps him down.

ON EDWARD'S SCREEN

Caroline pauses her show, stares at something off screen.

A faint RUSTLING makes her flinch. She grabs her laptop and jogs to her bedroom. She sits on her bed and hammers at keys.

Edward reopens BlackRoid, selects "Caroline," clicks a button titled "Screen Capture."

A window appears, providing a live feed of Caroline's laptop. It displays the homepage for local animal control.

She takes her phone, dials the number on the page.

CAROLINE

Yes, hi, I wanted to report some kind of -- I don't really know, like an animal in my yard, I guess.

(beat)

No sir, I didn't see it.

EDWARD

runs his fingers over her hair. He closes his eyes and allows her voice to lull him to sleep.

THE NEXT MORNING

Edward stirs, a faint BUZZ filling the air. He rolls over and taps his laptop, waking the screen.

ON EDWARD'S SCREEN

A window shows Caroline's bedroom. Though shadows hide detail, a vague figure is visible on the bed.

A light KNOCK rips

EDWARD

away from the screen. He closes his laptop.

His mother enters, a new plate of food and glass of water in hand. She places them on the nightstand.

EDWARD'S MOTHER

Sleep good?

EDWARD

What's the buzzing?

She stops at the sound of his voice.

EDWARD'S MOTHER

I think Caroline's having problems with her music, bless her heart. It's been doin' that for a while.

EDWARD

Oh. What time is it?

She turns to face him, beaming.

EDWARD'S MOTHER

A little after 11. I came by earlier, but you were still sleeping.

EDWARD

Okay.

EDWARD'S MOTHER

Need anything?

He shakes his head.

EDWARD'S MOTHER (CONT)

Okay, holler if you do.


She exits, delighted. He stuffs the laptop under his arm and rolls out of bed. He takes a wooden cane from his bedside and limps to the computer chair. He collapses into it, looks

THROUGH THE WINDOW

to see Caroline in her lounge chair wearing frilly lingerie. The speaker on her table pollutes the air with a harsh static. Much of her skin glows red.

EDWARD

studies her. He opens his laptop and looks to the silhouette on his computer screen, then to the cracked bottle from the previous day. He scowls.



ON EDWARD'S SCREEN

He opens BlackRoid, selects "Caroline," then clicks "Control Speakers." He searches through a folder of alarms, then plays one at random.

THROUGH THE WINDOW

Caroline remains stoic as a bright ALARM MELODY screams from her speaker, replacing the static. She sits upright, grabs the speaker, rushes inside.

ON EDWARD'S SCREEN

Edward kills the alarm, scrambles to disconnect from the speakers. The feed of Caroline's room lightens as a door out of frame SQUEAKS open.

The portable speaker barrels through the air, slams onto the bed. The silhouette, still mostly coated in black, does not move. The door again SQUEAKS and the light is gone.

EDWARD

stares at his screen. He rubs his eyes, looks to the medication on his counter, then perks up.

He grabs his cane and hobbles to the closet. He pulls a hoodie and a pair of sweatpants from their hangers and dresses himself.

INT. EDWARD'S KITCHEN. DAY.

Edward's mother searches through a cookbook, a chef's knife and a collection of vegetables sprawled out on the counter.

Edward descends the stairs behind her and limps into the kitchen. She notices him, and again lights up.

EDWARD'S MOTHER

Are you feeling better?

EDWARD

I guess.

Edward opens the refrigerator, takes out a bottle of aloe vera.

EDWARD'S MOTHER

Heading out?

EDWARD

I won't be long.

EDWARD'S MOTHER

Do you want me to help you? Are you going to be okay walking--

EDWARD

I'm fine.

Edward trudges to the front door. His mother returns to the vegetables, a hopeful smile crossing her face.

EXT. CAROLINE'S PORCH. DAY.

Edward climbs the steps leading to Caroline's front door. He knocks weakly.

The door swings open. Caroline stands in the doorway, still in lingerie. Up close, the pallor of countless blisters and brightness of the scarlet burns give her skin an alien look.

EDWARD

Uh, hey, Caroline, I-- well, my mom said--
I just wanted to ask-- ya know, are you okay?

CAROLINE

Yes.

EDWARD

Oh okay, good, so... So I brought this,
I-- just in case-- I wasn't, really, ya know--

He holds up the bottle of aloe. She steps back.

CAROLINE

Medicine?

EDWARD

For your burns, or what looked like--
I wasn't! I didn't--

CAROLINE

I am fine. No medicine.

Caroline's gaze pierces him. He takes a deep breath.

EDWARD

But your arms... looked burned.

Edward raises the aloe again, insisting. She reels

CAROLINE

You are the Medicine Man?

EDWARD

You need it! Or a hospital! It's-you--
it might get infected! Or peel away--

CAROLINE

No medicine.

Caroline sinks her fingernails deep into her forearm. She pinches tight, then rips away the skin from her elbow to her wrist.

Edward stumbles backward, falling off the porch.

Barren of skin, her arm shows not flesh or blood, but mud flowing like a turbulent river.

CAROLINE (CONT)

No medicine.

Edward struggles to his feet and rushes back to his house.

Caroline watches him.

INT. EDWARD'S HOUSE. DAY.

Edward bursts through the front door. He trips on his way to the stairs and his cane snaps. He crawls onto the bottom step.

EDWARD'S MOTHER (O. S.)

Sweetie? Back already?

She trots in and finds him panting, clawing at the wooden stairs. She dives to his side.

EDWARD'S MOTHER

What happened? Are you okay? Come on, baby, let's go rest on the couch.

He shakes his head, frantic, and attempts to climb the stairs.

EDWARD'S MOTHER (CONT)

Okay, okay, it's okay! Let's get you in bed.

She helps him to his feet. She tosses the aloe aside. He reaches for it, but she sweeps him away.

He sputters but cannot find the air to speak.

INT. EDWARD'S BEDROOM. DAY.

Edward's mother throws open the door and gently sets him on the bed.

EDWARD'S MOTHER

I'll get you some juice.

She runs out of the room. Edward takes the vial and syringe from his nightstand and loads it, still trembling.

A distorted MURMUR plays from his laptop. He looks to the screen.

Caroline's distorted voice, accompanied by the scraping of hangers against a metal rod, paralyze him.

CAROLINE (O.S.)

Medicine Man... Medicine Man...

Medicine Man...

His mother returns and puts the glass of juice to his lips. He gulps it down.

EDWARD'S MOTHER

It's okay, sweetie, it's okay. Do you want anything else? Want me to stay here with you?

Edward opens his mouth to answer, stops, then shakes his head. His mother nods, exits.

From his speakers, three sharp KNOCKs interrupt Caroline's rambling. He turns up the volume.

ANIMAL CATCHER #1 (O. S.)

Animal Control!

Edward squirms out of bed and limps across the room to look

THROUGH THE WINDOW

at an animal control van parked in front of Caroline's house.

EDWARD

cracks the window open with great difficulty, though he keeps the curtains closed.

EXT. CAROLINE'S YARD. DAY.

Caroline escorts two burly animal catchers, STEVE and PIKE, to the back yard. She wears a robe, ever-growing dots of mud staining the sleeve that covers her skinless forearm.

CAROLINE

Here.

PIKE

Ma'am, can you tell us anything else about the--

CAROLINE

No.

The men share an annoyed look, then split off to search the yard. Pike investigates the far corner of the lawn. Steve walks the perimeter.

Pike brushes aside some tall grass and comes to the carcass of a raccoon, covered in mud.


PIKE

Think I found it. It's a raccoon.

STEVE

Dead one?

Pike lifts the body with a metal grabber. He retrieves a plastic bag and drops the body in.



PIKE

Looks like it. Not much to it either.
Just... fur.

STEVE

Jesus Christ!

PIKE

What d'ya got?

STEVE

The rest of that raccoon.

Pike hurries to Steve's side. At their feet, the flesh and skeleton of a raccoon sit, fully intact.

The catchers look to each other, then back to Caroline. She stands behind them, stiff, unblinking.

They collect the carcass, then approach her. The stains on her robe are more apparent.

PIKE

Ma'am--

CAROLINE

You can leave.

STEVE

We want to ask some questions--

CAROLINE

No.

STEVE (CONT)

We have some serious concerns about
the--

CAROLINE

I do not know.

PIKE

Why is your arm so muddy?

CAROLINE

I do not know.

Caroline glares at the catcher. They lock eyes. The catcher blinks first. He puts away his grabber and shakes his head.

PIKE (CONT)

Alright, we'll get outta your way. We'll
send a bill for the disposal.

They avoid eye contact as they pass by. Once out of earshot, they hold a hushed conversation.

INT. EDWARD'S BEDROOM. DAY.

Edward watches the men, jaw agape. He looks to Caroline.

THROUGH THE WINDOW

She studies the spot where the raccoon's flesh sat. She turns to go back inside, then stops.

She looks directly at Edward.

EDWARD

jumps back, losing balance and falling to the ground. He lies there a moment. Then, breathing heavy, he fights to his feet and crawls onto his bed. He scrambles for his laptop

ON EDWARD'S SCREEN

He opens BlackRoid, selects "Caroline," then "Control Speakers."

He turns the volume as high as it will go, then searches the internet for videos of animals in pain. He finds one, hits play.

High pitched cries of agony erupt from Caroline's speaker.

EXT. CAROLINE'S HOUSE. DAY.

The two catchers, seated in the van and ready to leave, freeze. The pitiful cries that erupt from the house demand their attention.

They burst from the van, cross the lawn to the front porch. Caroline blocks the doorway.

CAROLINE

Leave.

PIKE

Ma'am I don't know what the hell you're up to, but I'm not playing this game!

Steve pushes her out of the way. They march inside.

INT. EDWARD'S BEDROOM. DAY.

Edward bites his lip, eyes glued to the screen.

ON EDWARD'S SCREEN

Frantic shouting and protests fill the silence between the wailing of an unseen animal.

The door SQUEAKS as it flies open. The ceiling light flicks on.

The gory form of Caroline's body lay on the bed in a pool of blood, free of skin.

PIKE (O. S.)

Holy shit--

A sickening SNAP, followed by a dull thud. Then another.

EDWARD

closes his laptop, tries to stand, but cannot carry himself.

He fights to remain upright as the door downstairs BANGS against the wall.

He reels, lightheaded. His mother shouts, then stops abruptly.

A steady POUNDING up the stairs.

His bedroom door flies open. Caroline runs to him, pins his shoulders. Her eyes are wide, bulging.

She opens her mouth; mud pours out, into his, stifling his screams.

He flails, slamming his hand on the nightstand.

Her wild eyes weaken. Edward's mouth opens wider.

His gums sever from his face, pushing his hard palate out of his mouth. His skeleton is ejecting from his body.

He grabs the loaded syringe. He swings and impales Caroline's temple, pushes the plunger.

Her body spasms wildly. She rolls onto the floor. The mud continues to pour from her mouth until she no longer moves.

Edward vomits up the mud, tinged a dark red. He sucks in air, though it guides more blood down his throat.

He coughs, hangs his head. He looks to his nightstand; the previous night's meal still sits there, barely touched. He drags himself out of bed and crawls to the hallway.

INT. EDWARD'S HOUSE. DAY.

Edward slides down the stairs. At the bottom, his mother lies, her chef's knife plunged into her throat.

He pulls himself to her side, wraps his arms around her.

His blood mixes with the small pool already beneath her. He weeps quietly as his strength disappears.

FADE OUT

END

This script was written for a competition where I had eight days to write a short horror film. I had to somehow include a sun bather and hacking.

When I'm brainstorming a story, I like to exercise and let my mind wander. Most of my rough outlines have been written in between sets of squats.

I tend to steal ideas—excuse me, seek inspiration—from whatever songs come on as I write. This story benefited from the songs “Made Out of Nothing (All That I Am)” by Coheed & Cambria and “Medicine Man” by Pantera.

I'm a fan of body horror, creepy protagonists, and monsters with impossible-to-understand motives, so I channeled that into a Rear Window meets Invasion of the Body Snatchers type narrative.

Unfortunately, I didn't do well in the competition. I was bummed out when the results were posted; unlike 99% of the stuff I write, I had a little pride in this script. I've gotten over the blow to my pride, though, and I've decided to share the story with whoever will read it.

For those unfamiliar with screenwriting format, most of the formatting peculiarities won't impede reading, but there are two things that may be confusing if left unexplained. The things put in all-caps on their own lines represent a change in focus. Basically, every time you read something like that, imagine a camera pointed at that thing. (O. S.) beside a character's name means “off-screen,” so you'd hear their voice, but you would not see them.



Daddy's Revelation

I remember the first time I heard my daddy cry.
It was late one night.
I was already in bed.

So were my brothers and sisters.
Mom and Dad had gone out earlier, leaving the six of us at home.
We lived in Germany; on a military base, where everyone looked out for each other.

I was young.
But I was attentive.
And I was a light sleeper.

Almost anything would wake me.

A creak in the floor.
The closing of a door.
The flush of a toilet.
Even the sounds of the radiator kicking on during the winter time.

I could see things that I heard;
no matter how dark it was,
or how many rooms separated me from what I hearing.

The sound I most awoke to were voices.

Daddy was in the bathroom.
Mama kept telling him to be quiet, "You're going to wake the kids."

I could hear daddy crying. But he was talking to himself too.
I didn't understand what he was saying.
He seemed to just be running words together in between the tears.

Hearing him scared me.

At times it sounded like he couldn't breathe.

I could hear him gasp for air; then moan, like he was in pain, before the talking and the crying would start up again.

Then I could smell the staleness of vomit.

Even through the cracks of my closed bedroom door.

In the distance, I could still hear mama trying to quiet daddy down.

I lay frozen in my bed, scared and sad that something or someone had made my daddy cry.

The sound of those tears, and the piercing cries of whatever my dad was trying to say, rang in my ears for many years after that night.

It was as a 10th grader working on a paper in US History, that I first asked my dad about the Vietnam War.

Mama said daddy didn't like talking about it.
It wasn't her favorite subject either.

I was too young to remember the first time he went.
I will never forget the second.

But it would be a few more years before my teenaged mind put the pieces together from that one night, in Germany, when I first heard my daddy cry.

Two months later we were back in America.
And he was gone.

house arrest

Mother, I feel so unbearably separate.

My fingers are blue and frostbitten,

I am sickly in this house.

Yet I will not leave.

These bars are of my design,

and I am a horridly

proud

creature.

Comfort, intimacy, familiarity:

the thread of my every dream.

These floors know me in every way

I don't wish to be known.

I despise my simple incapacity.

Mother, tell me how to rearrange

my

being.

Beg the dear doctor to unmake me

so I may relearn these abstracts.

Comfort, intimacy, familiarity:

the thread of my undoing.



I think I wrote this somewhere around midnight because things are always strangely sensitive in that general time. The poem is a personal reflection of my own emotional state and experience. I had less of a process for writing the poem and more of a sudden and unavoidable urge to write it.

If You're Reading This, There's Hope

Chaya

Chaya opened her eyes. She was lying in a bed that wasn't her own, staring at the guy from the bar—Jim or Tim, or maybe it was Jeffrey. His name didn't really matter at this point. Once she was out the door, he'd be forgotten.

It wasn't until she moved from the warm mold beneath the sheets to face the ceiling that she could feel her cold nakedness. The seven minutes, lying completely conscious after sleeping with some random guy always had that familiar feeling: cold, naked, and lonely. Yet, she craved it and she'd come back to it for months.



Six months ago she was clinically diagnosed with depression. Midway through her senior year at the University of California, Berkeley, she ended her violent relationship with Dustin the day he proposed to her.

He beat her again.

She left campus and went back home to live with her aunt. Her excuse for not finishing school had been that she wanted to get away from Dustin, but the longer she was home, the more she realized that there was nothing in Berkeley for her to return to. It hurt at first: having to explain to people that she wasn't doing anything with her life, seeing the disappointment in their eyes, knowing that she didn't know what was next.

On her first visit back at Zion Baptist Church, her aunt asked the pastor to pray for her. Chaya begged her not to make a big deal about her decision. She knew she would figure it all out somehow, but Lucia was a woman of faith.

"You need this," she had said. "We need this."

Chaya respected Lucia's wishes for the day, but she hated the empty glares she received from every member who pulled back from their firm embrace to say, "I'll keep you in my prayers." After the service Chaya went to the parking lot to wait for Lucia. As she passed through the pavilion, she could hear some of the members chatting.

"Lucia's girl is throwing her life away," the woman said, adjusting her pink suit jacket. "I can't say I didn't see it coming, though."

Chaya never went back after that. She wasn't sure what made her most uncomfortable: the fact that she was certain these people didn't really care about her, or the fact that she felt like she needed to be cared about.

After a while, she tried to turn it all off. She couldn't go on pretending to be happy—it was exhausting. So, she stayed away from people. She stopped going to church, she stopped talking to the few friends she'd kept in contact with, and she only left the house to hook up with random guys. Days went by quickly and nights were unmemorable. Lucia tried getting her to talk, but Chaya resisted. She resorted to getting help from the church counselor. When the counselor told Lucia about the diagnosis, she denied it.

“Mental illness is a cry from the soul,” she told Chaya. “No doctor can fix that for you.”

Chaya didn't care much about the labels. In fact, she hadn't cared about much of anything for a while. All she knew was that she couldn't feel and when she lay there in the stranger's bed, for those seven minutes, she felt lonelier than loneliness itself—it was something.



The time spent lying there was always seven minutes. A minute more and she could fall back asleep, or worse, the bar guy could wake up. When her seven minutes of staring at the ceiling were up, she rolled slowly to the edge of the bed, glancing back every centimeter of rotation to be sure she hadn't awakened Jeffrey, or Sam, or whoever. She sat up on the edge of the bed and glanced around the room to find her clothes. This guy was pretty clean compared to her usual. His hardwood floor was clear of any clothes or crumbs or cockroaches. The air even felt cleaner against her bare skin and it smelled like vanilla, which she thought was strange. There her clothes were: he'd draped them over the flat-screen television. She shifted to her feet and started moving towards them.

Seth watched Chaya tiptoeing her way to her clothes. He noticed how delicately defined the muscles in her back were. She was graceful and strong; intimidating and vulnerable; and her bronze skin was so smooth it glowed in the light that peeped through the window from the rising sun. He could remember what she felt like beneath his fingertips and under his lips and he didn't want her to go.

Chaya was slipping on her black lace bra when she felt the stillness of a glare. She turned slowly towards the bed, hoping she was just being paranoid.

“I like anything mocha,” the guy from the bar said from the bed. She hadn't noticed he was awake. “I'm sorry?” She was throwing her clothes on now.

“Well, either you’re on your way to get us breakfast or you were planning to leave without a proper goodbye.” The guy from the bar adjusted himself to sit upright in the bed.

“No hard feelings, but I’ve got to go,” she said, already headed towards the front door.

He rolled out of bed and rushed to reach the door before she could. He was more charming than she’d remembered. Then again, she always had a hard time remembering her nights, though she hadn’t drunk much. He posted up on the door with his arms crossed and grinned through his goatee. She locked with his grey eyes. He looked back into hers and he could see that she didn’t remember much about him—or she’d chosen to forget.

“Move.” Chaya broke their glare and stepped back assuming he would be courteous enough to accommodate her request.

“I’ve got a proposition.” He still hadn’t budged. “I’m making breakfast for you; I’ll slide you my number; then you can leave.”

This guy is either desperate or crazy, she thought, neither of which did she have the energy to entertain. “You’re kidding.”

He shook his head and walked her into his cozy vintage-style kitchen. “Name’s Seth,” he said to Chaya, “in case you forgot.”

She thought she must have been thinking out loud before, but she tried to act as though this was no news to her. “At least put some clothes on,” Chaya said, looking down at his bare legs.

He shrugged, “Fair enough.”

John

“Dude, get off my porch!” The voice was distant and muffled. Then John felt cold water smack him across his face, snatching him from his dark dreams to daylight. He jerked his body up from the radiating concrete, gasping for air and immediately felt his brain press against his skull. The figure speaking in front of him wasn’t clear yet.

“Lucia?” John squinted his eyes, searching for a face.

“No, there’s no Lucia here. You need to go.” John could see that now. This guy was certainly not a Lucia. In fact, his name was Sabastian. It was written on his name tag. His wife stood at the screen door holding their young daughter, hoping this drunk man wouldn’t strike back at Sebastian. From the wrinkles in John’s face, she guessed

he was much older than Sebastian. If Sebastian was twenty-five, John was at least forty-five and he wore every year like a ten pound weight.

The man was gesturing for his wife to go back into the house when John finally gained enough consciousness to grab his baseball cap and stumble down the stairs of the home onto the sidewalk. Sebastian yelled something from the porch, but John was too far to understand.

He could still taste the whiskey from last night—or maybe this morning. At some point in between he couldn't tell the difference. The aggressive sun was distracting and piercing. The heat made him more nauseous. "What the hell am I doing here?" he thought. The question he'd been asking himself more often than he was comfortable admitting to himself. He'd been wandering town trying to figure out what his next move should be. When he couldn't find answers, he'd drink— a habit he'd been guilty of for years. Only, recently he couldn't bring himself to find any answers. He'd drink and then wake up in the same neighborhood on a porch.

"John, is that you, brother?" He turned around to find his sister, Lucia, outside her home watering flowers.

"There you are, sis."

She sat her purple flower pot down and met him at the white fence. A fence he'd put up for her over ten years ago. The crime rate in her neighborhood had always been fairly above average, but it was all that she could afford.

"Did you call before showing up here?" She had a way of saying things like every word was meant as a threat.

"You not happy to see me, sis?" She could tell he'd been drinking again. She could smell the whiskey before she'd reached him. His heavy eyes reminded her of their father, which disgusted her even more.

"John, we're not doing this again." She stood there by the fence for a moment. "What reason have you got for showing up this time?" When he didn't respond, she turned around and headed back to the front door. She had made it all the way to the porch when he responded.

"Wait, I have something for her." He pulled a small silver box out of his jacket pocket. "It belonged to her mother."

Rose was his high school sweetheart. They'd married young and had a daughter named Chaya. A couple years after their daughter was born, Rose found out about John's other women. That was the start of his new bad habit--drinking. He felt so guilty that he never went back to see her, not even for her funeral. He thought it wouldn't be right. Chaya was nine years old when Rose passed, and since her father was not around, Lucia took custody of her. He hadn't actually seen his daughter since before the separation, when Chaya was five.

Lucia grabbed the box and walked inside the house.

Chaya

Seth had the kitchen smelling like a pancake house on a Sunday morning. After eating, Chaya leaned back in her seat and let out a deep breath.

"So, Chaya, tell me something about yourself?" Seth broke the silence.

"What do you really want?" Chaya responded.

"What do you want, Chaya?" The question annoyed her.

"So, I'm free to go now, right?" She was making her way to the door.

"What's your problem anyway?" He sat, reclined on the leather sofa in the living room.

"I'm going to leave now," she said.

"Just a sec." He ripped a piece of paper out of a notebook on the coffee table and scribbled something on it. Then he moved close to her and slid the sheet of paper into her pocket. She turned and walked out the door.

Chaya took a taxi to her Aunt Lucia's house. When she walked in, her aunt was grading papers in the dining room. She thought she'd get by without a conversation.

"Excuse me, where have you been?" Lucia hadn't looked up from the stack of papers in her lap.

"I just went out." Chaya said while still attempting to make it across the living room to the stairs.

"If you're going to keep this up, you're going to have to stay someplace else." She was looking up at her now. Demanding her attention with her eyes.

"Okay, fine."

Chaya knew it was time to go. Lucia had taken care of her for fifteen years, they were both getting older. At sixty-five, Lucia was too old to be worried about Chaya and Chaya knew she was too old to be worried about. She'd been searching for a small

apartment to move into and filled out an application for a barista position at Sweet Mugs Café downtown, where the manager advertised a high demand for full-time applicants. She was still unsure, though. As Chaya's mind wandered, she failed to notice how upset she'd made Lucia. When she looked up, she saw the television remote flying towards her. She ducked in time.

"Lucia, what the hell?" Lucia was always aggressive when she got frustrated. Once, while her son was living with her she had become so angry with the noise he was making by jumping on the bed, that she made him walk along the floor trim under the kitchen doorway where there were nails poking through. She wouldn't even flinch at his crying.

"Don't speak to me that way in my house." She looked back down to the papers in her lap. "Who do you think you are?"

Chaya made it to the stairs and up to her room, safely. Who do I think I am? She thought. That seemed to bother her a lot more than the remote almost hitting her in the face. She lay out on her bed and stared at the ceiling. It wasn't as nice as Seth's, nor was her bed. "Shit," she thought, "I remember his name."

She got up from bed and grabbed the job application from her dresser, just barely missing the unfamiliar silver box sitting close by. She stopped for a moment to inspect it and then shoved it in her bag.

John

John couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten. He had stopped going to work at the luxury driving service at least a month ago and he'd spent much of his last check on whiskey—which was an expensive habit to keep up. By this point, he was sure he didn't have a job to go back to. The day he decided to stop showing up to work, he was assigned to pick a family up from the airport. When he pulled up the father shook his hand and opened the door for his wife and son. The mother and son were fast asleep not long into the drive. The father talked to him the entire six-hour drive. He was well into his career as an events coordinator for the MLB. This weekend, he was coordinating a conference for the San Francisco Giants. Next month he would be in New York. He was a man who loved his career. His wife homeschooled their son, so they were able to travel with him most times.

Listening to the passion this man had for his family and career reminded John of the late night conversations he and Rose would have during the first nights of their marriage. They would lie in the dark room and talk for hours.

“John?” Rose would call out just as John was dozing off. He’d smile in his half awakened state and mumble back.

“Yea, baby?”

Rose loved the idea of a quiet, modest job where she could really impact people’s lives--like a teacher or a nurse. She loved to put smiles on people’s faces. It didn’t matter who the person was, Rose felt it was her purpose in life to bring happiness where there was none. She would hug strangers and cook massive dinners just so that she could host her coworkers in their tiny apartment. John’s dreams weren’t as modest. He wanted power and presence--something like an engineer or a business man. Looking back, John was ashamed that he hadn’t held on to some of his childish ambitions. After he left Rose, he stopped talking about dreams. She was his dream. And it seemed that those conversations only existed in that dream of her. They couldn’t exist without her.

When he reached San Francisco, the family left him in the car. He sat and thought about the dreams he once had and he grew contemptuous. He was forty-five years old and he hadn’t yet bothered to do something that made him happy. So he stopped going to work, and he went searching for answers at the bottom of his bottles.



John went into Sweet Mugs Café where he knew he could get a pastry for cheap. Something to keep his stomach quiet for a little while. He ordered a coffee and the cranberry scone. The lady at the register claimed it was one of their best pastries. He sat down at a table along the window and watched people outside the café. He heard a soft voice say that she was sorry she was running a little late. Then she rushed by him and dropped her bag.

“Let me help with that,” he said reaching down. Then he saw it--the box. He couldn’t look away. Either he would look up and see the daughter he hadn’t seen in fifteen years or he’d find the thief who’d somehow gotten a hold of Rose’s box.



“I’ve got it,” Chaya said. She was already fifteen minutes late to her interview.

She grabbed her bag and reached for the box, but John grabbed it before she did. He looked up at her.

“Oh, thank you,” she said. “I’ve really got to go.”

He handed it to her and smiled. Chaya returned a grin and hurried to the back. The manager hired her on the spot, out of desperation. He left Chaya to find a girl named Jessica who could train her on the register. When he left, she remembered the box. It had completely slipped her mind until it fell out of her bag. She pulled it out and examined it. There was a rose engraved on both sides. She ran her fingers over them, then she flipped the latch to open it.



John wasn’t breathing. He was staring at the coffee cup in front of him wishing it was another bottle in which he could search for the solutions to his problems. It was Chaya. She looked just like Rose, she sounded like Rose, and she even had her smile. He could see her more clearly now than he had in years: her brown hair that hung loosely on her shoulders; her large auburn eyes; her high cheekbones; that mole on her chin that she would always try to cover up with make-up. It felt like the first time he met her. He had been sent out of gym class for punching his step brother, Mark. Mark teased John because their dad had chosen to stay with his family and not John’s. He told him his dad left John because he wasn’t good enough.

Rose was late to school that day and she was on her way to first period when she spotted the distressed boy. She almost kept walking by, but she stopped mid-stroll as though something was tugging her his way.

“John, right?” She said. He was surprised that she knew his name and more surprised that she’d bothered to stop and talk to him. When he had confirmed, she came closer and asked why he was sitting in the hall. She chuckled at his brawl and asked why he was so angry. Realizing that he wasn’t amused, she sobered up. She grabbed him by the shoulders and said, “Hey, it’s okay.”

No one had ever seemed as invested in his problems as she appeared in that moment. John felt seen. The next day he saw her, he’d worked up enough courage to give her his number on a small piece of paper.



He didn’t know whether he should take off and pretend he’d never seen Chaya, or stay and let her know he was her father. The one who left her and her mother behind

because he was too much of a coward to face his regrets. The one who never even came to take care of his daughter when her mom passed away. The one who has never been good enough. The one who wished he could love her better. The one who wished he could be better. His legs were getting tense, so he decided maybe he should just go and walk it off. When he swung his feet around, he heard the shuffling of paper. He looked down and found a folded piece of paper under his foot. He picked it up and read.

“Chaya, if you’re reading this, there’s hope.” Below the note was a number.



In the box Chaya found a picture of her mom holding her in the hospital bed with her dad standing by her side grinning hard. On the back of the picture was a written note:

“Chaya, a name meaning abundant life.”

Life, she thought was the one thing she had been lacking. She hadn’t felt alive for months, but it was refreshing to read. She thought back to Seth’s question.

Abundant life.

“Hey, Chaya, I’m ready,” Jessica called from the hallway.

“Coming.” She walked out to the cash register and found John standing there.

“Oh, hey again!”

“I think you dropped this.” He pulled the piece of paper from his pocket.

“Oh, of course.” She felt his hand shaking as she grabbed the paper. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m sorry.” He stumbled over the words like he hadn’t intended for them to roll out, but he was relieved that they had.

She could see something familiar in him, and for a moment she sympathized.

“Hey,” Chaya said as he turned away, “it’s okay.”

“If you’re reading this, there’s hope” is my first-ever fiction piece, and it was originally written for a creative writing course. At the time, it was a project that brought my passion for writing back and created in me a desire to explore fiction. I wanted to write a story about real people, real struggles, and unlikely coincidences. This short story has gone through several revisions since I wrote it originally, and I have other versions in which I have begun expanding the plot. Writing this piece taught me to just write. I had intended to outline the story or set a purpose and found this to make the writing process feel far too restrained. So, instead, I just went for it.

Evanescence

Tell me where you've gone my dear
 I can't recognize your face
 Tell me what it's worth my dear
 I can't stand to lose you now

The apparition of your
 face is almost gone
 Please
 Don't fade into the norm

You're so black and white my dear
 Have the people drained your life
 Hold this conversation dear
 Lest your will may slip away

The apparition of your
 face is almost gone
 Please
 Don't fade
 into the norm

Just look at me
 Don't fade darling
 I promise things
 Aren't as bad as they seem

No will is worth
 feeling worthy
 I can't watch you
 As you give it away

The apparition of your
 face is almost gone
 Please
 don't
 fade

"Evanescence" was originally a song I wrote after breaking up with a boyfriend. I remember feeling hopeless as I watched someone I loved start changing before my eyes. By the end of our relationship, he was not the same person I fell in love with. After I wrote the song, I realized that the song wasn't just about my boyfriend anymore. I revisited the song for the first time this year and decided to shape it into a poem. This was hard to do at first because, to me, it was a song. After having some others read the lyrics in stanzas, I started to see how I could use the rhythm of the song to create a more consistent meter for each stanza. I enjoyed playing with the space around the verses and after some work I started to see the poem form out of this old song.

The Side Effects of Breaking Up

I hear his ghost in the other room,
always in the other room,
and gone by the time
I cross the threshold.
His shadow skulks along the hall
near the bedroom. He watches
while I sleep,
especially when the other man
spends the night.
His ghost sneers at the other man's
shoes by the door,
and locked the poor guy out
one particularly haunted
Saturday night.

I tell his ghost that
he's the one who wanted to leave.
I tell him that
I will never understand,
and I think his ghost
likes that.



It's never easy to lose someone you care about, especially when you are the one who didn't make the choice to leave. Getting over someone is like exorcising a ghost you didn't know you had.

Mercy on a Suburban Back Road

Do you think the frog
felt pain?



Thin, webbed
feet melting against
sunburned asphalt
in the middle of summer.
It bubbled and drooped like
Dali's clocks, struggled
for the lily pads and
cool blue of
picture books,
only to find pieces of itself
trapped in a sticky black sea
that had no end. Flies buzzed,
reborn as predators
to its wilting body.
All the flies
had to do was
wait.

Mama, do you think the
frog felt pain when
we struck?

I think—by then—
it must have smiled
when it heard our car
coming.

I used to ride my bike up and down my street; there were always small frogs flattened like paper into the asphalt. They never felt real. I wondered what they must've been thinking, so far from the water in the middle of a Tennessee summer.



Highlander

He stood overlooking the vast Scottish landscape: the loch, a stormy grey that reflects the sky. The misting rain mutes the colors of his wool coat and tartan kilt. The sweeping green valley shows the profound beauty of the country. The clansman stands at attention watching as if guarding over the beginnings of the new town below and the foundation of a castle made from pale green Scottish stones. He wonders what the town on the edge of Loch Fyne will become.

Then I watch as he fades from view and I look over the side of the mountain we have just climbed. I hear bagpipes on the wind and feel the presence of my ancestors behind me as I look out over a now centuries-old town and a finished castle.



My family and I went on a trip to England, Scotland, and Wales over the summer. It was the long awaited "one day we'll go" trip. My brain never seems to have left. I am quite sure part of me stayed and never got on the plane at Gatwick Airport. Memories of the trip are absolutely one of the reasons I have gotten through this rather difficult year. This flash fiction came out of that. I took a fiction writing class in the Fall 2019 semester, and on the first night I was sitting in class listening to my teacher talk very inspiringly about writing and was thinking about how I had just heard that we were expected to keep writing journals and write at least two flash fictions. That is where I got the idea for "Highlander." I mentally planned the basic structure in class, and then when I got home that night, it was the first thing I wrote in my notebook.

I Left My Heart

I left my heart in Dublin Town,
Its colorful streets and history,
And a little yarn store that spoke of home.

I left my heart at the Cliffs of Moher,
Clear skies gave a sight not often seen,
I tried to find where my parents stood, years before.

I left my heart at Bunratty Castle,
A fortress of the past reminds the world
How things used to be, in days gone by.

I left my heart in County Kerry,
On the side of the road in fact,
In the most beautiful place I'd ever seen.

I left my heart in County Cork,
I looked out across the final port of call
Where my great grandfather left his home to come to mine.

I left my heart in Dublin Town,
Where we spent our final night.
To that city we came, and from that city we went.

Oh, I left my heart in Ireland
With people I may never meet again.
I left my heart among the shamrocks where my ancestors once lived.

I had the opportunity to go to Ireland after I graduated high school, and I had a wonderful time. Memories of the trip are one of the things that got me through my first year of college. When I was stressed, I would imagine myself back in Ireland and how calming and happy the trip was. I wrote this poem during finals week on a day at the house by myself. I wasn't having a great day, but I started thinking about Ireland, how I wished I was there, and then I had the idea to write it.

The Isle of Iona



This is a photograph I took of the shore of the Isle of Iona, right after we got off the ferry. I was on a family trip to England, Scotland, and Wales, and Iona was one of the places that my dad was really excited about because of the monastery. We had been warned two days prior to visiting Iona that the roads on the Isle of Mull, between two ferry rides on the way to Iona, were terrible and that we should take the bus. My mom, who drove, is so very grateful we followed that advice. The bus rides across Mull, there and back, were very interesting. We learned about the island and about the sheep left on Mull by the Vikings.

seasons

In winter, I kissed the snow and bore my red nose
I felt something then
In spring, I danced with the flowers and daydreamed for hours
I felt something then
In summer, I burned to a crisp and tasted warm lips
I felt something then
In fall, I crumbled with the leaves and hid in the trees,
I felt something then
When you died in the spring and left me for The King,
I felt nothing then.

music

you spend thousands of dollars
just to feel something
anything
and just for a few hours
you feel something
everything
all at once
just for a few hours
you know who you are supposed to be
not what you have become

To start my work, I usually listen to music or get into a clear headspace. With writing, you have something that kickstarts ideas in your head. You could be with friends, watching television, or running, and you get an idea in your head. It is like a lightbulb goes off, and you have to write it down right away, so you do not forget it. My pieces are about feeling something and trying to put that into words in such an abstract way. The world can be viewed in many different ways, and writing is one of the main ways to express that. Usually, I start by sitting down and writing whatever comes into my mind if I do not have a certain idea. If it is something short, I usually try to finish it in one sitting because it disrupts the process if not. "Seasons" is actually a piece about my grandfather passing away. It really impacted me because writing about him was the only way that I could really connect myself to him after this happened. "Music" is about how music can be the only thing that connects you to a feeling in a moment of time. It is a feeling that also connects you to so many other people.

When Mirrors Don't Reflect a Familiar Face

To whom it may concern, when you don't know how to live anymore, when you've forgotten how to breathe.

You've been blessed with the Human condition hence there will be bad days when you forget who you are and what you're supposed to be. But it is okay, no creation has ever existed without a moment of chaos.

I want you to not think about anything else but the moment you're in right now. Don't worry about tomorrow until it gets here, never turn your gaze into the direction of the past, it's behind you for a reason. Instead learn from it. But focus on the gift you have now that is the present. After all, that's why it's called "present."

I want you to remember that not existence is consistent. Whatever it is I promise you; you will drink and laugh to it whenever tomorrow comes. There is nothing in this world that has the ability or skill to destroy you. You are a vessel filled with Light, Love. Even the stars have nothing on you.

You are loved. Never shut yourself out from love in hopes of protecting your feelings. In doing that you will lose yourself. Rather understand yourself and know the love you possess because in doing so, you will never lower your standard enough for anyone to hurt you.

Whatever it is, let it hurt, let it try to break you, it won't. Rather, it will shape you into what you were meant to be. You will fail and fail and fail until you succeed. Because success is

not a thing of luck or chance. It only comes to those who deserve it so work, sweat, fail, work sweat, fail, work, sweat, fail until you succeed. You need to hear this; you will fail your way to success.

So on days when mirrors don't reflect familiar faces, when you're not sure how to live rather than exist, when you don't feel LOVE simply go outside. Watch the Sunset, feel the air of the season against your skin. Breathe it in. Listen to the waterfalls. And watch how you will find your way back that which matters. You WILL find your way back to your purpose.

Remember, I will always love you.

When situations have not gone your way, when you are backed up against a wall, when you are at a frustrating point in your life and you do not remember who you are, read this over and over again. Read it until you realize that your current situation is not permanent. You will find You again.

On a Tuesday evening I picked up my phone, opened my notes and I typed.

I usually have a notebook that I write on but that evening I did not have it with me, but I knew if I delayed even for a second, I would not have been able to put what I was experiencing in verbal form. I would describe my creative process as an experience. There is this amazing feeling that takes place; it's a very joyous feeling that I can't really find the words to explain. I stop whatever I am doing and wait for my heart to find the right words to express itself.

After hearing a lot of struggles and situations that me and my peers faced as incoming freshmen in college, I realized that amidst a different environment and having no one but yourself, you can definitely forget your identity. So, it was kind of an ode to my friends and to everyone who is going through a very hard time at a certain point in their life.

This is America

Five minutes before art class. Five minutes to take this algebra book out of my bag. I just left my ELL class, the only place that has others like me. Even though everyone else is Hispanic, we are all in the same boat. English isn't our first language, so it's one of two classes I feel semi comfortable in. The second one, art class. Of course, Destiny always chooses these five minutes between classes to find me.

I put my book in my locker; my backpack becomes lighter, with only a notebook in it. My back isn't slouching, and I stand a little bit more upright. I turn to walk towards class, and there is Destiny, standing with her boyfriend, Roderick, and her best friend, Michelle.

Destiny has a lighter complexion than me. Mocha. Her hair is set in locked brownish-blond curls; it reaches midway on her back. Her face is immaculate, no acne, unlike the other girls in this school. She is 14 years old, but she must have hit puberty a bit too early. Her curves are already in, and people notice. She notices. She wears baggy pants, and usually has on a shirt twice her size. She tries really hard to hide her body; she turns her attention on me. I almost feel bad for her, because I still have a chance to be young, and the freedom to wear something without being told I'm provocative. She decides to ruin that small bad feeling with her constant tormenting.

Next to her, Michelle. She has a complexion much darker than Destiny, but she isn't as dark as me, a very dark chocolate. Her hair is straight, permed. It reaches her shoulder, and she has these fly-aways that she has to constantly pat down. She is skinny, with long legs and arms to match. Her lips are as big as mine, if not bigger. But since she was born in America, she is automatically better than me. She is also friends with Destiny, the "it" girl, so she chooses to follow what she does. Never mind, we look similar. No, all she sees in me is where I come from.

"Hold up guys, it's African," Destiny says. Her nickname for me. "She's looking a little burnt today." I internally roll my eyes. Her jokes are childish, and we are in middle school. By now, I'm used to her harsh words, a constant reminder that I will never fit in.

I hold my tongue, in fear of two things. For one, my accent is still very strong, and two, I get nervous and stumble on my words. They are blocking me, so all I can do is just stand and stare.

Talking very slowly, as if I have a mental disorder, Michelle says, "Aww. You must not be understanding her. Does she need to speak in your native language?"

Both girls start making clicking sounds. Imitating the Xhosa [kosa] clicking language from South Africa. I'm not from South Africa. I have yet to tell anyone at this school what country I am from. My answer is always Africa. Their stupidity is sometimes enough to bring me some small joy.

This time, I visually roll my eyes, and they definitely notice. The clicking stops. They move closer to me. I look around me. I see other students walk by, most of them ignoring the situation. Some of them stand by and watch, hoping for a fight.

Destiny lets go of Roderick's hand, and walks towards me. Her face turns into a scowl, and she has this look in her eyes. Cold. Calculated. "You're such a freak. You think you'll ever fit in, well think again. No one wants your black ass here. Go back to Africa! Go back to your shit country! You belong there anyways. Living in those damn huts and using your spears."

I ball up my hands and start digging my nails into my palms. My frustration bubbles, close to tears. I take slow, deep breathes. I start to make my way to class, trying to go around them. Destiny pushes me down. Hard. I fall on my back, my backpack taking most of the fall. Destiny takes a long, hard look at me. A scowl is on her face. Wild eyes squinting. She flicks me off. There is this small look between Michelle and her, a nod.

She walks pass me, with Roderick in her arm and Michelle by her side, taking everyone else with her. All the onlooking students stop for a moment, not sure what to do. The bell rings, deciding for them. A tan girl with brownish, long hair is 20 feet away from me. She has a heart-shaped face; her eyes seem dark. She turns her head around, lost and confused, sees the other students walking away. She pauses and looks at me again. She walks away as well.

I thought she was going to at least come and help me up, but she's like the rest of them, bystanders. Destiny's words are still taunting me. Like those hurtful things she said was justified. I take a deep breath and get up.



I run into the bathroom; I feel the tears slowly descending on me. I close the first stall I see. The color red boxing me in. I cry in silence, but I hope someone is there, listening, waiting to ask if I am okay. Does anyone care? I don't want to be late to class, but I can't go in there looking like this. My tears cover half my face. Mucus runs out of my nose, ready to hit the floor. I am a complete and utter mess. At this point, I have no clue how late I am going to be. I wait until my tears and hiccups subside. I take some toilet paper and wipe my face, my nose. I get up and make my way to the mirror. I wipe around my brown eyes one final time. I make my way to class.

Art class. My second favorite class. Ms. Pride is a robust, dark lady. She has no hair, by choice; her head is shiny, like a pearl. She wears these colorful outfits every day. Today, she has on a bright, red suit. The thing about Ms. Pride, she is very nice unless you upset her. She makes it an obligation to sit in our assigned seats. No one can move, no matter what. Everyone has a partner, an assigned partner. Mine just happens to be Roderick. The classroom has four rows horizontally and diagonally, which brings the total class number to 16. My table is situated in the left side, facing the chalk board. The second table from the front.

"So, talk to your partner and finish this assignment," Ms. Pride finishes. I want to ask what the assignment is, but I don't want to look stupid. I'm already late. For once, I'm glad I'm not noticed in her class. I slowly walk towards my table. When I get close to my seat, I quicken my stride. I sit next to Roderick.

Roderick turns towards me and says with an attitude, "You gona go get them papers and crayon and shit?"

"What?" My voice cracks. I clear my throat.

He laughs. "We gotta draw each other. We need the stuff."

"Why can't you get it?" I raise my voice. Now that my sadness has subsided, I am more than angry. I am angry at Destiny and Michelle. Angry at stupid Roderick. Angry that no one asked me how I am doing when I walked in. Most of all, I am angry at myself for even existing.

He huffs and gets up. He gets the supplies and sits back down.

"You first" was all he says. It isn't a question. Just a simple stated fact.

I start to draw. He has stubby, bushy eyebrows. His eyes are big and brown. His nose, a sideways three and big puffy lips. Capturing all of it is a difficult task, but we are given 30 minutes to draw each other. I draw every detail the best I can, but I need to add color to bring him to life; there isn't enough time. As I draw, I hear my fellow classmates, laughing and talking about what they did during the weekend. I hear words like "movies" and "sleepovers." Words I envy. I look at Roderick again, knowing he probably did something fun over the weekend. Roderick barely wants to speak to me, let alone look at me.

I look around me. I see that girl again, the one that thought of helping me. Our eyes make contact, and I look away. I sigh. Even with him and everyone else around, I still feel alone. The walls start to cave in, and I am reminded of what I cannot have. Coming to America was the easiest part, being an American is the toughest part. They say this is the land of dreams, but my dreams are to have a decent, real friend. My dream is to not get picked on for being different. My dream is just to make it without giving up on myself.

"Wow. African can draw." His voice was just above a whisper, interrupting my thoughts.

I guess that's a compliment. I don't respond. Too afraid to say the wrong thing and for my voice to crack, again.

I wait for him to start drawing me, yet all he does is draw a stick figure. I internally laugh. "That isn't what we are supposed to do."

"Fuck that. I don't need this shit, especially from you." He puts his pencil down. It's kind of sad. He doesn't have a creative bone in his body.

He takes my drawing, admiring my skills perhaps. I think he will compliment me further. To my complete surprise, he tears my drawing in half. Right down the middle. My first instinct is to raise my hand and call Ms. Pride. I quickly drown out that idea. I am already a reclusive, dark-skinned girl with zero friends. It will make the situation worst. Instead, I bite my lips, take a deep breath. I wait and slap him right in the face. The events of the day transferring from my hand to his black face. The smack reverberates through the classroom.

Surprising myself. Shocking Roderick. Shocking the whole class. Complete silence envelopes the classroom.

“He tore my drawing, just because he wanted to. I was just defending myself.”

“Regardless of what he did, you had no right to use violence. I am disappointed in your actions. Violence might be how you handle things where you are from, but that isn’t the way here. You need to understand that. Call someone to pick you up, because you are suspended for two days.” That is Principal Martin.

Principal Martin is an older white man on the heavier side. He used to teach at this school, Bragg Middle School, but he eventually worked his way up to be a principal. He wears thick framed glasses and has deep blue eyes. His face is covered in a long white beard, with a mustache to match. Around his neck is always a bolo tie.

“What? Suspended? I slap someone once and I get suspended!” So many thoughts run through my head. I’m such a good student. I haven’t missed a single day of classes, and I have all A’s. I constantly get mistreated, but none of my offenders ever get punished. The one time I decide to do something about it, I get punished with a suspension.

“Ms. Anderson, it is not up for debate. This is school policy. I suggest you call your mother before this gets more severe. As for you, Roderick, you will be given ISS for the rest of the week. Maybe you’ll learn your mistake. Ms. Pride, be sure to separate these two students in your classroom.” His voice has complete authority.

“Yes, of course.” Ms. Pride obliges.

My mother picks me up an hour later. She has to leave work early, and I know she’s going to be upset. She doesn’t say anything to me when I enter her car; that isn’t a good sign.

The ride home is in complete silence. I look out the window, I watch the trees. I see the leaves dying and turning into colors of red, orange, and brown. I see a maple tree like it’s on fire, with the way the leaves are changing in color, moving in the wind. The breeze moves between the leaves, letting each leaf get a blissful moment before an unfortunate demise.

When we arrive home, I make my way to my room, hoping she isn’t going to investigate the matter further. Knowing in my bones that she is.

Knock. Knock.

She opens the door and sits right next to me. I am sitting on my bottom bed. It is a bunkbed my parents got me years ago. The deal was too great to pass up, they said. So now, I'm stuck with it for a few more years, but at least I have two beds.

"So, what happened today?" My mother begins.

I know she is disappointed, but maybe she will understand if I just tell her what happened. She needs to understand what I am going through, that I can't handle it anymore.

"This girl at school. Mom." I pause. "She calls me really bad names. Tells me to go back to Africa. Today, she even pushed me... I..." I start to cry. Overwhelmed with emotion. "She just tortures me... and... I have... no friends. I ask myself why I keep going to school. Why even try? Why am I even alive? I just want to die. I can't—"

My mother slaps me across the face. No warning. No holding back. A hard smack.

Angrily, she says, "I don't ever want you to say that again. I didn't keep you in my stomach for nine months for you to say that to me. These people are being mean, well suck it up. You speak two languages, and you're getting a free education. Who cares about those people?"

There is a long pause. She looks me in the face and wipes my tears. A moment of tender care. Maybe love. "You are not allowed to kill yourself. Don't even think about it. I didn't raise a sinner. I raised a good girl, so pull yourself together." She hugs me as if her words are supposed to encourage me. I hate my mother.

It is Thursday. I get ready for school. I look at myself in the mirror. Glazed, brown eyes stare back at me. I wipe them for the 100th time. My hair is cut short. My mother does not have time to braid my hair. She is a nurse. She isn't home most of the time. She's very focused on her career, trying to be a successful woman for her family back home. Perhaps this is another reason I'm starting to hate my mother.

Dressed, I make my way to the bus stop. I walk to the stop sign near my house. I live on a corner, the only person at this stop. There is a small convenience store cross the street. The road I stand on has a cracked sidewalk, with green life fighting for its way out. I get a sudden chill as the wind wakes up. I look down my road, Landing Road, and see the bus coming my way. It stops near the stop sign, and I walk inside. A

quick “hello” to the bus driver. I sit in the first seat close to the front. The bus moves along to pick up other students and make our way to Bragg Middle School.

I roam from class to class acting as if Monday hadn’t happened. I breeze my way through each class. Before art class, I expect another retaliation from Destiny. I wait to hear her smart comments. None come. In fact, I don’t see her or Michelle. I count my blessing. I look around me on the way to class, making sure there are no tricks. It feels as if something will happen. A change is coming.

The change arrives in art class. That girl is sitting in Roderick’s seat. I don’t see him, wondering where he is. I remember he is in suspension. I walk slowly to my seat. There are a few minutes left before class starts.

“Hey, I’m Gretta,” she introduces herself. She has an accent. Polish? Norwegian?

“Hey.” I say this very casually, not really looking at her. I gaze at my fingers, out of embarrassment and fear. I don’t want her to be another tormenter. I don’t want her to be that white person. I also keep thinking about how she looked at me on Monday and never helped me.

“I’m sorry.”

I sharply move my head and look at her. Really look at her. Her eyes are blue. A deep dark blue, like the sea. I see sincerity in her deep eyes, with pain and regret. I notice her complexion. Mixed perhaps. There are freckles on her nose, battling for space. Her face is stone-cold, nonthreatening. There isn’t a smirk or loathing on her face. Her apology feels genuine. She isn’t being sarcastic. She just apologizes.

She says again, while staring into my eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m new. I wasn’t sure what to do. Those things they said, they were awful. The way she treats you... I’m sorry.”

I internally smile. I smile for better days. New friends. I promise myself. “Thank you,” I whisper.



When I was given the opportunity to write a short story for my fiction writing class, I had a hard time deciding what to write. How could I write a story that was relevant and honest yet fictional? I grappled for some time, but I finally decided on one conclusive thing. I had to write about something I know, something I've experienced. That was how "America" was born. I needed something that wasn't just about me. I am a black woman, but I'm also a black woman from Ivory Coast; this country is located in West Africa, but it is often unknown by many. Something I am still learning to accept.

During my younger years in America, I wasn't immediately treated with open arms. I had a hard time finding my place. I didn't always have other Africans around me. I felt lost and often humiliated. It was also hard to connect with people that looked like me, when I didn't understand them. It became more apparent that colorism was just as bad as racism. It took me a long time to understand, but it has given me the opportunity to learn more about myself. I have learned to love myself. In moments when I thought all was lost, people of different color, race, ethnicity, and background have come along to show me something different. Not everyone can be put into a bubble. Belonging can mean different things to different people; it isn't always about who looks like you.

Although now I view these things differently, it wasn't the case from middle school to high school. Not only was I dealing with normal puberty/ teenage problems, I was dealing with the fact that I was a dark-skinned African girl. The people that I thought would welcome me, didn't. This story addresses that very experience and that of being African. I wasn't always accepted with open arms, maybe out of fear or maybe out of hatred, but it was something that happened. In order to grow as individuals, we will always need to address it. I didn't write this story for any intent on discrediting anyone that was open and helpful or downplaying the people that were cruel and hateful, whether Black or White. This is a story of change and hope. In many ways, it addresses common issues we will continue to face, unless we learn to be better humans. In the end, we all bleed red and nothing can change that.



Loneliness

Loneliness is brutal.

It attacks the brain and murders the human inside.

It sparks uncontrollable tears and involuntary reactions.

Loneliness is isolation and seclusion.

It's pain,

sorrow,

bleak and depression.

It's heart clenching and twisting 'til it resembles a ragged string.

It's scars and gashes tattooed on the arm.

It's looking out into the eyes of everyone you care for and seeing big, black holes fill their eye sockets.

It's the revelation that nothing you do will ever be enough in the eyes of those who matter.

It's clamping a pillow to your mouth to stop the sound waves of sobs from escaping.

It's lying every time someone insincerely asks how you're doing.

It's trying to piece together what is left of your spirit only to find that the puzzle pieces don't match.

It's giving up when it's crystal clear you've lost the fight.

Acceptance

If you were the tree
 I was the leaves
 Wishing to hold on
 Till the last possible moment.
 You kept me vital,
 Once you're gone I fall
 Down
 And internally disintegrate.

People pass by
 Pick me up
 Smile at me
 Not knowing that without you
 I am just another mask.

They don't realize till it's too late,
 When my exterior shows the hell within.
 I became a child's game.
 Crunch the dead leaves
 Rip them apart
 Sprinkle them on mud pies.

My life source still stands
 But without me.
 There are new leaves in your life now.
 Do they know they have the same fate?

I've been reduced to decomposed matter,
 As if I was never there.
 But you know.
 And I know.

Still,
 I will never trade the memories.

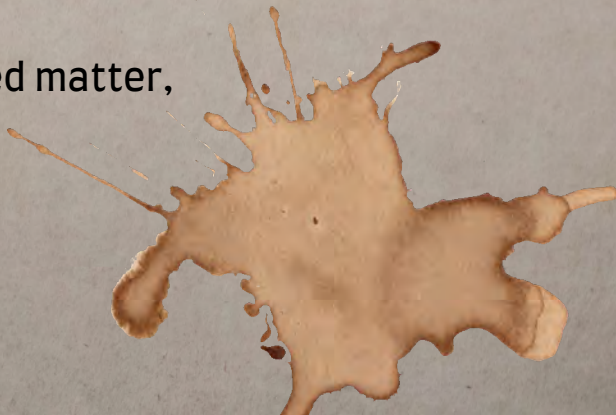
Everyday when you wave in the wind
 I will wave back.

Underground
 Suppressed
 Transforming into something new.
 Changing form.
 I am the flower on the other side of the lawn.

We live in the same vicinity
 Yet we don't communicate.
 What we had is over,
 Yet I cease to suffer.

I am a new creation,
 I am my own life source.
 Self-sufficient.

I look at you,
 Remembering all the good times and
 cherished moments,
 Finally content
 With floating away.



Dear Heart

I'm sorry that I've broken you.

I tried to piece you back together with the love and affection of countless guys,
but their natural charisma and fake smiles weren't enough.

I tried to use stronger glue; friends and family
but even they let me down and could not handle the responsibility of holding
something so fragile.

So I tried to put you back together myself,
but I lacked the confidence to do so.

I've failed myself numerous times, and now I've failed you too.

Will you forgive me?

I know you will never be the same,
but you are even better now.

You are marked with the fingerprints of everyone I've ever let in.

You are scarred with adventure and sunsets.

You aren't perfect but that's okay,
because perfect isn't for me.

You are shattered yet powerful.

With each piece we lose, we gain something stronger: hope, resilience, knowledge.

Heart, I'm sorry to have hurt you,

but I will never apologize for the lessons we've acquired over the years.

They make us an incredible team.

Love,

Me

These are a few of the poems in my collection that I am very proud of. I have been writing poetry since I was in the 4th grade and have loved it ever since. As I got into high school my poetry became less of a fun hobby and more as an outlet for my suppressed thoughts, feelings, and undercover emotions. Poetry became a form of therapy and it is a joy for me to be able to share these with others. My hope as a poet is to inspire and sometimes challenge my audience, to discuss and open the door to conversations that are deemed as taboo yet are relevant to people's lives, and to shed light on the darkness until it has become light itself. This is something that is near and dear to my heart, and I hope it becomes near and dear to the readers as well.

Exotic Particles

Silence. No time. No Mind. Empty, vast stretches of cold and dark. An eternity of unidentifiable matter, huddled near candle flames for warmth. Caught together, pulling apart, too much and not enough and only a drop in an ocean. Empty. Dead. Soon they'll lose sight of the other on the infinite horizon.

Now, there is rustling in a deep, unknown forest. There's something there, maybe. There must be. Has to be. But there is an eternity between and it's walking the wrong way. Can't be found, can't be touched. The silence is lonely, but it is too vast to matter. To find meaning in entropy is to find your way out of the forest. To find your way out of the forest is to look beyond. To look beyond is to be overtaken by the insignificance of it all.

A moth's wing catches fire, an expanding sun swallows solar systems whole. The current of the ocean drags you deeper, planets crack open and tumble into black holes. Indifference rules this universe.

In no meaning and no matter there is no use for a beyond. There is only what there is. Language is structure, is meaning, is meaningless outside of its context. A mayfly dies under an entomologist's boot. Humans wage wars of passion over texts younger than a pine tree. Galaxies swing like mobiles.

In the space between the space between one heartbeat and the next is a life, an eternity, and nothing at all. Above this life, a view of things, slower. A quark burns gloriously for a trillionth of a trillionth of a second. A hummingbird's heart thrums in time with the universe's expansion, and yet it has never taken the time to observe the stars. A universe of space and a universe of time, perception infinitely different and infinitely strange. Measurements don't equate, words aren't the parts of language and emotion is a puff of smoke in a hurricane. A life is a life is a life, spinning and burning gloriously

and

then

nothing.



I believe very firmly that, when looking for inspiration, the best place to find it is your everyday life. On a day I was struggling to find any inspiration whatsoever, I discovered the foundation of this piece in my astronomy class. After learning about something called exotic particles, taught to me as extremely small and incredibly short-lived particles, juxtaposed with the incomprehensibly long life of celestial bodies, I had enough inspiration to start writing. Originally, there were two pieces, one still called "Exotic Particles," while the other was called "Entropy." I was tempted to throw one out and focus on the other, but instead I was encouraged to combine them both into something entirely new. They have been revised so many times that I could not tell you where one ends and the other begins, but their origins are still clear to me. The revision process taught me the importance of keeping what you write, and not hesitating when you start tearing things apart in the editing process. This piece is short, yes, but that, at times, requires more editing than a longer piece. Every word matters, and every word counts. I cannot stand by you as you read and pick apart the meaning of every sentence, but I can say this: let it speak to you, follow whatever it tells you, and make your own meaning out of it. By reading it, to you, it becomes as much your interpretation as it is my writing.

Headbangers

Headbanger pt. 1

She **bangs** my head with her fists,
Her words,
Her fire-filled eyes.

She **slams** my head from the side-
I fall into the door jamb.

Cold metal and wood

Collide

With my six-year-old temple.
Mom leaves me in the closet,
A crumbled heap,
Stunned.

She returns,
Clasping my shuddering body
To her chest,
Uttering profuse apologies:
"I didn't mean it!"
"I didn't mean to be my dad".
She promises,
"Never again".
It was the first time,
But it wasn't the last time,
And it wasn't the worst time.

Seven years old,
Fear pounding my heart
As I frantically search
For a lost Sunday shoe.
I lean to reach under my bed.

As Mom silently enters the room
I am on all fours, worrying.

*So important to go to church,
To learn about God...
To be on time...
I've failed again...
Mom will...
WHAM!*

Mom **hits** my rear
With the shoe that she found,
Resting a foot
Out of my peripheral vision.
The fear explodes from my heart,
Coursing through all my veins.
I feel it in my fingertips
And shooting out into the air
Above my head.

I **pitch** forward-
My knees **jut** out-
My hands **thrown** out-
My browbone **hits** the metal bed frame,
Missing my eye
By an inch.
"Look harder next time!"
She **roars**.
"I did!" I cry.
She **tosses** the shoe at me.
I slip it on,
And, sobbing, leave to
Go to church,
Where everyone is happy,
Where Mom leads two choirs,
And where God isn't love.

Headbanger pt. 2

Dad **banged** my head too—
With hands,
With words,
With withdrawal.

Sitting at the kitchen table
On Saturday morning,
Eleven years old,
Making a smart-alecky
Comment
To my mom.

The air tenses.
The air whistles.
Dad **smacks** me upside
The head with his left hand,
With his wedding ring.

Without my consent,
Tears drip down
Into my pancakes and syrup.
My head aches
For fifteen minutes,
Then the family table
Returns to what it was before—
A Norman Rockwell painting,
While deep inside me,
In a place I can't hear,
Edvard Munch screams.

Headbanger pt. 3

By eighteen,
My head is calloused
From blows
Of word and fist
Beating my young brain.
Anxiety, anger, and sadness
Are my norm.

I forget what love is—
I forget what security feels like—
I forget that I am worth something.

I live my life in books,
Enmeshing myself with characters
And their lives
The same way I enmesh
With Mom.

It's a form of protection—
If I'm exactly like Mom,
She can't hurt me.
She can't hurt something
That is just like herself.

But enmeshment isn't enough.
Comments about my body,
About the quarter-inch
Wing of eyeliner
Extending
From the corners of my eyes,
Remind me that I am not her—
I am not allowed to be myself—
I am a non-being.

Headbanger pt. 4

In college,
An unknown force
Pervades my being.

I call it adrenaline—
Or efficiency—
Or perfectionism—

It **courses** through me
When I am teaching,
When I am walking,
When I am talking to
The few friends I have.

When I listen to music
In my car,
Or sing in church,
Or sing in the choir,
The unknown force beats
Within me, forming a cadence
That **constricts** my chest.

I feel it when I do my
homework,
When writing ten-page papers
At 2 am, fueled by
Mtn. Dew Black Cherry
Kickstart
And dark chocolate Raisinets.
Aiming towards perfection,
Needing to be right,
To be precise—

My headbanging in the car
To Skillet
Makes a satisfying **thump**
In my chest and head,
Echoing the **thumps**
Of fists
That made their marks
before.
I **smack** myself in the head
Whenever I have forgotten
Something,
Or made a small mistake.
It feels right- and deserved-
And the pain is what I need
To correct myself.
This unconscious
Undercurrent of
Unhealthy understanding
Undermines any other
Way of thinking
About life,
About myself,
About others—
I deserve to be corrected
In this way.

Years later,
When I force myself
To slow down and relax,
Fighting off voices
That say
"Nothing is wrong with you
You just need to try harder.
Meditation is dumb.

*You don't need medication.
You're so ungrateful.
Did that really happen?"*

I find two names for the
unseen force—
Anger and Anxiety.
My **headbanging** in the car
Echoes my forgotten inner
pain—
Pain which,
According to my
programming,
Is **right**
And **deserving** for me to
feel.
When I—
Slow...down...and...breathe..

I find peace.
I find that
This unconscious
Undercurrent of
Unhealthy understanding
Undermined any other
Way of thinking
About life,
About myself,
About others—
And that I didn't
Deserve to be corrected
In this way.

The Imp

I believe it was Poe who wrote about “The Imp of the Perverse,” a little horned demon looming over your shoulder. He encourages you to do the wrong thing at the moment it is most unnecessary, pushing an otherwise decent person to jump without thinking.

I must have been taking the B train, standing deep below the city’s bustling mess on a rather empty platform. From the far end of the station, I heard the echo of a bucket drummer, his syncopated beat ricocheting off the tile walls as it made its way to my ears. A woman and her congregation of plastic bags sat on a bench. A tailored man checked his watch, his leather briefcase clutched tightly in his opposite hand. My nose caught wind of the bag’s earthy, slightly sweet scent. When I inhaled again, it was gone, replaced by the dingy, scummy slosh of the trains’ wake. My nose scrunched at the subway’s unsatisfying substitute.

It was just us four on our side of the waiting room. Two others stood across on their way north. Like a birdwatcher, I quietly observed them through the thin forest of steel beams that held the world above our heads.

What if it collapsed?

I looked up to the ceiling, or rather the ground, in response to the question. Before my mind could wander much farther, I shook my head, throwing the thought onto the tracks. My eyes followed.

A filth-camouflaged rat scurried across the rails, its tail sweeping as its claws clinked against the metal. Its beady eyes glanced up at me as it sat down. I stared back. The wind picked up. I heard the man nearby adjust his case, readying himself to board. The rat wouldn’t move.

You could be down there, too, you know. Could save the rat. Put yourself in its place.

I watched as my body responded to the proposition, my eyes hanging back as my legs stretched forward. I crossed the yellow line and jumped into the ditch. The train’s glowing eyes appeared in the recesses of the cave as the wind pulled my hair into a fervent dance. The rails shook the rat from its perch, and it disappeared into a nearby pipe. I was left alone, the silver bullet flying closer. Just as I had braced myself for the impact, I was back on the platform, gently knocked sideways from the gust of the passing cars, completely safe and unharmed.

I boarded the train behind the tailored man, held onto the first pole, and turned to watch the doors clamp shut. Just as they did, I saw The Imp sitting where I had been standing. He smiled a sickly smile.

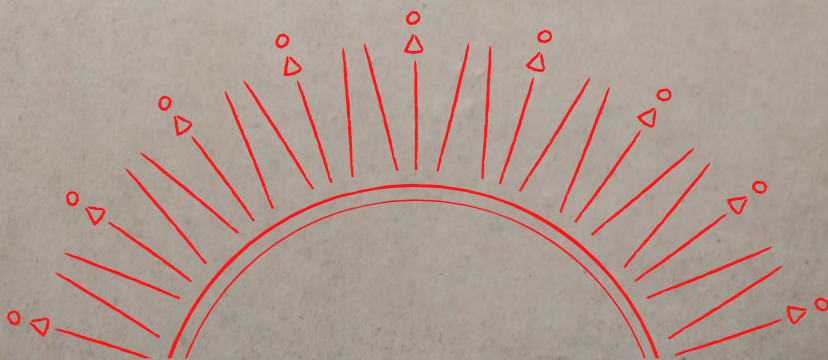
I only said 'could.'



One of my favorite places I've ever been to is New York City, this story's setting. My idea for "The Imp" came to me on one of my latest trips to the city as I stood on a subway platform after a long day, reeling with exhaustion from exploring the city. When you're tired, filled to the brim with a day's experience, your mind begins to wander. Edgar Allan Poe's description of The Imp concept has always intrigued me, and it represents a dark recess of the human mind that we have all inadvertently wandered into at some point. The Imp comes to you and plays with the terrifying possibilities of "what if" when you are most unaware. He sneaks up behind you and whispers crazy ideas into your ear that morally and ethically make no sense, and in the next breath, you scold yourself for even entertaining the thought. It's a mysterious sensation that I wanted to turn into an experience on the page. "The Imp" is still a mysterious piece to me, even though I wrote it myself. I feel like it has this air of its own; its narrator exists in that mind space between being present and in a subconscious stupor, and with that, the reader becomes mixed up in this world where they question what is real and what is not. I tried to make this piece read like a tangible daydream, a wandering of the mind that felt familiar to the senses. The first half of the story is all about surroundings. The narrator grounds the reader by identifying everyone around her and the details of their appearances, their smells, their sounds. Appealing to the senses, I've found, creates a more dynamic experience for a reader because they are able to identify with those experiences. While some readers of "The Imp" may have never been on a subway platform, they are more likely to recognize the smell of leather, the crackle of grocery bags, the sound of whistling wind. By creating a story world around these senses, the reader finds themselves immersed and on the edge of their seat, waiting for what is next. From there, the story follows the narrator's out of body experience and takes the reader right along, step by daunting step, immersing the reader and keeping them there. Tangibility equals immediacy, which equals curiosity and a very exciting read.

Full Tang

The sun-up, sun-down
Evenings with their familiar sparkle
Mornings, rise to rejoin the warmth
The hot course of the day, sweltering
One, two swings of the hammer
Cherry red, so very sharp
Day after day, sun-up to sun-down
Rise to the warmth, settle under the sparkle
One, two swings of the hammer
Cherry red, so very sharp
So many strewn aside, broken by the pressure
Shattered by the one-two, fragments cherry red
This one embraces the hammer
Stronger with each strike
Cherry red giving it life
Engraved with stars stolen directly from the sky
They were never at home above anyway
No escape when the warmth returns
The sun rising to the warmth of that cherry red
To the grindstone, sharpen
Never question a cut
To the cloth, polish
Shine as bright as can be
Reflect the light of the stars right back at the sky
Give the evenings a sparkle of your own
All the while retaining that razor edge, the strength of full tang
Tempered steel, to be handled with care or not at all



I Try

I do not forget cold.

Cold. Danger. Loud. Sometimes bright in dark. Howl. Danger. Alone.

Sometimes, no alone. Sometimes, warm. Sometimes, happy. But sometimes pain. Warm pain, happy pain. Alone, always pain. Danger, pain, alone.

Feel heavy, slower. Slower after much pain. More food, more rest. More danger. Must fast, please. Afraid.

Pain from inside, pain from warm. Must hide, rest. Stay. Until pain go away, stay. Feel so full, so slow. Danger if stay, but must stay. Stay.

Through pain, warm new. Alive. Pain no more. Wiggle, wag. Fresh new. One, two, three, four, five. Dac, Sa, Mor, Aoo, Ke. Wiggle, wet. I clean, I protect. No more alone, never alone. Mine.

Grow five. I teach, I protect, danger hide, food hunt. Happy. Aoo, Mor look like one I forget. He bring sharp pain, slow, warm, life. No more hate for him. Grow five, need more food. Must hunt near danger, loud, bright in dark. Sometimes howls. Danger.

New danger, but no howl. Sharp tooth, claw. Different danger. I must protect five. I claw, tooth, attack danger, but Sa too weak. Hot red, pain, stop. Hot red on danger tooth and claw. I, five, run across danger stone to dark hide, run away from danger sharp. I fast, I escape, but some slow. Aoo, Dac, crunch when meet bright in dark. Danger sharp afraid of bright, run away. I, Ke, Mor, alive. But pain inside. I cannot protect. Pain.

Stay near danger big. No howl, sometimes loud. Bright in dark, but no move? Danger, but give food. Run if close, but danger big not hunt. Rest, return, danger big give food. Ke, Mor do not afraid. Happy? I teach pain, protect. Danger big, danger, teach Ke, Mor. But must food, more cold soon.

Food different, under cage. Trap? Ke, Mor do not afraid, take food. I hide, do not food. Ke, Mor snap, trap. I anger, why Ke, Mor allow danger, trap? But now danger big, take trap, take Ke, Mor. I cannot protect. I watch danger big escape with trap. Warm new, all gone. I cannot protect. Alone.

Still food? More cold, more cold, but still food. Protect? No, cannot. Trap. Danger. Pain. Must alive. Sometimes no food, but must try. Hide, close, food? No, rest. Hide.

Empty pain inside, must food. Food in trap? But why? Can food, escape? Must try, must food. Small, small? Too big I, snap, trap. Afraid. Must alive. Danger big take trap. Afraid. Must alive. Must alive.

Warm. Loud. Afraid. Danger big, one, two, three, four. Take I to cold, loud move, cannot escape, take I to warm. Cannot hide. Many new danger big, cannot count. Loud. Can smell strange, more like I. Hiss, claw danger big. Sharp in leg, warm rest. I cannot protect. Warm.

Pain inside, but warm. No many danger, to danger big four nest. Food, warm. Hide? Escape? Danger big give food, I hide. Rest, food, hide. Pain escape, no pain. Rest, food, hide. Danger big four give food, warm. I nest? Must alive. Nest.

Many rest, still food, still warm. Danger big four nest, I nest. Still danger? No claw, no tooth I. Near danger big four, no pain. Sometimes loud. Sometimes afraid. But warm. New I.

Trust?

I try.



Illustration by Sophia Maas

Headlines

A pale note rises, its murmur fed by attention
 The crier, respectful in volume, finds me as always
 Eager
 Ushering headlines as I read, section to section
 Stories of hospitals, birthdays, family, hardship,
 -I'm squinting
 Tea houses and snowfall, wood smoke in salted ocean air,
 -I follow the meter and the life it brings
 The pain of first and joy of final, the unpredictable quantity of time against contact,
 language lost and learned,
 -I am rapt
 Cajun spices, saffron threads, impossibly intricate French pastries,
 Horoscopes and syndicated funnies,
 The classifieds,
 Op-eds.
 The pale note changes direction, its murmur fed by new attention
 The crier, respectful in volume, leaves me for another
 Eager
 She stirs

"Full Tang" and "Headlines" were written for the same person several years apart, each made around Christmas - the first after we barely started dating and the second after we had been married for a year. In "Full Tang", I was so taken by her life's story and all the hardships she endured, tempered by circumstance and situation, that I wanted to offer a humble assortment of words reflective of my admiration for her determination and strength. "Headlines" was written in a quiet hotel room in the stillness of early morning; I wanted to offer a small survey of images and objects that we had shared in the years prior, things that could be identified as special cornerstones of our memories together. She woke up as I was finishing my writing.

"I Try" was written as an imagined history of a feral mother cat named Momma who first introduced herself with two tiny kittens on our back porch. Since we had indoor cats, we would often be visited by outdoor cats tempted by the smell of cat food in cans left in our recycling bins. Momma's kittens were initially very cautious of us, but after several weeks had no problem with being close to us for food or petting - Momma was unfortunately very untrusting of us and wouldn't come near. We first took in Momma's two kittens, who we temporarily fostered and then rehomed with some of our best friends. We were able to catch Momma several weeks after that, initially intending on fostering her to rehome through a rescue service, but soon realizing that she was still too feral to interact with people and would not have a good life elsewhere. She has lived with us for the past three years and, although still nervous around other people, has discovered her own love of petting and electric blanket napping.

Old Things

I am in front of a building worn with age.
A factory, a school?
Time has eroded the meaning with her grace.

The door creaks, the inside has been gutted out;
Torn floorboards send up dust
That coats the interior densely throughout.

Yet brush off the dust— Look! The hearth, gently carved,
Remains in tact by mercy.
In spite of neglect, her well-built heart preserved

Though it has long lacked an attendant or flame.
The box of matches
In my pocket is soaked; I toss them down without restraint.

The concepts for my poetry often come to me in flashes. Sometimes they're sparked by an occurrence or an interaction with someone, other times they seem to really come out of nowhere. It can be just the idea, or in some instances a couple of lines. With either, I jot them down, refine, and flesh them out. In this instance, the imagery of the poem's setting came to mind as a way to explore concepts of time, memory, and change. I then worked to delve into the image and flesh it out more until it feels satisfactorily developed. The speaker tossing down the wet matches at the end reflects when one must accept things they cannot change and has to let go and move on.

I tend to go through periods where certain styles and structures appeal to me over others; at the time of writing this poem, I was quite fascinated by tercets.

The Future of English Class

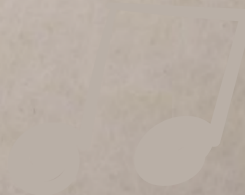
The ringing of the school bell filled the empty halls. In a classroom, the students were chatting among themselves while waiting for class to begin. The year was 2420. Mrs. Adams, the English teacher, walked into the classroom. She was clearly in a rush because of the funky way she was holding on to her belongings. A few papers had fallen out of her bag, but they were met with a swift snag made by her hand.

“Sorry class, it’s been a Tuesday for me,” said Mrs. Adams. “Did everyone get a chance to read the chapters I assigned for last night?” she continued. The class got quiet. “Anyone?” the discouraged Mrs. Adams asked. The class remained silent. The students just exchanged glances with each other. “Okay,” said Mrs. Adams with a sigh, “Looks like we will be reading it in class.” Mrs. Adams turned to her desk as a disgruntled groan came from the back of the classroom. Quick to realize which student it came from, Mrs. Adams called out, “Thanks for volunteering, Jarvis!”

The students pulled out their books titled *Lessons from The Owl*. It was a collection of Drake’s works that Mrs. Adams wanted to go over. Mrs. Adams went on, “Drake, the philosopher, commonly used words with simple meanings to paint a much broader picture. For example, remember what we discussed in yesterday’s lesson? We talked about Drake’s use of symbolism in his work ‘Marvin’s Room’ when he wrote, ‘I’m addicted to naked pictures.’ But he actually meant he was yearning for people to expose themselves and be true, right? Jarvis, now, will you read an excerpt from ‘Change Locations’? Drake wrote this piece with his friend Sir Future.” Jarvis nervously flipped through the book to find the correct page. He reached the story, gathered himself, and got up to go to the front of the class.

Jarvis cleared his throat and read out loud, “Smashing all the models, now we hit the waitresses. When you gettin’ a lot of money, you can’t ever save—” a betrayal from his voice sent it two octaves higher. His ears burned red as they filled with snickers from the other students, he continued, “Ahem, you can’t ever save it. But tonight, me and my friends got money to spend. Me and my friends, we got money to spend.” The class sat there with a blank look on all of their faces. Mrs. Adams applauded and said, “Great, Jarvis. Now, class, what do you think Drake and Sir Future meant by this?”

Do you remember in high school when your English teacher told you F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote that Jay Gatsby's curtains were blue because he was sad? It could never be because that rich man just wanted some blue curtains. No, there's no way that could be it. It was because he was sad and wanted to express himself with his curtains. So next time you're worried about your friend's well-being just see how their curtains are looking that day. I don't even remember if that's part of The Great Gatsby, but you know what I mean. I took that idea and put it in the future. The scholars of tomorrow will find lyrics where they say they spend a lot of money on women and say, "The philosopher made these comments to prove a point about how expensive healthcare was at this time," when in reality we know they mean something else. It'll just be our little secret from the future.



Painted Faces

We paint faces and pray they'll stick.
 You painted half your face and I got the other.
 Two different colors and different perspectives
 Always left me to expect the latter.

I thought you were in a mental drown, but no.
 But you wanted me to jump in the water anyway.
 And I did.
 A manipulated effort I never saw in the day,

As long as I could hold your head up,
 You gave me the reason to be above water.
 But you let water fill my nose for nothing.
 A struggle that could've been easier.

I had no reason to lay awake at night
 And shake throughout the day,
 But I did.
 I loved you more than you could play.

It long became the strike three
 I didn't know was hitting me.
 Of all the things you could've said or done,
 You watched my panic start circling.

I only let myself see one side of the moon.
 Looking for the dark no one else sought,
 But I did.
 What I saw wasn't real though.

We spent months pushing against each other.
 It happened to come and go in waves,
 But in the end, I know you know
 That we held hands in all that rage.

I look at you now and I still believe
 In how hard I'd still fight for you.
 And, finally, it took you long enough
 To reciprocate it, too.

In spite of everything we could regret,
 I don't wish to have left you in the water.
 "Your mind is a powerful thing"
 As we lay here to admire the rubble.

Writing poetry for me is like writing entries in a diary--completely personal. I never sit down and tell myself what I want to write and how to write it; it just happens. When I wrote this particular poem, I was at a point in my life where it felt like I had just come out of a storm and all the chaos in a certain situation finally made sense. I felt as though I could finally put it to rest. We all have not-so-great memories that we wish could be different. The inspiration for this poem was the appreciation I had recently gained from not-so-great memories. I realized that if they had never happened, I wouldn't have learned the lessons that I did. They taught me that there is always some good in the situations we all deem as bad. From these experiences, I now lack the desire to regret the past or wish I had done things differently. I can simply admire the rubble.



