

The background of the entire image is a complex marbled paper pattern. It features a mix of dark charcoal, black, and grey tones, interspersed with lighter, off-white, and beige streaks and veins. The overall effect is organic and textured, resembling natural stone or aged parchment.

2022

**BLACK
&
WHITE**

VOLUME 12

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**BLACK & WHITE LITERARY
JOURNAL FOR THE ARTS**

FOREWARD

Thank you everybody for reading this year's issue of Black & White!

It's easy to look at a finished product and gloss over all the effort required to get it to where it is. Doing that with this issue, however, is all but impossible. Not everything we did was successful. As a matter of fact, for every little thing we did right, there was a mistake right around the corner. And yet here we are at the end of another year, somehow surviving the many sleepless nights between classes and work, to bring you another collection of writing and art from our lovely classmates. Yeah, we don't know how we got here either.

This year is also just as much of a milestone for us editors as it is for creative publication on campus, since it marks sixty years of literary magazines in some form at Western Connecticut State University. We thought that Black & White was the first literary magazine in the history of our school, but that was actually the now defunct Cornatus. How funny is it that, much like that first edition of Cornatus, this edition was made exclusively by women. If literary publication at this university was kickstarted by women, then that torch will stay lit through the efforts of women.

Together, we move forward relentlessly not just as writers or artists, but as people who love creative art. This publication can only exist as it does because of that inherent desire in us all to create. With that being said, we cannot thank you enough, whether you're a reader or a contributor, for indulging in us if only for a moment and celebrating art with us. Your support is the foundation for us to do what we love most. And so, this is our treat to you.

ABOUT THE NAME

In art, there is no black and white, only shades of grey. It is putting ink to paper and handling something more important—handling ideas, emotions, experiences. This is and will always be a safe place for students by students to comfortably express their creativity in all forms—written or illustrated.

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Foreward, About the Name, and Join B&W written by Jenna Visca

JOIN BLACK & WHITE

Join our club or die. Kidding, of course ...

You don't need to join to submit anything; this literary journal is open to any undergraduates at WCSU who want to submit their work. Pieces can range from written word (poetry, short stories, flash fiction, and screenplays) to visual arts (illustration, paintings, and photography); the only limit is your imagination.

If you're interested in getting published, send your creative work to pubs@wcsu.edu.

Other than that, Black & White is always looking for more members to join!

Anyone who is interested in editing written and artistic submissions is more than welcome. You don't have to attend every meeting, but so long as you involve yourself and communicate with the other members, you will always have a home here.

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Some of the poems featured here in *Black & White* are also featured in the Breathing Space BroadSides release. Please visit echowcsu.com.



FALLEN ANGEL

Amy Cocoa



OCCUPY CITY HALL, NYC, 2020

Quinn Murphy





OCCUPY CITY HALL, NYC, 2020

Quinn Murphy



THE BIRCH TREE'S LAND

Kait Waterman

AMERICANA

Samantha Cross

It is the responsibility
Of the American Teenager
To fall irresponsibly in love.

THE UNCOMFORTABLE LIAR

Campbell Mitchell

Like most students, I lie to my mom, dad, and professors

“I never got the email.”

(I got it, read it, and chose to ignore it)

Unlike others, perhaps, I lie to politicians and on television

“This is a bold measure that will transform lives.”

(It is the bare minimum and avoids solving the problem)

I lie to children

“This won’t hurt. Everything will be okay.”

(It will hurt, and your generation will have to clean up the failures of mine)

And I lie to parents

“We will change the laws to ensure this never happens again.”

(Your son’s death-agony was a feature, not a bug, of our system)

The more I lie, the more praise and the more results I achieve

“I am a committed activist for meaningful policy change.”

(My political cynicism would give Machiavelli pause)

Sometimes when I let my guard down I am forced to wonder

“I believe that honesty as a virtue is the bedrock of a functional society.”

(The machinery of our civilization is lubricated by lies)

VAGABONDS

Jenna Visca

The answer to where we'll go hung in the air like the cool summer breeze. Wandering through New York City, I clung onto the sleeve of my boyfriend's vintage tee just to keep up. We tread behind our two friends meekly holding up their phones, with Google as our guide through the concrete jungle. The blanket of the night sky wrapped around us, the store lights that dotted the distance began to dim, and we still hadn't found an answer. I wanted the day to end, and yet I didn't.

Our legs ached in pain
beneath this labyrinth of lights—
we were lost together.

MENTALITIES

Isabelle Lubguban

The human mind is impressive. It serves as the foundation of all that someone is. Hopes, dreams, and values call it home. Thoughts are always circulating inside it in perpetual motion.

Aside from the mind, there is reality, and from these two things, balance is achieved. If that line is crossed, there could be serious consequences for an individual's way of life.

Sometimes, due to unfortunate circumstances, people have trouble processing what they went through. They deny the fact that the event ever happened and cannot accept their present. The only way to deal with pain like that is to go through it, learn something, and forget about it. Otherwise, the individual will end up lost in their own head, trying to find ways to change the past that should have been left behind a while ago.

Just like the brain can be reprogrammed to think the worst, it can also be reshaped to think the best. Thoughts can be strong, but in the end, they are only wanderers passing through the mind.

The question is are they staying, or are they going?

RINSE AND REPEAT

Meaghan Canavan

You will wake up at 7am, blearily silence your alarm, and stumble to the bathroom to shower. You'll give yourself ten minutes to lather but take fifteen, dripping water on the wooden floors as you rush to compensate for your tardiness. The same pants you've worn the past three days will find themselves on your body once more; a shirt you haven't worn since sophomore year of high school—why does it still fit you—accompanies them. The shoes you got for Christmas last year and have worn every day since will slip on your socked feet and kick the corner of your bed frame as you gather your bag. You will stumble but not fall. There will be no time to eat, and you will leave the house feeling nauseous. The nausea stays for two weeks, uninvited.

You do not remember to preheat your car and will find yourself scrambling to scrape frost off your windshield. You will spend an awkward five minutes sitting inside it, waiting for the air to warm so that you can see out your windows. Speeding has never really been your thing, but going 80 in a 65 has never looked more appealing. Your campus is forty-five minutes away, assuming that there will be no traffic. An hour is just enough time to get there—barely. You are going to fall asleep in class and wake up with an imprint of your glasses on your face. You'll leave the room with no comprehension of what the lesson was about. You've just slept through it, after all. The notebook page you've carefully numbered with the date will remain painfully empty. There will be nothing to write down because you will not be able to focus in any of your classes that day; you'll notice it seems you haven't been able to focus on anything lately. You leave campus without learning a single thing.

You almost throw up on the way home. Nausea will sit heavily in

your gut and you will briefly consider pulling over on the side of the highway. The thought goes away half a water bottle later, and you carry on.

I'm so tired, I just want to sleep, you think. The thought will be brushed away by the reminder of work in thirty minutes. You'll go to work, plaster on your customer service smile, and pretend to care about the old woman who talks about the carpet she's buying for her newly renovated living room, or the balding father who describes in vivid detail his plans for his "man cave," or the kid who slobbers all over the surface of your register as they babble to you about how they fell off the slide at the park today. You will not have to pretend to care about the pit bull with the pink collar that gently boops the back of your leg with her nose, and you will not resist the urge to bend down and scratch her behind the ear. It will be the only highlight of your day, but something good is better than nothing good.

You cry in the breakroom during your ten minute break then go back out and pretend nothing happened. Your shift ends and then you will go home.

Your first meal of the day will be two waffles you found in the back of your freezer, and you heat up a frozen hash brown on the side as a treat. You won't have an appetite as you eat, but you know from previous experience that going an entire day without eating is a bad idea, so you force it down anyway. You spend only two minutes thinking you're going to be sick: an improvement from the night before, when you spent ten minutes keeled over in the bathroom thinking that your dinner was about to come right back up. Self-care or something, right?

You'll have just enough time before you fall asleep—lights still on, wearing the jeans you've had on all day, phone in hand, to set your alarm for 7am the next morning.

Then you'll wake up at 7am, blearily silence your alarm, and stum-

ble to the bathroom to shower. You'll give yourself ten minutes to lather but take fifteen, dripping water on the wooden floors as you rush to compensate for your tardiness. The same pants you've worn the past four days will find themselves on your body once more; the shirt that you wore to bed last night accompanies the bottoms. The shoes you got for Christmas last year and have worn every day since will slip on your socked feet and you'll double-knot the laces, just in case. There will be no time to eat, and you will leave the house feeling nauseous, again.

You'll scrape ice off your car once again and spend the five minutes of awkward silence on your phone. You speed to class, you fall asleep in class. Your notes will remain empty and you will not pull over on the side of the road. You will go to work and you'll pretend to care and you won't cry in the breakroom today, but the pit bull does not come to visit, so there will be no highlight of your day. You will eat your dinner, and not throw up. You will pass out on your phone once more, and then wake up at 7am to silence your alarm, shower, not eat, go to class, sleep in class, go to work, eat, go to sleep, and wake up at 7am, only for your day to rinse and repeat and rinse and repeat and rinse and repeat.

WORK THERAPY

Kait Waterman

“Hello!” Despite popular belief, I do not start every interaction with “Howdy.”

“Hello,” says the unenthused customer.

“How are you?” I proceed with my usual greeting; it’s my social thermometer. With these two lines, it’s normally easy to see how an interaction will end up. Sometimes, there are still surprises.

“I’m good, and you?” A typical response, no character and formal. Sometimes you get a joke. One time a woman told me, “Sad,” and, when I asked her why, it was because we didn’t have the cat fabric she wanted. I tried to find the positive, told her that at least we had the Fiskars rotary blade she needed. “I’m going to go home and use it to kill myself because I’m so sad,” was her response. I think she was kidding.

“I’m doing alright,” is my script back to her. Now, it’s improv time. A short transaction means no more words will be exchanged until we say our appropriate goodbyes. Longer transactions get padded with conversation on the weather or what project they’re working on. Some product questions are also welcome; some – not all.

“Could you tell me how much this rings up as?” Red flag. It’s fine when it’s an item or two, but I look at the woman’s full cart in front of me.

“Fourteen ninety-nine,” I say before placing her string of glass skull beads back down. They make an ugly sound when they hit my counter, like when you drop a large marble in a silent room. It rings.

“For these?” She sounds offended. “No, no, far too much. Put them back for me.” It isn’t a question.

“What about this?” she places a small, stuffed ornament of a dog

on the counter.

“Seven forty-nine.”

“For this?”

I take a slow breath.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Well, the tag says six ninety-nine.”

“Yes ma’am, see, we, like many stores have had supply chain issues, so many items have had their prices fluctuate. We have signs all around the store.”

“This is false advertising! This is illegal is what it is!” Her voice is growing, filling the universe between her and my register.

“It’s seven forty-nine with the forty percent off sale,” is all I say.

“Well, I want the price adjusted.”

“I can’t do that ma’am.”

“Well, I’ll just call the cops then. This is illegal, you can’t do this to customers.”

Great. I breathe.

“That’s within your rights. Is there anything else I could help you with today?”

“No, I’m not done with you.” Her voice rings through the now silent queue like her glass beads on my countertop. “I know you can price adjust this; it’s been done for me at this store before.”

“The issue with me doing that is—”

“I don’t care what the issue is, fix the price or I’ll call the cops.”

I breathe. No, fuck it, I’m done breathing. I put a strong smile on.

“Ma’am, I can price adjust this for you no problem, but doing so will take the forty percent sale off the item. So, if I were you, I’d bite the bullet on the 50 cents and buy the fucking dog.”

YOUNG TO OLD

Austin Moran

I wish to grow old.
to follow the wind
and be the river.

To meet those that live
and join those that did.

I want to be young.
so, the songs can be sung.
and my eyes never undone.

I need to be seen.
for it, all must mean.

BECOMING A JUNKIE

Kanalla Hay

Sometimes

Getting lost is so easy

Close your eyes and keep going

Without knowing

Turn your brain off

Smell nothing

Taste nothing

See nothing

Hear nothing

Feel nothing

Be

nothing

Food is nothing more than ash on the tongue

The world hidden behind the dark black of your closed eyelids

Olfactory sense completely offline

Unable to even smell the blood dripping from your nostrils

Surrounded by silence so profound

Deaf in a way you never could even have imagined

Numb to it all

There is nothing

Until suddenly there is everything again

And reality comes pouring in as though you had never been lost in the first place

But you were

And your body remembers
And your mind remembers
And your spirit remembers
And you try to hold on to the feeling for as long as you possibly can
Because why be a functioning member of society?
Why exist at all?
Why not just stay stuck in limbo until the end of time—
The end of everything
No one will have time to miss you
And you certainly won't miss yourself
So you do everything you can to get the feeling,
Or lack thereof,
Back

Until you exist primarily within limbo
And there is nothing more to life than limbo
And you were never born
And you will never die
But if you do that's fine, too
Because it's just a side effect...
Soon the feeling lasts longer
And longer
And longer
But it takes more
And more
And more
Each time
And you're stuck in this seemingly endless loop
But you would never care enough to think of anything beyond
Because there is nothing else
There is only this
More

And more
And More

...

I never want to feel a thing again.

INSIDE, TOO DEEP

Meaghan Canavan

I want dreams weaved of stringed lights and silver lines,
the flood of intoxication blurring my vision.

I want my head to be full of cotton--
for my ears to be muffled by layered hands and my thoughts a mere
murmur.

I want to be so deeply enveloped by confusion that I am forced to ac-
cept the world.

Give me all that makes no sense; let me mold it like soft clay in my
hands,

twisting it into paths where gravity has no place.

Let me become a beacon for all that overwhelms.

I want to become a spectator of my own body,
my head loaded with so much and yet so little--
enough to force my own thoughts out of my head.

I am tired of the tightness of my own skin,
the weight of my bones, and the whirring of my own brain.

I just want- I just want- *I just want-*

Silence.

SUNSET AND THE CHILD STAR

Amanda Badillo

Swarming hordes of gnats clustered together for every few feet I took. Even with my mouth gripped tightly shut and the waving of my hands through each insect, one managed to make its way onto my tongue. Such is life. The tall grass tickled my ankles as it slipped through the gap of my pant leg and sneaker. So, this is what it feels like to be back on the bottom. Once America's favorite child-star, now bumped down to nothing more than a cameo actor. This is what life has come to—wandering aimlessly down a dirt road in the middle of God knows where.

The pile of pebbles beneath each footstep began to eat away at the already tethered sole of my shoes. In a fit of rage, I ripped off my sneakers and chucked them down the dirt road. Running over to the rotting, wooden split-rail fence, I hugged my arms around the splintered cylinder shouting, "Fuck!" out into the sky that was laced with nothing but blackened clouds. Staring out into the distance, I took a deep breath and listened to the soft rustling of forest green leaves behind me. The grass swayed next to my feet as I adjusted my body, hopping through the split-rail and sitting in between the fence posts. I rested my head against the wood and closed my eyes for only a moment. The burning sun soon crept through the treacherous sea of black clouds. Strong hues of orange with specks of gold caressed my eyes as I wiped my nose. The heat overcame my body, kissing my arms and face with a gentle warmth. I nodded delicately as I sat there thinking about my shoes.

ESSENTIAL WORKER

Campbell Mitchell

Whatever the woman at the coffee stand is getting paid, she deserves more. I've been here for a month, and seen enough to know that they are the lynchpin of the entire children's hospital, and by extension the entire city. Possibly the entire country and continent, given how large we are compared to the regional hospitals. The patients don't drink coffee, on account of being children and also hospital patients, but enough of the grownups do that she is indispensable.

Not all of the doctors partake, but for those who do, it is more than a routine. They could get their hot bean juice downstairs at the cafeteria for a third of the price, but prefer to spend their hard earned time buying from the little stand. They pay for the empty smile and idle chatter of the woman working the stand. Meaningless muttering about the weather and traffic and coffee. A couple moments of banality between crises.

Some of the parents partake. Those who are too addicted to the bean juice in their daily lives, but haven't sunk so low in their addiction to buy from the cafeteria. Some are still wearing suits from their day jobs, and are going through the motions to pretend that this is just another coffee run. A few are still on business calls on their little earpieces, tuning out the febrile cries of children, and the relentless beep of the monitors.

Other parents wear pallid faces and long stares. They do not speak. They cannot speak because they are made of glass— a loud noise and they will shatter. They need therapy, but they get coffee. They pay for the privilege of getting swindled; for the pretense that this bean juice that was premade and rewarmed exactly like the cafeteria is better. Every luxury in a place like this is marginal, but any luxury is an ex-

cuse for comfort.

There is nothing better on hospital TV, so I watch the coffee stand for hours from my wheelchair. The woman who works the stand is a mirror of her customers, friendly or businesslike or just going through the motions. She is an actress of unparalleled range, becoming a medical colleague, a friend, a vendor, an object, and a chaplain as the role demands. She is severely underpaid. Her bean juice keeps the hospital awake during the day, and her act allows it to sleep at night.

THE MUSICIAN OR THE WRITER?

Tristan Kawatsuma

So, the purpose of this is to get accounts of Nic when he was younger? Okay, I'll bite. Don't think you'll get much, though, since I only knew the guy from college. I never saw him before Western Connecticut State University, and I lost contact with him after I moved to Japan. The best you'll hear from me will be when DiDomizio ended his education in music and moved on to writing.

I may as well start by recounting when I first met DiDomizio. We were both first-year students and just happened to be in the same class in the first quarter. I was assigned to work with him on a project and figured I may as well show some type of connection to kill some time. I didn't take much notice when he told me that he wanted to be a songwriter. Everybody chooses their own career in life, like me for instance. I wanted to be an animator when I was young and I was able to achieve that dream in Japan-Oh, sorry for getting off topic. Now where was I?

After that class, I had few moments with DiDomizio throughout the rest of my time at WCSU. I do remember hearing once that he broke up with his boyfriend, but that type of stuff was normal back then. In fact, it's still normal to hear such things nowadays as well. I only had one more significant interaction with DiDomizio a month before we graduated.

DiDomizio came into another class we shared together like any other day. After he sat down next to me though, I noticed he was frowning. Sensing that something was up, I decided to ask him if anything was wrong.

"No, nothing at all. It's just that...well...I'm starting to wonder if being a songwriter is right for me."

“How so?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe I’ll figure it out when I’m in NYU.”

“You’re going to another college?”

“I figure I need to study for business.”

Afterwards I grew distant from him once more. As I was taking a job as an intern at the Japanese Consulate General in New York City to get a first-hand experience at applying to move to Japan, I didn’t think about DiDomizio for a while. He was always invested in the music industry the few times I had seen him, and it never crossed my mind that he would leave it. So, when I ran into DiDomizio right outside the consulate on my way to celebrate my success at getting a work visa for Japan, I was surprised to find out he had left NYU.

“You did what? What about your goal to become a songwriter?”

“It just won’t work out. That’s what’s running through my mind now. I figure I’ll try to become a writer for some corporations. Maybe I’ll start with MTV.”

“DiDomizio, are you sure about this? You’ve spent your entire college life preparing to enter the music industry. You’ll likely regret this later in life.”

“I’ve made my decision. Music just isn’t for me. Who knows, maybe I’ll be better as a business writer than a music one.”

He wasn’t. We exchanged contact information to keep track of each other’s careers, and the last message he sent to me was about him quitting MTV. He told me that he planned to keep low and rethink his life once again. I wished him luck and heard nothing about DiDomizio until spring of this year. I was on my way home after attending a memorial when I saw the novel in the window of a local store famous for selling foreign books. When I saw the name of the author on the front, my eyes almost shot out of their sockets in surprise.

I bought the book and read it for the rest of the journey. What little I was able to cover fascinated me. I couldn’t believe that DiDomizio

was able to do it. When I reached my apartment, I quickly called him.

“You made this two years ago? Man DiDomizio, I’m shocked its only being published now. It’s great!” I told him.

DiDomizio told me that this journey of his to becoming an author wasn’t easy. After quitting the corporate business, he had written a memoir and upon receiving positive feedback for it, had tried to become a novelist. His first two attempts had failed, but this third book, *Burn It All Down*, was a hit. And I can personally confirm that for anybody with any doubts.

To this day I always keep my eye out for anybody who feels disgruntled in life, for folks who want to try out something new. Because as I learned thanks to Nicolas DiDomizio, you don’t have to just stick to one thing in life. You can always change your fate and sometimes, it may be for the better. Now, if this interview is over, I’ve got to go to a nearby café. I’m due for a meeting with a couple of high schoolers who need some guidance in life.

TINMAN

Kanalla Hay

“Lost my heart... high speeds tryna find it”

Racing time

Fighting the clock

A body can't exist

Without a heart

 Sure my brain works fine

 But it's only focused on one thing

 Not oxygen

 But the hole in my chest that's lost the beat

But it's the middle of winter

Weather's not on my side

I hit a patch of ice

The car begins to slide

Spinning out of control

Thank God for these empty roads

I think it's all fine

But I hit the pole, the car explodes

 In looking for my heart

 I lost my life

 I should've just been empty—

 Leave behind the pain and strife

WHO IS IT, LORD, THAT YOU HAVE CREATED

Nickie DeSardo

Who is it, Lord, that You have created,
From the nucleus of the sun?
Am I a mere collection of matter,
Essence of pine needles, and debris the same?
Am I made just of that which I walk upon,
The wooded carpet and my heels one?
Am I a descendant of elm and cedar,
Did the breeze breathe life into me?
Did the sway of oak and maple produce the mating call,
That lead to my design?
Did tree trunks crowd in concert, a line of notes populating the sky,
What scurried in preparation
Of my arrival?
The squirrel, the chipmunk, the salamander,
Did it get news of me?
Of my birth?
What pulled me here?
What gave way to me?

BAD BLOOD

Kait Waterman

When I was a kid, I was diagnosed with anxiety. My feet would often pat down the stairs through the night to ensure— just one more time— that the door was locked and we were safe. My repetition caused my mother to go mad; she hated routine. I was an impossible child. To dad, I was the monkey, but to my mother, I was the monster.

I always knew Johnny as sick. I never knew him as anything other than the tube-tied older brother he was. The ironic part is that I don't remember what he was sick with, but it never seemed like the right time to ask. Should I have asked during the days at a time that he slept before one of his many procedures, or when he was moved to the hospital?

On dad's birthday, Johnny fell out of his chair. After that I didn't see much of Johnny or mother. Mother liked Johnny more than me, and I never blamed her. Johnny was sick, it was an illness, something medicine or a doctor could fix. There was no fix for me—the counting child that touched every surface, but threw tantrums in grocery stores. So, dad spent his days taking care of me while mother stayed with Johnny in the hospital. I think it was easier for everyone that way.

I remember coming home from school and mother was home. Something was wrong with her face, but I couldn't tell exactly what it was at first. They told me Johnny would be allowed home soon. They would both be coming back soon.

“Is Johnny feeling better,” I asked dad that night.

“Well, not quite yet bud. But the doctors are going to try a new medicine that they think can bring him home soon.”

Dad always talked to me the way I needed. Mother would forget

I was a kid and would've gone into the details of whatever Johnny's new medication entailed, giving me more steps to worry about along the way.

I worried about Johnny, but not the way I should have. At five-years-old, I didn't realize that not everybody's brother lived in the hospital. They were just visits to see him, my two favorite days of the week. Dad would drive me an hour to the city hospital and I'd admire the lights and the heights of buildings. Around Christmas time, he took me into one of the shops to pick out clothes for Johnny. After most of our trips we would go for ice cream. Dad made sure there was nothing for me to worry about. Until suddenly there was.

I woke that Saturday morning and dressed myself. We would be exchanging gifts tonight before Johnny went for another round of medicine. He would be too tired on Christmas for visitors. Dad helped me pick a few t-shirts with his favorite bands on them to give Johnny. We had spent the previous night wrapping the shirts meticulously to perfection. Dad put up with me as I begged him to readjust corners and retape folds.

Careful to only step on the stairs that didn't creak, I ventured down to find dad. Most mornings I found him downstairs at the table with a bowl of cereal, but that day there was no bowl or cereal box out. Whispers slipped free of the living room walls and I followed them, hoping they'd grow louder.

"They were supposed to help, Kelly. Now they're telling us to hang tight?"

"They're hoping it's a temporary shutdown, that we'll have him back in a few days."

"Days? He's unresponsive. In a few days he'll be brain dead."

And those were the words that my brain clung to in the moment. The words whipped around at such a speed I felt myself grow dizzy and sick. My mother sat on the couch her shoulders shaking from the

strength of the sobs that rocked her every couple of seconds. My dad stood, pacing, his face hot with clear streams down his face. *“In a few days he’ll be brain dead.”*

“In a few days he’ll be brain dead.”

“In a few days he’ll be brain dead.”

“In a few days he’ll be brain dead.”

I could feel chaos replace where Johnny once was, the uncertainty that stained where his room sat and could feel haunting grief march through the halls of the house. Maybe now was the time to ask what Johnny was sick with.

But he wasn’t sick anymore.

Maybe now was the time to ask what killed Johnny.

I know now the transfusion gave him HIV, but that’s not what parents tell their children. They tell them that their seventeen-year-old son died of “bad blood.” You don’t let them see their brother like that. Brain dead.

Mother liked to pretend that we could move on. She went right back to work, started taking me to school again, but it wasn’t so easy for dad and I. Johnny hadn’t lived at home in months, yet we felt the missing space. I think dad blamed himself. He stopped coming to dinner a week after Johnny died. After two months, he moved out. I stayed with mother, not that anyone asked me.

Sometimes, that’s all I can see when I think of him. Brain dead. Five years of him in my life, and those are the words I hear when his name is said at holidays. My mother never mentioned Johnny much after he passed. It felt like my brother grew into a shameful secret and after a while, he became an unspoken memory. He never left us, but I think that was the worst part. Life came to a routine that removed Johnny from our normal. The world ebbed and flowed without him and we followed suit. I wonder if my mother ever realized that she never fixed either of her children.

DEAR MOM...

Anonymous

you picked a pretty yellow paint
a color you knew i'd love
do you know why?

not yellow like a dandelion
or yellow like fall leaves

not like my favorite cousin's favorite
or like the sun

not yellow like the things i like
or even yellow just because

yellow like the way she said it
yellow because it was her favorite
yellow because a first love changes everything

and because if she liked yellow
who was i to disagree?

WHEN THE FLOWERS WILT

Samantha Cross

Lois' long brown hair caught in the wind, and she watched as it flew all around her arms and shoulders. The ends whipped and whipped about the tall stalks of the sunflowers. Under the canopy created by the giant heads of the flowers, she clapped her feet against the muddy dirt and stared into the maze for any sign of a lost hiker or "lost" teenager (a lot of them came to the farm to smoke weed or drink without being caught). She saw the fence that separated her and the rest of the world in the distance and started to walk towards it. The fence was nothing more than a property marker for the farm. Behind the farm was a simple, soft meadow in the seat of a big blue mountain. Wildflowers littered the meadow.

Lois loved that fence. She loved how it smelled old and a little moldy—like wood that withered in the rain and snow of Colorado seasons. The lichen that grew all over the old boards was nothing short of an "observational experiment-experience" for her. She put her hands up to the fraying, green wood and rubbed up the grain. She let her fingers drag across the boards as she wandered towards the end of the fence. Her fingers went up with the wood, and down with the spaces between the slats. Lois stopped and stared into the meadow sitting behind the fence.

She pushed her nose into the boards so her green eyes could stare desperately between the slats. She loved to imagine little scenes between each piece of wood. A queen awaited her king in their marriage carriage between the first two. The next pair held two circus clowns. Surprisingly, they were women. They kicked one of their legs up in their big, balloon-y, polka dot pants and hugged each other. The two boards after that revealed a princess with long, golden hair. Wild-

flowers dotted her hair and a soft ivory dress kissed her skin. She was beautiful. Lois looked at her face and saw that it, too, was of a soft disposition—like her skin was glowing. Her eyes were bright and delicate, like they held the wealth of the world’s heart in them.

Just as quickly as the image came to Lois, her father called to her from the barn. His voice bellowed from his horse-like chest, beckoning her to come for dinner. Lois turned, letting her hair whip behind her and trail the sounds of feet clapping mud. Her feet hit the ground rhythmically and her chest huffed as she ran through the vast landscape of bright, yellow flowers. Lois watched the big, blue mountains on both sides of the farm flash between the petals above her head. Little bees danced and worked above Lois; she watched them, too.

As the sun approached noon the next day, Lois set out to patrol the fields once more. She pulled out her Doors album to listen to on her portable music device. She loved The Doors the most, just like her dad. As she walked through the fields, she peered through the thick stems of the flowers. It was her job to search for anyone who might be lurking in the fields. The farm was private property, and they shouldn’t be here, Lois thought.

Lois trailed around and around the stems for any sign of life. She continued her listening gratefully until she spotted a bit of movement about forty feet ahead. She saw a little tuft of curly, red hair. She started to edge her way closer to the tuft to inspect the scene. When she approached, she saw a plump, red face horribly accentuated by a red sweater in the middle of summer. Lois couldn’t help but make a frown at the site. The plumpness turned around with a startled look on their face.

“AH! I’m sorry- I- I’ll- I’ll leave,” the face managed to stammer.

“What’s your name?”

“Gibbous...”

Lois stared at Gibbous, “Are you a boy?”

“Yes.”

Lois reached out her hand. “Lois.”

“Hello, Lois,” he said, shaking her hand.

“Gibbous, it has been lovely meeting you, but you have to leave. You shouldn’t be here.”

Gibbous stared at her through watery blue eyes. His cheeks burned red and his freckles seemed to blend completely in to his skin. Lois couldn’t separate which shade of red was from sunburn and which was from embarrassment. His mother dressed him poorly, Lois thought. That unfortunate little boy shouldn’t be wearing that color red. Lois watched as his redness streaked through the endless sea of green stems. His body jiggled and jumbled about him as he ran off back towards town.

Lois turned to the back of the property. The fence called to her slowly. She listened just as slowly, and took her time walking the long stretch to the back of the farm. It rained last night—Lois’ favorite. The scent of fresh fallen rain on leaves tickled Lois’ soul; it warmed her heart in the same way her mother’s embrace did. The dirt under her toes squished and squashed in just the perfect way. The mud wasn’t too thick, but it wasn’t puddle-like either. The earth stuck to her feet did not pile on in an uncomfortable manner as if she were wearing mud socks, but rather as if she had mud soles. Just the soles.

She finally reached the back of the property. She was just about in the middle of the long fence. Lois decided to turn right at the fence and follow its side. Again, she put her hands up to the panels and let her fingers slide along the wood. The Doors told Lois to break on through to the other side, but she didn’t want to. She started to imagine again. She let her dreams run wild. She continued dragging her fingers across the splintery wood lost in thought until she heard a giggle and some humming just beyond the other side of the fence. Lois stopped dead in her tracks and pressed her nose into the wood.

A beautiful girl with long, golden hair danced on the other side of the fence. She threw the weight of her body over each hip, alternating sides as her hips bopped to Lois' music. Lois watched her with amazement as she twirled, and her hands drifted up and down to the sweet sounds of electric guitars. The girl carried on in this way for some time before catching Lois' green gaze through the sliver of space between the slats. The girl stared back as her yellow hair fluttered about in the soft breeze.

Lois saw the girl wearing bell bottom jeans and a funky brown shirt. The shirt was short—shorter than Lois had ever seen. The shortness of the shirt showed off the girl's perfect porcelain skin. Lois would have mistaken her for a goddess if she lived in Ancient Greece. She must be Aphrodite, thought Lois. As the thought flickered about Lois' mind like a flighty lightbulb, the girl's mouth curled into a smile. The corners of her mouth bent down, though, like she was asking for a kiss. She approached the fence and put her hands up to the wood, too. She kept Lois' gaze for a moment before taking a tender step towards the end of the fence.

Together, they stepped delicately, keeping each other's gaze. Lois' mouth fell slightly open; she forgot how to breathe for a moment as she watched the blonde girl through the fence. The blonde squinted her eyes to see through the thin spaces of the fence and watched every breath Lois took. It was not a malicious stare, no. Please do not think this. The girls were so entranced by each other's beauty, they needed to observe it all. They needed to sop up every moment, each fleeting picture of each other, like a mop.

Lois' heart beat in her throat and ears. She swallowed hard every few seconds, but it was not enough to keep the nerves below her head. Her palms grew slick with sweat and started to slide across the fence. The edge came near as the girls kept each other's eyes in sight. The Doors started to ask the blonde girl to light Lois' fire. She hummed

along with Jim Morrison. Lois' knees grew weak as the girl's siren song exploded in her ears.

They finally reached end of the fence. Lois grabbed the last plank and popped her head over before the rest of her lanky body. Of course, the girl already saw how tall Lois was, but she tried her best to conceal her height for at least a little while. The girl laughed a gorgeous laugh. She reached for Lois' fingers wrapped around the board and pulled her whole body into the meadow ahead. The girl locked their hands together and ran into the field sitting in the lap of a big, blue Colorado mountain. Lois was filled with anxiety and fear, but somehow, she was absolutely entranced. Her body kept moving even though she did not remember every step she took.

The butterflies in the air floated between the long-haired girls and within them. They fell about themselves laughing and rolling in the long grass and flowers. The blonde girl rolled over to her shoulder so she could stare at Lois lying flat on the ground, arms to her sides. She propped herself up on one elbow and smiled with the corners of her precious mouth turned down.

Lois stared up into her eyes. They were brown. I have never seen someone with blonde hair have brown eyes before, Lois thought. They were beautiful; the most understanding brown eyes she had ever seen. Lois did not flinch or draw back as she saw them inch nearer to her face. Their eye lids fluttered shut as their lips sank together in the most objective display of love. As quickly as they joined, they parted.

The blonde girl drew back quickly, "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to—I..." She brought the tips of her fingers to her mouth, covering it.

Lois sat up and took her hand away. Lois didn't say anything. Lois only took her lips and placed them back on the blonde girl.

"I'm Cecilia," slipped out of the blonde girl's mouth between kisses and gasps of air.

Lois paused for a moment, looking at Cecilia. A smile crept into

her face and her eyes flashed a once-over of Cecilia. “Lois.”

And so the girls went on like this for some time. Kisses were planted in all the pockets of love they had. Lois did not want to leave the sensations Cecilia created for her. The sun started to set, and Lois knew it was time to get home before her father bellowed for her. She was too far away from the farm to hear him now, and he did not like Lois to dawdle. As Lois pulled away from Cecilia, Cecilia’s bottom lip quivered, and her eyes glassed over like they were about to shed a tear.

“How will I know where to find you again,” Cecilia pleaded of Lois.

She said, “Come to this fence and listen for my music.” With this, Lois said goodbye and took off towards the fence in the near distance. She ducked herself behind the fence quickly and her father called out for her from the barn.

The sun set and rose again over the farm. The pearly fingers of dawn stretched out and painted the sky in perfect pink hues. Clouds blossomed in the sky. Lois watched the sun tickle the morning dew, but she knew it would be some time before Cecilia would be by the farm again. Lois and Cecilia did not talk much during their brief interaction, but from what Lois could gather from the girl’s small marijuana leaf charm on her pink beaded bracelet and comfortable attire, Cecilia liked to sleep in.

Lois strolled about the fields and waited for any sign of movement surrounding the right side of the fence. Finally, the sun clocked in above Lois’ head, signaling noon time. Lois saw some flowers shake ahead of her, closest to the end of the fence. Lois ran over to the disturbance with Cecilia on her mind. Cecilia locked eyes with Lois and ran to embrace her.

“I can’t stay here today.”

“Why not? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just can’t say right now. I’ll be back tonight. Meet me

here, under the full moon. When it has fully risen, come out here. I'll be waiting," Cecilia rushed to Lois. As quickly as the words flew out of her mouth, she turned around and sprinted towards the town.

This worried Lois. She took to pacing the fields with dread. It felt like days before her father finally called for dinner. Lois ran in to the farm house and tried her best to eat as much food as she could. She knew she was going to be up late and needed the extra energy. She ate her food slowly, not savoring each bite, but rather relishing in the amount of time it took to chew each bite carefully and cautiously.

In her room, the walls washed with purple paint, Lois sat watching the moon slowly rise. She sprawled out over her bed, legs waving below the knee off the side of the mattress. The ceiling offered no further escape for her. The blank canvas it provided for her during childhood was effortlessly blank now. It simply did not have the same richness as the meadow. Lois tried anything to pass the time: listen to full length albums, paint her nails even though she hated the feeling of polish suffocating her natural nails, gnaw on air and tongue and cheek, and tend to her skin obsessively, waiting for a pimple to pop on its own but never having the self-control to let it.

"Finally," Lois whispered to the night air under the light of the blue moon. Blood pooled around the blemish she shamelessly plucked off her teenage skin. She blotted her wound, and quietly packed her belongings. A few simple things like unopened water bottles she had left forgotten in her room, her portable music player, and a big blanket that could fit the two young girls and most of their friends. She brought her body close to itself and slipped across the floor. Her calloused feet glided across the old wooden floor. She stopped for a moment by her parents' door to listen for the sounds of their snoring. She heard both of their breaths catch at the climax of their snores and crash in an explosion of sound—she was in the clear. Lois slithered through the back door, then its respective screen door, and ran off to

the back of the property.

Her steely feet carried her quickly and quietly to the edge of the farm. Lois did not run because the leaves of the flowers would whack her in the head and make a lot of noise. She wanted to sprint. She wanted to run faster than any person could ever run. Her heart beat hard with nerves and love and exercise. The fence loomed in the darkness. Would she ever get there?

Lois did not think so. She kept her eyes forward and her feet moving. Suddenly, two arms wrapped around Lois from the side and almost scared her out of her skin. Cecilia let out a tiny squeal of laughter before Lois hurriedly shushed her. Cecilia's eyes twinkled under the moon and her arms went up for Lois' neck.

"I've been so worried about you."

"I'm sorry. I ran as fast as I could here and back earlier today so we could spend time together tonight. My mom doesn't like me wandering out too far in town. Your farm is on the outskirts, you know. She saw the dirt under my fingernails and on the knees of my jeans. She knew I came out here. Normally when I come out here, I'm smoking pot. She doesn't like me doing that, either."

"I've never smoked pot," Lois admitted. Cecilia looked at her and scrunched her face into her nose with a laugh.

"What?"

"I haven't done much of anything. I haven't had sex. You were my first kiss, and that was yesterday. I've never smoked pot, I've never drunk alcohol, but I have lived here on this farm, though. And I have listened to a lot of music that involves all of those things. I'm only 16."

Cecilia looked into Lois' downcast eyes hard. "I was your first kiss?"

"Yes."

"And you've never had sex?"

"No."

“Do you...do you want to?”

“I guess. No boys ever really talk to me.”

“Who said sex has to be with a boy?”

Lois looked up suddenly. Her lips parted just enough to sneak a kiss in, eyes burning with desire. Cecilia took Lois' bag off her shoulders and started to go through it. They took the blanket and unfolded it right there in the middle of the sunflower field. Cecilia took Lois' hand and sat on the blanket wedged between the rows of flowers. Cecilia took out Lois' music player and rifled through the small arsenal Lois brought with her. She oohed and aahed to some of the choices. What to pick...what to pick?

“The Soft Parade?”

“The Doors,” Lois asked.

“Yes. I love them. I heard you playing them yesterday in the field. I couldn't help but dance.”

“I saw you dancing. You're very beautiful when you dance, Cecilia.” Lois' hair caught the brush of wind swaying between them.

“Thank you, Lois.” Cecilia grabbed Lois' hand and put it on her thigh. Lois felt a burning sensation in her lower belly. It burned with passion. She didn't know what passion felt like, or that it was all so physical. Cecilia turned her head to face Lois and it was as if she melted under the heat of Lois' gaze. While Cecilia melted away, she took Lois' face in her precious hands and planted liquid kisses on Lois' lips. Lois went loose-limbed under the pale blue light and Cecilia's love. Cecilia tipped Lois' head back to lay her on the blanket fully. There she stripped herself of layers of clothes and quickly helped Lois out of her own. The kisses started again at the lips and soon trailed down Lois' neck and abdomen. Before long, the two girls entwined themselves in each other's hair and bodies. The girls softened into one another's skin so they could not tell which touch belonged to who. They were a mosaic of brown and blonde hair—a yin and yang portrait

beneath the enormous flowers.

Lois tingled and ached and rolled around on the blanket. Cecilia looked down at Lois from up above and seemed to mouth something that looked like “I love you.” Lois could not hear and could not see very well. She decided in that moment that her brain was imagining and making things up like she always does during the day. The nighttime was a time Lois had little experience in. Cecilia drew her body close to Lois’ and held her tight for warmth and fear of letting her go.

Cecilia looked up at the twinkling stars and whined with a sigh, “I have to walk back home. I need to get home before it gets light out. My mother won’t let me out of her sight otherwise.”

Lois turned on her side to face Cecilia. “I don’t want you to go.”

“You know how I felt yesterday. We’re even,” Cecilia retorted. Lois’ eyes glassed over then, too. Her lip quivered shyly. Cecilia reached her index finger and thumb out to catch Lois’ chin. She placed one more kiss on Lois’ mouth. A kiss that was coated in everything love should be—gentleness, admiration, lust, empathy, dedication, and passion. When Cecilia pulled away, Lois remembered she needed to breathe. She kept reminding herself of this for quite some time.

Cecilia pulled her clothes back on and hugged Lois before saying good night.

“Just one more kiss, please?”

“Wasn’t that last one enough?” Cecilia smiled and turned around to head back towards the town. Dawn had not arrived, but rose as the golden girl waded through the tall flowers. Lois looked after her for a long time. She watched the sun come up through the screen of yellow petals and kiss her naked skin. When a flock of crows took off for the morning sky in the far distance, she decided that it was time to redress herself. She packed her things back into her bag and slumped off to the farmhouse.

Lois did not care about sneaking back in as much as she cared

about sneaking out. She clumped into the house and waddled up the stairs. She tried to minimize the noise, but was by no means silent. When she passed her parents still asleep on their mattress, she looked in on them for a moment before continuing to her room. She pushed the door open and flopped onto her bed. She stayed that way, in a star-fish position, for some time.

The noontime sun streamed in through Lois' window, burning her awake, sweat caked in the same clothes she wore last night. She wondered if it was even real, but the clues she left herself were reminders that it was. It was very real. She hobbled over to her mirror and looked into her own eyes. The green screens seemed to glow with satisfaction. She saw a dark spot poking out of her shirt neck; Cecilia left little bruises and bite marks just under her neckline. Lois smiled and brushed her hair out to greet her parents downstairs.

"You're up awfully late, dear," Lois' mother teased.

"Oh yeah. I... I couldn't sleep last night," Lois shrugged.

She grabbed an apple and her music player and went out into the fields. She wondered if she would see Cecilia today. Lois walked straight back to that fence and waited all day. The noon sun sunk into a setting sun, and her father called again for dinner. They ate quietly and gratefully. Lois climbed the stairs leading to her bedroom and fell asleep right away, dreaming of the night she had last night. Her cheeks flushed and eyelashes fluttered thinking about how Cecilia made her feel just the night before.

The morning sun woke Lois up day after day. The sunflowers in the field began to weep with signs of colder weather sneaking in. The tops browned and the petals flaked off. The stems wilted over greatly under the weight of the waterlogged flowers. It was some time before Lois ever saw Cecilia again. She cried about it sometimes when she neared the edge of the fence. When the full moons came for the rest of the summer, she was entranced by memories of Cecilia's perfect white

skin—soft and supple.

When she found stragglers in the fields, she cried hoping it was Cecilia. Wiping the tears away, Lois screamed saying, “You can’t be here.” Her father would hear the shrieks and wondered what could have ever created this violent change in his daughter. The last stranger Lois found was the worst.

There was a full moon predicted for that night. It was an older hiker with golden braids lining her back. Her eyes were hazel, and though they were not Cecilia’s brown, they hurt her heart just staring. Lois wailed and wailed at the woman.

“You shouldn’t be here! How dare you come here looking like her? Do you know what you have put me through? You shouldn’t be here!”

Lois couldn’t help but run to the barn for safety. Her eyes swelled and her skin went slick with tears. Her dad looked up from his work and ran to her side.

“Lois, Lois baby what’s wrong,” he pleaded with her.

“Dad...I think I love girls.”

OBSESSIVE WORSHIP

Kanalla Hay

“I’ve got you
under my skin”
Even when you’re not around
I know my heart beats
In sync with yours
My mind’s forever clouded by
Thoughts of you
Convinced it’s your blood
Pumping through my veins
I cannot survive even the thought
Of being without you
Needing to see you
Satisfy my appetite—
 my sweet tooth
with the sight of you
I look in every corner
Searching
Wishing
Dreaming
Hoping
Praying
Thinking
Hardly
 breathing
Without your lips on mine
To force oxygen into my lungs
I don’t think I can survive
Another minutemomentsecond

But you never look for me
never find me
So I try to come to you instead
And fall to my knees at your feet

STACKS OF STORIES

Campbell Mitchell

In the backyard sit stacks of large firewood, carefully arranged as they slowly rot. It has been months since we had an outdoor fire with chairs encircling the fire pit, and marshmallows offered for the flames to lick and caress into perfection—longer still since we had an indoor fire. Our generator contains within it more fire, throwing more heat and light than the entire surrounding woodlands. Still, the memories endure in those backyard stacks kept at the ready of cold winter's nights without heat or electricity; of midday darkness when the house was buffeted by hurricanes and tornadoes.

Before the electro-mechanical certainty of generators, when darkness and cold were kept at bay with axes and logs. When a tree would fall in someone's yard, and everyone was around to hear it. Within hours it would be disassembled by the neighborhood into kindling and fuel. The days when my brother and I would carry sleds laden with fuel to our neighbors and check on the elderly couple at the end of the lane. The logs are a relic and a monument to a time and a place not long gone, when the work of men—not machines— kept the lights on and the elements at bay. We may use them eventually for marshmallows or ghost stories, but they will never contain with them the feeling of warmth, safety, and humanity that they once did.

The next fire we have is a cold winter's night in the Adirondack mountains. A snowstorm is assailing the windows of my grandparents' lakeside cabin. We huddle around the waning fire with cups of hot cider as my grandfather fetches a small box. I know from the fact that it is dingy and unassuming, wrapped in a nearly worn-out towel that it is clearly of great value. My grandfather is a man who preserves his receipts from decades ago without any creases or folds, but man-

aged to get coffee rings on his certificate from the Nobel Committee within a month.

Unwrapping the box, I polish the dust off the glass display case with my sleeve to reveal a row of medals. Some of the symbols are familiar: the stars of the Legion of Merit, a likeness of King George V with the words “For God and Empire” faintly legible. Then more medals: foreign medals from countries lost to history, the Order of the White Elephant from the King of Siam, or the mysterious medal bearing the seal of the French protectorate Kingdom of Laos—its meaning swept away by the Indochina Wars.

Each medal is a volume unto itself, stories from a world at war. It is a world much like the ancient mythology my grandfather read to us, with plucky, underdog heroes, and morally unchallenging villains, bygone kingdoms and bands of brothers facing furious enemies. As he reads and I drift off to sleep, staring at the case and listening to the crackling logs, the two worlds seem to blur together.

DO NOT PRESERVE MY DEATH

Nickie DeSardo

Loved Ones:

When the breath leaves my lips
Stuff me not in a box
No rosary at my fingertips

Don't pump me full
of cellophane
Preserving leftovers
nor silken-wrapped remains

Don't paint my face with shimmer
nor drive shovel into earth
Unless to plant the seed
Of my rebirth

Kiss me on the forehead
Conjure a memory last
Laugh until we cry
In days past

Think of me—by all means
think of me
But forget the formality
Make me a tree.

NOT WITH A BANG...

BUT WITH A WHISPER

Kanalla Hay

What in this world
Do you fear
More than yourself?
Dangling off an edge
Wanting to let go of it all
Yet holding on tighter than
 you've ever held anything before
Lungs seem to require
 all the oxygen in the air
So try to breathe in the sky
Hold the stars in place of your heart
Have a chance at living again
 even as this world begins to die
The universe isn't big enough
 for the both of us.

HAUNTING REGRETS

Sheena Orten

“A memory is always precious as it is proof, proof that something happened even if it lasted a few moments. It existed. However sometimes those memories, good or bad, need to be laid to rest, lest it consumes you, driving away everything you ever cherished. Destroying the future once held for you.”

Should anyone look towards the farthest left seat in the back of the bus they would find a woman. One with long blond hair, and a hollow blank gaze. However, all it took was a screeching halt and a loud booming voice for the girl to shake away from her trancelike expression.

“Here we are! Tale’s Street. Everyone out.” It was a Friday evening in Suran City when she stepped off at Kamego State with a group of rowdy teens.

“Finally! I thought it’d never end.” Many of the individuals around this time had plans to either go home or to party the weekend away.

“Time to paaaaarrtay!” Arrow Qilsin couldn’t wait to move away from the loud group, rolling her eyes at their antics. Though the young woman was dressed nicely, a simple black strapless dress and sandals, she wasn’t out and about to get together with drinking buddies.

Personally, after traveling for work nonstop for the last six months, she was ready to go home where she could relax and snuggle in her own bed full of fluffy blankets and soft plush pillows while watching her favorite movies. It sounded like paradise... but that couldn’t come, not yet anyways, there was someone she had to visit first.

It was why she was dressed up after all. For once she wasn’t on

duty either. There was no one screaming for help, no environmental crisis giving her the perfect opportunity to make her way down the bustling streets. Silently, she kept her eyes forward, ignoring the rest of the world as she made her way to her destination.

She didn't care for the few men that would try to grasp her attention, nor the wind that would occasionally flutter her dress. The setting sun beamed on her skin—the still strong blaze and suffocating humidity caused her to sweat.

Summer was on the horizon, and she could already tell that it was going to be an agonizing season as she wiped her face. Though she felt miserable walking through the crowds, Arrow couldn't help but feel nostalgic. Days like today reminded her of her childhood when she didn't work herself to the bone.

“I'm sorry...there's nothing more we can do.”

However she knew better; it wasn't that the world she lived in was kinder, but instead it was camouflaged due to her age and naivety. One of her hands gripped the silver chain wrapped around her neck as she saw him leaning against one of the traffic poles. She blinked and sucked in a harsh breath—he was gone. Or rather, he was never there.

“He's dead, Arrow. Get a hold of yourself.” It's been happening more and more frequently; her eyes and mind would play harsh tricks on her. “I'm almost there...” In general he was always in her thoughts, more so than she would like to admit, and that was becoming a concern. Not that she could tell anyone about the hallucinations she found herself struggling with. The last thing she wanted was to be put in a straitjacket and dubbed a loony. It was because of him she was doing this in the first place.

“Dammit, Ren...”

She trekked through busy roads full of cars, thick moisture in the air, and obnoxiously loud people just to visit him. Only when she

arrived at the large, sturdy gates of Saint Shira's Cemetery did the young woman finally stop, breathing a sigh of relief. Already she was feeling much calmer, knowing she wasn't going to be bothered, or be at risk of getting run over.

That sense of peace only grew as she pushed open the gates, taking a step into what's been dubbed the 'Serene Cemetery of Saint Shira.' It really seemed like she was transported to a different world with how vast the cemetery was compared to the rest of Suran City.

An area entirely covered with silver-white blossoms protecting obsidian black memorial statues and slabs. Even if the world wasn't simply black and white, this sacred place was. The sole living being, Arrow, was the only splash of color in the monochrome world belonging to the dead.

"Beautiful." Regardless of the amount of times she came, the twenty-three year old couldn't help but be mesmerized.

The flowers that grew here are called 'whisper tips,' but are also known as 'corpseblossoms.' Now she was no florist, but according to her friend and Missionary Tasks and Clientele (MTC) agent Ella, taking in excess sunshine wasn't needed for photosynthesis. They produced a soft white glow while they underwent photosynthesis. Genetical breeding made it possible for whisper tips, as well as other various flowers, to grow all over the world. Frankly science, let alone chemistry and botany hybrid-breeding, were not exactly her forte, so she didn't completely understand the details. But all the same, she appreciated the warm light they gave off. If anything, she was more interested in their superstitious tales than their logical explanations.

It's been said by those of older generations that whisper tips grew and glowed for the lost spirits who were unable to rest in peace. The illuminated flowers thrived on decomposing matter and acted as beacons for deceased souls, guiding them to heaven. Even though Arrow didn't believe in those old folk stories, she was fascinated by it.

She could understand why people thought that way, as right now these flowers guided her. One by one under a darkening blue sky, their petals opened up, and made a white, bright path for her to follow. Their soft glow aided her in her search for a specific slab of cement just barely reaching her calf. Shaking her head with a huff, she gently kneeled and cleared away as much of the dirt and moss on it as she could.

A soft smile graced her lips, “It’s been way too long.” Her eyes lowered to the carved engravings.

She snorted, “In loving memory of Ren Lageesh...what a joke.” She still couldn’t get over what the people in charge of his funeral wrote. The only people that visited Ren these days were her and his younger brother, Raine. No one else came to see him. His parents had died in the accident that eventually led to his death. The hospital that took him in up until his death most certainly didn’t care.

Eight years have gone by since he left this world, and yet Arrow still hasn’t recovered. If anything, the more time that passed, the more her wounds festered with rage.

“I will not forgive, nor forget.” Her patience waned the more she was forced to interact with the idiotic, selfish pieces of filth she dared to call her fellow humans.

Were it not for Raine, she would’ve lost her sanity long ago. Her fingers gingerly traced the letters on the cold stone, “They just don’t get it.”

Memories flickered in and out. A gust of wind caused her long blonde hair to flutter and twist together, but she paid it no mind as she lost herself in the past. It’s something she always did when coming here. Every question she had when she was younger was never answered, and it haunted her.

“Why did things happen the way they did?” Oftentimes, she specifically questioned Ren’s death. Was it decided because of the choices

he made up until that point, or was it due to fate? There was no one to give her an answer, but she didn't expect one. That didn't stop her from feeling weary and bitter. Regardless, at one point there was hope for him to live, there was a chance...

“I wish she would just give up on him.”

“She’s just wasting time, there’s no going back once you’re infected with Mystical Metonia.”

“It’s been a week now. He hasn’t made any sort of improvements, it’s time to pull the plug-so to speak.”

“Seriously, there are more important things than a patient like this.”

“I’m sorry...but I’m afraid there’s nothing more we can do. It’s just another unfortunate case of MM.”

Her hand slapped down onto the ground with a low growl. Her eyes glazed over in hatred as more bullshit statements echoed in her mind.

“There was plenty you assholes could’ve done! Starting with actually giving a damn!” Again and again she smashed her now curled fist into the rough earth, as if to beat those excuses the doctors and nurses gave into the mud.

Inhaling sharply, she returned to reality, glancing down towards her hand. Her hand oozed red. She noticed the flesh raw, a speck of blood falling on the indented ground that she hit a moment ago. Tears bubbled to the surface as she stared at the stone slab. Her heart cracked the longer she stayed. “There was so much we could’ve done.”

“You know, for an archivist, you suck at organizing, Ren.”

“Oh lay off, Arrow! I’m working on it. Once I graduate and get my license you’ll see. I’ll have an office full of books, all nice and neat.”

“With me as your missionary, I doubt it.”

“Planning on overdoing things already? Why am I not surprised.”

Well, at the very least I'll never have to worry about being out of work."

He was her best friend and more. Together they were going to make this world a better place. So why did things happen the way they did? "Why couldn't they save you?"

Of course she received no answers. She wasn't crazy enough to expect them, either. However, seeing his grave revitalized her determination—her rage.

"Never forgive. Never forget." Like the whisper tips that fluttered around her, her past would guide her. She would not rest until the world was free of MM cases, no matter how long it took.

IF YOU HAD A SUPERPOWER

Campbell Mitchell

At the support meeting there is always crying
But children must not see their parents' tears
They are always curious, so it is my job to engage and distract them
I ask the little ones about what superpowers they would want

I catch the words "mortgage" and "hospital bills" as the first tears are shed

I find the kids hiding nearby, pretending not to eavesdrop
I ease them by chatting about t-shirts and movies and comic books
and superheroes and superpowers and flight and aerodynamics and
physics and dimensional analysis and orbital mechanics and the
space program and astronauts
They wish that they had the power to just fly away

The next mother is crying over her daughter's lab test results
I find the daughter and the brother and the older sister
We have a wide-ranging discussion on books and characters and superheroes and superpowers and healing and homeostasis and biology and science and school and researchers and doctors and nurses and veterinarians
All three unanimously agree that they wish they had the power to heal others

The last mother to leave is just crying.
I cannot find her son because he is gone.
We talk about his hobbies and dreams and favorite books and literature and poetry and the meaning of life and how can this happen

and why is this allowed to happen and how does a person even begin to make it okay again and how do we make sure this never happens again.

She says that she wishes she had the power to tell his story.

I THINK I'M GOING TO CUT MY HAIR

Kait Waterman

i think i'm going to cut my hair
because i paint landscapes
of mountains
and ponds
and proud trees,
but sometimes,
when i paint the willows
stretching over lakes,
i can feel you underneath the canvas.

i think i'd rather cut my hair
because i know you sit and watch
my brushstrokes and wait
for me to join you beneath
the willows' bend.
i'd rather cut my hair than rip the roots out
like i do when i think of you
and your promises, tied
to the tree's brittle, dead roots;
but the branches curve to match
your fingers soaked in soil.

if i cut my hair to remove what is dead,
maybe i'll feel the willow lighten without your gaze;
i can wisp brush bristles

to cover the scene in a rug of snow.

i have cut my hair.

you have nothing to grab now.

what love does she have?

MY MOM TOLD ME

Samantha Cross

Practicality over crime.
I know when I need to be worried.
I know you're not going to go out
And create chaos in your
Grinch pajamas because
Where would you pee?

She told me practicality over crime.
I have no enamel
Because I was out smoking crack, duh.

She taught me flowers were meant to be cut and
Brought into the house so the next morning you wake up
Sinuses stuffed shut.

She taught me to buy a fake blue heron
To scare off the one that ate her expensive koi fish
And shit them out on our roof.

She taught me it's okay to make mistakes
By trying to hang your own light fixtures
And almost set the house on fire with shoddy electrical wiring.

She taught me why the fuck should I hire somebody else
When I can redo the entire bathroom
And living room
And dining room
And my bedroom

And your bedroom
And the kitchen
By myself?

She taught me how to dead head roses.
She taught me how to identify poison ivy.

She tried to teach me proper knife skills but
I am a rookie on Hell's Kitchen
And refuse to learn despite Gordon Ramsay calling me
"An idiot sandwich."

She taught me how to make potato pancakes—
First you grate the potatoes—
And then you force them to your child even though she has told you
countless times
She does not like potato pancakes.

She taught me an Irish jig on Saint Patrick's Day,
Notwithstanding the fact that we are barely Irish.

She taught me courage is
Winging your mother's eulogy because
"If my daughter can come up here and say that,
I can do it, too."

She taught me motherhood is a job,
Not a chore,
And it's not unionized and it doesn't pay very well.

But it's satisfying.

THE BEST KIND OF BLACK

Mikayla Hill

An airplane flew through the crystal blue sky over Central Park. It headed towards the white sun, soared its wide wings, and roared its screeching engine to bring the attention of children that looked up and pointed fingers. Central Park was packed on this beautiful spring day. Bicyclists rode around in circles, civilians jogged through sidewalks and into the grass, dogs sniffed bushes they had no business being in, and food trucks sold hot dogs to ravenous customers. Three distinct men sat on a bench, drinking ice cold beverages from Starbucks that wet their hands. The crowd entertained them with their daily routines while they gossiped about women. Victor took a quick sip of his drink to tell his lie.

“So black women, they don’t know how to treat a man right,” he said.

Victor moved his hands around from the sky to the ground expressing his passion about how his ex-girlfriend hardly took care of him. He scraped his Air Force Ones side to side on the ground, as if his sneakers could magically hypnotize his friends into agreeing with him.

“There’s nothing wrong with black women,” Julius responded. “They are the most underrated people on this planet. If anything, your girl didn’t treat you right because you did something wrong.”

Victor sucked his teeth. Julius glanced at a middle-aged brown-skinned woman with locs, admiring her yellow sundress that complimented her complexion. He gawked at her with a tight smile and tapped Victor on the shoulder to make him look.

“See, look at her. What could be wrong with a beautiful black woman taking a walk at the park?”

Victor scratched his bald head and the oils he rubbed on it, digging his fingernails into his skull. He examined his fingers for any oils that gave off a glow and wiped his hand on his pants, reprimanding the brown-skinned queen with his dark mahogany eyes. On the other side of the bench, Benny bit the bottom of his lip, fully concentrated on the woman. He wanted to be mesmerized by her face and petite figure she displayed from her long, slender neck to her extended slim legs that made her look like she could have been at least 5'9." Benny had a black woman himself—a black woman of a much lighter complexion. The yellow sundress of the woman in the park made her skin prominent. Somehow, Benny was still unimpressed. He tried to see the beauty in her, though brown-skinned women weren't his type. He shook his head certain that he had no admiration towards such a stunning individual.

"I don't see it, Julius," Benny said.

Julius swiftly turned his body to Benny. One of his eyebrows twitched and he was tempted to stand up and shake Benny until he saw the beauty in black women.

"Excuse me, but don't you have a black wife," Julius asked dryly.

"I do," Benny responded.

Julius rubbed his head and looked back to Victor who was still judging the gorgeous woman on her walk.

"Are you hearing Benny, Vic? This man is not making any sense right now."

"He's talking about the black girl in the sundress, right? Because I don't see it either," Victor said. "I don't trust women like her."

In that moment, Julius' jaw dropped from the bigotry that came out of Victor's mouth. Julius looked at his drink. He thought about chucking it towards the ground to watch it splash everywhere. But he was better than that. Julius took a deep breath and exhaled, placing his drink down on the cement and wrapping his stocky arms around

his boys.

“You guys just always find a way to amaze me, you know that right? Both of y’all are in a relationship with a black woman. Now, I don’t quite remember what Benny’s wife looks like because I’ve only seen her twice in my life and she barely gets posted on social media, but I do remember her being black.”

“She’s actually South African and Nigerian,” Benny declared.

“Which still makes her black, Benny,” Julius spat.

Victor sighed while ignoring the rest of Julius’ conversation to search for a woman he could admire. A white woman jogged by wearing gray spandex and a blue tank top. Her forehead dripped with sweat that traveled down her face and onto her chest. Another woman of Asian descent was seen from a far distance talking to her companions as they were eating ice cream. Victor pondered on the women he would catch—women that would be interested in baking him mac n’ cheese, having good sex, and taking long walks in the park.

“Victor, are you looking!” Julius scolded. “Look at Benny’s Instagram photo! His wife is light-skinned!”

Victor startled, tightening his jaw and releasing a slight grunt as his fantasies came to an end. Benny held his phone out towards Victor and Julius, showing them the one Instagram photo of him and his short wife. She was wearing all red: a red midi dress, red heels, red scarf, red lipstick, everything red except for her golden hoops.

“Oh, Fantasia! I remember her from the wedding! Yeah man, she’s beautiful, Benny,” Victor responded.

“Of course she is,” Benny said.

Julius sucked his teeth, snatching Benny’s phone away to closely examine Fantasia. As gorgeous as Benny’s wife appeared to be, she was nothing compared to the woman in the yellow sundress. Julius peeked back up to see if she was still in sight, but she was gone. He wished she was still there. It would have been an opportunity for Ju-

lius to escape his confusing, wretched friends and find the love of his life. Julius never understood why Victor ridiculed black women when he saw beauty in Fantasia. Perhaps it was the self-hate that ate Victor up inside or the influence of Benny's disrespect towards black women—dark-skinned women. One time in high school, Benny sneered at an ebony girl during biology class and called her “blacker than night.” At least that's the rumor Julius heard.

“I could have gotten a woman like her,” Victor said. “Probably less aggressive than my ex.”

“Less aggressive you say,” Julius questioned.

“Yeah. I think women like Fantasia are less aggressive than my last girl. She didn't care about me and yelled at me whenever I had an opinion.”

Julius stood up, annoyed, and a pigeon flew into his spot on the bench, as if it heard familiar voices. The pigeon scouted for food crumbs, yet there were none to be found. Benny and Victor watched Julius gaze at the park, wondering if he was going to leave them. The pigeon cooed loudly and flew away to look for more food.

“Sometimes I wonder why women get treated the way they do,” Julius whispered. “Especially black women.”

After scanning the park, he turned back to his friends who were still seated on the bench. Julius hovered over them with such authority that there was no way he would let them talk over him. One little insult and it was over. Julius had a duty to protect black women—women that were treated with such indignity it made his brain ache. He wasn't going to let Benny and Victor make it worse.

“I don't care who y'all date, but don't disrespect my black women,” Julius said.

Victor stared into Julius' eyes, knowing that he was about to add more to the subject.

“Victor, you're a black man. We have blackness inside and out. But

you shun it for whatever reason and that makes you bitter and disrespectful. I don't want to be friends with a black man that is going to mock his own race. Yeah sure, you prefer light skins. But your preference isn't allowed to come with degradation. Your mother is just as dark as you and she wouldn't appreciate her son bashing women with the same complexion. Would you like it if someone made fun of your mother because she was dark?"

Victor began to sink his head down to his chest. Julius couldn't tell if it was anger or shame. He kept going with his speech as clouds gradually rolled in towards the sun.

"Benny, you are just the same as Victor. The only difference between you two is that you're white and he's black. Like I said, if your preference is light-skinned women, do as you please. But at the end of the day, you must come to realize that black women come in all different shades. Light and dark. If you're going to insult darker women, then don't bother dating any black women."

Benny sipped his drink, looking at Julius trying to hide his fear. A cloud blocked the sun, and more clouds invaded the blue sky, bringing tons of shade onto civilians where it became cooler than it was ten minutes ago. Julius thought about sitting back down. His friends were speechless. They didn't know whether to apologize or to just sit in the cool park listening to children shout. Victor's stomach growled and Benny smirked. He tapped Victor's belly to control his hunger—it barely worked. Julius glanced at the two of them, though he couldn't speak to them anymore. He exhaled. The clouds drifted away, allowing the sun to peek back out and blind people who dared to stare at it with its white rays. The rays grew until the sun completely showcased its circular brightness, giving all the black women at the park an opportunity to radiate themselves. Next to an Alice in Wonderland statue, the woman in the yellow sundress returned with a cheeseburger in her hand. Julius grinned at her, forgetting about his boys behind him

and admired her presence. He hoped that she would notice him. Benny flicked his wrist to look at the time. After realizing how late it was, he decided to head back to his apartment.

Victor saw him stand up as they dapped each other up. Before Benny could dash away, Julius called out, "Benny!"

Benny almost tripped on himself, turning around gingerly with his drink.

"Think about what I said. For real."

Benny didn't respond and darted off. Victor watched him leave, passing by boisterous children who sprinted around him. Julius went back to drooling over the woman in the sundress as Victor tapped him on the leg to grab his attention.

"What, man," Julius muttered.

"If you want her so bad, why don't you just ask her out," Victor said.

"Hmm. I'm surprised you would consider that."

"Look, I don't care who you date, just like you don't care who I date. But I can't hold you Julius, she would look great with you."

A crow cawed from the sky, swooping over Julius' head and soared towards the buildings as if it was trying to find a new spot to relax in. Julius watched the crow sit down on the roof of a beige building. It examined the park with its head held high, unconcerned of the other birds crying and pecking at each other. Another crow swooped in with smaller wings and sat next to the unbothered one. Both crows sat still as the rest of the flock left to head to the next building. By the time the flock was gone, the crows inched closer together to take over the throne. Julius directed his attention back at Victor who gave him a little grin. The woman in the sundress approached the two men once Julius spun back around. When she was less than ten feet in front of them, she had already finished her cheeseburger, wiping her mouth with a soft brown napkin. Victor raised himself out of the bench. He

gently put his hand on Julius' shoulder, gave him a wink, and left the premises. Just two black individuals, locking their brown eyes at one another to see who would speak first. Julius made a nervous chuckle.

"A charming man has been staring at me for quite some time. So, I might as well get to know who you are," the woman said.

"The name's Julius."

"Bernadette, but people call me Betty."

"Well, what would you like to do, Betty?"

"Anything but stand here."

A LETTER TO MY REFLECTION

Jenna Visca

They say that sometimes we are so blinded by love,
that we can't see red flags through rose-colored glasses,
that all of the flags just
look like flags.

But it's not that it's always hard to see the signs,
it's that sometimes, you don't want to.

Why would I want to find fault in
how his eyes swept over mine like a byline,
how he stole my privacy like he did my time,
how he loved in backhanded compliments
when his embrace felt warmer,
like no other?

Or when the taste of his honeyed words
was so sweet that it'd linger through the haze of daydreams?
He'd pull me close every time I wanted closure, and so
I bit my tongue.

In our daily dance between distress and depression,
I learned to live life
bracing for impact.

I counted down days like they were grains of sand
slipping through my fingertips,
as if I could fashion them into a sandcastle
to serve as my shelter.

But I fell in love with a mosaic of a man,

one that cast a shadow of the person he could've been,
but decided he couldn't be.

To love someone who hated how he did
was like trying to paint in the rain.

Whatever affection you write is diluted by depression,

It was far from an instant, it was little moments:

the drop of a hand,

the venomous thoughts that hung from his tongue,

the way he smiled back but spoke of our love in the past tense.

But none was worse

than his intimacy with another woman when we were together,

a secret partially shared to prove how "nice" he was

for telling me at all.

One of many wrongs that could only ever live on hushed lips.

Taken from until there was nothing left to give,

a spectator to myself, living in the third person, I

was stuck.

And it is all too easy

to sink into a sea of sadness,

to tremble beneath the weight of his gaze,

to read between the lines and pretend he was still mine,

to surrender to the idea that things can never get better.

But the greatest strength isn't how well you fight,

it is lifting the veil of shame draped over your face,

it is clawing at the hill you threw yourself down.

it is running ahead, worn, shitty sneakers pushing off concrete

shouting out into the void of the night sky

that “I am still alive.”

You don't owe the world an apology to breathe, so
just breathe.

When you ask to be held, loved, and protected,
honey, you aren't asking too much,
you're just asking the wrong person.

Don't compare your sadness to that of others.
Misery isn't a competition,
it is a marathon that can be overcome together,
so stop trying to run alone.

No matter what,
keep moving forward.

The worst place to be is the same place as yesterday
and life is too short to be spent standing still.

So write for no other reason than to write,
try the food of every damn restaurant in town,
binge albums and anime like they're drinks,
smile to let the light compliment your character,
learn to live as you again.

Live so that every day,
when I look into the mirror
nestled in the corner of the room
where I fell in and out of love with you,
I see more than the empty space where he used to be,
I finally see me.

THE MIRROR

Meaghan Canavan

Trigger Warning: Body Dysmorphia and Self-Esteem

I cup my hands around my waist, breathing deeply to bring my chest in further. My fingers press into the flesh of my waist and wrap around my stomach and squeeze. I want my fingertips to touch. I want my fingertips to touch and encircle my waist like a homemade corset. I want my fingertips to touch and prove to myself that my waist does not bloat and protrude. I need my fingertips to touch and prove that I am still the skinny girl that they all believe me to be.

I look into the mirror, send a quick prayer to a god I do not believe in, and press my hands in further.

My hands do not touch. The pressure pinches my breath and it catches in my throat—anything to keep my stomach hollow, even if I must suffocate to do so. I feel my fingertips brush. That is what I was looking for. I release my breath and my chest heaves. A wave of vertigo washes over me and I stumble forward. My hand pushes against the hand of my own reflection: me reaching back at me. I see me, but it is not me. It is the me I do not recognize; the one with protruding collarbones and skeleton fingers, not the one with thick thighs and rounded cheeks. I am tempted for a moment to ask my reflection who I am, who is the girl staring back at me? But I will not get an answer unless my own lips move. So I stay silent.

I leave a trail of fingerprints on the glass as I push away. I stare once more at my body in the mirror. It is the only full body mirror in the house. It is my least favorite one.

I mindlessly scan over my pale skin. I ignore the way it stretches painfully over the bones of my hips and bruises around my waist. I

have a habit of squeezing too hard when I measure myself. I have a habit of switching between staring at my own reflection for hours and being too disgusted to even look in a mirror. I shuffle on my feet. I turn away. It is a bad day, one of the ones where I can't stand seeing my own image. But is it really a "bad day" if it outnumbered the good ones? Should it not be counted as my new normal?

I grab the nearest shirt and let it fall over my face. I feel it drape, and I am reminded that it once clung to my figure. It now hangs loosely across my frame. The pants I pull on bunch at the ankles. The waistband droops where body is supposed to fit, but there is no body to take up the space. I slip a belt through the loops and pull, tight enough to cinch. My body is now fully covered.

I turn back around to the mirror. The sight is easier to swallow now that I cannot see the shape of my body. Things like the curve of my hips or the sharpness of my shoulders. It is the me I recognize this time—the one with the "normal" body, the one with the expected proportions. I see the ideal look: I see a skinny girl.

GLORY OF THE FATHER

Michelle Rochniak

“The most dangerous thing is to love.” –Gang of Youths, “Achilles
Come Down”

when your love dies in battle for you, you carve pebbles out of the earth's clay crust. you cast them into the murderous sun to harden. if only the amber armor did not fit his body. if only grey strategy warned you. if only you severed the prince's tendons while your heel distracted his eyes. if only a lightning bolt would drive down from the heavens and slice your skull in half. pomegranate seeds, thigh children, day-long falls, even dying in battle wouldn't hurt this much. the most dangerous thing is to love, and now your ashes are half-dead.

TIME AND THE MIDNIGHT CIRCUS

Amanda Badillo

The thin red hand ticked carelessly onward upon the small clock that rested on the far grey wall. Dallas watched intensely, raising his first three fingers up towards the man sitting across from him, shushing him. The sun peered in behind him through the slits of the roman shades, slightly illuminating a spot on the freshly vacuumed cream carpet. He leaned forward, waiting until the minute hand finally ticked, making its way to the large twelve, signaling the start of his session. He smiled wide before he scooted backwards to a more comfortable position on the black leather couch.

Dallas locked eyes with the man once more. An older gentleman with tired brown eyes and peppered hair that rested like strands of thin grass along the top of his head. He was white, almost pink, and covered in freckles from his arms to his face which sported a mustache that connected to his beard with long straggling strands of gray. The periwinkle blue Oxford shirt, impeccably pressed trousers, and dark wingtips were the most interesting aspects of this man. Dallas smirked, knowing the price of this whole ensemble. The shoes alone were roughly a thousand-dollars, Belvedere, you do the math.

Dallas flicked his tongue back and forth over his teeth as he tapped his thumbs together. He ran his fingers through his soft brown hair until he stretched out his arms and said, "So...what's up?"

The man across from him cleared his throat, straightening up his posture. He looked back and forth between Dallas and the clock before asking, "So, you like clocks?"

Dallas' lips spread, exposing his beautiful snow-white teeth. He laughed softly to himself before saying, "I like time."

“Oh? In what sense?”

“In all senses.”

“Meaning what? Being on time? Being early? Life? Time goes by so slowly? As the song says, at least.”

“So many questions from a simple statement, isn’t that something? I mean come on, I say I like time and here we are, seven questions in. That’s incredible. It’s amazing how our words affect one another’s mind. That’s why you asked to see me, right? Oh, there we go again, more questions,” Dallas said, tapping his finger to his temple.

The man stared at him, nodding while watching every slight movement he made. Every foot tap, hand motion, hell, any flicker within his eyes. He watched it all. The man asked again, “So, Dallas, what is it about time that fascinates you?”

“A man who is not so easily distracted. I like that,” Dallas said, smiling once more. He stretched his arms wide along the top of the couch to a more relaxed position. His black leather jacket would have almost blended in if it weren’t for the white t-shirt that rested beneath. He nodded his head before he continued. “It’s just that, the idea of time fascinates me, I suppose. I mean here, right now, you and I, we’re talking, right? Time is still passing, so much so that the minute hand is about to tick again.”

Tick.

“See? I find it interesting that time just never stops, not even for a moment.”

“I see.”

“Well, think about it. I mean, right now, we could be in the middle of a traffic jam where a woman has just died and her husband is stuck inside of their burning car with only two minutes to go before he’s burnt to a crisp and yet, time just keeps tick-tick-ticking by. Pretty neat, huh?”

“I suppose so,” the man said, furiously scribbling in his notepad.

Dallas stared at him intensely, trying to make out what he was writing by watching the movement of his pen.

“Uh-oh, did I say something weird?” Dallas asked, leaning forward in his seat while biting his thumb.

“Never mind what I’m writing, Dallas. I just like to keep notes of our conversations to refer back to, just in case.”

“Like a woman in her mid-twenties keeping ‘receipts’?” Dallas raised two fingers from each hand for an emphasis on the air quotes.

The man nodded enthusiastically with a laugh, “I never thought of it that way but yes, sure. Something like that. It’s good for the both of us in case you lose your train of thought or if I have a follow up question. I do this with every client, you’re not an exception.”

“So, why exactly am I here?”

“Well, as far as I knew it was because your mother called me—”

“Ah yes, mother.”

“Yes, she is a great person, very kind woman.”

“Some would say.” Dallas nodded slightly, squinting his eyes trying to determine where this conversation was going.

“Well, she contacted me yesterday morning. She was concerned about you.”

“Concerned, huh? That’s a first.”

“Have you and your mother not been getting along lately?”

“Irene and me? Oh no, things have been swell.”

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

“How would you infer that?”

“Your tone of voice, sarcastic remarks. Did something happen between the two of you?” The man began tapping his pen onto the edge of his notepad.

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Whatever it is she said to you.” Dallas said, smiling wide while

placing his tanned face between his hands, waiting.

“All she said to me was that she was concerned about you. She said you had been acting different, seemed a little on edge. She said you kept staring at your watch, and if it wasn’t your watch then it was your phone. She said you would leave at random hours of the night and then come home all disoriented—”

“Isn’t that what all people in their early-twenties do? Come back disoriented? Or as normal people would say, drunk?”

“Yes, it is. However, she didn’t say you were drunk or even high. She said you were just acting different. Muttering to yourself a lot. Laughing to yourself. She said you were locking yourself in your room more than usual, something you had never really done before.”

“Excuse me for wanting alone time.”

“Listen, I’m not on anybody’s side here, Dallas. I agree with you completely. We all have our fascinations, all adults go out at night and come back a little different or out of it, I get what you’re saying. I even told Irene this, but she wanted me to see you as precaution, just to make sure there wasn’t anything you may have wanted to talk about that you didn’t want to go over with her.”

“Nothing comes to mind.”

“Well, then, we could sit here in silence for the next half hour if you want to or we could talk about something else. I mean, man-to-man, like a couple of buddies. I’ll even put down the notebook.”

“Like a couple of buddies?” Dallas leaned back in his chair, continuing to hold his gaze.

“Like two guys shooting the shit.”

“No notebooks?”

“None.”

“Well, all right. Hey, have you ever been to the circus?”

“It’s been ages since I’ve been to one. The last time I went to one I must have been in my mid-thirties.”

“You’re how old now, like fifty?”

“Good guess, just turned last week.”

“Well, happy birthday!”

The man laughed softly at Dallas’ break of character. He nodded, “Thank you, thank you very much.”

“Oh anytime. Birthdays are great. You know the last time I went to the circus, it was my birthday. I was six. It was the Midnight Circus—”

“Yes, that’s the one that always came to town, right? Maybe once a year?”

“You got it. It was at this circus on that day that I learned adults are nothing but robots focused on time and growing up. They hate the idea of grown men or women still acting like children or having fun. It was a shocking revelation, but it’s one that has stuck with me my entire life.”

“Did something happen at that carnival that made you believe that?”

“Oh man, everything happened at that carnival. I remember when we first got there, the smell of popcorn hitting my nose followed by elephant shit and beer. But still, that first hit of popcorn, God, it’s different than movie theater popcorn. I always found movie theater popcorn to be so, nauseating, almost. Carnival popcorn, however, that hits differently. You know what I mean?”

“Sure I do,” the man encouraged with a laugh, leaning back in his swivel chair.

“I remember when we walked through the gates, mom, dad, and me. Well really it was more like when I walked through the gates. Mom and dad stayed back pushing my brother, Austin, in his stroller. Even at four-years-old he had them wrapped around his finger far more than I ever could. My parents’ sole focus through the years was always the same thing: Austin and work.”

“What about before Austin was born?”

“Before Austin, hmm, I suppose I was their focus for the first three

years of my life, sure. At least, I'm positive I was for at least an hour or so a day when my parents weren't drowning themselves in work constantly, doing anything they could to avoid me. They always had a nanny for me, even more so when Austin came around—"

"That's pretty standard though, Dallas. Most families will hire a nanny, especially once they have two children and they're working."

"Right, but Austin never had a nanny. Austin had my parents. My parents started working from home to be with him and stuck me with the nannies. Especially after the incident, but that's beside the point."

"I'm sorry, what incident?"

"Oh, you know, boys being boys. Brother-on-brother love."

"I see, care to dive in a little deeper?"

"Not much to say. Austin almost drowned in the pool and I was the only one outside with him. Ultimately, all fingers fell on me. Austin was fine. We were having a 'hold your breath' contest. He won," Dallas said shrugging his shoulders with a dirty, twisted smile.

"Is that funny to you?"

"I mean yeah, kind of. I giggled, didn't I? Anyways, mom and dad went through many nannies throughout the years, especially when it came to me. We had Mary Poppins who didn't last a week, the drinker who I made cry, the smoker I almost set on fire, and the stoner who didn't know where she was. Hell, they even tried teenagers at one point thinking I would connect or relate with them more. There was only one guy that I slightly liked, but he was a train wreck within himself: Nicholas Myers. He may even be dead. Actually, now that I think about it, maybe he's still working at Marco's Grocery in town. Who knows? I just remember he used to bring me everywhere—the arcade, baseball games, the usual stuff. Then as I got older, he would bring me drinking with his friends. Mind you, I was maybe thirteen for that one. I remember the night he brought me to his girlfriend's house and had me wait in the car so he could go and have sex with her. He

told me all the details later on. When mom found out about all the shenanigans we were doing, she wiggled out and cut all ties from me to him. Haven't seen him since. After him there were several more until I was maybe seventeen or eighteen, I've lost track. There's been so many that my age just didn't seem to really matter to my parents, the nannies, hell, even me for that matter. There had been so many through the years. Time and the mind are a crazy thing, man."

"How do you mean? In what sense?"

"Well, we can't travel backwards in time and we can't travel forwards in time. Not yet at least. I guess we'll see what Elon Musk invents next. So, as of now, we can't physically time travel, but our minds can. I can make up scenarios in my head at the drop of a hat." Dallas snapped his fingers while raising his eyebrow slightly. "I can envision myself older with the life I see myself living. I can make up a world where my family doesn't exist. I can invent an alternative reality where I'm married to Nina Dobrev and Mila Kunis living the whole polygamous lifestyle. I can even travel back in time and find myself in an old memory, like the one I was about to mention of the Midnight Circus."

"Ah, yes, the circus. Go on, you were explaining the smell of popcorn and walking in before we broke off."

"Yes, that's right, thank you for paying attention. This was again, about fifteen years ago, back when I was six. I remember wanting to see the animals, the bearded lady, and play the obnoxiously difficult and yet simple-minded carnival games. Mom and dad were too distracted by their precious baby boy to notice that after dad handed me forty dollars, I had slipped away from them. I saw it all that day. I watched in a crowded theater the dancing elephant who could balance on a ball in the center of the ring on the black flooring. I remember watching the lions being whipped by the asshole lion tamer. I even remember a strange looking man juggling on a unicycle and I was

just so impressed by, well, number one, the obvious, but number two, the fact that he was doing this unphased, surrounded by animals and people! The man was amazing!”

“I think you and I saw the same show, Dallas. Going back fifteen years ago that sounds right. The man on the unicycle, he had on clown attire and makeup, right?” The man leaned back in his seat scratching his face slowly, in an almost tranced like state. Dallas stared at him, his left eye twitching, wondering if the pair were thinking of the same thing.

“Yes, exactly!” Dallas said, lifting his hands to his face for demonstration. “He had this rainbow-colored wig, crazy neon orange pants with hot pink polka dots and ridiculously big, red shoes. His face was this stark white, but with the classic colors added to his mouth and eyes. He was kind of husky too, so I think that was even more amazing. The fact that a man of his size could balance so well while juggling and telling jokes to the crowd.”

“He was a pretty decent clown, I suppose.”

“Oh, he was the best. I remember I followed him backstage after the show—”

“You did?”

“I did. I snuck past all the other carnies and followed behind him. I remember seeing him ripping off his wig and I was of course in my young mindset, surprised to see it was a wig. The fact that this man had a full head of normal dark hair was amazing. I remember his arms being beefy, muscular. And his hands were huge! His knuckles were like two large meat mallets or lobster claws, think of something big and that’s what they were.”

“I get it,” the man grumbled, leaning back in his chair. The sun that once peered in through the window behind Dallas had disappeared behind a sky full of dark clouds. Rain began to ping off the windowsill, dripping down in various patterns down the windowpanes. Light-

ning crackled in the sky exuding vibrant stripes of white while a soft rumble echoed in the distance.

“Yeah, I’m sure you do.” Dallas nodded slowly, “Since you were there.”

“Yes, to watch the show.”

“Yes,” Dallas smiled wide, “the show.”

The man’s posture became stiff, “What do you mean?”

“The clown’s name was Larry. I remember watching him light up a cigarette and a guy in a black, elegant if you will, Armani suit came walking up to him. I remember the conversation well.”

“So then, what was the conversation?” He put his hands on his lap, stretching his fingers back and forth over his kneecaps, brushing along the pleaded pants.

“Well, the guy in the suit says to Larry:

‘Are you proud of yourself? Proud of the life you have now?’

Larry, I remember, laughed waving his hand at the guy and said, ‘At least it’s a life. Better than the one I had.’

His brother snapped back, ‘You’re pathetic you know that? My brother, a goddamn carnie! You could have been something! So what you didn’t go to school, you could have worked with dad!’

‘Dad’s a dick.’

‘Dad has done nothing but look out for us both and this is how you repay him? By disowning us and besmirching our family name by being some freak in a carnival?’

‘Watch your words, John.’

‘Let me tell you something, Lawrence, this is the last time I’m showing my face at this hell-hole! You either come home now or give me back all the money I’ve lent you!’

‘I’m not coming home, John.’

‘Then hand over the money.’

‘I don’t have that either.’

‘Well then, what’re we going to do with you? Shall I call Darius? 85

Bryce? Have them come down here and arrest you?

‘Arrest me? Listen here little brother, you’re looking to start trouble at a place you have no business being in.’

‘You also have no business being here.’

‘They’re my family.’

‘I’m your family!’

‘You’re my blood, they are my family.’

‘You want them? You want the freaks? You can have them! They can have you! You are nothing but a worthless piece of shit and the biggest disappointment I’ve ever seen walking! Oh, and that little girlfriend of yours, Mildred? She’s nothing but a two-dollar whore!’

That’s when the jolly clown named Larry snapped. He took little Johnny boy by the neck and slammed him up against the brick walls behind them. He stood there for five minutes laughing maniacally and slapping him all around until he heard me laughing.”

The man sat there frozen, staring at Dallas with a lifeless gaze. Dallas continued, “After Larry saw me, he tossed John to the ground like a sack of potatoes and walked with me throughout the rest of the carnival. We got food, ice cream, and enjoyed some more shows. He’s the one who taught me about time. The fact that time never stops for nobody, regardless of any situation they may find themselves in. It’s what we do with the time we are granted that makes it all worthwhile.”

“That’s a fine story,” the man said as his voice cracked within each word.

“Isn’t it? I found it very handy and useful, last night especially.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, of course, when I killed my entire family. Every last one of them. Irene, Austin, even the patriarch Billy. You wanna know what I truly discovered last night in the midst of the insanity? Clarity. Larry was right. Time didn’t stop. It didn’t matter how much they pleaded,

how much they begged, the amount of blood that flowed from their semi-conscious bodies nor how long it took for the fire to finally engulf the whole house, time just. Kept. Ticking. You know?” Dallas stood to his feet and snapped his fingers while laughing. He passed along a sly smile and stuck up his hands as shooting guns in a playful manner.

“Dallas, what are you talking—”

“It’s funny, we’ve been talking this whole time and you never properly introduced yourself to me, sir.” A lightning bolt shot through the sky, engulfing the room as if it were the sun, blowing the power to the building in the process. The thunder came closer, rolling in faster than before. Dallas squinted his eyes and extended his right hand forward as his other hand rested in his back left pocket, holding onto the handle of a knife, “I’m Dallas Northwood, and you are?”

“Jonathon Fisher.” The man stammered as a tear began to form in the corner of his eye.

“I can’t lie to you, John, we’ve been so honest with each other this whole time. I am here for a reason, you see.” Dallas moved in closer, “Do you know what that clown’s last name was?” The man looked at Dallas with fear lingering in his eyes. “Fisher.”

“Dallas, please—”

Dallas pulled the blade out from behind him and thrust it into the man’s throat in a swift motion. “And just like that, Johnny boy. Time still ticks by,” Dallas whispered in his ear. The man’s eyes fell on him once more as blood began to drip out of his neck. The blade from his knife remained stuck within the center of his throat until John’s gaze finally dropped. Dallas yanked the blade out from his throat and wiped the blood onto the man’s shirt before placing it back into his jacket pocket. He looked back at the clock and waited for the red hand to hit the twelve once more. The minute hand fell on the thirty and he smiled.

YOUNGBLOOD

Jenna Visca

Time is irrelevant
to those who eagerly reached out into the future
and now sit back and count all that they've lost
on worn, calloused hands.

Grief never sleeps,
and so,
neither do we.

THE EFFECTS OF ACCIDENTAL NUCLEAR RELEASES INTO THE ATMOSPHERE ON THE RADIO- CARBON DATING OF VINTAGE WINES PREDATING 1988 (OR WHITE NOISE '99)

Jack Dutt

1. The computer fails.
2. I do not understand
3. Paul had asked for the outcome of a midseason game between the Cincinnati Reds and the Pittsburgh Pirates that took place on July 12th, 1996.
4. It's a simple question SEL, who won the game?
5. SEL's processor repeats the function
6. ...waiting...
7. I do not have that information in my database, Paul. However, I'd be happy to display the game being played currently on Earth. Would you like that, Paul?
8. No thanks SEL, just give me the big moves before bed.
9. Certainly, Paul.
10. In a few hours, SEL gives Paul the update.
11. The designated hitter for the Oakland A-Pluses' has hit a ball up the Eastern Seaboard. The ball is travelling at a speed of 900 km/h. The angle of the hit is around 42.658 degrees relative to

sea level. The radius of the arc is estimated to be between—

12. Thank you, SEL. I get the picture
13. Of course, Paul. Goodnight, Paul, I will awake you at 6:00 AM Earth-relative-time for your daily mining duties.
14. Hey, SEL.
15. Yes, Paul?
16. How long does it take the game data to get to our craft from Earth?
17. Approximately 11 years, 3 months, 8 days, 6 hours, 27 minutes, and 13 seconds, Paul.
18. So back on Earth, the game is probably almost over.
19. That would be an accurate analysis, Paul. However, the Oakland A-Pluses' and the New York Met-Point-O's are almost evenly matched this season. The A-Pluses' have an overall batting average of 0.9999925 and the Met-Point-O's have an overall batting average of 0.9999922. This could indicate the game will carry into extra innings.
20. Great chatter, SEL. You'd do well on AM radio.
21. I do not understand, Paul. Those frequencies are no longer in use since the obsolescence of...
22. Paul rolls his eyes as he turns over.
23. Goodnight SEL.
24. In a different time and space, a cigarette is lit.
25. I don't get this story, is he talking to a calculator or something?
26. It's a computer, sir. Not entirely different from a calculator, but far more complex.
27. Will a reader know that? And why is this Paul character talking to a calculator—
28. Computer, sir.
29. Why is he talking to a computer about baseball?
30. Sir, baseball represents his connection to Earth and how

isolated he is in space. He's on a spacecraft and all he can think about is this game he loves. It's a metaphor.

31. I know it's a metaphor. But metaphors don't sell copies. Nobody watches Westerns because they think John Wayne is actually trying to make a grand statement about humanity, they watch them because they like seeing a cowboy shoot things.
32. Respectfully, sir, I disagree.
33. The publisher's brow furrows as he leans back in his chair.
34. The writer sits straight and stares.
35. You're not going to make any money on this.
36. Okay.
37. And people will hate it.
38. Sure.
39. And you'll never get published again.
40. Whatever you say.
41. The publisher finally takes a drag from the cigarette that was lit two minutes earlier.
42. He pulls out some papers from under one of several stacks.
43. He pushes the copies across the desk.
44. Sign these and you will be a published author.
45. The author glances over the documents furtively, pretending to understand the language.
46. Thank you for this opportunity, I look forward to having you read more of my work.
47. Don't hold your breath.
48. The writer puts on his jacket and heads out the door.
49. Three minutes pass and the publisher ashes his cigarette.
50. In a nearby future, a man and woman sit across from one another.
51. They are on a first date at a chain restaurant next to the bowling alley in the mini mall, five minutes from the nearby multiplex.
52. Suburban fracturing turns the once walkable and green downtown

into a mess of stroads that are under constant construction.

53. Did you know the author of the original novel was actually, um—
54. The man is briefly distracted by a passing plate of fajitas.
55. —he was actually rejected from, like, 23 different publishers before they took on his story
57. I did not know that. Sounds like they all missed out.
58. Yeah, and actually, um, one of the publishers tried to sue him when the book became such a hit because they thought that it, um, bared too close of a resemblance to a story they put out the same year but, um, it actually came out that they had totally cribbed his story and they were basically trying to, uh, scam him and—
59. Wow, I can't believe that. You know my friend actually saw this movie recently and he said—
60. I actually think that the book was way better because, um, the movie left out, like, all the really interesting stuff.
61. Yeah, my friend David said something like that about the book and stuff but he actually liked the movie and he—
62. Yeah I mean they definitely put more mainstream appeal into it like casting Harry Styles and, uh, I feel like in a lot of ways its just hard for film buffs like me when Hollywood insists on these stunt castings and—
63. Yeah, my friend David and I watched a lot of movies together and we actually thought Harry was great in that war movie, the Christopher Nolan one and—
64. Who?
65. ...Christopher Nolan?
66. Oh, no I meant, like, who is David?
67. Oh, he's my friend, I thought I said that.
68. I don't think you did, but, anyways, you like Christopher Nolan?

69. Yeah, I mean, he's okay, kinda film bro-ish, you know?
70. Maybe a little bit, but like, The Dark Knight? Inception?
Interstellar?
71. I mean, sure, all those movies look really cool, but like, all
the characters behave like automatons that deliver
explanations and plot and stuff. And he's like, really bad
at writing women.
72. Well who cares? I mean, no offense—
73. Taken.
74. —but who else is making movies like him?
75. Sorry, I was just saying he's not my personal favorite.
76. This goes on for some time.
77. The man continues to speak his mind unprompted as the woman
strategically assesses what menu item will take the least amount of
time from preparation to ingestion.
78. She orders no drinks.
79. Centuries earlier, a man of myth in a land of Eyre cuts a Black
Rose.
80. She glances to him as blackwater rings form around her.
81. The Hound of Culann waits.
82. The Black Rose feels the rings close tight to her waist.
83. The Hound of Culann digs in his heels.
84. Were I a man, I would lament and sing.
85. And thou are not a man?
86. Not I, not I who slays hounds with strings.
87. And he who slays hounds, who is he?
88. He is the hound, The Hound of Culann.
89. Mo ghile mear, he is no hound.
90. He who cuts roses hast no use of houndstooth.
91. A hound hast been slain, lament for a hound.
92. But do not lament for the Black Rose, she hast no chains.

93. What of thine rings, are thou not bound?
94. Are thou not tied to blackwater?
95. The Black Rose is none of these things,
96. Not bound nor tied,
97. The Black Rose is only a daughter
98. The Black Rose smiles.
99. The Hound laughs.

