“What are memories,” Leah Christianson writes, “if not the shadows we cast on old relics?”

This line from Christianson’s story “Filling Up,” which appears in the pages to come, is just one of the many stunning sentences you’ll find in Issue no. 12. We were delighted to see Christianson think of “relic” in this way, as objects from our lives that we haunt with memory, and we were excited to discover how other writers incorporated that element into their work, as well. Some, like photographer David McCarty, tied it to a scarred and aging man, while others, like poets Christopher McCarthy and Devon Balwit interpreted the element as bone, as human artifact, and used it as an opportunity to explore our fascination with the past.

When we first chose the elements for this issue – relic, kiss, and passageway – we worried that this specific trio of words would be a bit too leading. Would we get dozens of submissions about alluring, illicit affairs, kisses stolen along the shadowy hallways of castles and cathedrals? As it turned out – the answer was no. This issue is filled with writers and artists who surprised us, who made us see and consider the elements in ways we never had before, and we are honored to be able to share their work with you all.

In the pages that follow, you can read a chilling and lyrical retelling of the myth of the sirens (Rhea Abbott’s “The Siren”), an oddly relatable story in which a family eats photographs and buries their dead mother’s chair instead of her body (Drew Pisarra’s “Granny”), an essay in which a young woman makes a personal connection with the Pulse nightclub shooting while trying to
understand her father (Jeanette Geraci’s “Love They’ve Been Denied”), and a poem that had us hooked right from its amusing first lines: “All of us were forced to kiss/ the aunt from Chicago/ even though she only brought us pencils” (Skaidrite Stelzer’s “Primary Lessons”).

This issue also includes stunning artwork from photographers, painters, sculptors, collagists, and digital artists. We were especially interested in the interpretations these artists had of “passageway,” such as Susan Yount’s “Remember Me,” Thomas Gillapsy’s “Choices,” and Ian Kelley’s “Early Morning,” which, besides presenting a literal passageway, also acts, in the artist’s own words, as “a passageway for the viewer to reconnect with magic, wonder, imagination, and childhood.”

Before we go, we’d like to give a hearty welcome to the two new additions to our staff – Poetry Editor Whitney Schultz and Fiction Editor Sarah Wylder Deshpande. Both Whitney and Sarah are terrific writers who also happen to be past contributors to 3Elements Review. They look forward to reading and viewing your work, and we are so happy to have them on board as part of our team.

The elements for Issue no. 13 are THREAD, GLAZE, and MURMUR, and the deadline to submit is later this month on October 31. We’d love for you to be a part of our next issue!

In the meantime, please follow us on Facebook and Twitter for announcements, samples of published work, and inspiration – and please enjoy Issue 12! We’re confident you will love it as much as we do.
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FATHER’S Day 2016 – exactly one week after the shooting at Pulse.

My father, his partner, Tony, and I meet for dinner at a restaurant in Palm Beach Shores. My father and I live only half an hour apart, but we haven’t seen or spoken to each other since he took me out for dinner shortly after my twenty-eighth birthday four months ago.

Tony and my father sit next to each other on one side of the restaurant’s booth, and I sit on the other.

After about twenty minutes of catching each other up,

¹The New York Times
conversation dwindles – my go-to cache of details about the surface of my life has run dry, and apparently, my father’s has, too. I shift the focus off me, off my father.

“Can you guys believe Orlando?” I ask.

I look first at Tony, then at my father, and then at Tony again. “It’s horrible,” Tony says in between bites of a spring roll he and my father ordered to share.

We talk numbers, facts: the staggering death toll, how young many of the victims were.

Tony says that, according to what he’s seen on the news, anti-gay protesters have attempted to picket outside of some of the victims’ funerals.

I turn my gaze back to my father. His face is deeply creased, his complexion sallow. The mane of dark, curly hair he used to pride himself on is thinning and gray, and his eyes – always deep set, but once bright-brown – now look sunken.

My father sits slumped, his mouth a thin, straight line, and fixes his vision on the plate of food in front of him.

He goes quiet.

After my mother filed for a legal separation, my father – in all his grief and confusion – turned cruel.

I remember his spells of misplaced rage: how he would leave my brother James long lists of chores and then scream at him for neglecting to vacuum corners “thoroughly enough.”

On one occasion, my father hit James so hard that he momentarily lost consciousness.

On another occasion, when I talked back, my father dug his fingernails into my cheek, leaving four dark crescents. After he did this a second time, my mother told him that she would report him to the police if I came home looking like this again.

My father was bent to the task of harassing my mother. He would sometimes phone our house repeatedly in the middle of the night, and then hang up when she finally answered.

My mother’s lawyer told her to be careful in dealing with my father – that he was “the type who could go off.”

“There were early signs of emotional trouble and a volatile temper, according to [the attacker’s ex-wife]. [She] described [him] as an abusive husband who beat her repeatedly while they were married. ‘He was not a stable person,’ [she said]. ‘He beat me. He would just come home and start beating me up because the laundry wasn’t finished or something like that.’”

² Washington Post

Although my father dated women for a year or two after the divorce, eventually, he stopped bringing them around.

He didn’t tell us anything directly – he left a dead-end trail of crumbs, a series of clues that amounted to nothing but continued speculation. Boyfriends, who he always introduced as friends, at the house for dinner and sleepovers. Dozens of gay porn sites bookmarked as Yahoo favorites on the family PC.

When I was 15, I found photographs of some grizzly man in a speedo flexing his biceps and demanded that my father and I have an honest conversation once and for all. After several minutes of insisting that he was part of an amateur wrestling league and that the man in the pictures was a fellow member, my father’s resistance weakened.
“When did you know?” I asked.
“I had one experience when I was a teenager. I decided right then and there that I’d close that door,” he said.
“Don’t ever tell a soul,” he said. “Not even under torture.”

My father isn’t a bad man.

Age 3 – with my father in our backyard garden.
A yellow jacket landed in my hair. When I reached up to touch it, it stung my palm. My father gingerly teased out the stinger with a pair of tweezers and lay with me in my twin bed until I stopped crying and fell asleep.
“Once upon a time,” he whispered, “there was a very brave little girl named Jeanette.”

Age 17 – with my father in my grandmother’s hospital room.
She lay connected to a tangle of life support machinery, a feeding tube jammed into the corner of her mouth. She couldn’t move, but she stared directly into my father; a desperate panic flashed in her eyes.
He walked out of the room.
Minutes later, I found him facing a wall in the hospital hallway.
“Dad –” I said, walking toward him. Before my outstretched hand could land on his back, he spun around and collapsed into me.
“I can’t see her like this,” he said, sobbing into my shoulder.
“She just keeps looking at me like she’s trying to say, ‘Help me.’”

Age 24 – with my father at my grandmother’s grave.
He grunted like an animal as he got down in the dirt on his bad, brittle knees to plant red geraniums: his mother’s favorite.

“‘My son . . . was a very good boy, an educated boy, who had a child and a wife, very respectful of his parents,’ said [the attacker’s father].”

“Following the shooting, [the attacker’s] father . . . said his son was angered after recently seeing two men in public kissing and later released a video saying that God should be the one to decide punishment for homosexual behavior.”

About twelve years ago – when I was 16 or 17 years old – my father told me that sometimes, he barebacked with strangers in hopes that he’d contract HIV.
If I knew that he was meeting up with someone (who he’d likely met at a club or on an M4M website), I’d always say, “Be safe.”
I’ve heard it said that the means by which someone commits suicide – for example, overdosing on sleeping pills versus lighting himself on fire – is often directly proportional to what he believes he deserves.

My father’s body is a warzone, his T-Cells under constant attack.
I can no longer keep track of everything that’s wrong with his health: Ulcerative Colitis. Night sweats. Swollen lymph glands. Hypothyroidism. A severely enlarged prostate.
He has lost three or four inches of height to Osteoporosis.
He is a fossil, a relic, a meager vestige of the vibrant man he was even a decade ago.
“The medication I’m on now is terrible,” he once said.
“Well, you obviously have to switch,” I said.
“I asked my doctor how long I have to be on it for. He said,

---

³ The New York Times
⁴ Time
‘How long do you want to live?’

My father will never know his three grandchildren; James no longer speaks to him at all.
I force myself to check in with him once every few months.
Last year, I visited him at his condo in Palm Beach Shores; he gave me the grand tour. When I went into his bedroom, I immediately noticed framed photographs of James and me as children hanging on the wall directly across from his bed.

Things about my father that I know for certain:
He hurt my brother and me.
He loved my brother and me.
He loves my brother and me.
He is almost 70 years old.
He is sick.
He is mostly alone.

One thing about my father that I’ll never know for certain:
Things could have turned out better for him.

“Mina Justice was sound asleep when she received the first text from her son, Eddie Justice, who was in [Pulse Nightclub] when [the attacker] opened fire.
This is the conversation she had over text message with her 30 year old son:
‘Mommy I love you,’ the first message said. It was 2:06 a.m.
‘In club they shooting.’
Mina Justice tried calling her son. No answer.
Alarmed and half awake, she tapped out a response.

‘U ok’
At 2:07 a.m., [Eddie] wrote: ‘Trapp in bathroom.’
Call police.’
Then at 2:08: ‘I’m gonna die.’”

I imagine my father as a teenager: a chubby Catholic schoolboy who worked a paper route to pay for a nose job – who hid the blush on his face and the erection in his gym shorts every time he changed in the school locker room.

She sent a flurry of texts over the next several minutes.
‘I’m calling them now.
U still in there
Answer your damn phone
Call them
Call me.’”

I imagine my father as a man who’d been openly gay all his life: lying in a hospice bed in 1983 – covered in a violent bloom of purple lesions.

‘At 2:39 a.m., [Eddie] responded:
‘Call them mommy
Now.’
He wrote that he was in the bathroom.
‘He’s coming
I’m gonna die.’”

I imagine my father as a healthy thirty-year-old man at a gay
nightclub: strong and limber, hips swiveling with abandon to the rhythm of merengue, sweat dripping into his eyes, tongue lost in a stranger’s open mouth.

“[Mina] Justice asked her son if anyone was hurt and which bathroom he was in.
‘Lots. Yes,’ he responded at 2:42 a.m.
When he didn’t text [again], she sent several more messages.
‘Text me please,’ she wrote.
‘No,’ he wrote four minutes later. ‘Still here in bathroom. He has us. They need to come get us.’” ⁸

I imagine my father as a healthy thirty-year-old man at a gay nightclub: a hostage. A victim. A wounded body steeping in a pool of its own blood.

“At 2:49 a.m., she told him the police were there and to let her know when he saw them.
‘Hurry,’ he wrote. ‘He’s in the bathroom with us.’
She asked, ‘Is the man in the bathroom wit u?’
At [2:51] a.m. . . . a final text from her son: ‘Yes.’” ⁹

“A GoFundMe page has been established to collect money for [Eddie Justice’s] funeral. ‘[He] loved his mother,’ the page notes, ‘and was a momma’s boy at heart.’” ¹⁰

I imagine the fierce, aching love that Eddie Justice’s mother must have felt the first time she looked into her son’s eyes.

“I imagine the fierce, aching love that the attacker’s mother must have felt the first time she looked into her son’s eyes.

“Cord Cedeno, a customer at the Orlando club, told MSNBC on Monday that [the attacker] tried to get in contact with him through Grindr, a dating application for gay and bisexual men — but that he blocked [the attacker] ‘because he was creepy.’
Cedeno said that after [the attacker] killed 49 people and wounded 53 others at Pulse early Sunday, ‘I recognized him off Grindr.’

‘That’s not his first time there,’ Cedeno said. ‘He’s been there several times. I know that for a fact.’
An FBI official told NBC News that investigators are reviewing similar reports, as well as statements by members of Orlando’s gay community who said they recall having seen [the attacker] at the LGBT club several times.
At least four regular customers of Pulse told the Orlando Sentinel on Monday they had seen [the attacker] there before. One of them, Ty Smith, told the newspaper he had seen him there at least a dozen times.

‘Sometimes he would go over in the corner and sit and drink by himself, and other times he would get so drunk he was loud and belligerent,’ Smith told the newspaper

Kevin West, another frequent patron of the club, told the Los Angeles Times that [the attacker] had messaged him via the gay dating app Jack’d over the course of a year. They met only one time, by chance: [on the] morning [of Sunday, June 12th].
West told the newspaper he was dropping off a friend at the nightclub when he saw [the attacker] — a man he recognized but didn’t know by name — crossing the street with a cellphone and

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⁸ Associated Press
⁹ Associated Press
¹⁰ Associated Press
wearing a dark cap at about 1 a.m., roughly an hour before the carnage began.

‘He walked directly past me. I said, Hey, and he turned and said, Hey, and nodded his head,’ West told the newspaper. ‘I could tell by the eyes.’”

I look at a close-up photograph of the attacker and do what I often do: cover one side of his face with my hand, examine the exposed half, and then switch.

His eyes in the picture are dark, heavy-lidded, fringed with long lashes, and framed by thick, arch-less brows.

His right eye looks impenetrable in its meanness. But his left eye – a passageway – holds a warm, wet, beckoning depth of feeling.

If I saw this eye out-of-context, isolated from the face of a man who I knew to be a mass murderer, it would look to me like the eye of a person in pain – the sort of pain that I’ve recognized in the eyes of many other men:

A turbulence more pitiful than menacing. A fragility. A wordless plea for love they’ve been denied.

¹¹ NBC News
Say a word that opens every mouth from under us—cradles crayfish and silent macrophytes, spills minnows through quartz passageways. Pigeons huddle on a February wire. Trains pass along each other’s lengths. Foals born days apart—in early spring—stand as relics, clasped beneath full grasses. Raw pencil marks bend—curve upward into parallel moons. Rumbling seizures fold beige bear hide foothills. Clear waves breathe down the front of white shirts. Salt of sweat. Your kiss.
You left your car on the road’s edge
to skim the shore while I stayed above,
blew me a kiss
as you laddered down rocks
for conchs and cockles,
the ruined houses of the submerged,
those relics that reassure our pockets
when our fingers run sifting through.

Leaning against the car door
when the first wave fisted,
I knew what was too late to know.
So quick no human sea-wrack—
just milky settling and a pulling back.
The second rose, monstrous petal,
blossoming out of its bed.
My legs, those slow instruments, froze;
my fingers sought harbor in coat’s pocket, finding
your keys, tiny treasures of escape
you must have dropped in
before you went down.
I jumped

in the car, floored,
sped, roil sloshing up the rearview.

They call it the open road,
but it’s only one long passageway:
behind, the color of liquid ash,

ahead,
grey undulations
of the road I’d ride,
I knew,
drowning,
the rest of my life.
I see fuzzy kids
attached to lion backpacks
straining against
their leashed tails,
fearful parents
gripping them tight
like prey
grazing uncomfortably
in open fields.

I feel your invisible need
to keep ahold of me
while I stand at the end of
Pismo Beach pier
for a sunset picture
I wish to memorialize alone,
because true photos require
a taker who remains a lost relic

obsured in the background,
a loose extension of self,

persona undocumented.

I wonder why we hang on
to the very things we should let go of.

Leaping into the ether,
I time my jump

at a wave crest
to gain the most depth

while you clutch the railing,
calling to sea for safe passageway.

I once saw a shark-bitten man
the coast guard dragged in,
thigh torn open, separating his
hip bone from his leg bone,
ball out of socket,
and all I could think of
was that nursery rhyme
connecting our cinching
extremities to our torsos like
marionettes, the anatomy we

guard as self-possession
but also fiercely share,

lingering as saltwater taffy—
an abrasive, sandy kiss

receding into solitary moon
and tidal crescendo.

The man was already
exsanguinated,

his lifeblood slipped free
from his femoral artery,

body light as driftwood, dead
or repurposed, he seemed to
wear a wetsuit of contentment:

a vessel with pieces capsized
upon land, pieces oceanic—

at peace with being allowed
to swim out into the unknown

for a little while,
and tumble home different.
Floral Wrinkles - Rose
Aubrielle Hvolboll

Floral Wrinkles
Aubrielle Hvolboll
ON the day they put Spencer in the ground, I held on tight to Daniel’s hand. We hadn’t spoken in years but as they put his best friend’s brother six feet below the dirt, my hand found its way to his trembling fingers. On my other side, Annette sat very still. October had made her pale already, and her eyes seemed even redder against that paper skin. After a while, I grabbed her hand too. What a funny sight the three of us must have made, sitting together as though we were kids again. Ones told that they were grown, holding onto each other in hopes of being anchored in something familiar. Strange, to be meeting again like this.

At the reception, Will walked around thanking everyone for coming to his brother’s funeral. His face didn’t seem right. It bothered me that I couldn’t place the difference, although I suppose that is what loss does. Changes a person in some obvious way that you can’t put your finger on.

“He would have been happy to see you,” he said. What a strange way to put it, I thought. A hug seemed like a good idea, but my arms didn’t agree. Will moved along, and I realized that the difference was in his eyes. They did not bother mimicking emotions the rest of his face pretended to feel.

Annette and I drove together. On the ride home, we listened to the radio and commented on how short we heard the fall had been. We talked about our lives in other places and felt guilty when we laughed, stopping quickly.

When we got to my parents’ house, I waited for Annette to park her car and scale its steep driveway with me. This was where we congregated in high school—not only due to its central location, but because my parents opened up our home to anyone and everyone willing to jump in. Both from large homes, they hadn’t known how to fill the silence when a job transfer landed us in the middle of the country, far away from the wonderful disarray that is extended family. So my friends became their new agents of anarchy, filling our house with orange warmth and teenage noise. We would sit on the floor of my kitchen and eat homemade pretzels or watch movies in the basement, sneaking a beer when we could and feeling drunk regardless. If I caught a ride somewhere else—although we rarely found occasion to leave—it was understood that my chauffeur would come inside and endure one of my father’s bad jokes while sampling what my mother

He held his wide shoulders back, standing the way Spencer had tried to. They were Irish twins, but they might as well have been identical. Always the competitor, Spencer used to revel in this size similarity. “I’m coming for ya! Soon I’ll be bigger!”

I held the knot a few seconds too long. Will didn’t seem to mind.

“Your tie is crooked,” I replied, reaching out to straighten it.

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made for dinner.

“I actually have to get going,” said Annette.

Mascara remnants had settled below her eyes, drawing spindly webs that could have been wrinkles. *So that’s how you’ll look in twenty years,* I thought. She was beginning to resemble her mother.

*Funny,* I thought. *She’s going to hate that.*

“I’ll see you tomorrow. We’ll get coffee before your flight.”

I wanted to wipe the makeup from under her eyes—to smack her arm and tell her to stop being stupid. We weren’t coffee date friends. Her cell phone buzzed and she dove for her purse, an Iowa State alumni lanyard still tied around its outer strap.

“This is Annette,” she spoke smoothly into the phone and it still wasn’t right.

I stepped out of the car and she waved through the rolled-up window before speeding away. The driveway was steeper than I remembered, but at least it wasn’t snowing yet. There were mid-winter days when I’d step out of the car and start sliding back down, grasping at car antennas and air, praying for a gravity-induced deliverance that didn’t involve sacrificing my tailbone. Once, Spencer’s car couldn’t make it up the driveway so he and Will climbed up on their hands and knees. They were drenched when they reached the door. My mother shrieked—“*We HAVE to do something about that driveway!*”—and ordered the boys to “*hand those sopping excuse for pants over*” that very instant. They sat in their boxers for the next hour while she dried their jeans.

Spencer’s underwear was emblazoned with Captain America shields and Will’s ears stayed pink even after recovering from the cold outside.

“Where’s Annette?” my mother asked as I walked in the door.

I was home over summer break after my junior year of college. I hadn’t planned on being back. But an internship had fallen through and I’d ended up at my parents’ place, working odd jobs and wondering how many hours it would take to hitchhike to Florida.

Annette’s birthday was the night before. Halfway through her party, Spencer disappeared. I’d driven home with a nagging feeling, growing angrier with myself as I mentally shuffled through the places he could have gone. He showed up at my parents’ house the next day while I was washing dishes, striding in like he brought the sunshine.

“How you doing?” he asked casually, pouring himself a glass of water.

“Fine. Fine and dandy,” I answered, not looking up from the stacks in the sink.

“Have a good rest of your night?” he asked, taking a seat at the
counter.
“Yes.”
“Good.”
“Yes. It was good.”
Sudsy bubbles floated in the air. I remember swatting them.
“Do you wanna get some lunch—”
“Where did you go?” A cup slipped out of my hands and cracked. “Last night?”
He had somewhere else to be, he said while examining his fingernails. I nodded and took the glass of water from him.
“I’m not done with that.”
“Yes, you are.”
I put the cup in the sink, careful not to break this one.
“You’re mad.”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“Oh, I don’t know. Actually, that’s a great question. Why would I be mad? Jesus, Spencer. I know you’ve got a lot of uncharted vagina to discover, but you could have said goodbye!”
Spencer’s cup toppled into the water, embarrassed for me.
“Uncharted—?” Spencer stuck his fist into his mouth, biting at his pointer finger’s knuckle. He rocked back and forth. He had been sitting right there.
“It’s not funny! Fuck you, Spence, stop laughing! It’s not…”
But I couldn’t follow my own request and he knew it. Soon we were both laughing so hard that we became noiseless, shaking things. He stood, wiping his eyes and wrapping his arms around me. I scooped bubbles from the sink and rubbed them in his hair.

“Grace. Are you all right?” asked my mother.

I don’t know what I wanted her to ask, but that certainly wasn’t it.
“I don’t like eating without your dad,” she continued. “Let’s wait.”

My mother could have whole conversations with herself. And I knew I should respond, knew I wasn’t the only one feeling empty and so heavy all at once. We both reached for our wine, then pulled back.
“How’s work?” she asked, a question normally reserved for my father.

I’d forgotten I had a job. There were things—bills and happy hours and traffic jams—waiting for me in Los Angeles. They were new enough to forget.

Ah, if only the road home was a one-way street.

We let the chicken grow cold, sitting in silence until the doorbell rang.

I recognized the bulky shadow before I opened the door. Its owner stood there, hands shoved deep in wool pockets.

“That driveway, man,” Will said. The overhead porch light stretched lengthy shadows down his face.

“Are you busy?” he asked, scratching a pink earlobe.
I turned around to find my mother standing there, my coat in her outstretched arm.

“It’s good to see you, Will,” she said, squeezing his arm quickly before closing the door behind us. He stared at the space she had filled, as though someone else had been there. I scanned the street for his car.

“I was out of gas,” he said, turning away.

So we crawled into my mother’s two-door car and I almost felt like laughing when I saw how much space he took up. He used to
fit better.

“What?” he asked, adjusting the seat until it lay nearly flat. I tucked my left foot under my leg and put the car in Drive.

We remained like that for hours as I circled our small town. The radio looped the same songs and I thought of all the times we had driven these roads in high school, debating dance dates and college choices years before.

“My mom won’t stop cleaning,” he said to the dashboard after we passed the high school a third time. “Everything in our house—she keeps wiping it all down.”

When he started to cry, it shouldn’t have surprised me. I suppose I was just used to that big shape sealing itself up, rather than letting anything seep out.

“Do you think...?” he began, never finishing. Right then, I couldn’t think of anything but his mother finding Spencer like that, in the bathroom where she had given him baths as a baby and saw him shave for the first time. I wondered if she ran or if she stayed and stared. As if either option would make it less true.

“It wasn’t so long ago, was it?” he asked. “That we were all here, together.” He wiped his nose on his sleeve, blurting out a desperate laugh. “That was this lifetime, wasn’t it?”

“I can’t remember the last time,” Will said, only to trail off again.

The only other time I’d seen Will cry was at the Wrestling State Championship our senior year. He and Spencer both made it to the semi-finals. Spencer was going to win. They were both good—great, actually—but Spencer was better and it had never been more obvious. I had gone outside for some reason and there was Will, leaning against the brick wall with tears in the corners of his eyes.

“Shit, Grace.” He tightened his sweatshirt’s hood around his head. “Can’t sneak up on a guy like that.”

“Not what you think,” he continued, shuffling his feet. “He needs this. He’ll win it and they’ll all see and he’ll go somewhere good. Now, it’ll be all right.”

He looked up. He looked happy.

“I just want him to be good.”

Now, his granite face held eyes that didn’t seem to be looking anywhere. Why should they? What was worth looking at now that the person he’d spent his life protecting was gone? Without Spencer, there were no expressions for Will to offer.

“I should have called more. I should have let him know,” I said. Will shook his head. “He wouldn’t have let you.”

He was probably right.

I hadn’t seen Spencer since I graduated from college. Only a few years ago, really, but it felt like centuries had passed since I’d been a recent graduate with big plans.

We met at the little bar near my house, and I found it funny that the place we had tried to sneak into as high school graduates was so lackluster once legal. He only had one year of school left but was acting like a freshman, proud of excessive drinking and failed exams. His college was in the South and he had picked up a bit of an accent. When he told me he’d lost his scholarship, I didn’t believe it. It wasn’t his voice that told me.

Still, when he leaned in, I let him. He was forceful that time, as though my kisses were something that he needed, rather than enjoyed.

“Let me help,” I whispered, trying not to plead.
“I don’t think you can,” was his wilting reply.
That was the first time I hated him, sitting in that sad bar,
seeing toughness that sat on him like a tattoo. Unnatural, but
there to stay.
He said my name, the “A” too drawn out. It didn’t sound safe
in his mouth anymore.
After that, I didn’t call. I stopped cutting holes in my chest in
an effort to fill his. I got angry and stayed that way. You can’t fill
him, I told myself. He is bottomless. But he had found the bottom.
I never thought sadness had such a tight grip on him. I never
thought.
They were still there, those holes, and when Will’s sobs hit a
high note I felt their sutures rip. I pulled the car over and rubbed
his back, whispering clichéd things in hopes that they would stitch
us back together.
He fell asleep eventually. It wasn’t until his heavy breath filled
the car that I got back on the road. The streets were empty and
that was fine. When we reached his house, I didn’t wake him. If I
looked quickly enough, I could trick myself into seeing Spencer in
the passenger seat, as though this were some elaborate scheme
to bring us home. It wasn’t hard. They had the same silhouette,
the same State Championship ring shoved over knobby knuckles,
the same thick hair. I reached out to touch it.
Funny, I thought, feeling its waves, that this is all I have left of
you.
I sketched more features upon Will, as if he were a canvas.
Drew a sharper jaw line. Penciled in the missing freckles. What
are memories, if not the shadows we cast on old relics? But even
the best artist in the world couldn’t capture the enigmatic chaos
burrowed within Spencer. It was never for Will to wear. So I shook
him awake, enjoying the way his eyelids fluttered as they opened.
As Will fumbled for the door’s handle, I thought about telling
him I would call. He crawled out of the tiny car and tapped its
hood twice, the way they always used to.
The drive home was short. I probably rolled the window
down and turned the radio up, but to be perfectly honest I don’t
remember a bit of it.
I awoke to black marks on my pillow. So I stripped the bed and
carried the sheets downstairs quickly, knowing if I didn’t wash
them soon, the stains would set. They probably already had.
Expecting my mother, I was surprised to see a blonde bob
bopping around my kitchen.
“Oh, you’re up,” Annette said, bowl in hand and flour on her
cheek. “Can you point me in the direction of some chocolate
chips?”
She turned towards the pantry, ignoring the wad of blankets in
my arms.
“There’s coffee,” she called into the laundry room, voice
muffled. She emerged from the pantry when I returned, proudly
brandishing a bag of Nestle chips.
A thankful mumble escaped my lips.
“Sit,” she demanded.
Pouring doughy circles onto a sizzling pan, Annette hummed a
familiar song and swayed her hips along, each move deliberate. If
anything, Annette was a girl who took her time.
“How are you?” she asked as the pancakes cooked, fixng me
with an iron gaze—her specialty—that did not offer the option of
looking away.
“I’m sad.”
“I know. Have a pancake.”

And for the second time in the past twenty-four hours, someone I loved handed me a steaming plate of food. The hot ceramic felt nice on my fingers. Annette passed me a fork, and I quickly shoveled a piece of pancake into my mouth. The chocolate hit my tongue with a surprising sweetness, although I’m not sure what I was expecting.

The first time I knew I loved Spencer, I was eating chocolate chip pancakes. We were in an IHOP after a homecoming dance. Annette was pretending to be asleep against the wall, much to the chagrin of her mopey date. Spencer and Will were debating who could tap their dad out faster. I was still dating Daniel; he was pouting because I’d made him take his hand off my leg.

“Hold up. Genius idea. Give me one,” said Spencer, grabbing a mini pancake off my plate and ignoring my shooing hands. He wrapped it around one of his Tater Tots.

“You’re a chef now?” Will said. “That’s not gonna help you keep weight class.”

“Sweet and salty. It’ll be delicious. Try,” Spencer said, holding the pancake roll in front of my face while suspending his giant body over the table. I leaned back and he pushed forward.

I’m sure I made a disgusted face and I’m sure I took a bite anyway. But somehow, he dropped the rest of his gooey creation and it fell onto the leg of my dress. It was my favorite shade of purple and I remember thinking, I should be angry, I should be mad, that’s going to stain, look how shiny his eyes get when he laughs.

He dunked his napkin in water and ran to my side of the table, cursing as the color rose in his face, apologizing over and over. Our friends laughed as he tried to sponge the syrup off my dress. I knew it wouldn’t work but I let him scrub. When he looked up, I knew it quickly and all at once.

“How are you?” I asked Annette, reminding myself to return the question.

“Oh, my dear,” she exhaled deeply, planting her chin firmly in a cupped palm. “I’m suffering from a very small case of heartbreak.”

She stood, giving her head three little shakes, and headed for the coffee pot.

“Nothing that won’t heal eventually,” she said before filling up my cup.

We finished eating and meandered upstairs. Annette rifled through my closet, choosing an outfit for my flight back to Los Angeles, while I groomed invisible lint from my sheets. The clink of hangers and her mumbles about my lack of fashion sense lulled me into something long gone, something as familiar and comfortable as favorite blue jeans.

Perhaps the passageway back in time had always been hidden in my childhood closet.

“Oh, god. You still have all these?” A rustle of plastic and a series of little shrieks ensued as Annette unearthed a pile of shimmering silk and frilly taffeta, still wrapped in plastic bags. Dresses left over from high school dances—of course my mother saved them all.

“I remember this,” said Annette, peeling the plastic veneer off purple silk. As it slid through her fingers, I recognized the look on her face from when we first plucked it off some sale rack years before.
“Let’s see if it still fits,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows.
Arguing with her was futile, so I pulled the dress over my head. Surprisingly, it slid smoothly down my body and flowed cleanly to my feet.
“I think you’re one of the only people who’s gotten tinier since high school,” Annette sighed. “Bitch.”
I stepped in front of the mirror. With my hair scraped back into a messy knot and my face bare of makeup, I looked so young. Funny, I thought. When I first wore that dress, I’d felt so old. I squinted at my reflection. The stain was still there, but the tinier I made my eyes, the less noticeable it became. I tightened them still, turning back the years. Soon, I began to look like the girl who found a purple dress so many years ago. So excited to be growing up, as though donning lipstick and silk was all it took. There she was. As if not a day had gone by.

A pack of Days Work chewing tobacco sits on the corner nightstand beside my father’s bed. He spits into his tin cup
I am filled with Disgust and Love. I feel a burning in my arm
You can’t have a kiss without the spit
He puts a wad of tobacco on the sting
Surely, the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me.
There is no pretense in darkness, in the trees, outside his room, with their needles that sting
When the hospital hour comes, I am working his yards. I’m not there to squeeze his hand
My father’s breathing, slow and filled with whistles and tones, sounds like kids playing soccer in a field far away
I swallow while the mower runs and stand beside a fig tree where a wasp walks along a milky passageway

My father’s pickup truck, the trash bags in the back the rakes, his weeder yet wet with grass. All these relics

Now, take away my faith. Tie up the bags of leaves and grass. Take them to the roadside where pines cast shadows

Everywhere I turn. The possibility of twisting or deceit is impossible, on glistening days

I insist, my faith is unbound and authentic

I cannot understand this, how my father, strong all his life, was killed by a mosquito.

Becket’s elbow has returned from Hungary, poor Becket, who learned that confronting kings will cut life short, but perhaps did not know that heroic dismemberment would be a readier passageway to fame than integrity. Excommunication is only as fearsome as God is fearsome. Once that distant bastard threatens or cajoles less than flesh and blood on earth, watch out.

Poor Becket, cut down in his very sanctuary, a place as good as any other. Even with skull split, legend goes, he delivered a rousing speech before blood and brains stained stones. We haven’t stopped retelling since, incarnating and exsanguinating the unlucky priest for centuries.
Now his elbow rejoins his skull in pilgrimage, Hungary to Canterbury and back. Go ahead, kiss the relic, ask it to perform a miracle, silence dogs, ward off incubi, find lost cheese, maintain Europe’s Union.
Someone has left orange peels to shrivel on the steps down to the ossuary.

From the dim passageway below, a breath of air whispers a damp invitation, a cool incantation that offers no excuses for the bare relics within, the tannin-stained bones in grotesque pyramids, peaks crowned by hollow skulls, empty eye sockets and slack jaws offering open-mouthed kisses.

One skeleton stands supported by rusty wires, a dusty scythe propped against his clavicle.

Below his Capuchin robe a sign leans against his shins: As I am now, so you shall be.

We surface, suddenly chilled, as streetlights shiver alive in Rome’s twilight.
The summer heat tried to punish me for coming back, but I was barely sweating by the time I got to Alex’s. I had to ring a few times before he finally answered the door. He’d just woken up. He wore a pair of baggy basketball shorts and nothing else. The tattoo he’d gotten when he was in high school—AGUIRRE, our surname—sagged on his nearly 30 body, a relic of a boyhood falling further and further back. It was about 2 p.m.

I’d moved away for college and stayed away for work—and my girlfriend. I hadn’t been back in El Valle for almost three years, hadn’t seen Alex in nearly four. Still, once I knew I was visiting, I held off on getting a haircut because I wanted to get it cut the way I used to, by my cousin.

I repeated motions I hadn’t performed since I was a teenager. We dapped, hugged; I pulled off my t-shirt as we walked towards his bathroom. I sat on his toilet while he pulled his kit out from beneath the sink. I was back.

“All right, dogg,” he said, still wiping sleep from his eyes. “How do you want it?”

“Same as always, cuz.” I lifted my right hand to my head and ran my fingers through my hair. “Two on the sides, scissors up top, and fade it in.”

He nodded, cleared his throat, and turned on his machine.

Alex started with the left side of my head. The machine struggled at first to get through the thick growth I’d cultivated over the past year. So many times I’d had to fend off Sarah, tell her I was waiting to cut my hair once I was back in my hometown. I told her it was just how we did things my neighborhood—how I’d done it for most of my life, even though Alex was only a few years older than I was. I told her she wouldn’t understand. She shrugged but didn’t concede.

“It’s just getting out of control,” she said. “You’ve gotten it cut around here tons of times, haven’t you?”

I didn’t want a fight, so I didn’t challenge her. I didn’t tell her how, most of the times, I just trimmed my own hair—with varying results—when she traveled to Boston or New York for work. I didn’t bring up the one time I went to a barbershop in Portland and the guy nodded like he knew what I’d asked for, but, when it came to it, he ran the machine through different parts of my head, asked, “That good?” and then shrugged and kept cutting when I would say, “No.” The memory of the cacophonic awkwardness sent waves of embarrassment through me for weeks after.

I told myself I’d never suffer that again. I told Sarah she didn’t get me, and that there wasn’t anything more to talk about.

“So how you been, man?” I asked Alex. I could feel the left side of my head breathe, and part of me wanted to stop right then and go outside to let the hot wind kiss it.
“Been all right.” His words were muffled and distorted by the buzz-humming so close to my ear. “Work at the hotel is slow right now, but that’s always how it is. Tourists only come to mess with us when they think they can handle the weather, you know?”

I knew he wasn’t really asking, but the question swelled in the absence of my response. I felt like I needed to say something, anything.

“Well, hey, I’m here, right?” I forced a laugh into the air. Thankfully, Alex caught it. He chuckled and cleared his throat. “True,” he said. “But that’s different, you know?” He motioned for me to turn so he could move to the back of my head. “You’re still family. You come back ‘cause this is home, you know? These tourist-ass people, though, these old farts, they don’t come for anything, really. They don’t come from anywhere, either, you know? It sounds crazy but that’s how I see it.”

My chin was pressed to my chest, but I mustered an “uh huh.” He moved the machine away from the back of my head.

“Like if you ain’t gonna be here when shit gets hot, then we ain’t want you here. Period. You know?” His tone didn’t change, nor did he raise his voice, but I sensed a change. Almost like I could feel his pulse rising.

“It’s good to see my mom and dad again,” I said, without turning to look at him.

“Word.”

That’s it. That was all he offered. I stared at the wall and thought about Sarah and me. We’d planned to take our vacation days in January to be out of Portland for at least two weeks. She really wanted to go to Mexico and I really wanted her to make her happy, but I was uneasy about going—to where my grandmother lived for all of her ninety years, where both my parents were born and dreamed they, too, would return as their final resting place—as a tourist. I turned to look at Alex.

He blew into his machine and hair sprayed out like black dust. It was like I wasn’t there.

“All right, lemme fade you in.”

He didn’t notice my silence, or he noticed but didn’t mind. Maybe his frustrations stemmed from his own self-dissatisfaction. Living in Maine, I’d definitely met my fair share of people who identified with my birthplace by responding, “Oh, I vacation in Arizona,” or “My parents retired there,” or, sometimes, “Jesus, what was it like being Mexican in a place like that?” The truth was, in my neighborhood, we stuck to our own. I didn’t become a stranger in a strange land, really, until high school. Despite Desertwood High being mostly Mexican kids, I was the sole ambassador of my people in the college prep courses. I always had to be different.

Alex faded in both sides and the back. Then he touched it all up with a straight razor. Neither of us spoke. Once he sprayed the rest with water and started trimming the top with scissors, the absence of the machine was too much for me and I had to break it.

“So.” I was already regretting that I’d chosen to speak. It felt like a weakness, like I was apologizing for myself—apologizing for my departure, absence, and return all at once. “How’re things around the hood?” I forced out.

“You know, same ol’ shit.”

I waited for him to say more. He wouldn’t. Part of me knew this, because I’d grown up with Alex and he’d never been much of a talker. Still, I felt my body tense. He knew I’d been gone, why wouldn’t he just fill me in, make small talk, anything? He kept
snipping, with subtle rhythm that I would’ve ignored except he
also started beatboxing with his mouth as he snipped. I couldn’t
deal.

“Nothing ever changes around this fuckin’ place, huh?”
Alex chuckled, I think. He motioned for me to turn around so
he could get all angles of my head. I couldn’t be sure, but felt like
he was mocking me. I felt like a child again, trying to pick fights
with older kids in my neighborhoods, kids who’d want to mess
with me if I was ever walking home from school alone or declining
an invitation to play basketball, deciding to stay home and read
instead. Fuck them, all of them.

“But hey, I guess, that’s kinda comforting, right? I mean, it’s
cool to know I can always come home and there ain’t gonna be
anything surprising.”

The snipping stopped. Over my right shoulder, I thought I could
feel Alex stunned. Had this gotten to him? Did he realize that
not all of us had the luxury of being dreamless?

Some of us were
compelled to get the hell out of our crappy dead-end hometowns.
I knew early on that I didn’t want to die in El Valle. Despite being
born and raised here, I never felt like a native son. It felt like
nothing could be worse than being stuck somewhere you didn’t
belong, and I was aware that it could happen to me, if I let up.

“You comin’ to the bonfire tonight?”
“What?” I turned. I was sure I’d misheard.

Alex was looking at his phone. He’d stopped cutting to attend
to his social life?

His eyes still on his phone, he said, “Your dad just texted me to
make sure I bring my guitar tonight to the bonfire out in El Campo.
Are you gonna be around for it?” He smiled.

I’d been smacked across the face with warmth, and I’d’ve felt
guilty if I wasn’t so rapt by the odd details: “guitar,” “bonfire,” “El
Campo.”

“You play the guitar?” I barely got the words out. It felt like my
mouth would never close again and I might just walk through the
rest of life looking and feeling like a dumbfounded jackass.

Alex laughed.

“Yeah, dogg. I mean, I’m playin’ guitar now ‘cause mi tío ain’t
got anyone else to strum, but usually I’m on drums.” He mimed
with his hands. “Makin’ beats, cookin’ meats, charming chamacas
like sweets.” He mimed a drum solo finish, laughed some
more. With each of his laughs I felt lighter, as though Alex were
expanding the earth with his self-propelling delight.

Was this how life was made when you don’t pay attention? A
series of small details that collect over time and form an event,
a defining characteristic. The cousin who had been the brother I
never had; the person who taught me how to shoot a jump shot
and how to steal candy from convenient stores; the person I once
feared I’d become if I slacked in high school. He stood in front of
me, after so much time had passed and so little contact kept, and
he was all right. Not terrifying nor inspiring, but alive and almost
beautifully so.

The sweat on my face dragged bits of hair down my cheek.
Alex looked at me with promise.

“Y-yeah, I’ll come.”

“Word!” Alex said. “Now lemme finish makin’ you look good.
You know, it’s mostly family at these bonfires, but sometimes
friends come and sometimes there’re some fine ladies there,
huh?”

I laughed. I felt like I wanted to cry. Alex ran a comb through
my hair like a blessing I wasn’t sure I’d earned.
“I’m just playin,’” Alex said. “Mi tía told me you got a girl already. She fine or what?”

I looked down at Alex’s bathroom floor and saw months of growth scattered about. I felt closer and further away from the world, like I was hearing an echo of my own voice after it’d bounced off some distant body and returned.

“Yeah, man. She’s great,” I sighed. “Wanna hear something kinda crazy? She didn’t want me to wait ‘til I was back home to cut my hair.”

Alex banged his scissors against the comb—tas-tas-tas—and shook his head.

“That’s no good, dogg. People gotta let people do their thing, no?”

He stood before me, combed my hair back one last time—like a painter putting final touches on a piece he’s positive he won’t see again once it’s viewed by the public—and nodded with approval.

I tried to mirror his motion, his delight back to him.

“I know you got this, though. You always been the smart one in the family, you know?” Alex turned away, for the first time since I’d come over, and looked at the entrance of his bathroom as though he was expecting someone. “Like you think about this shit for a while instead of just actin’ crazy. Me? Shit, I just need to keep hustlin’. A ver que pasa, you know?”

I looked at the empty passageway, too. I did. I knew.
He knelt to tie the child’s shoe,
relic of himself in the obstructed stillness
between stations.
*Is this our stop?*
*Next one* articulated nothing
as the Metrorail shuttled beings
in tangled repletion
around them.

(They were not here for the parade,
though the boy felt it tapping
like a question
at his back: later?
And the streamers, brandished from chopstick stilts,
and the coiling crepe?)

She was waiting,
time squeezing itself down arterial passageways
to the pressurized drumbeat of their approach.
Upstairs in her apartment
she would kiss the child
like a reliquary, he thought,
and the boy would not understand,
and the parade would announce itself loudly
from the street below,
deaf to the humming silence.

He stood once more,
hand heavy on a small shoulder,
and the doors slid shut.
I was almost eight months pregnant with my first child—the son of an Italian-Irish Catholic father—when I woke up from a nap craving ground lamb with tamarind and mint, and spinach pie with feta and fresh-squeezed lemon. That was comfort food to me. Rich, complex, delicate, and sour. It was all I wanted to eat those days. I’m only a quarter Persian, but it’s enough to make me not-totally-white in Caucasian circles and not Persian enough amongst Iranians. My grandfather was the first of his immigrant family to marry a white woman. His marriage was considered disgraceful and contentious, but at least she was a Jew. My mother was neither Jewish nor Iranian, and my brother and I became the second generation of my father’s family never to speak a lick of Farsi.

They came through the great passageway, Ellis Island, and settled in New Jersey. They brought with them their Judaism and their name, but little else. Somehow my family curated Persian art and displayed it in their homes. Urns and large trays of hammered metal—steel, tin, aluminum, and brass with raised Farsi lettering and pictographs of the Empire. Beautiful rugs as soft as mink pelts rolled out over the carpet of their suburban living rooms. The fibers absorbed the smells of Gormeh Sabzi and grilled lamb, and long after the silver was tucked away in felted boxes, the smell of fenugreek and sumac lingered in the halls.

My mom wasn’t like the Persian women. She had short hair and wore no make up. Her skin was fair and freckled. Bones protruded at all of the articulations of her body. My aunties had big hair and large breasts. They wore perfume and eyeliner and fine jewelry. They talked on the phone. They talked to each other. My mother didn’t do any of those things and mostly she was quiet.

When we visited my father’s family in New Jersey, The Persians began arriving in the afternoon even though we wouldn’t eat till eight or nine o’clock. Everyone shouted in Farsi and greeted each other loudly. Their strange, guttural language sounded terse to me. Harsh, repetitive, and impossible to discern. They seemed to be spitting at each other—spewing angry words—then an exchange would end abruptly in a short hug and a wet kiss on each cheek. Ordinarily this was the kind of situation where my Irish-Catholic mother would busy herself in the kitchen, but she was politely shunned by The Persians. She stayed in a bedroom upstairs and tried to put herself together. I watched her stand in front of a full-length mirror in her homemade skirts and modest blouses looking close to tears. She’d put on a belt and take it off. Over and over she criticized her reflection and chased me out of the room before she changed her top again or put on lipstick. Downstairs The Persians were shouting and cooking and kissing.

My “aunties” were a mystery to me. My grandpa’s sisters
Maheen and Parveen had daughters named Ghila and Valentina. Valentina had a husband named Nedjat and they had three kids around my age. Then there were my grandpa’s brothers Joseph and Farhad. Farhad’s wife is named Marguerite and she is white, too. My great-grandfather’s name was Azzizolah but he died when my dad was just a little boy. And hidden upstairs in a Spartan room was my great-grandmother Galeena, but everyone called her Honom.

Valentina wore shimmering silk suits, gobs of mascara, and enormous earrings. Her jackets were cut to expose her perfumed cleavage. Parveen had fuchsia lips and wore paisley-print, Mandarin-collared dresses with jeweled rings on her frail bony hands. At nearly six feet tall in her heels, Marguerite glided effortlessly through the throng in a black silk dress and rosewater cologne, gold bangles singing from her wrists. Her blond hair was teased high over her blue eyes and she seemed abjectly unafraid of the petite Persian women around her. There were breasts and shoulder pads everywhere.

But the old men seemed to take a shine to me. Perhaps it was because I looked like my full-blooded grandpa. I had jet-black hair and large, deep-set eyes. We lived in Minnesota where I was frequently mistaken for an Italian or Native American. In the summer when I was young, my mother would wrap her pale freckled arms around me and whisper into my neck, “You turn such a pretty color in the sun!”

But I wanted freckles and green eyes like my mother’s. Instead, I was brown. Not always. Not everywhere. I was white under my bathing suit and brown everywhere else. I felt like an outsider wherever I went, and now I was about to bring a child into the world knowing little and understanding less about the culture that colored so much of my life.

I drove to the Caspian Bistro in Minneapolis to quell my craving. The restaurant was filled with thick padded chairs, wall murals, and oil paintings of the old country in gilded frames. Adjacent to the restaurant behind the cash register was a fragrant marketplace. There were shelves lined with boxes of tea, sumac powder, dried apricots and dates. Tubs of roasted seeds, ten-pound bags of nutty basmati rice, and wooden barrels full of walnuts and pistachios in the shell. Everything was imported.

At dinner, beef and lamb kebabs were served with a whole roasted tomato and a pile of basmati rice, shimmering in bright yellow saffron butter. Black tea was served with bowls of sugar cubes, the salad dressed with lemon juice and shiny olives. For dessert there was baklava with nutmeg, cardamom, and honey, a glass dish of shaved ice with sour cherry syrup, or rosewater ice cream.

The smells soaked into me. Grilled lamb with coriander and mint. Gormeh Sabzi with red kidney beans, dried lime, fenugreek and parsley. Jeweled rice with golden raisins, barberries, walnuts, and pomegranate seeds. Dilled fava beans with fried rice and noodles. I never felt more Persian than when I was there. The food spoke to me. Directly to my soul. Called it home. I didn’t get to be one of The Persians at my grandpa’s house.

When I was little I felt like a sad reminder of the once-great empire, a tragic case of poor breeding. Like my tongue probably wasn’t even the right shape to make Farsi sounds. My father’s family never taught me how to cook, how to speak, how to act, so I gleaned what I could from the Caspian.

I wandered aimlessly, nervously, past the cassette tapes of popular Iranian music and sidled down the aisles of the market,
afraid I’d be exposed as a fraud. I picked up boxes of dried tea and put them back. I examined packages of soft pistachio candies and returned them to the shelf. I couldn’t bring myself to buy anything. I was too scared to go up to the register and say, “Just this please,” like the only ingredient missing from my kitchen was a jar of ground sumac. I was afraid the man with the black moustache would know my cupboards were void of anything required to cook Persian food.

I thought about my grandpa’s house in New Jersey with his mother and all of his sisters and brothers milling about in the steamy, fragrant air on holidays, jabbering in Farsi. We always stayed at my grandpa’s house – a shrine to the Old Country complete with real Persian rugs and glass bowls of pistachios. There were wall-hanging tapestries and great hand-hammered trays for serving the finest Persian food. Walking into my grandpa’s house made me both excited and nervous. My parents were always tense, and my dad seemed especially angry when we were there. He seemed irritated by the stories my grandpa told when I asked him excitedly, “Is this real gold?!”

“Yes, Dear,” he always began. “Of course it is. And that’s real gold there, too.” He once pointed to a large samurai sword-shaped bottle of cologne balanced on the back of the toilet in the guest bath. Later, I asked my dad, “Papa, did you know that grandpa has a real gold sword in the bathroom?!” His face soured and he shook his head. “It’s just garbage,” he sneered. “He probably got it at a flea market in Brooklyn. I guarantee that thing is made of plastic.

Plastic or not—it was gold—my grandpa told me it was real. In every room of the house there was a relic, a treasure to be discovered. Large metal urns carved with ornate patterns and cryptic writing. Crystal bowls filled with dried apricots and sugary dates. Rugs fringed with silky white tassels that stretched from one end of the huge rooms to another. Even the kitchen held mysteries. In the cupboard under the toaster there were Ziploc bags filled with single-serving sweetener packets and powdered non-dairy creamer, individually wrapped tea bags, pouches of instant coffee, and cocktail napkins from hotels in far-off lands.

And the house was spotless. No surface gathered dust, no tassel out of place, not so much as a lingering water spot in the kitchen sink. It was almost as if no one lived there. My grandparents had been divorced for forty years and after my great-grandmother passed away my grandpa lived there alone. He and my dad stopped speaking when I was thirteen and I didn’t see my grandpa again for a decade.

I returned to my grandpa’s house when I was twenty-three and saw that it was unchanged. I attended Bar Mitzvahs and engagement parties for distant cousins and learned to smile and nod politely when addressed in the mother tongue. I clung to Marguerite and her fearlessness and for the first time felt a real longing to know where I came from. I didn’t stay there long enough to find out.

In December my son was born just after my thirty-third birthday and I was shocked at his coloration. My son’s skin is pink. Peachmilk with carnation cheeks and rosebud lips. I look at him and think: he will never be pulled over because his complexion is displeasing or suspicious. He will never have his toiletries searched at airport security because his last name is on a terrorist watch list. No, he will go through life as A White Man with everything that means.

When I watch him sleep I wonder, will it matter to him that he
has Persian heritage? I stare at the contrast of his pudgy cream-colored fingers against my sunbaked olive arm. He has light eyes and fair hair like my husband. But I am used to being the darkest one. Some day I will tell my son, “I am a quarter Persian,” and hopefully by then I’ll understand what that means.
The Passageways of Early Snow

Lillo Way

Nearly weightless, these miniature spider webs land
kisses that melt on our rose cheeks. Light

as dandelion fluff traveling from sunshine-in-a-bud
to hoary relic. As underbelly feathers floating

from an overhead nest. Faces up, mouths open,
like new birds awaiting their parents’ disgorge,

we aim cadenzas of bellylaugh to crack the sky,
arms wide, catching white petals. Only after

the wires collapse and the barn sags in, only after
a solid white sledge from the hip-joint house roof

surrenders in the overdue sun, snapping all bushes
to kindling, do we take its full measure, remember

the ruse kisses.

Abandon

Laurie Barton

You left on a Wednesday
while I was at work,
leaving a relic or two in the closet—

a belt you didn’t want,
a shirt I bought you,
an old pen that stripped a lady

if you tilted it just right,
clothes disappearing into the barrel,
passageway to your first lust.

I took that pen and paid the credit card,
writing checks for Sammy’s Seafood,
won­dering who dined with you

when you crossed the line
from loving only me
to her first kiss.
JACKSON Mitchell was like a composite of the entire Brat Pack. He had looks, charm, and versatility, and not one Pack member would have stood a chance if Jackson had auditioned for a role in a John Hughes film. When I knew him, Jackson’s acting class was putting on their second season of *The Breakfast Club*, and I’d helped him prepare all of his scenes as John Bender. I most remember Jackson morphing into the rebel with a heart and climbing all over the living room furniture yelling, No, Dad, what about you?

If you’d seen Jackson, Molly, you’d’ve defied the script and planted a kiss right on his mouth right then. Each time I saw him do the scene, I would think that Jackson had what Bender had, a reason to look through his layers, even if I had to peel through twenty of them, to find the redeemable character at his core.

In fact, Jackson’s talent so thoroughly charmed me that I believed he possessed the best qualities of the characters he’d brought to life. For seven months, to my lasting chagrin, I blinded
myself to the character that permeated every layer. He was a delinquent, fraudulent taker, through and through.

The first time Jackson’s talent made an impression on me was over a year ago when I lived with Lindsey, Anna, and Kenny. Our apartment had been an all right situation. The place was nice, as well as affordable, and provided stability. The girls weren’t my best friends or anything, but we shared our space easily, each presence offering a tone that was in harmony with the others.

Kenny’s presence offered the discordant tone. He was a real *Sixteen Candles* Neanderthal, who ate nothing but ground beef, boiled to slimy brownness in our big silver pot.

Every night, the beef scene ran like clockwork. At six-thirty the stench would permeate every room in the apartment and the girls and I would gather outside the kitchen to watch the burner. When it stopped glowing, we’d know to count forty-five minutes for the smell to dissipate so we could fix our own dinners.

Meanwhile, Kenny would load up a plate of beef and stomp gracelessly to the couch. I swear, Molly, the center cushion still sags where he’d sat all those nights.

Three abreast, the girls and I would glare at him as he stripped himself naked from the waist up and spread his knees apart like an alpha gorilla. Arms folded, we’d nearly gag as he shoveled slop into his mouth with a tablespoon.

For the bare chest, the beef, and other reasons, the girls and I felt relief when Kenny moved out. We’d had a real shot to restore harmony.

Potential replacements started responding to our ad within an hour of placing it—some nice-sounding callers, but none transmitted tones harmonious enough to earn our invitation to see the apartment until Jackson’s call. His was our tenth, and over speakerphone, he made sure we didn’t answer an eleventh.

Glad to hear from you, Jackson. So tell us a little about yourself.

Well, I’m a grad student in the acting department. You must spend a lot of time studying.

Yeah, I’m mostly at the library or rehearsing scenes. Do you have good references?

Yes, everyone’ll tell you I pay rent on time and don’t make a lot of ruckus.

That’s good to know.

Thus far, he’d sounded thousands of years more evolved than his predecessor. He’d given no impression that he was a beef-boiler, but I, for one, had to be sure that the evenings of gagging were over.

Now, Jackson, do you eat beef?

Not really. Why?

Just curious.

Oh.

Anna’s top concern was cleanliness. We run a pretty tight ship around here, Jackson. What I mean is, we’re tidy.

No problem. You girls won’t see any dirty dishes from me.

Well, you may as well just come on by and see the place tomorrow.

A wiry thirty-year-old had shown up to audition for the role of fourth renter. With alarming grace, Jackson accepted a mug of coffee and the ground rules we’d fashioned for the edification of Kenny’s replacement.

You understand, Jackson, that with four of us, we’d all need to manage together, as a unit.
Of course, y’all. I just want to be a good neighbor, as they say. Any which way you girls want to do things is fine with me.

To conclude the audition, we’d led Jackson on the grand tour, and then he slipped us a check he’d already written for his deposit and three months’ rent like it was a done deal.

Jackson had spent his first week in perfect harmony with his illustrious roomies, as he’d called us. His first gestures of goodwill were to populate the kitchen counter with seasonal fruits and exercise enough sense not to boil any beef. His next gesture was to teach us how to play Battleship. With the four of us around the coffee table, he’d kept his shirt on and his knees no more than a foot apart. Those early days with Jackson had been like singing in a barbershop quartet.

The games of four dwindled to two during the second week, but I was having so much fun sinking my opponent’s submarines I had barely noticed the pitying looks on the girls’ faces when they walked by the living room. I found out later they’d seen the attraction between us and decided it would do very little good to tell me about the phone conversation they’d overheard between him and someone they assumed to be his sweetheart. Why, girls? I’d asked. Because, Judith, you wouldn’t have listened.

For Jackson, the girls’ withdrawal from Battleship had given him the opportunity to brainstorm a nickname for me, and thereby secure a position in the space of my mind. He went through Jeeves, Joonie, Jay Jay, and a lot more nonsense before finally settling on Ju Ju Beads. By that time I was eating seasonal fruit out of the palm of his hand and losing nine out of ten rounds of Battleship.

The next week he’d interrupted round five to half-confess his secrets.

I’m separated, Ju Ju Beads.
From?
My wife.
I’d felt my lungs shrivel up inside my ribcage.
And I was kicked out of school last semester. They only let me back in a month ago.

My cruisers were suspended somewhere in the Pacific grid, but I forced air through my trachea and attempted to gain control over the flow of information.

So, lemme see if I can get this straight. All that jazz you gave us last month about wanting to be a good neighbor was just jazz.

No, I do have good references, and I’ve kept the sink clear, just like I said.

And then he told me a story, that, try as he might to save the marriage—even missing weeks of class to devote himself to the cause—she’d wanted to be free.

I tried to keep my face as plain as an Idaho potato.

Months later a member of his Breakfast Club cohort—Jennifer, or somebody—approached me at a mixer and told me the real story, that he’d been cheating on his wife with at least three women and she’d kicked him out.

All of us knew every detail, she’d said, because he came to rehearsal and told us like we’d be impressed or something.

God.

It was horrible when his wife came to Breakfast Club opening night—this was before she found out. She sat right on the front row.

Are you kidding me?
Nope. I looked out into the audience and saw her watching him. Her face was so proud. And you know, the worst part was
that I was Claire.
I’d almost choked on my cocktail, but I made my lips move anyway.

The Molly Ringwald character.
Yep, the popular girl. So at the end Claire has the hots for Bender, the bad boy.
Uh-huh.

Gives me the willies just thinking about having to kiss Jackson right in front of his clueless wife.

So much happened?
He kept bragging about his women on the side. But after the last fall performance of Breakfast Club our director suspended him from school.

Because he’d missed class, right?

Nope. ‘Cause the director caught him selling dope out of his office to undergrads. We didn’t see him again until January and he’d found you girls.

But in our harmonious apartment, Jackson made me believe that he was simply a devoted but underappreciated husband on the brink of divorce.

She wanted to be free, Ju Ju Beads, so I had no choice but to scour the ads.

And you saw ours.
Saw you girls’ ad—
—and came over here and drank our coffee—
—well, yeah . . . but I also felt a little bit of hope that I could start over and get my life together.

Shit, Jackson.
I’d tried to switch my mind back to my cruiser.

Swear you won’t tell the girls, Ju Ju Beads.

Then he looked at me with eyes like a motherless fawn’s.

Ju Ju Beads, I don’t have anywhere else to go.

Okay, I sighed.

Right hand to right hand, we shook on it, and he sunk one of my vessels with his left.

By week six, he was telling me, you’re my girl, Ju Ju Beads, and we were reading The Breakfast Club in preparation for his spring season. Whatever Lindsey and Anna thought, they continued to look the other way and our four-toned harmony had quieted to dead silence.

By week eight, I was pressing Jackson about divorce papers.

When’re you gonna serve ’em? Or is she gonna do it? What’s taking so long? Hadn’t she wanted freedom?

I like you, Ju Ju Beads, but divorce is not that simple.

By week twelve, the Battleship grid lay idle and the kitchen counter was bereft of fruit.

By week sixteen, Jackson was staying out ’til midnight and my lungs were cemented shut on a regular basis. When I’d forced air in to ask him why, he was all, I don’t have to keep a schedule around here, do I? and took showers in water so hot his face was pink for three hours afterward.

By July, I’d made my discontent quite apparent. We’ve got to cool it, I’d say to him. This isn’t what I wanted for myself. I suppose one of Jackson’s layers heard me and decided a grand gesture was in order, because one Thursday, I’d walked in to find him already home, earlier than usual. From the sound of things, I could tell he was making a purchase.


Five seconds later he was standing in the door to my room.
I didn’t care about baseball, not even the Atlanta Braves, so I don’t know why I got so excited about the tickets, other than perhaps it was because he was going to some kind of trouble, doing something to salvage whatever he found meaningful between us.

He was excited because he’d bought my silence, forty-eight hours’ worth of it, at a bargain price.

By two o’clock the following afternoon, Jackson was behind the wheel of my old Pontiac. We’d brought Sixteen Candles along so that he could practice the final scene as Jake Ryan, while I read the part of Samantha Baker. A thousand times he’d said, Happy Birthday, Samantha. Make a wish. A thousand times, I’d blown out sixteen imaginary candles and read my line: It already came true.

By four o’clock we were checked into a hotel a mile from Turner Field and deciding how to deal with the impossible parking situation. Jackson had done the legwork: we would get to Turner either by cab or the scenic route. He even knew the prices, more or less.

What’s the scenic route?
Couple blocks to the Underground, weave through that, MARTA to Turner Field. It’s the cheaper route, but we’d have to get going soon.

Let’s take the scenic route.
Yeah, we’re in Atlanta. It’ll be like an adventure, ‘cause we’ll go fast, then slow, then up and down, and here and there, and all around.

At following my logic—God, Molly, I’ll never forget it!—at seeing my vision, his eyes became dreamy, like he was about to reach the end of a rainbow he’d been chasing.

Ju Ju Beads . . .
Better’n some boring cab, right?
It’s brilliant.

A few minutes later we were taking hits off a really skunky joint in the hotel bathroom. Jackson had stashed a baggie in his duffle just for the occasion, and it was the first I’d ever seen him with the stuff. Even though I’d never been a pothead, after seeing Jackson’s dreamy eyes, I wasn’t going to resist his suggestions.

He flipped the exhaust switch and pulled me up to stand with him on the toilet, chest to chest, hip bone to hip bone. To pass the joint he’d simply rotated it a hundred and eighty degrees in the inch of space between our mouths. Then he showed me how he’d hidden his habit from us girls for seven whole months.

Here’s what you’re gonna do, Ju Ju Beads. You’re gonna hold your smoke as long as you can. Yeah . . . like that. Now, when you can’t hold it anymore, blow it straight up into the vent.

When I took my last hit, the single Jackson split into twenty. Some of the faces grinned through the haze like clowns while others leered solemnly, but all twenty mouths spoke in unison—Let’s go, Ju Ju Beads—and led me outside into a rotating kaleidoscope of sound and color.

The scenic route.
Five minutes later, or for all I knew, five hours, we were approaching the MARTA station, and entering the passageway, we stood at the top of an escalator leading down several floors.

It was oddly deserted, but there was nothing else to do but to ride it down. The twenty Jacksons stepped on first, and once the descent began, the top of each head was just below my chin.

As soon as our bodies had gone below street level, we felt it:
the hot air coming off of the MARTA trams. It was in such a hurry to get above ground that it hit our bodies hard. We had to hold the arm rails to keep from falling.

The heat and sudden force smooshed my lungs flat but I was still aware that an adventure was unfolding in just the manner I had described. Before I could say anything about it, the twenty Jacksons were facing me and saying it for me.

Ju Ju Beads, look!
I looked down and brought the twenty faces into focus to see that Jackson’s eyes were wet.
Look, Ju Ju Beads, look!
I turned away from his eyes and looked down through the passageway and then turned back to the wetness that had moved to his cheeks.

Ju Ju Beads, it’s just like you said!
In awe of the descent, of Jackson, and of my own self, I kept my mouth closed and nodded.

Ju Ju Beads . . . it’s just like you said!
And it was. We were going fast and slow and up and down and all around through the bowels of Atlanta.

Ju Ju Beads, did you feel it, when we passed under the overhang? I’ll never forget this.

And then he stepped up to my step and put his mouth on mine. Never mind the taste of dope, because his tears were pouring into the place where our tongues met and one of his arms was holding me close while the other braced us both against the rushing air. As my hair was blowing straight back, Jackson kissed me and kissed me and kissed me like he was thanking me for my gifts of hot subway air and the timeless descent of an escalator. Like he was thanking me for leading him to the end of the rainbow and sharing the pot of gold.

Tasting dope, toothpaste, gratitude, and my own magic, I forgave him everything he’d bought the tickets to make me forget. I’d given him a miracle and he’d loved it enough to give it back.

By six-thirty, we were sitting in damn fine seats right in front of the home stretch. The high had worn off, and we stared into the abyss for four straight innings. At the top of the fifth, the Braves hadn’t hit a single home run, and it finally became apparent we were starving to death. Between the two of us, we went through four hot dogs and two large Cokes.

At the bottom of the sixth, we went back for Cracker Jacks and poured eight boxes straight into our mouths. At the end of each one, a prize would fall out and smack our faces. Five press-on tattoos emerged, which we promptly applied using the condensation from the Coke cups, along with a negligible figurine, and a defunct toy compass.

When Jackson turned up his last box, the prize fell out and bounced right off his nose. He caught it right before it hit the concrete, where it surely would have rolled all the way to the base of the stadium.

What do you think’s in this one, Ju Ju Beads?

Chomping, he opened the package to a pink plastic ring and looked at it for a long time. After putting the last kernels in his mouth, he caught my hand, still sticky from everything I’d eaten, and ceremoniously put the ring on my pinky.

And Molly . . . God! I told him how much it would have matched your costumes in *Pretty in Pink*, when you rocked it out as Andie Walsh.

Don’t you think so, Jackson?
He licked his chops.
Suits nobody but you, Ju Ju Beads.
So I’d worn it for two whole days, until I put it in my desk drawer, where it was promptly forgotten because Jackson had started coming home late again. On the third night of it, Jackson walked in and instead of hightailing it to the shower, his mouth came straight to mine. The taste of dope assaulted my tongue. A second flavor crept over every square centimeter of gums until it reached the back of my throat.
  I wiped my mouth and named the flavor aloud.
  It’s—.
  I can’t even write the letters, Molly. But the bitterness was unmistakable.
  Ju Ju Beads, what are you talking about?
  Some tone in his voice yanked me out of John Hughes’s soda-pop cinema that had scripted our affair and deposited me in the middle of a David Lynch neo-noir. My esophagus was actively closing itself to the second flavor, but I named it aloud again.
  It’s—. You taste like—.
  Jackson, though, was as innocent as the day he was born. All I could see were his eyes and palms opening wider and wider.
  Ju Ju Beads, I swear.
  July thirty-first, the girls and I stood three abreast watching him pack. August first, Jackson was gone.
  August second, I’m sorry to say, I followed the internet trail of likes and comments that led right to her profile. Her name was Sophie.
  I’m sorry to say I stared at her duckface selfie for a long time trying to see her as I wanted to see her, in the simplest terms, the most convenient definitions. I wanted to see a brain or an athlete or a basket case or a princess or a criminal, some movie character that would justify the indignation I felt.
  But I actually looked through her twenty-some-odd layers to the person at the core. I’m sorry to say I saw a fifteen year-old about to celebrate her next birthday. I saw a girl too young to have ever seen a John Hughes film. I saw a human—I’m sorriest to say—too innocent to know that Jackson would blow out all sixteen of her candles before they were even lit.
  Enclosed you’ll find the ring and *The Breakfast Club* script. I found them today, the one-year anniversary of Jackson’s departure. An hour ago, I was clearing my desk drawer of the relics I’ve accumulated since living with Lindsey and Anna. When the ring and script emerged, my lungs caved in and I’ve been trying to get my breathing going again since. It helped to write you this long overdue fan letter, thanking you for your heroic performances of Samantha Baker, Claire Standish, and Andie Walsh. I wonder what they would make of Jackson.
  And of me.
  J.
A gripping hungry thing, open wide and ready is the honeyed purchase one gets on fresh lips.

But hidden costs accrue when Out of Sight does not mean Out of Mind. Kisses lick your brain as you walk dank passageways from the train, your face tilted up to slanted rain. Even with bills in arrears, you’re sucked into dropping coins into a violin case splayed open, a frayed red velvet blossom seeded with spare change. You forget to write a check for the electric, neglect to cram for your driver’s exam. Your smile is fixed as you carry on, change the world one good deed at a time, pick frangipani blossoms, lavish them upon cancer patients where you work. You help the neighborhood kid with her calculus, your senses a cumulus of benevolence. But the busker yells at you for not leaving enough, the Hindu oncologist lets you know frangipanis are for funerals, the mother next door screams it’s her job to teach her child. Alas, reveries of kissing leave you in the red, allot only relics of scratchy pizzicatos, misplaced decimals, limp browned petals, nothing that really touches you in those deep moist parts where you need to be touched.
I Alone Have Escaped to Tell Thee

Brent Fisk

GOD and the Devil are in the prop room hidden behind a ton of theatrical relics getting a blow job from a sophomore named Tess. In the wings, I am a nervous wreck, desperate to remember my cue. My acting stinks, I can’t sing or dance, and I deliver my dialogue like I’m falling from a tree, each word a branch I desperately grab as I plummet toward the ground. Spring budget left no room for a musical, so we perform J.B., Archibald MacLeish’s dramatization of Job. J.B. loses everything. Though I’m in the limelight, I feel a strange affinity for the poor bastard. There’s one line that repeats itself, an anaphora woven through multiple scenes that ties the whole play together. Normally this snippet is delivered by different actors, but because there are never enough boys to try out for all the male roles, I change costumes, and in addition to the latest bad news that’s befallen our hero J.B., I spit this line at the audience: “I alone have escaped to tell you.” My favorite part is when I’m a leper.

Two weeks before the curtain rose, I thought I was in heaven. My girlfriend Josephine, who I lost my virginity to during a break in rehearsal, pulled me away to the driver’s education room again to make love beneath the thin-legged desks.

Then one day in Josephine’s Pinto, with the rain roaring down on the roof, she says she wants to see other people. Quick as a lightning strike, God’s sidling up in study hall to ask how I’d feel if he took Josephine to dinner. Judas’ kiss. I always thought of God as a close personal friend, even though he stole my one-liners at the lunch table and claimed them as his own. Thou shalt not steal, I thought. Thou shalt not covet. Evidently loyalty isn’t chiseled in stone.

Those rare occasions when he chipped in for gas? Minor miracles. God got to know the Devil in civics class, and they became great friends. The Devil blasted around town on a crappy motorbike, this loud contraption that belched blue smoke behind him. Though he never did his homework, he got C’s in every class because the teachers loved him. God shared cigarettes with him after detention, and they laughed together in Chemistry when Shelly Berman’s purse caught fire or when Robert Franklin puked onto the splayed belly of a frog. They loved getting attention from the pretty girls, and it seemed to me they were working together and not really interested much in what happened to anyone’s souls.

Why was I surprised that God got a big head? There was no one willing to tell him no. What had I created? I’d known him since fifth grade when we were second-string on the basketball team. He was the awkward center with thick glasses and a bowl cut; I played point guard by default. The summer before I met Josephine, I drove through the coalfields to his house way out in Elberfeld, and we drank Coke after Coke, nuked nachos, watched
zombie flicks until four in the morning. We were both painfully shy, awkward, and we knew it was affecting our ability to move through the world. I said *let’s try out for a play this year*, said *you’d be a natural*. I thought it would be a passageway, maybe not to fame, but perhaps to fitting in. God didn’t need a ton of encouragement. He worked his magic. If God ever went out with Josephine, he never told me.

His senior year was brilliant. He rebuilt a bug convertible, discovered the Misfits, and dyed his hair electric blue. Sometimes he’d give me a nod when I passed by his locker. And all these years later, I could pick up the phone and dial his old number though I wouldn’t know the stranger who answered now any better than I’d know God. I like to imagine God as paunchy, with a patchy beard and a pony tail. I hope he has sciatica and nasal drip.

I often think of that play, the long rehearsals and the difficult text that mystified us. Our director, Mrs. P had one of her now ex-husbands on stage trying to tell us what it was all about. So much of it went over my head. In the final act, J.B. keeps his faith in spite of all his troubles. God restores all that was lost to him. I just never bought that part-- that true love can be replaced. No bitterness burning away your insides. No regret. A wife isn’t a thing that can be replaced like a can of tennis balls gone flat or a headlight cracked in a fender bender.

The last time I went to church I took communion. The minister smelled of aftershave and peppermint, and when he shuffled up with the host, I stuck out my tongue and begged forgiveness. The small wafer was bland on my tongue, and the blood of Christ was grape juice, not wine. The candles flickered on the dais, and the people to my right and left took their turns, offered up prayers, confessed silently their sins. On the way back to my seat in the pews, a young woman bowed her head, her lips red and full, and though her eyes were closed as if in prayer, a small smile played across her face; I wondered what sin she was dwelling on, and what fresh hell God and the Devil devised while we mere mortals strode our meager stage doing our best to survive?
I.
She realized it more and more that spring. She thought of deserts and her mind kept fixing itself on extremes: extremes in nature, in faith, and in love, crumbling demigods and shorn sacred hair that is kept as a relic, tucked away in a drawer by an ex-lover. She thought of the salt flats in Ethiopia that dotted the land near a volcanic crater. She dwelled on acid ponds (green and opaque where the water is poison) that surrounded volcanoes in the shapes of cones, of salt pillars of fire and rain that burns.

II.
It rains but all it does is squelch the flowers. It makes your mouth so dry, like T.S. Eliot wrote. You cannot spit. You cannot suck. Your lips can’t form a kiss.
III. These thoughts contrasted with what she craved: to drown in mud, to take a sauna, to feel moist compresses on the back of her neck. She wanted mineral-rich earth and to feel like she had a tiny bud planted deep inside her, deep within her soil, in her womanhood, through the passageway of her birth canal, where flesh becomes too exterior. She dreamed of flooding brightly lit rooms with her urine, of sinking only as far as she was comfortable and of breathing evenly and with purpose.

IV. She worried about the dead land, the scorched beaches, the rocky cliffs and the ruined altars. The sacramental monuments will be left only in pieces for our ancestors. She mourned the loss of love and she prayed for the renewal of her blood, her cells, her hair, her teeth. She wanted to spit and suck and gnaw.

V. Then she remembered all her fears: of her face buried in the earth after the explosion, of her hands covering the back of her head and how soft it felt, of how he did that. He cupped the nape of her neck, right at the hairline, when he held and kissed her.

VI. She cradled her belly and thought of her own fire, her own flowering, dewy sprout. She realized that flames will destroy but they also purify.
This tomb pays no mind to runes, illuminates reluctantly. No brass gods. No faces, skulls, no relics to mark the square where each year they have fed it light. Five thousand gulps, pulsing, fire-thinned sun devoured and born again.

Look, the man with the torch says. It would have taken hours. The German couple isn’t impressed. The French recall Versailles. Two Dutch children build a little cairn of stones.

Look, the man with the torch says. Here is where the skulls were found. And what he means is look,

we’re going home, into the blank, the stone-stacked passageway. Please stoop until there’s gravel at your feet. We are reborn, the National Trust Badge, a kiss, a midwife’s pin, a shawl. Bent tourists tired of miracles and everybody straining to be moved. We hold death at our eyes, in cars on busy roads, deep rivers, leave it cairned carelessly. Rip the roof off, darkness asks us. Rip the roof off and roll the skulls. See if one fits. They all fit in the dark.
I.

There was a scent that led me to you. I asked if I could study in your room. You let me in. It was just before our spring break. I was, of course, already done with the assignment and asked if you wanted to take the night off.

“I really need to get ahead,” you told me.

You were drowning in papers—trying to write them while falling asleep there in the commons. We were taking the same poetry class. Our teacher wanted us to dissect what was, in all our minds, a glorified typo: Lighght

I found a way to make my paper about the Kishi Bashi album instead. It was easy to talk about it for three to four pages. I stood up, walked over, knelt down in front of you and undid your belt, pretending to mishear what you said. You didn’t try to stop me.

It turned out to be a pleasant surprise for both of us.

I put you to sleep with my lips and I woke you up early to study. You did not fail your test the next morning. You even managed to find your own way of writing 1,000 words about just one.

I confess now, I thought you smelled naturally of licorice then, but I believe it’s actually anise. It’s not common knowledge, but on canine-kind it’s comparable to catnip. My nose is very good.

II.

The following summer I was worried I would be turned away, but your parents were kind to me. They let me in. They trusted your judgment.

I almost felt bad for you. This was your home. You even bought my plane ticket. How could you have known? And how could they? I was a girl in frumpy grandma’s clothes. What big teeth I have. There are scratches down your back that tell a tale.

The next morning, I went through your closet while you went for a jog. It’s your own fault what happened happened. I woke up pawing for your morning wood, but you skipped out on me.

The things I did with your clothes...

Like I said, I looked through your things. All of your things. I hope you don’t mind.
I discovered where you hide your condoms, and the panties I gave you. I found another frilly, baroque pair I didn’t recognize. They smelled of long-stale, dried petrichor. Perhaps an old keepsake, a relic you couldn’t bear to part with. I shouldn’t make assumptions about what belongs to whom, but that’s how it is: you let me in. For a time, I have you and reason to be jealous. That’s okay though—you have me, too.

I was done with your room, but I realized I was not finished. I wasn’t satisfied with your secrets alone and down the hall passageway I went—in search of more, in your parents’ chamber.

You almost caught me snuffling around then, after I found your mother’s noir playthings. I almost left one of them out for you. I would have hid inside their bedroom closet and watched to see what you might do with it. Instead, I quickly put it away when I heard you coming and entered their bath, drawing the hot water. I was wondering how recently your mother might have worn them, when I felt you press the point of your prick against the small of my back.

I’m not very tall. It isn’t easy. But we make it work. I stand on my toes. You bend your knees and get low like you’re lifting a jug to impress me.

The warm water makes you come right away. It still feels good to me, but there are pleasures I want beyond the wet slap of your stomach against my ass in the shower.

There are things I know you would give me if I asked. You’re a good Catholic boy, but you would genuflect just the same and take your communion between my legs—if I wanted you to. Lick my little prayer bead, like a kitten lapping milk. With the water running down on your head, you’d need gills to breathe.

What I want you to do, I can’t have because you have to ask me for it. But I would be anyone you wanted me to, and everything you’d never dream of asking me for.

I wish you would take me into your parent’s bed. I want you to fuck me while I wear your mother’s stockings and garter belt. I want to look up and see the face your father gave you wince with pleasure. It’s prettier on you the way you wear it. Your older sister looks just like you (you get it a lot) and if she had a y instead of an x, I’m sure I’d fancy him, too. It’s nothing personal.

These are the things that occupied my thoughts as I clawed my hand over your jaw and pushed your head back, under the showerhead. I went for that exposed throat. I started to Maul your neck, and then finished with a kiss.

You’ve disappeared now. I wonder where you’ve gotten to, why you’ve gotten out of the water so soon. I look over and see you toweling off. Watching me finish my shower. My hand spreads out to you then, paw-like. In disappointment, it finds the frosted shower door separating us—padding against your crude image. A shadow.

My own figure flickers before you like candle fire, across the condensed glass. In it belies another shape. But even if you could know both the creature and me, your idea of me would die then. You wouldn’t be able to reconcile them. People see only one of us, or the other.

You are just a blur yourself, but you look like you are privy to something secret—something I’m treating you to.

I ask you something like this, but it’s a question I already know the answer to. It’s something that’s been on my mind, even after my sociology class last semester:

*Is it the passions we have and act on that makes us? Or is it our denial of them—our control—that we are to be admired for?*
You tell me, all things considered, that you think it is a loaded question. You’d prefer not to answer. If pressed, though, you would sheepishly say it is the latter. You Catholic boys. You’ll be the death of me.

III.

When we part (I say “when” for I know it is coming, with the end of our last year at the university) you will think I’m acting irrationally.

You will talk of physicians and necessary procedures, blame it on some wandering internal organ, or the moon, but it’s all you. You’re the spin doctor.

You’ll spirit the memories of me down a narrow corridor to a gas-lit oubliette.

You prefer to keep me immured there. You’re the type that likes to forget, rather than remember. Of course, we all do what we must, but that doesn’t make it okay.

There will be a last time. A last time my world will be perfumed by your sweet musk. A last time my teeth sink into your Adam’s flesh, taste the apple of my eye. Be thankful I will not break the skin; I like you too much. Your parents too.

IV.

There are those who take one look at me and know exactly what I am. Those that cry words from an Old Country. The Old World: suffer not a wolf to live.

Sometimes I have nightmares that you will join them. Fall under their spell—embittered. Your family will be there too.

Perhaps you’ll even lead them against me—holding the book, bell and lamp. I’ll hear those words from you too—you’ll all be chanting them.

“Burn the bitch.”

I shrink from those who would will such harm against me. Against my kin. Perhaps it keeps their sons safe for now. At least, until they have a home of their own to wreck. One they might invite her into—the wolf at their door.

For what is a wolf? Just a word—or a world I can be confined to?

A world that begins with the grueling application of dogma, then thumbscrews, proceeds in the pangs of my spine stretched upon a rack, and always ends—whether I’m judged guilty or not—with torches warming a pyre beneath my feet. Well, if it’s going to be that way, come on, baby boy.

Light it.
Do you have a boat with painted eyes to see where the passageway narrows?

The oar fixed in its cradle will row and row toward the gleam of wet sand as the ebb of the world turns back, turns forth. We swim between eagre tides, gather relics spit onto shore, a wake of broken nacre as each bright kiss of wave recedes farther than the last. Do not take too long, my love. The Severn scallops the flats, leaves them blackened, stained, abandoned. Hurry, now. It is time to row towards home, as the ebb of the world turns forth, turns back.
She faded in Manhattan, was more suited to Rome where a passageway called us to a row of arches and time was willfully forgotten as we wandered, grateful to be lost on uneven stone streets. Her scent lingered on Venice bridges, and in Sorrento, her sideways hair caught my cheek every time she turned. We lusted in Halifax, where parks had graceful benches, though we never stopped to sit. We brushed our open hands on black iron lampposts, unaware that silence could be painful, or twenty years hence, we’d argue in Malibu, then find our guarded overtures. Hers: a smile on the ferry, sliding under Vancouver skies. Mine: a wordless reach beyond the part that hurt. All of it forgotten in Paris, where a relic made us pause: a small glass vase in a sensual market maze, and oh, she loved the artful window treatments, the old women, with their thin, black stockings. I should have stopped at the gypsy cart to buy the lavender scarf with waves. I matched her lengthy strides to musty London bookstores. It was then she teased, her eyes said come, we must always walk fast in London, love. She was sad in Orvieto, looking over the edge of the hilltop town, where children still sing to their mothers, and stores have bells on doors. We walked much slower in Santiago; an art to that, she said. Slower still on the reefs of Fiji, where small blue starfish live. We had ten thousand tides. Come and bring my favorite kiss: the one you give in San Francisco, leaning up steep hills, with sirens and wind all around.
IT’S hard to fall asleep. It’s been that way for awhile, but tonight is especially bad. Annalise Yancy showed up to English with her hair cut almost all off. Sitting behind her, I couldn’t help staring. Her hair used to hang straight over her shoulders. Now I see her bare neck, the rest of the hair buzzed into an inverted triangle. It looks soft. The urge to reach forward and run a finger down the center of her nape leaves me short of breath and aching from restraint.

When the bell rang I waited until everyone else left. Mrs. Hoffman even went out before me, tossing a sad-eyed look over her shoulder, like she knows. She doesn’t. After the door whispered shut, I stood hunched and adjusted my messenger bag before making my escape.

The bag is new and smells like chemicals and gasoline. I bought it myself. Before, school supplies appeared like magic. Everything did. When I asked Dad for money, he nodded and plucked three twenties from his wallet without moving his eyes.
from the computer screen. I had a lie ready, my backpack ripped, but he didn’t ask what the money was for.

I’m so tired, but I can’t stop thinking about Annalise’s nape.

Last summer, we visited my grandparents. In the afternoons, Grams and Gramps slept in recliners and Mom and Dad played cribbage on the porch. Too hot to be outside and without cable, my brother Lyle decided we’d explore the attic. He didn’t ask permission.

I kept quiet as Lyle pulled on the chain and the steps descended. He climbed without looking back. I wiped my damp palms on my shorts and followed through the passageway. Lyle’s a lot older than me. He’d be the one to get in trouble.

The attic air was hot and stale. A beam of light from the dormer window was the only illumination. Our presence panicked the drifting dust particles. A bookcase stuffed with paperbacks caught my eye. I wanted to run my fingers along the cracked spines, to pick out a few, but I didn’t. Lyle says that I only read because I don’t have any friends. (That’s half true.) So I just stood there, while in the far corner, past the Christmas decorations, Lyle let out a low whistle. He’d found a box full of yellowing porno magazines.

“We should go.”

“Chicken shit.” Lyle threw a Hustler at me and began flipping through one himself, the pages crackling like kindling. Mine smelled of mildew. I opened it with care. I’d seen women on the internet, but holding them in your hands is different. Inside, the women posed with splayed fingers and open mouths. Some had thick swatches of hair between their legs, in the same shape as the hair on Annalise’s nape.

There’s a crack in the ceiling above my bed. I stare at it, trying not to think of the box in the attic or Annalise.

The more you avoid a thought, the further it invades your brain, planting landmines in every gray wrinkle. Dr. Mabel, the grief counselor Dad’s making me see, asks about the circles under my eyes. She knows I can’t sleep, but I don’t tell her why. Dr. Mabel is kind and says I can tell her anything. She’s older than Mom. Well, older then Mom will ever be.

Dad doesn’t go to counseling. He should, though. His hair turned white in just a few months, which isn’t normal. I Googled it. Lyle doesn’t go either because he’s “handling it.” His hair has gotten long and greasy. I look the same as before.

I am handling things. I do my own laundry. Lyle doesn’t know how. All his clothes are dirty. Mom always did that stuff. I never questioned how my sheets perpetually smelled Downy fresh.

When I quit, I began having dreams. That’s normal. I Googled that, too. It still seems weird, and I think it happens to me more than it should. That’s why I had to learn how to clean my sheets. We’re out of fabric softener.

I’d started about a year ago. When everything was fine. It felt good and helped me fall asleep. It was a solid part of my nightly routine. Like flossing.

I stopped after the funeral.

Before the other mourners arrived, Dad and Aunt Virginia walked Lyle and me up to the shiny white casket. I didn’t want to look. But I was supposed to. So I did.

Death made Mom tiny, deflated of air, of living. Her hands looked strange. Darker than they were before. Lyle cried. Dad stood hollow. I stared at Mom’s weird hands until they rose with the movements of her chest.

Breathing.
I wanted to yell. To run. Aunt Virginia squeezed my shoulder. Still, Mom’s chest lifted and fell. She’d been dead four days.

Aunt Virginia was the first to tell me that Mom was watching over me. I lost count of how many people said that. I don’t know if I believe in an afterlife or God anymore. All I know is if Mom is watching over me, she’ll see. And I don’t want her to. So I’ve stopped. And now it’s all I think about. That and Annalise.

In Sex Ed, Coach Lemmon said masturbating was a good alternative to sex. “Do women do it? Not just girls, but adult women? And parents?” I wanted to ask. “Do they...would they be mad at you for doing it? If they caught you?” But I didn’t ask. No one did.

Lyle’s girlfriend is a senior and she puts out. Lyle said I should use the whole dead mother thing to my advantage. He does. I told him I think that’s wrong. Lyle says it’s wrong that all we get to eat now are Hot Pockets.

Whatever he’s doing down in the basement makes Clarissa Richardson whinny like a horse. “Aren’t you worried Mom sees?” I want to ask him. But I don’t. He’d gut-check me. He’s been hitting me more, almost always in the stomach. Dad says that’s just how brothers are.

Dr. Mabel taught me to visualize a list of my worries and cross off each item. I need sleep. I try.


It’s easy to cross off the magazine ladies. They’re relics now. Grandmothers are rarely naked.

Annalise. The nape of her neck. It’s just a neck. Just a triangle of soft hair.

I must have slept a little. My eyes are scratchy. Dad leaves for work before I get up. A car horn sounds and the door slams, Clarissa picking up Lyle. The Pop Tarts box sits empty on the counter. I check the fridge: expired creamer, mustard, soy sauce, and baking soda. For breakfast, I eat saltines and lumps of brown sugar. People stopped bringing casseroles after the funeral. We never gave their dishes back. I miss Mom the most when I’m hungry, and then I feel guilty.

Mrs. Hoffman assigns a novel and passes out paperbacks for us to start reading. For twenty minutes, I stare at the back of Annalise’s head. She feels it. Wisps of hair stand up on her neck, ruffling with electricity. I want to touch them, smooth them down. I focus on that triangle. The hairs. A dark mole underneath. I hear my own breathing. It’s louder than the clock ticking. I reach out and let my finger slide down the center path of her neck, my nail resting at the start of her spine. Annalise whirls around and glares at me. My hand drops and smacks the back of her chair. It hurts. Throbs. I’m not dreaming.

My mouth drops open but no apologies, no explanations, no words come out. Annalise smiles. It’s odd; I’ve never seen her do that. She turns back around.

When the bell rings I wait for everyone to leave. It is worse today. But Annalise stays. She speaks to me. Her voice is huskier than I remember.

“Let’s get out of here.”
I can’t open my mouth. My tongue feels fat. I nod. She stands. “Come on.”
“We have seventh period.”
She rolls her eyes. With her hip popped like that, my eyes zero in on her shorts and the tiny triangle of air between them. Trouble, Mom would’ve said. But Mom’s not here.
“Walk me home.”
I follow.
Sneaking out through the gym exit, we are quiet. I am half surprised when there is no alarm, no adults waiting to pounce. We cut through the baseball diamond. Annalise leads the way, not needing to look, she checks her phone. Her legs bump with gooseflesh, she wraps her arms around her chest, holding the phone to her heart.
Annalise’s house isn’t a house at all, but a first-floor apartment. I’ve never been to a girl’s place. The apartment smells woody and sweet. It’s small with a kitchen/living room and two bedrooms. Scarves drape the tops of cabinets and even the TV. Empty glass bottles huddle along shelves. A purple bra straddles a chair back. My face heats. “What if your mom comes home?”
“Bonnie gets in late.”
“Your dad?”
“Don’t know him.”
Annalise shows me crates of records, old punk albums belonging to her mother. I’m supposed to be impressed, but I don’t recognize the bands. She leaves me to flip through as she stands at the kitchen island pouring a thick red liquid into two jelly glasses. “Cherry schnapps.” She hands one to me.
I’ve never drunk. Schnapps tastes like cold medicine on fire. I try not to make a face, but I can feel the twist of my mouth and the furrow of my brow. Annalise doesn’t see. She’s heading to one of the rooms. A bare mattress surrounded by piles of her clothes. She sinks into the bed, ignoring the splash and stain of red. Not knowing what else to do, I sit.
Annalise rests her head on my shoulder. “I feel tipsy.” She’s had two, maybe three sips.

“Me too.” Tired enough to finally fall asleep, I want to go home.
Annalise’s arm slips around my neck like a noose. Her lips press against mine. Chapped. Her tongue is hot. She tastes like sour Skittles.
My first kiss.
I don’t know what to do. I go still. Her lips move to my neck. Her palm slides on my leg and I wince at the rubbing denim. Fully hard, I grab a pillow and try to cover my lap but she shifts, wrapping her arms around me.
Tears prickle at my eyes. I try to hide my face before pushing Annalise away. I wipe my nose with the back of my hand. When I stand, I trip over the messenger bag, causing its contents to spew.
“Is it my hair?” Annalise asks so softly I almost don’t hear. It’s a weird question. “Bonnie says no one will want me now.”
I sit and whisper, “I love your nape.”
She lies down. “I’m sorry.”
“Me too.” I lie beside her.
“Do you ever feel like everyone’s watching, waiting for you to fuck up?”
“Sort of.” I think of Mom. She’d be disappointed about the schnapps and probably think there’s something wrong with Annalise. There’s something wrong with me, too. “Are we friends?”
Annalise strokes my cheek and nods.
I don’t know who falls asleep first. When I wake the sky is navy. Annalise’s mom is still out. I check my phone; Dad hasn’t noticed I’m not home. Black mascara trails Annalise’s face. Her mouth is open and she looks younger. From this angle, I can’t see her neck at all. It’s nice to have a friend. Mom would like that, even if she is trouble.
All of us were forced to kiss
the aunt from Chicago
even though she only brought us pencils.

Special Chicago pencils, she told us.
(We knew they were nothing special.)
And when we visited,
her apartment smelled of mothballs.
Even the food she cooked retained a tinge.

Yet she let us ride the L to the movies.
Zombies haunted my dreams—
the hidden passageway,
the coffin suddenly flying open,
an erect body and no foreplay.
No way to prepare for any of it.

The uncle did not want kisses.
We appreciated that.
And he left us a gun
which it took us a few tries to learn
was only a cigarette lighter.

He must have laughed all the way home
on the Greyhound,
this monkey uncle,
an old world relic himself,
avoiding the aunt’s hennaed
kisses, shaking the powder off.
My grandmother brings me history, fragile relics she has saved, decades, inside sleeves of purple plastic casing.

Her age, 88, marks a passageway through which I must travel too, as the someone in our family who needs these stories.

I imagine, by the gold imprinted church logo, the vital documents contained within these folds will be memberships, doctrines, or Biblical laws.

For years, my grandparents proudly belonged to Pine Valley, to a Home Owner’s Association, where lawn care is included in the monthly expenses.

Taking care of the grass is serious business, as blades of grass are to be meticulously maintained just so one man’s grass is the same exact height as the grass of his neighbor. One summer there was a discrepancy requiring a wooden ruler to settle the dispute, like a parent, or teacher, placing a pencil mark on a wall.
atop a growing child’s head. My grandmother stresses there is required reading within these folds, as she doubts they teach it in school any more. *Life. Time.*

Issues about the Kennedys. William & Kate’s wedding. Obama being named Person of the Year and articles about the deaths of Princess Di and Mother Teresa.

Carefully smothered inside a small plastic trash bag is a *New York Times* dated November 26, 1963. The frail yellowed iconic photos of JFK’s death my generation’s known only in books.

There are *U.S. News & World Reports* on terrorist attacks, 9/11, and the Challenger. I remember. January 28, 1986. 11:39.13 a.m. I was sitting in my first-grade desk, tuned in to Channel 1 where the entire school was watching, eyes like glue, looking up at the screen, counting down, as everything was a go and the first teacher was going to space. The classroom filled with the awful space. My English teacher wept in the hall, folded her hands and prayed. Holding history mixes past-tense grief with present-tense tears.

Curious, my son wants to know who are all the old people he doesn’t know. My grandmother seems pleased she is providing this education.

She encourages him to read, devour whatever he wants. I remind her, at 10, he has not lived enough life or time to have a profound understanding of such tragedies.

I am thankful he has not yet known one of such magnitude. My grandmother and I, both, simultaneously echo, “Yet.” He smiles cheerfully, tells us he’ll read everything on 9/11, because 9/11 is his birthday and he thinks that’s sorta kinda cool. Besides, his textbook at school only had like this one little paragraph. I want to kiss him, to stop counting the tears in my grandmother’s eyes.
IN the remote port town of Eldheimer, the sea life was the only life, but men took to the boats for more than just work. Whether placid calm or writhing in tempest, those waters held Eldheimer’s boys in a spell. The seduction was strong but silent, and each man wrestled secretly with the dreams it brought. Their love of the ocean wove a brotherhood between them, and the town was full of generations of sailors and mates, hundreds of suitors courting this one unknowable lady.

But the seas in these parts had a temper, and there wasn’t a family in town untouched by it. Any young Eldheimer lass knew well the chances were high she’d marry a boatman, and higher still she’d be a widow within five years. So the women had their secret too, a solemn piece of advice passed from gram to mam to lass: love him, but hold him loosely, he’ll not be yours for long. And she knew this was good advice, she knew generations of heartbroken fishwives had learned a terrible lesson and were right to bear daughters with hearts closed from the beginning. But she
and Matthew had been different, of course. theirs was a true love, a strong love, and she was sure the bond between them would overcome the curse so many had fallen to. She knew they were destined for a different fate.

She had three years to grow in this confidence before the day Matthew’s ship came home without him. She felt no surprise when the first mate stood in her dim doorway with his cap in his hands and told her that her husband had been lost to the vaster of his two loves. Instead she felt denial, anger, resentment.

She had waited, standing on the dock of their little home, looking out to sea for six months. It was winter when the dreams began. Her mother reminded her that any lost man who didn’t make it home by first snowfall never returned at all, and she knew this to be true in her brain. But her heart fed her the dreams like a strong moonshine that warmed her going down and scalded her coming back up. She sank into those dreams with relief; they always began joyfully enough, as either a tearful reunion or an afternoon as if he’d never left, but they never failed to slide sideways, and she fought her way to the surface in a cold sweat.

In the aftermath of one of these nightmares, and in the whitewash of a cold moonlight, she lay staring at his glasses on the nightstand. They were the only item there, and the stand itself served more as a pedestal for this cherished relic. She stared and prayed as the constellations turned the clock, but finally admitted to herself that he would not be returning on his own. She could survey the incoming boats all she wanted, but the truth was in her like an itch she had tried to ignore, and it was this: he was alive, but was unable to come home. The ocean, in all her drama and intrigue, had bewitched him. Sensing that his loyalty to his human wife would win out, the waters had fed him their poison and tricked him into staying out there.

He was confused. He needed to remember who he was: her husband.

She would remind him.

In the cellar of their small house, a heavy wooden door gave on a dank passageway. She had not used it in months and it had since been draped in cobwebs. She let these crown her as they would while she marched confidently down this dark corridor. She had no lamp, but the passage only went to one place and after a time she emerged onto the end of the jetty, greeted by that clear night and the ever-present white noise of the surf. Skyward, a waxing gibbous received her upturned face, heard her whispered prayer, agreed to her suicidal pledge.

“I’m coming, Matthew. I’m coming, love.”

She blew a kiss, lifted her skirts, and marched into the sea.

Her expression of determination faltered as the cold waves lapped at her face, but the gown soon took on its weight in water and her hesitation came too late. She managed a last big breath before she was pulled under, thrashing wildly as she descended. Her lungs burned and her hands pawed madly as her brain screamed a singular objective: SURFACE. It was in vain, though, and when she finally stilled and the bubbles cleared, she found herself looking at the wavering form of the moon, with the sea and the sky between them.

All right, she thought, I trust you. I’m putting this in your hands. Deliver me.

With that, she emptied her lungs and the ocean took her. Her last breath floated lazily upward in a herd of bubbles, and she watched them go. Before they reached the surface, and as her consciousness was dissipating, an impact suddenly struck her. The
shock wave emitted outward, easily catching the bubbles in its path.

Perhaps the moon had cast the spell, or maybe the sea herself had an agenda, but whatever the cause, the shockwave transformed her dying breath into a small clutch of translucent moon jellies. Rather than continuing to the surface, they paused a moment, then sank toward her. In the site of her narrowing tunnel vision, she watched them approach like pulsing angelic hands, bringing with them a gentle glow. They surrounded her body, melding into her gown and pale skin, grabbing hold with fragile tentacles, fusing painfully and seamlessly. The largest landed upon her chest, and though she felt it searing through her flesh, she had no life force to react. Her heart was zapped into erratic beating, and she gasped in water with lungs that now welcomed its icy touch. She had been spared her death, but to continue as...what? She understood she was now some terrible kind of immortal, that she was a cursed woman in the belly of her nemesis, but this was of little consequence if it meant she had all the time in the world to look for Matthew. Her bare feet finally touched bottom. She drew in a full breath of saltwater and set off to begin.

"I'll find him for certain, she thought, find him and remind him. Find him and return."

Back in Eldheimer, the whispers became rumors, which became pub stories, which became legend. The legend of the widow who walked into the sea, who was doomed to see her husband in every sailor, cursed to lure him to her and to kill him over and over. If the mariners found themselves in that perfect mix of drunk and honesty, they admitted she had not been the first and, if pressed, they confessed she was not the last.

Eldheimer had a hex upon her: as the men were apt to drown at sea, so the women were known to follow; the sea was filling up with the souls that foolishly sought her embrace, and those that resolved to save them.

*

She’s dreaming again.
She knows it because Matthew is with her.
This time they’re on the beach and he’s kissing her sweetly. His horn-rimmed glasses bump her face and she giggles, pulling away and skipping down the beach, enticing him to chase. He laughs heartily, rolls up his slacks and sleeves, and dashes down the sand after her. She’s grinning ear to ear, the sun filling her vision, loving the feel of her muscles propelling her, and she relishes the giddy tension of waiting to feel his fingers in her hair. She’s running and expectant, but his fingers never come.

She slows and turns in time to see his terror. The beach is roiling, has formed waves like water that are moving in on Matthew from all directions—a ripple in reverse. They’re crashing over him, he’s sinking and coughing as he tries to shout through the sand that keeps sweeping over his face. She screams and backtracks, desperate to get to him and pull him from the pounding sand-waves. He is waist-deep, now chest-deep, now only his head and one arm extend above the surface of the beach. She’s running as hard as she can, but reaches him only in time to grasp at his fingertips as the last of the sand-waves laps over him, and all that is left of her love is a pair of horn-rimmed glasses to be picked over by crabs.
It's her own scream that awakens her, though all she hears of it by the time she gets her bearings is the echo rebounding off the cavern walls.

There is a distant shout. She runs to the cave opening and peeks around the corner. The beach is empty. Craning her neck, she looks out to sea and spots a beautiful sight: a 5-mast ship, a trader from Spain by the looks of it, is anchored a mile out. A longboat carrying a dozen men is rowing inland. She settles herself at her post, oblivious to the barnacles cutting her bare feet, and watches the boat's approach with rapt fascination for the next half hour.

As the boat finally nears the shore, her vision is filled by the man standing at the bow. He looks like Matthew: the long dark hair, the thin physique, the short beard masking a strong jaw. A pair of horn-rimmed glasses border his dark eyes. Before the prow meets the beach, he leaps elegantly into the surf and uses a towline to haul the boat ashore.

The men are scouts. They clot into a brief huddle around the Matthew-man, then spread out and dissolve into the underbrush. He remains alone on the beach, studying a crude map and marking it with a grease pencil.

She's entranced—even the furrow of his brow is familiar. She could watch him for hours, but soon he folds the map, sticks it in his back pocket, and strides purposefully down the beach in her direction. She creeps down to the cave mouth, careful to keep to the shadows. With every step that brings him closer, she feels her face brightening as if he were a rising sun casting a liberating dawn upon her, and for a fleeting moment she fears his beacon will reveal her. She can feel the warmth of him heating her world of icy seas and frigid crypts, his radiation freeing her ice-locked love of life, her frost-bound sense of meaning. As his approach reaches its zenith, she is almost blinded by his person; she is burning in his flames. For an instant, she is bathed in white-hot blankness, and when it fades and she returns to herself, he is gone. She can hear him tromping through the thicket behind her cave, off on some resolute exploration.

The immensity and fullness of his presence are the measure of the void he leaves behind, and in it she feels a vacuum collapsing her mental structure. She is deflated, imploded, ruined. She retreats to the depths of the cavern and sinks into a stagnant puddle of seawater, completely unaware of the starfish crushed beneath her or of the crabs that scuttle over her toes. She has lost the capacity to do anything but lament and wait for his return, but in her secret heart she fears the fingers will never come and he'll drown in sand.

Six hours later, the sun is easing its way to setting. She has not moved from her puddle, and her pale fingers and toes are wrinkled from soaking. She stares blankly, sight turned inward watching the reruns of their brief life together.

She is at last broken from her trance at the sounds of shouts and splashes. Blinking crusty eyes that have not closed in hours, she pads to the cave mouth and squints out. The scouts and the tide have returned. Matthew sits in the front of the longboat, bent in concentration over his map, marking additions as the various scouts make their reports.

She begins to panic—Matthew is leaving, but the tide has not reached her cave yet. Her eyes twitch anxiously between the departing boat and the incoming tide. Faster, faster she thinks.
I cannot lose him again! I will not! Hurry! She paces nervously at the threshold, biting dirty broken nails. The approaching surf is moving perceptibly closer, now only a few feet away, but she begins whining because Matthew is already halfway back to his ship. The sun is nearing the horizon now, moving as indiscernibly as the tide, and she strains at her post. The next surge finally rushes over the threshold in the same instant the sun meets the horizon, and in the flash of its setting, she steps onto the breaching wave and at last walks into the sea.

I’m coming, Matthew. I’m coming, love.

The night sky is clear and the sea is still; the ripples of her sleek head breaking the surface are the only motion to be seen upon the water. The sails of the great vessel are down and several lanterns glow along the length of it like softer, yellower extensions of the starry backdrop.

A full moon has climbed a good distance into the sky before the change of watch. When she spots Matthew at the starboard post, her heart thumps so hard it makes minute ripples in the water. His head begins to nod drowsily. It is time.

She moves out from the ship’s shadow into the full wash of moonlight, allowing her movement to be appropriately noisy. His nodding head becomes erect at the sound, and he comes to the rail, looking hard into the night, trying to figure out what he’s looking at.

It is time to show him.

Slowly, and so smoothly, she rises from beneath the water.

He hears a splash and makes out a mass beyond the shadow of the boat. Perhaps what he’s seeing is the head of a seal out there, but he has seen no seal with such pale features. The moonlight is strong and in the instant he recognizes the form of a human face; the head rises from the water, revealing the long sloping lines of a delicate female figure.

As she ascends, rivulets of water run from her hair and slender fingertips. It cascades over her shoulders, between her breasts, down her thighs. It takes him a moment to realize she is wearing a thin gown with a short train, clinging to her body in full display of her endowments. Paralyzed by the vision and by the certainty that he is hallucinating, he can only stare and force shallow breaths as the woman begins walking toward him across the ocean.

Her steps release ripples onto the still surface, and her movements cause her to glisten with water and starlight. With her first step, her full lips part and a long sweet note floats up to him. As she approaches, the note is joined by another and another. The peaks and troughs of her song are matched by the blowing of her gown and long luscious hair in a breeze that is not really blowing. Even at a distance, he can see the full moon reflecting in her deep eyes. This reflection does not dissipate, even once she has come close enough to be standing in the shadow of the ship.

The song is filling his brain, drowning it, putting out the healthy fires of purposeful thought and leaving soggy charcoal hissing in the murky cave of his skull. Abandoning his post, he walks swifly to the stern and climbs into a small dinghy, lowering himself to the water even as the other watchman rushes over, asking “¿Cuál es él, hermano? ¿Qué usted ve? Donde está usted que va?” (What is it, brother? What do you see? Where are you going?)
Rowing around the side of the trader, he sees her turning away from him, walking slowly out to sea. He rows with determination, eyes never breaking their hold on the trailing gown and slowly swaying hips, but somehow she is keeping ahead of him. He adjusts his hold on the oars and rows harder, demanding his muscles use the most of their strength and efficiency, and his efforts are rewarded when she turns to face him, waiting, calling, arms extending, face bathed in a waterfall of moonlight. With every stroke that brings him closer, he can feel his face brightening, as if she herself is the full moon and he is advancing into its radiance. He is willingly drowning in her fierce glow, and with every breath he gives up for it, he feels his hardness melting, his bitterness sweetening, his stagnancy stirring.

He is so close now: 50 yards, 40 yards, 30...

His dinghy, having reached a speed that should have been impossible considering its design and motor, crashes into a small island of rocks, the hull splintering and collapsing inward in a shower of debris. The force that had propelled the vessel is instantly transferred to his body and launches it high out of the boat in a comical arc before dashing it against the rocks. He has an instant to see the slick shapes rushing up at his face, and then darkness.

His brain is filled with the screaming messages of broken and mangled things coming from his body. But even these shrill voices are soon dampened and smothered by the cacophony of the woman’s voice. He feels his head lifted and a hot hand brushes aside the long strings of his hair. Opening his eyes, he looks into her face. It emits a harsh beauty so powerful it brainwashes him, erasing all capacities and functions other than those used to endure it. She holds him in her lap and he is painfully aware of every piece of her that is touching a piece of him. The contact is white-hot and he is gladly burned. She is looking down at him, expressionless, and puts a palm upon his cheek, branding him with her handprint. Though the deafening song continues unrelenting, her mouth stops moving and she lowers it to kiss him. He perceives the moment in slow motion, certain that her proximity is scorching him, that her advancing lips are escorted by a blaze that is charring away the flesh of his face, and he wants nothing more than to be cremated by her presence.

The instant her fiery lips touch down on his quivering ones, his mouth floods with freezing seawater. The salt makes him gag, but the force of its flowing overcomes his reflex and he feels its iciness filling his throat, his stomach, and further. Eyes that had drooped to slits fly wide in panic, and what he sees upon him is not the vivacious maid he had been following. Wrapped around him is a cold living corpse, an emaciated woman with skin so pale it is almost translucent. Her hair is tangled through with stinking kelp and her cheekbones are dotted with barnacles like freckles. The sheer delicate gown is dirty with mud and hanging from her angular frame in tatters. The skin of her fingers and toes is waterlogged and wrinkled, riddled with slashes and gashes that will never bleed or heal. He begins thrashing and she clutches him tighter, her touch no longer an igniting caress, but a stony frigid embrace. His flesh is becoming bloodless and numb where her skin meets his and he soon loses all sense of his body’s existence. All that is left of his awareness is the thunder of her song, and the icy ocean pouring into him from her mouth.

At last she releases him from the drowning kiss and looks down at him with eyes no longer full of the moon, but glittering
like obsidian in the hard starlight. Her features flex into a contortion of relief, triumph, and deliverance.

“Matthew,” she says and it sounds like sand through an hourglass.

He chokes on the water filling his lungs as he tries to croak that he is not Matthew, he is Domingo. She recognizes his attempt to speak and shuts him up with another kiss. He is paralyzed by the new surge of icy Atlantic flowing into him, and then horrified to feel the bodies of living things wriggling down his esophagus, and there is no air to scream with. Still holding the kiss and his broken body, she rolls them both off the rocks and into the ocean. The ripples of their departure dissipate, leaving the surface smooth and reflective once more, restoring the illusion of a five-mast ship suspended amidst stars.
After “On the Beach (Two Girls against the Light)” by Maurice Denis

I want the two girls in my painting to appear as if they are sweeping the sand back into the sea. The wind blows across the spit as they rest from their labor. Maddie covers her hat with her hand; Guinevere swats the last starfish into the tide. I avert their faces, the rapture and purpose they bring to their task. The giggling way they work their fragment of beach. Their blue eyes. A gust lifts Guinevere’s hair, tossing it before her eyes as she gazes out at the swells rising on the curve of the earth’s kiss. The girls remove their shoes at my request. Their footprints leave faint tracks, like the indifferent nests of sea turtles, in the brown sand. These girls will be women in another life. Maddie will wash her husband’s shirts and her daughters’ skirts and blouses until the colors merge into the reds she prefers. Guinevere will coax Lancelots into her bed but never settle for knights who have no grail. They are moving farther down the beach. They have turned their backs to me and are walking toward the passageway promised by a shy sun. Although the beach ahead of them is littered with shards of sea glass, Mad-
There’s a wall outside the window of my house. On the other side are storage units, for secret lives discovered in wars and auctions, places to holster vulnerabilities: photo albums, the divorced relic, disowned tears and a boat that never sees water.

There’s a wall outside the building where I work. On the other side are trash cans and recycling bins, a passageway to noise, visiting odors that vacate on rotating bases: deposit, collect, bring castaways to life again, but never as pearls, even by eyes that lie.

Inside is me, separated by glass oyster shells that slide open only halfway, imagining cycles on concrete’s far side, angles for hurling stones, breached dams where sunrises kiss garbage, caress space, dreaming of coffins. Someday I’ll be planted, re-used—one portion held for mulch and signified in trees, breathing new generations through leaves; the other part, fruit for sentimentality.
GRANDMA wept when the coffee table fell out the back of the pickup and crashed into the empty street. Or sobbed might be more apt, the way the tears flooded down into the wrinkle-canyons of her face. “That was an antique!” she wailed, confusing old for precious relic. “That was an antique.” When the driver, a family friend, lifted the coffee table from the road and brought it into the house, Grandma scowled at him and ran her fingers like a kiss over the new spider web cracks in the surface. “That was an antique,” she murmured again and again to herself, an incantation to raise the dead.

A remnant of the Depression, Grandma has an obsessive attachment to the material. “The worst part of going to live in a nursing home,” she told me, “is that I wouldn’t be able to bring all my stuff.” I imagine her alone in the lull of the late afternoon, meandering from room to room, boring a passageway through the junk. I see her touching each Thing with a withered hand, saying to herself, This is mine. This is mine. This is mine.

As a result of growing up with Grandma, I have accumulated too many superfluous objects, a fact that springs to the surface of my mind anew each time I move. My menagerie of stuff daunted me again as I prepared for my most recent move to Cedar Falls for graduate school. My evenings were spent in a continuous litany of wrapping my hodge-podge of dishes in old newspaper and Tetris-ing them into boxes. With the preparation came the unbearable and unavoidable sense of touch as I picked up each Thing and rubbed it as if doing penance on a rosary. This is mine. This is mine. This is mine.

There is a sense of guilt that comes with moving. Or maybe I’m just personally prone to guilt. When I pick up everything and transfer my entire life, piece by piece, into a new apartment, condo, house, I am saying, I don’t like where I am. In terms of both geographical location and general life situation, and all the metaphysicalities in between, moving comes with the admittance of a need for change. And as I always do most of my moving myself, as far as the little things go, preparing to move and eventually ferrying my stuff to a new place, the experience is a solitary and spiritual one. And there is the opportunity for purging and the methodical giving up of the material when I move. I separate the unwanted from the wanted, and it’s like a piece of my soul is delightfully shed.

Before Grandma moved, she burned all the letters she received from soldiers during World War II. Every morning, she went out to the fire pit in the backyard and turned them one by
one into piles of white ash. “Why did you burn them? Why didn’t you give them to a museum or something?” I asked.

“Many of their wives are still alive,” she said. “I don’t want them to know their husbands were once in love with me.”

I have a garbage bag in my apartment. When the indelible desire to purge my life grapples at my hands, my body, I tour my apartment and pluck up unwanted Things: unused kitchen gadgets, clothes I’ve given up fitting into, that stupid tree of decorative holiday wineglass charms my aunt gave me. (My aunt has given me wineglasses, wine stoppers with funny sayings on them, and kitschy wine-oriented wall hangings from Hobby Lobby, so I am well equipped for a stylish, Martha Stewart approved descent into alcoholism.) When the bag is full, the black plastic stretched near to tearing, I take it to Goodwill. I look in the rearview mirror as I drive away, imagining the workers picking through the junk, my voodoo dolls of obsolete years and experiences. Goodbye! I say to it all. Goodbye! Goodbye!

When I visit Grandma, she has me help her “go through” stuff, which really just means moving it to a new out-of-the-way place in the basement. “There’s no use getting rid of anything,” she says, mostly to herself. “You never know when you might need it.” I nod and nod and shift boxes around to where she wants them. But before I leave, I sneak handfuls of old junk into the bottom of the kitchen trashcan knowing she’ll never notice it’s gone.

Relic abandoned for newer half-moon steel,
still wears a tin top hat rusted by tongues of rain.
Chest crushed, ribs broken, it bends on moss-kissed knees.
When I last saw him, he was this weathered grey.

There I recall strength as he mended its roof and braced its beams; calmness as he tended to fields and bees. His gravesite holds only a slab that waits for mom’s final date. There is where I’ll go to lay my clover wreath.

I cross the cornfield, hope for safe passageway.
Avoid the stone house, rigid and nimbus grey
where I would lay with ear pressed against the grate,
straining to hear if floors creaked beneath pacing feet or walls rattled a severe storm warning.

When thunder rumbled up the stairs,
I prayed while lying statue still
that lightning would not strike at me and tried to escape with my breath out through the drafty window sill.
Time rots barn boards as warm memories decay
but the stones remain tethered around my waist,
bang down the aisle with me on my wedding day.
Here is where I’ve come to lay my clover wreath.
To mourn the loss of man and cut my ties to beast.

David McCarty
Relic
Lois Harrod

Tit for Tat

In the nursing home parking lot, the Amish girl gave me a tomato on her way to evening shift, relic of the summer sun—I held it warm and red in my hands.

It was Tuesday and muggy, the day of my mother’s bath, her breasts damp that morning, cool beneath her shift lazing on her belly.

Every day had its passageway: Wednesday, the movie, Thursday, the manicure, Friday, bingo cards with prizes. Saturday, your brother’s dry kiss.

But it was Tuesday and muggy, the day of my mother’s bath, her breasts damp that morning, cooling beneath her shift, the heft of tomatoes.

Drew Pisarra

Granny

NOBODY gave a shit about the old bitch anymore. They were here to bury a chair, a large overstuffed Queen Anne that she’d sat in for the last 40 or 50 years and which still carried her scent, a sickly relic stinking of perfume and delicately farted gin. The chair, encased in a casket shaped like the state of Utah, was lowered into the grave while five children huddled silently to the side. The priest, too, said nothing, for following the unconventional wake in the living room, he had mistakenly picked up an old photo album instead of the Bible, both of which had been placed next to the cremation urn where her ashes remained. He was not a man for improvising and so now he found himself at a loss. Amidst the silence, he stepped from the top of the grave and passed the tattered album to Jack who, years out of practice and religion, mistook this as part of the service. He looked towards the priest for guidance and received in turn a tight, nasty smile. Jack couldn’t help but return a smile of his own for he appreciated the gesture, this passing of the album. He opened the matter at hand, which
was filled with unnamed faces, faces Mom had been incapable of remembering, or possibly had never known. Except for the few of her and Dad, and the one family shot taken when he was five, Jack didn’t recognize anyone even in a vague familial way. He turned to one of Mom, but a flood of memories rushed in and he wasn’t interested, wasn’t ready, so he clapped the tome shut.

One photo slipped loose, and dangled like an annoying dingleberry. Jack caught the photo between his fingers before it could descend to the frostbitten soil. He gripped the snapshot between his teeth while flipping pages, but the emptied slot remained elusive. The photograph began to slide out of his mouth. He slid it further back with his tongue. A corner cut into his cheek. He crushed the edge between his molars. The other cheek received a sharp jab. He chomped down on that side. Swallowing was simply a reflexive act. The chewed photo didn’t break down and began to unfold as soon as it passed the uvula. The edges cut against his throat. In his belly, the photo resumed its original shape; inside this perfect square, his mother: flat and calm.

Jack pressed his hand against his belly, but the hand that touched his stomach wasn’t his own but his father’s. He recognized it by the copper bracelet, a talisman to ward off arthritis—don’t laugh, it worked. As he raised this hand—at once his father’s and his own—for closer inspection, he saw it was holding the photo. In front of him stood the subject: his mother, his father’s wife, at 30 was it? Then a small child slipped out from beneath her skirt. The woman slapped life into its face. He recoiled. Another child, another girl, another slap. He turned his head away but the sound remained, now followed by a sharp hiccup. The childproof cap frustrated his hand. There were five different slapping sounds repeated in an infinite variety of patterns interspersed with hiccups. It wasn’t musical, simply percussive, a rhythm which he accompanied with his prescription bottle like a maraca.

The top opened easily. What had been the problem? This was years before childproof caps. The next slap was clear; he didn’t turn his head as red life rushed into the child’s face and then the burp as if one caused the other, as if should he slap a child then he too would burp. But he’d kissed that face to burps: that face in the photo, once in a book, now in a stomach, soon in a grave. The next two slaps were sharp. He had no special chair of his own. He molded his waxed moustache, a yellow of his own making, each morning to perfection. In the mirror, he saw his father content without distractions and vaguely philosophical about the bottle of pills. Somehow, Jack had managed to keep that cabinet shut.

Jane was slightly stunned as she watched her brother chewing a photograph. She’d seen the priest pass the book, then, before she knew it, here he was munching away and swallowing hard. She was not at home in the traditions of her siblings. She was a late birth, eight years after the baby, her brother Michael. A mistake? An afterthought? She was never sure. This album had no photographs of her. That she knew. And she hated it. She refused to look to her other brother or sisters for guidance. She was tired of feeling as if she were living in a family that lived by rules pre-set and impossible to learn. She wanted to know, to be “in the know,” to erase the eight year gap as if she too had been a part of the rule creation.

She looked for something small, something she could handle. On the third page was a small portrait, a ghost of a girl faded to yellow on paper not plastic. Thankful, she chewed, and in her mind the yellow disappeared from the little girl’s skin.
taste was bad but the badness wasn’t blandness or the twang of must and dust; it was gin. As she continued to chew the taste came in waves. She could taste how many ice cubes were in each glass or when it came straight from the bottle, until finally the gin came in one fierce blast so strong, so strange, as such an assault, that she felt unsure she’d ever tasted it before. Was it a better quality? Janie wasn’t sure. She always opted for Scotch. In fact, she may not have recognized the taste at all if not for the smell. She knew that smell like others know Lysol, or a vacuum cleaner’s exhaust. (Rose smelled it too. Though she stood at the opposite end of the line, Rose had a nose for this. She was disappointed that Jane was drinking, especially today. It seemed petty. With a nod of the head, she signaled to Michael to take the album from Jane. The smell became stronger, so strong that Rose momentarily wondered if it wasn’t she, herself. But that was absurd. Rose didn’t drink).

Jane giggled. She couldn’t help it, she didn’t know why, but my how she wanted to have that casket spring open, for the chair to levitate above the grave with her, Janie, its drunken occupant. How ridiculous, this burying a chair. And yet how forlorn it had looked shortly after her mother was sent to Newburgh in the freezer car of some express train. They all recognized the chair as an absence in their lives. Empty, the chair was more their mother than the cadaver.

Only these siblings understood that, each knowing the limitations of such a thought, knowing its confines and creating excuses to leave husbands, wives, and a lover behind.

“Rose wants this to be private. It’s not me.”

“Mike’s not bringing his wife either. Don’t feel odd. You never liked her. Well, it’s true.”

“No. I’m not going to Newburgh. I’m just going to zoom up and pay my respects with Rose, Jack, and the others, and then continue up to Greenwich for that seminar I’m giving.”

Janie burst into a loud laugh. Her laughter turned all heads: priest, brothers, sisters. It was totally inappropriate and therefore continued. She had pictured her mother in the chair, raucous, rocking in the flat silver sky, with an audience of naked trees. Mom, the party animal. Late born, Jane had only seen mother as an old woman, something to clean up after.

Numbed, Michael took a photo right before Betsy snatched the album from his hands. He watched as Betsy wolfed two down, didn’t see her spit them out. He was nervous. Being nervous worried Mike. He’d been on the verge of a breakdown a year ago. Actually, he’d been through one, past the verge, but no one here knew that. (Well, Jack did, but Michael didn’t know Jack knew). Janie was still a kid, never mind that she was 40. But Betsy. How to explain this. The priest looked uncomfortable standing at the head of the grave like a living tombstone. How many times had this same priest slipped the body of Christ into Mike’s own mouth, Mike couldn’t remember. He’d never understood the sacrament, communion, the notion of a chosen people, the saved, the piety of pain. Well, maybe the pain he obliquely understood but not how a crouton was connected to it. He’d used his father as a bridge to his mother, an amplifier, a… But when Dad died, Mike lost all connection. Dad had been the connective tissue in this family. When he’d died he left behind disjointed bones capable of the most appalling, unnatural actions. Mike was left with an empty, dry mouth and his memory of his father became quite cruel, unforgiving. This badly taken photo of his mother with an arm cut off at the elbow and only part of the head, why save it?
Not that Michael had any intention of eating it. He looked towards Rose who agreed with eyes of horror and shared disapproval. He had taken a picture, however. He’d made that concession before Betsy had yanked the album out of his hands. It was a shot of his mother at 20, 25, or thereabouts. Whether this was taken before or after she’d married Dad he couldn’t be sure. Mom had said she’d married late but no one ever knew how old she was, or what she considered late. This was a different time. People no longer married late. Now they simply weren’t married and then got married to someone who had been. There were no late marriages, just second and third ones.

Here Mom was looking jovial and unmarried (he’d say) in a fetching bathing suit for anytime. Where was this? A beach? A lake? The background was all sky; the angle, slightly underneath. It could be a backyard, the top of a hill. Her hips were full, not yet; her breasts, solid. One had a smudge that he rubbed with his finger. No luck. He wet a fingertip with his tongue. Better. When the finger re-entered his mouth it carried with it the slight taste of potato. With a quick glance in Rose’s direction, he brought his tongue tentatively to this selfsame shot. Yes, potato. Before he knew it he was licking furtively at the smudge. He was aware of the pattern, this digestion of the past. No he did not, would not eat this photograph, he repeated in his brain. But he licked. And licked. He licked this little boxed-in ankle-chopped 25 year-old version of what would become his Mom and tasted wholesome, robust, meaty, if bland Irish potatoes.

As Jane laughingly gulped further and further into the past, Michael licked this woman older and older as if age is deterioration, for with his magic tongue her smudged breast dissolved and broke apart. Her thighs turned to mashed potatoes. Her face and hands crinkled and crisscrossed with lines like hashbrowns. Everything potatoes. Her teeth, little yellowy-white choppings. Her fingers, fries, her eye-like moles. Moles. Moles. And as she cooked and boiled, her eyes glossed, her skin reddened, enflamed. Good grief, that sick taste over and over and still he licked. The spot and a part of her arm disappeared. Potato. Her right leg, gone. Potato again. Around his head flew the burlap sack from the basement, then a smaller one, plastic, brightly colored, made for the freezer. Idaho chased Ireland. Thank goodness his wife wasn’t here. College romance in Boise and he had brought her back. What was this big nation that feigned freedom with strict immigration laws. He’d never made it into the water. Plane, bus, train, and automobile had brought him back to kitchen walls yellowed by cigarette smoke as thick as though he’d never quit. Three kids of his own he’d sworn he’d never hit. How he’d tried to keep that promise, and now a bottle of his own which had been valium but now was lithium. It’s genetic. The doctor thought that was reassurance. And he licked, now the other leg, now the remaining arm. Who would’ve imagined eating could be an act of anger. If Rose hadn’t been there he would have chewed with a vengeance, taken this image and turned it to pulp, finally spitting it out with triumph wet on his lips. But he retained his dignity. He licked. There was the Father. An eye. The face. Persistence! That face, finally gone. Sick, his tongue dry, he stared at what was left, a womb and one breast, and wondered if that was enough.

He found himself raising his warm brown vial like a little champagne glass. “To science. Perhaps genetics.” And with that, the drug kicked, stopped him from an unseemly emotional outburst but unable to put any color in his cheeks, which this
weekend were gray as mice, gray as old soup.

Rose finally held the book in her hands where it was safe. Was this the smell? She lifted it closer. The priest caught her eye. She smiled bashfully. She couldn’t resist. She breathed in. Again. Again. Finally, the scent returned, that cloying perfume which even Rose’s dog Muffin detested. It was an unsettling smell, not pleasing but natural. On the next sniff, she smelled the church where her father had had his burial service. She recalled her brothers, sisters, obvious siblings, united by a shared skin grayed by grief, grief that made the skin hang loose as if with age while a different feeling—what was it?—tightened the face of Mom. And Aunt Clarice, who could tell what she was thinking. Her back hunched her into a question mark suggesting numerous possibilities, one being plain exhaustion. But that was another funeral. Aunt Clarice was dead now too. Rose smelled her own wedding. She smelled the fresh cut wood of a new house. She smelled the grass, cut grass, what a new smell! She smelled the blood of childbirth steam up from between her legs, from out of these pages. She smelled the fumes of the dentist’s office. She smelled the garbage outside rising five, six, seven stories up to an apartment window: hot, thick, noisome. She heard floors and floors and floors of laundry hung up to dry. Ten stories of sheets, socks, pants, and dresses flapping as loud as a flock of birds.

She heard snow. Who would think you could hear snow. And yet she did. Snow, each particle making its barely detectable descent into sound, colored with a tiny cymbal crash as it touched the ground, perhaps soil or rock, perhaps wood. And after the snow came rain, first light and pleasing, then full and beating down in sheets that obscured vision. As she tried to see, she almost slipped into the grave but was rescued by a moan that yanked her back, though the book slipped out of her hands.

All the children watched as the book of photographs quickly descended out of view, down six feet next to a chair encased in pine. Sick, laughing, crying, each turned to the priest for an answer. Would he go down there and rescue it? All eyes turned to him. The priest couldn’t suppress a grin. Perhaps now they could begin the ceremony that they’d come here for, ridiculous as he found it.

“Dearly beloved.” Then he stopped. That was the wrong sermon. By the time he continued, Betsy had already separated herself from the group. She stood to the side and stared at her own crumpled photographs rocking gently at the edge of the grave until the wind pushed them in. These were all objects, Betsy thought. The pictures, the album, the chair, even mother’s corpse. So why this hollowness? Why Jane’s laughter? Jack’s sickness? Michael’s stupor? Rose’s tears? Betsy stood alone. Unmoved, the priest thought. Removed was closer to the truth. For Betsy alone, Mom had been dead for years. She was the only one who had bothered to go visit her up at the nursing home every week at first, then every month. She couldn’t connect to Mom’s non-sequiturs, or see any beauty or find any pleasant memories in Mom’s decrepit face. No grace of age existed in her doglike jowls, in her runny yellow eyes warped behind bulletproof glasses. The floral dresses were indistinguishable from the housecoats. When she had her hair done, the Halloween mask had a tight blue cap, that’s all: something to highlight the tone of her skin. All anyone could remember of her was that chair, how she sat in it for the last 40 years, immobile, as Jeopardy and the Wheel of Fortune glared at her night after night. Every afternoon as the world turned, the days of her one life to live led to the general hospital. How many
re-coverings for that chair? Who could remember even one, for it was always dominated by Mom’s presence more than any fabric. Was it even comfortable? Did anyone else ever have a chance to sit in it? By the time the first grandchild had been born, Mom and the chair had combined into one permanent fixture until no one could remember her moving towards it, being in it, spread out like a field of flowers or fruits depending on the dress, in a solid colored pot, an overstuffed Queen Anne with lace doily armrests.

The immobility scared Betsy. She suggested a nursing home. And the chair had gone with her. They’d all argued for it afterwards with claims ranging the gamut from proximity to seniority. It would’ve gone great with Betsy’s sofa and everyone knew it. Oh, fuck it. She didn’t want it. And it was with some relief that she heard the first shovelful of dirt land, and her mother continued on through that final passageway.
Old gods,
their brittle splintering bones
litter the unhallowed brine of this beach.
Glaring fossils, they shriek toward the sky,
defiant
and bewildered at dying.

I see the gods driven from the flaming groves,
and I hear the oracle scream and strangle on prophecy.
I know that it is never enough,
fleeing to the edge of land;
the loss of faith demands an extinction.

The waves are eternal, relentless, indifferent.
The vines of Bacchus wither, writhe dying
in the keen saline sting.
Scorched locks, kisses sere,
the maenads drop dancing,
shrink bleached on the sand,
astonished forever to die by the sea.

But it is only old lovers calling drunk in the passageways of night,
voices shaking,
desperate in parodies of old arrogances,
that move me as the tides are moved,
scouring imperviously these discarded gods,
turning tawdry flesh to the pale perfection of bone.

The slow dissolve of calcium—
icons into sand and salt.
Is there grace for the old gods
blanched fragile and white and endlessly baffled?
Relics, they howl in resistance,
fading away.
When they hung you on the racks to dry,
   a flattened, salted relic of your sea self,
   you were redolent of old footwear,
   sex with strangers, love’s unmentionables.

Your corpus was crusty, fishy, a salacious sniff,
   before your passageway to heavenly cuisine,
   before they flushed you overnight in fresh water,
   before they bathed you in olive oil, grilled you—

   your crust transmuted into soft white coins of flesh
   for me—your lover—to treasure, to possess,
   finding you by chance in a worker’s restaurante
   when rain pounded the cobblestones of Lisbon,

   and the touch of you on my lips and tongue—
   with your sweat of cabbage juice
   and your shameless, saline exudations—
   was first kiss in a night of little deaths.
Contributors

Rhea Abbott is a naturopathic physician practicing in Kenmore, Washington. Writing folklore, myths, and short tragic stories got her through med school (as well as some of life’s toughest lessons).

Arni Adler is a multi-disciplinary artist in visual art, writing, singing, and songwriting. A graduate of Vermont’s Bennington College, she deeply believes in the transformative power of the arts. As a self-taught painter/collagist, Arni exhibits her work in and around Seattle. She has nine recordings with the critically acclaimed folk-pop vocal trio Uncle Bonsai, and has recently recorded with her two-year old ukulele trio, The Blue Janes.

Bruce Alford’s first collection, TERMINAL SWITCHING was published in 2007 (Elk River Review Press). He received a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Alabama and was an assistant professor of creative writing at the University of South Alabama from 2007-2011. Before working in academia, he was an inner-city missionary and journalist. He currently lives in Hammond, Louisiana.

Joe Amaral splits his time spelunking around the California central coast as a paramedic and stay-at-home dad to two saucy little girls. His poetry and short stories have appeared in awesome places around the world including Arcadia Magazine, Crow Hollow 19, Diverse Voices Quarterly, Kind of a Hurricane Press, Tolosa Press, Writers of the Portuguese Diaspora and Underground Voices. Joe won the 2014 Ingrid Reti Literary Award. He also hiked Mount Kilimanjaro. It was epic.


Laurie Barton is a Best of the Net finalist and winner of the New Southerner Literary Prize in Poetry. Her work has appeared internationally in Juked, Glass, Word Riot, Poetry Pacific, and Jabberwock Review. She lives in southern California and teaches English to speakers of other languages.

Michael Brockley is a 66-year old school psychologist who works in rural northeast Indiana. Recent poems have appeared in Zingara Poetry Picks, Panoplyzine, Flying Island and Third Wednesday. In addition, poems are forthcoming in Atticus Review and Gargoyle.

J. Chavers is an emerging artist, writer, and photographer living in Austin, TX. Most recently, he was awarded month-long artist residencies at Blue Mountain Center, and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. He is currently working on a series of kaleidoscope images that incorporate photographs from his collection. Also, he is working in collaboration with the resident
visual artist at The Broad Institute in Cambridge, MA, over the next six months on a series of images concerning research and the human genome.

**Nathan Chilton**, lives in Prairie du Rocher, Illinois and I fell in love with photography the first time he developed black and white film.

**Leah Christianson**’s work has appeared in *Sliver of Stone Magazine, Storm Cellar Quarterly, River & South Review, Sundog Lit, Westwind Literary Journal*, and received the Ruth Brill Scholarship for short fiction. After graduating from UCLA, Christianson began working in healthcare consulting. She currently resides in Los Angeles and various airports.

**Elise Cole** is an MFA candidate for a Master’s in Creative Writing at Hamline University in Saint Paul, Minnesota. She received a Bachelor’s Degree in Legal Studies from Hamline in 2010 and studied creative writing at The Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis before beginning graduate school. Her published work can be seen at TCJewfolk.com. She currently resides in Saint Paul with her husband, Peter, their eight month-old son, Joshua, and their dog Sookie.

**J.L. Cooper** is a writer and psychologist in Sacramento, California. He is winner of the *Tupelo Quarterly* prose open prize, TQ9, judged by Pulitzer winner Adam Johnson. Additional awards are First Place in Short Short Fiction in *New Millennium Writings*, 2013, and Second Place in Essay in *Literal Latte*, 2014. His short stories, poetry and a craft essay have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Manhattan Review, Oberon Poetry Magazine, The Tishman Review, Paper Swans Press, Gold Man Review, KY Story, Structo, Temenos Journal, Folia Literary Magazine, The Sun (Reader’s Write)*, and in other journals and anthologies. A full length collection of poetry is forthcoming from WordTech.

**Jen Corrigan** is an editorial intern at the *North American Review*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Heather; Apocrypha and Abstractions; Yellow Chair Review; The Gambler; Change Seven Magazine; Hypertext Magazine; Cease, Cows; and elsewhere*. She has been shortlisted for the *Mash Stories* quarterly flash fiction competition.

**Foster Donnell** is a recently-graduated aspiring writer and photographer from Dallas, Texas. He has an unhealthy obsession with baseball and BBQ and follows far too many Seinfeld parody accounts on social media to be considered normal.

**Ronald Dzerigian** resides in a small farming community just outside Fresno, California, with his wife and two daughters. He received his MFA from California State University Fresno and has been a recipient of the Academy of American Poets’ Ernesto Trejo Memorial Prize and the C.G. Hanzlicek Fellowship. His poems can be found in poets.org, *The Santa Ana River Review, Watershed Review*, and forthcoming in the fall 2016 issue of *Prairie Schooner*. He teaches English and is a writing tutor for institutions throughout the great Central Valley.
Brent Fisk is a writer from Bowling Green, Kentucky with over 300 poems, essays, and short stories published so far. He has a B.A. in English Literature, and an M.A. in Creative Writing from WKU.

Jeanette Geraci is originally from Long Island, New York. She currently lives in Delray Beach, FL with her black cat, Zula and attends Florida Atlantic University’s MFA Creative Writing program. Jeanette is fascinated and inspired by many things, including (but not limited to) people she knows intimately, characters in books she reads, strangers she sees at the grocery store, and faces that appear in her dreams. Her poetry, literary translations, and creative nonfiction have been published in numerous online and print journals.

Thomas Gillaspy is a northern California photographer. His photography has been featured in numerous magazines including the literary journals: Compose, DMQ Review, and Citron Review.

Matt Gold has been living in Bloomington, Indiana for the past fifteen years and recently relocated to Brooklyn, NY. He divides his time between pursuing his musical career, acting auditions, and writing. As a singer and songwriter, Matt frequently performs; some of his music can be found online at www.mattgold.net. As evidence of the democratizing nature of this approach to photography, Matt has no formal training in the visual arts. When he took a simple picture of his cat on his Sony Ericsson Z310A flip phone, Matt was amazed by the quality of the camera (something Matt has a keen eye to judge based on his modeling work). He started exploring different subjects and this collection has grown from that picture.

Mark Yale Harris was born in Buffalo, New York, and spent his childhood enthralled in a world of drawing and painting. Though honored for his creative endeavors, he was encouraged to pursue a more conventional career. After finding conventional success, the artistic passion that existed just beneath the surface was able to present itself. Harris began sculpting, and has since created an evolving body of work in stone and bronze, now featured in public collections, museums and galleries worldwide, including: Booth Western Art Museum - Cartersville, Georgia; the Four Seasons Hotel - Chicago, Illinois, and the Open Air Museum - Ube, Japan.

Lois Marie Harrod’s most recent collection Nightmares of the Minor Poet appears in May. Her chapbook And She Took the Heart appeared in January 2016, and her 13th and 14th poetry collections, Fragments from the Biography of Nemesis (Cherry Grove Press) and the chapbook How Marlene Mae Longs for Truth (Dancing Girl Press) appeared in 2013. The Only Is won the 2012 Tennessee Chapbook Contest (Poems & Plays), and Brief Term, a collection of poems about teachers and teaching was published by Black Buzzard Press, 2011. Cosmogony won the 2010 Hazel Lipa Chapbook (Iowa State). She is widely published in literary journals and online ezines from American Poetry Review to Zone 3. She teaches Creative Writing at The College of New Jersey.

Aubrielle Hvolboll is an independent photographer currently soaking up heat in Northern California to prepare for her move to the snowy beaches of Maine. She dreams of traveling with a purpose, and enjoys people watching, many many podcasts, and making usual things unusually beautiful.
Ian Kelley is a native of the great Inland Northwest and is a recent post baccalaureate graduate from a Visual Communication Design program. He is pursuing freelance opportunities as well experience in the design industry.

Matt Kolbet teaches and writes near Portland, Oregon.

Richard LeBlond is a retired biologist living in North Carolina. Inspired by travel and other nuisances, his essays and photographs have appeared in numerous U.S. and international journals, including Montreal Review, Hippocampus, Compose, Smoky Blue, Appalachia, and Still Point Arts Quarterly.

Deanna Lee was born in upstate New York, to parents from China and Taiwan, and was raised in suburban Boston. After many years of classical music training on several instruments, she received degrees from Oberlin College and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and studied at the Rome campus of the Tyler School of Art. She lives and work in Brooklyn, New York. She has shown her work in numerous venues, including Robert Henry Contemporary, Wave Hill, The Drawing Center, and Schema Projects. Her public art works include a 700-foot-long mural on bicycle-path barriers in Queens, commissioned by the NYC Department of Transportation; and a design for tree guards in Fort Greene and Clinton Hill in Brooklyn. Among her honors are awards from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, Asia Society, National Academy, Millay Colony, and Saltonstall Foundation.

Bezalel-Levy is the combined signature of the husband and wife collaboration of Chaim Bezalel and Yonnah Ben Levy. They live and work in Stanwood, WA and Ashkelon, Israel. For more than 20 years they have been combining their talents including photography and painting to document architectural elements from various periods in Israel. Their landscape paintings have been commissioned and purchased for numerous public venues in America including hospitals.

L.L. Madrid lives in Tucson where she can smell the rain before it falls. She resides with her four-year-old daughter, an antisocial cat, and on occasion, a scorpion or two. Her work can be found lurking in places like Flash Fiction Magazine, Literary Orphans, and Dali’s Lovechild.

Oscar Mancinas is a young, fly mestizo from around the way. Originally from Mesa, Arizona, he now works, writes, and studies in Boston. His work can be found or is forthcoming in Queen Mob’s Tea House, Blue Mesa Review, Phoenix Rising Review, Contraposition, and latinosbelike.tumblr.com.

Chris McCarthy is a retired Marine, having completed 30 years of service. With the help of The Muse Writers Center in Norfolk, Virginia, he is working on his poetry and learning the difference between Lord Byron and Billy Collins. He prefers Billy Collins. He lives in Virginia Beach with his wife.

Dave McCarty is a writer, director, photographer, and creative director. He has spent his career in advertising mostly with a focus on fashion, and lives in Cape May, NJ.
Kimberly Merenda concurrently pursues a doctoral degree in multicultural women's and gender studies and a second master's degree in English. She has a farm with too many goats and a hundred chickens. She is very tired. She is from California but now mired in Texas. Her research interests are human-nonhuman hybridity, speculative realism, critical animal studies, and dystopian fiction. She needs/reads poetry as theory-praxis. As Audre Lorde pivotally says, poetry is not a luxury.

Marigny Michel lives on the left edge of the continent. Her work appears in print journals such as Calyx, Chaffey Review, Louisiana Review, and Weave, as well as online in publications such as Goblin Fruit and Scissors and Spackle.

Luke Normsy is a mid-level bureaucrat by day and guttersnipe poet/photographer by night. He lives in the same meaningless void as the rest of us, but tries to be cheery about it.

Tania Palermo is a fine art and portrait photographer based out of Manchester, CT. She is a self taught artist who traveled the country in 2010 to teach herself photography.

Kimberly Peterson has previously been published in Scaling the Face of Reason: An Anthology of Canadian Poetry. An eventful family life and successful career does not leave enough space for poetry. After germinating in the rich soil of motherhood and work as a nurse, Kimberly now returns to poetry full time. A number of her poems have been published in Poetry Breakfast and her poems are scheduled for publication in Banister and Drunken Monkeys.

Romey Petite is a writer, cartoonist and playwright. Sometimes he illustrates his own stories and sometimes the stories don’t require pictures to lean on. He has biblical daydreams.

Drew Pisarra was a magician’s assistant for a weekend, a restaurant critic for a few years, and a Digital VP for a cable network for nearly a decade. But none of that’s true now.

Arthur Plotnik is better known for his prose works, including two Book-of-the-Month Club selections (Elements of Expression and Elements of Editing). An emerging poet who has appeared in Brilliant Corners, Rosebud, Harpur Palate, THEMA, Comstock Review, The Cape Rock, Glass, Off the Coast, Kindred, and several other literary publications. Formerly editorial director at the American Library Association, he was a runner up for the William Stafford Award and a finalist in the Dana Literary Awards for poetry, Blue Lyra Review’s Longish Poem Prize, Great Lakes Review Poetry Prize, and Atlanta Review International Poetry Competition. He lives in Chicago.

Elizabeth Richardson-Isom is an artist creating romantic, stylized, warm and inviting sculptures and paintings since 1999. She studied sculpture with Simon Kogan of Olympia, WA, and bronze casting at both The Bronzeworks in Shelton, WA, and River Dog Fine Art Foundry in Port Townsend, WA. She is currently an Artist Trust Member. Elizabeth has worked for Pilchuck Glass School as the Studio Building Coordinator for numerous summer programs, along with being the Artist in Residence Technician and the Professional Artist in Residence Technician. She has exhibited at numerous galleries and art shows throughout Washington. Most recently exhibiting with Gallery North in Edmonds, WA. Elizabeth lives in Tenino, WA, where she is currently working on a new body of work.
Laura Schaffer is a Notre Dame graduate, currently pursuing her Masters degree at Appalachian State University. She has invested her deep love of literature in teaching high school English over the past four years.

Katherine Sloan is a Virginia native, and obtained her MA in English with a concentration in Creative Writing from Longwood University. She is currently living and working in New York City.

Skaidrite Stelzer lives and writes in Toledo, Ohio. Growing up as a post-war refugee and displaced person, she feels connected to the world and other stray planets. Her poetry has been published in Fourth River, Eclipse, Glass, Baltimore Review, and many other literary journals.

Alice Tarbuck is a PhD student in Edinburgh, Scotland, where she studies contemporary poetry. Her work has appeared broadly, most recently as a performed commission for Timespan Festival, in Helmsdale.

Tammy Tillotson lives & writes in Chase City, Virginia. Her first chapbook Lady Fingers was published by Finishing Line Press in 2012. She is a member of the Poetry Society of Virginia and the Writers Studio in South Boston. She holds a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies from Hollins University and her award-winning poems appear in numerous print publications and online journals.

Julie Tyler lives in Miami where she serves as writer and editor for a Florida-based social marketing company. Tyler is currently working on a novel project, having completed her Ph.D. in contemporary literature and literacy studies at the University of Tennessee and having taught composition and literature at the college level for ten years. Her previous publications include an edited collection of scholarly articles, Space and Place in The Hunger Games (McFarland, 2014) and an article reviewing Daniel Grassian’s Writing the Future of Black America: Literature of the Hip-Hop Generation (Callaloo, 2011).

Lillo Way’s full-length manuscript, Wingbone, was a finalist for the 2015 Barry Spacks Poetry Prize from Gunpowder Press, and her chapbook manuscript, The Life We’ve Slept Here, was a semi-finalist in the 2015 Grayson Books Chapbook Competition. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Poet Lore, Tampa Review, New Orleans Review, Madison Review, The Sow’s Ear Poetry Review, Poetry East, Common Ground Review, Third Wednesday, Yemassee, Santa Fe Literary Review and WomenArts Quarterly, among others. Five of her poems have been anthologized in the Good Works series of FutureCycle Press. She lives in Seattle, where she has had the good fortune to be mentored by David Wagoner.

Carol Weliky is a Portland Oregon writer. In addition to recent print and online publication, a poetic line of hers can be found stamped in concrete along one of Portland, Oregon’s light rail lines.

Susan Yount was raised on a farm in southern Indiana where she learned to drive a tractor and hug her beloved goat, Cinnamon. She is editor of Arsenic Lobster Poetry Journal, madam of the Chicago Poetry Bordello and founder of Misty Publications. She also works fulltime at the Associated Press and teaches online poetry classes at The Poetry Barn. As if all that wasn’t enough, she is mother to a rowdy 9-year-old. She has published two chapbooks, House on Fire and Catastrophe Theory. Her collage work has appeared in Glint Literary Review, Masque & Spectacle and elsewhere. In her free time, she works on the Poetry Tarot.
Submission due dates are October 31, January 31, April 30, and July 31, for issues forthcoming January 1, April 1, July 1, and October 1, respectively, unless otherwise noted on our website.

There is no minimum word count, but please keep your fiction and nonfiction submissions under 3,500 words. Poems must be under two typed pages.

It is equally important that all three elements given for the specific submission period be included within your story or poem. Artists and photographers are only required to represent one out of the three elements.

For multiple submissions, fiction is capped at no more than two stories per submission period. Poems are limited to five per submission period. In the event your material is accepted in another publication, we request that you withdraw your submission from 3Elements Review should you decide to publish your piece elsewhere.
Mikaela Shea is in her thesis hours of her MFA at Columbia College Chicago and was recently a writer-in-residence at Ragdale Foundation. She has published stories in Midwestern Gothic, Copperfield Review, Waypoints Magazine, Foliate Oak, Hypertext Magazine, Paragraph Planet, Vagina: The Zine, Columbia College’s annual Story Week Reader, as well as a children’s book at the State Historical Society of Iowa. Mikaela is currently writing a novel and is Editor-in-Chief of 3Elements Review. @mikaelashea.

Sarah Wylder Deshpande has published fiction and poetry in The Dunes Review, Tammy Journal, 3Elements Review, Gravel Magazine, and Fire Tetrahedron. She holds an MFA from the University of Maryland. She lives in Oregon with her husband, son, and border collie.

Whitney G. Schultz earned her MFA in poetry at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her poetry and flash fiction has appeared in The Light Ekphrastic, One for One Thousand, SmokeLong Quarterly, deLuge, Blinders Journal, End of 83, and several others. She currently works at a private high school where she teaches literature and creative writing. She lives near Baltimore, MD with her husband and two cats. When she’s not cat-wrangling or grading essays, she enjoys traveling with her husband.

Megan Collins received an MFA in Creative Writing from Boston University. She teaches creative writing at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts, as well as literature at Central Connecticut State University. Her work has appeared in many literary journals, including Compose, Linebreak, Off the Coast, and Rattle. When not writing or teaching, Megan enjoys reading, watching The Ellen DeGeneres Show, collecting miniature items, eating cupcakes, going on Netflix binges, and spending time with her husband, Marc, and her golden retriever, Maisy. Check out Megan’s work on her website, megan-collins.com.

C.J. Matthews is a writing teacher from Des Moines, Iowa. She adores traveling, elegant food, bold red wine, and her two little dogs, Hercules and Hucklebee. Her recent work can be read in Spoilage Magazine, Cahoonalooloodaling, and the Kind of a Hurricane Press anthology In Gilded Frame.

Kelly Roberts received a BA in English from the University of Iowa. After years of writing creative nonfiction, she decided to give fiction a go. Kelly lives in Iowa with her adoring husband, clever daughter and rescued wire fox terrier. By day she works in Human Resources, which provides her with more writing material than she could ever hope for. Cooking, reading and popping bubble wrap—one bubble, one row at a time—are her passions. Her work has appeared in Lunch Ticket.
Marlon Fowler is a Des Moines–based designer and web developer for 3Elements Review. He received his bachelor’s degree in Journalism with a major in Advertising from Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. Marlon enjoys all things technology, making websites “do things,” running, reading nonfiction, sports, movies, video games, and Chicago food. He would really like to learn PHP and get back to Paris. You can check out Marlon’s portfolio at www.marlonfowler.com.

Katherine Davis earned an MFA in fiction from the University of Maryland and a PhD from the University of Tennessee. Her most recent work appears in Gravel and in Broad River Review, and she won Gigantic Sequins’ 2014 Flash Fiction Contest. Currently, she is living in Wisconsin with a small flock of cockatiels and is completing her first novel.

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