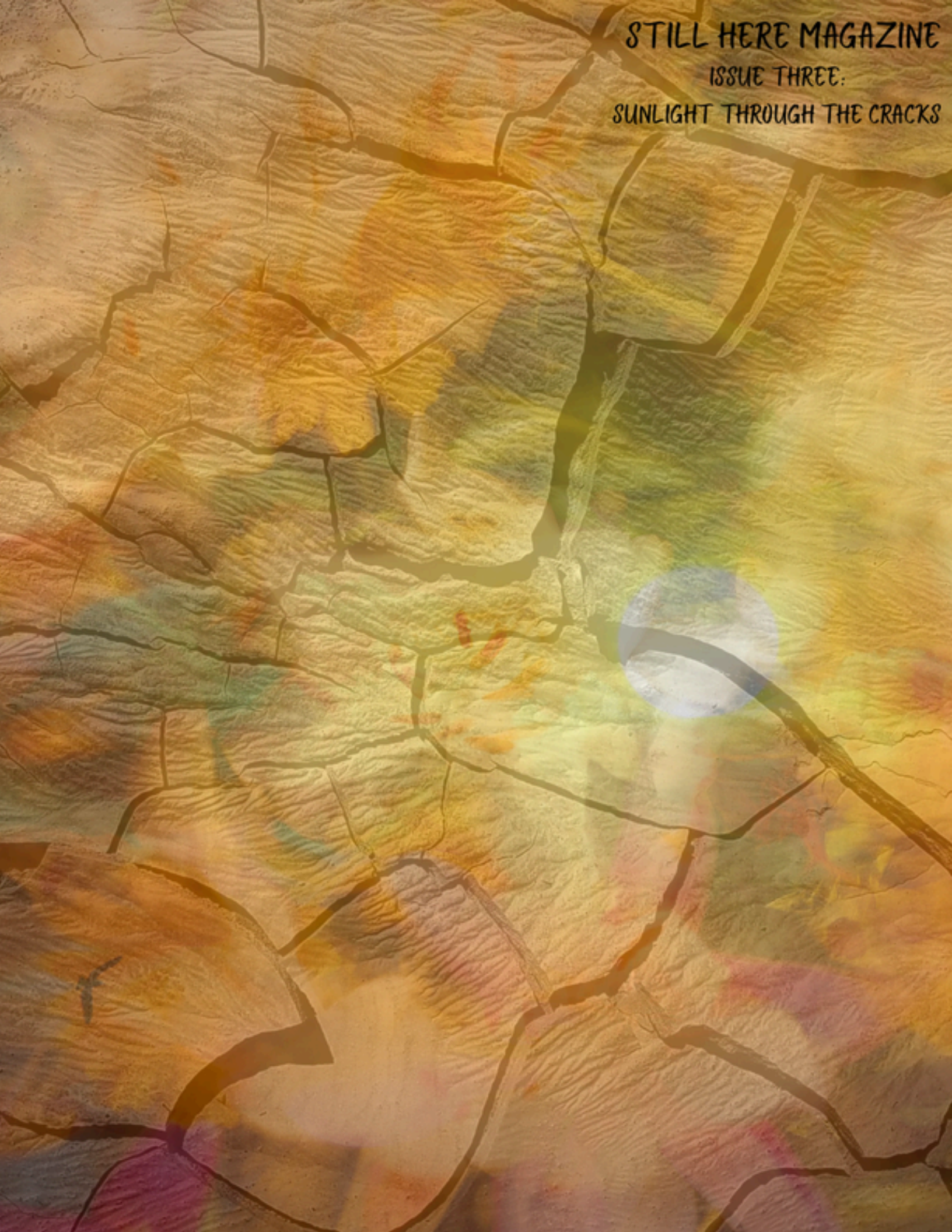

STILL HERE MAGAZINE

ISSUE THREE:

SUNLIGHT THROUGH THE CRACKS

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the third issue of Still Here. We made it.

This issue received twice as many submissions as usual, and the response was overwhelming in the best way. Inside, you'll find 34 contributors sharing 19 poems and 18 pieces of prose; each one a reminder that there is always light, even when it filters in quietly through the cracks.

Editing this issue has been a privilege. Every submission carried honesty & intention, offering perspectives that lingered long after I finished reading. Whether a piece aligned with the issue or not, the care behind it never went unnoticed.

Thank you for your continued support of the magazine and the writers who make it possible. As you wander into Sunlight through the Cracks, I hope each page reminds you that the world needs your authentic self. Not the polished version, but the real one.

Enjoy.

Warmly,
Alauna Lester
Editor-in-Chief, Still Here Magazine

THE BEE GEES ARE A CRUEL JOKE

BY BEE WRIGHT

I feel the most present when my eyes crease and hide behind the rounder bits of my face,
Propped up by a painfully wide grin,
Heaving lungs playing out of time with my jittery hands and heart.

I am grateful for the funny people in my life,
Thoughts that amuse and alarm me too much to speak aloud,
My knack for making awkward moments bearable with a trailing ha-ha.

Vodka, too.
(*I am not an angry drunk, but a giggly one.*)

I'd probably be dead by now if life wasn't so funny,
I would have left every job a few months sooner,
Which is a death in and of itself in this economy.
Luckily-
There is always a joke to be made at the end of every bad day.
This is one of the only ways I know to get by.

Even at my lowest point, I found something to make light of.
My father's wake was at this corny pseudo-rhinestone-cowboy bar on the top floor of a hotel no normal person could afford on their own,
Filled with bodies I had never met before-
No one knew him like I did.
While men in suits talked stocks and new generational slang they couldn't wrap their aging heads around,
I folded my upper half over the patio railing,
Watching Aston Martins and pristine lifted F-150s whiz past each other on the streets below.

THE BEE GEES ARE A CRUEL JOKE

BY BEE WRIGHT

Just as I imagined myself denting three cars at once,
A familiar song played over the speakers
"Stayin' alive
Stayin' alive
Ah, ah, ah, ah
Stayin' alive."
I laughed,
For staying alive was the only thing he didn't do.


LOGISTICS EXPERT
COMPUTERS
SOFTWARE ENGINEER

BRATS FOR DINNER BY ALEXANDER HURLA

I live in a house with five other men.
We're all here for different reasons,
but mostly because we can't afford anything
besides a single bedroom to call our own.
Sometimes we sit in our cars,
all lined up next to each other on the street,
because it's different than sitting in our rooms.

Cynthia owns the house and stays in what I think is a large closet.
I had brats cooking on the stove the other day
(they were buy-one-get-one-free)
when she sat down at the kitchen table.
We made small talk alongside the dirty dishes and cluttered cabinets.
She said she grew up on a dairy farm
before her father thought he could make it big
digging for gold in California like a 49er.
It amazed her that I'd seen kangaroos in Australia.

I glanced at the brats to make sure they weren't burning.

Then she said things had been tough since her illness.
She didn't say what it was,
but only then did I notice the green light blinking
from a square-shaped bulge under her shirt.
She said she wished God would take her home
to end the pain she'd had on earth,
and she didn't know why He'd left her here,
but she hoped it was for more than just to suffer.

I'd thought there was something I should say.
Something from the Bible or a moving quote?
But nothing came to mind,
and sometimes words make it worse.
So, I just listened.

BRATS FOR DINNER BY ALEXANDER HURLA

Who cares about brats?

She stopped and stared at the floor —
the one she'd mopped that morning —
and I stumbled on, "I know it's not much,
but it's sure helped me out:
you letting me stay here for a bit."
She looked up and smiled
and said I seemed like a nice guy.
She must've noticed the brats then,
because she said I could use the spices on the shelf
and showed me where the candy was for dessert.
Then she said, "OK," as though that settled things
and went back to her room.

I ate my brats alone.

BLUFFSIDE BEAUTY BY SHAWNA DAVIS

You are built like the bluffside
You are still like the breeze
I'm well acquainted with your posture
I wonder I wonder I wonder
(I'm scared to ask)
Have you had the craze of love too fast?
Do you love me like an addiction?
How often have you fallen asleep with my ghost in your arms?

Time stretches between you and me
My arms aren't half as long
(my patience, twice as strong)

KITCHEN WITCH BY SHAWNA DAVIS

Sweet herbaceous earth root love
Simmered scraps turned briny kitchen essential
Fruit of Near Rot
Fruit of past meals
Fruit of Fruit turned Fruit anew

Like spells cast in cauldrons
Like brews brewed down
Like blessing, Like anointment,
Like prayers answered and fish multiplied
Waste not wasted, Wants fulfilled

Transmutation at its finest,
most ordinary

BEHIND THE GLASS OF THE NIGHT

BY LUCY OLSMAN

I'm not wearing my contacts. The black branches stand like scars against the sky, fading from a dark denim to gray. Three glowing, square windows from the house behind the tree peek through, trying to catch my eyes. Desperate for attention, just like me.

I often feel melancholy on the bus rides home. It is always after class that I descend into these hopeless moods. My mom was here just a few days ago. She still lingers in the waft of sauerkraut rising from my sanitary bin. The shards of the jar could have poked right through her soft skin. I'm glad they spared her, though her knee had a nasty scrape — shreds of loose skin, white as a lamb.

My landlady's husband parks his car, always in the same place, diagonally behind hers, like two rancid animals in mating season. His blue car sniffs her red car's backside. Go forth and multiply, or whatever it said. He gets out with a thermos can of either tea or coffee, or maybe something else entirely. The amber windows blink in the car's clean, glossy reflection. There's an ocean of Irish droplets that haven't yet found a way to stop pouring from the sky. I don't mind.

I want it to be dark forever. Unable to see my face, only a blurry image of my hands in the distance. I think I might be really strange for sitting in my room in the dark after 4. But I can't bear the harsh light of the bleak sky, despite the fact that it covers up the sun. I'm grateful for that.

The sun is mean, prickly and loud. I can never be myself in that cosmic spotlight, though that's not the sun's fault. I feel large enough as it is. There's no need to illuminate that presence.

I love being alone more than ever. My room has an air of artificial cinnamon, cheap laundry detergent, and Christmas as a child.

BEHIND THE GLASS OF THE NIGHT

BY LUCY OLSMAN

It strokes my hair as I linger on the threshold of sleep. If I squeeze my eyes shut, I can nearly see my mom tucking me in behind thousands of dancing stars. She is everything to me, but I grew too big for her arms. Luckily I haven't changed, she said.

A circle of light shivers on my ceiling, blinking softly, as if trying to tell me something. I don't want to hear it. I have been speaking too much today already, and it, too, will probably want a reaction from me. Not today, not right now. And most certainly not in the morning, when it will all start over again.

Thank your mother for the sinful chocolates, my landlady says. If that's sinful to her, she should try talking to my psychiatrist, who retired a few years ago. I'm a cartoon series, each episode conveying another mistake. When I try to tell others about my faults, I somehow always become a clown, a red nose like a cherry, and shoes seven sizes too big. I like eliciting laughter from them; it makes me feel I'm off the hook for the day. I can crawl back into my snailhouse, into the blissful chokehold of sleep.

Those episodes don't feel as big anymore now. I can now worry about normal things — things girls in their twenties are supposed to worry about. Sometimes I still feel the splinters against the walls of my aorta, like fingers poking me into awareness. But my brain is the final boss that they cannot beat. It used to be weak, but now I can finally count on it. I increased its armor class with thick scar tissue. It looks mean and red, but I can trust it. And I don't want life to end anymore.

PRIDE BY KAROL NIELSEN

I think it's pride that keeps us
from our best work—
must look busy, must look good,
must look like we're going places,
like we know what we're doing.
But the best work comes when
we have failed—when we don't know
where we are going, what we are doing—
and we try anyway. Desperately, doggedly.

THE END OF THE CYCLE BY HAYDEN NOX

I storm into the laundry room and close the door. The galloping sound of our old dryer keeps my heart beating in time despite the rage.
I can't go to my best friend's birthday party?! Not alone? I'm thirteen years old. I should be able to go without my mother and both of my younger sisters coming along.

I start loading another load into the washer.
We've known his family for years. And his mother is strict. It's not like we'd ever be alone. Not that I like him like that anyways.

I fill a cup with the deep blue liquid and drizzle it over the clothes before dropping the lid of the machine closed with a clang.
But I am my mother's mistake. The product of a teenage pregnancy. Come hell or high water she is going to make sure I make it out of high school with a diploma, not a newborn.
I press the dial in, turn it, pull it out, and hear the rush of the water pour over the clothes.
My mother's surveillance is suffocating. And ever-shifting.
No Halloween.
No Santa.
No Pokémon.
No books with magic.
No black clothes.
It is exhausting trying to keep up with it all.
When do I get to be a person? I didn't agree to be the one she had to give up all her dreams for. But she is nothing if not clear: She gave up her life for me, I have to make her sacrifice worthwhile.

THE END OF THE CYCLE BY HAYDEN NOX

I look around the laundry room, dying to find an end to the burning in my chest, the way my skin felt stretched over every joint in my body.
But what can I do?
A thought flashes into my head.
Lacey? Her arms are carved in defiance.
My face frowns its disapproval as a voice helpfully consults, 'Just looking at blood makes you queasy.'
I look over my arms for a second and notice the ghost of a scar from when I burned myself on the iron last year.
'That'd be pretty obvious...' the voice offers again.
Well, I don't know what my options are. I can't keep living like this.
Amusement ripples in my chest through the despair. 'You can't be serious.'
My face creases in uncertainty.
'You can't give up now. You might end up in a box on the side of the road somewhere. Don't you want to know how the story ends?'
The dryer buzzes announcing the end of the cycle.

SECOND CHANCES BY HOWARD OSBORNE

Some believe second chances are not real
To feel they still linger, some might pout
As doubt and resentment forever can last
The past is never over, and comes around
Profound or superficial, it'll soon be back
A lack of faith in a partner or fellow man
It can dwell deep inside, feel it thinking
And blinking from the box, it will emerge
The urge to allow its first breath, is strong
A song cannot do justice to angry words
The sherds of those broken pots says it all
Yet a call is ever there for second chances

WARM YOU UP BY WILLIAM CASS

Agnes started her morning the same way she had for the sixty-odd years she'd lived alone in that house: with a cup of tea while she said the rosary at the kitchen table. She mumbled as she prayed. Dawn crept through the sheer curtains over the sink.

When she finished the rosary, Agnes made toast and ate it at the counter with another cup of tea. The plate and cup she used had been her grandparents', as was most of the furniture in the house. She looked into the backyard as she ate and was vaguely aware of the sounds of traffic increasing beyond the hedge and down the hill on the town's main street. The maple tree at the far corner of the yard had made its seasonal turn, brightly colored leaves circling its base. When Agnes opened the window to set her crusts on the sill for the birds, she was surprised by the chill breath of air that came inside. Not yet mid-October and already someone had a fireplace burning nearby. Like always, the realization of another fall deepening saddened her: the shortened days, the colder weather, the passage of time.

She said, "My."

The sound of her own voice was unsettling, too. She couldn't remember speaking the previous day, nor the one before that.

By eight, Agnes had showered, dressed, made the bed, and was ready for her morning walk. She put on the old Mackinaw coat that had been her grandfather's and left through the front door, jiggling its handle afterwards to be sure it was locked. She started down the hill towards the elementary school where she'd taught for forty years. Its entry bell rang as she came up beside the playground, and she smiled. She stopped to watch the clambering children, diminished in numbers over the years, being shuttled into the building by staff members.

WARM YOU UP BY WILLIAM CASS

Agnes only recognized one of the adults, a tall man who'd started there as a teacher's aide shortly before she retired; she felt her eyebrows knit as she realized his hair that had been jet-black then was mostly gray now.

Agnes continued up to the main street and waited for the traffic light to change to cross it. She looked down a few blocks at the old fertilizer plant that had closed a decade before and the train depot just beyond it that had shut down, too, not long afterwards. The buildings loomed large, dark, still. When the light changed, she crossed into more streets not unlike her own with small houses and tall trees along the curbs. Like most of the neighborhoods in town, nearly as many houses were for sale or boarded up as were occupied.

Five minutes later, Agnes came to the town's central park. She had it entirely to herself as she made her way past the baseball field, the jungle gym, the miniature pavilion, and up onto the footbridge that crossed a small brook. She stopped there and watched the water babble by. She thought of collecting pollywogs in a jar along the brook's banks as a girl and trying to cross it from rock to rock after it had risen in the spring. Agnes could hardly believe she'd been that young once, that she had been that girl. The memory was like thinking about another person altogether.

She crossed the remainder of the bridge and had almost come to the park's opposite entrance when she saw two feet in high-top sneakers protruding from a cluster of bushes near the pathway. Agnes felt a jolt; she sucked in her breath and looked for someone to help. But she remained alone, so she swallowed and took tentative steps into the bushes. A heavy-set woman in a hooded sweatshirt and jeans lay on her back there.

She appeared to be sleeping, but her breathing was slow and shallow. Agnes bent down, shook the woman's shoulder, and got no response. She grabbed her cell phone from her coat pocket and called 911.

Agnes stayed at the woman's side, recognition slowly filling her, until she heard a siren approach, then hurried to the entrance and waved the ambulance up to where she waited. She stood off to the side while the two male paramedics examined the woman. The older paramedic lifted one of the woman's eyelids, then shouted, "Get the Narcan!"

Agnes had heard about Narcan and its use. She put her hand over her mouth and began to pray.

The paramedics treated the unconscious woman, then arranged her on a stretcher inside the back of the ambulance. Agnes heard the older paramedic report into a hand-held receiver that they had a drug overdose in transit and were heading to Memorial Hospital.

The younger paramedic rode in the back with the woman. Before the older one climbed into the driver's seat, he asked Agnes, "Are you with her?"

"No, I just stumbled upon her, but I know her. She was a third-grade student of mine many years ago."

He nodded.

Agnes felt her lips trembling. "Will she be all right?"

"Don't know. Hope so."

He got inside, started the engine and lights, and sped away. Agnes watched after it, considering, until it disappeared and she could no longer hear the siren. It had been the woman's wide forehead and small mouth that had first led Agnes to recognize her; even thirty years later, both were distinctive.

WARM YOU UP BY WILLIAM CASS

Her name was Jean, and she'd sat at the back of the last row in Agnes' classroom. She'd been unusually quiet as a little girl, taciturn, shy. Her father, like most of the school's students, had worked at the fertilizer plant.

Agnes changed her normal route and walked over to St. Matthew's Church. Like the park, it was empty. She lit a votive candle in the little alcove dedicated to the Virgin Mary, lowered herself onto the kneeler there, and prayed some more for Jean. She remembered that as a girl, Jean had been larger than most of her classmates and rarely had interactions with any of them. The exception was one bitterly cold winter afternoon after dismissal when she saw Jean creep back into the classroom; at the time, Agnes was in the room's storage closet but could see her through the doorway. The girl opened her backpack, took a paper bag out of it, set it on the seat of a boy's desk, and quickly left the room again. Through one of the windows, Agnes watched her scamper across the playground, then went over to the boy's desk. His name was written in green crayon on the outside of the bag. Agnes opened it. Inside were a pair of mittens, a scarf, and a knit cap, all well-worn. The boy's house had burned down the week before, and his family had lost almost all their belongings. Agnes replaced the bag where it had been and looked out the window again. Jean was nowhere to be seen.

~

That afternoon, Agnes tried to take her regular post-lunch nap but couldn't sleep. Instead, she lay there thinking about Jean, the dealt hands of life, and the dwindling number of days she herself had left on earth. Finally, she bundled up again and drove over to the hospital.

WARM YOU UP BY WILLIAM CASS

She found the emergency room receptionist behind a glass window and asked about Jean.

The receptionist regarded Agnes evenly and paused before asking, "Are you family?"

Agnes shook her head.

"Well, if you're not, I'm afraid I can't disclose that sort of information to you. All I can tell you is that she's no longer here and hasn't been admitted upstairs."

"She's left then, been discharged?"

The receptionist stared back and said nothing.

"Or I guess it could mean she didn't make it at all. That she passed away."

With pursed lips, the receptionist showed her palms.

"All right," Agnes said. "Thank you."

She went back outside and drove home. When she got there, Agnes checked the phone book and did an internet search but couldn't find any contact information about Jean or her family's surname. She thought to herself: thirty years is a long time; if she's alive at all, she could be anywhere. Agnes looked out her window and across the street where the weeds surrounding an abandoned house rustled knee-high on the small breeze. She thought back to when the town and region had been thriving; it seemed so long ago. Many people had lost their way since then. Jean was just one of them. She touched her fingertips to the window's glass and blew out a long breath.

On her walk each morning afterwards, Agnes slowed her steps though the park and looked for Jean.

WARM YOU UP BY WILLIAM CASS

She looked for her, too, when she passed by people huddled together outside taverns, empty storefronts, or in alleyways. She looked more hopefully at church, the supermarket, the gas station. She continued to look, but to no avail.

As the days shortened further, Agnes filled her time in the usual ways to which she'd grown accustomed: praying, reading, drinking tea, knitting afghans for the church's winter bazaar, watching nature programs on television. Gradually, all the deciduous trees became completely bare, and the titter of birds no longer greeted her upon waking.

Two Mondays before Thanksgiving, as the afternoon's light had begun its descent towards gloaming, Agnes opened her front door to get the mail and stopped dead in her tracks. Her palms flew to her chest. Jean was standing there on the porch looking directly at her. She was dressed in the same sweatshirt, jeans, and sneakers, but a timid smile creased her lips.

"Ms. Stafford," she said quietly. "I'm sorry to startle you, but they told me at the hospital that you found me that morning and called for the ambulance. You saved my life. I wanted to stop by to thank you."

Agnes slowly lowered her hands to her side and said, "You're all right."

"Well, I just got out of rehab. You know what they say: one day at a time." She paused."I was struggling with some things.But, so far, so good."

"And you have a place to stay?"

Jean nodded. "My cousin has a spare room."

"How about a job?"

"Not yet. Need to find one, though, and quick."

Agnes thought; we all make mistakes. A sudden idea struck her. "I'll hire you to paint my house," she said. "Start on the outside while the weather holds, then I need the inside painted, too. I have all the supplies you need in my garage."

Jean's eyebrows rose. "Paint your house."

"Why not?"

Jean gave a little snort-like chuckle. "Well, I suppose I could do that." She cocked her head, her eyes narrowing. "Why are you doing this, Ms. Stafford?"

"Because I believe in you."

Jean shook her head. "That's what you said when I was eight."

"And I still believe it." Agnes paused. "I do."

Jean continued shaking her head, but her smile widened. "Okay, I guess. When do you want me to start?"

"Tomorrow morning. Be here at eight and we'll have a cup of tea before you begin."

"I don't think I've ever had a cup of tea."

"It'll warm you up." Agnes smiled, too. "All right, then. Eight o'clock. Don't be late."

"I won't." Jean stepped down from the porch onto the front walk, turned and said, "Thank you, Ms. Stafford."

"Of course. Take care, Jean."

The big woman nodded. Agnes watched her go down the walk and turn towards the school. She watched her make her way down the hill and disappear around the bend. Streetlights blinked on, and a dog barked in a neighbor's yard.

WARM YOU UP BY WILLIAM CASS

Agnes could hear the familiar, quiet murmur of traffic from the main street. It was the time of day when the shift change whistle used to blow at the fertilizer plant. A train rumbled by in the near distance, passing the town's shuttered depot, coming from somewhere, heading somewhere else.

SOFT CONSTELLATIONS
BY ABRAHAM AONDOANA

I tally the ratings through my window,
one by one,
and call them by things I can not say.
They do not answer,
but their presence is enough.

Each flicker is a memory,
a wish, a small apology,
a reminder that the night
does not consume
everything it touches.

I trace the constellations in my finger.
and in the spaces between,
I recognize the quiet
that carries me
from one fragile day
to the next.

COIN TOSS BY MADELINE MONROE

For Chris

On the night our father dies, I let Luisa and I into the laboratory after hours. Luckily, no one else is here tonight. On weekdays, there is often at least one of us who needs to stay late, completing a case study or sending test results to neurologists. But our father has died on a Friday, and all the lab assistants have decided that their ongoing projects can be postponed. I'd have done the same.

But this is a task I can't stand putting off for the weekend. I barely made it this long.

"It's so... bright," Luisa says.

I lead us towards the back of the room. Luisa's eyes glide over the equipment: the centrifuges, the collection tubes, the pipettes, the microscopes.

"What'd you expect? Candelabras?"

I pump a glob of hand sanitizer into my palm. Luisa copies me. She scrunches her nose at the strong, sterile scent of it.

She's never been here before. When I had John, my coworker, take our blood, we used the exam room down the hall. He took the samples back to the lab, while Luisa and I went back to see Dad. He was in the hospital then, being monitored for a pneumonia flare up. When he was stable enough to go back to the house, his doctor handed Luisa a note with the hospice services he recommended.

That was six weeks ago.

Luisa looks out of place here. Her unraveling sweater and paint-splattered jeans stand out against the starch white light. She is so obviously out of place— an artist in a genetic research lab. I can't remember the last time I saw someone here with their hair down. That's just laboratory protocol. But Luisa's hair flows over her shoulders and down her back. She's always worn it long.

COIN TOSS BY MADELINE MONROE

I had John run the test for us. He does most of the DNA mapping here, anyway. I was already breaking protocol by running my own test in my own lab, and by bypassing the psych and neuro consults. I'd have never been able to interpret the entire sequence anyway, not while keeping it a secret that I was looking at my own sample. Each test takes time, sometimes hours, and it's been so long since test results were my responsibility. Now, I sift through vitals and neurologist notes all day. I map disease progression instead of interpreting microsatellites. Still, those three little letters stick out in my mind. CAG. CAG. CAGCAGCAGCAG. So much of my life has been devoted to counting those letters again and again.

I hang my jacket on the back of my chair. I motion for Luisa to hand me hers. I put our bags in the cubby over my desk.

She runs her finger over a packet of paper on the counter, traces her finger along the bottom edge.

"Carmen, did you write this?"

"Yeah," I say. "With Dr. Wrenner."

"Convergent Pathways of Synaptic Failure in Huntington's Disease. I don't even know what half of those words mean."

"You don't need to."

"You sure?" Luisa asks. "If Huntington's is going to kill me, maybe I should know more about it."

"You know plenty."

Luisa bites her cheek. Her face is puffy and her eyes are red from crying off and on all day. Maybe I shouldn't have made her come with me tonight. Maybe I shouldn't have made her come with me at all. It's possible I crossed the line as soon as I let John put that needle in her arm. It was strange to think of our entire lives in that little vial.

COIN TOSS BY MADELINE MONROE

It was strange to think of our entire lives in that little vial. Everything we were made up of was in there: our thick black hair, our dry elbows, everything our father had ever given us. And maybe that small gene sequence that had a 50% chance of destroying either one of us was in there as well.

This was always the deal. We'd find out if we had the gene after dad had died. Luisa didn't want him to die knowing he had given it to one of us. His circumstances had been horrific enough as is, between the personality changes, the memory loss, the way he couldn't speak or move. She didn't want to pile on the guilt of knowing whether we were gene positive. We'd decided we'd take the test once he had passed. Luisa agreed she'd wait at least that long too, although, I can never tell if the test is what she truly wants. I'd been able to convince her to come in for the blood draw, so that we wouldn't have to wait for the results. But I have no idea if she'll want to look at those results today.

To me, having the choice to know roughly when and how I'd go seemed obvious. But it wasn't the same for Luisa.

She's still looking at the paper; her finger runs over my name again. Dr. Carmen Romero.

"I forget that you're a doctor sometimes."

"PhD," I say. "Not an MD. Who has time for that?"

"Definitely not us," Luisa says.

"Hey," my eyes lock onto hers. "We don't know that yet."

But that's why we're here, bereaved and exhausted in this little laboratory, to figure out how much time we can expect. I'm 27 now. Symptoms start at 30 to 35. In our last study, we reported that patients can expect anywhere from 10–15 years after symptoms first begin. From this side, 10–15 years feel impossibly short.

"So where are they?" She asks. "Locked in some safe somewhere?"

I shake my head. I pull a folder out of my file organizer. On the front is a sticky note with John's shitty handwriting.

Call me if you need – John

We stare at the folder. Luisa cocks her head to the side, pouts. It's how she looks at her artwork when she's adding the last touches. I've seen her make that face at her sketchbook thousands of times, often as she'd tucked up in a hospital recliner.

Dad first started needing to stay over in the hospital when I was sixteen and Luisa was thirteen. Luisa would pack sketchbooks and paint pallets in her bag. I'd pack my textbooks. My back used to ache from sitting on the floor, leaning over my notes. I'd go home at the end of the night, but Luisa would stay on the small couch in the room, or in the recliner. She was scared to be in the house without Dad. I could never comfort her like he did.

We'd moved to Baltimore when dad got accepted to the trial. He'd gotten the placebo, and I was never quite able to forgive his doctors.

I know now that the doctors had nothing to do with who got which drugs. That was people like me. The researchers tucked away in labs like this, copying down data, studying gene after gene, nucleotide after nucleotide.

I stopped going to his appointments the same year I declared a bio major. I spent hours reading about DNA and sequences. Then, I specialized in Huntington's for grad school. I was spending days at a time obsessing over this disease and, still, I couldn't muster the strength to go with Dad to his checkups. I left that to Luisa.

"How would this work?" She asks. "Like if you weren't you and we had to go to the doctor like Dad did?"

"Psych consult first. We have to try and make sure no one's going to turn around and kill themselves if they're positive," I tell her.

It comes out blunt and insensitive. “And then to a neurologist, to check for any other potential conditions or to see if symptoms have started. Then the blood draws.”

It’s been 15 years since dad was diagnosed, and testing was still in its very earliest stages then. The protocol is entirely new now. Dad never saw a psychologist.

It was me who found him that day. It was years after his diagnosis, but before we’d needed to hire a live-in nurse. He’d taken an entire prescription worth of sleeping pills. I reacted so fast. I’m not sure I even comprehended what he had done as I picked up the phone and called for an ambulance. I hadn’t even thought the word ‘suicide’ until I heard the EMT speaking to the ER doctor.

He’d been okay. I remember Luisa holding me in the waiting room, saying, “thankgodthankgodthankgod.”

“And it’s okay that we’re skipping that stuff?”

“It’s fine, Luisa.”

It’s not fine actually. If one of us is positive we’ll have to do everything again because none of this will be considered valid, but this is hard enough without having to go through a checklist about suicidal ideation or having some egotistical neurologist stare at us as we touch our nose and walk in straight lines.

“I mean,” I say. “I’ll probably get in trouble, but if I’m positive, I’m planning to quit anyway.”

Luisa looks at me as if I’ve done something wrong.

“What?”

“You’d quit? This has been your whole life.”

“Exactly,” I say. “If this thing is going to kill me, I don’t want to spend anymore time studying it. If it’s going to kill me that’s all I want to give it. It doesn’t get to be the thing that kills me and also be my life's work. That’s not fair.”

As if any of this could be considered fair.

"Even if you could find a cure?"

I stare at John's note while I think of what to say. If Luisa was someone else, someone whose father hadn't just been killed by Huntington's, I'd be honest. I'd tell her that I feel like I've come no closer to finding a cure than I was the first day I walked into this lab. I'm not sure I'd be able to save myself even if I spent every minute here, certainly not if I only have seven good years left before severe symptoms start.

But Luisa has the same fifty present odds that I do, and she gets scared so easily. I want her to have some shred of hope, even if she's gene positive.

"Even if I could find a cure," I tell her. That's all I've got.

"What would you even do?"

"I don't know," I say. "Travel. Date someone for real. Get a dog."

Luisa laughs, "I have a hard time picturing that."

"So, you get to have a husband and a dog and vacations, and I don't?"

Her smile disappears fast. Her jaw goes slack and she furrows her eyebrow as she stares at me. Her shoulders fall and her head drops. Right away, I wish I could pull the words back into my chest. She looks so small there. The final years of Dad's life rendered him unrecognizable, but they also seem to have completely erased my sister. Her hair is thinner. I never see her in makeup anymore.

"I'm sorry."

As if apologizing could erase my sudden snap. As if it makes it human error and not a symptom. I don't mean to be short with her, but more and more recently I have been. I feel irritable lately, more stubborn than I used to be, and for the life of me I can't figure out if it's my dad's decline or Huntington's incline in my own brain that's making it so hard to be empathetic.

I look at the data all day. I see the accounts of personality changes: depression, irritability, apathy.

COIN TOSS BY MADELINE MONROE

I thought, after a decade studying this disease, I'd be able to tell when the symptoms started in my own brain, but I can't. I don't know if I'm short tempered because my dad's been dying or because my own death is beginning to unravel.

Luisa tips her head up. Fluorescent light pours over her face. I can see where the tears have dried out the skin underneath her eyes, little paths running down her cheek.

"Of course you deserve all those things, Carmen. That's not what I meant."

I want to grab the folder and rip it open. But I don't. I've known I wanted to get the test since I was eighteen. Luisa had to convince me to wait until Dad was gone.

Our father had always done the best he could with us, even after he started getting sick. His own mother died when he was young, before he immigrated from Venezuela to Austin. Mom had stopped showing up by the time I was ten, but he made it work. Luisa always had pastels and I always had money to pay for the AP tests. We didn't want him to die knowing he'd passed Huntington's onto us. There was nothing we could do for him in the end except spare him that knowledge.

There was a moment, last month, when Dad was trying to take a sip of water. His arm was shaking so badly that, by the time he got the cup to his mouth, there wasn't any water left to drink. Splotches covered his t-shirt, the wet fabric clinging to the shadow that was left of his body. I could see how frustrated he was. He held his jaw tight and his eyes were wide. I could tell he wanted to say something, but his words kept slurring together, barely understandable. Almost all the parts of him that actually mattered seemed to be gone. I wished, for just a moment, that instead of calling the ambulance that day, years before, that I'd just let him go the way he had wanted to.

He was my father. Maybe I should have trusted him.

"What if I have it and you don't?" Luisa asks.

COIN TOSS BY MADELINE MONROE

"I would do whatever you'd want me to. I'd quit and backpack through Indonesia with you, or, if they don't fire me, I'd come back to this lab every day and try—"

"I'd want you to come hang out every day," Luisa interrupts. It's so simple. "I'd guilt trip you into posing for me. And I'd make you watch all of Breaking Bad with me again."

I've spent ages imagining what I'll do if I have Huntington's: the places I'd travel, the things I'd say, the people I'd sleep with. I have a spreadsheet already. But Luisa, without a shred of hesitation, knows she wants to sit on the couch and watch television. I didn't even like Breaking Bad the first time around.

"Okay," I say. I smile. "Sounds like a plan."

"And if neither of us have it?"

"Oh, Luisa," I say.

She bursts into tears. It's the hardest I've seen her cry all day. She can see on my face that I know that last hypothetical will not be true. It's a 50% chance we inherited the mutation. Huntington's is autosomal dominant, which makes it a coin toss. One for her. One for me. Heads or tails. We have a 25% chance that neither of us will carry it. There are worse odds. There are riskier bets to take. But Luisa and I, so far in life, have not been incredibly lucky. She always tells me I'm beautiful. I always tell her she's brilliant. We are those things and more, but we are not lucky.

I reach up to the shelf above my lab bench, where I keep a box of tissues. As my finger brushes the cardboard, my hand twitches, sending the box flying onto the floor in front of us.

Luisa's sobs stop. We stare at the box on the floor.

"That was—"

"An accident. That was an accident. Accidents happen to everyone."

"Everyone's fingers just jerk unexpectedly?" I ask, waiting to see if it will do it again.

"Yes," she says. "Yes. It happens."

"Does it happen to you?"

"Of course it does. I knock shit over sometimes. It happens to me. It happens to everyone."

I keep staring at my hand. It is dry from years of putting on hand sanitizer dozens of times a day. That was not "knocking shit over." That was Chorea. I've seen hundreds of patients whose bodies move just like that.

"Tony dropped his mug the other day, and he has no history of Huntington's in his family. Coffee all over the floor. A big fucking mess. That was an accident. An accident. Not—"

"But I don't know if it was just an accident," I say. I drop my hand and look back at her. "And I need to know. We can't— We can't not know anymore. I'm tired of wondering."

"Well, what if I don't want to know?" Luisa asks. Just asking the question, she calms down. "Carmen, what if I don't want to know? I mean, I don't even think I'd change my life that much even if I was positive. What good does it do me to know? I can't do anything about it. I can't paint Huntington's away."

I don't say anything. I look at the tissues on the floor. I tell myself to reach down and pick them up, but my body does not move. Even when I beg it to.

I feel Luisa's hand on my shoulder. Then on my chin, lifting my eyes to hers.

"I need to," I say. "I can't do the next parts without knowing. I can't plan a funeral and put him in the ground and not know if I'm going to die the same way."

"I know," Luisa says. "I know."

Luisa and I have been different in almost every aspect of our lives. I should have known this would be another distinction between us.

COIN TOSS BY MADELINE MONROE

I am so scared of knowing without her.

My little sister holds me then. She wraps me in the arms she used to haul our dad into a sitting position every morning and to lay him down every night. The fingers she used to clean up his spills and button his coat now rest on my neck, perfectly still.

PANCREAS BY DANIELLE WILFAND

Every autumn, I see ghosts. They take the shape of fried oil dripping into the fading humidity of late summer air, aerosolized powdered sugar tickling my nostrils. The smell of funnel cake still lingering in the air. Cassandra got a plate for her, Olivia, and I to share as we wait in line for the lone rollercoaster at the state fair. The homecoming dresses we bought at the mall earlier that day are wrapped in plastic garment bags, nestled in the trunk of Olivia's silver Toyota Corolla between a tennis racket and some empty root beer cans. The fair is closing soon, some of the tents already disassembled leaving their empty skeletons exposed, waving in the warm breeze.I look up at the giant loop-de-loop as we pass under its cool blue shadow. Only then do I see the name of the rollercoaster spelled out in graffiti-style letters over an embossed skull. I don't yet believe in bad omens.

I never make it to the front of the line.

I bolt to the public bathroom. Huddled on the floor of the stall, I rock back and forth willing myself not to vomit. I swallow down the sour metallic taste that bubbles up in my throat, but it loiters on my tongue, coats the back of my teeth. My stomach crumples in on itself, fragile as tissue paper, a pain that echoes down to my toes. I catch a glimpse of my face in the grimy mirror. Powdered sugar dusts my lips, my fingers, the front of my shirt, and no matter how I try to wash it off it's still there, mocking me. I survey the darkness under my eyes, the green tinge to my cheeks. In the dim light, I can barely tell what's sugar and what's skin. I call my mom to come pick me up, and before I start speaking, she knows something is very wrong.

That night, on the way to the ER, I watch the streetlamps reflect off the rain-soaked pavement, fragments of orange light fracturing, kaleidoscoping across. The surfaceis so smooth, unbroken, it looks like a swimming pool.

PANCREAS BY DANIELLE WILFAND

I reach my finger out as if to touch it, press my cheek against the cool glass of the car window.Mom drives, it's two in the morning.This isn't my first middle-of-the-night ER trip nor is it the last.

I'm whisked away as soon as I set foot in the ER. I know there was pain, but where it should've been in my memory,there is only emptiness. A disembodied sensation, like TV static. In a small alcove behind a glass door, a nurse takes my blood and hands me a jug of something red and sickly-sweet-smelling. Drink. I stare into the depths of the CT contrast mingled with cherry-flavored Gatorade. The container seems bottomless. I drink but it comes back up soon after, a fountain of red and sour acid. Crunched on the floor over a blue vomit bag, I curse her for mixing the CT contrast with cherry-flavored Gatorade, curse whoever invented cherry-flavored Gatorade, curse it all.

After an indeterminate amount of time, a man in blue scrubs and a hair net slung around his beard moves me up to a hospital inpatient room. It must be morning given how energetic the voices filtering in through the threadbare curtain sound. The curtain yanks open and the shape of a woman materializes. Her sweater is such an acidic shadeof yellow I reflexively shield my eyes from the sting. She sidles over to where my mom is curled up still half asleep on the pull-out sofa bed and whispers something I don't catch. I cough softly. Ahem-ahem. Then again, a little louder. I am 17, turning 18 in four months. More than old enough to hear whatever she has to say. Lemon woman looks up at me and four men in long white coats step into the room. I know something must be wrong because otherwise, they would've sent me home by now.

PANCREAS BY DANIELLE WILFAND

You have pancreatitis, they say.

Is that bad? My eyes say.

No, their mouths say. It could have been something much worse.

Pancreas. I like the taste of the word, so I roll it around on my tongue. The Lemon Woman looksat me funny, wondering why I'm not middle-aged, or an alcoholic, or a man. I shrug my shoulders wondering the same thing, but there is no forgiveness in her eyes.

Lemon woman tells me that the best way to treat pancreatitis is not to eat anything for a few days, so I resign myself to catching up on some reality TV as I wait for my pancreatic enzymes to normalize. Apparently, fatty foodsare especially bad, and eatinga mountain of fried dough at the fair probably didn't help things. As I'm flicking through the TV channels, a nurse comes in with a syringe of morphine, and I fall into a murky sleep. I wake to my cell phone vibrating beneath my pillow. It's Cassandra wondering why I wasn't in 5th-period English. Oh yeah, today is the first day of senior year. We chat for a few minutes, but she has to hang up to get to after-school volleyball practice. She calls again the next day to see if I'm any better but then doesn't call again.

Sleep becomes my favorite state of being because, during that time, I don't have to exist in my life.There is no pain, no nausea, no impending sense of emptiness expanding in my chest. I love the feeling of going under anesthesia because that is an even deeper nothingness.
Everything goes black then I wake up and the time has passed but I didn't have to go through the arduous process of actually experiencing it.

PANCREAS BY DANIELLE WILFAND

I discover this one morning when I'm wheeled down to the OR. The doctors decide they want to look at the inside of my intestines because I'm not getting better fast enough. The anesthesiologist injects something white into the IV line that stings as it seeps into my veins. I wince. One of the nurses massages my hand as everything starts to blur. The gesture is small, but it's one of the kindest things anyone has ever done for me. It almost makes me cry but the anesthesia hits too hard and too fast and I'm out before another thought can blossom in my mind. When I wake up, there's a crick in my neck and something on the tip of my tongue I can't quite place. I google if it's possible to have dreams during surgery and the answers are conflicting. Below the recommended searches, someone has asked where your mind goes when you're under anesthesia. Perhaps when you wake up not everything comes back. My finger hovers over it but I don't click.

Time does not exist in the hospital, but I can tell I've been here a while by the shift changes of the nurses. One comes in at seven A.M. then leaves again at seven P.M. Then a new one comes and the cycle repeats. Again and again, rhythmically, like how the tide beats against the sand then recedes back to sea. I am trapped in the cycle but with each rotation, I can't help but feel like something inside of me is no longer the same. In moments of stillness, I fumble around inside myself for what's missing, reach deep down into my ribcage, wiggle my fingers into the corners between my diaphragm and lungs. But my fingers only grasp empty air.

Ghosts haunt this place. Especially the hospital Starbucks. It's the only place where I can get food that doesn't taste like Styrofoam. The baristas make the most perfect caramel frappuccinos I've ever seen. And I've seen a lot of them. The whipped cream is always in a perfect spiral.

PANCREAS BY DANIELLE WILFAND

Always dead center, terminating in a peak so sharp and precise it puts Mount Rainier to shame. The caramel drizzle follows the hills and valleys of the cream like garland on a Christmas tree. Neverleaching through, never dripping down in unsightly globs. The drink they pass across the counter to me looks like it could be in a commercial, but I know that the food they use in commercials is usuallyfake or filled with glue or paintedwith shoeshine or something grosslike that. It's suspicious, too suspicious I think, so I shake the drink side to side, take a sip through gritted teeth. But no matter how I inspect it, I come to the same conclusion—there must be some otherworldly forces at play. I offer a silent prayer to whatever gods or witchcraft or hidden deities were involved in the making of this sugary drink.

I know I probably shouldn't be drinking Starbucks. They only gave me the go-ahead to start eating two days ago. Or was it two weeks ago? One of the times I sneak down there, I see Lemon Woman waiting for an espresso. She leans against the bar, drums her fingers against the pale oak counter. I fold myself behind a display of rainbow rhinestone tumblers and oversized coffee mugs like a child caughtstaying up past bedtime. LemonWoman glances in my direction. I'm pretty sure she's spotted me, but her eyes are glassy like she's looking at something right over my shoulder. You've seen the ghosts here too? I whisper through the hand covering my mouth. She doesn't respond.

Before long, red sneaks into the leaves of the maple tree outside my hospital room window. The time that has stood still for me has moved along for everyone else. Caramel frappuccinos have become pumpkin spice lattes. It's the end of October and the Homecoming dance approaches. Dresses in every color of the rainbow flood my phone.

PANCREAS BY DANIELLE WILFAND

The boy I like has asked someone else to go with him and I scroll throughtheir homecoming pictureswhile I watch Ironchef reruns at three in the morning. His tie is red, her dress is red, corsages red, like the Gatorade I vomited all over myself in the ED. I wonder if he remembers I exist or if he thinks I died or changed schools or disappeared into the void without a trace. Tears spring to my eyes, sharp like pinpricks. This is the first time I've cried since I've been here. I put a hand to my chest as my lungs lurch and my heart cracks. This is the kind of pain even morphine can't steal away. This is what it's like to become transparent, to have everyone's eyes pass through you.

I picture my homecoming dress slung over the back of my desk chair where I left it. It's strapless, white, flowy, faux crystals sewn across the waist and bodice. But that was a lifetime ago, a timelinelost. I conjure up a vision of a me in some parallel universetwirling around to the fifth iteration of the "Cha Cha Slide", slapping Band-Aids across the blisters on my heels. I watch the hem of the dress sway back and forth, like the leaves of a willow tree caught in a breeze. The ends meander and droop from the weight of the fabric, like teardrops, like the tail end of my inflamed pancreas, like the scent of hospital antiseptic. Even now, the image is haunting.

SHIP OF THESEUS BY MURAD ISLAM

I came to America
on the Ship of Theseus
At first everything felt strange
Roads, people
language, manners, behavior
Everything felt somehow frightening
slowly
I realized it doesn't feel that way anymore
Everything is becoming familiar
society, light and air, snow and the squirrels and birds in my garden too
I realized my roots are growing here
just like the seedlings in my garden spread their roots underground
or the big trees who have taken their seats in the soil, in front of and behind my house
and then one day reading news from Bangladesh
I felt I couldn't quite understand what was happening there, why it was happening
I felt Bangladesh slowly slipping from my grip
America slowly coming into my grip
What a strange state
I don't even know if I should feel bad or good about this
Change is a reality
one slips from the hand, leaves behind memories
another comes into the hand, creates new experiences
if I think of arriving in this world the same way
living here the world starts coming into grip with time
and slipping from grip is a faint memory, of infinite possibility
from where probably I came, and you too, dear reader

TOO FAR INLAND BY BENNETT DURKAN

We stood under the awning as the rain pounded above us. I watched the streams that gathered and poured like a broken spigot from certain points on the awning's rim. Matt, my roommate, also looked out past our dry spot. I don't know if he watched the streams as well. When I glanced at him, I saw him frowning. He retreated a step and then gestured to all the rain. He made a sound. He gestured with both hands before closing both hands into fists. I angled my hand so that a few raindrops landed on my palm.

"We should just go back into the apartment," he said.

"We can't. We need food. We don't have any in the apartment."

"We don't really need any. You can survive for about three weeks without food. Plenty of time to wait out the storm."

"I want food." I removed my hand from the spray and shook it dry. "I'm hungry and I would like to eat."

Matt crossed his arms and sighed. He tapped his foot, which matched the rhythm of some dripping off the awning. I faced him. The spray misted the back of my shirt. Matt stopped tapping his foot. He lowered his eyes.

"I don't feel like driving in this weather," he said.

"We'll walk."

"We'll get wet."

"We have umbrellas."

"We'll still get wet." He unfolded an arm to point at the rain. When he unfolded his other arm, he took a step forward. He leaned and peered into the rain.

"It's just a little water."

"I guess we could walk to McDonald's. It's not too far. I'd prefer to not go there, but I guess there's no choice."

"Yeah. It's not too far. We can get there quickly, order quickly, eat quickly, and get back quickly. We could get back before the storm ends."

"What happens if the storm gets worse?"

"Nothing." I turned halfway. To my left, the rain poured and pounded. To my right, a light bulb flickered and created shadows on the stairs. "Probably nothing. We're too far inland. This is probably the worst that we'll see."

"Fine. I'll grab the umbrellas." Matt spun around. He climbed the stairs two at a time. When he hit the second floor, I heard his footsteps. They resounded on the landing but faded on the next set of steps. The constant noise of the rain persisted.

When I looked into the rain, I saw a gray world. The downpour overpowered other colors. I inched my toes to the line in the pavement between wet and dry. In the distance, I saw a few lights, unrelated beacons. Above me, the sky hung low. It looked solid yet not solid, like mercury. I hummed. Then I heard footsteps tumbling down the stairs and stopping behind me. Something prodded me between the shoulder blades. Over my shoulder, I spied Matt holding an umbrella against me.

"Here." He retracted the umbrella, flipped it, and presented the handle. After I took it, he stood beside me. He clicked his umbrella and opened it into the rain, which produced a deeper tone against the material. He stepped from under the awning. Raindrops hit the ground and splashed onto his shoes and the hem of his jeans. He clicked his tongue.

I unfurled my umbrella and left the awning. The rain landed on my left shoulder. When I adjusted the umbrella, the rain hit my right elbow. I shrugged. The rain tapped against the entire surface of the umbrella, but not at the same time. We walked along the path, with him a step behind. I avoided a puddle. He stepped in it and swore under his breath.

"I was just thinking," I said, "the clouds look like mercury. At least they look like what I've been told mercury looks likes."

"Sure. Sounds about right."

We reached the street and the sidewalk. I paused at the curb. To my right, a red light hung above the road. To my left, I saw the same. The light from the streetlamp above me stretched in cardinal directions. Matt, standing next to me, looked left and right. A rumble sounded. A few seconds later, a car flew by, slicing the rain, and splashing our pant legs. Matt groaned. He offered his middle finger at the vehicle's wake.

"So," I said as I wiped at my knees and shins.

"So."

"How far do you think it is to the McDonald's?" After drying my hand on my shirt, I headed to my left. I watched the red sparkle bob and bounce with each step.

"Do you mean in distance or in time?" Matt jogged abreast to me before matching my pace. Rain fell in the gap between our umbrellas.

"Well, you can measure distance in units of time, but I meant in general units of distance. Feet, yards, miles. That's more accurate than saying 'oh, a five-minute walk.'"

"I don't know." He clicked his tongue. "A mile, maybe two. I'm really bad when it comes to judging distance. It shouldn't be too far. We've never walked there before."

The red light turned green. I heard another car nearing. In unison, we veered and gave the street a wide berth. The splash leapt upward and hit the concrete. We then resumed our previous positions. In the distance, the arches on the McDonald's sign appeared as a pair of yellow smudges.

"Have you heard back from what's-her-name?" I said. "Stacy? Sasha? Shania? I know it begins with S."

"No." He paused and I heard him inhale through his nose. "I have not."

"That's a shame. That's too bad." I lowered my eyes to the squares that comprise the sidewalk. "If it's any consolation, I haven't heard back from anybody, not even Walmart." Tipping the umbrella, I checked the sky. A few drops landed on my face before I readjusted. "I can understand not hearing back from these small offices in their office building."

"You know you don't need to get involved in my personal life."

The sign grew larger and sharper. I discerned the shape of the arches. I also noticed the building's roof.

"Want to hear something personal?" I said.

"Not really. I'm afraid you'll say something twisted."

"What I miss most about summer is the classic taste of an ice-cold Coca-Cola. I miss being able to just sit in the heat and drink something cold." I shaped my empty hand as though it held a can. I curled and watched the way my skin folded together. When I dropped the hand, I chuckled.

"You really shouldn't drink soda," Matt said. "It's not good for you."

"That's my point." I turned my attention to the traces of the golden arches. "We're getting closer. I really hope it's not crowded. There's nothing worse than a crowded McDonald's. Actually, scratch that. There're a lot worse things." The wind surged. Rain changed trajectory for a moment. I braced against this moment.

"I'm just glad we're almost there. I'll be even more glad once we're there. I don't care how long it takes. I'll wait out the storm inside. Luckily," he snickered, "luckily, I don't have anything else to do today."

"What are you going to order?"

"Food."

"I'm going to order so much food that it kills me."

The building's form coalesced under the downpour. Lights shimmered through the windows. We stopped at the crosswalk.

TOO FAR INLAND BY BENNETT DURKAN

I watched the building's front. I saw some movement but didn't know if it happened on the other side of the windows or if the rain created a kind of illusion. I tilted my head and squinted. The windows, dark except for a few lights, like the night sky when Jupiter shines before the stars, remained the same. After some time, I heard a beep. Matt prodded my shoulder. He hopped into the street and hurried across. I caught up with him on the other side.

"Know anything about astronomy?" I said,

"Only what I've read in sci-fi."

The AC almost knocked me over when we entered McDonald's. While collapsing my umbrella I shivered. The door closed and cancelled the noise from the rain. My umbrella continued to drip as I ordered and left a trail as I took a seat by the window. Matt joined me, sitting across the table. A TV hung in the corner. On it, a weatherman waved his hand around a map full of swirls and arrows bending in different directions.

The weatherman addressed the camera and then the image changed to a woman, covered by a yellow raincoat, standing along the seawall. She yelled into her microphone. Closed captioning appeared, but I couldn't read it. The woman pointed toward the beach and the camera followed. The ocean and the sky looked gray. The sand looked a few shades darker. The camera returned to the woman, who now leaned into the incessant wind. Her raincoat flapped. The hood obscured her face.

I gestured to the TV. Matt twisted around, made a sound, and then untwisted. He looked at me and offered a shrug. I returned the shrug. We chuckled.

We ate without speaking. The employees chattered. The deep fryer sizzled. Somewhere I couldn't see, a door opened and closed and opened and closed. Finished, Matt looked out the window. With a light touch, he traced the path of a raindrop.

Crossing his arms on the table, he sighed.

"Want to hear something personal?" he said without taking his eyes off the window. "I don't expect to ever hear from her again. But that's just how it goes. That's just how it always goes."

"Do you think the people closer to the shore are safe? There's a chance this storm will never end. It could rain forever."

"No. It will end. This isn't Venus. Venus is the one that's always raining, right?"

"Even so, it's been raining heavily for a while. I just hope that people are safe."

"They'll be fine. This isn't the worse storm. There've been worse. Plus, like you said, this is the worst we'll see of it. I bet the storm'll die down any minute now."

"And we'll just wait until then."

"Sure." He leaned on his elbows and peered out the window. "We'll just wait. Nothing else to do. Always waiting."

I turned to the window and watched the raindrops form branching paths as they slipped down the surface. Beyond the drops, I saw the streetlamps. A car passed, adding two points of red to the scene. When I turned to the TV, I saw a commercial that showed an old man walking through the park with his cane. On the far side of the room, I saw two teenagers, dressed in their work uniforms, chatting about something. One of them laughed. The other groaned. I didn't hear the groan, but I saw it in the way he shook his head. I smiled. Matt continued looking out the window.

"Food wasn't too bad," I said.

"No," he took a breath, "not too bad."

I relaxed into my plastic seat. It creaked. When I stretched my legs, the chair creaked again. Matt sat upright.

He, one hand on his chin, twisted his head and popped his neck. I winced. He slouched. I moved my foot when he knocked it on accident. We both chuckled again.

In time, the rain slowed. The drops striking the window lost their tempo. I started to stand but stopped when I noticed that Matt didn't move. He pointed out the window. Across the street, a trio of children danced. One twirled her umbrella. Another spun with her arms outstretched. The third halted her skipping to jump into a puddle in the gutter. The water reached above her yellow boots. She trembled with laughter. I didn't hear the laugh, but I saw it in the way her and her friends' faces contorted. I smiled to one side.

"I remember being that young," Matt said. He paused long enough for me to nod. "I don't remember doing anything like that."

"Is that because you don't remember or because you never did anything like that?"

"The latter. Although, when I think about it, I don't think I ever had the opportunity. The situation never came up. Not like this."

The girls lingered across the street. A second one jumped into the puddle. They climbed onto the curb as a car went by. The girls waved with their free hands. One of them skipped out front. The other two followed, falling behind. They left the view presented by the window.

"Have you ever," I said, "walked through the rain, hand in hand with your lover?"

"From what book did you get that image?" He scoffed and shook his head. He avoided my eyes when I looked.

"Nowhere," I said. "I just thought of it. I thought it must be nice."

"No. Never done it. And—you know what? —it looks less and less plausible every day."

"Want to hear something personal?" I didn't wait for his response. "I applied to this McDonald's, a couple times actually. At the interview, the interviewer was younger than me. I don't remember being this old. When did it happen?"

"Did I ever tell you how Sonya and I met?"

I shook my head. He smiled. We both leaned forward, meeting in the middle of the table. Meeting his gaze, I also smiled. I thought about those times as a child when my friends and I shared secrets. Like those times, Matt whispered.

"We met here," he said, "in this McDonald's. We bumped into each other. I apologized. She apologized. We then got to talking. She liked older moves and not just the ones with Audrey Hepburn, the ones everybody likes. I found that so damn charming. She wanted to, probably still wants to, make movies." His smile vanished. He dropped his head and dropped his voice. "The more time we spent together, the more I realized that I don't have hobbies." Head still down, he laughed a full laugh. His shoulders convulsed. The laughter got louder. The two teenagers in their branded hats looked at us. I groaned and mumbled.

After some time, his fit subsided. The teenagers returned to their business. Clouds separated enough to let the sun make a few shafts in the sky. On the TV, the news showed a shot of a parasol, the kind used by people with backyard furniture, floating down a street. I liked the image. I decided if I had the chance, I'd used the image somehow to describe something.

When we left, we didn't extend our umbrellas. We crossed the street. We retraced the same path. The drizzle came soft. We avoided puddles. At our apartment, we dropped our umbrellas in the sink. He went to his room and closed the door.

TOO FAR INLAND BY BENNETT DURKAN

I sprawled on the couch and listened to the rain dying outside and though about the three kids playing and thought about Matt bumping into someone who likes older films. I rolled onto my side and closed my eyes. After some time, the rain stopped.

A week later, I retrieved a can of Coca-Cola from the fridge. I placed it in the middle of the counter. I planted my hands on either side of the can. By the time Matt entered, condensation had beaded around the can. A ring of moisture formed around the bottom. Matt saw the can, looked at me, and frowned. I tapped the top out of ritual. I popped the tab. The soda fizzled. Matt, my roommate, groaned. As I took a long pull, I walked to the window, where I saw a world warmed by an uninhibited yellow sun.


McDonald

CEREAL FOR CATS BY MONTY ROZEMA

There's a boy in my neighborhood who eats cereal with the cats. I can't tell if he's homeless or not. I suppose he has to get the cereal somewhere, but cereal is easy to get. I can't tell if the cats are his or not, but cats are easy to get as well. I don't presume that he sends out invitations, but I do presume that the cats show up based on word of mouth, or word of whisker, or that they have some way of spreading the news among them. He has dishes for all the cats. Most of them are pretty blue-and-white porcelain but no more than a few match. He doesn't seem to mind if people on the street stop and watch the feast. Sometimes there is milk involved. Usually not. He doesn't seem to have another shirt—just the one shirt. A blue shirt that is big, with one breast pocket. The same cats come regularly, in slightly different combinations. The gathering has no regular time but is always at the same place. Up against a brick wall, behind the consignment store, near the place where the crocuses bloom in winter. If it is snowing or raining or especially cold, the boy wears a scratched-up parka and sits on a plaid blanket. I say "boy", but he could be a man. The type of cereal varies.

—

I have been trying to plan the same party with the same four friends for well over nine months. We were close at one point, had a group chat, lived within the same city limits. Now we are unclose, no group chat, spread out over two counties. Someone is frequently in crisis. Someone is usually moving. Someone just needs a break from social media. I loathe and idolize their budding families, the inertia of their conflicts, the way they bounce intentions around like fast, hard racquetballs. I am the most stationary of the five. I end emails with exclamation points because I am not sure what else to do.

CEREAL FOR CATS BY MONTY ROZEMA

I had a cat once as a child, but she escaped one night and never came back, and I have reason to believe that she was intercepted by a coyote or a highway accident before she was able to take stock of what she had left behind. I live in a tall apartment complex in a medium-sized city with a college and altogether too many coffee shops. I am not a regular at any of them. Rather, I cycle effortlessly between, until one owner or another is inevitably accused of sexual misconduct or tax fraud, at which point I strike the place from my list and continue without missing much. Every once and a while I find myself thinking that I might prefer to go to the same cafe two days in a row, even sit in the same chair, but I snap myself out of it when I remember that the cafe I "frequented" as an undergrad (although it was in another city, another state) was discovered to be unduly plagued by asbestos. I couldn't study anywhere else — it just wasn't the same. That was the semester where I failed my first exam.

This year, as Christmas time approaches, I am simultaneously allergic and attracted to gatherings. I walk along the shoreline often to appreciate the well-constructed barrier of rocks that stand between the train tracks and the water. My four friends and I once fit together so snuggly, our sharp parts like footholds, our coves full of standing water. There's a man on the beach who has a special kite — the kite is actually 100 kites tied together, like a staircase up to God. He only comes to the beach on days that are "worth his salt," days where the wind grabs onto each step with fishhooks and the kite conglomerate unfurls without inhibition. I spoke to the man once and he told me this. Sometimes only ten, thirty, fifty kites are airborne before the wind stops or changes abruptly, collapsing the staircase. Today he has over half the kites already in the air, and he is focused, hands trembling against the fair and hearty wind. I say "man", but he could be a boy. I don't know when a boy becomes a man.

CEREAL FOR CATS BY MONTY ROZEMA

I look for new ways each year to convince those closest to me that I am not lonely. “Those closest to me” is a phrase that has lost its meaning. Since 2020, the year when I did not come home from the holidays, the year when no one came home for the holidays, it is easier to forgo tradition, especially the traditions that are inconvenient due to distance. I attended my niece’s birthday party from inside my mother’s shaking iPhone. I have no idea how old she is. I had no idea then; I have no idea now. I have asked my four friends for their home addresses, so I can send them “snail mail.” Last year, out of the blue, I received a homemade family newsletter that was dutifully hand-collaged and copied on a copier. She had left a space at the top to handwrite my name in blood blue pen, just after “Dear.” I was warmed by the newsletter. I considered feeling offended by the impersonality of the update, but I couldn’t bring myself to be anything other than grateful. Her son was two, almost three. She left a space for my name, which she wrote in the same cursive that she signed my yearbook in the 11th grade. I could see the large-ish dot at the end of the pen swipe where the ink had been prepared to keep flowing. I will write to her first since I am most sure of her address. I will write the letter on my phone. I will copy it onto paper later this month and drop it in the mail, or I will lose steam and print the typed message out at the library with minor guilt in my heart. My mother would buy stamps at the grocery store when I was young, back when adults mailed records to their accountants, checks to their bank, and photos of their children to their far-off, aging parents. She asked for stamps as the last item on the conveyor belt was swiped by the cashier, the lightest item, a bag of chips or popcorn. I don’t know if you can still buy stamps at the grocery store. I don’t know how to check. I don’t want to frighten teenage cashiers by asking.

CEREAL FOR CATS BY MONTY ROZEMA

At the tip of the beachfront park, a collection of seagulls pick at the carcass of a Wendy's bag. I feel a brief twinge of guilt when I notice that the gulls all look diseased, brown and grey, with clumps of missing feathers and mangled feet. When they peck at the bag, they often miss. Their heads bob and tick in a way that suggests a neurological sickness. They smack into each other and chitter, dancing around the bag. Eventually, some smoother, stronger, younger seagulls swoop down and snatch the bag. The old gulls dance and peck at nothing until they realize it has been taken from them.

On the way home, I go to the grocery store. I buy a combination of my regular items and stand in line to check them out from an older female cashier. I ask for stamps and she pulls them out and scans them without speaking. The sheet says "humane society" in the bottom right corner. The design is kittens and puppies, sitting inside or on top of gift boxes, wearing bows or wreaths or Santa hats. A portion of the proceeds are going somewhere at some point. I run awkwardly out of line while the woman bags my items and swipe a box of Rice Krispies from a nearby display, the elves on the front in festive colors, the ever-present recipe for Rice Krispie Treats in large print on the back of the box.

Instead of writing a letter to any one of my four friends, I make an easy soup and wrap the rice krispy treats in a shimmery silver tissue paper. I place it in a tote bag next to my front door and carry it around with me whenever I think my errand route may take me past the consignment store. As it begins to snow, in the darkest days of December, just before the solstice, I am less likely to want to take out my recycling. Cardboard boxes lay around my house in stacks, like a miniature city. For the first time in my adult life, I am beginning to wonder what it would be like if I adopted a cat. Would she like to sit in the boxes, knock them over, shred them?

Would she feel trapped here in this tower and come to resent me? Could I press her little foot against a pet-safe ink pad and sign my very own holiday newsletters with it? To encourage myself to follow through, I write each of my four friends' addresses onto a pre-stamped envelope as soon as they respond to my message. I sometimes go to the store just to buy one orange. I create one pomander ball at a time, whole cloves puncturing the dimpled skin, wearing my grandmother's old thimble on my thumb like a doughboy helmet. The soup I made bubbles on the stove. I love the way it sounds like someone gently snoring in the next room.

—

As soon as the plaid blanket appears up against the brick wall, I run to place the present near the crocuses. I don't want the present to be stolen, so I find a cafe within eyeshot, one that I have been to before but not too many times, not enough to be loyal to it in any way. I order a specialty drink with egg nogg and try to type out a draft of a letter to one of my four friends. I look up again and again to make sure that the box and the blanket are still there. I get distracted eavesdropping on a toddler and her overwhelmed mother at a nearby table — the toddler will not eat and won't stop fussing, and the people around them are stiffening up, frustrated by the fact that it would be uncouth of them to be frustrated at a child who is just being a child.

When I look back, the boy is settling in, taking the dishes out of a paper bag and setting them down in a circle. Two cats have already joined him, or maybe they came with him. He has on his scratched-up parka and a knit hat that makes him look older, maybe more of a man than a boy after all. One of the cats is white with brown feet.

CEREAL FOR CATS BY MONTY ROZEMA

He sniffs the box and chews at the paper. The boy who might be a man is arranging the dishes in a particular way. My face begins to feel hot until I realize that I'm holding my breath. I am tense from the toddler's whines and the arrival of the cats. From the bag he produces a box of Cheerios, which he shakes playfully. He stokes the cats who are already there and more cats begin to arrive. A brown cat with one mangled ear inspects the dishes. A long-haired orange cat with a collar on arrives and waits at the periphery. The white cat with brown feet sits on my present. As soon as the Cheerios are opened, the cats chitter and dance, feasting and laying down on top of the crocuses. The boy waits for the white cat to move off of my present before he shakes it hesitantly. A cat who has already snarfed down its Cheerios sniffs the tissue paper. I watch him unwrap it, but because of the angle and distance I am viewing the scene from, I can't see his face, just the white cat rubbing the side of its body up against the box. He holds it up against his chest. The cats step lightly on top of the man until he pries open the Rice Krispies. I watch him dispense an equal amount into each little dish. The cats feast until they are done. They lay down on him, and on the crocuses, and on one another, and they roll around in the shimmery silver tissue paper.


LDH

A RIDE HOME BY S.K. RATIDOX

The coffee shop was booming with the usual crowd of yuppies. Late aged adolescents with stripped shirts, Chuck Taylor shoes, and dark framed glasses. Many of them were in cliques seated at the small metal tables outside in the cold November night.

Inside the coffee shop was an Open Mic event where amateur guitar players and socially awkward poets sat in front of a microphone with their back to the front window. Surrounded by an audience that wasn't listening. One half was deaf due to the glass and the other was tuned out from the performances because of a loss of social respect.

A pair of young men arrived that seemed to be the same age as the main crowd of the coffee shop. But the two of them reserved their energy behind their jackets while the rest of the patrons were bursting with energy and sarcasm that they used to taunt there close friends.

The two young men were good friends and both were quiet fellows that seemed older than they actually were. One of them ordered a black coffee that seemed like a fantastic request to the frazzled barista who was so use to making lattes with a double shot of soy or a cappuccino with one shot of espresso buried under seven grams of sugar and cream. The other young man ordered a cup of tea that wasn't asking for a background check on how organic the leaves were or the trials and tribulation that went into crafting the flavor. When the two young men had their simple, old fashion drinks they went outside to let the cold drive their need for hot beverages.

Outside was just as much sarcasm steaming in the breaths the young folks bellowed into the air. Just as heavy was all the cigarette smoke coming from minds that though only about the moment and nothing else. The two young men sat down at a vacant table by the edge of the sidewalk.

A RIDE HOME BY S.K. RATIDOX

"I've never been here during these open mic events." Said the man with the coffee, his face covered in heavy scruff.

"Me neither. But don't you live like five blocks away?" Responded the other young man with the green tea and a pencil mustache.

"Yes but there really is no reason for me to come here when I can have a cup of coffee at home. I did just get off work so that's why I drove here. Plus I came here so you and I can have a nice chat and see what our peers are up to." The scruffy many looked around with a stern expression,

"Doesn't look like it's anything special. Too much sarcasm and one-upmanship."

"Agreed. It's hard to talk to anyone that's just two years younger than you or I."

"I think its fear."

"Is that just because you're a psychology major?"

"I graduated, remember. I have a degree in psychology which doesn't make much of a difference except for job interviews. But I digress, the over use of sarcasm today is a great method that people use to hide what they really feel. Rarely is there face to face confrontation anymore." The cold air was making their beverages lose their fire so both men drank their drinks. They sat in silence for a while.

"At least you're not afraid." Said the mustached friend.

"Don't be a fool. I'm full of fear, we all are."

"What are you afraid of?"

"Talking to people I don't know. Striking up a conversation with a stranger. It's why I only go out with friends like you. You are someone that I trust and enjoy talking to. I don't think I could socialize with the groups here because they don't listen like you or I. They just wait until it's their turn to talk and prove themselves for nothing tangible."

A RIDE HOME BY S.K. RATIDOX

"Always the brilliant social philosopher my friend." The scruffy man shook his head with disapproval. As their drinks came to an end the cold started to wear on them. It didn't seem to trouble the other folks. Perhaps they were all too busy being social and energetic to notice how numb their bodies were. A young lady in jeggings and a wool sweater and a beret hat came outside looking around the group of skinny faces with a look of panic on her own.

She walked up to one group in a worried voice,

"You guys haven't seen Jeff have you? He's a tall blonde haired guy with a leather jacket." The crowd pauses, trying to register the question and the girl's present frame. Half of them drew out their smartphones and pretended to be texting someone. One young man with a goatee said,

"Nah, I haven't seen that guy. Don't really know who he is. Sorry, I guess." The girl had tears in her eyes and she walked up to the two young men at their table. Both looked up at her with full attention.

"You guys didn't see a tall fellow with a leather jacket leave here did you."

"Think I saw such a person in the parking lot going to his car when we got here." The tears started to flow.

"No! That's not fair." The man with scruff pulled out a chair.

"Sit for a second, tell us what happened." The girl didn't sit and folder her arms as she cried.

"I can't believe he used me like that. And now he's got my phone and how the fuck am I supposed to get home!"

"He used you?" The mustache pondered.

"I don't want to talk about it. He's gone and I'm stuck here! God I'm so fucking stupid!"

"I'm sorry" the mustache said. The scruff said nothing and frowned for a second at his friend.

A RIDE HOME BY S.K. RATIDOX

"What am I gonna do!" The tears burst out with pants of frustration.
"Where do you live?" The scruff said in a calm voice.
"Huh? I live in Bay Shore."
"I can give you a ride home." The mustache man looked at his friend with a puzzled look. The girl suddenly had a look of fear.
"Uh, thanks but I don't know." The scruffy man dug in his pocket and held out his wallet. Both the girl and his friend looked confused.
"Take this, look at my license and all my information. You can see where I live and what my name is. You hold onto that until you get to your house. Think of it as a collateral."
"Hey man, are you sure about this?" The scruffy man looked at his friend.
"Sorry we have to cut this short but it was still nice getting to talk to you again. Give me a call tomorrow when you get out of work and we can set up that trip to Canada, okay?" The mustache man seemed too confused to argue. He also knew his friend was stubborn when he made a sporadic decision like this. So the mustache man got up and walked off to his car after saying goodbye and another empty "I'm sorry" to the girl.
The scruffy man still had his wallet out in front of the girl.
"Why are you doing this?"
"You need a ride home and I would like you to trust me. If you have my wallet than you have something to hold against me."
"But how do I know you're true to your word?"
"You don't. I know it's scary to trust a stranger but here I am trying to give you a sense of security by giving you my personal information." She took the wallet and looked through it, the driver's license told her that he lived here in this town and that he was a registered organ donor. She also saw that he had an EMT card.
"Okay." She said and the scruffy man led her to his car.

A RIDE HOME BY S.K. RATIDOX

He let her hold onto his wallet which she clenched against her chest as if it were a locket. They climbed into his purple Hyundai and she directed him to her town. The drive was quiet except for the random folk songs playing on the radio from the college station.

As they approached her town she broke the silence.

"Why are you doing this?"

"No reason other than to help you out." She was puzzled by how calm he was and how he kept looking ahead at the road, he never once glanced at her for more than a second. As if he wasn't trying to ogle her.

"But you had to leave your friend. I ruined your night."

"No you didn't. I would've cut that moment short soon enough. I'm not much for going out at night into crowds."

"My street will be up on the next left. I hope you don't start stalking me once you know where I live."

"That's silly. If you feel that uncomfortable I can just drop you off on your street so I won't know what house you live at."

"No that's alright. I just don't understand why you're doing this. I can give you gas money."

"That's alright. It wasn't a long drive so you can keep your money."

"Well I sure won't be giving you a blowjob if that's what you're looking for." The scruffy fellow turned onto her street and let out a sigh.

"Some people aren't so shallow, you know. You try to be a nice guy and often for no reward."

"Well just because you're a nice guy doesn't mean I'll want to fuck you."

"Just because I'm a nice guy doesn't mean I'm looking to fuck. That's not why I'm being nice." The resentment started to grow in his tone. She pointed out her house and he parked in front of it.

"I hope you find the guy who took your phone. Can I get my wallet back, please?" She handed him the wallet and sat there for a moment.

"I guess you want to come in."

"No. Unless you want me to come in but I think you've had enough of an ordeal tonight."

"I guess you want my number so you can call me then."

"Your phone is missing, remember? If you want to keep in touch, here's my number." He grabbed a pen and piece of paper from his dashboard and scribbled his number down.

"Now you know a lot about me and I know almost nothing about you. So, call me if you wish but most of all, have a wonderful life. Okay?" She looked at the phone number and back at him with his calm expression and dark eyes. She thanked him once again and climbed out of the car. He didn't drive away until she was inside the house. As he went back to his home he broke his own silence.

"Turning down all those offers? For what! A chance to be a kind person, that's what. How stupid! You're an idiot. No! All glory is fleeting and kind acts need no reward."

When no answer came from his outburst, he drove to his house in silence. All the time knowing that she would never call him. That was fine by him as long as she was safe and lived her life while he lived his.


MUTE

THE ALL'S SOMETHING
BY EDWARD CODY HUDDLESTON

Like a landscape being unpainted,
your memories liquefied and shrank,
losing depth and perspective,
before yielding to complete blankness.

One day, I was me to you—
your oldest grandson.
The next, I was my brother.
A few times, I think I was Grandpa,
but it's hard to say because I share his first name.

Only once did you admit to not remembering me.
Am I a stranger? I asked.
No, because I love you,
whoever you are.
I have that thing with my head, you know.
The all's something.

Before I could answer,
Bob Ross came back on TV
and we watched him paint a log cabin
surrounded by happy little trees
again for the first time.

THE SUN BY LEANN LUDWICK

I don't think the sun wants to be seen anymore. It seems like she was always just peeking around the clouds afraid of something. Was it the same thing as me? Could something that big and powerful have the same fears as something as small as me?

Did she come up every day afraid she would do something wrong or worried that one day her light would possibly go out?

The sun is supposed to shine for a very long time. That's a lot longer compared to me. If I had the chance to burn that long would I be able to do more?

I wish the sun could be my mom. I would let the warmth of her completely surround me and the light completely blind me from anything that scares me. I would be safe. How many people has she looked down on like me? I wonder if she's ever wanted to reach out. To give comfort.

WHAT REMAINS AFTER LEAVING

BY ALSU GARA

When I was moving away from the Czech Republic two and a half months ago, I felt surprisingly at ease with saying my goodbyes. Maybe it has become easier now that I've done it quite a few times. In fact, part of me was relieved to leave; eager even. I felt as though I had overstayed, got too familiar with life in a small South Moravian town, got too attached to a city I had no purpose in. Although I had spent almost three years there and had a life filled with friends, intrigues, and lavish social experiences, none of it felt like an anchor that could let me settle. Many of my friends asked me the same strange question — "Why don't you stay?" — and frankly, I could not understand, why should I?

Yes, I graduated. I could have found a job and settled there. I could have started dating someone, split the rent, finally started learning the language. I could have, but all of this seems to me nothing more than a fantasy, an impossible version of events. Maybe it's because when I first arrived, I made the mental note of it being a temporary stop with an immediate purpose— to finish my studies. Once I did, it felt like the statute of my visit had expired. Throughout the three years I was there I never once imagined settling in, learning the language, or getting a job. The Czech Republic was never a destination for me, just a stop.

This isn't the first time I have said goodbye to a city that served as a home to me, although temporarily. I do this all the time. I learn the rhythm of a place, I taste its light and sound, I let its corners become mine. And then I leave. The process repeats until anticipation is automatic, attachment optional. I guess that is why this time it was particularly easy to leave. It is necessary to note that leaving is rarely a choice and mostly a condition of my circumstances, which is another reason why I have learned to do it as swiftly and gently as possible.

WHAT REMAINS AFTER LEAVING

BY ALSU GARA

For someone with a rather unpredictable life, emotional detachment from locations and surroundings has become a survival strategy. Every apartment, every café, every street corner is a temporary experiment in presence. Memories are cataloged, observed, but not held. They are indexed and distilled: the intimacy of a city is always mediated, never permanent. Transience teaches a certain rhythm of life: to embrace beginnings without surrendering to permanence. Each city is a laboratory of selfhood. Attachment is dangerous; it increases the cost of departure. The frequency of goodbyes in my life has pushed me to such necessary measures. The mind learns to abstract from experience: you meet friends, build memories, but it is all attached to a time and place and remains there upon the end of the moment. I do not take it with me as a souvenir; I leave it all there as evidence of my being there. Once.

Sociologically, this contrasts with others who build lives rooted in place. I've made friends who lived their whole lives in the city, I've made friends with people who moved there with me but were planning to settle in for life. I've watched all of them dissolve into routine, ecosystems for which I was nothing but a passing ghost, watching the permanence I cannot adopt. The ache of witnessing continuity elsewhere builds upon my insecurities of ever settling down, of finding a place to belong, to experience that sense of belonging like I watch others do. For now, it is nothing but a myth for me, that sense of belonging. And I truly wonder if it will ever find me.

I remain in these cities as nothing but a ghost, an archetype of impermanence: visible yet untouchable, present but unclaimed. Cities are mirrors: they receive me, reflect me, and then release me. I move through them as an emissary of transition, a witness to permanence without participation.

WHAT REMAINS AFTER LEAVING

BY ALSU GARA

And though this lack of attachment fuels my excitement for new experiences and transitions, this excitement has an expiry date. Once I become too familiar with the corners of the city, once I begin to recognize one too many faces on the streets, I will know that my time in this place has come to an end. So often I've had to move away, so fast I've taught myself to detach from places and experiences, that now any sensation of familiarity puts me in unrest.

Although I've adopted the role of a passing ghost in this world as a defense mechanism for the unpredictability of my life, I've now got stuck in this role. I am afraid I will remain a ghost so long as I'm alive and then—for the rest of eternity.

But here's the quiet truth that endures after so many departures: this ghostliness isn't just haunting, it's survival. What falls apart—roots, routines, the myth of permanence—leaves space for clarity. I've learned to keep going not despite the movement, but through it.

Detachment isn't absence, it's a muscle built from necessity. What remains isn't heavy anchors or lasting claims, but the distilled light of having been present. The ease of goodbyes. The automatic rhythm of arrival. The way I still carry the taste of each city's corners, not as weight, but as breath.

This is endurance for me: the small, unremarkable insistence to witness without possessing, to feel without holding fast. Sunlight slips through these cracks of impermanence. It's in the gentle momentum of leaving, in the space made for what's next. Perhaps staying, in its deepest sense, isn't about place at all. It's about the unbroken thread of beginning again, the ordinary grace of motion when stillness would shatter me. The light between departures. That's what keeps me going.


Goodbye

BEAUTIFUL WASTELAND
BY IMAAN FAROOQ SHEIKH

Maybe it's a severe deficiency or
Maybe I'm just withering with age.
My bones creak, joints scrape each other,
Like wood grinding as it turns to timber.

The soft clay used to sculpt my skin
Has only turned barren over the years.
Fired in the kiln of hardship, this statue
Has achieved a firmness that does not sprout.

So used to emptiness my body has become
That hair shed in clumps of brittle thorns.
No shoots emerge from the grains of sand.
No seed penetrates this barren wasteland.

What happens then to a land not yielding fruit,
A land not letting shoots come to the surface?
If abandoned becomes a wasteland, otherwise
Becomes a shrine to which people pay offerings.

Where no plants sprout now rests a tomb,
Built with marble, cloaking sun-dried clay.
Lines of devotees gather to pay respects,
Admiring beauty, reminiscent of the divine.

BEAUTIFUL WASTELAND
BY IMAAN FAROOQ SHEIKH

So now my body is also a shrine I tend
Layering it with marble, I've built each step.
I pay offerings of fruits, nuts, and milk,
They fall into a marble pit to decompose.

My barren wasteland is beautiful in all seasons
As millions gather to fill that void.
Why should I long for blooming flowers?
The petals I gather are strewn by my admirers.

So, I've learned to live with this marble,
Laden over my creaking bones.
Even if in this life I can't bear fruit
At least I've not yet crumbled to dust.

A SHORT HISTORY OF LIFE WITH GIRL CHILD BY ALEX NEWMAN

For most of her 20-plus years, my daughter has elicited — at least in me -- one of two responses: the yoke of love or the desire to throttle.

This is unusual for me since I've always avoided conflict, walking away from people, jobs, relationships, even dialogue. Like the guy I left waiting outside the jewelry store the day we were to pick out wedding rings, while I drove to the US border. The note I left on the kitchen counter read: *Feed the dogs. I've gone away and won't be back.*

My biological clock eventually intervened because I married — not that guy but a different one who had some of the same commitment issues as me. After much back and forth, we decided to venture into parenthood. Being a mother isn't something you can walk away from. Luckily, our first child, Aidan, was easy -- after we resolved a few sleep issues. And I was all the way in with this parenting business, quickly falling in love with his little round person, the bobbing head, alert eyes, clutching hands. He was compliant and eager to please, and our lives proceeded in a calm and predictable way. So, we ventured into parenthood a second time.

And then along came Anna.

No cherubim this one. Even though she looked the part -- rosebud lips, halo of fuzzy blond hair, and cerulean eyes — she arrived with yowling fanfare, a foreshadowing of things to come; pushing her way to the centre of every conversation, laughing hysterically one minute (or making others do so), sobbing the next.

She affected all of us — in one photo she's held aloft by her father, legs flailing, mouth wide open, tears streaming, outraged that she cannot blow out the candles on her brother's cake.

A SHORT HISTORY OF LIFE WITH GIRL CHILD BY ALEX NEWMAN

At three, during a violent scene in Lord of the Rings, she declared she "be cutting someone's head off when I be grown up." Thrusting her head towards the floor like an overwrought opera diva when she didn't get her way or rocking back and forth and howling like an injured Italian soccer player over a scrape on her finger.

The months leading up to Grade One were punctuated by emotional outbursts once having a temper tantrum so severe I had to pin her arms to her body to control the eruption.

My elderly father used to say of her: Life is either one big joke, or a vale of tears.

When I wasn't tearing my hair out, I was laughing: at six, she tromped around a department store in size 10 boots with 4-inch heels, prompting a friend of mine to say she was a 40-year-old French woman trapped in a child's body; waving like the queen from the backseat of the car at stoplights (people always waved back); wondering aloud if a girl had to be a princess in order to get married, then asked if I had ever been a princess.

At six, furious with me over something, she whispered to her dad at the dinner table: "Mommy is such a bad cook, I really hate the things she makes, these hamburgers are disgusting." And when he told her he'd made them, she replied: "These are yummy Daddy."

Once when I forgot to pay the promised 50 bucks for each A on her end-of-year report, she told me not to bother coming to parents' visiting day at camp.

But she could flip the other way too.

A SHORT HISTORY OF LIFE WITH GIRL CHILD BY ALEX NEWMAN

At seven, she walked into the store where I'd admired something in the window and asked if she could put it on hold until she was old enough to buy it for me. When the 50-something protagonist died in a movie we were watching, she started to sob and asked what if that happened to me. (I was 56 at the time.)

When she turned 13, I jokingly told a friend I was going to blog The Year of Living Dangerously: My Life with a Teenage Girl. Once she turned 14, I realized the blog had at least a four-year shelf life. In retrospect, I could have made an online career out of it.

As a teenager, her complicated personality converged with hormones and a not-yet-matured prefrontal cortex to predictable results, which often left me emotionally spent. She was so adept at circular conversations that I would fume and sputter, losing track of what it was about.

The fighting escalated. One time I broke down in tears, asking her how we got to this point. She said: "Mom, you need to relax -- all mothers and daughters fight."

Yes, I fought with my own mother, but blinded by her mental illness and drug addictions, I never turned the mirror on myself. I was a conscientious mom, read the books, and yet the conflict raged on.

But there were days it felt like my daughter was seizing power — and succeeding — and I wondered if we'd forever be caught in this cycle. I mean *who is this kid, and what am I supposed to do with her?*

She could reduce me to tears and shouting, our voices escalating until nobody could hear the last salvo even if they wanted to.

A SHORT HISTORY OF LIFE WITH GIRL CHILD BY ALEX NEWMAN

Is it any surprise that international peace talks so often fail when we have a hard time managing family discord?

One thing that sustained me was introducing the physical reminders — like the pictures I put up all over the house to realize remind myself just how much I did love her. My tendency to walk away from what is hard is from not learning which battles are worth fighting, and which are a lost cause. The pictures remind me she is not a lost cause, and that my confusion is more about whether my husband's leaving has completely destroyed this family or merely reduced it, refashioned it.

I also took to re-reading the journal I'd kept on her since infancy. We had become so joined at the hip it provided me a much-needed long view of our God-given Otherness — not just hers, but mine as well. This allowed me to see in more sanguine moments that the intense behaviour was her way of punching through the walls of the baby cocoon in order to emerge one long limb at a time, into adolescence and then ultimately into adulthood. And to see through the drama to her inner subtext: *don't be mad at me; I'm trying to be grown up and will clean my room eventually; those friends stick by me, and that makes me happy.*

Even so, plenty of times I wanted to walk away. Never far from my lips was the suggestion my daughter go live with her father (and his girlfriend and her two kids). But I swallowed it because no one should feel unwanted, especially one whom I love to the bone. —

Anna left home for uni, came back for a period, then left again for the UK. Because that's what children do as they grow up and figure things out.

A SHORT HISTORY OF LIFE WITH GIRL CHILD BY ALEX NEWMAN

Her intensity remains though —her passionate cries against injustice (often tested out on me) are tempered equally by her many kindnesses: carrying cash to shell out to the homeless guy outside the grocery store, running the marathon in aid of Gaza, volunteering long hours with sexual abuse survivors.

My daughter has managed to do what nobody else has been able to — helped me see that my struggle with commitment stems from feeling trapped by my mother's neediness. And she's forced me to embrace responsibility but know when to let go. She once told me that when her father is mad at her he scowls and walks off. I remind her that I have done the same. "Yeah, but I know you're coming back," she says.

THE WICKIE BY DANIELLE ELLIS

She should be honest in her own mind. Many years have passed since she'd been happy. The mirror didn't lie. Unhappiness spoke in her straggled hair and the dark red swelling around her eye. Crimson dripped from her lip.

He called her name, snarled the sound like she disgusted him. She pushed away from the sink, feeling uneasy as the ship swayed under her footsteps. Quick patters back to the bedroom. Must be quick. It prevented being struck.

"Sorry," she said, a quivering whisper, "I just needed a moment." She bent down, picking up the evidence of his anger. Strewn objects. Broken glass. Pieces from the hole in the wall. They would be charged for the damage, and she would pay it.

He was yelling. Rarely did he speak. Long ago, conversations warped into one-sided demands. He accused her of not listening. How could she? His speech slurred and blood rushed in her ears. Books were yanked from the mounted shelf and thrown. One hit her. She dodged the others when she ran towards the door.

Sweaty, shaking palms made her hand slip but she gripped tighter, opening an escape just as he grabbed her sleeve. The fabric tore as she snatched away. He wouldn't follow. Even in the still of night, he avoided an audience.

The floor swayed beneath her feet. One step at a time. She turned the corners of the maze corridors until the stuffy cabin musk slipped past her and ocean air gently caressed her cheek. Wood replaced carpet as she stepped onto the deck.

Her eyes stung with no tears to soothe them. She stood, bathed in the warm amber of the ship's lights. Staring at a metal rail surrounded by a never-ending black void of night. Water rushed, splashing softly against the ship walls. She hated darkness.

When he slept, she would turn on a small night light, hoping he wouldn't wake up. He would rip it from the wall.
The void was inviting. The darkness wrapped around her, pulling her across the rocking floor. She grabbed the rail with a gasp. Stopped and thought. Her friend was waiting for a text back. There were deadlines to meet. And...what else? No family. No children. No tethered close connection to pull her back.
She was alone and trapped. In the void she would escape forever.
The darkness grabbed her hand and guided her over the rail. The water was cold and heavy. She went under and couldn't breathe. She floated to the top and struggled against the waves. The ocean held a hand over her mouth, so she flailed. Hoping to catch someone's attention.
She remembered. It didn't matter. There was no one to miss her. She closed her eyes, prepared to escape forever.

Warmth touched her cheeks, and water held her like a baby to the chest. Waves rocked her like a cradle. She stayed in the void until she was placed gently on soft ground and tender grass. Her eyes fluttered open, burning as the sun greeted her. She looked around, trying to sit up. Water rose in her throat. She coughed it up, convulsing, until she could breathe.
Footsteps crunched the grass nearby and she looked up. A man gazed down at her, brow pinched, a peaked cap with a brass emblem sat on his head. He stood in the shadow of a red brick lighthouse.
Her voice was strained, "Who are you?"
"Just the wickie," he said.
She nodded as if she understood. Exhaustion pulled at her eyes, and she laid down. Allowing herself to sleep.

In darkness, he yelled. Something hit her and she ran. She gasped, sitting up. Expecting angry red eyes and a raised fist. Instead, off color red bricks held a picture for her to see. The frame presented a child with flowing hair and brown eyes. Who was that?

Her breathing was heavy, her eyes shifted wildly. The luxuries of the cabin were replaced with a small beige couch tucked in the corner and a single nightstand holding a clock and a plated sandwich.

She remembered now. The man. The...wickie? Like a candle wick? She leaned back against the headboard, feeling dizzy. Smacked her tongue, grimacing at the lingering taste of salt.

"Hello?" She called. Silence lingered. She turned, scooting to the side of the bed, moving to stand but the world swirled around her, making her fall back on the mattress with a small bounce. Closing her eyes made it worse.

Soft taps echoed before a figure appeared in the doorway with a glass of water in his hand. She looked up, panting softly from the disorientation.

"You'll feel that way for a while." He said, walking into the room. "It will take some time to heal." He held the glass out. Her eyes drifted to it.

Memories were scattered in her mind like disrupted puzzle pieces. She started putting them together. From the cabin to the cold water.

Shouldn't her world be clouds at an intersection between pearly gates and flames?

"Where am I?" she asked.

"Lighthouse." He placed the glass beside the plate, standing with his hands at his side. "We're a long way from shore. You're lucky." Not lucky. Stranded.

She sighed, looking around the small room again. "How do we get to land?"

He shrugged, hands held out. “We don’t. The lighthouse is self-sufficient. I’ve been here for some time.”
“Alone?” She met his eyes.
He nodded slowly. “Preferable. Whoever ends up here is a sad soul.”
Her eyes fell to his clothing. A puffy white shirt tucked into cotton brown pants. They looked old. A truth tapped her on the shoulder, and she ran from it.
“What do you do all day?” She asked, sitting up slowly to avoid vertigo. The truth was gaining on her, but it didn’t make sense. She was hungry. The room was chilly. The taste of salt was in her mouth. This wasn’t death. She picked up the sandwich and bit into it. Just to prove the point.
“Lots of things.” He said, sitting on the side of the bed. Arms distance away, giving her space. “Weather logging, maintaining the light, tending the farm and fishing. I’ll show you when you’re well.”
Her eyes searched the room again, inhaling slowly. She looked out the window by the bed. The ocean waves brushed up against the grassy shore, as if waving hello. Her eyes drifted to her hands. She hadn’t been happy, but this remote stranger was the first person who noticed.
“Are you a sad soul?” she asked.
He shook his head. “Not anymore.”
She smiled a little. It gave her a bit of hope.
“Rest up.” He rose to his feet. “Don’t try to rush it. There’s nothing but time here. I’ll bring some books and puzzles if it’ll keep your mind at ease.”
“Thank you,” she said, taking another bite of the sandwich. She tasted chicken. Did his farm have animals?
He gave her a small smile before disappearing in the doorway.

Before, she had grown accustomed to unrealistic work tasks and impossible deadlines. No appreciation when she exceeded expectations. Instead, more work was piled on.
The man never gave her more than she could handle.
The farm did have animals. Chickens and cows. Alongside them was a garden. The city never acquainted her with rural pleasantries, but he was patient with her lack of knowledge. He instructed through demonstration, aiding her practice when she mimicked his actions.
The beacon, however, was most important. The light had to burn bright in the thickest of darkness. She learned how to clean the lenses and refuel the flame. Fuel tanks were stored in the basement. Enough to surpass several lifetimes. Seeing them gathered many questions in her mind. Written by the truth she was still outrunning, and she wasn't tired yet.

"How did you end up here?" He watched closely as she opened the reservoir for the lamp. Carefully, she tipped the kerosene can over a funnel. Her grip was unsteady, and he gently placed his hand over Her's.
"Don't worry. You'll get stronger over time." He said. The encouragement gave her a small smile.
"I was..." She trailed off, deciding to wait until after the task was finished to talk about it. He was patient. Guiding her as she trimmed the wick, polished the lens, and relit the lamp. Waiting until she was ready to answer.
"My husband and I were on a cruise." She said, taking slow steps down the long staircase. He followed behind quietly. "He wasn't—isn't..." She hesitated again. Maybe she was a little tired of running. "He wasn't a kind man. I felt trapped and I...I suppose I made a mistake."

“You sound unsure.” He said, speaking softly. She stopped, hand on the rail as she thought. Mistake implied regret, which she didn’t have. She was free. Isolated, maybe. But not alone. Sadness lingered, and it was undeniable. Heartache for the life she could have lived. That’s what she regretted.
“I made a decision,” she said, slowly turning to face him. Afraid of judgement. Instead, his eyes were kind, shining with what might have been sympathy. “I wish I had made better ones.”
“Forgivable.” He said, “Sometimes our emotions are stronger than our common sense.” She smiled a little, finding humor in the truth.

Not long after she had arrived, the picture of the girl was moved. She hadn’t realized until she popped her head in his room to ask a question. Her eyes found the picture hung on the wall adjacent to his bed. The question was forgotten.
“She seems important to you.” She said, leaning against the doorframe. He had been getting ready for the day. Tugging on a watch and throwing on his cap. He turned, following her gaze to the picture.
“My daughter.” He said, “She looks just like her mother.” Her head tilted. She could see the relation now. The child had his nose and ears.
“She’s about ten years old there. My wife died when she was born. Did my best with her but she got sick.” He crossed the room, touching the painting on the cheek. As if she were there.
“I guess I was trying to find them.” He said. She looked down, feeling the weight of his sadness. He brought the truth to her like a letter. She would take it, even if she didn’t open it.
“I think you will find them,” she said, hoping to give back some of the peace he had brought her.
He nodded absently, “I do too.”

Days quickly became lost in routine. Weeks or years could have passed; she wasn't keeping track. Her strength grew and she could do most of the tasks on her own. They split the work up, swapping every other day. When the work was done, sometimes they would retreat to their own spaces. To read or sit and think. Usually, they would tackle a puzzle or sit along the shore and let the ocean tickle their feet.

She gave the weather no thought. Every morning was a little chilly until the sun came up and warmed the island. During the heat of the day, the ocean allowed a cool breeze, and night restarted the cycle.

Today, the sky was overcast. She stood in the window, hands wringing as she watched it. Movement caught her eye, and she looked down. Watching as he walked to the shore, head pointed up towards the gray clouds. Either the truth was getting faster, or she was getting tired. Farming was her task this morning, but she hid away inside. There were no nooks she could fit into, so she retreated to the basement. Dusting the fuel tanks with a rag. She heard his soft footsteps when he came through the door. Soft taps as he walked down the stairs.

"I'm sorry," She said, without turning to face him, "It looked like it might rain so I figured the garden would get watered and the animals would go inside their shed."

"They will." He said, voice gentle like a hug. She heard the squish of his boots as he came near, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I haven't shown you how to log the weather."

She shook her head. "I don't want to learn,"

He sighed, looking down, "Nothing lasts forever, not even here."

Her eyes stung, her vision blurred as tears fell, "But I'm happy now."

"I'm glad I have been your friend." He said, "But you have to learn to be happy with yourself as well." She exhaled, turning to wrap her arms around him. He matched her tight embrace.

For the first time, she let the truth catch up.
“Am I dead?” she asked.
He shook his head, “Not quite yet. Not until your own storm.”
Her voice was tight, “I’ll miss you.”
“I know.” He said, “but I will not be far away.”

Every day the sky got a little darker, the winds stronger, and the rain heavier. The only task they kept was maintaining the light. Mostly, they sat in the living room and talked. He told her how he met his wife, and who his daughter was. She told him about marrying young and how it all started falling apart.

One day, she woke up and the only light in the sky was the beacon. He stood in the shine, facing the ocean. Waiting for her, she knew. For a moment, she wanted to dawdle for as long as possible. But he had a wife and daughter to find.
With a deep breath and a heavy heart, she left the lighthouse. The winds pushed and pulled, the rain poured down, adding weight to her journey. She marched through it to meet him, standing at his side.
“Goodbye, my friend,” she said.
He met her eyes, smiling. Taking his hat and setting it on her crown, “Not goodbye. See you soon.”
He stepped into the ocean, stepping forward until he could swim. A wave rose, rising above him, flowing down like a caress. The sky cleared, the rain ceased. The sun inched out from the clouds. She cried as she watched the ocean settle, flowing peacefully along. With a sniffle, she walked back towards the lighthouse.
There was much to do but once inside, she froze. No soft steps or the echo of his presence.

She looked towards his room, not expecting the glint of gold on his bed. Her brow pinched as she went to inspect. His watch sat on the quilt. She smiled, picking up the timepiece, eyes rising to look for the picture. It was gone.

Years passed. She didn't have a calendar, but she felt it. She stayed faithful to her tasks. When lonely, she played with the chickens and spoke to the cows as if they understood her. Sorrow didn't leave her at once. It fractured and fell away one piece at a time. Until she could face a mirror and smile at the person looking back at her.

While painting the animal sheds, and telling the cow a story from childhood, the sound of rushing water interrupted her. Louder than usual, like the ocean was calling. She walked to the shore, eyes falling on a young man lying on the green as if he had been gently laid. Her footsteps crunched the grass as she walked closer, observing his state. His neck was circled with a thin and angry bruise.

His eyes fluttered open, his gaze found her. With a hoarse voice he asked, "Who are you?"

She answered, "Just the wickie."

SUNFLOWER IS STRONGER THAN ME
BY TERRY TROWBRIDGE

pulling up sunflower roots
sorry
pressing my feet to the ground
by pulling on a sunflower stalk
sorry
clamping myself to the ground
with a sunflower stalk
sorry
going nowhere is as rewarding
as bootstraps bootstraps bootstraps

THE SUPERINTENDENT

BY LOKIKONE

I came to the Cresswell Building in August when the city had already marked it for demolition. The paperwork said I had sixty days to secure the structure and relocate the remaining tenants, though who remained and where they might go were questions the paperwork did not address. I took the keys from a clerk who did not look up from her screen and drove across town with the windows down, my shirt sticking to the seat. The building stood five stories on Pitch Street where the Basin opens into the flats. Brick the color of dried blood, windows boarded or broken, fire escape rusting into lace. Someone had spray-painted CONDEMNED across the ground floor in letters tall as a man. I stood on the sidewalk and looked up at the facade. My back already hurt and it wasn't even nine. I thought about the apartment I'd left that morning, clean and silent and empty of everything but my own furniture and failure. Then I unlocked the front door and went inside. The lobby smelled of mold and old cooking and something else, sweet and spoiled, that I never did identify. Mailboxes hung open like broken teeth. Water stains bloomed across the ceiling in shapes that might have been continents or internal organs. I heard movement above, footsteps, a door closing. The city records listed three occupied units, but I suspected more. People have a way of appearing in the margins of official documents, unnamed and uncounted.

I started on the first floor. The boiler wheezed but still produced heat. I walked each corridor with my flashlight, noting holes in the plaster, exposed wiring, places where the floor had gone soft. In 1C I found a mattress and blankets, a camping stove, a cardboard box of canned goods. No one home. I left it.

THE SUPERINTENDENT
BY LOKIKONE

On the second floor I met Mrs. Oliveira. She answered my knock after a long silence, opening the door only as far as the chain allowed. She was perhaps seventy, perhaps older. Her apartment was dark and smelled of mentholated ointment and instant coffee. I have nowhere to go, she said. I told her I was there to make repairs, not to evict anyone. That I'd been hired to keep the place standing as long as possible. She looked at me with eyes that had seen men make promises before. "The ceiling leaks", she said. "In the kitchen." "I'll look at it", I said. She let me in. The kitchen ceiling was stained dark and sagging in one corner where water had pooled above. I could see the shape of it, pressing down. I told her I'd be back with materials, and she nodded and offered me coffee which I declined though I wanted it. I had three more floors to inspect, and my thermos was already empty.

The third floor was mostly vacant. Doors ajar, apartments stripped of fixtures. In one I found a dead pigeon on the windowsill. When I picked it up the body crumbled in my hand. I wiped my palm on my jeans and kept going.

In 4A lived a man named Santos and his daughter who was perhaps six years old. He worked nights at a bottling plant and slept days. The girl sat in the hallway when I came up the stairs, playing with a doll made from a sock and yarn. She watched me with the frank curiosity of children who have learned not to expect much from adults. "You the new super?" she asked.

I said I was.

THE SUPERINTENDENT

BY LOKIKONE

“The last one left”, she said, “He took the rent and then he left.”

Her father appeared in the doorway behind her, unshaven, exhausted. I explained my purpose. He asked about the window in the girl’s room, which no longer closed properly. I told him I would fix it. He studied me the way his daughter had, then nodded and went back inside.

That night I slept in the basement apartment the building’s owner had said I could use. Really just a storage room with a cot and a hot plate. But it was cool and dark, and I was tired enough not to care. I lay listening to the building settle around me, the old wood and brick contracting, pipes knocking, something small moving in the walls. I thought about my ex-wife who had left because I could not keep anything together. Not a job or a schedule or the small routines that make a life bearable. I thought about the people upstairs in their damaged rooms. Then I stopped thinking and slept.

The work began simply. Patching holes, replacing broken fixtures, hauling trash from the corridors. I found a stash of pornographic magazines from the seventies in a crawlspace. I found love letters in Portuguese tucked behind a radiator. I found a child’s shoe, just one, in perfect condition. The building gave up its secrets slowly, or maybe it was just that I was slow. Mrs. Oliveira’s ceiling required more than patching. I climbed into the crawlspace above with a trouble light and found the copper pipe corroded through, water staining the joists black. I cut out the bad section and soldered in new pipe, working in that narrow space with sweat dripping into my eyes. My knees hurt.

THE SUPERINTENDENT
BY LOKIKONE

My neck hurt. I was forty-two years old and felt sixty. When I came down she was waiting with coffee this time and I drank it, sitting at her kitchen table while she told me about the building as it had been, forty years ago when she'd first moved in. Clean hallways. Neighbors who knew each other's names. A super who kept everything running. "Now look at it", she said.

"I'm looking", I said.

That afternoon I fixed the window in Santos's daughter's room. The frame had warped and the sash no longer sat square. I planed it down and reset the hardware and tested it until it slid smoothly. The girl watched from the doorway, hugging her sock doll.

"What's your doll's name?" I asked.

"She doesn't have one", the girl said.

"Why not?"

She shrugged. "Names are hard."

I told her she could think about it. She seemed to accept this. I left my tools in the hall and went down to fix a leaking faucet in 2D that I'd been putting off for three days.

THE SUPERINTENDENT
BY LOKIKONE

In the evenings I sat on the front steps and smoked cigarettes I'd sworn I'd quit and watched the street. Sometimes Santos came home from his shift and we'd nod to each other. Sometimes Mrs. Oliveira appeared in her window above. The condemned sign across the bricks seemed to glow in the dusk. September came cooler. I worked my way up through the building, floor by floor. Light fixtures, drains, paint peeling from window frames. Small tasks that in aggregate began to suggest order, or at least the memory of it. I discovered more tenants than the city knew about. In 3B, an old man named Kowalski who rarely left his apartment. In 5C, a woman my age who worked at the hospital and came home in scrubs smelling of antiseptic. Her name was Diane. She asked if I could fix her radiator which clanged all night, and I said I would try.

The radiator required bleeding the air from the system, adjusting the valve, sometimes just talking to it. I showed her how. She offered me a beer, and we sat in her kitchen, not saying much. Through the window I could see the Basin stretching away, its scrubland and scattered houses, the far mountains going purple.

"You know they're going to tear this place down", she said.

"I know", I said.

"So why bother?"

I didn't have an answer that made sense. I told her I'd been hired to do a job and that was true enough.

She looked at me and I could see she didn't quite believe me, but she let it go.

The building began to change in small ways. Mrs. Oliveira started leaving her door open during the day. Santos's daughter played in the hallway more often, and sometimes other children from the building joined her. Someone cleaned the mailboxes and swept the lobby. I never learned who.

In October the inspectors came. Two men with clipboards who walked through shaking their heads, noting violations, structural deficiencies, code failures that would cost more to fix than the building was worth. I followed them and said nothing. When they left they told me I'd done good work, but it didn't matter. The demolition was scheduled for December. That night I drank most of a bottle of whiskey in the basement and thought about leaving. Just walking away. In the morning, I was sick and ashamed, and I went upstairs and told Mrs. Oliveira what the inspectors had said.

"Where will I go?" she asked again.

"I don't know", "I said.

She looked at me for a long time. Then she said, "You'll figure something out."

I didn't know if she meant for herself or for me.

THE SUPERINTENDENT
BY LOKIKONE

I didn't know if she meant for herself or for me.

I started making calls. Social services, housing authorities, charitable organizations whose phone trees led nowhere. I filled out forms, wrote letters, and showed up at offices where clerks told me there were waiting lists, procedures, and no guarantees. I learned how bureaucracy worked, which is to say it mostly didn't. Some nights I wanted to quit. Most nights.

Santos found me on the steps one evening, smoking. "My cousin has a place", he said, "In the Orchards. He says we can stay there until we find something else."

"That's good", I said.

"Because of you", he said, "You fixed things. Made it so we had time." I didn't know what to say to that. I'd only done what I needed doing. But he shook my hand and went inside, and I sat there smoking until the cigarette burned down to my fingers.

In November I found Mrs. Oliveira a room in a building on the south side. Not condemned, not clean but livable. I helped her pack her things, which weren't many. We loaded them into my truck, and I drove her across town, helped her carry boxes up two flights of stairs to a room smaller than her kitchen had been. She stood in the doorway looking at the bare walls and the single window. "It's temporary", I said, though I didn't know if that was true.

THE SUPERINTENDENT
BY LOKIKONE

“Everything is”, she said.

Before she closed the door, she touched my arm, brief and light. I felt it for days afterward.

The building emptied slowly. Diane left for a better apartment near the hospital. Kowalski moved into a nursing home. Santos and his daughter went to the Orchards. I helped them all, loading trucks, signing forms, carrying furniture downstairs I’d climbed so many times I could do it in the dark. By December I was alone. Last week I spent winterizing pipes, boarding windows, locking doors. The building was silent now. I moved through it checking rooms, closing doors. In Mrs. Oliveira’s apartment the ceiling I’d repaired was still holding. In the girl’s room the window opened and closed smoothly. On the final day I walked through one last time, top to bottom. In the basement I packed my few belongings and stood in that dark space listening. Then I locked the front door behind me and left the keys in the mail slot and drove away. I found work at another building, then another. The Cresswell was demolished in January. I didn’t go to watch. Someone told me they cleared the site in three days.

But I still have the girl’s drawing taped to my bathroom mirror. She’d given it to me the day they moved out, a crayon picture of a building with flowers growing from the windows and a man on the steps who might have been me or anyone. At the bottom she’d written MY FREND THE SUPER in careful letters. I look at it sometimes when I’m shaving. I told myself once that healing others was healing myself. Maybe that was true.

THE SUPERINTENDENT
BY LOKIKONE

Maybe it was only work that needed doing, and I was there to do it. Either way, I keep my tools sharp and my truck running and when someone says a ceiling leaks or a window won't close, I say I'll look at it. Then I do.

Curator's Note:

"Ἐκ σκότους φῶς λάμψει" — Out of darkness, light shall shine.

The epigraph from 2 Corinthians frames The Superintendent and runs through the whole story. A man takes a job in a building that everyone else has given up on. He fixes pipes, windows, and ceilings, but what he's really fixing is himself. The work is slow and tiring, but it gives him a reason to keep going.

The Cresswell Building is falling apart, but the people inside still try to live their lives, an old woman with nowhere to go, a father and his daughter, a nurse who comes home tired from work. The superintendent can't save the building or stop what's coming. Still, he keeps showing up, doing what needs to be done. That's where the light is. In small acts that don't change the world, but mean something anyway.

The story isn't about big miracles. It's about noticing what's left, a warm cup of coffee, a window that finally closes, a child's drawing taped to a mirror. It's about how caring for a place or a person, even for a little while, can turn broken things into something almost whole again.


ROMA
FENCE
WWW.ROMAFENCE.COM

REJECTION BY MARK KEANE

He sits by her bed and examines the arrangement of tubes and bags, draining and feeding her body. More distressing are the bald spots where her hair was shaved for the radiotherapy that made no difference. Her tractionless gaze glides over him, showing no recognition.

"You seem brighter today," he says.

The terrible drag at the corner of her mouth gives her a permanent disapproving look. The tumour's smile, as he has come to think of it.

Never one to complain, his mother had ignored the headaches and blurred vision. Numbness in her feet made walking difficult, and she fell on the driveway. A neighbour went to her aid and then called him at work. He brought her to the doctor and she was taken into hospital.

Neurological tests revealed the brain tumour. Three surgeons looked into her case and decided against surgery. Nothing to be done now but make her comfortable in the time remaining.

Her condition is worsening with each visit as the tumour remorselessly squeezes the life from her brain.

"I'm a little thirsty," she says.

He holds the plastic cup to her lips, and she sips the water.

"I want to be cremated."

He busies himself, refilling the cup from the pitcher.

"No funeral or fuss. Headstones are such gloomy things. Why have your name in stone with those dates, the beginning and end? As if it matters. Cremation, and you're not to keep the ashes. Promise me that."

"Of course," he says, only mildly surprised by her request.

"My will is in the dresser, signed and witnessed." She purses her lips, a brief reminder of her old self. "You'll be getting everything."

She falls asleep, her mouth hanging open, sibilant breathing with a faint echo of a wheeze. The first stages of the death rattle, he thinks and pushes the thought away.

"I'll let you sleep," he says though she can't hear him. "I'll be back this evening."

Downstairs, he dawdles in the lobby, reading notices about flu jabs and German measles. Nothing about cancer or brain tumours. No one wants to be reminded of such things. Maybe he could use that in one of his stories.

He sits in the park across from the hospital. This must be the worst period, an intolerable present, regretting every minute that brings the eventual closer. Worse than the funeral or the time after, when she'll be forever absent, memories no proper substitute.

Not even a funeral but cremation. Her brother and sisters won't like that but it's her decision. They will come to the hospital that evening, Uncle Joe with his thoughtless remarks.

"She's had a good innings," he'll say, or "We all have to go sometime."

Worse still, her sisters and their crass piety about finding peace and going to a better place.

"Time is a great healer," one of them is bound to tell him.

Back at his mother's house, he fixes the hinge on a cupboard door that doesn't close properly. As he waters the plants in the sitting room, he stops to run his hand along a bundle of needlepoint she'll never complete.

He has no appetite and no interest in preparing a meal. Instead, he sits at the kitchen table, turns on the laptop and goes straight to his e-mails. One new message, the sender's name: *Dream Writer Journal.*

REJECTION BY MARK KEANE

His brain switches to high alert. The message is from a literary magazine where he had submitted a story. Too soon for a response. A rejection, of course, in such a short time. Enough to glimpse the start of the message: *Thank you for submitting your story to DreamWriter...* Beginning with a *Thank you for submitting* always means rejection.

He scrolls through the message. *Thank you for submitting your story to DreamWriter. We're sorry this story is not right for us at this time. We wish you success in finding a suitable home for your work.*

He closes the laptop, and goes into the garden. His head fills with the ooze of rejection. *Not right for us at this time, or any time.*

He walks to the bottom of the garden, accompanied by his rejection.

Returning to the kitchen, he reads the message again. It feels more dismissive. He clicks on links, taking him to the magazine website, scans the accepted stories without taking in a single word, sees the faces of the authors who submitted the right stories.

Later, he sits in front of the TV. Hopping from one news channel to another, drawn to reports of failure: rising unemployment, stock markets plummeting, a disgraced politician, an acrimonious divorce, a sacked football manager. He stares at the screen and churns with failure.

The room darkens. It's seven o'clock, evening visiting at the hospital has already began.

He puts on his coat, walks to the hospital, dreading his uncle and aunts and their empty talk. Having to put on a show of mournful acceptance for them. She had a good innings. Time is a great healer.

Visitors gather at the hospital entrance. He delays entering her ward, suffused in a paler sorrow.

LEARNING TO LEAVE
BY PAUL MCALLISTER

Rory pulled the weeds out of the plot, emptied the scummy water from the vase and refilled it at the tap by the gate, trimmed the stems of the white chrysanthemums he'd brought along and arranged them in the vase at the base of the headstone. Then he stood before the grave with clasped hands, trying to immerse himself in happy memories of his parents.

But he couldn't. The oddness of being here after so long distracted him. He looked around and saw nobody but a bent-over, white-haired woman going past on the road below the churchyard. A wheeled shopping bag trundled behind her. She was too far away for him to tell if she was someone he knew.

No one was watching him. No one would judge him if he didn't stand by the grave, looking solemn. So he turned and ascended the path to the church.

New headstones rose along its sides. He read the names on them: *ArthurMacFarlane, Samuel Thompson, Greta Wilson, RonaldMcCreadie, Maureen McCreadie, David Keys...* Names, mostly, of contemporaries of his parents. "All gone," he muttered to himself.

At the top of the path, level with the church doors, he discovered a grave that was recent – so recent it was laden with fresh flowers. Since it hadn't yet acquired a headstone, he crouched and read the messages on the wreaths until he discovered whom it contained.

The grave was that of a woman called Carol Raynie. He'd known her too. Among the wreaths was one from her son, Stephen. Rory had last heard about him twenty years ago when someone mentioned he was working as a dentist in Edinburgh. He stood up again, imagining Stephen Raynie standing on this spot just days earlier.

LEARNING TO LEAVE
BY PAUL MCALLISTER

He walked past the church to a fence at the churchyard's edge. Beyond it was a slope descending to a one-storey building on a rectangle of asphalt. Though Rory lived in Bristol, he knew about the school's recent demise because it'd been reported on the Northern Ireland page of the BBC news website. The education authority had closed it because its enrolment had dropped to below 40 – it'd been designed for around 70 pupils. The local community mounted a vigorous campaign to save it, but to no avail. Now Rory stared down at the silent building and its playground, wondering if he saw flecks of green in the asphalt where already grass was breaking through.

He recalled things Stephen Raynie and he had got up to in that school. The art lesson when Ma Campbell went out for five minutes and they slashed red paint across their cheeks to make themselves look like Apache warriors in a western movie. The lunch-break when they raced each other along the playground and, swerving around a corner, Rory smashed into the wall that jutted out and enclosed the steps from the girls' toilets, with the result his nose leaked blood for half-an-hour. Another break when they dared each other to climb higher and higher up a tree by the football field until Stephen got stuck and Joe the janitor had to fetch a ladder.

Ma Campbell loomed in those memories like an ogre in a fairy tale. After each episode, she'd raged at them. She'd given them hell. But she'd been an excellent teacher. She'd kept them at their books, made them navigate the Eleven Plus exam and got them into the grammar school in Enniskillen. Which in turn got them into university, into good jobs, and away from here.

LEARNING TO LEAVE
BY PAUL MCALLISTER

Rory was proud of the detail with which he could remember things from 40 years ago. Now, though, his memory felt dishonest. It'd depicted the school as big as a castle, the playground as long as a runway, the football field as wide as a plain, everything on a scale that bore no relation to the tiny place he saw below. He'd also thought himself good at remembering names. As he turned away from the fence and went down the path again, he tested himself. He tried to list everyone who'd been at school with Stephen and him. *Mark MacFarlane, Rena Thompson, Brian Thompson, Sally Wilson...* The surnames on the path-side headstones helped to jog his memory.

If he'd recalled all the names by the time he left the churchyard, he would have climbed into his car and driven away. But a few still eluded him, which irked him enough to make him stay in the village longer. He'd take a walk. When all his schoolmates' names had come back, he'd leave.

He'd already wandered east of the churchyard, where his old house stood — he hadn't knocked on its door because he didn't know the family who'd bought it after his parents died. Now he started westwards, towards the village centre. On one side of the road was the Orange Hall. It wasn't the building he remembered with concrete walls and a corrugated-iron roof but a bigger, smarter one of brick and slate. On the other side was a row of bungalows that in his childhood everyone had called the New Houses, though even then they'd been there for two decades. An elderly man sat outside the door of the first New House, slumped so far down in his chair he looked boneless. In a garden a few bungalows along, a woman knelt by a flowerbed and removed weeds with slow arthritic hands.

LEARNING TO LEAVE
BY PAUL MCALLISTER

He remembered more names. *DerekMcCreadie, Elisabeth Keys...* But a face and voice for which there was no name started to bother him. For instance, he recalled a time when a rumour went through the school that Ma Campbell and the education authority were planning a school trip to London. Not to one of their usual school-trip destinations like Irvinestown Creamery or Castle Archdale Country Park, but the whole way to London! The rumour was nonsense, of course, but for a few days in the playground they discussed nothing else. And one day while they talked about seeing Trafalgar Square, and Buckingham Palace, and Madame Tussauds, a boy said in a quaking voice: "But I couldn't go there! Not to London! I couldn't leave my cows!" Everybody in the playground, even the littlest ones, howled with laughter at him.

The cow-boy... What was his name?

The arthritic woman looked up from the flowerbed and then, laboriously, stood up. She pointed at him with her shears. "I've identified ye," she announced. "Ye're Winston and Mona Gibson's boy."

"I am," he said. "I'm Rory."

"Rory Gibson. I mind ye well."

She insisted he come into her house because, she said, Winston and Mona Gibson had been great friends of hers and she couldn't let their son go by without offering him hospitality. While the old woman ushered him in, part of him still wondered about the boy with the unremembered name. He had another recollection, of a school Nativity play. This time the boy had a dish-towel tied around his head and a long wooden crook in his hand and tears were running down his ruddy round face. He lamented: "I can't be a shepherd. I can't. I don't keep sheep. I keep cows!"

LEARNING TO LEAVE
BY PAUL MCALLISTER

At least he managed to recall the old woman's name: Irma Mulligan. Her husband had been a big jovial farmer called Robert and they'd owned land a few miles out of the village. He hadn't recognised her initially because he associated the Mulligans with a farm. But that was long ago. Now the farm was in the hands of somebody else and she was living out her remaining time in the village.

He was relieved to find Robert Mulligan sitting in a chair in the bungalow's living room. It spared him having to inquire after a husband who might be dead. Robert looked very small and old and was wrapped in a bathrobe. But his eyes brightened when his wife introduced the guest. "Well, well, Rory Gibson." His voice was hoarse but remained jolly. "Come and have a seat. I'd rise and shake yer hand but I've been in hospital. Had repairs done on the oul waterworks so I'm none too mobile." He winked. "Won't go into the details because I don't want to put ye off yer lunch. Irma, dear, will ye get the bottle o' Bush? So, young Gibson. Back on the home turf, are ye?"

It'd been ages since anyone called him 'young'. "Aye. I was taking a dander around the village when I bumped into your wife."

"See much change?"

He almost mentioned the multitude of new headstones in the churchyard. But he checked himself, realising those headstones marked a generation of whom Irma and Robert were among the last survivors. Instead, he said, "Ye've a new Orange Hall."

"Aye, a cultural grant from the EU paid for that, believe it or not. Father O'Shaughnessy from along the road had got money off them a few years earlier to refurbish his Parochial Hall. He told us about the grant. Actually, he helped us fill in the paperwork."

LEARNING TO LEAVE
BY PAUL MCALLISTER

Rory was astonished. "Father O'Shaughnessy? The Catholic Church helped ye get a new Orange Hall?"

His astonishment delighted the old man. "There ye go," he laughed hoarsely. "There's hope for us all yet!"

Irma brought a bottle of Black Bush and two tumblers on a tray. "Ye appeared at a good time, Rory," she said. "We were discussing an oul photo and there were a few faces in it we didn't remember. Maybe ye could help us."

He decided to allow himself one whiskey. While he sipped from the tumbler, Irma Mulligan retrieved a black-and-white photograph from a pile of other photographs and yellowy newspaper cuttings on a table. "What do ye make of that?"

Robert explained, "It's the confirmation service in 1977. Our Walter's in it and I'm sure it was '77 he got confirmed."

He counted 14 youngsters standing outside the doors of the church. It was definitely the 1970s from the length of the boys' hair and the width of their ties and jacket lapels.

"Funnily enough," he said, "I was just thinking about the people who were at school with me. Let's see." He began at the far left of the picture. "That's Derek Balfour..."

"Oh, we recognised him," said Irma. "Derek did well for himself. Became a PE teacher. Then opened a sports shop in Portadown."

"And Walter of course. What's he up to nowadays?"

"He's in Dublin, working for Ryannair. He could have stayed on the farm and worked for me, but he chose a more reputable employer — Michael O'Leary." More laughter.

"That's Mona McCreadie next to Walter..."

LEARNING TO LEAVE
BY PAUL MCALLISTER

He managed it. He went through every teenaged face in the photograph, from left to right, and named them. When he said a name Irma was familiar with, she'd interject and say what the person had ended up doing: accountancy, insurance, tourism, nursing, teaching. And where: Omagh, Belfast, Birmingham, London, Sydney.

The last figure in the photograph was a boy with a round face and dull eyes. The name finally came to him: "And at the end is Johnny Irvine." After he said the 14th name there was a moment's silence. Then, his voice lacking its usual joviality, Robert remarked, "Aye, all gone now. Nothing for them here, so they moved away."

"Not all of them, surely?"

Irma clarified, "Not quite all. There's a couple still around."

Rory looked down at Johnny Irvine. More memories came back about how inarticulate and clumsy and stupid the boy had been, about how his only ambition had been to tend his father's herd of lumbering dungy cows. "What about Johnny?"

"Oh aye, Johnny. He never went away."

He was tempted to say, "No wonder." But, hearing a respectful note in the old farmer's voice, he said nothing.

When he left the Mulligans half-an-hour later, he kept walking because the single glass of Bush had turned into two glasses and he needed to sober up before he got into his car. He walked past the rest of the New Houses and turned down a side road leading to the village shop.

The shop had a new glass-filled frontage and a new sign describing the premises as a 'convenience store'. He peered through the glass and saw three women around the till, a staff-member, two customers, deep in conversation. All had grey or white hair.

LEARNING TO LEAVE
BY PAUL MCALLISTER

One of them was the stooped woman with the wheeled bag he'd seen from the churchyard. She must have spent an hour in that shop now. Maybe her visits to it were the only contact she had with other human beings.

Past the shop there'd been a cottage, home to the shop's former owners, and then a river and a narrow stone bridge. The cottage had vanished, replaced by a sprawling warehouse-like building with windowless walls and big shutter-doors that extended almost to the river's edge. The riverside trees, bushes and hogweed where, as a boy, Rory had played and fished from had been cleared and the ground built on or tarmacked over. The river-end of the building contained an office and above its façade was a hoarding with a company name.

Annoyed that the building had erased the riverbank, his old childhood haunt, Rory didn't stop to inspect it. He followed the road, which crossed the bridge and then split into two roads heading east and west. Both bridge and river, like the school, were much smaller than he remembered. He looked over one of the bridge's walls and wondered how the ribbon of water below had ever qualified as a river. He'd seen wider things that were called streams.

Another memory returned. It was from just after the birth of his sister. He was standing in his living room with Stephen, Mark MacFarlane and the boy with the cows. His baby sister was inside a cot and they crowded around it to look at her. "Well," commented the cow-boy, unimpressed, "I'd rather have a calf."

He halted on the bridge and put his fingertips against his temples. The cow-boy... What was his name? He'd said it in the Mulligans' house but suddenly he'd forgotten it again.

LEARNING TO LEAVE
BY PAUL MCALLISTER

What was wrong with him? Was he getting early-onset dementia?

Standing there, he heard a rumbling noise. A lorry prowled into view at the fork ahead of him. Its flatbed was loaded with bags of cattle-feed, arranged in plastic-cocooned blocks that sat on wooden pallets. It slowed and began to manoeuvre onto the bridge. The vehicle was so big and the bridge so narrow that there wasn't space for Rory on it too and he retreated until he was once more in front of the new building. While the lorry aligned itself with the bridge, its cab came within inches of one of its walls. A yard-long strip of white cement filled the wall at that spot, not stonework.

He watched the lorry cross the bridge and pull up beside the building. Two men climbed out of its cab. One moved along the sides of the flatbed, unfastening from hooks the ropes that held the load in place. The other pressed a button on the wall, a bell clanged inside and a shutter-door started to grind upwards. When the door had risen above head-height a third man emerged from the building, pushing a pallet-truck.

"I hope," said the depot-man, "ye didn't give that oul bridge another wallop."

"Naw. Though we were cruising on the back road. Hit 50 on the stretch at Corrigan's place."

"Jaisus. Ye're a right pair o' cowboys."

All three men wore dark blue boiler suits and had a company name printed on their backs. The same name ran along a strip above the cab's windscreen and also, Rory realised, along the hoarding above the building's office. This name was:

JOHN IRVINE Ltd AGRICULTURAL SUPPLIES

LEARNING TO LEAVE
BY PAUL MCALLISTER

The name he'd forgotten, remembered and forgotten again. He wouldn't forget it now.

Meanwhile, hearing and watching Johnny Irvine's employees, he noted how their accents were local, yet their faces weren't wrinkled and their hair was unblemished by white or grey.

(*Inspired by Learning to Leave: The Irony of Schooling in a Coastal Community by Michael John Corbett, published by the University of British Columbia in 2000.*)

The response was a rejection. That wasn't surprising, but the comments were, it said my language was bland and my vocabulary was limited. I was sunken and I felt like I was back at school again.

At school I discovered that identity was a strange and fickle thing.
The school I went to divided the students into groups.
There was top, where all the bright ones went.
Then top middle, where you went if you were quite bright.
Next came the middle, which meant you were average.
Then bottom. For those who were below average.

At school I was struggling with the work

And then came the call, one day in October for me to join another class.
I was to pack my stuff up and go to another part of the school that I'd never seen before.
It had carpets and a new smell.
It had a small number of students, all boys like me.
I'd been put in remedial.

I found there was a group so bad that it was below the bottom.
Like it was beneath contempt.
That was remedial.

At the time I was glad. I had found the work hard. I was like someone who couldn't swim floundering in the sea. It was like a weight of panic and anxiety had suddenly been lifted from me.

But from that day I noticed other changes.

OUTSIDE BY SIMON COLLINSON

Like people treated you differently when you're in remedial.
Your parents were no longer proud of you. It was as if an invisible line had been drawn between my parents and I.
They stopped asking how I'd got on at school. I felt like I'd let them down and that they were ashamed of me.
At home I became, *Stupid boy*

My parents mourned for a long time for the clever child they thought they had, who was now no more.
It was like I was observing a living wake as family drifted solemnly and silently around me.
My family commiserated with my mother, telling her sagely that they always thought that I was odd.

The teachers now thought I was stupid or silly.
It was as if overnight, I'd acquired a new superpower,
A power of imbecility.
Expectations were lowered.

The other students treated me like I had some invisible and disgusting disease.
They looked at me like I was like something undesirable that you'd find upon the sole of their shoe.
I think the medical term for it was stupidity.
There were other terms bandied about, *Idiot, donkey, daft, clown, twit, thick, bing-bong.*
Each new insult was another layer to add to your new burden of identity to carry around. I became silent and withdrawn.
It was many years before people used my proper name to call me.

OUTSIDE BY SIMON COLLINSON

It was so surprising it took some getting used to, as if I'd almost forgotten my real name so seldom was it used.

I dreaded group work time most of all. When the call went up for the class to get into groups, you knew that nearly everyone would avoid you, like you didn't exist.
The room would part as wide as the Red Sea, my social exclusion laid bare for all to see.
Nobody wanted to work with a bing-bong like me, like they were afraid they might catch stupidity off me.
You could see it in their eyes whenever I spoke, as if in front of them a corpse had woken.

I managed to get out of remedial and did o.k.
But those memories and names took my confidence away.
It doesn't take much to scratch away that thin veneer of intelligence.
Even with the passage of time, I'd been broken and all the pieces wouldn't go back together again.

In some ways I never really left "remedial", no matter what I achieved later in life.
Like I felt I could never be a writer.
I thought that people from "remedial" don't write books.

The comments on that rejection wounded me deeply. I thought about giving up writing. But I kept at it, got used to the rejections and celebrated the acceptances. I got into my head that in writing not everyone will like what you do, but I can only write the way I see it. If I wrote in a different way it wouldn't be me.

OUTSIDE BY SIMON COLLINSON

For good or ill I just write the stuff that comes to mind. The only person who can write your story is you. If it gets rejected then so be it, move on, submit it elsewhere or write another story. The key is to keep writing. If you believe in a story or a poem chances, are it will be accepted sooner or later. Just keep writing.

Though I admit, even with all the stories I've written that I've had accepted, a tiny part of me will forever be, "Stupid boy".
Maybe identity is not so fickle after all.

THE SUN BY CHAYADA

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The Sun (printed June 2025) of Vision Magazine

Mama, I feel the weight of grief
collecting like snow on winter boots
heavy with regrets
love
melancholy.

The more I trudge on
the more lives and stories I leave behind
yet I carry them all with me.

I stop walking and the bitterness washes over me
like a swell at dusk.
A whisper of sweetness.
Mist over my eyes.
Salty wind whipping my hair into sticky clumps.

Memories like snow.

Memories like sand.

Mama, I feel my years upon me.
I have scars on my knees
and calluses on my feet.
I am no longer an unrefined ore
I've no right to dream of gems and perfection
and I'm too old to feign ignorance anymore.

THE SUN BY CHAYADA

Mama, I feel the weight of the world.
I close my eyes and I see it all
the hate, the tenderness,
the courage, the injustice

I sometimes can't help but feel my heart tug
and tear a little from the load.

Mama, how can this be?
I am but a child.
Will it always be this way?

She takes my hand and smiles
and mama's eyes become my own.
For a moment
she bears my burden and I catch a glimpse of hers.

Mama carries the sun.

"Yes, dear.
And you must live."

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT BY REAGAN FREED

I've spent my entire life searching relentlessly for you. I looked for you in coffee shops, wine bars, nightclubs, on train rides and plane rides. I looked for you in different states, different countries, in the mountains, in the cities, in the depths of the oceans. I traveled the world looking deeply into the eyes of others hoping to find you there. I looked down every street, every alley, in every nook and cranny for you, Love.

I even caught you a few times and you were as magnificent as I imagined! Everything with you is magical – your presence makes life sweeter, softer, kinder. I found you in partners, friends and pets...in my career, in my writing, in movies, in books and in nature. You have been present throughout my life in so many different and unexpected ways. You changed me and shaped me in ways I never imagined. But you always slip away. You never stay. Why don't you stay?

Each time I catch you, I hold on for dear life. Begging you to please stay this time, begging you not to leave me again. I've prayed for you, cried for you, pleaded with you. And yet, every time you quietly and unsuspectingly slip out of my grasp, again. I've chased after you in my darkest hours. Had countless sleepless nights longing for you to come back to me. But you don't come back. Why don't you come back?

I believed that if you truly knew the depths of my desire for you, you would stay. That if you saw that my will was stronger than yours, you would stay this time. I wanted to believe that if you understood how desperately I needed you in my life, you would want to stay. But you don't stay, you never do.

You are as excruciating as you are exuberant. You arrive without warning and disappear without explanation. You are everywhere and nowhere at the same time.You have brought me the greatest joys and the greatest pains of my life. My highest of highs and lowest of lows have been because of you, Love.

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT BY REAGAN FREED

You are my best friend and my worst enemy. You abandoned me when I needed you the most and you found me when I least expected it. You are fleeting, mysterious and unpredictable. And yet, I can't get enough of you. You are addictive and spellbinding, my constant craving.

I looked everywhere for you, Love. Not just pieces and parts of you, but the real you. All of you. And suddenly, on a cold and lonely winter's night, there you were. Right there in the mirror, staring back at me. I had looked for you in everyone and everything else but I never looked for you within myself. You were there all along, hiding in plain sight, patiently waiting for me to find you.

You are extraordinary, Love! Bigger and stronger and easier than any other love I've experienced. It's as effortless as an exhale and as pure as honey. I see you everywhere I look now, I feel you in everything I touch. You are delicious and mouthwatering as you swirl through my being filling my heart and soul with your exquisite gifts. You see me, all of me. You hold my flaws and imperfections with a warm embrace. I see now that you are unconditional, infinite and breathtaking.

I no longer fear losing you, Love. This time no one can take you from me. This time I've made a home for you, for us, within myself and will fiercely protect you, guarding our love story with my life. You are my north star, my warm blanket on a cold night, my constant companion. I finally found my forever love with you, Love.

THE FLIGHT BY EDEN HITCHCOCK

The sun shined through the window that morning, hitting her full in the face. It seemed to be struggling to get up, to rise past the trees that lined the yard. The light flickered in between leaves and branches, rays of that strange, magnetic glow reaching through to touch her through a thin glass pane. It filled the room, giving the impression that the walls had turned into tiny, flickering flames. Huddled under the blankets, Lana was warm for a moment, comfortable and comforted.

Then the warmth turned to heat and in a second she was burning.

Screaming, she wrenched herself up, throwing off the blankets, nearly falling out of bed. The flames were all around her, licking at her, eating away at her from the inside, somehow, even though they were outside, of course they were, she could see them—

Then the illusion, the nightmare, was over, at least somewhat. The walls were no longer covered in fire and neither was she. The sunlight returned to a honey-sweet glow. The panic in Lana's chest seemed to falter a bit. Her heart slowed. Abuela's. A voice in the back of her head seemed to pierce through. You're at Abuela's. That is where you are. It was distant, but calmed her slightly. Even as the thought was just starting to retreat back into the dark muddle of her mind, she was standing, pulling a robe over the clothing she had worn the night before. Maybe for the past few nights, actually.

She opened the door to her room a crack. The hallway was warm, almost muggy. It made Lana's skin tingle unpleasantly. But that was how Abuela liked it, and so nearly the whole house was kept that way, except for, of course, the room where Lana slept. She had always liked it cold before, so that she could snuggle under layers of quilts and comforters, but now she could hardly stand anything else. The cold seemed like a friend — either to keep her in the present, remind her where she was, or to numb out everything.

THE FLIGHT BY EDEN HITCHCOCK

Lana crept downstairs quietly. Abuela was already up, making breakfast, so Lana didn't have to fear waking her, but there seemed to be something else in this old house that was sleeping. Something both frightening and familiar. When she had tried to explain it, Abuela had simply waved her off. "Por supuesto duerme algo aquí. ¿Que creias que fue mi compañía todos estos años?"

That was what Lana liked about Abuela. She understood what Lana was trying to say before she could even say it. Which meant neither of them had to say much of anything at all, and that worked quite nicely for both of them. And Abuela's food was wonderful.

Lana began to catch whiffs of something from the other room. Honey and cinnamon, and something savory, too. Chorizo? Probably. She drifted into the kitchen with the other delicious odors, finding Abuela bent over the stove. It was such a sweet, familiar sight that any part of Lana that was still in a slight panic calmed. Her mind fogged over as she inhaled every breath of spiced air.

"Te oia gritando," said Abuela, without turning around. Lana's soft footfalls allowed her to sneak up on and startle everyone but her grandmother, who, despite being hard of hearing in every other aspect, always seemed to know when there was another person in the room. She would not let her granddaughter be a ghost, though that's often how Lana felt. Ghostlike, wandering, lost, maybe (but not stranded, she reminded herself, when panic began to rise again).

"Yeah." Lana padded over to the stove and took a spoonful of simmering potatoes and chorizo. No explanations required. And no questions or concerns from Abuela, only a plate handed to Lana heaped high with baked goods and fruit. Lana took it to the table and sat down. As with every meal, the food melted on her tongue, spreading flavor all over her mouth.

THE FLIGHT BY EDEN HITCHCOCK

She had devoured the whole plate by the time Abuela set a different one, this one with papas and chorizo, in front of her. Lana had gained weight since coming to live with Abuela, her arms and cheeks rounding out again. This had delighted everyone. The doctors said it was a sign that her health, both mental and physical, was improving. She didn't have the energy to tell them that it was only because her grandmother's food was the only kind that didn't taste like ash.

They sat in silence, Lana eating, Abuela watching her eat. She didn't ever seem to eat herself (at least Lana had never seen her do so), but was still quite round. Maybe she had become fat just from being around food so much.

As Lana finished breakfast, Abuela reached for her hand from across the table and took it. "¿Recuerdas quien eres?" She asked, as she did every day.

"Yes." The word came almost automatically, robotically.

"¿Recuerdas lo que pasó?"

"Yes."

"Y qué vas a hacer?"

This question was new. It caught Lana off guard, shocked her, almost. This was not part of the routine, not scheduled, not planned. Not what she wanted or needed. She needed the familiarity, the order, and this question was like a bullet tearing through all that, shattering it. Behind it was something ugly and unknown. Lana pulled her hand away. In a moment she was standing up and sweeping back up to her room, feeling hurt, though not sure why. Then she pulled back into the dark recesses of her mind and blocked it out, though not before she saw the disappointed look on Abuela's face.

She pulled the curtains of her room shut and climbed into bed, letting the cold sink into her bones.

THE FLIGHT BY EDEN HITCHCOCK

It's dark. Early in the morning, both of us tired, but excited. Driving in your old minivan, whose AC, overhead lights, and about a million other things are broken. The car's a piece of junk, and we both know it. You often groan dramatically whenever we climb into it, once again pointing out all the reasons you should get rid of it. But you never do, and I question that you even want to. I always get the feeling that there's something about the ripped seats, cracked windows, and weird smell that's precious to you, and you just don't want to tell me what it is. I'm fine with that. Unlike some people, whose idea of being best friends revolves around telling each other everything, ours is about being fine with not needing to know every tiny detail. Not even all the big stuff.

You have the radio, the only working luxury of the van, blasting, the windows rolled down to let in the cool night time air. I'm laughing as you bleat the words of the song that's playing. Your singing is terrible, though only in that car, with me. In reality your voice is beautiful. At least I assume it is, because you were in the highest level choir at our high school, and you received about ten different music scholarships from colleges all over the whole country. But somehow, I think you're embarrassed to sing in front of me, for a reason I can't quite figure out. You're happy to plague the neighborhoods we drive past with your awful renditions of Adele.

I'm laughing so hard that there are tears in my eyes. Then you're laughing, too, both of us giddy with the prospect of adventure, the two of us, setting off into the unknown.

The unknown of being alone.
All flights were canceled. Did she know that?
Did she know I'd be left behind, stranded?

THE FLIGHT BY EDEN HITCHCOCK

The girl that Lana met in the mirror every day was still a stranger. A burnt, angry stranger that no one could possibly even stand to look at if they knew the real Lana. A stranger who Abuela could not hold the hand of and stare directly at every morning. It was not possible.

A therapist who came to the house occasionally had helpfully put a sticky note with the word "LANA" in big, bright letters and an arrow that she guessed was supposed to point at her face on the bathroom mirror. Instead it veered off to the left slightly and pointed down at her feet. This made sense, really, since her feet had been one of the few things to remain untouched by the fire. They were nice-looking feet, all in all, with evenly separated toes and smooth brown skin. No blisters, no scars. Lana still painted them, though she wasn't entirely sure why. Maybe she just liked how it looked.

Lana washed her hands and face in the cold faucet water. It felt good, woke her up slightly, drew her further out of her nightmare. Although it hadn't been a nightmare this time, not really, not yet. Just a harmless memory. Maybe even a happy one, if it could be viewed separate from what followed.

But as her mind involuntarily drifted towards that thing that followed, it seemed that things went blank, that it was taken away from her, or she from it. A sort of fog cloaked the room, blurring the edges of the mirror, of her ruined face...

A sharp knock at the door dispelled the fog. "Lana?" She heard Abuela's voice seeping through the wood. "¿Qué pasa, mija?"

Lana realized that the water was still running in the faucet. She quickly turned it off. How long had she been standing there, watching the water run, she wondered? A minute? Ten? An hour, maybe? She turned and opened the door. Abuela was standing there, and Lana caught a bit of concern on her face before it was replaced by annoyance.

. Then something different, that made Lana feel weary. Abuela turned suddenly and began to walk back down the stairs, towards the front door. “Vamos, Lana,” she said.

“What?”

“Vamos en un camino. Y porque me hablas en inglés?”

A sharp pain, somewhere in her stomach. ¿Por qué no hablas español a mi? in broken Spanish. A moment Lana couldn’t quite place, and maybe didn’t want to. She stood in silence instead of answering her grandmother’s question. Silence that meant it had something to do with the trauma. Abuela knew what her lack of a response said immediately. She sighed.

“Pronto no voy a aceptar esas excusas.” She continued to hobble down the stairs. Not entirely sure why she was doing it, Lana followed. They stepped out the door into the warm late-august air. Abuela began to walk slowly down the sidewalk. A blond woman walking her dog waved and smiled gently, but didn’t say anything. The neighbors were under the impression that Lana’s grandmother didn’t know how to speak English, when, in fact, she simply refused to. Ever since her son had practically forced her to move to be near them in the United States, she hadn’t spoken anything but Spanish, and proudly let everyone believe that she knew nothing else. Lana, her poor, maybe insane granddaughter, only added to this pitiable image, which Abuela did not seem to mind in the slightest.

Lana fiddled mindlessly with her long black hair, waiting for the questions she was sure Abuela would soon fire at her. The same chorus of “do you remember?”s. But they didn’t come. Instead, her grandmother lifted her face up, smiling slightly as the sun hit it. When Lana refused to do the same, staring resolutely at the pavement, Abuela smacked her sharply under the chin.

Annoyed, Lana tilted her head back, but shielded her eyes from the light and did not smile. The heat felt like tiny, venomous pricks in her skin.

"La luz no puede dañarte, querida," Abuela said. "Tampoco el calor."

Lana winced. Her heart began to beat frantically. That same fog began to creep into her senses.

"Escucha." Her grandmother was staring at her now. "Escúchame. Sé que no quieres pensar en lo que pasó. Pero también sé que no puedes pensar en lo que va a pasar antes que pienses en lo que te dañó. Y Evalina no apreciaría lo que estás haciendo con tu vida."

There was something like anger boiling in Lana's stomach. What could Abuela say for Evalina, who had never asked Lana to say or do anything she didn't want to, and certainly couldn't now? Evalina, who would never sing for Lana and would never sing at all ever again? Evalina, who would never catch the plane they were supposed to take together, and had boarded a different one that Lana had somehow missed. Lana opened her mouth to say all of this, to make her grandmother, this small, fierce woman who loved her, hurt as much as Lana did, because there was no one else left to hurt. Evalina didn't have to. Lana did.

Her best friend's burns had been once and final. Lana felt them every minute of every day.

But a strangled, hoarse "No," was all that escaped Lana's mouth before she turned and started walking. Away from her grandmother, away from the pain. But not before she saw the laughter on Evalina's face, the excitement at the approaching adventure, heard the music, tasted the sweetness.

Not before she saw it all go up in flames.

THE FLIGHT BY EDEN HITCHCOCK

The sun is just peeking above the horizon when you stop singing suddenly. "I guess on our trip you'll have to speak Spanish with the locals, won't you? And translate for me."

"Yeah, if necessary." I try to keep my voice casual, but there's a familiar uncomfortable feeling in my stomach that says there's something wrong about this. "I mean, we'll probably end up in some Spanish-speaking country."

"Good," you say. But then we sit in silence for a while, and neither of us have ever liked silence between us. So you add, "how come you never speak Spanish in front of me, Lana?"

I shrug. She stopped asking me this a long time ago, just like I stopped asking why she didn't sing for me. But this is the beginning of something new. Maybe talking about this would propel us into new places even more than the two plane tickets in my suitcase would. "I guess... well, Spanish felt like something that didn't belong in the part of my life that you were in. Like, I have two lives - the one with you, and the one without you, and —" I glance over at you, sure you're smiling at how cheesy my words are, but your face is serious and thoughtful. "and I don't want to mix those two worlds. I guess I'm afraid of messing ours up."

I take a deep breath and wait. We both know it's your turn now.

"I guess it's the same way for me. With singing. I like our little world, too."

I nod. We're both so serious that it feels strange. Finally, you make a face at me and say "ugh, feelings." Then we're both laughing again.

And then the sun seems to glow red as it reaches the tops of the houses. The car glows red.

THE FLIGHT BY EDEN HITCHCOCK

A stoplight glows red and you're pressing on the brakes but the car is so old and something's broken and we can't stop and there's a loud, angry sound that I think is a horn honking and you try to swerve—

But then it's too late. Something explodes, probably the engine. I hear screaming – mine, yours – as our little world is consumed by the fire.

The screaming goes on for a long time in my head. Longer than the pain of the burns last. And when it stops, something inside of me swears that it will never start again.

By the time the flashback was over, Lana had walked a long way. Maybe a mile, maybe more. Far more, she was sure, than Abuela could have gone. Poor Abuela. She didn't deserve this. All of it. The burden that Lana was now. The weight of the sadness that had taken up residence in the house. "Is that what the sleeping thing is?" She wondered aloud, without meaning to. The words became a sort of mantra in her head as she sat down beneath a tree and looked around, wondering how she would get back home. It blocked out the screaming. But it didn't fully cover up her grandmother's words. That to move forward, she had to look back. She had to let the fog clear and watch that moment when everything went wrong.

It was so painful. Lana hated it. Would she ever not hate it, she wondered? Probably not. And would Evalina be glad that she hated it, that it hurt? Probably she'd be glad that Lana hated it. Not so glad that it hurt. Friends didn't like each other to hurt.

But it didn't matter what Evalina thought anymore. She was dead.

But what if I want it to matter? A little voice in the back of Lana's head whispered. And what if Abuela and my parents and the people who love me want it to?

It seemed like such a nonsensical thing to think, but also important. Like there was reason behind the strange words.

And maybe, caring what Evalina would want would eventually become what the living people who loved her wanted. And then she could want it, too.

Perhaps this line of thought only made sense to Lana. Maybe it was supposed to be like that. But just thinking again, at all, felt good. Sweet. Like that sweetness that had been in the car before everything went wrong. Can I get back to that? Lana wondered. Then she whispered it to the trees and the open air. And she said it louder still. “Can I get back to that?”

In answer, sunlight fell softly on Lana’s face.

And though she did not turn to it, she did not turn away.

A FRIENDSHIP IN FOUR ACTS
BY ERIN MATHESON RITCHIE

& we danced, borrowed projector,
starry room, silent disco threading
our fingers a friendship bracelet

& Newell Creek flooded, rain jacket rivulets,
sandy hills, battered scrub oaks shielding
our soaked-sponge sneakers

& you moved, barren wetlands,
roundabout litanies, two hundred miles unspooling
my tires into steel, rubber, tree

& monarchs migrated, eucalyptus rest stops,
tidal grove, king tide tugging
us home to orbit.

TWO HALVES OF THE SUN
BY SARAH VOIGHT

The winter trees tangled on the sunset
Like veins of a leaf spilling orange blood
That you could almost touch if not for the risk of being caught
Jealously, I eyed the squirrel who could so freely jump
Between branches high in the canopy

The night came from the east
It wasn't black and heavy yet
Just a fine gray mist
Deepening before me

I thought about the other half of the sun
Breaking open a sunrise
Were both halves producing this ferocious spectacle of light all the time?
Stretching across countries, yet never moving?

I only had a moment to take it all in
That darkness kept slowly creeping
Owls stirred in the hallowed oaks
The fiery show was ashen
A day had begun
Mine ended

FIRST SNOW BY HANNA BERGMAN

It snowed last night
Bright, white, and blanketing
The crisp, clean air smelling of sunshine and possibility
A weighted silence
The world outside untouched and inviting
Hope rising, despite myself
A blank page
A clean break
Permission to start anew

SONG OF SQUANDERED PROMISE

BY HANK KIRTON

When Candy Cox gazed at the mountain behind her father's home she felt as if it were intentionally intimidating her. It stood above her with the looming scrutiny of an oppressive ancient god. Menacing, stoic. It growled over her like a massive *kaiju* grizzly bear.

Candy turned from the colossal mass and walked back toward the house. The morning felt dry and comfortable, but the local weather forecast predicted a "scorching summer day!" Candy didn't care. She'd been living in Los Angeles for two years now. She was used to the heat. She'd have never returned to New Hampshire if it were any season other than summer.

Her father was headed to a dental appointment and Margaret (gag) was shopping, leaving Candy alone for the first time during her visit. She lit a menthol cigarette and stepped up onto the porch. She sat on a small wicker bench under the shade of a cantilevered overhang.

The mountain was there. The cicadas sang with droning, buzzsaw tones.

The air was thickening.

Candy smoked, staring out at the backyard. Her father had mowed the lawn the day before her arrival and dewy striations of dead grass ran like latitude lines to the border of the forest.

Candy wondered what Misty was up to back home. Candy Cox and Misty Reign had become roommates in February and lovers by March. They had so much in common that a relationship made perfect sense. They had both entered the industry at age eighteen. Both had been born in New England (Misty in Massachusetts). They avoided the parties and drugs endemic to their profession. They both loved Japanese *anime* and *manga* and had eventual plans to visit the country.

SONG OF SQUANDERED PROMISE

BY HANK KIRTON

Candy had only been at her father's place for one day, but she already missed Misty.

She stubbed out her cigarette and then stood up, stepped off the porch and marched across the lawn, toward the forest, the mountain. She wanted to take a solitary walk before the rising heat drove her inside. She was dressed for the summer weather: shorts, tank-top, sandals, but news reports indicated a high of 101° once the sun really got cooking.

She entered the calm shade of an evergreen forest. The deep smell of pine carried intense feelings of nostalgia. She'd loved playing in the woods as a kid, running, hiding, assembling impenetrable forts out of stray sticks and branches.

Just standing amid trees again produced an infusion of dear, sensory memories. Candy had uncovered a small pocket of joy in this dismal visit.

That was something, at least.

She'd felt compelled to come since she hadn't seen her father's new house or met his new fiancé, Margaret. She hadn't seen him in nearly two years. Now that all three tasks had been accomplished, she was eager to return to her life in L.A.

Her father had bugged her for months to travel across the continent and witness his living conditions. He'd paid for her first-class plane ticket. Just to brag. To purchase validation. To show off his fancy, secluded house and Candy's soon-to-be "stepmother," Margaret.

Gag.

The forest floor was carpeted with a springy layer of pine needles. Brittle twigs and small pinecones crunched and snapped underfoot.

SONG OF SQUANDERED PROMISE

BY HANK KIRTON

Granite rocks jutted up like carved art, decorated with damp, emerald moss and pallid lichen. The woods were quiet, the hush broken only by her footfalls on the jumbled duff and intermittent birdsong.

She wondered if she might spot a deer or moose. She hoped she wouldn't encounter a black bear. The mountain range harbored all three species.

She didn't even want to think about snakes.

Her father and Margaret had been somewhat civil yesterday, but Candy still couldn't wait to escape, return to California, and resume her life.

One more day, she reminded herself. She was leaving tomorrow.

Thank God.

They were bound to bring up her career eventually. Candy could sense the condemnation coming. Probably tonight. Before, during and/or after dinner. She prayed things wouldn't escalate. She was tired of defending herself. Tired of hiding her life.

She was not ashamed.

She climbed a grassy embankment. From her elevated vantage she could see a narrow stream
pouring over a bed of oval rocks, slick and green with algae.

She jumped down and approached the brook. It was clear and looked cold, running straight down from the mountain. She sat on a ledge of granite cushioned with thick moss. Candy removed her sandals and lowered her feet into the cool, gently tugging current.

Growing along the opposite bank of the stream, a brake of delicate ferns spilled from a grove of blue spruce trees. The dense forest was damp, dusky. Silent. A cluster of slender, cream-colored mushrooms grew with imperceptible momentum from a thin crack in the mossy rock.

A strange serenity overcame her, dissolving her thoughts. She gazed at the water as if hypnotized.

Candy sat like that for a while.

She remained rooted in this tranquil idyll until she observed a small, spotted rainbow trout darting in the glistening current.

She often felt like that fish—sometimes going with the flow, other times fighting against the current. Forced to make quick decisions anytime a rocky obstacle got in the way.

She thought about her colleague, Cherry Meadows, and how she was always fighting against herself. Her pain was apparent. They'd only worked together on two occasions, but Cherry's inner demons were keen and clear to see. She was punishing herself with desperate, destructive behavior, convinced she was worthless and deserving of all the damage she brought upon herself.

Last week Candy learned that Cherry had overdosed on a ketamine–heroin cocktail and now she was imprisoned in a coma with severe anoxic trauma to her brain. Candy heard they were thinking of cutting Cherry's life support. She was dead to the world. Even if she miraculously awoke from the coma, the damage to vital areas of her brain was irrevocable. She'd never be the same. Even walking and talking were forever out of her reach.

Candy grabbed her sandals and removed her feet from the stream. Intrusive reminders of her life had violated the peaceful interlude.

She decided to head back. If she walked any farther, she risked becoming lost. She had a decent sense of direction but didn't want to gamble on that chance. There were no trails to follow.

Besides, she had no intention of climbing the mountain.

SONG OF SQUANDERED PROMISE

BY HANK KIRTON

Her father and his fiancé (gag) would be returning from their errands any time now. She'd have to start defending herself again.

They'd probably try to use poor Cherry Meadows' medical calamity as a weapon.

See?! they'll say. *This is what comes from what you're doing with your life!*

Her father will use his favorite hurtful term: *squandered promise.*

He'll never forgive her for dropping out of college; for hating and flunking the pre-med classes he'd insisted she take.

You've squandered your promise!

She'd never wanted to be a fucking doctor. Becoming an M.D. was *his* dream. That *he* squandered.

She was exactly what she wanted to be. For right now, anyway.

Her father's main concern in life was maintaining threadbare respectability.

Candy emerged from the woods into a backyard she didn't recognize, behind a house she'd never seen.

Shit, she must have wandered off course.

REFLECTING ON A NEW MOON
BY IAN RADFORD

This space that I inhabit,
when the moon has turned to slate,
is the liminal divide
between our waking and the nightmare,
between our sanity and seeing,
between our smiles and forgetting,
between a moment of enjoyment
and the weight of the awareness
that everything must end,
that we are light that has descended
to be witness to its absence.

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS!

Bee Wright

The Bee Gees Are a Cruel Joke

Bee Wright is a spoken word artist based in Denton, Texas. They write and perform with the intent to connect to other creatives through topics like grief, queerness, and how awkward it is to sit in a diner booth while four or five waiters sing "Happy Birthday". Their cat, Andy, appreciates you reading their work. She can not read herself. Her Instagram and TikTok is beewrightofficial and her Twitter is beewrightoffish !

Alexander hurla

Brats for Dinner

Alexander Hurla is a Marine Corps veteran originally from Topeka, Kansas. He is a graduate of Kansas State University and Wichita State University. His hobbies include woodworking, hiking, theology, and everything related to the prairie.

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS!

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Bluffside Beauty, Kitchen Witch

Shawna (they/she) is a Minneapolis-based, Wisconsin-born artist and queer. They have been previously published in Queer Home of Craft, Headstone Zine, and Handbasket Magazine.

Lucy Olsman

Behind the glass of the night

Lucy Olsman (she/her) is a 24 year old Dutch student of MA Creative Writing at UCC. She has also completed her English Literature master in Groningen in the Netherlands. Her work has appeared in Motley Magazine, Double Dutch (forthcoming) and Abyss Literary Magazine (forthcoming). She is currently based in Ireland, and is finishing up her novel Little Princess. Her Instagram handle is @lucyolsman !

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS!

Karol Nielsen

Pride

Karol Nielsen is the author of the memoirs Raising the Price of the House, Walking A&P, and Black Elephants and three poetry chapbooks. Her first memoir was shortlisted for the William Saroyan International Prize for Writing. Her full-length poetry collection was a finalist for the Colorado Prize for Poetry. Her poem "This New Manhattan" was a finalist for the Ruth Stone Poetry Prize. Her handles are:
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Hayden Nox

The End of The Cycle

Hayden Nox writes from the knot of mind and body, where desire, power, harm, and care cannot be disentangled. Their work moves through poetry, prose, and narrative nonfiction, tracing intimacy as a lived, somatic experience shaped by memory, regulation, and survival. They follow these threads to their frayed edges toward the quiet moments where damage lingers, meaning shifts, and something like tenderness becomes possible.

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS!

Howard Osborne

Second Chances

Howard has written poetry and short stories, also a novel and several scripts.
With poems published online and in print, he is a published author of a non-fiction reference book and several scientific papers many years ago.
He is a UK citizen, retired, with interests in writing, music and travel.

William Cass

Warm You Up

William Cass has had over 395 short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines such as december, Briar Cliff Review, and Zone 3. Winner of writing contests at Terrain.org and The Examined Life Journal, he's also been nominated once for Best of the Net, twice for Best Small Fictions, and six times for the Pushcart Prize. His three short story collections were all published by Wising Up Press. He lives in San Diego, California.

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS!

Abraham Aondoana

Soft Constellations

Abraham Aondoana is a writer and poet. He is a recipient of Idembeka Creative Writing Workshop 2026. His poem was shortlisted for Interwoven Anthology 2025 (Renard Press). His works has appeared in Kalahari Review, San Pedro River Review, Mayari Literature, Zoetic Press, Temple in a City Journal, Underbelly Press, Flowers-of-the Field Journal, Genrepunk Magazine, Eye to the Telescope Journal of speculative poetry, Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine, Hollow and Sky Magazine and elsewhere.

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Madeline monroe

Coin Toss

Madeline Monroe graduated with her B.F.A. from Emerson College in 2025. Her work has appeared in Brilliant Flash Fiction, Fiction on the Web, The Kokanee Literary Journal, and more. She grew up in South Lake Tahoe, California, and now lives in Madrid. She wrote this story for her dad's best friend, Chris O'Brien. Website:

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THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS!

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Pancreas

Originally from the Pacific Northwest, Danielle Wilfand resides in Cleveland, Ohio where she is in her fourth year of medical school at Case Western Reserve University. She enjoys writing about and examining her experience of living with chronic illness through different lenses. Her Instagram handle is: @ellewilfand_draws

Murad Islam

Ship of Theseus

Murad is a writer and poet based in Michigan with ten books in Bengali. His poems explore displacement, identity, and the ordinary absurdities of staying alive. @muradul.bsky.social

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS!

Bennett Durkan

Too Far Inland

Bennett Durkan's fiction has appeared in Crow Name, October Hill, and Waywords. His poetry has appeared in Divot, Willard & Maple, and Ikleftiko. His nonfiction has appeared in Nomandartx, Lit Mag News, and WritingBad. His website is: bennettdurkan.wordpress.com.

Monty Rozema

Cereal for Cats

Monty Rozema (they/them) is a queer writer and performing artist from Seattle, Washington. They enjoy reading the newspaper, listening to 2000s techno, and playing Jenga. Their fiction and essays have been published by The Ugly Radio, Hash Journal, Jeopardy, Moss Puppy Mag, Prismatica, and more. Their first full-length play, Disappearance at the Rocky Mountain Leatherdyke Snowpicnic, will debut in 2026. Find them on Insta @montyisms and online at montyroz.wordpress.com.

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS!

S.K. Ratidox

A Ride Home

S.K. Ratidox is an admirer of humanity, but a critic of people. They seek to explore the odd and often contradictory journeys people take in their lives and express such journeys through stories. Ratidox is quick to admit their own flaws as well as those of others, because they want to write about all aspects of people to help share and grow the knowledge of mankind. Ratidox has no formal history in writing but still pursues the chance to share stories with readers, they are the author of self-published works found on www.ratidox.com and www.substack.com/@skratidox.

Edward Cody Huddleston

The All's Something

Edward Cody Huddleston is a radio DJ in the state of Georgia. His writing, particularly micropoetry and microfiction, has appeared in over 100 publications worldwide and won dozens of awards. His debut haiku collection, Wildflowers in a Vase, is available from Red Moon Press. You can visit him online at www.echuddleston.com.

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The Sun

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What Remains After Leaving

Alsu Gara is a Ukrainian-born writer whose essays probe the contradictions of identity, narrative, and cultural stasis, blending literary criticism with confessional lyricism. Her prose dissects the feverish fragments of memory and unspoken tensions. In her professional life, Alsu is a specialist in political communications, captivated by noticing patterns, highlighting challenges, and predicting consequences. In her free time she daydreams or sleeps, her dreams is where most of her ideas come from.

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS!

Imaan Farooq

Beautiful Wasteland

Imaan is a writer and poet with an insatiable love for books, art, and nature. She was born in Karachi, Pakistan, and earned her B.Arch from NEDUET. Her architectural background enables her to envision words as bricks and her compositions as living structures full of emotion, depth, poetry, and connection. She actively seeks writing opportunities, and her poems were published in the anthology Coalesce of Eunoia (2025) by TWS Publications. Her Instagram Handle is: @imaan_zen_d

Alex Newman

A SHORT HISTORY OF LIFE WITH GIRL CHILD

Alex Newman is a Toronto freelance writer and editor. Her website is alexnewmanwriter.com

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS!

Danielle Ellis

The Wickie

Danielle Ellis is a writer from the Quad Cities and a reader for The Colored Lens. Her work has appeared in Ink in Thirds Magazine, Westbrae Literary Group, and is forthcoming in Kings River Review, Penumbric, Neon & Smoke, and Brilliant Flash Fiction. Her Socials:
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Terry Trowbridge

Sunflower is Stronger than Me

Canadian farmer Terry Trowbridge's poems have appeared in CV2, The New Quarterly, Dalhousie Review, Nashwaak Review, The Ex-Puritan, Studies in Social Justice, and ~200 more places. He is grateful to the Ontario Arts Council for funding during the polycrisis. His ResearchGate is: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Terry-Trowbridge

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Lokikone

The Superintendent

lokikone writes poems and short fiction concerned with devotion, appetite, memory, and the quiet violence of keeping. Their work appears in serial form and long-cycle projects, including Soil of Bones. Their Substack is: https://substack.com/@lokikone

Mark Keane

Rejection

Mark Keane has taught for many years in universities in North America and the UK. Recent short stories have appeared in The Sunlight Press, The Interpreter's House, Foofaraw, Inlandia, Paris Lit Up, Prosetrics, Twin Bird Review, For Page & Screen, Shooter, untethered, and Night Picnic. He lives in Edinburgh (Scotland).

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS!

Paul McAllister

Learning to Leave

Paul McAllister was born in Enniskillen in Northern Ireland, but he has lived and worked in many places since then. He currently resides in Singapore. His fiction has appeared in the Honest Ulsterman, the Belfast Telegraph and Bindweed Anthologies: Winter Wonderland and he blogs regularly at www.bloodandporridge.co.uk/wp/.

Simon Collinson

The Outside

Simon is a writer from England. He is a member of the All Seasons writing group. He seeks stillness and solitude.

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Chayada

The Sun

chayada (she/her) often misses her home in Thailand in a way that she can't quite place. She spends much time looking at things and sometimes draws or writes about them. She currently runs a creative student magazine (you can check it out @vision.pple on Instagram) and is trying to put herself out there more. chayada wants make education better and currently studies Politics, Psychology, Law, and Economics and the University of Amsterdam.

Reagan Freed

Hiding in Plain Sight

Reagan Freed is an aspiring writer living in the mountains of Colorado. Her work is deeply personal exploring the moments where ambition, introspection and quiet transformation intersect. Her writing lands somewhere between the reflective and the real, holding both clarity and complexity. Reagan connects with readers through her blog: With Grit + Grace. Her Instagram is: https://www.instagram.com/withgritandgrace_2022/

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS!

Eden Hitchcock

The Flight

Eden Hitchcock is an avid reader and slightly less avid writer. She lives and attends high school in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. When not busy with school, homework, and other tedious necessities, she enjoys playing guitar and hammocking with her friends.

Erin Matheson ritchie

A Friendship in Four Acts

Erin Matheson Ritchie lives in California with her spouse and pet rabbit. She earned her master's degree in education at Stanford University, taught secondary English for seven years, and now coaches speech & debate. Her poems appear in New Feathers Anthology, Naugatuck River Review, and Oracle: A Fine Arts Review. Her social media handles are:
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Sarah Voight

Two Halves of the Sun

Sarah Voight is a poet who channels nature, ritual, and transformation into her work. She holds degrees in Chemistry and Animal Behavior. When she isn't writing or roaming the woods, she works for her local library. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in Belladonna's Garden Literary Magazine, Still Here Magazine, bramble online press, and The Faoileánach Journal.

Hanna Bergman

First Snow

Hanna Bergman is a poet based in Toronto, Canada. She's a big proponent of talking to trees, vintage fashion, and literary fiction. She loves dogs, stirs her tea with intention, and believes poetry is one of the best ways we learn to pay attention. You can read more of her work at substack.com/@lessextraordinary

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS!

Hank Kirton

Song of Squandered Promise

Hank Kirton lives in New England and writes weird fiction. He has worked in factories, warehouses and kitchens from Rhode Island to New Hampshire. He currently lives and writes in Massachusetts. His published collections include, The Membranous Lounge (Apophenia), Everything Dissolves (HST) and Bleak Holiday (Apophenia). His blog is: https://crumblingasphalt.org/

Ian Radford

Reflecting on a New Moon

Ian is a forty-something year old poet and acupuncturist living in London, UK. He has enjoyed reading poetry since the age of 9 and dabbled in writing his own from time to time. He decided to apply himself more earnestly to writing poetry following a diagnosis of dyslexia in 2024. Since then several of his poems have been accepted for publication. He has also self-published a short book of poetry entitled "Fingers Pointing at Polaris". His second book, "Whispers in the Storm", is due for publication in the spring of 2026. Among his notable poetic influences are John Donne, William Blake, e.e. cummings, Dylan Thomas, Leonard Cohen, Rumi, and Yunus Emre.

FINAL NOTE FROM STILL HERE:

To everyone holding this issue in their hands (or maybe not), thank you for being here.

This issue arrived a little later than I hoped. Life asked for my attention in ways I couldn't ignore, and I fell behind while tending to things that mattered in my personal life. I appreciate your patience more than I can say.

Still, I'm grateful this collection of voices made its way into the world. Each piece carries a small kind of light; moments of honesty, reflection and resilience. And sometimes that's what we need: a little sunlight through the cracks.

Thank you to every contributor who trusted Still Here with their work, and to every reader who continues to show up for it. As always, this magazine exists because of you.

Until next time.


THE LIGHT GETS IN ANYWAY.