Crosscurrents: Fall 2023

Associated Students of the University of Puget Sound

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Crosscurrents

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– Fall 2022 Edition –
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About the Cover Artist

My name is Jackson Waterman. I’m a Studio Art/Art History double major, and I enjoy reading, climbing and hiking in my free time, as well as learning about bugs. Growing up, I did a lot of fishing with my father, and it really sparked an interest in animals. I haven’t been fishing since I was a small child, but the memory of it is still a part of who I am today. This set of pieces is an exploration of lost identity, reflecting on the transformations of life. The distorted figures and messy, fluid background evoke the nature of water and its constant changes. BAIT’s wistful expression is meant to mourn the past versions of oneself which no longer exist, while the face of rapture in FISHHOOKS instead represents the bittersweet feelings of becoming someone new & different.
A Note from Maia

It is the end of November, and the great joyful racket of this edition of Crosscurrents has begun to really get clattering. The windows of the media office remain lit late into the night. Our staff compiles review packets, crunches numbers, and agonizes over which of our submissions have been voted the most resonant, evocative, funny, sincere, and audacious reflections of this semester’s campus culture. I have eaten chicken parmesan from the Sub for three Thursdays in a row now. It’s cold outside. I’ve read so much literary and economic theory this semester that all my notes for class read like sad little poems: the nights are long and no one knows where the money is going.

The truth is, I need some good reading—and I need to tell someone how I feel about it. A truth that often goes criminally under-acknowledged, in my opinion, is that the consumption and creation of art are equally and uniquely laborious. The process of making something requires you to chop your soul into little bits, toss it into the frying pan, and meekly wait for your dinner guests to tell you it needs more pepper. Consumption is another task entirely. To take a bite of a piece of art, chew it over, and swallow the whole of it requires tact, goodwill, and a little bit of acidity. You could taste something delightful. It might require a little choking to get it down.

Herein lies the tricky bit. What are you supposed to do when you are hungry in the dank pit of November, too tired to cook for yourself and impossibly sick of the Sub’s chicken parmesan? Trick question. No matter what you choose to do, you must eat sometime. The creation and consumption of art is hard. There is limited prestige in it. It’s a thing budgets don’t want
to bend for. And yet we need it regardless. We need it in the way you need a creamy butternut squash soup on a blustery day. We need it like olive oil to keep your pasta from clumping up. We need it like lava cake and fresh fruit; chicken parmesan on the days when you are too tired to cook for yourself. We need it like all our friends standing in the kitchen, peering over your shoulder as you simmer the sauce down, tasting it, making faces, saying that’s way too much salt and laughing.

All of that is to say that I am endlessly thankful for this publication. I am grateful to the staff who came every week to collaborate, critique, and be in community together through our shared passion for art. I am grateful to our readers, and to the most prolific defenders of the humanities and arts on this campus: the professors who are continually willing to contribute their wonderful insight for our selected pieces each semester. Thank you all for coming to dine with us. Please come again, and again, and again.

With love,

Maia Nilsson
A Note from Andrew

Like any self-respecting writer studying abroad, I spent a great deal of hours wandering in art museums, but beyond any painting or sculpture it was the woman with the selfie stick in line to see the Mona Lisa that truly struck me. Naturally, I immediately took the pompous response. What was she doing? Couldn’t she see that one of the most famous paintings in all of humanity’s history deserved a little more respect than an Instagram post?

Well, not really, I mused as I made a post about being in Paris. The woman had no higher quality response than myself, who refused to wait in line to see the painting and instead walked to the side of the line, took a glance and a quick picture, and then walked out. If art at its best provokes an impassioned response from the viewer, then even behind glass, in the most backwards room in the Louvre, behind miles of airport-type fence and straining, gabbling, selfie-taking tourists like myself, the Mona Lisa has more than retained its dignity. One might even say that behind some tomato soup or oil that art can be more profound.

Alas, when asked why exactly we create art we cannot simply point to the woman taking a selfie with the Mona Lisa to justify ourselves, at least, not without giving any one of us undue credit. The odds that anyone who works in the arts on this campus goes on to achieve the fame of such a painting in any field is exorbitantly low. So, to ask the question that we all have been confronted with lately, in the face of Thanksgiving dinners and overbearing grandmothers, restructurings, budget cuts, and the leering, reaper-like notion that the job market for those who aren’t in STEM is virtually nonexistent,
what exactly is the point of art? And why do we make it? It’s not as if I have a claim to answer this more than anyone else, but here I go anyway. Because artistic expression is the only possibility we have of ever truly conveying what it’s like to witness another person’s experience, to see out of their eyes, even for half of a blink of just one, to shock us out of the solipsism of the individual and connect with another person. Across years and cultures and ages and ethnicities and religions and every barrier humanity can think of, art allows us that slim chance of the intermingling of souls. To banish the arts as a frivolous pursuit is to banish the possibility of human connection to a similar grave. In short, because we can’t possibly bear to live without it.

Cheers,

[Signature]
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Light Pollution
Andrew Benoit

when past the line has gone the sun
the army of angels cloaked by our glow
Too Bright! Too Bright!
Celestial soldiers claim
So Orion and Cassiopeia flee
like hunted boars, dying slow as dogs overtake them.
Vanquished! Vanished!
No battle or struggle
Our weapons of fluorescence simply
illuminated them to darkness
with no quarter given for the child
who may never lay in grass and trace
with their finger
the spoon in the sky.
Night Orig  Liam Abbott
Both the sunflower and the golden retriever are some of the first to go when the end of their time grows near. The sunflower fades faster than the rest of the bouquet, the thin yellow petals begin to brown, the seeds begin to crumble, and the stem starts to wilt while the others stand as strong and vivid as ever. The golden retriever’s fur grows white in the face far before the other dogs, the golden barely surviving to the age of 11 and suffers with arthritis while the miniature poodle survives past 15 suffering only with bad breath. They know us for their whole lives, but they only take up a portion of ours. They are loved, they are lost. The sunflower and the golden retriever. Sunflower and goldens. Sun and gold. Sun, gold.

The golden sun shocks my body and jolts me back to life. My body heaves as my lungs fight to inhale a new breath. Revived. My body shivers as the cold sweat drips from my skin. No, not sweat. The water on my body is frozen, no drops fall. How did I get here? I can’t move. I’ve been paralyzed. Paralyzed by fear, by the cold. How did I get here? The world is silent as my brain screams at me to stand.

My fingers push through the ice, breaking the cast that binds them to their lifeless prison. I wiggle my pinky finger; not paralyzed. I will my undead body to rise from the grass, the concrete, the ground. Where am I? It is in this moment I realize I am naked. The cast of the frozen water is the only thing that covers my bare skin, the most translucent clothing a person could put on. My nipples are hard due to
the cold and I’m pretty sure my feet are an unseemly blue. I’m sure my lips are too. I use all of my strength to break through my icy cell and force myself into a sitting position.

From what I can make out through my half opened eyes, I’m sitting on the bank of a river which has frozen over. There’s a crack in the ice just wide enough for a person to squeeze through. The splintering of the frozen water expands past the void of the hole, the cover of the water now thinner and delicate. My body came from there. I brush back some of the snow at my side to reveal a wilting blade of brown. I’m laying in what used to be grass and is now a frozen wasteland. There are no trees in my view, no sense that anything could be alive out here. No people, no animals. A blanket of snow tampers down any greenery. The world is white. Who am I? I don’t remember. Visions of sunflowers and yellow dogs float through my vision. A woman is there. She’s coming towards me.

The sunflower and the Golden Retriever have always been my favorites, they’ve never failed to make me smile. The other flowers in a bouquet don’t seem to compare to the radiant sunflower; the roses too ordinary, the peonies too generic, the foliage just used to fill the empty space. Maybe it’s the multi-use of the seeds: a tasty snack on the sidelines of a baseball game you don’t want to be at or to make emergency flour in the middle of an unforeseen apocalypse. Maybe it’s the fact that when I was really little my mom would sing “You are my sunshine” to me to help me fall asleep, and the daydreaming child in me would hum along, you are my sunflower. The fact that I could have the sun on a strong, neon stem in a blood red vase dying on the counter of a hospital room; left by a griever, forgotten. The memory sweeter than the scent of any flower. But a memory grows bitter now that my mother is in the ground, the nutrient dirt cannot revive the dead and make her grow. Make her come back to me.
I shake my head. I need to get up. I need to find help. I need something that I won’t be able to find, though I am unsure what it is. I don’t even know if I can stand up. I don’t even know how I’m not dead. My body rocks back and forth, trying to create warmth and motion. I need to will away the frost that still holds down my legs and makes them heavy. My arms are weak. I can feel the ice nipping at my nose. There has to be a mild icicle forming there. There’s one on my cheek as well. I taste the ice on my lips, not hydrating as water, but instead salty.

My body feels lighter now as if my bones have fled my body, burying within themselves to hide from the cold. I take this opportunity to shake the ice from my legs and stand, the snow crunching under my feet. I look over where I was laying and I see my body. I watch smoke, steam, water come out of my mouth. There is no more. I see myself, and I am no longer alive. I observe the hands and feet of the corpse. The lips, in fact, blue. The hair is frozen to their back as if they had dragged themself halfway up the bank then collapsed onto it. The legs were pale and pink, fighting to work until the end. The stomach sucked in, empty. The ribs are defined under the skin. I was small. I wanted to cry, but my body felt like ice. Was this real? I couldn’t really be gone. I glanced behind me at the river.

The ice pawed at my heels as I tried to skate along the river. I hadn’t had actual skates in years, so it was more or less graceful falling rather than a clean skate. It had been frozen for months, I hadn’t had the chance to explore it just yet. My mother always used to take me skating on the frozen lake near our house before we moved. Since she’d passed my father had refused to go anywhere with me, as if embarrassed of his only daughter. I thought about him as I skidded along the river, miles from our new shack. He couldn’t look at me the same anymore, I think I remind
him too much of my mother, the grief too strong for him to even make eye contact. I had become his shadow rather than his light, the only light he desired would never be lit again. All I heard was a crackling before I was submerged in water. The ice fell out from under me and I was plunged deep into a still moving river. I had fought at first, clawing at the ice, at my clothes, at my lungs but there was a second where I considered that the river was where I belonged now, I wasn’t scared or angry. I was oddly at peace, the flow of the river taking away my pain as my body began to float. Until my lungs began to burn. I felt my eyes grow wide and I fought at the ice, viciously. I tore off my clothes to save me from being dragged down. Rushing water forced its way down my throat as I resisted the urge to gag. My nails scratching at the surface until they grabbed hold of something. I saw a light at the end of the bank above a rock I had been trying to avoid, the snow slipped through the water where the ice was thin. I wrenched my arm free and dragged my body through the tiny hole I had created. My breath felt haltered, I still couldn’t breath even as I moved up the bank.

Looking away from the river, I pull my own hands in front of myself, pale or clear I could not tell. I looked down at my feet, no longer blue. I felt my face, it was soft, not icy. The cold was gone. All I felt was the warmth from inside of me. As I glanced at my body I found the blue hue of my old self had turned an unseemly color, one I don’t quite recognize. It grew hot then hotter. Could I be on fire? Is this Hell?

My body glows yellow. Golden. The color of hope and creativity. Optimism. I’m brought back to the flowers and the dogs. My mother, I realize, the woman in the vision. The reason my love for life was so profound. She was beautiful and warm. She took the weight of the world on her shoulders to make the light around her shine brighter. She was overworked and underpaid with a smile forever painted upon
her lips. As she grew older her hair grew whiter and her eyes grew tired, but that smile remained. I knew she was gone, no longer my mother, when she finally got sick. Her tired eyes grew tired tears and her smile faded away. She was gone well before she was dead. I watched her joy from life fade out of her, the months in a hospital bed taking its toll. I watched her decay in front of my eyes, for days on end I would visit, the tears only falling once she was asleep. I was there when she died. The sound of the monitor as jarring as the ambulance which took her from the house. She looked as if she were asleep, I could barely see through cloudy eyes as I went to brush her face, begging her to wake up. The nurses and doctors came sprinting in and escorted me from the room, trying to shy me away from their efforts to save what I knew was already gone. I was screaming, I think. I don’t remember what illness stole her from me, I guess it doesn’t matter now anyway.

Why is it that the most beautiful things seem to fade the fastest? Fields of the yellow flowers fill my dreams as I go to sleep, before they’re invaded with ice. The flower, taller than me, begins to wilt. As beautiful and strong as they are, winter always comes and the sunflower hangs its head in defeat. Soon to be buried under the weight of the snow, forgotten. The next spring new seeds will be planted for another flower to take its place. No one mourns the sunflower, yet the sunflower mourns, and another takes its place.

Her joy faded, her smile faded, her life faded. I remember joy and laughter and smile and then nothing. My life is a blank after that. After she died, my whole world stopped spinning and the sound of laughter was drained from our household. My father wasn’t much better off. His hair was gray, his eyes gray, his life gray. Whatever brightness my mother had brought into the world for him was
gone. I too finally faded. The weight of the world grew too big for my shoulders and I was crushed under it. I lost sight of the things that mattered and my tired eyes grew tired tears and with it my smile faded. I too changed. I too was gone well before the river. I wonder if my father would miss me, or if he too would find himself in a river.

*Life is meaningless if you can’t enjoy the little things.* Eventually, the Golden’s face grows white and their bones grow feeble and weak. When the dark day comes for the golden to be taken to the vet to be put down its owner mourns. Tears stream from my father’s eyes as he puts to rest the last piece of my mother he had, his hands resting over the dog’s heart. Its owner mourns for the loss of their friend and they never forget. However, the golden is replaced with another, a younger version, meant to last another some 11 years before the process is repeated. The owner mourns, the golden mourns, and another takes its place.

I closed my left eye and observed my corpse through my translucent right hand. That girl is not me. Her face is mine and her body is mine, but a soul we do not share.

I hear barking. I look in front of me, nothing but the white blizzard. I turn slowly, that feeling of floating making me fatigued. I saw the river, but the frozen water was changing. I could see the ice moving along the stilled water, floating away towards the darkened sky as if snow falling back to the heavens. The ice lifted to reveal what was underneath. Bright yellow petals sprouted from the snow, growing taller and taller on thick, green stems. The ice lifted, floating back into the clouds revealing more and more of the lively flowers until it was all I could see. The snow still melted under my feet, but that too dissipated when I took a step into the patch. I was face to face with a field of sunflowers. The river was gone, had faded to nothingness. My corpse was cleared. It was just me and the flowers. I kneel down to caress the
petals of the largest flower closest to me. They are softer than silk. I scratch at the dark seeds in the center and laugh as I watch them fall to the ground.

The barking sounds closer, a deep but not aggressive huff. I look up to come face to face with a golden retriever. Its face was not white and still had the soft squishy puppy skin around its jowls. A smile was plastered on its face, its tongue lolling from its mouth. It got low on its front paws with its tail wagging high in the air and let out another bark. Lucky? Could this be my childhood dog that had passed away a few years ago? He’s not wearing a collar, but he seems to know me. Lucky, I say again. The dog jumps with excitement and flies into the air, landing not so gracefully in a patch of flowers. Lucky! He takes off across the field, barking, begging for me to follow. I take off after him, giggling as the flowers brush my shoulders. This is my absolute dream.

All of a sudden I am frozen in my tracks. A figure walks towards me. Has God finally come to take me? The figure opens its arms wide. I take a couple steps closer. In front of me stands a shorter woman with long dark hair and porcelain skin. She’s wearing a white gown which makes her look like a runaway bride. Her eyes a deep brown and upon her lips is a painted smile. Mom! Before I know what I’m doing my body is in motion. My legs have never moved so quickly in life. I want her embrace, crave it, need it. I need to feel her warm skin against mine. I need her to tell me that it was all going to be okay, that I’m safe now. I come crashing into her, my body against hers. She wraps me in her arms and squeezes harder than I’ve ever felt. Mom. The hot tears spill from my cheeks, splashing on her shoulder. I haven’t felt her warmth in years, it was different from any other warmth I’ve ever felt.

It’s okay, she whispers in my ear, it will all be okay.
The sunflower and the golden retriever. Sunflower and goldens. Sun and gold. Sun, gold. The golden sun has finally, truly reached me. I don’t know how long it will last, the warmth from my mother’s embrace already turning cold, but as for now, I am happy again.
Professor Review

As an honor to the strength of this work’s craftsmanship and insight, Professor Priti Joshi will explore the depth and achievement of the piece.

With her characteristic penchant for coming at things obliquely, Emily Dickinson wrote: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can every warm me, I know that it is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that it is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?”

I felt frozen as I read Emma McCarthy’s “Sunflowers and Golden Retrievers”; I felt tears welling in my eyes, I longed for my mother, for an embrace, for a golden retriever. Such is the power of this story with its precise details and unerring command of timing.

On the page the story is visually split – italicized and non-italicized sections – a split that, as the story progresses, signals not division but suture. The two “parts” do not separate into “thinking-and-being” or “life-and-death”; rather, each illuminates the other such that the binaries no longer matter – or suffice. The space created from the conjunction of “reality” and imagination is the realm of this story. I’m chilled – and also warmed. Such is the power of this subtly-crafted story by Emma.
Drowning
Katerina Wearn

There was a question in the request: drown me
A meaning lost in the weight that would drown me.

Was there any more to it than that? To sink,
just as I would expect when you said: drown me.

Or was it to open your lungs to the water, and breath the ocean,
was it to see the beauty underneath that you said: drown me.

Maybe it was the attention—no, the affection, the love.
Was it for praise to rain down that you said: drown me.

Tell me it wasn’t the thought of blame,
on my withering shoulders when you said: drown me.

Do you wonder if my hands are clean, of what I don’t know,
and is that why I was chosen when you said: drown me.

Is there a prayer or a promise within this plea,
a bitter due date on my task set when you said: drown me.

But perhaps, you have no purpose for such things,
so as the climax of this melodrama you request: drown me.
i won’t let the water touch me
Andrew Benoit

i won’t let the water touch me
when I shower today
though my body sticks with sweat
dried and reapplied throughout the day
my skin a white canvas
where memories leave salt behind.
The water will wash away the art
and leave me bare
discarded and alone like the serpent
after the original sin
unaware of what I’ve done
my skin shed, lost down the drain
an apocalypse of water every day.
I will stand in the shower,
careful not to lose any grime
With water all around me,
I will rub my body dry
salt eroding away my face
fragrance of memory
tattooed deep beneath my skin
so that one day, I may bathe.
Into thehww Abyss  Fletcher Crone
A Eulogy for a Mermaid
Shoshana Groom

Exhibit #31: The Entangled Mermaid
Specimen MM201, or “The Entangled Mermaid” as it’s colloquially known, was sourced from a bay near Leiden, Holland. It was rescued after becoming entangled in a fence trying to leave a bay after housing construction disrupted the area, and was rehabilitated in captivity. It died shortly after its first display in Leiden. Its discovery has been groundbreaking in the study of mermaids; it has been the model for every anatomical depiction of mermaids in all major marine textbooks since 1912, and its organs have been replicated for study all over the world. Most importantly, it has birthed a love and respect for mermaids in an entire generation, being honored in no less than 9 family crests and being the subject of numerous children’s songs.

The preservation of MM201 was the matter of significant controversy, launching the great 1911 Soul Debate. While there have been anecdotal tales of mermaids acquiring souls (see specimen MM582, or “The Little Mermaid”) a thorough scientific investigation of MM201 led to the monumental discovery that mermaids do not, by default, have souls, and thus burial was not necessary. By studying and admiring its stuffed remains, you the public can help MM201 achieve immortality without a soul through its substantial contributions to the world of science and to public memory.

Follow the yellow footprints to the next exhibit, #32: Styf the Elf
Arbol de la Luna  Fletcher Crone
Clothes Line

Iris Manring

I thought i heard your voice today
In the background of a phone call
Giving grandpa a hard time.
It wasn’t you of course-
But somewhere in my matted heart I hoped for your words.
I have strung memories up on a clothes line
And picked them out one by one
Choosing which ones fit in this piece of art,
Which ones fit on the walls of my home.
Tears over mosaic tiles and rolls of ink-
I need to hang this memory up to dry i think

The grief feels so heavy,
Sopping wet clothes
In moments that don’t feel right.
When I see your face in the passenger seat of the car across from me,
Eating apple sauce and thinking of my mothers sobs in the bathroom that night,
And seeing antiques in restaurants
Knowing they would have caught your eye.
The grief feels so heavy,
But I’ll wear it for a while
Until i think it’s time to hang it up to dry
Heist on the Blue Train
Emma McCarthy

The world whizzes by frame by frame as the blue train rumbles through the blank world. The snow falls and coats the bare and rotting trees, not a river or lake to be seen, any remembrance of one has since been buried. House after house, farm after farm, a girl is carried further from her known universe. Off to a different world. Only from the windows of a train could the world look this beautiful, this peaceful. The sound of the train rattling on the tracks drones her to sleep, only for the sound of the whistle to yank her from her trance. She watches the all too expensive chandeliers - with cobwebs and dust clinging to the fabric, the tassels looked as if they would fall off - wobble above her head, the back and forth lullaby matches the flow of the train. She twirls her wedding ring anxiously, having no need to still wear the damn thing, but the feeling of the cool metal on her finger is comforting. She wonders if she should just throw it away, but the lure to her husband still calls her. The carpet, a pattern as ugly as all hell, draws her attention.

She concentrates on the amalgam of shapes and creates images in her brain. That shape looks like a bunny. That one a hotdog. Hotdog. The girl’s stomach growls with hunger. She places a hand on her navel to try and quiet the whale noises coming from under her shirt. After a few hours into this journey, she has only just woken from a nap. She looks up from her seat, trying to make eye contact with any possible passerbys, hoping one of them will direct her to the food car. Only now does she realize how alone she is on this
train. What used to be an old luxury was now something not many could afford. Not too many people were traveling by train, if at all anymore. She remembers passing a couple other individuals on the way to her seat, but it now feels eerily quiet. The line to get aboard the train stretched the entire platform, so there must be more people here. There are only two other passengers in the car with her: an older man with silver hair flattened under his hat already heavily asleep, and a wild looking woman with a green scarf and her head buried deep in a book - The Mystery of the Blue Train, Agatha Christie. Oh, how she desired some adventure of her own, preferably one that wouldn’t lead to her death or a bizarre mystery on a train, but she wanted something, she craved for more.

The girl wills herself to stand on shaking legs, leaning against the booth to catch her balance. I’d make a poor sea captain, she thinks to herself, her skirts wispy as her stance gets fitted. She wobbles over to the woman with the book and leans down to her level.

“Pardon me, but do you know where I can get some food?” The woman looks up at her wide eyed and pulls her hat lower over her face as if trying to block her from sight. White, silk gloves rest delicately over her hands as she paws at the pearls at her neck. Of course she wouldn’t talk to someone like the girl. “Thank you for nothing,” she says much too loudly under her breath.

She straightens her back as she catches a whiff of hot coffee coming from behind her, and follows the scent, hoping it’ll take her to a desired destination. The girl uses the seat backings to stabilize herself, making her way along as if she were a child on the strangest jungle gym. On her way, she daydreams about snacks. She has gone way too long without eating, the thought of food on a moving vehicle had
made her nauseous, but now sugary treats danced through her skull.

She is startled from her dreams of seductive treats by a hand resting on her lower back. She jumps slightly and whips her head to the man who smiles kindly back, awkwardly reaching from his seats. The girl simply glares and goes to take another step. His hand tightens on her dress.

“Excuse me sir,” She says through gritted teeth, “Remove your hand now, please, if you’d like to keep it.” She returns his sweet smile with too many teeth showing, like a dog growling, about to fight.

He raises his hands slowly above his head and shrugs, “I just thought you should look up.”

The girl raises her eyes to the door in front of her. Emergency Exit only, it reads in bright red letters. She lets out a frustrated sigh. She is at the back of the train and has apparently been walking in the wrong direction.

“Thanks,” She says as she slowly turns around, trying not to stumble or lose her grip on the chairs.

“Might I ask what you’re looking for? Maybe I could help.” His head tilts to the side, in question. Only now does she get a good look at his face as she stands over him. His blue eyes sparkle brighter than the ocean. His long, brown hair falls gently over his face; it’s just long enough that he has to push it out of his eyes. He still smiles sweetly, his teeth as white as the snow that falls outside the window. His nose is quaint and pointed at the end. He is young, maybe a few years older than the girl, likely has just made it into industrial life. He looks simple, yet beautiful.

“Um, yeah, I’m looking for food. Food of any kind, really.” The train makes a slight jolting movement and she has to stomp her foot in front of herself to refrain from falling on her ass. She shrinks closer to the floor, her skirt now covering
her old shoes.

He shakes his head slightly, “I’m sorry, ma’am, they came by with food an hour or so ago. They won’t come back out until dinner.” The girl’s face grows pale. Shit. “However,” he continued, “I snatched a little extra from the cart. The woman seemed to like me and gave me an extra treat.” He holds up a wrapped napkin so that she can see it and get a glimpse of what is inside. A croissant. The delicate scent shoved its way up her nose and almost forced her legs to give out. All she could do was stop herself from drooling. This was all she could have asked for.

The girl recenters herself and her footing, trying to sound nonchalant, “Um yeah, I’ll take it if you’re sure you don’t want it.”

He lets out a laugh, as sweet as a bell, “From the look on your face, you definitely need it more than I do.” Had I stopped myself from drooling?

She tries to smile and refrain from the blood rushing to her face. “Th..thank you,” She started to take the napkin from him then added, “sir” just to make sure she sounded polite and truly thankful.

His eye contact never breaks. He holds out his other hand, “You don’t have to call me sir, my name is Clyde.”

The girl looks at his hand, large and calloused. She wonders what he does for a living, something on his feet, maybe. She glances back at his face then grasps his hand and shakes, “Bonnie,” she replies.

“Bonnie, would you consider joining me while you enjoy that croissant I so kindly gave up to you?” His eyebrows raise as if he’s trying to play some sort of game. She recognizes the look on his face, it reminded her of her husband. He always got that look right before he dragged her along to witness his crimes and threatened her to be silent
about them. Clyde shifts over one seat and pats the one by the aisle. She has to be careful with this one.

Skeptically, Bonnie takes her place beside him. She gives him a small nod then gently unwraps the croissant from the napkin. Never would she have thought to be eating such a delicacy, not in this setting. Bonnie grasps it with two hands as if she were afraid it would sprout legs and run away. It is still warm; she lifts her pinkies as high as an Englishman drinking tea and takes a bite. Absolutely heavenly. Chocolate runs down her lips, she cleans the spill with her tongue, not wanting to waste the flavor. How long has it been since I’ve had chocolate? She lets a moan escape from her chocolate stained lips.

Clyde smiles at her, “That good, huh?”

Bonnie nods enthusiastically, “Mhmm.” Once her stomach has quieted and settled, she places the half eaten dessert on the napkin on her lap. She makes sure that her knees are squeezed together tightly and her skirt hovers just above her boots - boots which were falling apart at the seams. She couldn’t remember the last time she had bought herself new clothes. These boots were a gift from her husband the last winter before he had been incarcerated, more than a year ago. These were one of the only gifts he had given her. She knocks the heels together, half hoping they would just fall apart. She looks back up quickly, hoping Clyde wouldn’t catch sight of her boots. He was so well dressed, he had on a black suit and vest, no tie hung from his neck. A hat hangs from his seat back. He came from money. Bonnie had come from nothing. She could barely afford to eat.

Sure enough he notices her boots. “So what’s a pretty little thing like yourself doing on a train to nowhere?”

Bonnie smiles in response, the smile no longer lighting
up her eyes. “It’s not nowhere for me, I’m heading to Joplin.” She holds her head higher, feigning confidence.

“Missouri?” His head tipps back as he lets out a sharp laugh, “Bonnie, I’d hope so, I don’t think this train goes anywhere after Missouri. That’s my stop too.”

His laugh sets off a sting in her eyes, “Why are you going to Missouri?” she shifts her knees closer to the aisle and takes another bite of the croissant.

“Business. And you?” The snow had stopped falling out the window, the blanket that remains coating the ground looks like something you would want to wrap yourself in. The light reflecting off of the snow contrasts Clyde’s dark clothes. From this angle, he looks like a dark figure, or a shadow. He looks out of place; the devil. A beautiful, enticing devil.

“Just trying to get away from it all. Nothing for me anymore.” Bonnie’s head bows as she takes another bite of her treat. It was true, after her husband went to prison for the robbery - which he claims was for her -, she couldn’t afford to live by herself. This ticket on the blue train was the last of her money, she just had to escape her husband. He’d come after her if he found out she chose to pay for food over the cost of his bail. He had his ways of escape, he’s already tried, but no prison would hold him for long. He believed he controlled her, she was nothing more than a slave to that man. Sometimes she missed his warm, strong touch, only to be jolted back to life, reminded of how poorly he treated her. She’d kill him, if she had to, but for now she made her way to Missouri; her best, and only option left.

“You have a ring.” There’s no question in his voice.

Her hands had gone to her wedding ring as she twisted it while in thought, drawing attention to the one jewel she owned. “Yes.”
“Married?”
“Not quite.”
He straightened his posture to appear taller. “What do you mean, not quite?”
“I am married, but he’s in prison. It’s complicated. I’m leaving him, I just can’t quite...”
His voice softened slightly “You can’t get rid of him completely. Hence the ring.”
She meets Clyde’s eyes. “Yes.”
His right hand reached towards his coat pockets. They hovered for a second before he rested his hands on his knees. “He hurt you.” She couldn’t tell if he meant to say he broke her heart or physically hurt her, though the answer to both is yes. She couldn’t bring herself to say anything in response. She looks back down at her lap and twists her ring again.

He watches her while she remains quiet. Bonnie catches his eyes running over her body, inspecting her face, her hands, her skirts. He gently places his hand on her chin and pulls it slightly to turn and look at him. After a moment of pause he finally says, “Well, Bonnie, you could join me in my business if you’d like.” His smile is so tempting, she wants to say yes to anything he says.

She shakes off his hand that had lingered on her face for a touch too long, “What’s your business got for a girl to do?” As a woman, she wasn’t used to men offering her positions of any kind if it didn’t involve sex.

Clyde leans back and crosses his arms over his chest, “Bonnie, in my industry I’m the boss, so you can do whatever you’d like. I need help with transportation and counting of our funds and profits. You can even travel with me. My business takes me all around the south.” His eyes meet hers again, “What’d you say?”
Travel. The allure of the promise to travel the country and to get paid doing it called to her. The promise almost as seductive as the man’s lips. He ran his tongue over his bottom lip and gently bit it as if deep in thought, awaiting a response he likely already knew the answer to. How could anyone turn him down?

“One week with me and I’m sure we could get you some new boots.” He raises one eyebrow and holds out his hand for her to shake.

“Alright, Clyde, I accept. But on one condition.” Bonnie takes another bite of her croissant.

His eyes grow wide for a second, and then he rests into a smile. His right eyebrow raises just slightly. Likely no one challenges him like that. He must’ve been intrigued, “And what would that be, Bonnie?”

She holds up what is left of the croissant and smiles, “To provide more of these treats.” She plops the rest of it in her mouth and wipes her hands on her lap.

Clyde lets out a deep belly laugh, “That, my girl, I can do.”

Bonnie lets out a laugh too, more of a giggle. She can’t hide her excitement. This business sounds like a true adventure. Exactly what she needs to get her mind off her husband. An exciting journey with a partner, a true partner, someone she can actually work with. She looks up at the man sitting next to her. He truly is gorgeous, he looks so kind, she trusts him and wants to know more about him. Clyde pats her thigh with his hand, careful not to ruffle the long skirts.

“Now, Bonnie,” He says very softly and sweetly, “Are you ready for your first act as a business woman?” He ushers her out to the aisle.

Her eyes grow wide, “I mean sure, what do I have to
do?” She stands again on shaky legs, gripping the chairs for support.

Clyde grabs his hat and puts it on top of his brown hair, smushing it down to cover more of his face. “Hang on, Dear.” His arm reaches casually towards the ceiling to pull on the emergency stop cord. In an instant his body is pressed against hers as she struggles to stand against the pressure of the train’s brakes. Bonnie sinks further and further into her body, trying not to be thrown to the floor. The locomotive comes to a screeching halt, causing many passengers to exclaim in fear or confusion. Luggage spills into the aisle as passengers struggle to hold on to their own seats. Bonnie holds onto Clyde until the train stops fully, his large hand again resting on the small of her back. She feels a strange, hard bulge in his left coat pocket. When she looks up, those glowing blue eyes are staring back into her.

“Are you ready, Bonnie?” Before she can answer, Clyde was pulling two pistols from his coat. He holds them up at shoulder height and starts making his way towards the front of the train. Bonnie hides behind him in his shadow, trying to make herself as small as possible. Is this really happening? Her breath catches as she struggles to keep calm. He comes upon the first passenger, the nervous woman who had been in Bonnie’s train car a few seats behind where she had been sitting earlier. “Excuse me, ma’am,” he said with a grin, “I’m going to have to ask you to leave all your valuables in your chair and vacate to the back of this vehicle, if you would be so kind.”

With a gun pointed at the woman’s face she scurries out of her seat and practically sprints to the other end of the train. She leaves her book, which she had almost finished, and her pearls scattered around her seats. You deserve this, Bonnie thinks to herself.
“Pick those up for me, would you Bonnie?” He nods his head towards the jewelry on the cushions and makes his way down the train, excusing every passenger from their seats and making the same commands. The passengers listen to the man with the soft voice, as does Bonnie. Each aisle they pass Bonnie becomes more and more confident in herself, her posture straightens and her breathing settles. A cool calm spreads over her body as her muscles struggle to carry all of the riches.

When they finally make it to the front of the train, bags and wallets and pearls are spilling from Bonnie’s arms onto the locomotive floor. Clyde had the sense to shove some of the valuables into emptied bags of the other passengers. There were more people aboard the train than she remembered, a few stragglers who had likely taken their place in the front. He asks her to stand watch over the passengers while he goes to “handle” the conductor. She has a fair understanding of what that might entail, but wasn’t going to press or ask questions. Without a pistol in hand and no weapons in sight, unless you count the dangerous amount of riches, it was lucky that none of the passengers got brave or made attempts to harass her. However, Bonnie still holds her head high as if daring someone to challenge her.

A gunshot went off behind her. Some of the passengers scream and Bonnie holds back a flinch. She stands strong, her grip tightening on the valuables in her arms until she feels Clyde’s breath on the nape of her neck. Her hair rises to the touch. “Face me, Bonnie.” Again she obeys. She hasn’t realized how tall he is when standing up. He towers over her at least half a foot, elongating his limbs and torso, turning him into a true shadow. He is smiling wide, a new sparkle in his eyes, something she hasn’t witnessed before. True enjoyment. The adrenaline rush people risk their
lives to feel; he has captured it in this moment. Her eyes are drawn to the bright red color of blood that now painted the collar of his shirt, he doesn’t seem to notice or care.

Bonnie doesn’t break eye contact as she lifts her arms full of treasures, “Did I pass, boss?” She raises her left eyebrow, she knows very well that she has in fact pleased him.

His smile widens and there is something new in his eyes, hunger. He raises his pistols over her shoulders to keep the passengers at bay. Clyde steps closer to her so that their faces are inches from one another. He whispers slowly, “Yes, Miss Bonnie, I’d say you passed.”

At that moment Bonnie closes the space between them, allowing everything in her arms to spill to the ground as she cups his face in her hands. His lips are warm and soft and taste better than any croissant ever could. She wants this, she wants him to last forever. This excitement, this nervousness, this adrenaline that now powered her, she couldn’t let it slip through her fingers.

After an eternity Clyde pulls away, his lips still spread as if waiting for Bonnie’s to fill the gap, “What do you say we take our things and go?”

“Go where?”

He slides open the door at the front of the train and gestures to the white, open plains, “Go anywhere.”

Bonnie scoops up most of the items she had dropped and jumps from the train to the powdered snow. The wind nips at her cheeks and bites at her boots, but she couldn’t care less. Bonnie finally had another purpose. Clyde takes off running at a slow pace, she can see a short, black car off in the distance under the only tree for miles; a getaway plan. He is a smart man, cold and calculated and charming. She looks back at the train to see the passengers pressed up against the back windows, in complete and utter shock. Only
then did she realize that the train is blue. From the engine to the caboose, the train is covered in a dark navy coat of paint. The train, which used to be of grandeur, is now run down, the blue paint beginning to peel, the metal beginning to rust. No wonder she could afford the ticket. Bonnie looks down at the new riches that filled her arms and back at the train. Bonnie huffs, then lets out a laugh, more of a cackle. Then she turns and takes off after Clyde, whooping and yelling the whole way.
By the time I felt his heavy form fall in next to mine the neon numbers across from me read 2:33 AM. His soft breathing told me he was asleep faster than I had the time to ask how he was, what he’d been up to, where he’d been. I just felt the space fill and the ache in my stomach start to subside. The ache of the unknown turned into the chewing sensation of guilt, syncopated with the slow steady rhythm of his heartbeat. Cursory reactions of wincing, scrunching my spine under the covers, biting the inside of my cheek, trying not to create any motion he might detect. I knew that if he felt the sense of responsibility to console me he would get frustrated all over and leave again. I didn’t want him gone.

The past four hours in the house felt like a trial by fire. When he threw the door closed I felt the full force against the inside of my skull, and at first I just sat there. It was strangely peaceful, a room suddenly coaxed in silence. My mind slipped into nothingness, Animal Planet playing noiselessly on our television. I held my head in my hands. I created craters out of my palms and cupped my cheeks into their hold, breath shallow, eyes glazed. Time passed and I sat there, first held deep within my own sadness, but soon I was transfixed on the television. Fluttering birds. The tiniest insects. Migration, death, rebirth. The more distracted I became the more the grief became a bodily sensation. Trying to deny it took a toll on my body.

After a while the tears flowed, but it was only after I’d
replayed him in my head. I wasn’t sure he could ever touch me again. I wasn’t sure if I could look in the mirror without the urge to break it. Covering them with sheets, blankets, I didn’t want a body anymore. Just for a little while, I’d like to be a floating entity. Something above it all, floating like a cloud, a listless existence without a need for a who, why, when, where. I wanted to be organic in thought, shape, form. Something tells me this is something I once had and can never return to.

I still have his expression in the front of my mind, the disgust and disappointment ate at me like ants pulling bits of me away, hauling all of it away to their little hills where they tore me apart with their brothers and sisters. I fizzled and drowned in his gaze. There was something about it, something that said ‘It’s your fault’, and there wasn’t anything in me that could defend myself anymore.

The last thing I wanted was for him to feel guilt. The facts were simple: I didn’t need his consent. I didn’t even need to tell him if I didn’t want to. The moment I understood how complicated it made everything for him, I regretted telling him.

“You know it’s not the right time for this. You know how hard it would be.” I remember telling him, knowing he’d admonish me for even thinking about it. But his venom was beyond what I could’ve expected. Perhaps because I was expecting nothing, maybe I got exactly what I wanted from him, the guillotine. His sense of righteousness in the eye of my life’s biggest storm yet. I might’ve wanted pity at one time, but as soon as I saw the creases in his gaze I realized the only thing he could’ve given me was shame.

His mom was pro-choice, father pro-life, and I knew what I was potentially getting into when I broke the news. We’d just never even thought about it, together for months
and months, inseparable. I understood how out of touch we both were then. He didn’t have to say it, it was written all over his face. This is something we’ll never come back from.

Have your foundations of another person ever been so shaken that you wake up out of this pipe dream of your idea of them to a version of them you could only love in spite of yourself? I’d felt that with him for the first time long ago, when the words he said to me felt like a script he’d taken out of a bad movie. Cheesy, borrowed, meaningless. When we stood in line and he commented on the disgust he felt about people bigger than him, people smaller than him, people who walk too slow or kiss too much in public, chew too loud, laugh too hard, smile a bit too much. When I found myself buying plan B biweekly because he didn’t want to use condoms. When I asked him to chip in and he blushed like a little boy. All the times I knew, I just didn’t let myself think.

My eyes upturned and I found myself watching a great migration of Monarch butterflies fluttering across my screen in droves. Swarms of delicate orange wings fluttering in syncopated rhythm I was floating with them. I was smiling, I was laughing at myself. Why did I always feel so small?

After a while the hunger pangs hit. Realizing I never made dinner, I inched to the kitchen and got busy. I started snacking light, crackers, peanut butter, occasionally picking up a truffle and chewing at it, masticating until my jaw ached. But the hole in my stomach was widening and nothing was filling it. Stale cereal, frozen bagels, soggy takeout, whatever I could find I was practically inhaling it and I didn’t feel any fuller. I searched for more until I’d run us through of just about everything but condiments, digging through his gluten free oreos and old marshmallows. The treats I’d bought him were not excluded from my binge. Nothing was off limits, I didn’t even think about what he’d say when he
got back when he saw the carnage of our small studio apartment kitchen. I drank half a bottle of wine, smoked a bowl, took my meds and fell asleep before the clock hit twelve.

I didn’t dream of his face. His vindictive fucking face. I didn’t think about the first time he told me he loved me, the way he’d massage the sides of my head when I told him I’d had a headache, the coarseness of his calloused hands when he tried to make the time slip faster, faster until I was waiting for him to stop. Until I was waiting for the silence and the submission and the acknowledgement of effort; a forehead kiss, throw me a towel, babe. At first he’d made me laugh but looking back I wasn’t sure if that was because I was trying to seem like a more laughter-prone person or if I thought he was genuinely funny. I don’t know why I thought he could give me the world. His was so small. But together, our worlds together, they looked better together.

It wasn’t like I didn’t have any self respect. I wasn’t in denial, I knew what he wanted from me. In that respect I was a realist. I was more than willing to put myself out for him, go out of my way, trip and stumble to be there when he wanted me.

And here he came, waking me from sleep for a brief moment.

And after it all, I still didn’t want him to leave. It wasn’t about who we’d been or everything that had happened but the truth was I liked having another source of warmth, another empty vessel. He was hollow as me, for a moment I thought he was what I deserved.

I felt every single pore in my body expand at once. My eyes widened, feeling something coming on, whether it be the sudden force of my bladder flooding over or my bowels emptying I could feel every part of my body committing
to some atrocity that I had no control over. With gripping force it was as if my insides were turning themselves out and seeping through the tiny holes in my skin. It felt initially like sweating profusely, like waking up and being drenched in a clammy personal rainstorm from inside out. But immediately I recognized what was flowing out of my wasn’t water. Sweat would’ve dripped but this coagulated, thick like syrup. It settled against my skin like jelly and all at once I was covered head to toe. I tried moving, tried scraping it off, getting myself free from it, but my eyes and mouth involuntarily shut, and I found myself still. Where once I was making an effort to keep myself from moving an inch, now I was clamped shut in every joint, every muscle fiber refused to budge. I was acutely aware of every part of myself, the jell hardening around my body was excreting from my head and drenching my hair until I felt as if I were in my own little swimming pool, surrounded by the warmth of my insides being allowed to float with me. The gel just kept getting thicker, and the more nauseated and disturbed I felt the more I realized I was feeling less and less as the liquid was swallowing me whole. I was absorbing into something new.

In moments I wasn’t human at all, all of the parts of me that made me separate from everything around me turned into shapelessness, I didn’t know where I started and where I ended. All I could feel was this same steady stream of consciousness, the dripping drone of disdain and denial as my skin dissolved. I imagined all the times he saw me as gross, the way he cringed at the sight of period blood or treated my body like public transit, a filthy last resort when he couldn’t afford an uber, reliable but repugnant. When I kissed him in the mornings he would dart his head away and blame my morning breath. It took my body so long to
to feel comfortable around him, even now performing regular body functions felt like a valid reason for him to run away. If he woke and saw this he’d never want to see me again.

Everything happening to me registered in my brain as terror, disgust, but as the particles in my body began to shift and mutate I released myself from gripping so tightly, from being so frightened. I could no longer feel anything around me besides myself and the amorphous blob I had turned into. And I decided to let go. What was happening wasn’t in my control. If my goop got on him, so be it.

I floated in my shell. The thick fluid surrounding me felt softer than cream and my mind ruminated on the miracle of my transformation. I felt everything shifting, my arms progressing back into wide flaps that cast a beautiful orange glow against the warm light filtering in through the curtains. I was warmer and safer than I’d ever been.

Before I could even grasp what I was and what was happening, a crack startled me from my daydreams of sunshine and nectar. The tear in my sack forced me to open my eyes to see that most of the fluid was dry now, hard and peeling off against my body with every move I made. The sudden whiff of fresh air ignited the desire to be free. I tore the slit wider, forcing my arms out and my body down. With one heavy drop I felt myself come loose. I arched my back, shivering at the exposed air and twittling my newly developed proboscis, wiping my face clear of any fragments of my old home. I was brand new.

Looking down, I recognized the figure beside me, but only barely. I remembered my old body. My old reality, but only as a distant dream. And here was this man. I was going to wait for him to awaken on his own so he could see me in my newfound glory, so he could pet my wings and admire everything I’d worked so hard to become. So he could see my changes, my final form. But the more I looked the more hungry I became. I bet his blood is sweet.
jealousy eats me from the inside
till I’m just a sack of flesh
I pretend I have bones
because that’s what people are used to
a whole person
because I have forgotten how to be whole
if I ever was
cobbling together a body
from old roadsigns and douglas fir cones
other people’s coffee drinks
and breath that turns to steam in cold air
fragments of moments make me up
memories triggered by music
whispering
I just want to be a better person.
All My Stupid, Selfish
Poems Start with I
Annika Freeling

I want to be needed
By someone who confuses need with love.

In my worst moments
I want to hang the moon for someone.
In my best moments I don’t think I ever could.
At 2:30 in the morning, all alone in the biggest bed I’ve ever owned,
I want to be someone’s world
Even-- especially-- if they aren’t mine.

Beg me not to leave.
Break without me.
A Bag of Clothes
Iris Manring

The matriarchs of our family
Went through your closet full of clothes today.
They took out everything
And passed onto me
What they did not need.

Now I sit in my room
With a bag of your clothes on my floor.
I am too afraid to touch them
Because they smell like you.
I do not want to remove them from the bag
Put them on over my head,
And ruin what is so perfect right now.

I know the smell will fade no matter what.
I know there isn’t much point in delaying it,
But for now,
Just for a bit
I will let the smell of you linger in my room,
And let the memories of soft hands and cinnamon rolls waft
on after it.
Phoenix ran to the little gazebo beside the forest and dropped himself onto the wooden bench, frowning at the ground.

He whipped his head up at the sound of footsteps. “Mind if I sit?” a familiar voice inquired. Akasma was standing at the entrance.

“Uh – sure,” he stammered.

She settled herself down beside him. “I know what you’re going through,” she confessed quietly while staring at a pole across from her as if it contained all the secrets of the world.

Phoenix glanced down at his knees, then his eyes wandered to his right, where a small patch of white roses hung over the railing like tiny streetlamps.

He carefully snapped one of the flowers from its stem, then broke off the thorns.

Akasma gasped quietly. “Phi?” she whispered, using her nickname for him.

Phoenix regarded her. “I know what roses mean to you,” he told her. “I accidentally read parts of your diary, without realizing it was a diary.” He took a deep breath and pressed his lips tightly together. “I read about your father giving you a rose. And your description of him in his funeral coffin.”

Akasma watched Phoenix silently, struggling to process his words.

“But you’re stronger than you think,” he went on.
“There are so many people who wouldn’t have made it through what you did. You shouldn’t see yourself as weak afterward; you should see yourself as strong for getting through it. This rose is so delicate, but it still has thorns to protect it. From a distance, it looks like it doesn’t have any thorns since I broke them off, but when you look closely, you can still see the bumps. You’re still strong, even when you don’t think you are, even when you don’t feel like you are.” He held the rose toward Akasma. She smiled slightly as she took it, and he smiled back.

A moment passed, then she asked, “What’s with the necklace?”

Phoenix dropped his head to look at his necklace and slowly lifted his hands to it. It didn’t seem like much – just a simple chain of wooden, barrel-shaped beads on strings of white yarn.

He pulled the necklace over his head and contemplated it. “My older sister gave it to me when I was thirteen. She noticed I was struggling with depression, so she made it for me in her shop class.”

Akasma raised her eyebrows at him. “How old was she?”

“Fourteen.”

“Only?!”

The ghost of a smile rested on Phoenix’s lips. “You realize you’re fifteen, right?”

Akasma’s mouth lifted slightly at the corners. “I rest my case.” They laughed together, unable to help themselves. When they had calmed down, Akasma wondered aloud, “Why isn’t there any pendant?”

Phoenix’s fingers played listlessly with the necklace, but his eyes didn’t leave Akasma’s face. “Well, my sister told me to wear this every day, as a reminder to always have
hope. But then, I wore it so much, the string broke, and I lost the pendant. I was really upset, but my sister said – I think it was, ‘You’re in charge of how you feel, so... choose happiness.’ Yeah, that was it. There was also this quote that resonated with me – I mean, not to make me feel better about the necklace, just in general. Uh, so, it was, ‘It may be stormy now, but it never rains forever.’”

Akasma smiled softly at Phoenix. “I like that. That’s a good quote. And I like what your sister said, about choosing happiness. I don’t know if that’s actually possible, but it’s a cool idea.”

Phoenix paused, then asked, “Can I give you a hug?”
Akasma laughed gently. “Yeah.”

They embraced each other and stayed that way for a while. When they finally pulled away, Phoenix told Akasma, “I think we can help each other out. But, with or without me, you can get through almost anything, because you have hope. That’s really important. It’s the first step to getting better.”

Akasma and Phoenix talked for the rest of the evening, as the stars and crescent moon slowly became visible through the openings in the gazebo, giving light to the dark night.
Heat Haze Tumor
Rowan Baiocchi

August bleeds through my fingers in
Sticky sweet rivers. It stains my palms
Bruise purple and cherry red as I pull my hands away
From the open wound of Summer in
My side. Maybe I will learn to
One day love the summer heat haze and
The acidic nostalgia that eats at the edges of thought and
Maybe. Just maybe I will call summer a
Friend. The way I did in elementary school on
My way home from a half-there final day,
But I don’t know when this wound will close and
I can’t afford to give it the hope I afford
So much else. You can only touch a hot stove
So
Many
Times before you realize it will hurt you. I can only
Go through so many summers aching for people
Who do not ache for me
Before I have to cut it out from me
Excise the tumor;
Suture the wound, even as I feel August’s pulse
Slowing under my sticky fingers. Even as the
Heat haze clears. Even as I am myself
Again.
Guitar Man
Bismi Kado
As an honor to the strength of this work’s craftsmanship and insight, Professor Elise Richman will explore the depth and achievement of the piece.

Guitar Man captures a moment of solitary immersion. It’s cool blue and violet palette evokes the quiet of night and tranquil emotion. This is an inward moment, the guitarist looks downward at his instrument, engaged in focused strumming. The artist represents the room with stains, washes, and dabs of liquid color, soaking the watercolor paper and manifesting melancholy light, intimate space, and gestural form.

Color and process literally saturate the picture plane while infusing it with a meditative mood and implication of vibrations of sound. This is an image of private connection with the creative spirit in the still quiet of an evening spent making music at home. This painting not only represents a man and his guitar it also pays homage to moments of pure concentration when melody and making are all that matters in this ever spinning and demanding world.
“You didn’t throw it all away, did you?” Her question slid into my half-conscious mind, took its time wandering about, and eventually settled in the front of my head just above my eyes.

My mouth wouldn’t work, so I decided to answer by tracing my hand down her spine from where I lay beneath her. The motion took far too much effort, but I hoped it came across as properly contemplative. There was little else I could do.

Slowly, reluctantly, sleep slipped from my grasp as it had been initially loosened by her first words of the morning. I thought about chasing after it for a moment, but the idea seemed pointless and taxing. Abandoning that intent, I turned again to the question which had managed to press itself further against my mind, demanding far too much attention for such a trifling thing. Yet it pressed forward with all the determination of a seamstress’ needle through tough cloth, so harsh I thought it might force its way right through my forehead.

I turned to my side, bringing her with me so that she was now curled into my chest. It warranted a small noise of discontent, but after a moment of wiggling and adjustment she seemed to settle once more into stillness.

Foolishly, I had thought facing sideways would give the needle less of an angle, but with the smell of her hair
pressed to my nose, and the feeling of her light breaths in the small space between us, I had only succeeded in making it worse. Her question, now sharp and large as a knife against my skull, caused me to clench my eyes and tense my jaw.

If she noticed, there was no indication of it.

I don’t know how long she would’ve waited for me to speak. Both of us sitting in silence, obviously awake with our unnatural stillness. She had the patience of gods which made me itchy all over, like a child being stared down by a disapproving parent. Sometimes a lack of words provides the most pressure, until you crack and break the silence by admitting whatever horrible thing you must have done. But my mind broke before my mouth could take the chance.

A white blindness shot through me, stealing the air from my lungs, the strength from my muscles, the thoughts from my mind, and the sight from my eyes. Everything touching me felt like it had been charged full of electricity, slipping between my layers of skin for fun. The rustle of sheets as I shoved her away from me caused the sensation of sand to fill my ears. I fell twice in my efforts to stand, half-aware that I wasn’t being offered any help. I didn’t blame her. I must have looked disgusting in my gaunt nakedness, whimpering like an injured animal, crawling my way across the room, reaching for the truth.

I dug into a drawer, under some papers, and into a bag within a box. My hands were trembling the entire time, I could barely see anything I was touching, but I knew it by heart.

She must’ve watched me take it, but maybe I am allowed to hope that she looked away.

It always feels as though it takes longer than it should to kick in. My agony is prolonged just until my breathing begins to cut short... and then everything reaches a plateau.
I look briefly over the side before being swept back with a
gasping breath of relief.

Time seemed to rewind as everything played out in
reverse. I grew steady enough to pull myself into a chair
where the fabric felt truly soft. My sight, sense, and breath
returned, as though the peaceful morning had never been
disturbed... if not for the weeping.

I wish I could say I apologized, I ran to her and
begged forgiveness. Unfortunately, that is not how the mind
works in such a state. I sat for a while across from her, con-
sidering. I took in the white sheet and her velvet cocoa skin,
the morning light and whispering curtains, the shadows cast
across it all while she cried, and I turned to rifle through the
desk once more, this time rising with much more innocent
implements: my pencil and sketch pad.

It couldn't have been more than ten minutes before
she eventually looked up to see me working away. Our eyes
met but it frightened me so I broke contact and continued to
work. The next time I looked up she was no longer crying,
but she was still looking down, almost as if mourning. It is
cruel how beautiful some people can be while in pain.

The rest of the day carried the same eerie silence as
the beginning had. She left for work without a word, and I
copied my sketch onto canvas before painting it, remaining
at my desk that sat across from the now empty bed.

She came back to find me on the floor, which was not
all that uncommon, much to my embarrassment.

She gathered me up easily, and rested me on the sofa
in the living room. She set about making dinner and I fol-
lowed the motions with my eyes, unwilling to move more
of my body. I could only finish half of what she had served
me, but she seemed satisfied enough. After cleaning up, she
disappeared into the bedroom, leaving me on an empty sofa in an empty room.

I don’t know how long it was before I realized she wasn’t intending to come back for me. I was meant to stay on the sofa that night, but as evening got darker I knew I wouldn’t last.

The sensation of a thousand ants began dancing along my skin as I stretched an arm out to push myself up. Leaning heavily on the wall, I stumbled my way to the door, stopping in front of it. Did I need to knock on my own bedroom door? I settled for opening it slowly, giving her plenty of time to express dissatisfaction with my presence, but there was no vocal response.

What surprised me was that she was not in bed, but sitting at the desk, where I spent most of my day, staring at my painting. She studied it with squinting eyes, like an art teacher might, or someone who had noticed a fly trapped under a layer of paint.

I wanted to go to her. I wanted to look at the painting with her and see what she might be seeing. But the bed was closer, and my legs were beginning to give, so I let myself fall towards it, taking the tedious amount of time I needed to crawl and drag myself onto my proper side.

I was afraid to ask what she thought of it, and when I finally got the question out I could barely hear her voice over the rushing of blood in my ears. But I closed my eyes and let her words carry themselves to me.

She said it was sad. She said she didn’t like it, but it was good. She said she hated that it was good and she wished that it was bad.

I said, me too.

Then, finally, I answered her question from the morning. I told her I obviously hadn’t thrown everything away but
I also hadn’t gotten more. I told her that was the last of it. I told her I was no longer going to be a painter because of it, at least, a good painter. I spoke of my fears, and told her that she might hate me if my paintings were bad.

And as I continued through my hopeless list of truths, I felt the needle returning inside my head, this time with nothing trivial to blame. I kept talking, but for the life of me, I can’t remember anything else I said.

I know that at some point she joined me on the bed. Her arms wrapped around me where I lay curled in on myself, and her hands ran through my hair, across my skin, as if she were attempting to smother the fire I felt with her own body. She attempted to comfort me. Her words were pointless, but the fact that they were there was entirely crucial.

I had hoped sleep would carry me through the worst of it. Unfortunately, the night was restless, for I am wicked.

... And my ending is despair,
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
    As you from crimes would pardoned be,
    Let your indulgence set me free.

*Italicized excerpts are from William Shakespeare’s The Tempest*
A7.
Sometimes the world feels too small.

B6.
It is uncanny to be in a new city, a new state, a new home
Yet find familiarity just around the block,
or working next door, speaking a language
like your own from another timeline,
each interaction leaving you wondering if you missed
the buttons in their eyes.

C5.
Sometimes the sky looks as if I could just
reach up and stroke the clouds,
as if they are nothing but a blanket over my head as I
lay in bed after school and pretend to be
anywhere else,
and suddenly the vast expanse of space doesn’t feel
quite so far away.

D4.
Sometimes I count the checkered lights,
windows in an apartment building,
snapshots of a million different lives all lived
in the space of a couple hundred square feet,
And I can’t help but feel I’ve already lived
every single one
as time seems to freeze, 
shrink and expand in the same breath until 
it is all-encompassing and infinite, 
the past and the future everywhere and nowhere, 
and the clock on the wall has no meaning.

Each tick is a footstep, a choice of direction 
in search of purpose, a circle 
in which you turn to move somewhere else, 
turn to go sideways, only to discover 
such a direction does not exist.

E3. 
I ran halfway around the world with the goal 
of understanding the person I see in mirrors, 
Yet now when I look up at the trees 
I see an inverted map I’ve already studied for so many years 
that I walk it each night as I sleep.

F2. 
Perhaps the world is too small, 
or perhaps I’m too afraid to step out of the clock 
and fall down a rabbit hole 
and learn that

G1. 
Wonderland isn’t what I told myself it would be.
A young girl swears at her mother, without understanding its meaning. Abruptly, she finds herself on the ground, her father pinning her down. The carpet rubs against her cheek, absorbing the tears running down from the corners of her eyes, as he presses her into the floor. He’s screaming in her ear, louder than she’s ever heard him scream before, but she doesn’t hear a word. “I’ll never say it again,” she sobs. She doesn’t understand. What had she done wrong?

Her mother places a bowl of macaroni and cheese in front of her. As she chews, her mouth slowly fills with revulsion. She sets the bowl aside on the mahogany coffee table. “Really?” her dad asks derisively. “Come on, just eat it, for God’s sake!” She stares down morosely at the carpet. The same place he’d pinned her to the floor when she was a little kid. A sudden chill sweeps over her. But he refuses to let it go. “You know, you’re wasting a lot of food. And Mama worked hard to make it for you. It’s pretty disrespectful to turn it down.” She leaps up from the chair, rips into her bedroom, and slams the door. “JULIETTE!” His heavy footsteps thump up the stairs two at a time, like a charging rhino. He gets right in her face. “DO NOT SLAM THE DOOR! EVER! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME? EVER!” She nods faintly, unwilling to give him the satisfaction but resigned to it.
As she reads her book, her face begins to beam, and a squeal mounts inside her. Finally, she flings the book down, too fervent to continue. She gallops across the room, back and forth, trying to work off the excess energy. Then, a voice cuts through her euphoria. “JULIETTE! CAN YOU PLEASE STOP RUNNING AROUND LIKE THAT?” In a brief instant, her joy is extinguished.

Her friend inquires about her day, and her head immediately snaps up. “I spent all day taking notes on Shintoism and researching psychology experiments!” The other girl laughs. “Oh, Juliette...”

The familiar words send a shock into her skull, teasing other memories out – phrases she’s heard so many times before.

“JULIETTE!”

“Come on, Juliette.”

“Oh, Juliette...”

“JULIETTE!”

The voices reverberate like a rhythmic chant, overlapping each other.

All her life, she’s been told to embrace her individuality. Yet, when people are confronted with her differences, they reject her. Treat her like a silly child or an inconvenience.
Finally, in her last year of high school, she discovers a word. A word that changes everything.

She hears it spoken in hushed tones, her parents whispering from the kitchen.

“What do you mean?” she asks. “Willow has autism?”

Willow. Her sister, who understands her more than her parents, more than her friends, more than anyone she’s ever known. It can’t be true...

A horrific thought wrenches her heart into her stomach. If she has autism, do I? No, she refuses to believe it. And yet... No, it doesn’t make sense... She flees the room in a bemused panic.

The next day, her mother offers her a book. Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder. It might help her understand her sister better, she tells her. But the girl knows her mother thinks she has autism, too. What if she’s right? Hoping to prove her mother wrong, she reads page after page after page.

As I read, a multicolored ribbon began to trail through my memories, painting my life in brilliant rainbow hues. Me shouting a curse word at my mother without knowing the meaning because that was how neurotypicals spoke. My aversion to food, a result of my hypersensitivity. Me whirling and careering across the living room, unable to contain the need to stim. My keen fascination with storytelling and psychology, two of my “special interests.”

“Autism acceptance.” It took strenuous work, but I’ve learned to accept myself for who I am. Both the challenges of autism, the blues and purples and greens, and the bright, optimistic side, the reds and oranges and yellows.
The Colorist
Katerina Wearn

Grey trees, grey sky,
Grey skin;
I wake before the colorist,
His thousand hands

Held and bound by
Merciless stars;
The night air has
Greyed my lungs.

Reach towards
Reflectionless waters;
Salt-flat smooth,
Glass ocean cold.

Sense the time stretch,
Languishly wind;
I grasp to a
Transitory breath;

The colorist arrives.
Chroma blooms
Perfuse the eyes,
Blink once,

Blink twice,
Crystal cracks find
waves; old nature,
New tides.
I want to own a musty notebook. The kind that has endured water and coffee love.

The kind that includes squashed-up dried-out lavender and lilac.

The aroma of scrupulous note-taking and doting attentiveness.

Kept inside its paper, the specter of a truth-seeker, the keeper of cattails.

I want to run my fingers across the bumpy pages and soak in the life of wanderlust.

I wish I had the oomph.

But already the book’s spine distresses cheap leather cracking under hot sun.

I know the owner would just buy another,

But what’s the point of a notebook if not to capture your memories: how can you just replace memories like that?
I keep all my memories in a jar on the windowsill.

I hope that photosynthesis makes them grow,

But I know
that’s silly.

New memories require lilac and cattails,
Lavender and love,

And I think I’d like to start.

Must I wait for the flowers to dry out first?
Professor Review

As an honor to the strength of this work’s craftsmanship and insight, Professor Tiffany Macbain will explore the depth and achievement of the piece.

I read this poem in mid-January, just as the targeted ads for paper planners had slowed, ads that had intuited (correctly) that I have responsibilities and commitments and passions and pet projects, and that I’d want and need a notebook to track my progress. But which one to buy? And would it be better than last year’s? Would this planner, finally, sort me out, keep me in line, catalog the events of my life? It would and would not, will and will not. And I love it for that.

“Foggy-Mirror Fortunes” understands the limitations, even the futility, of the well-loved notebook, its insufficiency to “capture memories” and yet its determination to try. The “musty notebook” that the speaker considers seems not to be their own—whether found or imagined, its contents and condition were created by someone with more “oomph.” This other person has traveled, has sought “truth,” has preserved experiences in the form of coffee rings and lilac sprigs. The speaker is captivated by the object, wants to know the stories it contains. In spite of the notebook’s “Cheap leather cracking” and its weakened spine, the speaker perceives its value: the notebook is irreplaceable.

The turn of the speaker’s attention to their own practice of memory collection introduces a comparison that attests to the poet’s skill. The “jar on the windowsill” is an analogue to the weathered notebook—a different container with an equally organic feel. What a striking image. Memories
contained by a jar would be visible to anyone, exposed to whatever light or darkness might fall upon the windowsill. And we know from the speaker that the memories require tending: water, sunlight, carbon dioxide, the stuff of “photosynthesis.” Without this care and exposure, the speaker suggests, the memories will fade.

To my mind, the image of the jar conveys tenderness and vulnerability. Like the speaker, I am drawn to the worn notebook, and yet I recognize that it is personal, encoded, not meant to be read or understood by someone other than its keeper. The jar is the open book. I wonder, then, at the speaker’s dismissal of their mode of remembering: “But I know / that’s silly,” they say. They seem to consider their attachment to the past almost childish. They want to move on, to make new memories and to store them in a new way. And yet the poem ends on a note of uncertainty. The speaker asks, “Must I wait for the flowers to dry out first?”

The question reminds me of my younger self, eager to try new things and to take new shape but unsure of what to do with who and what I’d been. In “Foggy-Mirror Fortunes,” some readers will see themselves as they are at the moment. Others, like me, will recall how they were—as well as any of us can. The poem invites the reader to consider their relationship to their own past and future, to consider how and whether any of us can contain the uncontainable, how and whether we can be ready for what is ultimately beyond our control.

Tiffany Aldrich MacBain
January 14, 2023
Beowulf Liked his Mead with Spice
Rowan Baiocchi

I wonder how Beowulf felt when he died. Was he scared? He couldn’t have been, right? He was a proud warrior, a hero of mythical proportions. Bane of Grendel, ender of bloodlines, dragonslayer, king of the geats, and yet i cannot help but wonder what it must have been like to feel dragon’s poison stealing through his veins. Did it burn, like its progenitor did? Dragons in the west have existed as engines of calamity since their inception. Winged death, fire belched on wooden frames, the sweeping wrath of a long dead time come to burn the homes of men to a crisp.

It must have, right? Beowulf must’ve felt it scorch through him, singing his arteries and razing the capillaries that lay beneath his skin. How long did it take him to realize death had come creeping up behind him, dagger in hand? Even though the blow may have come through open battle, even if the jaws that filled the hero of the danes with venom and bile had glimmered in front of the man’s eyes before they struck, death still had to come creeping up behind him. I don’t really doubt that the only way to claim the great hero was under the cover of blinding pain. Death could not draw steel against him; Death had to creep through his veins and slow his heart from within, else the great king would have slain Death dead. Wouldn’t that have been something?

I know that Grendel was scared when he died. That’s not hard to guess. Bleeding out, bereft of an arm from fingernail to shoulder cap, fear must’ve run rampant over the mon-
-ster’s heart as he limped back to his cave. The child of Cain, scorned of God, had gone in a single night from a terror amongst the fens to a corpse laid low. And he deserved it, to be fair. His nature was that of a petulant child, angry at the affection shown to a younger sibling. Man has faults—man is cruel, and loud, and brash, and far too skilled at violence—but man does not deserve the deaths Grendel delivered to them.

So why do I pity him?

Imagine being in his skin; I wasn’t kidding when I called him “child of Cain, scorned of God.” His fate was written in his blood the moment his wicked feet touched soil. He was always going to end up where he did, cold and scared and empty in some cave amongst the marsh and fen. He was an animal, at the end. But do we blame the animal for what it does? We know that the great white does not enjoy the violence it occasionally and rarely inflicts upon “our” kin, and we know that the wolf does not deserve to bleed out cold and alone and sickly because it had to eat. We know this, just as well as we know that Grendel was not an animal. He acted out of anger, out of wrath, spite and malice moved his hands as much as animal instinct. Yet we do not know if he could have understood the wrath he invited upon himself. Why do we judge him as if he were an animal yet celebrate his death the way we would a war criminal? Are those the same? Is that what I’m saying?

I guess I am. Maybe I’m saying that I agree with Grendel’s mother, nameless and monstrous as she was. Her kin lay slain and desiccated on the edge of the fens while his murderers drank and cheered in the hall, his arm mounted above the fire. Why were these danes, these men who lived by the weregild, by the idea of blood for blood, of an eye for an eye, surprised when she came in to exact her price? Gren-
del took many, one could argue, and so Beowulf had to avenge the singular death his Mother exacted. Did Beowulf not also take more than his share of lives, though? How much blood did the king of the geats spill? How many mothers found themselves without sons thanks to the hero of those spear-danes? If we want to be specific about how much of a blood price is to be exacted, we should apply that same eagle eye to the one holding the sword, the one who tracked a mother/monster to her home/lair to draw blood/exact justice. See? Easy to trip yourself up, isn’t it?

Why am I saying this? Why are you reading it? Why did Beowulf ask, in his dying moments, to gaze upon the wealth hoarded by his killer? Stolen wealth of stolen wealth, a treasure fit only to be scorched and entombed with their great murderer-king. So what was the point? Violence begets violence? Astute observation, said every anthropologist ever. Humans may have come into love as they figured out how to stand, but apes were born with the neural pathways required to kill each other. It’s in our blood. Your blood, I mean. Not a mistype.

Who am I?
Wrong question.
What am I?
Better!

Call me a shooting star. Call me Halley’s comet. Call me Io, call me Titan, call me Jupiter and Phobos, call me Pluto and Siri, call me whatever you want. You won’t be close. I’m old, baby, older than old. Stardust and radiation skipping across the universe, lucky enough to lose enough speed to watch your little planet. It’s cool, up here. You might’ve seen my cousin, actually, up in the satellite wreckage, doing his little waltz with your orbital debris. Why am I here? Wrong question. You’re not going to get a right one, either, so I’ll ask
one for you- why am I talking about Beowulf?

Cause it’s fun. Cause he’s the first human who looked at me and prayed to a god that’s out on vacation. Cause i looked down at him, small and bleeding and full of poison, surrounded by a thousand uncounted ghosts, and I saw someone who just needed a hug. Someone who had shou-dered the immeasurable burden of being a hero without question, simply because that’s who he was. He was brave, Beowulf. Braver than brave- there’s a reason his story survived so long. Because as I watched his twelve kinsmen ride ‘round his barrow in grief and sorrow, I realized no one would ever remember Beowulf, the man who loved his mead with a little bit of spice. The only Beowulf to survive the rav-ages of time would be the Mythic, not the Man.

I can see your brain working overtime to try and derive a point from all of this. Sorry to disappoint, but I don’t have one- not really. But you know what? Because you’ve been such a wonderful listener, such a captive audience, I’ll try my best to condense.

Anyone who tells you there is a universal rule for how to determine if someone deserves to die is a fucking liar, a snake, and a person with an agenda. They’re wrong. No one is born deserving to die; often, people who “deserve” to die are people who never knew how to lose momentum. Some people are seen as heroes before they’re seen as people who had favorite bedtime stories; most people who are seen as villains, as monsters, had a favorite way to order their cof-fee– neither of these facts change the people they became. It is important for you, sweet mortal thing that you are, to choose love, yes. A life lived in the shadow of love, in the cold of hatred or even just plain old apathy is a life lived by half measures. But you must never, ever let love leave you stepped on. Love fiercely and as often as you can; bite back
by the same metrics. Know within your heart of hearts that every great hero and every reviled monster was a person before they were anything else: do not let the personhood of monsters shield them of consequences, and do not let the mythic status of heroes prevent you from showing them compassion.

Live your life to the heights you wish to reach, little Beowulf. Die knowing that you lived it well. Go, now, back to your little blue dot. Remember this when you return: If nothing else will say it, I will love you from up here, drifting as I am. Take care, little Hominid.
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My name is Jackson Waterman. I’m a Studio Art/Art History double major, and I enjoy reading, climbing and hiking in my free time, as well as learning about bugs. Growing up, I did a lot of fishing with my father, and it really sparked an interest in animals. I haven’t been fishing since I was a small child, but the memory of it is still a part of who I am today. This set of pieces is an exploration of lost identity, reflecting on the transformations of life. The distorted figures and messy, fluid background evoke the nature of water and its constant changes. BAIT’s wistful expression is meant to mourn the past versions of oneself which no longer exist, while the face of rapture in FISHHOOKS instead represents the bittersweet feelings of becoming someone new & different.
A Note from Maia

It is the end of November, and the great joyful racket of this edition of Crosscurrents has begun to really get clattering. The windows of the media office remain lit late into the night. Our staff compiles review packets, crunches numbers, and agonizes over which of our submissions have been voted the most resonant, evocative, funny, sincere, and audacious reflections of this semester’s campus culture. I have eaten chicken parmesan from the Sub for three Thursdays in a row now. It’s cold outside. I’ve read so much literary and economic theory this semester that all my notes for class read like sad little poems: the nights are long and no one knows where the money is going.

The truth is, I need some good reading—and I need to tell someone how I feel about it. A truth that often goes criminally under-acknowledged, in my opinion, is that the consumption and creation of art are equally and uniquely laborious. The process of making something requires you to chop your soul into little bits, toss it into the frying pan, and meekly wait for your dinner guests to tell you it needs more pepper. Consumption is another task entirely. To take a bite of a piece of art, chew it over, and swallow the whole of it requires tact, goodwill, and a little bit of acidity. You could taste something delightful. It might require a little choking to get it down.

Herein lies the tricky bit. What are you supposed to do when you are hungry in the dank pit of November, too tired to cook for yourself and impossibly sick of the Sub’s chicken parmesan? Trick question. No matter what you choose to do, you must eat sometime. The creation and consumption of art is hard. There is limited prestige in it. It’s a thing budgets don’t want
to bend for. And yet we need it regardless. We need it in the way you need a creamy butternut squash soup on a blustery day. We need it like olive oil to keep your pasta from clumping up. We need it like lava cake and fresh fruit; chicken parmesan on the days when you are too tired to cook for yourself. We need it like all our friends standing in the kitchen, peering over your shoulder as you simmer the sauce down, tasting it, making faces, saying that’s way too much salt and laughing.

All of that is to say that I am endlessly thankful for this publication. I am grateful to the staff who came every week to collaborate, critique, and be in community together through our shared passion for art. I am grateful to our readers, and to the most prolific defenders of the humanities and arts on this campus: the professors who are continually willing to contribute their wonderful insight for our selected pieces each semester. Thank you all for coming to dine with us. Please come again, and again, and again.

With love,

Maia Nilsson
Like any self-respecting writer studying abroad, I spent a great deal of hours wandering in art museums, but beyond any painting or sculpture it was the woman with the selfie stick in line to see the Mona Lisa that truly struck me. Naturally, I immediately took the pompous response. What was she doing? Couldn’t she see that one of the most famous paintings in all of humanity’s history deserved a little more respect than an Instagram post?

Well, not really, I mused as I made a post about being in Paris. The woman had no higher quality response than myself, who refused to wait in line to see the painting and instead walked to the side of the line, took a glance and a quick picture, and then walked out. If art at its best provokes an impassioned response from the viewer, then even behind glass, in the most backwards room in the Louvre, behind miles of airport-type fence and straining, gabbling, selfie-taking tourists like myself, the Mona Lisa has more than retained its dignity. One might even say that behind some tomato soup or oil that art can be more profound.

Alas, when asked why exactly we create art we cannot simply point to the woman taking a selfie with the Mona Lisa to justify ourselves, at least, not without giving any one of us undue credit. The odds that anyone who works in the arts on this campus goes on to achieve the fame of such a painting in any field is exorbitantly low. So, to ask the question that we all have been confronted with lately, in the face of Thanksgiving dinners and overbearing grandmothers, restructurings, budget cuts, and the leering, reaper-like notion that the job market for those who aren’t in STEM is virtually nonexistent,
what exactly is the point of art? And why do we make it?
It’s not as if I have a claim to answer this more than anyone else, but here I go anyway. Because artistic expression is the only possibility we have of ever truly conveying what it’s like to witness another person’s experience, to see out of their eyes, even for half of a blink of just one, to shock us out of the solipsism of the individual and connect with another person. Across years and cultures and ages and ethnicities and religions and every barrier humanity can think of, art allows us that slim chance of the intermingling of souls. To banish the arts as a frivolous pursuit is to banish the possibility of human connection to a similar grave. In short, because we can’t possibly bear to live without it.

Cheers,

[Signature]
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Light Pollution
Andrew Benoit

demi
when past the line has gone the sun
the army of angels cloaked by our glow
Too Bright! Too Bright!
Celestial soldiers claim
So Orion and Cassiopeia flee
like hunted boars, dying slow as dogs overtake them.
Vanquished! Vanished!
No battle or struggle
Our weapons of fluorescence simply
illuminated them to darkness
with no quarter given for the child
who may never lay in grass and trace
with their finger
the spoon in the sky.
Night Orig
Liam Abbott
Sunflowers and Golden Retrievers

Emma McCarthy

Both the sunflower and the golden retriever are some of the first to go when the end of their time grows near. The sunflower fades faster than the rest of the bouquet, the thin yellow petals begin to brown, the seeds begin to crumble, and the stem starts to wilt while the others stand as strong and vivid as ever. The golden retriever’s fur grows white in the face far before the other dogs, the golden barely surviving to the age of 11 and suffers with arthritis while the miniature poodle survives past 15 suffering only with bad breath. They know us for their whole lives, but they only take up a portion of ours. They are loved, they are lost. The sunflower and the golden retriever. Sunflower and goldens. Sun and gold. Sun, gold.

The golden sun shocks my body and jolts me back to life. My body heaves as my lungs fight to inhale a new breath. Revived. My body shivers as the cold sweat drips from my skin. No, not sweat. The water on my body is frozen, no drops fall. How did I get here? I can’t move. I’ve been paralyzed. Paralyzed by fear, by the cold. How did I get here? The world is silent as my brain screams at me to stand.

My fingers push through the ice, breaking the cast that binds them to their lifeless prison. I wiggle my pinky finger; not paralyzed. I will my undead body to rise from the grass, the concrete, the ground. Where am I? It is in this moment I realize I am naked. The cast of the frozen water is the only thing that covers my bare skin, the most translucent clothing a person could put on. My nipples are hard due to
the cold and I’m pretty sure my feet are an unseemly blue. I’m sure my lips are too. I use all of my strength to break through my icy cell and force myself into a sitting position.

From what I can make out through my half opened eyes, I’m sitting on the bank of a river which has frozen over. There’s a crack in the ice just wide enough for a person to squeeze through. The splintering of the frozen water expands past the void of the hole, the cover of the water now thinner and delicate. My body came from there. I brush back some of the snow at my side to reveal a wilting blade of brown. I’m laying in what used to be grass and is now a frozen wasteland. There are no trees in my view, no sense that anything could be alive out here. No people, no animals. A blanket of snow tampers down any greenery. The world is white. Who am I? I don’t remember. Visions of sunflowers and yellow dogs float through my vision. A woman is there. She’s coming towards me.

The sunflower and the Golden Retriever have always been my favorites, they’ve never failed to make me smile. The other flowers in a bouquet don’t seem to compare to the radiant sunflower; the roses too ordinary, the peonies too generic, the foliage just used to fill the empty space. Maybe it’s the multi-use of the seeds: a tasty snack on the sidelines of a baseball game you don’t want to be at or to make emergency flour in the middle of an unforeseen apocalypse. Maybe it’s the fact that when I was really little my mom would sing “You are my sunshine” to me to help me fall asleep, and the daydreaming child in me would hum along, you are my sunflower. The fact that I could have the sun on a strong, neon stem in a blood red vase dying on the counter of a hospital room; left by a griever, forgotten. The memory sweeter than the scent of any flower. But a memory grows bitter now that my mother is in the ground, the nutrient dirt cannot revive the dead and make her grow. Make her come back to me.
I shake my head. I need to get up. I need to find help. I need something that I won’t be able to find, though I am unsure what it is. I don’t even know if I can stand up. I don’t even know how I’m not dead. My body rocks back and forth, trying to create warmth and motion. I need to will away the frost that still holds down my legs and makes them heavy. My arms are weak. I can feel the ice nipping at my nose. There has to be a mild icicle forming there. There’s one on my cheek as well. I taste the ice on my lips, not hydrating as water, but instead salty.

My body feels lighter now as if my bones have fled my body, burying within themselves to hide from the cold. I take this opportunity to shake the ice from my legs and stand, the snow crunching under my feet. I look over where I was laying and I see my body. I watch smoke, steam, water come out of my mouth. There is no more. I see myself, and I am no longer alive. I observe the hands and feet of the corpse. The lips, in fact, blue. The hair is frozen to their back as if they had dragged themself halfway up the bank then collapsed onto it. The legs were pale and pink, fighting to work until the end. The stomach sucked in, empty. The ribs are defined under the skin. I was small. I wanted to cry, but my body felt like ice. Was this real? I couldn’t really be gone. I glanced behind me at the river.

The ice pawed at my heels as I tried to skate along the river. I hadn’t had actual skates in years, so it was more or less graceful falling rather than a clean skate. It had been frozen for months, I hadn’t had the chance to explore it just yet. My mother always used to take me skating on the frozen lake near our house before we moved. Since she’d passed my father had refused to go anywhere with me, as if embarrassed of his only daughter. I thought about him as I skidded along the river, miles from our new shack. He couldn’t look at me the same anymore, I think I remind
him too much of my mother, the grief too strong for him to even make eye contact. I had become his shadow rather than his light, the only light he desired would never be lit again. All I heard was a crackling before I was submerged in water. The ice fell out from under me and I was plunged deep into a still moving river. I had fought at first, clawing at the ice, at my clothes, at my lungs but there was a second where I considered that the river was where I belonged now, I wasn’t scared or angry. I was oddly at peace, the flow of the river taking away my pain as my body began to float. Until my lungs began to burn. I felt my eyes grow wide and I fought at the ice, viciously. I tore off my clothes to save me from being dragged down. Rushing water forced its way down my throat as I resisted the urge to gag. My nails scratching at the surface until they grabbed hold of something. I saw a light at the end of the bank above a rock I had been trying to avoid, the snow slipped through the water where the ice was thin. I wrenched my arm free and dragged my body through the tiny hole I had created. My breath felt haltered, I still couldn’t breath even as I moved up the bank.

Looking away from the river, I pull my own hands in front of myself, pale or clear I could not tell. I looked down at my feet, no longer blue. I felt my face, it was soft, not icy. The cold was gone. All I felt was the warmth from inside of me. As I glanced at my body I found the blue hue of my old self had turned an unseemly color, one I don’t quite recognize. It grew hot then hotter. Could I be on fire? Is this Hell?

My body glows yellow. Golden. The color of hope and creativity. Optimism. I’m brought back to the flowers and the dogs. My mother, I realize, the woman in the vision. The reason my love for life was so profound. She was beautiful and warm. She took the weight of the world on her shoulders to make the light around her shine brighter. She was over-worked and underpaid with a smile forever painted upon
her lips. As she grew older her hair grew whiter and her eyes grew tired, but that smile remained. I knew she was gone, no longer my mother, when she finally got sick. Her tired eyes grew tired tears and her smile faded away. She was gone well before she was dead. I watched her joy from life fade out of her, the months in a hospital bed taking its toll. I watched her decay in front of my eyes, for days on end I would visit, the tears only falling once she was asleep. I was there when she died. The sound of the monitor as jarring as the ambulance which took her from the house. She looked as if she were asleep, I could barely see through cloudy eyes as I went to brush her face, begging her to wake up. The nurses and doctors came sprinting in and escorted me from the room, trying to shy me away from their efforts to save what I knew was already gone. I was screaming, I think. I don’t remember what illness stole her from me, I guess it doesn’t matter now anyway.

Why is it that the most beautiful things seem to fade the fastest? Fields of the yellow flowers fill my dreams as I go to sleep, before they’re invaded with ice. The flower, taller than me, begins to wilt. As beautiful and strong as they are, winter always comes and the sunflower hangs its head in defeat. Soon to be buried under the weight of the snow, forgotten. The next spring new seeds will be planted for another flower to take its place. No one mourns the sunflower, yet the sunflower mourns, and another takes its place.

Her joy faded, her smile faded, her life faded. I remember joy and laughter and smile and then nothing. My life is a blank after that. After she died, my whole world stopped spinning and the sound of laughter was drained from our household. My father wasn’t much better off. His hair was gray, his eyes gray, his life gray. Whatever brightness my mother had brought into the world for him was
gone. I too finally faded. The weight of the world grew too big for my shoulders and I was crushed under it. I lost sight of the things that mattered and my tired eyes grew tired tears and with it my smile faded. I too changed. I too was gone well before the river. I wonder if my father would miss me, or if he too would find himself in a river.

Life is meaningless if you can’t enjoy the little things. Eventually, the Golden’s face grows white and their bones grow feeble and weak. When the dark day comes for the golden to be taken to the vet to be put down its owner mourns. Tears stream from my father’s eyes as he puts to rest the last piece of my mother he had, his hands resting over the dog’s heart. Its owner mourns for the loss of their friend and they never forget. However, the golden is replaced with another, a younger version, meant to last another some 11 years before the process is repeated. The owner mourns, the golden mourns, and another takes its place.

I closed my left eye and observed my corpse through my translucent right hand. That girl is not me. Her face is mine and her body is mine, but a soul we do not share.

I hear barking. I look in front of me, nothing but the white blizzard. I turn slowly, that feeling of floating making me fatigued. I saw the river, but the frozen water was changing. I could see the ice moving along the stilled water, floating away towards the darkened sky as if snow falling back to the heavens. The ice lifted to reveal what was underneath. Bright yellow petals sprouted from the snow, growing taller and taller on thick, green stems. The ice lifted, floating back into the clouds revealing more and more of the lively flowers until it was all I could see. The snow still melted under my feet, but that too dissipated when I took a step into the patch. I was face to face with a field of sunflowers. The river was gone, had faded to nothingness. My corpse was cleared. It was just me and the flowers. I kneel down to caress the
petals of the largest flower closest to me. They are softer than silk. I scratch at the dark seeds in the center and laugh as I watch them fall to the ground.

The barking sounds closer, a deep but not aggressive huff. I look up to come face to face with a golden retriever. Its face was not white and still had the soft squishy puppy skin around its jowls. A smile was plastered on its face, its tongue lolling from its mouth. It got low on its front paws with its tail wagging high in the air and let out another bark. Lucky? Could this be my childhood dog that had passed away a few years ago? He’s not wearing a collar, but he seems to know me. Lucky, I say again. The dog jumps with excitement and flies into the air, landing not so gracefully in a patch of flowers. Lucky! He takes off across the field, barking, begging for me to follow. I take off after him, giggling as the flowers brush my shoulders. This is my absolute dream.

All of a sudden I am frozen in my tracks. A figure walks towards me. Has God finally come to take me? The figure opens its arms wide. I take a couple steps closer. In front of me stands a shorter woman with long dark hair and porcelain skin. She’s wearing a white gown which makes her look like a runaway bride. Her eyes a deep brown and upon her lips is a painted smile. Mom! Before I know what I’m doing my body is in motion. My legs have never moved so quickly in life. I want her embrace, crave it, need it. I need to feel her warm skin against mine. I need her to tell me that it was all going to be okay, that I’m safe now. I come crashing into her, my body against hers. She wraps me in her arms and squeezes harder than I’ve ever felt. Mom. The hot tears spill from my cheeks, splashing on her shoulder. I haven’t felt her warmth in years, it was different from any other warmth I’ve ever felt.

It’s okay, she whispers in my ear, it will all be okay.
The sunflower and the golden retriever. Sunflower and goldens. Sun and gold. Sun, gold. The golden sun has finally, truly reached me. I don’t know how long it will last, the warmth from my mother’s embrace already turning cold, but as for now, I am happy again.
Professor Review

As an honor to the strength of this work’s craftsmanship and insight, Professor Priti Joshi will explore the depth and achievement of the piece.

With her characteristic penchant for coming at things obliquely, Emily Dickinson wrote: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that it is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that it is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?”

I felt frozen as I read Emma McCarthy’s “Sunflowers and Golden Retrievers”; I felt tears welling in my eyes, I longed for my mother, for an embrace, for a golden retriever. Such is the power of this story with its precise details and unerring command of timing.

On the page the story is visually split – italicized and non-italicized sections – a split that, as the story progresses, signals not division but suture. The two “parts” do not separate into “thinking-and-being” or “life-and-death”; rather, each illuminates the other such that the binaries no longer matter – or suffice. The space created from the conjunction of “reality” and imagination is the realm of this story. I’m chilled – and also warmed. Such is the power of this subtly-crafted story by Emma.
Wild Grapes and Hometown Summers
Fletcher Crone
Drowning
Katerina Wearn

There was a question in the request: drown me
A meaning lost in the weight that would drown me.

Was there any more to it than that? To sink,
just as I would expect when you said: drown me.

Or was it to open your lungs to the water, and breath the ocean,
was it to see the beauty underneath that you said: drown me.

Maybe it was the attention—no, the affection, the love.
Was it for praise to rain down that you said: drown me.

Tell me it wasn’t the thought of blame,
on my withering shoulders when you said: drown me.

Do you wonder if my hands are clean, of what I don’t know,
and is that why I was chosen when you said: drown me.

Is there a prayer or a promise within this plea,
a bitter due date on my task set when you said: drown me.

But perhaps, you have no purpose for such things,
so as the climax of this melodrama you request: drown me.
i won’t let the water touch me
Andrew Benoit

i won’t let the water touch me
when I shower today
though my body sticks with sweat
dried and reapplied throughout the day
my skin a white canvas
where memories leave salt behind.
The water will wash away the art
and leave me bare
discarded and alone like the serpent
after the original sin
unaware of what I’ve done
my skin shed, lost down the drain
an apocalypse of water every day.
I will stand in the shower,
careful not to lose any grime
With water all around me,
I will rub my body dry
salt eroding away my face
fragrance of memory
tattooed deep beneath my skin
so that one day, I may bathe.
A Eulogy for a Mermaid
Shoshana Groom

Exhibit #31: The Entangled Mermaid
Specimen MM201, or “The Entangled Mermaid” as it’s colloquially known, was sourced from a bay near Leiden, Holland. It was rescued after becoming entangled in a fence trying to leave a bay after housing construction disrupted the area, and was rehabilitated in captivity. It died shortly after its first display in Leiden. Its discovery has been groundbreaking in the study of mermaids; it has been the model for every anatomical depiction of mermaids in all major marine textbooks since 1912, and its organs have been replicated for study all over the world. Most importantly, it has birthed a love and respect for mermaids in an entire generation, being honored in no less than 9 family crests and being the subject of numerous children’s songs.

The preservation of MM201 was the matter of significant controversy, launching the great 1911 Soul Debate. While there have been anecdotal tales of mermaids acquiring souls (see specimen MM582, or “The Little Mermaid”) a thorough scientific investigation of MM201 led to the monumental discovery that mermaids do not, by default, have souls, and thus burial was not necessary. By studying and admiring its stuffed remains, you the public can help MM201 achieve immortality without a soul through its substantial contributions to the world of science and to public memory.

Follow the yellow footprints to the next exhibit, #32: Styf the Elf
Arbol de la Luna  Fletcher Crone
Clothes Line
Iris Manring

I thought I heard your voice today
In the background of a phone call
Giving grandpa a hard time.
It wasn’t you of course-
But somewhere in my matted heart I hoped for your words.
I have strung memories up on a clothes line
And picked them out one by one
Choosing which ones fit in this piece of art,
Which ones fit on the walls of my home.
Tears over mosaic tiles and rolls of ink-
I need to hang this memory up to dry I think

The grief feels so heavy,
Sopping wet clothes
In moments that don’t feel right.
When I see your face in the passenger seat of the car across from me,
Eating apple sauce and thinking of my mothers sobs in the bathroom that night,
And seeing antiques in restaurants
Knowing they would have caught your eye.
The grief feels so heavy,
But I’ll wear it for a while
Until I think it’s time to hang it up to dry
Heist on the Blue Train

Emma McCarthy

The world whizzes by frame by frame as the blue train rumbles through the blank world. The snow falls and coats the bare and rotting trees, not a river or lake to be seen, any remembrance of one has since been buried. House after house, farm after farm, a girl is carried further from her known universe. Off to a different world. Only from the windows of a train could the world look this beautiful, this peaceful. The sound of the train rattling on the tracks drones her to sleep, only for the sound of the whistle to yank her from her trance. She watches the all too expensive chandeliers - with cobwebs and dust clinging to the fabric, the tassels looked as if they would fall off - wobble above her head, the back and forth lullaby matches the flow of the train. She twirls her wedding ring anxiously, having no need to still wear the damn thing, but the feeling of the cool metal on her finger is comforting. She wonders if she should just throw it away, but the lure to her husband still calls her. The carpet, a pattern as ugly as all hell, draws her attention.

She concentrates on the amalgam of shapes and creates images in her brain. That shape looks like a bunny. That one a hotdog. Hotdog. The girl’s stomach growls with hunger. She places a hand on her navel to try and quiet the whale noises coming from under her shirt. After a few hours into this journey, she has only just woken from a nap. She looks up from her seat, trying to make eye contact with any possible passerbys, hoping one of them will direct her to the food car. Only now does she realize how alone she is on this
train. What used to be an old luxury was now something not many could afford. Not too many people were traveling by train, if at all anymore. She remembers passing a couple other individuals on the way to her seat, but it now feels eerily quiet. The line to get aboard the train stretched the entire platform, so there must be more people here. There are only two other passengers in the car with her: an older man with silver hair flattened under his hat already heavily asleep, and a wild looking woman with a green scarf and her head buried deep in a book - The Mystery of the Blue Train, Agatha Christie. Oh, how she desired some adventure of her own, preferably one that wouldn’t lead to her death or a bizarre mystery on a train, but she wanted something, she craved for more.

The girl wills herself to stand on shaking legs, leaning against the booth to catch her balance. I’d make a poor sea captain, she thinks to herself, her skirts wispy as her stance gets fitted. She wobbles over to the woman with the book and leans down to her level.

“Pardon me, but do you know where I can get some food?” The woman looks up at her wide eyed and pulls her hat lower over her face as if trying to block her from sight. White, silk gloves rest delicately over her hands as she paws at the pearls at her neck. Of course she wouldn’t talk to someone like the girl. “Thank you for nothing,” she says much too loudly under her breath.

She straightens her back as she catches a whiff of hot coffee coming from behind her, and follows the scent, hoping it’ll take her to a desired destination. The girl uses the seat backings to stabilize herself, making her way along as if she were a child on the strangest jungle gym. On her way, she daydreams about snacks. She has gone way too long without eating, the thought of food on a moving vehicle had
made her nauseous, but now sugary treats danced through her skull.

She is startled from her dreams of seductive treats by a hand resting on her lower back. She jumps slightly and whips her head to the man who smiles kindly back, awkwardly reaching from his seats. The girl simply glares and goes to take another step. His hand tightens on her dress.

“Excuse me sir,” She says through gritted teeth, “Remove your hand now, please, if you’d like to keep it.” She returns his sweet smile with too many teeth showing, like a dog growling, about to fight.

He raises his hands slowly above his head and shrugs, “I just thought you should look up.”

The girl raises her eyes to the door in front of her. Emergency Exit only, it reads in bright red letters. She lets out a frustrated sigh. She is at the back of the train and has apparently been walking in the wrong direction.

“Thanks,” She says as she slowly turns around, trying not to stumble or lose her grip on the chairs.

“Might I ask what you’re looking for? Maybe I could help.” His head tilts to the side, in question. Only now does she get a good look at his face as she stands over him. His blue eyes sparkle brighter than the ocean. His long, brown hair falls gently over his face, it’s just long enough that he has to push it out of his eyes. He still smiles sweetly, his teeth as white as the snow that falls outside the window. His nose is quaint and pointed at the end. He is young, maybe a few years older than the girl, likely has just made it into industrial life. He looks simple, yet beautiful.

“Um, yeah, I’m looking for food. Food of any kind, really.” The train makes a slight jolting movement and she has to stomp her foot in front of herself to refrain from falling on her ass. She shrinks closer to the floor, her skirt now covering
her old shoes.

He shakes his head slightly, “I’m sorry, ma’am, they came by with food an hour or so ago. They won’t come back out until dinner.” The girl’s face grows pale. Shit. “However,” he continued, “I snatched a little extra from the cart. The woman seemed to like me and gave me an extra treat.” He holds up a wrapped napkin so that she can see it and get a glimpse of what is inside. A croissant. The delicate scent shoved its way up her nose and almost forced her legs to give out. All she could do was stop herself from drooling. This was all she could have asked for.

The girl recenters herself and her footing, trying to sound nonchalant, “Um yeah, I’ll take it if you’re sure you don’t want it.”

He lets out a laugh, as sweet as a bell, “From the look on your face, you definitely need it more than I do.” Had I stopped myself from drooling?

She tries to smile and refrain from the blood rushing to her face. “Th..thank you,” She started to take the napkin from him then added, “sir” just to make sure she sounded polite and truly thankful.

His eye contact never brakes. He holds out his other hand, “You don’t have to call me sir, my name is Clyde.”

The girl looks at his hand, large and calloused. She wonders what he does for a living, something on his feet, maybe. She glances back at his face then grasps his hand and shakes, “Bonnie,” she replies.

“Bonnie, would you consider joining me while you enjoy that croissant I so kindly gave up to you?” His eyebrows raise as if he’s trying to play some sort of game. She recognizes the look on his face, it reminded her of her husband. He always got that look right before he dragged her along to witness his crimes and threatened her to be silent
about them. Clyde shifts over one seat and pats the one by the aisle. She has to be careful with this one.

Skeptically, Bonnie takes her place beside him. She gives him a small nod then gently unwraps the croissant from the napkin. Never would she have thought to be eating such a delicacy, not in this setting. Bonnie grasps it with two hands as if she were afraid it would sprout legs and run away. It is still warm; she lifts her pinkies as high as an Englishman drinking tea and takes a bite. Absolutely heavenly. Chocolate runs down her lips, she cleans the spill with her tongue, not wanting to waste the flavor. How long has it been since I’ve had chocolate? She lets a moan escape from her chocolate stained lips.

Clyde smiles at her, “That good, huh?”

Bonnie nods enthusiastically, “Mhmm.” Once her stomach has quieted and settled, she places the half eaten dessert on the napkin on her lap. She makes sure that her knees are squeezed together tightly and her skirt hovers just above her boots - boots which were falling apart at the seams. She couldn’t remember the last time she had bought herself new clothes. These boots were a gift from her husband the last winter before he had been incarcerated, more than a year ago. These were one of the only gifts he had given her. She knocks the heels together, half hoping they would just fall apart. She looks back up quickly, hoping Clyde wouldn’t catch sight of her boots. He was so well dressed, he had on a black suit and vest, no tie hung from his neck. A hat hangs from his seat back. He came from money. Bonnie had come from nothing. She could barely afford to eat.

Sure enough he notices her boots. “So what’s a pretty little thing like yourself doing on a train to nowhere?”

Bonnie smiles in response, the smile no longer lighting
up her eyes. “It’s not nowhere for me, I’m heading to Joplin.” She holds her head higher, feigning confidence.

“Missouri?” His head tips back as he lets out a sharp laugh, “Bonnie, I’d hope so, I don’t think this train goes anywhere after Missouri. That’s my stop too.”

His laugh sets off a sting in her eyes, “Why are you going to Missouri?” she shifts her knees closer to the aisle and takes another bite of the croissant.

“Business. And you?” The snow had stopped falling out the window, the blanket that remains coating the ground looks like something you would want to wrap yourself in. The light reflecting off of the snow contrasts Clyde’s dark clothes. From this angle, he looks like a dark figure, or a shadow. He looks out of place; the devil. A beautiful, enticing devil.

“Just trying to get away from it all. Nothing for me anymore.” Bonnie’s head bows as she takes another bite of her treat. It was true, after her husband went to prison for the robbery - which he claims was for her -, she couldn’t afford to live by herself. This ticket on the blue train was the last of her money, she just had to escape her husband. He’d come after her if he found out she chose to pay for food over the cost of his bail. He had his ways of escape, he’s already tried, but no prison would hold him for long. He believed he controlled her, she was nothing more than a slave to that man. Sometimes she missed his warm, strong touch, only to be jolted back to life, reminded of how poorly he treated her. She’d kill him, if she had to, but for now she made her way to Missouri; her best, and only option left.

“You have a ring.” There’s no question in his voice.

Her hands had gone to her wedding ring as she twisted it while in thought, drawing attention to the one jewel she owned. “Yes.”
“Married?”
“Not quite.”
He straightened his posture to appear taller. “What do you mean, not quite?”
“I am married, but he’s in prison. It’s complicated. I’m leaving him, I just can’t quite…”
His voice softened slightly “You can’t get rid of him completely. Hence the ring.”
She meets Clyde’s eyes. “Yes.”
His right hand reached towards his coat pockets. They hovered for a second before he rested his hands on his knees. “He hurt you.” She couldn’t tell if he meant to say he broke her heart or physically hurt her, though the answer to both is yes. She couldn’t bring herself to say anything in response. She looks back down at her lap and twists her ring again.

He watches her while she remains quiet. Bonnie catches his eyes running over her body, inspecting her face, her hands, her skirts. He gently places his hand on her chin and pulls it slightly to turn and look at him. After a moment of pause he finally says, “Well, Bonnie, you could join me in my business if you’d like.” His smile is so tempting, she wants to say yes to anything he says.

She shakes off his hand that had lingered on her face for a touch too long, “What’s your business got for a girl to do?” As a woman, she wasn’t used to men offering her positions of any kind if it didn’t involve sex.

Clyde leans back and crosses his arms over his chest, “Bonnie, in my industry I’m the boss, so you can do whatever you’d like. I need help with transportation and counting of our funds and profits. You can even travel with me. My business takes me all around the south.” His eyes meet hers again, “What’d you say?”
Travel. The allure of the promise to travel the country and to get paid doing it called to her. The promise almost as seductive as the man’s lips. He ran his tongue over his bottom lip and gently bit it as if deep in thought, awaiting a response he likely already knew the answer to. How could anyone turn him down?

“One week with me and I’m sure we could get you some new boots.” He raises one eyebrow and holds out his hand for her to shake.

“Alright, Clyde, I accept. But on one condition.” Bonnie takes another bite of her croissant.

His eyes grow wide for a second, and then he rests into a smile. His right eyebrow raises just slightly. Likely no one challenges him like that. He must’ve been intrigued, “And what would that be, Bonnie?”

She holds up what is left of the croissant and smiles, “To provide more of these treats.” She plops the rest of it in her mouth and wipes her hands on her lap.

Clyde lets out a deep belly laugh, “That, my girl, I can do.”

Bonnie lets out a laugh too, more of a giggle. She can’t hide her excitement. This business sounds like a true adventure. Exactly what she needs to get her mind off her husband. An exciting journey with a partner, a true partner, someone she can actually work with. She looks up at the man sitting next to her. He truly is gorgeous, he looks so kind, she trusts him and wants to know more about him. Clyde pats her thigh with his hand, careful not to ruffle the long skirts.

“Now, Bonnie,” He says very softly and sweetly, “Are you ready for your first act as a business woman?” He ushers her out to the aisle.

Her eyes grow wide, “I mean sure, what do I have to
do?” She stands again on shaky legs, gripping the chairs for support.

Clyde grabs his hat and puts it on top of his brown hair, smushing it down to cover more of his face. “Hang on, Dear.” His arm reaches casually towards the ceiling to pull on the emergency stop cord. In an instant his body is pressed against hers as she struggles to stand against the pressure of the train’s brakes. Bonnie sinks further and further into her body, trying not to be thrown to the floor. The locomotive comes to a screeching halt, causing many passengers to exclaim in fear or confusion. Luggage spills into the aisle as passengers struggle to hold on to their own seats. Bonnie holds onto Clyde until the train stops fully, his large hand again resting on the small of her back. She feels a strange, hard bulge in his left coat pocket. When she looks up, those glowing blue eyes are staring back into her.

“Are you ready, Bonnie?” Before she can answer, Clyde was pulling two pistols from his coat. He holds them up at shoulder height and starts making his way towards the front of the train. Bonnie hides behind him in his shadow, trying to make herself as small as possible. Is this really happening? Her breath catches as she struggles to keep calm. He comes upon the first passenger, the nervous woman who had been in Bonnie’s train car a few seats behind where she had been sitting earlier. “Excuse me, ma’am,” he said with a grin, “I’m going to have to ask you to leave all your valuables in your chair and vacate to the back of this vehicle, if you would be so kind.”

With a gun pointed at the woman’s face she scurries out of her seat and practically sprints to the other end of the train. She leaves her book, which she had almost finished, and her pearls scattered around her seats. You deserve this, Bonnie thinks to herself.
“Pick those up for me, would you Bonnie?” He nods his head towards the jewelry on the cushions and makes his way down the train, excusing every passenger from their seats and making the same commands. The passengers listen to the man with the soft voice, as does Bonnie. Each aisle they pass Bonnie becomes more and more confident in herself, her posture straightens and her breathing settles. A cool calm spreads over her body as her muscles struggle to carry all of the riches.

When they finally make it to the front of the train, bags and wallets and pearls are spilling from Bonnie’s arms onto the locomotive floor. Clyde had the sense to shove some of the valuables into emptied bags of the other passengers. There were more people aboard the train than she remembered, a few stragglers who had likely taken their place in the front. He asks her to stand watch over the passengers while he goes to “handle” the conductor. She has a fair understanding of what that might entail, but wasn’t going to press or ask questions. Without a pistol in hand and no weapons in sight, unless you count the dangerous amount of riches, it was lucky that none of the passengers got brave or made attempts to harass her. However, Bonnie still holds her head high as if daring someone to challenge her.

A gunshot went off behind her. Some of the passengers scream and Bonnie holds back a flinch. She stands strong, her grip tightening on the valuables in her arms until she feels Clyde’s breath on the nape of her neck. Her hair rises to the touch. “Face me, Bonnie.” Again she obeys. She hasn’t realized how tall he is when standing up. He towers over her at least half a foot, elongating his limbs and torso, turning him into a true shadow. He is smiling wide, a new sparkle in his eyes, something she hasn’t witnessed before. True enjoyment. The adrenaline rush people risk their
lives to feel; he has captured it in this moment. Her eyes are drawn to the bright red color of blood that now painted the collar of his shirt, he doesn’t seem to notice or care.

Bonnie doesn’t break eye contact as she lifts her arms full of treasures, “Did I pass, boss?” She raises her left eyebrow, she knows very well that she has in fact pleased him.

His smile widens and there is something new in his eyes, hunger. He raises his pistols over her shoulders to keep the passengers at bay. Clyde steps closer to her so that their faces are inches from one another. He whispers slowly, “Yes, Miss Bonnie, I’d say you passed.”

At that moment Bonnie closes the space between them, allowing everything in her arms to spill to the ground as she cups his face in her hands. His lips are warm and soft and taste better than any croissant ever could. She wants this, she wants him to last forever. This excitement, this nervousness, this adrenaline that now powered her, she couldn’t let it slip through her fingers.

After an eternity Clyde pulls away, his lips still spread as if waiting for Bonnie’s to fill the gap, “What do you say we take our things and go?”

“Go where?”

He slides open the door at the front of the train and gestures to the white, open plains, “Go anywhere.”

Bonnie scoops up most of the items she had dropped and jumps from the train to the powdered snow. The wind nips at her cheeks and bites at her boots, but she couldn’t care less. Bonnie finally had another purpose. Clyde takes off running at a slow pace, she can see a short, black car off in the distance under the only tree for miles; a getaway plan. He is a smart man, cold and calculated and charming. She looks back at the train to see the passengers pressed up against the back windows, in complete and utter shock. Only
then did she realize that the train is blue. From the engine to the caboose, the train is covered in a dark navy coat of paint. The train, which used to be of grandeur, is now run down, the blue paint beginning to peel, the metal beginning to rust. No wonder she could afford the ticket. Bonnie looks down at the new riches that filled her arms and back at the train. Bonnie huffs, then lets out a laugh, more of a cackle. Then she turns and takes off after Clyde, whooping and yelling the whole way.
Common Paintbrush

Bismi Kado
By the time I felt his heavy form fall in next to mine the neon numbers across from me read 2:33 AM. His soft breathing told me he was asleep faster than I had the time to ask how he was, what he’d been up to, where he’d been. I just felt the space fill and the ache in my stomach start to subside. The ache of the unknown turned into the chewing sensation of guilt, syncopated with the slow steady rhythm of his heartbeat. Cursory reactions of wincing, scrunching my spine under the covers, biting the inside of my cheek, trying not to create any motion he might detect. I knew that if he felt the sense of responsibility to console me he would get frustrated all over and leave again. I didn’t want him gone.

The past four hours in the house felt like a trial by fire. When he threw the door closed I felt the full force against the inside of my skull, and at first I just sat there. It was strangely peaceful, a room suddenly coaxed in silence. My mind slipped into nothingness, Animal Planet playing noiselessly on our television. I held my head in my hands. I created craters out of my palms and cupped my cheeks into their hold, breath shallow, eyes glazed. Time passed and I sat there, first held deep within my own sadness, but soon I was transfixed on the television. Fluttering birds. The tiniest insects. Migration, death, rebirth. The more distracted I became the more the grief became a bodily sensation. Trying to deny it took a toll on my body. After a while the tears flowed, but it was only after I’d
replied him in my head. I wasn’t sure he could ever touch me again. I wasn’t sure if I could look in the mirror without the urge to break it. Covering them with sheets, blankets, I didn’t want a body anymore. Just for a little while, I’d like to be a floating entity. Something above it all, floating like a cloud, a listless existence without a need for a who, why, when, where. I wanted to be organic in thought, shape, form. Something tells me this is something I once had and can never return to.

I still have his expression in the front of my mind, the disgust and disappointment ate at me like ants pulling bits of me away, hauling all of it away to their little hills where they tore me apart with their brothers and sisters. I fizzled and drowned in his gaze. There was something about it, something that said ‘It’s your fault’, and there wasn’t anything in me that could defend myself anymore.

The last thing I wanted was for him to feel guilt. The facts were simple: I didn’t need his consent. I didn’t even need to tell him if I didn’t want to. The moment I understood how complicated it made everything for him, I regretted telling him.

“You know it’s not the right time for this. You know how hard it would be.” I remember telling him, knowing he’d admonish me for even thinking about it. But his venom was beyond what I could’ve expected. Perhaps because I was expecting nothing, maybe I got exactly what I wanted from him, the guillotine. His sense of righteousness in the eye of my life’s biggest storm yet. I might’ve wanted pity at one time, but as soon as I saw the creases in his gaze I realized the only thing he could’ve given me was shame.

His mom was pro-choice, father pro-life, and I knew what I was potentially getting into when I broke the news. We’d just never even thought about it, together for months
and months, inseparable. I understood how out of touch we both were then. He didn’t have to say it, it was written all over his face. This is something we’ll never come back from.

Have your foundations of another person ever been so shaken that you wake up out of this pipe dream of your idea of them to a version of them you could only love in spite of yourself? I’d felt that with him for the first time long ago, when the words he said to me felt like a script he’d taken out of a bad movie. Cheesy, borrowed, meaningless. When we stood in line and he commented on the disgust he felt about people bigger than him, people smaller than him, people who walk too slow or kiss too much in public, chew too loud, laugh too hard, smile a bit too much. When I found myself buying plan B biweekly because he didn’t want to use condoms. When I asked him to chip in and he blushed like a little boy. All the times I knew, I just didn’t let myself think.

My eyes upturned and I found myself watching a great migration of Monarch butterflies fluttering across my screen in droves. Swarms of delicate orange wings fluttering in syncopated rhythm I was floating with them. I was smiling, I was laughing at myself. Why did I always feel so small?

After a while the hunger pangs hit. Realizing I never made dinner, I inched to the kitchen and got busy. I started snacking light, crackers, peanut butter, occasionally picking up a truffle and chewing at it, masticating until my jaw ached. But the hole in my stomach was widening and nothing was filling it. Stale cereal, frozen bagels, soggy takeout, whatever I could find I was practically inhaling it and I didn’t feel any fuller. I searched for more until I’d run us through of just about everything but condiments, digging through his gluten free oreos and old marshmallows. The treats I’d bought him were not excluded from my binge. Nothing was off limits, I didn’t even think about what he’d say when he
got back when he saw the carnage of our small studio apartment kitchen. I drank half a bottle of wine, smoked a bowl, took my meds and fell asleep before the clock hit twelve.

I didn’t dream of his face. His vindictive fucking face. I didn’t think about the first time he told me he loved me, the way he’d massage the sides of my head when I told him I’d had a headache, the coarseness of his calloused hands when he tried to make the time slip faster, faster until I was waiting for him to stop. Until I was waiting for the silence and the submission and the acknowledgement of effort; a forehead kiss, throw me a towel, babe. At first he’d made me laugh but looking back I wasn’t sure if that was because I was trying to seem like a more laughter-prone person or if I thought he was genuinely funny. I don’t know why I thought he could give me the world. His was so small. But together, our worlds together, they looked better together.

It wasn’t like I didn’t have any self respect. I wasn’t in denial, I knew what he wanted from me. In that respect I was a realist. I was more than willing to put myself out for him, go out of my way, trip and stumble to be there when he wanted me.

And here he came, waking me from sleep for a brief moment.

And after it all, I still didn’t want him to leave. It wasn’t about who we’d been or everything that had happened but the truth was I liked having another source of warmth, another empty vessel. He was hollow as me, for a moment I thought he was what I deserved.

I felt every single pore in my body expand at once. My eyes widened, feeling something coming on, whether it be the sudden force of my bladder flooding over or my bowels emptying I could feel every part of my body committing
to some atrocity that I had no control over. With gripping force it was as if my insides were turning themselves out and seeping through the tiny holes in my skin. It felt initially like sweating profusely, like waking up and being drenched in a clammy personal rainstorm from inside out. But immediately I recognized what was flowing out of my wasn’t water. Sweat would’ve dripped but this coagulated, thick like syrup. It settled against my skin like jelly and all at once I was covered head to toe. I tried moving, tried scraping it off, getting myself free from it, but my eyes and mouth involuntarily shut, and I found myself still. Where once I was making an effort to keep myself from moving an inch, now I was clamped shut in every joint, every muscle fiber refused to budge. I was acutely aware of every part of myself, the jelly hardening around my body was excreting from my head and drenching my hair until I felt as if I were in my own little swimming pool, surrounded by the warmth of my insides being allowed to float with me. The gel just kept getting thicker, and the more nauseated and disturbed I felt the more I realized I was feeling less and less as the liquid was swallowing me whole. I was absorbing into something new.

In moments I wasn’t human at all, all of the parts of me that made me separate from everything around me turned into shapelessness, I didn’t know where I started and where I ended. All I could feel was this same steady stream of consciousness, the dripping drone of disdain and denial as my skin dissolved. I imagined all the times he saw me as gross, the way he cringed at the sight of period blood or treated my body like public transit, a filthy last resort when he couldn’t afford an uber, reliable but repugnant. When I kissed him in the mornings he would dart his head away and blame my morning breath. It took my body so long to
to feel comfortable around him, even now performing regular body functions felt like a valid reason for him to run away. If he woke and saw this he’d never want to see me again.

Everything happening to me registered in my brain as terror, disgust, but as the particles in my body began to shift and mutate I released myself from gripping so tightly, from being so frightened. I could no longer feel anything around me besides myself and the amorphous blob I had turned into. And I decided to let go. What was happening wasn’t in my control. If my goop got on him, so be it.

I floated in my shell. The thick fluid surrounding me felt softer than cream and my mind ruminated on the miracle of my transformation. I felt everything shifting, my arms progressing back into wide flaps that cast a beautiful orange glow against the warm light filtering in through the curtains. I was warmer and safer than I’d ever been.

Before I could even grasp what I was and what was happening, a crack startled me from my daydreams of sunshine and nectar. The tear in my sack forced me to open my eyes to see that most of the fluid was dry now, hard and peeling off against my body with every move I made. The sudden whiff of fresh air ignited the desire to be free. I tore the slit wider, forcing my arms out and my body down. With one heavy drop I felt myself come loose. I arched my back, shivering at the exposed air and twittling my newly developed proboscis, wiping my face clear of any fragments of my old home. I was brand new.

Looking down, I recognized the figure beside me, but only barely. I remembered my old body. My old reality, but only as a distant dream. And here was this man. I was going to wait for him to awaken on his own so he could see me in my newfound glory, so he could pet my wings and admire everything I’d worked so hard to become. So he could see my changes, my final form. But the more I looked the more hungry I became. I bet his blood is sweet.
jealousy eats me from the inside
till I’m just a sack of flesh
I pretend I have bones
because that’s what people are used to
a whole person
because I have forgotten how to be whole
if I ever was
cobbling together a body
from old roadsigns and douglas fir cones
other people’s coffee drinks
and breath that turns to steam in cold air
fragments of moments make me up
memories triggered by music
whispering
I just want to be a better person.
All My Stupid, Selfish
Poems Start with I
Annika Freeling

I want to be needed
By someone who confuses need with love.

In my worst moments
I want to hang the moon for someone.
In my best moments I don’t think I ever could.
At 2:30 in the morning, all alone in the biggest bed I’ve ever owned,
I want to be someone’s world
Even-- especially-- if they aren’t mine.

Beg me not to leave.
Break without me.
A Bag of Clothes
Iris Manring

The matriarchs of our family
Went through your closet full of clothes today.
They took out everything
And passed onto me
What they did not need.

Now I sit in my room
With a bag of your clothes on my floor.
I am too afraid to touch them
Because they smell like you.
I do not want to remove them from the bag
Put them on over my head,
And ruin what is so perfect right now.

I know the smell will fade no matter what.
I know there isn’t much point in delaying it,
But for now,
Just for a bit
I will let the smell of you linger in my room,
And let the memories of soft hands and cinnamon rolls waft
on after it.
Untitled
Emma Hahn
Phoenix ran to the little gazebo beside the forest and dropped himself onto the wooden bench, frowning at the ground.

He whipped his head up at the sound of footsteps. “Mind if I sit?” a familiar voice inquired. Akasma was standing at the entrance.

“Uh – sure,” he stammered.

She settled herself down beside him. “I know what you’re going through,” she confessed quietly while staring at a pole across from her as if it contained all the secrets of the world.

Phoenix glanced down at his knees, then his eyes wandered to his right, where a small patch of white roses hung over the railing like tiny streetlamps.

He carefully snapped one of the flowers from its stem, then broke off the thorns.

Akasma gasped quietly. “Phi?” she whispered, using her nickname for him.

Phoenix regarded her. “I know what roses mean to you,” he told her. “I accidentally read parts of your diary, without realizing it was a diary.” He took a deep breath and pressed his lips tightly together. “I read about your father giving you a rose. And your description of him in his funeral coffin.”

Akasma watched Phoenix silently, struggling to process his words.

“But you’re stronger than you think,” he went on.
“There are so many people who wouldn’t have made it through what you did. You shouldn’t see yourself as weak afterward; you should see yourself as strong for getting through it. This rose is so delicate, but it still has thorns to protect it. From a distance, it looks like it doesn’t have any thorns since I broke them off, but when you look closely, you can still see the bumps. You’re still strong, even when you don’t think you are, even when you don’t feel like you are.” He held the rose toward Akasma. She smiled slightly as she took it, and he smiled back.

A moment passed, then she asked, “What’s with the necklace?”

Phoenix dropped his head to look at his necklace and slowly lifted his hands to it. It didn’t seem like much – just a simple chain of wooden, barrel-shaped beads on strings of white yarn.

He pulled the necklace over his head and contemplated it. “My older sister gave it to me when I was thirteen. She noticed I was struggling with depression, so she made it for me in her shop class.”

Akasma raised her eyebrows at him. “How old was she?”

“Fourteen.”

“Only?!”

The ghost of a smile rested on Phoenix’s lips. “You realize you’re fifteen, right?”

Akasma’s mouth lifted slightly at the corners. “I rest my case.” They laughed together, unable to help themselves. When they had calmed down, Akasma wondered aloud, “Why isn’t there any pendant?”

Phoenix’s fingers played listlessly with the necklace, but his eyes didn’t leave Akasma’s face. “Well, my sister told me to wear this every day, as a reminder to always have
hope. But then, I wore it so much, the string broke, and I lost the pendant. I was really upset, but my sister said – I think it was, ‘You’re in charge of how you feel, so... choose happiness.’ Yeah, that was it. There was also this quote that resonated with me – I mean, not to make me feel better about the necklace, just in general. Uh, so, it was, ‘It may be stormy now, but it never rains forever.”

Akasma smiled softly at Phoenix. “I like that. That’s a good quote. And I like what your sister said, about choosing happiness. I don’t know if that’s actually possible, but it’s a cool idea.”

Phoenix paused, then asked, “Can I give you a hug?” Akasma laughed gently. “Yeah.”

They embraced each other and stayed that way for a while. When they finally pulled away, Phoenix told Akasma, “I think we can help each other out. But, with or without me, you can get through almost anything, because you have hope. That’s really important. It’s the first step to getting better.”

Akasma and Phoenix talked for the rest of the evening, as the stars and crescent moon slowly became visible through the openings in the gazebo, giving light to the dark night.
Heat Haze Tumor
Rowan Baiocchi

August bleeds through my fingers in
Sticky sweet rivers. It stains my palms
Bruise purple and cherry red as I pull my hands away
From the open wound of Summer in
My side. Maybe I will learn to
One day love the summer heat haze and
The acidic nostalgia that eats at the edges of thought and
Maybe. Just maybe I will call summer a
Friend. The way I did in elementary school on
My way home from a half-there final day,
But I don’t know when this wound will close and
I can’t afford to give it the hope I afford
So much else. You can only touch a hot stove
So
Many
Times before you realize it will hurt you. I can only
Go through so many summers aching for people
Who do not ache for me
Before I have to cut it out from me
Excise the tumor;
Suture the wound, even as I feel August’s pulse
Slowing under my sticky fingers. Even as the
Heat haze clears. Even as I am myself
Again.
Guitar Man
Bismi Kado
Professor Review

As an honor to the strength of this work’s craftsmanship and insight, Professor Elise Richman will explore the depth and achievement of the piece.

Guitar Man captures a moment of solitary immersion. It’s cool blue and violet palette evokes the quiet of night and tranquil emotion. This is an inward moment, the guitarist looks downward at his instrument, engaged in focused strumming. The artist represents the room with stains, washes, and dabs of liquid color, soaking the watercolor paper and manifesting melancholy light, intimate space, and gestural form.

Color and process literally saturate the picture plane while infusing it with a meditative mood and implication of vibrations of sound. This is an image of private connection with the creative spirit in the still quiet of an evening spent making music at home. This painting not only represents a man and his guitar it also pays homage to moments of pure concentration when melody and making are all that matters in this ever spinning and demanding world.
“You didn’t throw it all away, did you?” Her question slid into my half-conscious mind, took its time wandering about, and eventually settled in the front of my head just above my eyes.

My mouth wouldn’t work, so I decided to answer by tracing my hand down her spine from where I lay beneath her. The motion took far too much effort, but I hoped it came across as properly contemplative. There was little else I could do.

Slowly, reluctantly, sleep slipped from my grasp as it had been initially loosened by her first words of the morning. I thought about chasing after it for a moment, but the idea seemed pointless and taxing. Abandoning that intent, I turned again to the question which had managed to press itself further against my mind, demanding far too much attention for such a trifling thing. Yet it pressed forward with all the determination of a seamstress’ needle through tough cloth, so harsh I thought it might force its way right through my forehead.

I turned to my side, bringing her with me so that she was now curled into my chest. It warranted a small noise of discontent, but after a moment of wiggling and adjustment she seemed to settle once more into stillness.

Foolishly, I had thought facing sideways would give the needle less of an angle, but with the smell of her hair
pressed to my nose, and the feeling of her light breaths in the small space between us, I had only succeeded in making it worse. Her question, now sharp and large as a knife against my skull, caused me to clench my eyes and tense my jaw.

If she noticed, there was no indication of it.

I don’t know how long she would’ve waited for me to speak. Both of us sitting in silence, obviously awake with our unnatural stillness. She had the patience of gods which made me itchy all over, like a child being stared down by a disapproving parent. Sometimes a lack of words provides the most pressure, until you crack and break the silence by admitting whatever horrible thing you must have done. But my mind broke before my mouth could take the chance.

A white blindness shot through me, stealing the air from my lungs, the strength from my muscles, the thoughts from my mind, and the sight from my eyes. Everything touching me felt like it had been charged full of electricity, slipping between my layers of skin for fun. The rustle of sheets as I shoved her away from me caused the sensation of sand to fill my ears. I fell twice in my efforts to stand, half-aware that I wasn’t being offered any help. I didn’t blame her. I must have looked disgusting in my gaunt nakedness, whimpering like an injured animal, crawling my way across the room, reaching for the truth.

I dug into a drawer, under some papers, and into a bag within a box. My hands were trembling the entire time, I could barely see anything I was touching, but I knew it by heart.

She must’ve watched me take it, but maybe I am allowed to hope that she looked away.

It always feels as though it takes longer than it should to kick in. My agony is prolonged just until my breathing begins to cut short... and then everything reaches a plateau.
I look briefly over the side before being swept back with a gasping breath of relief.

Time seemed to rewind as everything played out in reverse. I grew steady enough to pull myself into a chair where the fabric felt truly soft. My sight, sense, and breath returned, as though the peaceful morning had never been disturbed... if not for the weeping.

I wish I could say I apologized, I ran to her and begged forgiveness. Unfortunately, that is not how the mind works in such a state. I sat for a while across from her, considering. I took in the white sheet and her velvet cocoa skin, the morning light and whispering curtains, the shadows cast across it all while she cried, and I turned to rifle through the desk once more, this time rising with much more innocent implements: my pencil and sketch pad.

It couldn't have been more than ten minutes before she eventually looked up to see me working away. Our eyes met but it frightened me so I broke contact and continued to work. The next time I looked up she was no longer crying, but she was still looking down, almost as if mourning. It is cruel how beautiful some people can be while in pain.

The rest of the day carried the same eerie silence as the beginning had. She left for work without a word, and I copied my sketch onto canvas before painting it, remaining at my desk that sat across from the now empty bed.

She came back to find me on the floor, which was not all that uncommon, much to my embarrassment.

She gathered me up easily, and rested me on the sofa in the living room. She set about making dinner and I followed the motions with my eyes, unwilling to move more of my body. I could only finish half of what she had served me, but she seemed satisfied enough. After cleaning up, she
disappeared into the bedroom, leaving me on an empty sofa in an empty room.

I don’t know how long it was before I realized she wasn’t intending to come back for me. I was meant to stay on the sofa that night, but as evening got darker I knew I wouldn’t last.

The sensation of a thousand ants began dancing along my skin as I stretched an arm out to push myself up. Leaning heavily on the wall, I stumbled my way to the door, stopping in front of it. Did I need to knock on my own bedroom door? I settled for opening it slowly, giving her plenty of time to express dissatisfaction with my presence, but there was no vocal response.

What surprised me was that she was not in bed, but sitting at the desk, where I spent most of my day, staring at my painting. She studied it with squinting eyes, like an art teacher might, or someone who had noticed a fly trapped under a layer of paint.

I wanted to go to her. I wanted to look at the painting with her and see what she might be seeing. But the bed was closer, and my legs were beginning to give, so I let myself fall towards it, taking the tedious amount of time I needed to crawl and drag myself onto my proper side.

I was afraid to ask what she thought of it, and when I finally got the question out I could barely hear her voice over the rushing of blood in my ears. But I closed my eyes and let her words carry themselves to me.

She said it was sad. She said she didn’t like it, but it was good. She said she hated that it was good and she wished that it was bad.

I said, me too.

Then, finally, I answered her question from the morning. I told her I obviously hadn’t thrown everything away but
I also hadn’t gotten more. I told her that was the last of it. I told her I was no longer going to be a painter because of it, at least, a good painter. I spoke of my fears, and told her that she might hate me if my paintings were bad.

And as I continued through my hopeless list of truths, I felt the needle returning inside my head, this time with nothing trivial to blame. I kept talking, but for the life of me, I can’t remember anything else I said.

I know that at some point she joined me on the bed. Her arms wrapped around me where I lay curled in on myself, and her hands ran through my hair, across my skin, as if she were attempting to smother the fire I felt with her own body. She attempted to comfort me. Her words were pointless, but the fact that they were there was entirely crucial.

I had hoped sleep would carry me through the worst of it. Unfortunately, the night was restless, for I am wicked.

... And my ending is despair,
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
  As you from crimes would pardoned be,
  Let your indulgence set me free.

*Italicized excerpts are from William Shakespeare’s’s The Tempest*
A7.
Sometimes the world feels too small.

B6.
It is uncanny to be in a new city, a new state, a new home
Yet find familiarity just around the block,
or working next door, speaking a language
like your own from another timeline,
each interaction leaving you wondering if you missed
the buttons in their eyes.

C5.
Sometimes the sky looks as if I could just
reach up and stroke the clouds,
as if they are nothing but a blanket over my head as I
lay in bed after school and pretend to be
anywhere else,
and suddenly the vast expanse of space doesn’t feel
quite so far away.

D4.
Sometimes I count the checkered lights,
windows in an apartment building,
snapshots of a million different lives all lived
in the space of a couple hundred square feet,
And I can’t help but feel I’ve already lived
every single one
as time seems to freeze,
shrink and expand in the same breath until
it is all-encompassing and infinite,
the past and the future everywhere and nowhere,
and the clock on the wall has no meaning.

Each tick is a footstep, a choice of direction
in search of purpose, a circle
in which you turn to move somewhere else,
turn to go sideways, only to discover
such a direction does not exist.

E3.
I ran halfway around the world with the goal
of understanding the person I see in mirrors,
Yet now when I look up at the trees
I see an inverted map I’ve already studied for so many years
that I walk it each night as I sleep.

F2.
Perhaps the world is too small,
or perhaps I’m too afraid to step out of the clock
and fall down a rabbit hole
and learn that

G1.
Wonderland isn’t what I told myself it would be.
A young girl swears at her mother, without understanding its meaning. Abruptly, she finds herself on the ground, her father pinning her down. The carpet rubs against her cheek, absorbing the tears running down from the corners of her eyes, as he presses her into the floor. He’s screaming in her ear, louder than she’s ever heard him scream before, but she doesn’t hear a word. “I’ll never say it again,” she sobs. She doesn’t understand. What had she done wrong?

Her mother places a bowl of macaroni and cheese in front of her. As she chews, her mouth slowly fills with revulsion. She sets the bowl aside on the mahogany coffee table. “Really?” her dad asks derisively. “Come on, just eat it, for God’s sake!” She stares down morosely at the carpet. The same place he’d pinned her to the floor when she was a little kid. A sudden chill sweeps over her. But he refuses to let it go. “You know, you’re wasting a lot of food. And Mama worked hard to make it for you. It’s pretty disrespectful to turn it down.” She leaps up from the chair, rips into her bedroom, and slams the door. “JULIETTE!” His heavy footsteps thump up the stairs two at a time, like a charging rhino. He gets right in her face. “DO NOT SLAM THE DOOR! EVER! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME? EVER!” She nods faintly, unwilling to give him the satisfaction but resigned to it.
As she reads her book, her face begins to beam, and a squeal mounts inside her. Finally, she flings the book down, too fervent to continue. She gallops across the room, back and forth, trying to work off the excess energy. Then, a voice cuts through her euphoria. “JULIETTE! CAN YOU PLEASE STOP RUNNING AROUND LIKE THAT?” In a brief instant, her joy is extinguished.

Her friend inquires about her day, and her head immediately snaps up. “I spent all day taking notes on Shintoism and researching psychology experiments!” The other girl laughs. “Oh, Juliette...”

The familiar words send a shock into her skull, teasing other memories out – phrases she’s heard so many times before.

“JULIETTE!”

“Come on, Juliette.”

“Oh, Juliette...”

“JULIETTE!”

The voices reverberate like a rhythmic chant, overlapping each other.

All her life, she’s been told to embrace her individuality. Yet, when people are confronted with her differences, they reject her. Treat her like a silly child or an inconvenience.
Finally, in her last year of high school, she discovers a word. A word that changes everything.

She hears it spoken in hushed tones, her parents whispering from the kitchen.

“What do you mean?” she asks. “Willow has autism?”

Willow. Her sister, who understands her more than her parents, more than her friends, more than anyone she’s ever known. It can’t be true...

A horrific thought wrenches her heart into her stomach. If she has autism, do I? No, she refuses to believe it. And yet... No, it doesn’t make sense... She flees the room in a bemused panic.

The next day, her mother offers her a book. Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder. It might help her understand her sister better, she tells her. But the girl knows her mother thinks she has autism, too. What if she’s right? Hoping to prove her mother wrong, she reads page after page after page.

As I read, a multicolored ribbon began to trail through my memories, painting my life in brilliant rainbow hues. Me shouting a curse word at my mother without knowing the meaning because that was how neurotypicals spoke. My aversion to food, a result of my hypersensitivity. Me whirling and careering across the living room, unable to contain the need to stim. My keen fascination with storytelling and psychology, two of my “special interests.”

“Autism acceptance.” It took strenuous work, but I’ve learned to accept myself for who I am. Both the challenges of autism, the blues and purples and greens, and the bright, optimistic side, the reds and oranges and yellows.
The Colorist
Katerina Wearn

Grey trees, grey sky,
Grey skin;
I wake before the colorist,
His thousand hands

Held and bound by
Merciless stars;
The night air has
Greyed my lungs.

Reach towards
Reflectionless waters;
Salt-flat smooth,
Glass ocean cold.

Sense the time stretch,
Languishly wind;
I grasp to a
Transitory breath;

The colorist arrives.
Chroma blooms
Perfuse the eyes,
Blink once,

Blink twice,
Crystal cracks find
waves; old nature,
New tides.
Foggy-Mirror Fortunes
Kieran Berryman

I want to own a musty notebook. The kind that has endured water and coffee love.

The kind that includes squashed-up Dried-out lavender and lilac.

The aroma of scrupulous note-taking and doting attentiveness.

Kept inside its paper, the specter of a truth-seeker, The keeper of cattails.

I want to run my fingers across the bumpy pages and Soak in the life of wanderlust.

I wish I had the oomph.

But already the book’s spine distresses Cheap leather cracking under hot sun.

I know the owner would just buy another,

But what’s the point of a notebook if not to capture your memories: how can you just replace memories like that?
I keep all my memories in a jar on the windowsill.

I hope that photosynthesis makes them grow,

But I know that’s silly.

New memories require lilac and cattails,
Lavender and love,

And I think I’d like to start.

Must I wait for the flowers to dry out first?
Professor Review

As an honor to the strength of this work’s craftsmanship and insight, Professor Tiffany Macbain will explore the depth and achievement of the piece.

I read this poem in mid-January, just as the targeted ads for paper planners had slowed, ads that had intuited (correctly) that I have responsibilities and commitments and passions and pet projects, and that I’d want and need a notebook to track my progress. But which one to buy? And would it be better than last year’s? Would this planner, finally, sort me out, keep me in line, catalog the events of my life? It would and would not, will and will not. And I love it for that.

“Foggy-Mirror Fortunes” understands the limitations, even the futility, of the well-loved notebook, its insufficiency to “capture memories” and yet its determination to try. The “musty notebook” that the speaker considers seems not to be their own—whether found or imagined, its contents and condition were created by someone with more “oomph.” This other person has traveled, has sought “truth,” has preserved experiences in the form of coffee rings and lilac sprigs. The speaker is captivated by the object, wants to know the stories it contains. In spite of the notebook’s “Cheap leather cracking” and its weakened spine, the speaker perceives its value: the notebook is irreplaceable.

The turn of the speaker’s attention to their own practice of memory collection introduces a comparison that attests to the poet’s skill. The “jar on the windowsill” is an analogue to the weathered notebook—a different container with an equally organic feel. What a striking image. Memories
contained by a jar would be visible to anyone, exposed to whatever light or darkness might fall upon the windowsill. And we know from the speaker that the memories require tending: water, sunlight, carbon dioxide, the stuff of “photosynthesis.” Without this care and exposure, the speaker suggests, the memories will fade.

To my mind, the image of the jar conveys tenderness and vulnerability. Like the speaker, I am drawn to the worn notebook, and yet I recognize that it is personal, encoded, not meant to be read or understood by someone other than its keeper. The jar is the open book. I wonder, then, at the speaker’s dismissal of their mode of remembering: “But I know / that’s silly,” they say. They seem to consider their attachment to the past almost childish. They want to move on, to make new memories and to store them in a new way. And yet the poem ends on a note of uncertainty. The speaker asks, “Must I wait for the flowers to dry out first?”

The question reminds me of my younger self, eager to try new things and to take new shape but unsure of what to do with who and what I’d been. In “Foggy-Mirror Fortunes,” some readers will see themselves as they are at the moment. Others, like me, will recall how they were—as well as any of us can. The poem invites the reader to consider their relationship to their own past and future, to consider how and whether any of us can contain the uncontainable, how and whether we can be ready for what is ultimately beyond our control.

Tiffany Aldrich MacBain
January 14, 2023
I wonder how Beowulf felt when he died. Was he scared? He couldn’t have been, right? He was a proud warrior, a hero of mythical proportions. Bane of Grendel, ender of bloodlines, dragonslayer, king of the geats, and yet i cannot help but wonder what it must have been like to feel dragon’s poison stealing through his veins. Did it burn, like its progenitor did? Dragons in the west have existed as engines of calamity since their inception. Winged death, fire belched on wooden frames, the sweeping wrath of a long dead time come to burn the homes of men to a crisp.

It must have, right? Beowulf must’ve felt it scorch through him, singing his arteries and razing the capillaries that lay beneath his skin. How long did it take him to realize death had come creeping up behind him, dagger in hand? Even though the blow may have come through open battle, even if the jaws that filled the hero of the danes with venom and bile had glimmered in front of the man’s eyes before they struck, death still had to come creeping up behind him. I don’t really doubt that the only way to claim the great hero was under the cover of blinding pain. Death could not draw steel against him; Death had to creep through his veins and slow his heart from within, else the great king would have slain Death dead. Wouldn’t that have been something?

I know that Grendel was scared when he died. That’s not hard to guess. Bleeding out, bereft of an arm from fingernail to shoulder cap, fear must’ve run rampant over the mon-
-ster’s heart as he limped back to his cave. The child of Cain, scorned of God, had gone in a single night from a terror amongst the fens to a corpse laid low. And he deserved it, to be fair. His nature was that of a petulant child, angry at the affection shown to a younger sibling. Man has faults—man is cruel, and loud, and brash, and far too skilled at violence—but man does not deserve the deaths Grendel delivered to them.

So why do I pity him?

Imagine being in his skin; I wasn’t kidding when I called him “child of Cain, scorned of God.” His fate was written in his blood the moment his wicked feet touched soil. He was always going to end up where he did, cold and scared and empty in some cave amongst the marsh and fen. He was an animal, at the end. But do we blame the animal for what it does? We know that the great white does not enjoy the violence it occasionally and rarely inflicts upon “our” kin, and we know that the wolf does not deserve to bleed out cold and alone and sickly because it had to eat. We know this, just as well as we know that Grendel was not an animal. He acted out of anger, out of wrath, spite and malice moved his hands as much as animal instinct. Yet we do not know if he could have understood the wrath he invited upon himself. Why do we judge him as if he were an animal yet celebrate his death the way we would a war criminal? Are those the same? Is that what I’m saying?

I guess I am. Maybe I’m saying that I agree with Grendel’s mother, nameless and monstrous as she was. Her kin lay slain and desiccated on the edge of the fens while his murderers drank and cheered in the hall, his arm mounted above the fire. Why were these danes, these men who lived by the weregild, by the idea of blood for blood, of an eye for an eye, surprised when she came in to exact her price? Gren-
del took many, one could argue, and so Beowulf had to avenge the singular death his Mother exacted. Did Beowulf not also take more than his share of lives, though? How much blood did the king of the geats spill? How many mothers found themselves without sons thanks to the hero of those spear-danes? If we want to be specific about how much of a blood price is to be exacted, we should apply that same eagle eye to the one holding the sword, the one who tracked a mother/monster to her home/lair to draw blood/exact justice. See? Easy to trip yourself up, isn’t it?

Why am I saying this? Why are you reading it? Why did Beowulf ask, in his dying moments, to gaze upon the wealth hoarded by his killer? Stolen wealth of stolen wealth, a treasure fit only to be scorched and entombed with their great murderer-king. So what was the point? Violence begets violence? Astute observation, said every anthropologist ever. Humans may have come into love as they figured out how to stand, but apes were born with the neural pathways required to kill each other. It’s in our blood. Your blood, I mean. Not a mistype.

Who am I?
Wrong question.
What am I?
Better!

Call me a shooting star. Call me Halley’s comet. Call me Io, call me Titan, call me Jupiter and Phobos, call me Pluto and Siri, call me whatever you want. You won’t be close. I’m old, baby, older than old. Stardust and radiation skipping across the universe, lucky enough to lose enough speed to watch your little planet. It’s cool, up here. You might’ve seen my cousin, actually, up in the satellite wreckage, doing his little waltz with your orbital debris. Why am I here? Wrong question. You’re not going to get a right one, either, so I’ll ask
one for you- why am I talking about Beowulf?

Cause it’s fun. Cause he’s the first human who looked at me and prayed to a god that’s out on vacation. Cause I looked down at him, small and bleeding and full of poison, surrounded by a thousand uncounted ghosts, and I saw someone who just needed a hug. Someone who had shouldered the immeasurable burden of being a hero without question, simply because that’s who he was. He was brave, Beowulf. Braver than brave- there’s a reason his story survived so long. Because as I watched his twelve kinsmen ride ‘round his barrow in grief and sorrow, I realized no one would ever remember Beowulf, the man who loved his mead with a little bit of spice. The only Beowulf to survive the ravages of time would be the Mythic, not the Man.

I can see your brain working overtime to try and derive a point from all of this. Sorry to disappoint, but I don’t have one- not really. But you know what? Because you’ve been such a wonderful listener, such a captive audience, I’ll try my best to condense.

Anyone who tells you there is a universal rule for how to determine if someone deserves to die is a fucking liar, a snake, and a person with an agenda. They’re wrong. No one is born deserving to die; often, people who “deserve” to die are people who never knew how to lose momentum. Some people are seen as heroes before they’re seen as people who had favorite bedtime stories; most people who are seen as villains, as monsters, had a favorite way to order their coffee– neither of these facts change the people they became. It is important for you, sweet mortal thing that you are, to choose love, yes. A life lived in the shadow of love, in the cold of hatred or even just plain old apathy is a life lived by half measures. But you must never, ever let love leave you stepped on. Love fiercely and as often as you can; bite back
by the same metrics. Know within your heart of hearts that every great hero and every reviled monster was a person before they were anything else: do not let the personhood of monsters shield them of consequences, and do not let the mythic status of heroes prevent you from showing them compassion.

Live your life to the heights you wish to reach, little Beowulf. Die knowing that you lived it well. Go, now, back to your little blue dot. Remember this when you return: If nothing else will say it, I will love you from up here, drifting as I am. Take care, little Hominid.