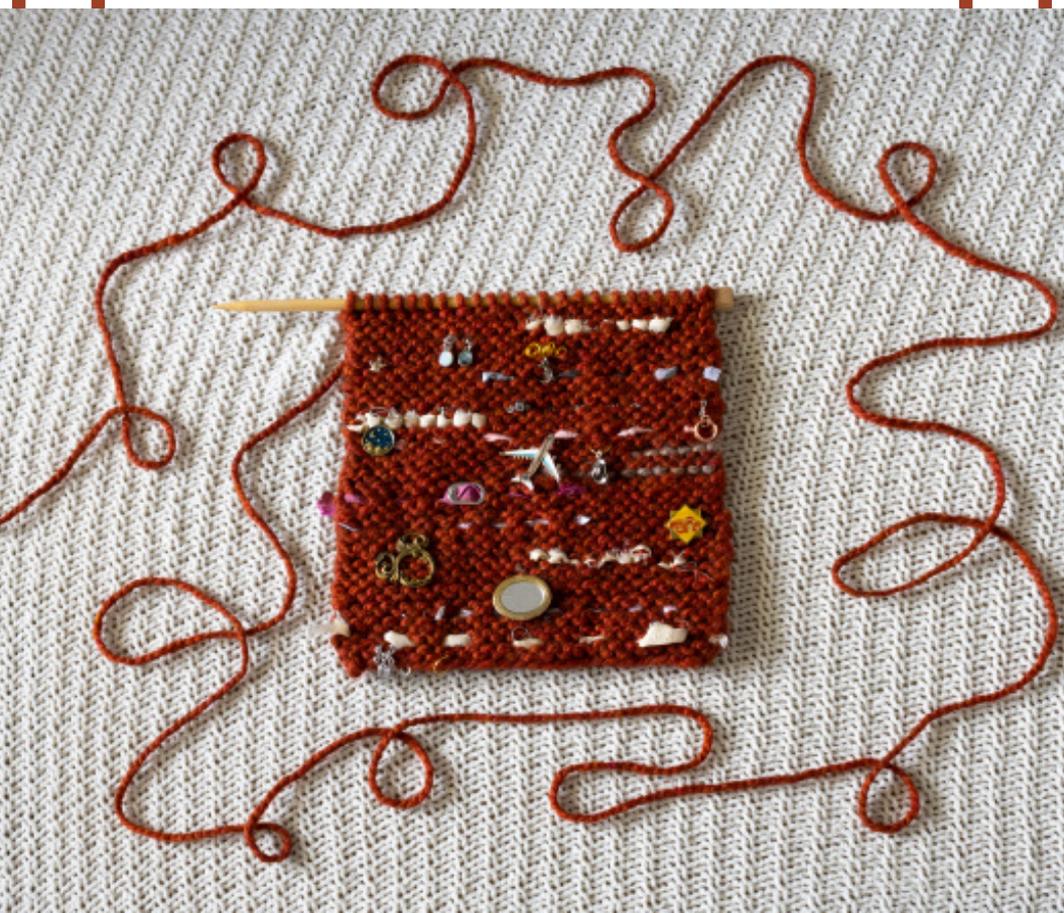


Loch Norse Magazine

Issue XII



Cover Art:

Evey Cooper / *Wear It Like a Hat (5 of 9)*

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Loch Norse Magazine

Northern Kentucky University

Highland Heights, KY, 41099

Dear Reader,

This year was a year of firsts. As *Loch Norse* we have opened ourselves up in a multitude of ways this year that we have not previously. This was the first time we collaborated with SOTA, our first Open Mic with a musical guest, our first time in the Planetarium where students read among the stars, our first time adding a new genre to the magazine. It has also been the first year we have felt the most normal since 2019. We have returned to campus in a way that feels as close to before the pandemic as we may ever get. It has been such a joy to see everyone's faces again, to see life breathed back into campus. And while everything may feel different, we have preserved and explored this year of firsts.

Throughout this edition of our magazine we are sharing beautiful works created by amazing students who make up NKU. These students have pushed through, lived through a pandemic, and are still writing and creating art. They have found beautiful ways to write about what still matters. There are stories of love, of loss, and trying to heal. Wonderful works by wonderful people just trying to make their own way in the world.

Our staff would like to thank everyone who attended our Open Mics this year. We thank you for exploring new places with us and for embracing a diverse cast of featured readers in person, in new places, and on Zoom. We would also like to thank the College of Arts and Sciences, the Department of English, and everywhere that has hosted us this academic year.

Welcome to *Loch Norse Issue XII*. We hope you enjoy.

Sincerely,
Josafina Garcia
Editor-in-Chief

Loch Norse Magazine

Issue XII

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Thank you to all of our contributors, continued supporters, open mic attenders, readers, and our devoted staff for making Issue XII of *Loch Norse Magazine* possible. Thank you for supporting our passions and providing us with a space to be creative.

Charleigh Haley

We Should Start a Band

Do you remember when the earth was still, and the streets were mute?

We danced together in the pouring rain on our metal balcony with no shoes

How thoughtless we were to the threat of the first strike of lightning that ripped through the sky

We didn't retreat to the safety of our living room to watch the show

We stayed where we were, soaked in the tears of angels

You had on a tattered Bowie shirt passed down from your sister

The red bolt across his face mirroring the blue above our heads

I remember our roommate calling us in from the other side of the screen door

You'll get sick, she said, and you can't afford to this day and age

Do you remember laughing at her cautiousness?

Do you remember dancing to the beat of the thunder?

Do you remember holding my hand?

Can you remember the taste of the hot chocolate we found way back in the pantry?

The gritty, cocoa-powdered hot water in ceramic mugs

We were out of milk, and so was everyone else

I remember the clink of our mugs because you pointed it

out
with enthusiasm in your voice

We should start a band, you said
We don't know any instruments, I said
You laughed and told me that it didn't matter,
We have plenty of time to learn

We never did.

Do you remember when we drove to the banks
after dark and watched the skyline ripple?
You told me about your father, and I, my mother
We were vulnerable that night

How about that time we sat on the rusty swing set down the
road
and named all the places we'd ever been and all the places
we wanted to go?
Or that time when we saved up our loose change that we
found
on the sidewalk, in the couch cushions, in our cars
and put it towards a rainy-day fund to use for a vacation?
We wanted to see the ocean, be kissed by the sun
and feel the salty breeze in our hair

We never did.

Do you remember when the earth got loud again?
When our plans to create something bigger than us began

to feel wasted?

Do you regret spending all our time dreaming when we could have been acting?

You smiled at me, yet said nothing

You always had something to say



Sarah Myers

To be an Alien in a Woman's Body;

;is to shape-shift your existence
apologize for the space you take
up
trade in two legs for six wheels

;is to forgive those
who stared and pointed fingers
when you were trying your hard-
est

;is to barter with your limbs
make amends with muscles
in hopes that they'll work one
day

;is to deny a supposed God's
plan
why damn someone
when you can cripple them?

;is to wither in the winter
tendons curling with the flowers
after the first frost

;is to settle between the blurred
lines of special and spectacle
on an unrelenting spectrum

;is to foster back-handed
half-hearted comments disguised
as
compliments between your lips

;is to weave threads of skin into
scars
seventeen constellations scat-
tered across my ever expanding
skin

But to be an alien in a woman's
body;

;is to bloom luminous petals
under the soft glow in a friend's
dorm
throat horse from laughing

;is to bruise beneath the lips
of a lover marking the left carotid
with freshly bitten flesh

;is to believe that nobody could
create
the same beauty you've made
with the body you were placed in

Nathan Wells

Green Gummy Bears

"Bewildered, I'm lost in a dream, of the love I need"

James Brown, Bewildered (1958)

Nine-hour drives. I miss it. The **"Lost in a Dream"** feeling that you get after 14 espressos and 5 albums. You pick one I pick one. Denver to Vegas, Vegas to Long Beach, the 101 from Long Beach to Santa Cruz. Beachside bungalows in the land of the lost boys. Gold coast strolls, early morning smoke, left over pizza in the back of a repurposed moving truck just trying its best to be a home. **The great come down, the morning after, the day long-long day. It's a blur, but a good one.** People often use the cliché "you are what you eat" - We felt like lime green gummy bears injected with mescaline.

Down my throat- choked once- forced it back- laughed it off. Terrified but not enough to admit it out loud. The drive makes you weary, throwing an out of body experience on top is a choice of no caution. But who needs caution in Aptos, California? Home of the dudes, the less down dames, the never-ending surf- **"Endless Summer"**.

The streets are cracking under the weight of free love and lip injections. We were young again, innocent and full of the baggage you pick up and lose and pick up again when in transit and as you age. That baggage has power, it weighs you down, keeps your feet on the earth in an odd way, reminding you that you're human, whether you like it or not, and so is everyone around you. So, **"Lost in a Dream"** is a rare feeling you don't forget. And as lovers of life, you and I, will inevitably lose ourselves in the subconscious nights time and again, even if this time we pepper in a little of

that caution, so often disregarded by people like us, when in places like Aptos. Caution is wisdom, wisdom is knowing when to use wisdom, and when to let your hair down. You lose that you might as well be dead, so don't lose it- but know when to put wisdom away, even for a few hours....

You're going to be fine. Mescaline never killed anybody, well, it probably has, but we're going to be fine. We'll go watch the fireworks, just off the boardwalk on the beach. The first mortar soars into the California night air. The end of the wick causes a brief silence, then an explosion- with a sound that hits my chest like a slug from a shotgun. It feels swollen. Everyone's face around me stranger or not is illuminated green. The fireworks painting the boardwalk as they see fit. Sundresses and khaki shorts take on a new, colorful life. Red and white plastic Coca-Cola cups turn deep shades of lime and purple. The lime is bitter on my tongue, but a palate cleanser none-the-less. Can I taste this firework? Or is it the Gummy Bear's desperate attempt to crawl up the chimney of my esophagus and get one last deep breath of the January sea-breeze. Sulfur and Lime. First time tasting a firework- it feels American. ***"Endless Bumner"***.

1 a.m., a few hours north of the Inland Empire. The boardwalk is closing. The crowds of crying, tired children and adults who probably shouldn't drive are starting to thin- as is the black cloud of anxiety that hung over the firework finale. The one that pushed me into some sort of mental combat field on which I was greatly outnumbered. The battle is over, the good guys lost- and I'm stuck with a hole in my chest and a stomach lined with artificially lime-flavored corn starch and a hallucinogenic lab-made chemical. The sweet lime fades, the sulfur chooses to stay.

We make our way north past the rollercoasters, singing clowns and straggler beach bums asking if we need any

weed and if not, do we “at least have a dollar?” I see it all through the blue light of a projected film. I say nothing, not out of spite or ignorance- I’ve just never been one to talk during films. We walk past them wide-eyed and silent- roll credits.

The beach sounds are different when they’re not being heard under the interrogation room lighting style of the Santa Cruz boardwalk. The sand has more give when you can’t see your shoes. Sweet artificial lime-just for a moment. The calm of darkness, the stress-relief of turning the light switch downward and watching the film under the blankets of the California storm clouds rolling in from the Pacific, preparing the morning rain.

I long for the morning rain to wash my face clean of the green tint of the first mortar that soared into the California night air. To clean my chest-wound left open from the sounds of battle-field explosions. To drink down the lime and sulfur that lingers on my tongue. The orange rind sun peaks over the oceans now visible horizon. The curtain call for the boardwalk’s interrogation room lamps. ***The great come down, the morning after, the day long-long day. It’s a blur, but a good one.***

Theo Sells

The Boy in the Crick

One day, around the age of seven, I ventured up into the woods to see a friend.

The pallet of leaves the autumn trees laid out for me crunched under my feet as they roughly swashed around in my boots. The trees would always stretch out their barky hands and pull me further up the hill, out of the holler my childhood home sat within.

Even as a kid I knew that if I kept climbing I could make it to the ridge of the valley and see over my entire town. The whole mile it stretched. I could see the roof of my elementary school, the one my teachers would insist there wasn't enough time to explore. I could see the steeple of my church that held a bell that hadn't worked since the year my mother was born. All I'd have to do is glance to my right to see her childhood home and its blue siding; or maybe it's gray. I suppose that people are right when they say how easy some things are to forget.

The trees that were helping me climb turned to catching me as I began to stumble into the hill's belly button. The brush was always taller there, but I slid through the path I'd trampled before. My dress got snagged on a thorn bush, Mama always suggested that I change before I went out. Her pleas would follow me as I catapulted myself from the family car after church.

The rushing water of the crick glided its way into my ears, it didn't have to knock anymore, I started letting it in so long

before. It was as if we were born at the same time, destined to guide each other through youth. Its earthy perfume would pull me in and join the leafy aroma that had already bombarded. They'd hug each other hello and begin to set up camp, they knew they'd have time to reminisce and roast a marshmallow or two.

The crick came into view, and I knew he was waiting for me. I could never see him until I got to the edge but he was always there. He was there every day that past month. The first time I ran into him was entirely accidental. I followed the family hunting dog here while she was following the trail of some poor rabbit. Mama used to say that curiosity bit me like a dog. I didn't care. I followed her up the hill, graciously accepted every hand the trees help out for me and tripped my way down into this divot. When we got to the crick she lost her trail and there he sat. He was wearing grass stained overalls that matched the color of my Daddy's favorite jeans. His shirt was stripped with reds and yellows and his skin looked like the sun gave it a kiss with every greeting. His curly blonde hair hung lazily over his eyes in a way that made me believe I could sneak up on him if I wanted too.

When curiosity bit me, it bit hard. It left teeth marks twice the size of my hands, ones I still can't wrap my brain around. The first day I just sat on the edge staring down at him. He didn't talk, we just shared some shy smiles and every time I glanced at him he was looking right at me. I thought my eyes were playing some type of trick on me, I swore there was no way a boy could live inside the crick. I tried my hardest to explain it, maybe there was another world and I'd found the portal. Maybe that is the truth, maybe I stumbled upon it in a lazy way, the way someone stumbles upon their favorite song on a radio.

That night I shared the boy with my parents. Told them about my new friend and how he lived in the crick. I can

imagine their confusion. They complimented my creativity and sent me to my room, shoulders hunched and face twisted.

The next day I made the trek back, just to see if they were right, but he was there waiting for me. Same for the following day, the one after that too, and every day for next month. We were hesitant with each other, too hesitant to say a word. Our childish fragility and buttery filled stomachs glued our lips shut.

But not today, I thought. I was determined: I would talk to that boy and he'd talk back to me. I'd learn his name and ask him why he spent so much time at the crick.

My feet started sinking into mud and there he was, staring right back at me. The sky in his world looked the same as mine. Just like everyday. He was wearing the same clothes; he was always wearing the same clothes.

As I went to speak, I tasted iron on my tongue, I didn't realize the grip my teeth had on it, "Hi."

It looked like he was trying to speak at the same time as me, but quickly his grin stretched from ear to ear and my cheeks were aflame.

"You ain't gonna talk to me?"

We were so in sync after a short month that we were trying to speak at the same time.

"What's your name?"

Is he playin' some game I ain't heard of?

"My mama always says it's rude to not speak when spoken

to. I'm Daisy."

To this day, I swear he said the exact same words as me except for the last one.

"Since you ain't gonna talk, hows about we race up the crick," we glanced down the stretch together, "First one to that tree wins. I win: you tell me your name; you win: I'll just try again t'morrow."

He shot me a smirk. We both turned on our heels and took off. The tree wasn't far. I glanced down to make sure he was still with me, and he was looking right back at me. We jumped over a thicker branch, and I could feel the crick rocks shooting out behind me with every step. I made it to the tree first, and when I glanced down to taunt my victory he wasn't there. The water was shallow there, it was mostly rocks. I tried being patient; waited a few seconds but he still wasn't there. I didn't know proposing that race was signing up to watch paint dry. It was getting darker and the smell of rain took a seat around the campfire.

Knowing that my lunch must've been cold and betting my mama was near fuming, I decided to start back.

Maybe he walked back and is waiting for me at our spot, I thought, finally giving my burning heels attention. One of the many times I was reminded why someone shouldn't run in boots. My eyes stayed glued on the crick the entire walk back, I kept trying to rationalize where my friend had gone; maybe he had to go to lunch. Maybe his mama called for him.

Maybe I was too much for him.

In a mixture of distraught and nervousness I waited a week before going back. As I was going out the door my mama

stopped me and made me tell her where I was going. She wanted to go with me.

She followed me up the hill, accepted the branches' hands as I passed them to her. The descent was slower with her with me and when we approached the crick, I could feel every wall of my stomach. Every hair on my neck stood at attention.

He won't be there, I knew it for a fact. It is undebatable. I talked far too much and ran way too fast. With every step we took towards the crick, a rock bounced around my chest and hit my ribs a little harder. We got to the ledge, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Honey, it's just you and me," Mama said. I could feel the tears welling, my cheeks becoming mountains for their runoff. I braced myself, I had to face it at some point, he wasn't real, but when I opened my eyes he was still there. Except, he hadn't come alone either. There was someone else with him. My mother smiled up at me from beneath the surface, "Honey, it's just you and me. We told you, you just have a creative imagination."

The walk back was silent, I stayed a few paces ahead of Mama so she couldn't see my stained cheeks.

That night, I went to bed without dinner. My stomach already too full with the questions he left me with. The questions stay with me still, except the boy in the crick is growing up too. He's becoming the man in the back of the spoon, in the window of the coffee shop, in the mirror. He's becoming the man in the mirror. Sometimes he disappears for a while, like he did on the rainy day at the crick. On nights like that, sleep has trouble finding me and, even though I am hungry, my stomach is full.

Eros Ritchie

The Feral Child

Soft moonlight covers me like a blanket
Wanting me to snuggle underneath
Whispering for me to go to bed

Wandering around at night
Playing in the downy light of the moon
Within the woods, I shall never leave

I will be known as a feral child

The stars
Twinkling at me
Winking at me

Wanting for the day to end
Enjoying the night
No adults telling me to go to bed

The cicadas, moths, and critters enjoying my presence
Giving me a performance

Meeting me into their minds
Showing me how to live under the moon's soft belly

I want to be known as the moon child
But I'll be known as a wild child



Hades Whalen

Doll/Child

There is a dead girl underneath my bed.
Her face is a mirror, a lake of flesh,
framed by a bronze wave of synthetic hair.
A porcelain calm ripples from the fog
that lingers in her frosted glass green eyes.

My family hasn't noticed her absence
for I wear her skin to veil my raw scars.
To them, her name is mine and we are one.
I am dressed in her clothes where her ghost lives.
With my misty eyes, they can't see through me.

At night, she's a secret stealing my sleep.
I cradle her between trembling hands.
Her chest is ice as I listen for her
heart to beat and burn my ears. Past her cloth,
my pulse gives an answer, saying my name.

Logan Davis Gilb

Childhood, Lost

When does childhood actually end?
Is it when we start acting like adults,
or when we rumble upon the realization,
that we are afraid of *failing*
to fulfill the dreams we had as children?
Perhaps it's the innocence we one day lose,
with some maturing - changing
more, and before others do;
I hope I never forget my youth, my younger

days full of soft, white linens on windows
and hurricanes fed by the sprinkler in the lawn.

Truthfully, I'm very much too *scared*
of changing my Scooby-Doo sheets to an off-white hue,
replacing my Clifford toy with a pound of boring labor,
to go out, but not for recess after lunch.

I am absolutely
positively,
horrified and afraid,
of growing up.

Tell me your secrets, Peter Pan.



Kara Ferry

Forever Indebted

"I *almost* died today", I anxiously whispered while glaring in the mirror of the hospital bathroom. My eyes were sunken, my face pale. I turned on the cold water and let it run for a while as I clutched the side of the white sink and bowed my head to weep. *Drip, drip, drip*, I hear as I watch my own tears plunge and submerge into the crystal-clear water in the bowl. "What if I really did die?" I thought in disbelief. My hands grasped the sink harder as I whip my head up and stare at my reflection. Oh, my reflection— the iris' in my eyes glisten far more than the stars from the tears I shed, the whites of my eyes are webbed with red, and my cheeks are swollen and embedded with the residue of my tears. My lips are chapped from the dehydrated air, and they bleed ever so slightly every time I glide my tongue over them. It tastes like fucking copper.

On the exterior of the door, my husband presses his ear tenderly and listens ever so slightly. "Honey?" His voice is soft, concerned. I gasp, anxiously as my voice crackles out, "Uh-uh yeah, I'll be right out!" I instantly immerse my pale, frigid hands in the water, and douse my face. The coldness feels blue, lacking any empathy it could possibly have, as it gradually creeps down my spine. I glance in the mirror— "but I *didn't* die." As I exit the bleak bathroom that was bricked with white though out, I give my husband a marginal nod in hopes he'll back away. Of course, he doesn't, instead, he grasps lightly at my knotted hair, running his long warm fingers delicately through it. In that moment, the warmth of his fingers made it feel like I was walking on sunshine. The coldness had melted, but now I am damp.

I stop short of my hospital bed and stare down into the bassinet. After a minute of silence, my husband standing near my shoulder kisses the side of my head. "A little tiny human being, so fragile, so warm," I murmur in her ear. I reach down and stretch my cold fingers over her delicate cheek. Her mousey brown hair is covered in vernix, her dull wonderful blue eyes feel as if they were bright, and her fingers are so minuscule they only just caress mine. She coos loudly and smiles. My voice quivers as I blurt out, "I almost died today!" My husband's hand caresses the small of my back; I wince a little as he hit the forming bruise from the epidural.

"Babe," he whispers, "you are remarkable." He takes his hand that was once on my back and glides it over her prominent belly, "Once they got her to breathe, she was just fine."

I give a delicate smile, that kind of smile that you do when you're just in awe, "Well I am grateful that she is fine." I start to feel shitty again, as the coldness creeps up my back. "I'd rather go through what I went through again before I ever let anything happen to her," I declare, as a bout of nausea comes over me, my vision blurs, and I lose consciousness.

When I come to, Dr. Andrews is hovering at the foot of my unforgiving bed, her fingers freely contacting the bed rail. "You're having complications of Eclampsia, again," she states as she gestures her hand. "Your blood pressure reached 187/115 during the end of your labor. That means you had a hypertensive crisis due to Eclampsia," she clears her throat, "Sometimes it just comes out of nowhere." She continues, "We had to use forceps to get the baby out as her heart rate rapidly dropped, and you began to seize." Pausing for a moment, she states, "However, since you are still showing symptoms of Eclampsia, we had to start you on a Magnesium drip that runs through your IV before

you seize again," she gestures her hand again and nods to me vigilantly waiting for my response. I only nod back, as I begin to reminisce on my birth once again.

I stare down the shitty hospital bed, back in my unforgiving thoughts. "I almost died, but I didn't die... but you could have died," the thoughts are racing.

My husband reaches out for my hand, "Hey, Honey, are you doing ok? You didn't answer the doctor."

I glance at him like a deer in the headlights, "Uh huh" I respond as my eyes start to cross, and a burning sensation goes through my body- "I feel like I'm intoxicated."

Not realizing Dr. Andrews was still there, she returns with an answer, "That's normal, as well as being extremely hot for about twenty-four hours," she states as she makes her way out of my room. I hear an agonizing slow dribble for the next twenty-four hours.

It was in my time of need; I was nine and a half centimeters dilated and it was go time. I pushed three times for five minutes when suddenly my blood pressure skyrocketed, and the baby's heartrate dropped. They immediately pulled her out with forceps, ultimately tearing me. They swung her on my chest, and that's when we noticed she wasn't crying. She was turning blue, and I had just begun to seize- they took her away to get her to breathe. I laid there just thinking "what in the fuck did I just go through?" I felt I was deceived, cheated by childbirth as I was led into an erroneous conclusion that I somehow deserved this kind of experience, but if this was the end for me, so be it. I didn't want to go through childbirth just for my child to die; she deserves her chance at life. Her daddy doesn't deserve to lose us both, but in the end, he deserves his daughter. I felt so cold because I was; I was cold towards life. Afterwards,

I felt betrayed by the Grace of God because I was dealt some shitty cards, conclusively developing postpartum depression.

These feelings I characterize are valid and they don't have the right to perceive me as a shitty mother. Childbirth is indeed a gift, but it is not wonderful and whoever says that is probably a damn liar. I am, however, forever grateful I was able to experience childbirth because in the end, it has made me a stronger person and the mother I am today. Would I ever do it again? Absolutely not. Though, the whole experience is warranted as I stand here with my daughter in my arms going through the daily struggles of motherhood and for that I will be forever indebted.

Mackenzie Basl

Last Christmas

What is your favorite Christmas movie?

- A. It's A Wonderful Life
- B. A Christmas Story
- C. Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer

You pull the grate across your fireplace and secure it with the padlock you've been using for the past four Christmases. It's not Fort Knox level intruder prevention, but at least the chimney is officially inaccessible. Frank will roll his eyes when he gets home and sees it, but he'll do the same when you refuse to watch *Polar Express*. Then he'll bitch about how you poured the rest of the milk out that morning, so the effect is mostly lost on you anyway after eight years of the same reaction.

Frank is probably still at the mall buying a last-minute present like he does every year because he knows you'll never go with him. Not around this time of year. Not with the chance that you'll see him sitting on his throne, or sleigh, or whatever cheap set the mall provides for his photoshoots, with music praising him piped through the tinny speakers around every corner.

*You better watch out
You better not cry
You better not pout
I'm telling you why*

The scraggly beard and synthetic snow both gleam such a bright white that the counterfeit is jarring. Most of the time

you're honestly not sure which is creepier: The way that parents are letting their children sit on a stranger's lap and hanging a picture of it on their fridge, or the fact that these kids *voluntarily* flock to such a man.

Santa Claus is comin' to town

* * * * *

Your mother mailed out five years of holiday cards with three smiling faces before it finally changed to two, and every card came with a wallet-sized shot of you resting on Santa's knee tucked inside. The next year she wiped your tear-stained cheeks on the dirty floor of the mall bathroom after carrying your thrashing body away from the helper elves that weren't paid enough to deal with this. You'd barely felt his velvet suit brush your chubby little legs before erupting into sobs and trying to crawl your way to safety.

You were six when your mother told you Santa wasn't real after the fifth nightmare you had about him that month. Children should be sleeping with visions of sugarplums dancing through their heads, not waking in a cold sweat, the image of thick, black boots shuffling into their bedroom lingering behind their eyelids. That Christmas Eve, your mother stayed up all night, holding you securely in her arms as you stared at the fireplace and waited. You needed proof, evidence that no one would break into your house that night.

The next year you felt safer knowing he was a myth. But then you heard noises. Not knocking, not creaking, not from below your room—definitely from above. A clatter? On the roof? You sat in the living room all night once again, this time alone, watching for those boots to dangle into the fireplace low enough that you could strike them with the poker.

Not a peep, not a sole, not a single hint of Santa came all night, and you decided that more research was necessary. *Elf*, *The Santa Clause*, *Miracle on 34th Street*—you’ve seen all the movies about him so many times that sick dread pools in your gut even hearing Tim Allen’s voice as Buzz Lightyear. You knew he couldn’t be real, knew that it was all impossible. But it was still a relief when all *Santa isn’t real*. No need to worry. It became easier to avoid. Instead of watching Christmas movies, you’d decorate gingerbread cookies and gossip at sleepovers late into the night.

You remember filling out those silly quizzes in *Teen Vogue* and *Seventeen* when you were younger, circling letters and flipping the page upside-down to see which celebrity haircut fits your personality.

What is your favorite hair accessory?

- A. Butterfly clips & barrettes
- B. Headbands and scrunchies
- C. A stylish hat

You would take turns interrogating your friends on everything from their middle school crushes to their ideal dog breed, and you’d privately rejoice at how much easier it was to make lists of kissable boys in Ms. Decker’s homeroom class than it was to write Christmas lists.

* * * * *

You’ve been home all day preparing while Frank is at work because you don’t have a job. Why would you when he provides you with everything? Your secluded house in the hills, your grocery list full of organic ingredients, personal library off the foyer. Despite the cozy interior of your villa—which you furnished yourself, Frank treated the space as a sparse bachelor pad before you moved in—your life is not glamorous. Being a housewife doesn’t come with health

benefits or paid vacation, and the house often feels too large and empty. Even with all the construction workers constantly revolving in and out renovating various parts of the estate, Frank spends any time he's sometimes you wonder if this habit means he's nostalgic for a time when he didn't work so much, or if he's nostalgic for a time when you weren't around.

Every day Frank commutes to the office for long hours at a time while you clean the house and cook dinner, hearty meals kept warm in the oven until the moment he steps in the door, ready to eat. Chicken marengo and pork high pie and lamb ossobuco and creamy beef with mushrooms and anything else Frank will choke down his gullet. He always seems to be hungry. Even in summer months when people tend to eat lighter, you still find yourself cooking half a holiday meal just for one man while you manage to snag a few bites for yourself.

You don't mind how much he eats. You just wish he was more appreciative. You wish he stepped up to cook once in a while. You wish he would at least sit at the dining table and finish the whole meal at a slower pace so the two of you could have a whole conversation for once. It doesn't even need to be every time, you'd settle for once a week. It could be a date night.

What is your ideal date night with your man?

- A. A quiet night in watching a movie with some popcorn.
- B. A fun night out dancing in a club together.
- C. A silly night out playing trivia at your favorite local bar.

You've tried to implement date night before, usually around this time of year when he starts working even longer hours, including weekends. He'll say he's too busy, and when you finally mention it enough days in a row, he'll give in, then purposefully choose things he knows you'll hate: going ice

skating, seeing the *Nutcracker*, driving around and looking at Christmas lights.

That always shuts you up until next year.

It's hard to maintain committed friendships when you live forty minutes away from the nearest town, so you never have plans in the evenings. You'll often curl up with a book for lack of a better option, since the thought of watching a movie makes you think of Frank laying around in the reclining theater chairs well into the night, collecting dust from how little he moves from his seat. You once read all the time when you were younger: self-help books as a newlywed, textbooks during high school, fantasy novels during recess long before that. You used to enjoy those choose-your-own-adventure books from the top shelf in the library, checking each ending until you'd read every page. There was always something intriguing about having an endless number of choices with none of the real consequences.

The door in front of you is locked.

- A. If you pick the lock, turn to page 37
- B. If you break the door down, turn to page 59
- C. If you decide to head back the way you came, turn to page 102

You've picked up reading again as a hobby, only now you prefer the romance genre, tiny mass-market paperbacks with shirtless men on the cover that contain impossibly improbable love stories. You especially favor the ones that take place in sunny locales like tropical islands or coastal beaches. It's so different from your snowy home in the alpenes, and you wish it was you instead, that your life was a little more Turtle Bay resort, a little less Overlook Hotel. It feels almost voyeuristic to read about these people shacking up in their private little paradise while you sit alone on your

couch.

It felt like a fairy tale romance at first. You met Frank two weeks into college, moved in with him four months later, and were married in less than a year. Your mother couldn't stop crying tears of joy during the entire ceremony; You were about to start the perfect life that she had always wished for you, the perfect life she prepared you for, the perfect life she never got to finish herself. You dropped out of school after the wedding to devote more time to your new duties as a wife, and Frank made it clear that you never needed to go back. You didn't need a degree when you had him to provide for you. It was a classic, eight-month whirlwind romance that you can hardly remember enjoying eight years later. Surely the stuff of novels, fictional and predictable.

The books keep you sane, and the cooking keeps you busy, so it's hard to find a reasonable complaint. You sometimes think you should have gone to culinary school, for all the cooking you do every day. Home Economics was no longer an offered class by the time that you were in high school, but Frank, who had to take it back when he was in school forever ago, argues that it should still be a requirement for everyone. Your mother would have agreed; she taught you that cooking and cleaning were the most important characteristics of any woman who was worth marrying. With no husband around to cook dinner for, she would spend every meal instructing you step by step so that you could one day prepare it for yours. These skills have proved helpful so far, though Frank did get frustrated when you forgot how to sew up his favorite red coat, and he spent the night sulking angrily in his shed out back when you burnt a tray of cookies after forgetting to set a timer on the oven. But you try your best.

It's the least you can do for your husband.

After all, you spend so much of Frank's money now. You purchase everything yourself, but if you do enough mental gymnastics, you can almost convince yourself he bought it all for you. He's bought you an entire shelf of cookbooks, a new industrial vacuum, a fancy set of fall-themed dinnerware, and much more. He's technically bought you a whole new design scheme with all the remodeling and redecorating you've had done over the years. It's a pain to hand wash the cashmere bed sheets, but the hardwood floors installed throughout the whole house are much easier work than the old carpet used to be.

Your new husband is totally loaded, the first thing you buy is...

- A. A brand new wardrobe. You need to impress all your friends!
- B. A weekend getaway. The honeymoon wasn't enough!
- C. A total remodel of your home. Maybe you'll finally feel like you belong there!

After securing the fireplace grate, you check your phone for any word from Frank and find no new messages. You've been trying to get in touch with him since this afternoon when he was supposed to arrive home after running some last-minute errands in the morning. You look out the front window and wonder if perhaps he missed the end of the driveway. Frank used to use Christmas lights to find the house in the dark, but you stopped putting them up a year after you moved in.

Frank fought you on the Christmas lights at first, insisting that you at least keep the strings lining the gutters and garage that first winter you spent together. Your frequent nightmares bothered Frank, and the numerous trips outside to make sure nothing was on the roof every time you heard a noise in the house grated on his nerves until he relented to turning the lights off on Christmas Eve and taking them

down on the 26th. The indoor decorations soon followed: wreaths, advent calendars, even the gigantic fake tree Frank now keeps in storage. Your insomnia is much more manageable every December now that there's no trace of the holidays in your house and no beacons of light outside, but the countdown to Christmas still sets you on edge like nothing else.

Sometimes Frank will come home singing carols under his breath, and you'll lie awake in bed all night long trying to hear any sound of hooves over Frank's heavy snoring beside you. You panic a little when he wears his heavy snow boots into the house, and you nearly burst into tears that time he came home from a month-long business trip at the end of one November with a full beard.

It's irrational. You know it's irrational. Frank, your mother who you haven't seen since your wedding, your old high school friends, even your childhood therapist, all know it's irrational. Santa Claus isn't real. But isn't that the plot of every Santa-related movie? That he's the one leaving gifts under the tree despite none of the adults believing in him? No amount of exposure therapy, historical St. Nicholas research, or cold hard logic has kept your fear at bay for long. Even the song haunts you when you hear Frank humming the notes to himself after he must have listened to it on the radio.

*He's making a list
He's checking it twice
He's gonna find out who's
Naughty and nice
Santa Claus is comin' to town*

You still cook Frank a Christmas dinner—roast duck with cranberry sauce—and give him a present every year. He shouldn't have to suffer just because of your Kris-Kringle-induced paranoia, but you refuse to place the presents

under a tree because it almost feels like tempting fate. No stockings are hung either, but that's probably for the best. You can still remember your father ripping one off the mantle to use the weight of the holder as a weapon. You watched your mother stumble over the tree he had knocked down on his way in through the broken window.

You hear screaming in the living room. Do you...

- A. Go back to bed? Grown-up talk doesn't concern you.
- B. Call the police? The man in the suit said he wasn't allowed to visit anymore.
- C. Run to your mother? You're too young to think about stepping on glass shards anyway.

* * * * *

Frank still isn't home even though it's almost eight o'clock. The goose still sits in the oven, but you know it probably turned room temperature an hour ago and is now verging on outright cold. You could try heating it up, but that might overcook it. You could just leave it be, but then Frank might complain and start another fight over how you've been slacking in your dinner quality the past couple months. This Christmas *needs* to go perfectly because you're afraid of what you might do if it doesn't. But to keep everything running smoothly, you must make a decision about the goose, and you only have so much time before Frank comes home, which you hope is still any minute.

Maybe it won't make any difference. Surely, dinner is ruined by this point regardless of what you do now. Reheat it: Frank will fuss over its dryness. Leave it alone: Frank will argue that it's too cold to eat. Blame him for not being home on time: Frank will fire back that you know how unpredictable his schedule can be. Any choice you make will end with the same fight, the same consequence, the same conclusion with no real change. Every decision. Every time. Even

a Barbie doll has more free will than you—she can be anything from an astronaut to a rockstar. She can *choose* to be a housewife.

Your husband hasn't texted you back all day. Do you...

- A. Text him for a sixth time?
- B. Leave him alone?
- C. Call his office and see if he stopped in on his day off?

Just when you come to a decision, a key turns in the lock. The choice becomes obsolete as Frank stalks through the front door in a huff, aiming himself straight for the kitchen without pausing to unlace your least favorite pair of his boots.

"Is dinner ready?" he asks, glancing at the empty table with its two place settings and no food. "I have to work late tonight, but I came home to eat before heading back into the office." So he must have been at work after all. He notices the goose in the oven and wrenches open the door before pulling it out himself. The tray isn't even warm, he can surely tell it must be cold. "Is this it?"

You can't speak. You can't even move.

"It's fuckin' cold," Frank says, touching the top to test the temperature. "How am I supposed to eat this?"

You stand stock still, staring at the snow-laden hat he hasn't even bothered to remove.

"Hello?" He waves a hand in front of your face to grab your attention, as if you could possibly be thinking of anything but him right now. "Is this all you made? Tell me there's something else for me to eat."

You don't move.

Frank heaves an exaggerated sigh and makes his way back to the door. "I'll just pick up some food at the Chinese place next door. They're open all night."

Your tongue finally finds its footing and manages to twist enough to ask, "You're leaving?"

Frank stops and turns back to you. "Yeah, it seems like dinner is a bust." He gives you a pitying smile. "Not your best work. Watch out, I might hire a personal chef if you keep this up."

"You're going back to work?" you ask, ignoring the comment. "When will you be home?"

He shrugs his hulking shoulders and fiddles with the straining buttons of his winter coat. "Late. You don't need to wait up for me."

"But it's Christmas Eve."

"And?"

"And," you say, speaking through the sudden tightening of your throat, "you know how I am on Christmas Eve."

Frank waves his hand as if dispersing the problem like an unpleasant odor. "God, don't fuckin' cry," he says as your eyes begin to water. "You'll be fine. This might--"

"I need you here tonight."

His frown deepens even further. "Stop throwing a tantrum about this." You continue to stand motionless across the room from him as he glares you down with a burgeoning sneer. "You can pout all you want, it's not gonna change anything. I'm going back to work tonight, it's not that big a deal."

The room feels like it's closing in on you, like your number of

options is shrinking until there's nothing you can say to make a difference. "But I need—"

"No you don't." Frank opens the door and turns his body to almost face it. "Look, if you hear a *ho ho ho* from outside, call the cops, okay? I have a lot of work to do, I don't have time for this."

You hear the song on repeat in your head:

*He sees you when you're sleeping.
He knows when you're awake.*

"Hey, are you even listening to me?"

He knows if you've been bad or good.

Frank fishes his keys out of his coat pocket and pulls his hat down low to protect his ears from the chill. "Whatever, I'm going."

Your husband is abandoning you on Christmas Eve. Do you...

- A. Follow him?
- B. Beg him to stay?
- C. *Just be good for goodness sake?*

"I want a divorce."

Frank pauses with one foot out the door and turns back to you. He stares for so long that you wonder if Santa Claus himself has you raising the poker to strike. Then it hits you that you're the one who spoke. You've felt nearly catatonic for this whole conversation, but the words must have been your own because your mouth is still parted from the last syllable.

Frank remains frozen until he finally breaks form with a disbelieving laugh. "Excuse me?"

You feel your lips moving this time. "I want a divorce."

"Oh really?" he asks around a condescending grin. "Are you actually so desperate for me to stay that you're *threatening* me?" He barks another shrill laugh.

"I have a lawyer."

That wipes the smirk off his face. "What?"

You steel yourself for this next part. This is what makes it real, after all, not just some intangible hypothetical or some fantasy you only entertain late at night after rinsing him out of your mouth. "I've already discussed everything with a divorce lawyer I've found."

You haven't, but maybe saying it aloud will keep you from backpedaling later when you've lost the courage of this moment. Maybe saying it will make Frank really pay attention to you for once.

"What, you're leaving me?" You nod. "You can't leave me. You don't have any money."

"I'll have no trouble living off your alimony checks." You're not sure if that's even true, but you can't think about the alternative right now or you'll spiral into a panic.

Frank's jaw hangs low enough you can practically see the bile rising in his throat. "Are you kidding me?" he demands. "Are you goddamn serious right now? I've provided—" You continue to stand there, not budging an inch. "I've given you everything you—" He snaps his mouth shut and pinches the bridge of his nose. "I don't have time for this right

now, they need me at the office. We'll talk about this in the morning."

He swings the front door open wide and lurches through it like he's trying to wake himself up from a dream, and you call after him before the door can swing all the way shut, "If I'm still here in the morning!"

The resounding slam echoes through the first floor followed by silence descending upon the house. You think about all the choices you could have made and wonder why it took you so long to realize there was an out this whole time. If you don't like the ending, you can always close the book.

It's not how you expected any of it to play out, but you're relieved it's finally happening. You wish it could have waited until after Christmas so you wouldn't be alone tonight, but maybe it really is for the best. Maybe it's time for you to face your fear head-on. What's so scary about Santa anyway? He's not even real. Divorce is real. Leaving your husband of eight years with nothing to fall back on is real and terrifying. Santa shouldn't even be your top priority right now.

Are you still afraid of him entering your house? Or are you just afraid of him entering your life? Are you afraid he'll give you everything you could ever ask for, until your belief in him is so strong that you don't realize how much time you've spent waiting for him by the fireplace, waiting for him to return?

You choose one of the comfy armchairs facing the mantle and decide to curl up in it for the night, straining your ears for sleigh bells on the roof.

Roma Markle

Hanahaki

Hanahaki (noun)

/ ha: / nʌ / hak: / hi /

1: a fictional disease in which flowers begin to grow in the lungs and slowly spread through the body when the affected experiences unrequited love. Symptoms include coughing or throwing up flowers and flower petals.

2: the disease is cured when their love is returned in some form. If their feelings are not mutual, the affected will die of the disease. The only other cure is to surgically remove the flowers, but the feelings for the person will be lost.

3: in some cases, the flowers begin to grow out of the eyes and ears, and even out through the skin.

I clutch his hand and press it hard into my sternum, my breaths shaky and stuttering.

“Do you feel it?” I ask. His fingers clench, scrunching up my shirt under them, and my heartbeat quickens. He is silent, brows furrowed just slightly as the pressure from his fingertips shifts and changes.

“Feel what?” he replies. I take a deep breath, wheezing, hoping that he’ll understand.

“That,” I grip his wrist. He spreads his fingers wide across my chest, the movement slow and meticulous. I love when he touches me like this, searching for something, whether it be new flesh, a place he hasn’t touched before, or finding a familiar pattern to trace. As if my heart couldn’t beat fast

enough, it starts again.

"Your heart?" He gives me a breathy chuckle, but his eyes are focusing on his hand that I'm clutching like it is the last thing keeping me alive, and it is. "It's beating so fast." I shake my head and pull him in closer. I rest my head against the side of his and breathe next to his ear, the interrupted flow of air sputtering out against his shoulder. I can feel the vines snaking up the insides of my lungs.

"The growing," I say. It's getting harder to breathe, soft coughs passing my lips. "You don't feel it?" He shakes his head lightly in reply and it feels like he's burrowing his temple further into mine. My nails begin to dig into his skin. I cough again, but it gets stuck in my throat. "How can you not feel it?" Tears begin to well up in my eyes as I gasp for breath enough to get the words out.

"Are you okay?" His free hand reaches up to cup my cheek, and I turn my head to kiss it, leaving drops of blood where my lips had been. I pull back from him, eyes wide, and body shaking. I clasp a hand over my mouth to hold the coughs in. His eyes trail my features, I can see the worry in his eyes. "What's wrong?" He presses. I cough, blood spattering out into my hand. I try to hold it in, but I can't. I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head, pushing myself back against the wall, trying to distance myself from him.

"I'm f-ine." I barely get the words out. I cough, harder now, twice. The blood begins to leak through my fingers and down my hand. He looks horrified as he sees it, moving closer to me.

"What's going on?" He reaches for my wrist to pull my hand away. I cough, three times now, and I feel it start to come up, filling my mouth. I'm too focused on trying to breathe that I can't fight to keep my hand in place. Blood dribbles

down my chin, splashing onto the bed, but it's more than that. I spit it out, all of it, the blood, the petals, the pieces of lung and esophagus, the twigs. I can't stop coughing, the petals just keep falling out, and I can feel the flowers pushing their way up my throat as I gasp for air.

"I can't," I try to press the words out. I want to say *I can't tell you*. If he just loved me, maybe it would stop. I choke, reaching my hands past my teeth and tongue into my throat to try to pull them out, the vines twisting up and out towards my mouth. I grip onto a flower, ripping it from my throat, then a second, and a third. Red petals float down, poppies tumbling from my jaw. I take a gasping breath in, finally getting some oxygen in. Blood seeps into my clothing, into my bedsheets. He reaches out for me, fingers trembling, brushing my hair back to keep it from getting blood in it. I am reminded of the time he held my hair while I puked when I drank too much, my tears falling in the same pattern as they do now. "I'm s-sorry," I manage to choke out. He shakes his head, tears falling from his own eyes. I've never seen him cry.

Ending 1:

He cannot stop it. I cannot stop it. There is nothing we can do. He lets out a scream of frustration before grabbing my face with both of his hands, smearing blood all over me, and pressing his lips desperately against mine. My eyes widen in shock and confusion, but his lips are persistent and his eyes are clenched shut. I can feel the flower petals push from my tongue against his and then into his mouth. He takes them in, consuming them before kissing me harder. I let my eyes fall shut as I kiss him back, not worrying about the vines that I can feel creeping up the roof of my mouth, twisting around my tonsils and tongue. He traces his tongue over the stems of the flowers that are blooming from my every cell and he begins to choke them down.

I don't know how long he kissed me, but eventually, the pain in my throat begins to dull, the space between the petals returns, and I feel myself begin to breathe again. I take a deep breath as he gulps down the last of the petals in my mouth. He pulls away slightly, resting his head on mine, now gasping for air himself, trying to catch his breath. Our cheeks wet with shimmering tears, we finally meet each other's eyes. I've never seen him look at me like this, yet it feels so familiar, like he has always looked at me this way, but I've never noticed. I can feel the vines begin to recede, shriveling as they retreat back into my lungs.

"I love you," I whisper. He gives an exhausted smile, pulling me in close to him and pressing his chest against mine. I feel our hearts beating to the same rhythm, I feel the shuttering of our breaths matching the others.

"I know," he replies. There's a pause, a moment where the blooming in my lungs returns, before he speaks again, "I love you too." I can feel the flowers wither inside my chest, the petals wilting and dissolving. His arms wrap tightly around my body, but his hands are gentle and kind, like they always are, once again searching for something unknown to them, but in this moment, all of me is new.

Ending 2:

He is persistent and passionate; he wants to save me. I can feel myself losing something, some feeling, some security. He keeps plucking the flowers, the stems breaking and regrowing. The tears on his cheeks drip onto my body. They look so warm on his face, but they're so cold by the time they hit me. He drags whimpers from me as he pulls and I can feel him finally taking hold of the vines, the roots that dig into my tonsils, soft palate, and esophagus beginning to yield. I can hear them snapping and breaking loose from each other and my flesh, blood pouring into my mouth,

leaving holes where they once bore in. I feel the exhaustion beginning to give way to what feels like peace, but I cannot tell.

“Why? For what? What is happening to you!?” He still looks so composed, but his eyes are darting around my features. I can feel more coming up. I reach my trembling fingers towards my mouth as I gag and retch. My sobs roll out into the room, filling the air between us, the sound muffled by all of the poppies. “What can I do?” His voice trembles. I try to put my fingers back into my mouth, trying to pull at the flowers, to get them out so I can breathe, but I’m shaking so hard I can’t get ahold of them. He tows my hand away from my mouth and I gaze up at him with desperate eyes, coughing as blood and petals pour out of my mouth.

He grits his teeth and takes a deep breath, his hand stretching up toward me. He cups my cheek in his hand and I let my exhausted head lean into his palm. With his other hand, he brushes his fingertips against my lips and I part my mouth the same way I always do, ready to consume him. He reaches inside my mouth and grips the flowers, hands stable and sure. He pulls, and whimpers of agony leave my exhausted vocal cords, but I don’t fight. I feel the stems breaking in my throat, and it hurts, but it is him so I don’t mind. He rips them from my throat, dropping them onto the bed and reaching back inside to gather more. He keeps taking them, clearing my throat only so I can gather enough oxygen to cough more up, and I cannot tell how many are left, how long until it stops, but he does not quit. As they are pulled from me, I can feel the vines gripping tighter into my body, expanding into my every cell, crushing my ventricles, and working their way through my intestines. Tears are streaming down his face and falling softly to the sheets, leaving lighter spots where it mixes with the blood.

“I’m not going to let you die,” he mutters through gritted

teeth, determination in his expression. He pulls and pulls as I gargle up blood, spitting as much as I can out so I don't drown in it. The crimson liquid splashes out onto him, staining his clothes, his hands, his face. *I'm not going to let you die.* What a nice thing to do for me. Finally, I can feel the vines give way. He takes one last deep breath before tugging with everything he has left in him, and in that moment, he looks new, beautiful, ethereal, and I know why I loved him. I give a retch as his arm lurches back and pulls the vines and branches from me, flowers dropping around us as the bronchi-shaped root system is finally extracted from me.

The red of the poppies mixes with the blood as I hack the rest of it up. Pieces of branches fly from my lungs and I take a deep breath. It is the first time I have been able to breathe in months. As the last of the flower petals leave my gaping mouth, I look down at the stretching expanse of roots and vines and blooms and think *that's beautiful, I wonder who those are for?* I look up at the boy in front of me, his wide eyes scanning my features with both fear and relief. I scan his features with my own eyes. I know him so well, I know his every detail, but I feel nothing.

"Are you okay?" His words are shaky. I spit one last mouthful of blood down onto the bed before staring into his eyes. His eyebrows furrow and he looks at me like I am new, like I am no longer the person he knows every part of. He reaches for me, his fingertips grazing my neck and cheeks. I remember how this used to make me shake, make my heartbeat quicken, make it hard for me to breathe, but I breathe in deep again, air entering my lungs unbroken. My eyes don't leave his. He looks confused, and I'm not sure why. "What happened to you?"

My expression doesn't change as more tears run down his cheeks, but it's different this time. They are not tears

of determination, they are tears of loss. I know you are supposed to hug someone when they experience loss, to comfort them, so I wrap my arms around his neck, the twigs between us breaking as I press into him. He wraps his arms around me loosely, and we sit in silence. I feel a wheeze in his breathing, and with my chest strained against his, I can feel it. Something growing. I wonder if he feels it too.

Ending 3:

He keeps going, but the flowers are growing too fast. For every one he plucks, two more grow. I can feel the weight of the petals in my lungs dragging my body down and I fight to stay upright, using my hand to prop myself against the wall. He is becoming frantic, frustrated, one hand gripping my jaw with his thumb in my mouth to compress my tongue down and the thumb and forefinger of his other hand seizing the blossoms and tearing them out. My cries are not a deterrent, nor do I wish them to be. I want to breathe, to be able to feel my lungs inflate and the carbon dioxide not feed the thriving garden inside of them.

"S-stop," I mutter, but he does not hear me. He just fills my mouth with however much of him he can in an attempt to take the flora that he does not know grows for him. I weakly grasp his wrist with my trembling hand, making him pause. I cough hard, a poppy much larger and much more vibrant than the others ejecting itself from my windpipe. I take a deep breath in, and as the resignation hits me, I do what I should have done months ago when I first felt the sprout in my lungs. I look up at him, exhausted and knowing that his attempt to remove them is all in vain. He looks me in the eyes and he seems broken, something I've never seen before. I gather the last bit of strength I have, and as I make my resolve, I can feel the vines pause their spread.

"What?" He whispers.

Ending 3 alt 1:

"I love you," I say. Finally, the roots loosen a bit, their grip on my organs not quite so tight. His eyes gaze into mine, but I cannot read them. For the first time in months, I am able to breathe, and for the first time, I cannot read his expression. He is thinking, but he is taking too long, and the roots start to take hold again, coughs beginning to wriggle their way out of my lungs. The panic returns to him, his breathing quickening.

"I—" He tries to speak, but I don't think he knows what to say. "I love you too?" I can hear the question in his voice, the vines inching their way toward my tongue. I don't have much breath left.

"Do you?" My eyes plead for the truth.

"I-I don't know," he responds. I grit my teeth, trying fiercely to hold the convulsing of my lungs still for just a few moments more.

"Do you love me?" I can barely squeeze the words past the buds that are begging to bloom. His eyes dart around, inspecting every inch of me he has touched, every inch that I thought he knew so well.

"I do but," he can't finish his sentence before I lurch forward, retching as petals spill out. He tries to put his hands on me, to help me sit back up, but I push him back.

"But what?" I grit the words out with frustration and anguish soaking each one.

"Just not," he hesitates, no doubt wondering if he should tell the truth, but I need to know. More than anything I've ever heard, I need to hear him say it. "Not like that." My tired eyes meet his and I can see the shame in them. I've

never seen someone so apologetic, but apologies can't stop nature. Coughs wrack through my body with a force that I cannot describe, and I can feel the branches tearing into me. He pulls me into his arms, my head against his chest as he sobs. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he keeps whispering over and over, but it isn't enough. Sorry can't fix this.

My throat is blocked, but my windpipe is the most alive it has ever been, filled to the brim with red blossoms that would be so beautiful if only he could see them. I am fatigued, the entire weight of my sick body now on him. I try to encase him one last time in my arms, but they are too unsteady. I can no longer take a breath in, and I don't have the energy to push any more out.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what to do. I'm so sorry I did this to you..." His words fade into background noise, and all I can hear is the growing and blossoming of the flowers in my lungs, and then I can't hear anymore. Finally, I breathe out.

Ending 3 alt 2:

I try to choke the words out, but the fear strangles me and I can't get them to move past my vocal cords. I want to tell him, but I am more worried about his rejection than whatever the flowers will do to me. I cede whatever confidence I have left and let the melancholy overtake me. I fall into his chest, the vines pulsing with the last of the love I can give.

"What!?" He shakes me, trying to bring my speech back to me. "You have to tell me!" I let out a low groan, but the words can't form, my mouth is too full. Flowers tumble from my lips as I try to push them out with my tongue, but I can't make room enough in my maw to breathe. I choke, my body convulsing against his as he grips my shoulders. "Tell me! You can't leave me like this!" I want to tell him, I want to say

it all, to say, *I am in love with you, I have always been in love with you, and it is killing me*, but I can't. There is nothing I can do. My eyes flutter shut. "Please, don't leave me like this..." His words fade, the world fades, and I can feel the final bloom in my lungs finishing what he started the first time he touched me. His fingers trace patterns across my limp body, new ones, in the shape of flowers, and then I cannot feel it anymore.

Maia Loiacono

Revolution

As in flurries of powdered joy

We dance

harken to the unseen sun

a sweet, unopened throw of chance

With petals forcing color bright

We smile

awakened to the simple splendor

that graces the world to wait awhile

Tilting constellations find

painted horizons and mountainous frames

of regal nature questions climb

the light each eye for clarity claims

Ruby Osborne

Three Words, Just Eight Simple Letters

I love you.

Three words that mean so little, yet so much: "I adore you," "you complete me," "I support you," "I appreciate you." So many meanings in just three words, just eight simple letters put together. People put so much meaning and weight on these words when they're really just words of affirmation. I've said these three little words so often in my life, completely disregarding their "weight."

My mother said I love you to me as she coaxed me in the middle of the night, comfortingly shushing my choking sobs as she ran her fingers through my hair, tickling my neck. This became our routine as I wondered time and time again why I felt so different from everyone around me, so lonely despite being surrounded by people.

Laying belly-down on the stiff, rigid rug in my grandma's backroom of her house, Barney, the infamous purple dinosaur of my childhood, sang to me through the TV, *"I love you, you love me... won't you say you love me too?"*

I said I love you to Haley in fourth grade, as we sat crisscross applesauce on the floor, doodling pictures of each other holding hands. We were inseparable as we talked about our future apartments and the places we'd visit someday.

"I get all worked up, and my stomach starts to hurt... I don't know what's wrong with me!" Charlie Brown grumbles to Linus.

*"I know what's wrong with you," Linus replies smugly.
"You're in love, Charlie Brown."
"What!?"*

I said I love you to Jamie when I was twelve as she cried backstage because she missed her entrance. I comforted her like my mother had comforted me, running my fingers through her hair and shushing her silent sobs, just as I had been taught. She thanked me, then kissed me. She kissed me, then pulled away immediately and giggled. I giggled back. But it felt weird. It felt different.

"I'm in love with you," Jim Halpert confesses to Pam in 'The Office.'

"What?" Pam replies.

"I'm really sorry if that's weird for you to hear, but I needed you to hear it."

"What are you doing?... What do you expect me to say to that?"

I said I love you to my first boyfriend. I said it over text because our high school selves were too scared to ever hang out in person. I texted him every day and every night and said I love you a million times. He broke up with me eight months later, saying that he didn't think it was normal for us to be too scared to go on dates. I wasn't sad.

"I care about you so much," Mike pleads to Eleven in 'Stranger Things.'

"Care... but you don't-you don't love me anymore?" Eleven asks.

"Who said that I didn't?"

"You never say it."

I said I love you to another ex-boyfriend later in high school, but he laughed in my face, shoving me onto the floor. I still don't know to this day if it was out of anger or amusement.

"Of course you love me. How pathetic," he sneered.

I decided I would never say I love you to a boy ever again.

"I've loved you ever since I've known you Jo," Laurie confesses to Jo in 'Little Women.' "I couldn't help it, and you've been so good to me -- I've tried to show it, but you wouldn't let me."

"I don't see why I... I can't love you as you want me to," Jo admits.

"You can't?"

"I can't change the feeling and it would be a lie to say I do when I don't. I'm sorry."

I said I love you to my two high school best friends, but I don't think they loved me as much as they loved each other. They were entangled in one another, completely inseparable, and there was never one without the other. They always held hands and rested their heads on each other's shoulders and sat very close. I thought of my childhood best friend, and how I used to feel that way with her. I longed for that inseparable connection my two high school friends had, but I found it odd that they always wanted to be touching each other. I felt lonely once more, as if I wasn't catching on to something everyone knew, as if I was flunking the class of growing up while everyone else excelled. I didn't know why.

I've said I love you to my friends, my family, my cats, strangers. I say I love you everywhere, as if it's a greeting: "Hello, I love you!" "Bye, I love you!" My best friend and I say it, at a minimum, three times per conversation.

Never did it feel like a pivotal moment. These vulnerable confessions I've been shown all my life through TV have always felt overly dramatized. Why is it so scary, shameful, and jarring to say those three little words? How could those three words, just eight simple letters that I've said thousands

of times, be the climax of every relationship? I could never understand it.

"That wasn't the first time [I wanted to kiss you]," Héloïse confesses in 'A Portrait of a Lady on Fire.'

"Tell me," Marianne pleads.

"No, you tell me."

"When you asked if I had known love. I could tell the answer was yes. And that it was now."

"I remember."

It wasn't until you were sitting near me, but not right next to me. Not as close as I wanted you to be. We took turns taking pictures of each other. You gave me that goofy eyebrow raise and smirk combination that you make when you're teasing me. Above us, a cascading vine of tree branches encircled us. You were looking down, your head tilted. The back of your neck was revealed, the one I had been massaging mere moments before. I couldn't stop thinking about how pretty you looked. We were in our own little world, the branches of the tree protecting us from reality, from our past. From everything that had kept us apart from each other. All the heartbreak, confusion, expectations, melted away. It was just me and you, enjoying each other's presence without a care in the world.

And then I felt it. Those three words, just eight simple letters, choking in the back of my throat. I finally felt that fear, that shame, that exasperation, and that excitement of it all bubbling and bouncing in my body, everything from the tips of my fingers to the back of my neck to the ends of my feet just wanted to say how I loved you. I wanted to scream it to the rooftops and whisper it to the tiniest flower. I wanted to tell anyone and no one how much I loved you. I wanted to kiss you again and again, and hold your hand, and ignore all the judgment from everyone else, from ourselves. I wanted to wither away in fear and I wanted to be printed on the

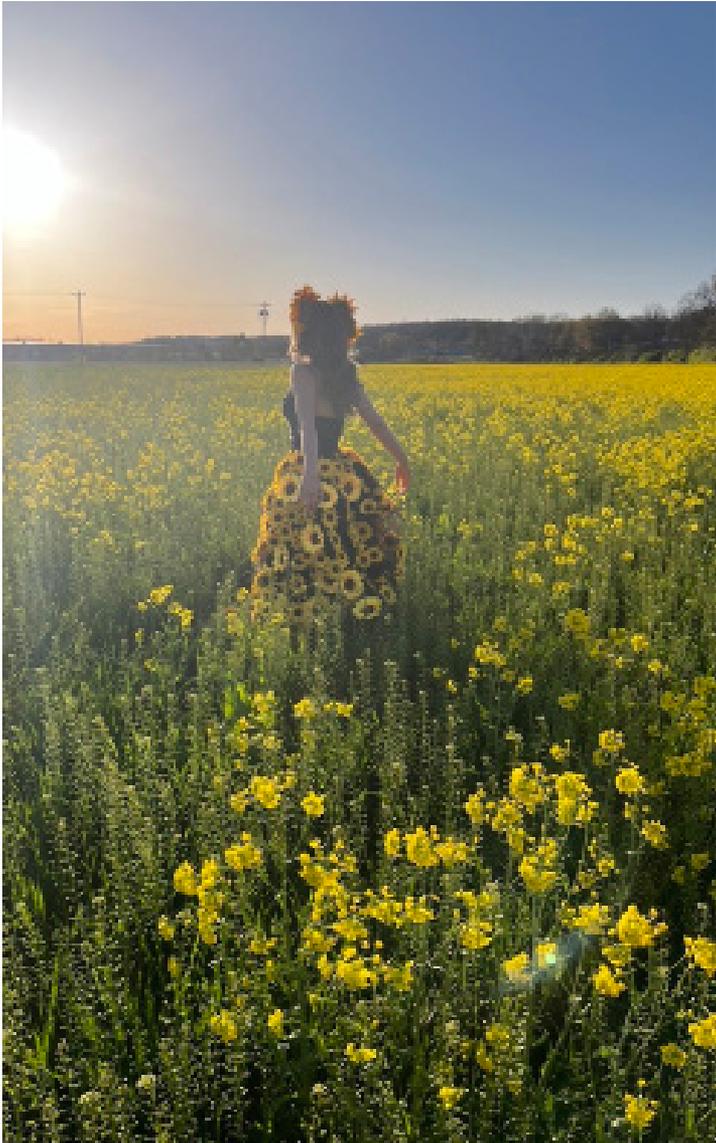
biggest billboard in the entire world.

But I couldn't say it. For the first time in my life, I hesitated to say I love you, even though I desperately wanted to.

And that's when I knew.

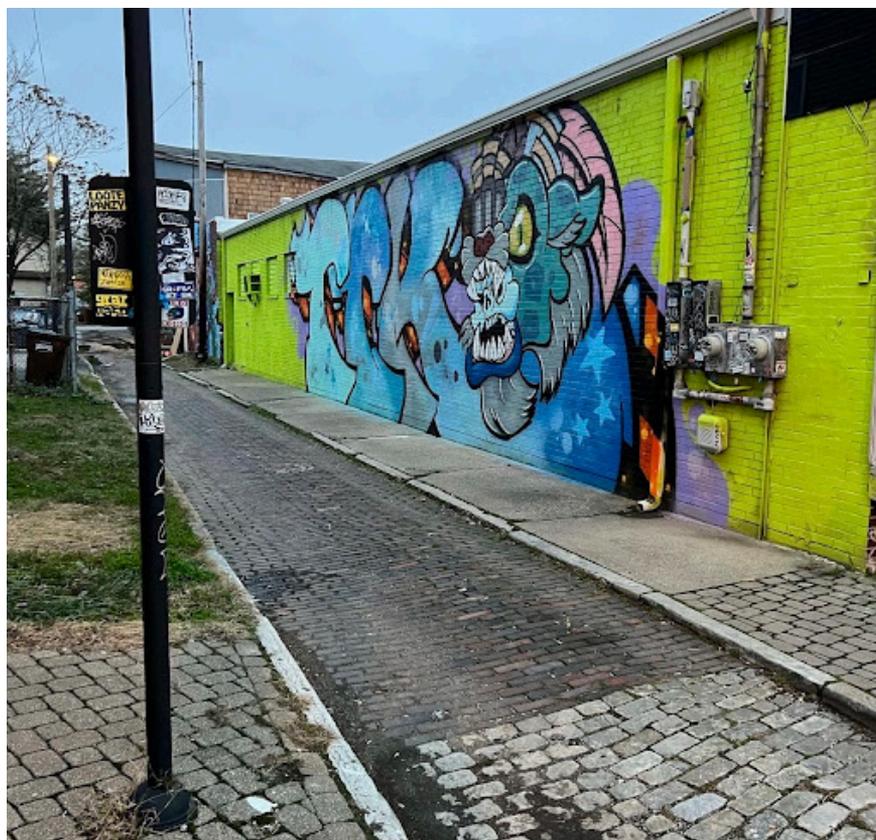
Chloe Mullins

The Sunflower Fairy



Chloe Mullins

Cincinnati Lane



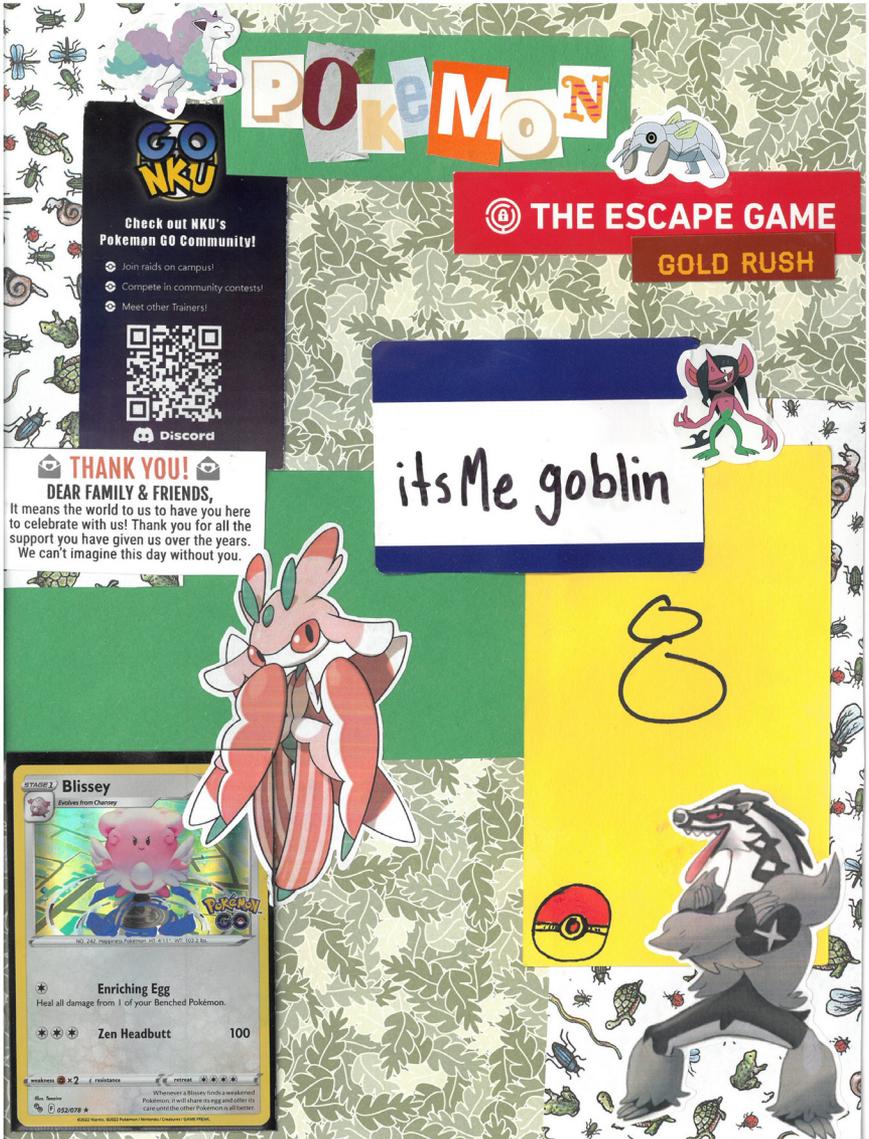
Grace Pfanstiel

Spring Fever



Grace Pfanstiel

Collage Friends pt 1



Evey Cooper

Kevil Collection (12 of 15)



Ezra Knapp

Peaches

By In The Valley Below

The nectar covering our eyes, transporting our tongues away from the troubles outside. We don't mind too much. Each of us reach up the tree, tearing our muscles, desecrating our limbs, the desire irresistible.

The feeling of power, swindling our senses, converting our nerves, to devices it uses to fuel our bodies. An electrifying feeling that numbs our senses to the crackle across our skin. Nothing compares to how we feel now, unstoppable and irresponsible, free to do whatever we please.

There are no consequences when the nectar is in effect. All that matters is getting more, even if that means we are scrambling, clawing, tearing at each other, competing to get there first.

Falling, Falling, Falling, Falling
 breaking, breaking, breaking, breaking...
 standing, limping, crawling,
 going again. going again. going again.

...lying there, as the pain buries deep back in our bones, the nectar gone.

Rachel Little

Daughters

I wish my mother and I
Could've been girls together.
I think we would have gotten along
In our wild youth.
But instead,
She was learning how to be a mother
While I was still learning how to
Just be.
I wish I could've known who she was
Before she grew up.
Before she had to learn how to take care of things.
When she wasn't a daughter, or a sister, or a mother.
Just a girl.

Roma Markle

Pomme Puree

He says he does not want to talk about it and that can only mean "it" is about me. While we sit at the dinner table, I find empty words leaving my lips in the form of small talk, but our hollow conversation plays like a radio in my mind. I can see in his eyes that he's trying to decide which bags will fit the most clothes, which boxes he should keep from packages over the next month to fit his items in, how many things he's fine with leaving behind. I can see he's trying to formulate how to tell me, or if he even will tell me. He is considering simply leaving, without a word. I would receive the divorce papers in the mail a week later; he would settle for whatever I would let him have. I shovel more mashed potatoes into my mouth. I can tell that he wishes that they were homemade, not the instant kind that you buy in red boxes at Walmart for \$4. It seems that if I was a better wife, a wife who put more effort into trivial things - like how I make the mashed potatoes, or scraping the little bit of mud off of his shoes, or making the bed a little neater than usual - that he may decide to stay. In his head, he is criticizing my every detail. I am rough around the edges, but he used to say he liked that.

When I wake in the morning, he is not beside me, and neither are the things on his bedside table - his \$2 drugstore chapstick, his thin frame reading glasses, his copy of a second-hand self help book that he always said he'd read but never got around to. In the kitchen, some of the photographs that were stuck to the refrigerator with a magnet are gone, and so is his favorite pen from the counter.

I do not check for his worn out Adidas tennis shoes by the door.

Instead, I pull potatoes from the pantry, milk and butter from the fridge, salt and pepper from the spice rack, peeler and masher from the drawer, and pressure cooker from its spot in the cabinet. I peel the potatoes, fill the pressure cooker with water, and set it on the stove to boil. I drop the potatoes in and let them cook for 15 minutes.

I do not check for his post-it note reminder to go to the dry cleaner that sat on the wall next to the phone.

I drain the water from the potatoes and transfer them to the mixing bowl, beginning to beat them with the masher, using all of the muscles in my right arm in the hopes that I can summon the memories of my mother making them so I may do this perfectly.

I do not check for his navy coat on the back of the recliner in the living room.

I add the butter, milk, salt and pepper to the potatoes, mixing it all in until they are smooth. I pull leftover baked chicken from the fridge and heat it up on two plates, placing them on either side of the table - one in his spot and one in mine.

I do not check for his colorful glass paperweight on the side table that was a gift from his brother on the announcement of his promotion.

I scoop a heap of potatoes onto my plate and onto his, wrapping the bowl in saran wrap and placing the leftovers into the fridge. I sit at my place at the table, linking my fingers together in my lap. I wait and watch the door, knowing that he will be happy to come back to a home cooked meal. That he will be happy to come home.

I do not check the time as the days pass.

Luciano Montazemi

Passings

JD is an old friend of mine. He's the kind of guy who always looks to make people smile, always down to hang out, to lend a helping hand with anything you may need. I have a lot of fond memories with him; wrapping up the semesters playing *Super Smash Bros*, debating the merit of Tyler, the Creator records, laughing ourselves weak at absurdist memes. He's a really wonderful man.

Back in those days, in high school, he was always this delightful, goofy presence to everyone. His permanent smirk and surfer-dude affect hid an intelligent, kind, mature soul underneath, and I think people took notice of that pleasant contrast. You couldn't blame them for expecting a meat-head, though.

His surname was Poindexter, but he was anything but. An athlete first and foremost, the kind of kid you often meet in small towns, whose first love was football, and slotted neatly into a world of competition and comradeship. He was svelte yet strong, short frame masquerading a formidable physique. And yes, football was his M.O. Maybe he'd have succeeded more in other sports, track, baseball, gymnastics, swimming. But he loved football, and he worked his ass off to be on that team, and I could not say it wasn't where he belonged. I certainly considered him a closer friend than he must have considered me, and his teammates were undoubtedly the primary reason.

JD has siblings, but the guys he played with, those were his brothers.

That day, he wept. Once a week, in US history, we spent class in the library. He and I always sat with a group of our peers at a long table. A few minutes prior, the principal had made an announcement over the loudspeaker.

“... After speaking with local authorities I am saddened to announce...
... they found him at the scene of the crash...
...in times like this, we have to stand strong as a community, as a family...”

You can tell just by the texture of the air. It's that haunting silence after a hurricane, where yellow sky blankets catastrophe's wake.

When I was in the fifth grade, my brother, Jake, lost a close friend in a car accident. Everyone I knew had taken it hard, of course, but he was wrecked. He later told me of how, for several days afterward, any semblance of the typical high school structure had completely crumbled away. These kids had gone from a world where a student could not be trusted to go to the restroom without a hall pass to one where doors were left open for mourners to flow in and out throughout the school day, passing periods stretching indefinitely. The teachers abandoned their lesson plans, opting to sit in silence, or to talk through their grief in hushed tones. They even turned off the bell system. It was like time itself had been forced to stop.

My brother and his friends went to the site of the crash. It was right near the base of Georgetown Road, a major thru road in Lawrenceburg, IN, where it meets Indiana State Route 1, one of the major connections from our town to the greater world. I took both roads every morning on the way to school; Jake would speed through that turn like it was nothing. There was something ghastly about it from there

on out. He told me about tracing tire marking and debris to conjure an idea of exactly how it happened, so clear that he may as well have witnessed it himself. And no matter how much he was able to rationalize it, to piece together exactly how it happened, something was wrong. The autumn air, usually a gale, smelling rich of soil and cold... it wasn't just slow. It was gone. Like the molecules ripped from the atmosphere. The street was empty. The sky was grey.

"It just feels wrong to sit here like this."

"They just need to address it, it's just wrong that they haven't yet."

"It's just gonna get worse the longer they put it off, just wrong..."

"It's wrong that no one in charge is even mentioning it."

"There's really something wrong with this."

There was a night I'd had about a year prior that I think of now, alongside this sad, cold day.

I never tried to sleep early, but that night, things had been different. Every light in my bedroom was off, the door shut, the curtains drawn. The only sign to an outside observer that it was much too early for me, or anyone frankly, to try to sleep was the splintering tendrils of light, halcyon spiderwebs squeezing under the door and into the corner of the room, where my head lay. And maybe, if you had listened closely, you would have heard the din of a party, the sights, sounds, and even smells of a gathering, creeping through the air vents below me. The sound of people celebrating a life.

From this perch, in a quiet bedroom atop a twisty house, it was that sound of laughter and a distinct odor of ciga-

rette smoke squeezing through the cracked window which stirred me. My mouth was overrun with a taste of sleep in the too-cold room, that dry, stale quality that only snoring could have brought. I scanned the blackness, straining to make out details in the dark. That house no longer belongs to my family, but I can see it now, clear as day. It was a study of duality, showing signs of where a young boy had slept, and where a teenager then resided in equal measure, with old toys on the display shelf above the desk, covered in a week's worth of unfinished homework. In that moment, I resigned to fall back asleep; nevertheless, something prodded me, keeping me awake. It was the knowledge that I had nothing I wished to wake to the next day.

That was the first weekend without my mother, in my entire life.

There's something universal about how, across time and across cultures, we struggle to process, to grow, grieve. I saw then, across the library, the quiet confusion of people going through their first loss; the painful familiarity of those going through yet another; the apathy of those dealing with their own demons; the agony of those with soft, open hearts. There were occasional chuckles at inappropriate jokes, someone who talked just too loud for the temperature of the room, little sparks of liveliness tamped down like flareups of a miskindled campfire. Across the room from me were seven heads buried in hands at once, all sitting in a line on one side of a table. I can recall now wishing to speak to one of them, any of them, but I proceeded in the silence, too. Honestly, I wish I hadn't.

How stupid it is, this communal grief that, nonetheless, you're expected to deal with on your own.

I always wondered how they handled it. The teachers, I mean. My history teacher, a chronic pacer if there ever was one, kept standing still. He must have been thinking. He'd been at this school since the late 80s. He'd just passed 30 years. All the kids he's taught, man. Class of '88, '89, '90... I asked him once what he'd learned about us. After all, he has all these generations of kids in front of him, he must have noticed some interesting things, how we have changed, how the culture has evolved around us. He told me, outside the Internet, kids were roughly the same. We have the same hopes and dreams, The same petty dramas and rivalries. The same anxieties of the future. He's been through it with these students. He's taught kids through the fall of the USSR, dozens of American wars, 9/11, the '08 housing crisis, the rise of opioids in small towns like this. Through Reagan, HW, Clinton, W, Obama, Trump. Nations have come and gone... He's taught juniors all his career, so he's seen all these kids at the precipice of something bigger, something more. He has to have seen hundreds of heartbreaks... hundreds of kids missing out on a big scholarship, losing their home, getting ill, losing loved ones... losing their own lives. That's how you know something's wrong. Because you know if he's stuck in his head, this older, wiser man, trapped mulling it over in his mind, shaken to the core... you know if he can't process it, how the hell can you? How're any of us?

It's almost four years now since he died. His name was Brett, by the way. They all called him Big Bad Brett. #8 jersey. I wanted to learn some more about him, so I've been digging through the local news about him. Y'know what I learned? Three days prior, he signed a letter of intent. He was going to stay in the area, play DIII football at Thomas More in Northern Kentucky, on a team with lots of his former high school teammates. I also found a message one of his coaches had shared around his passing, a text Brett had sent him. It's hard not to see poetry in Brett's own words, a sort of final

broadcast he didn't even know he was making:

"Hi Coach Roden, this is Brett Fox. I just wanted to thank you for everything you did for me during my high school football career. You are a huge role model to me and I'm glad that you were my coach for my first 3 years. I appreciate everything you taught me about the game of football and becoming a better man. Much love coach. You will never be forgotten."

It's almost five years now without Mom, in case you were wondering. When I awake at night, it's quiet now. My sister, my roommate, is in bed early, needing to wake before the sun rises to open at work. Her room is through the wall just to the left of me. If I were to press my ear against it, I could hear the family dog snoring at her bedside, now an elderly man, less the puppy he once was. But from my bed, tucked in the back corner of the room, it is quiet. There's a neutral quality to this apartment. Yes, the smell of cigarettes is gone, but it is replaced by a non-descript, odorless air. The walls, beige, and the carpet, too. The silence at nights, the emptiness in the air, it hangs heavy, a reminder of shifted responsibilities, and family who have come and gone. But I still feel a piece of me in the past, tethered to a reflection of myself. I may sleep on a different mattress, but the same frame supports it.

Brett Fox, October 18, 2000 – February 21, 2019

Lisa Montazemi, June 4, 1967 – March 11, 2018

Eros Ritchie

Sugar Skull

CW: Death and Suicide

the wishes of the dead
 podredumbre de las frutas
whispering in your ear
 flores muriendo
telling you to end it
 cempasúchil
what is suicide?
 la conexión de los vivos y los muertos aparece llena
 de flores amarillas
the release of your own pain
 siguiendo el rastro de la fragancia y cempasúchil
push onto others
 qué atrae tu alma al ofrenda
the wanting of better
 de vuelta a donde viviste
but not being able to do it
 dónde te recuerdan
maybe if i disappear i will not have to face it
 dónde sentiste tu dolor una vez antes
others do not need me
 te has unido a los muertos
i am only a replica
 el pan se ha comido
i am not who i wish to be
 la cerveza ha estado fluyendo
looking into a mirror full of someone who is not needed
 los cigarrillos y los puros pintan el aire con humo
i am better off dead
 te has unido a los muertos
only to be a memory to be forgotten one day
 solo para celebrarse una vez al año

Ruby Osborne

i'm a fire, and i'll keep your brittle heart warm.

sometimes i think about
the way your body fits into mine.
feel the dip in your back.
i crave to lay down
and hold you,
memorize the way your breath
hitches.

oh, i cant stop this infatuation;
i look at other women
and think of the possibilities,
how it would be for them to graze their thumb
along my hand
like you used to do –
the way you look at me
copied onto other people,
and my heart hitches into my skin
like a catastrophic casualty.

and when im alone, lonely
you creep into my mind
little
by little
until youre an infestation,

(an infestation.)

eating me alive
in the most horrific,

(yet most pleasurable,)

way.

i wish you loved me
the way i love you.
why is it so hard
to hug me
and feel the dip
in my back?

i'll warm your cold, bitter heart
with the bristles of my passion.



Anna Bohn

Whipped Cream

A black marker scribbles instructions on the side of a plastic cup before it joins the long line of cups waiting to be filled. My eyes are magnetized to the cup with my name, as if staring at it would make the process go faster. There's nothing else to do but watch and wait. All the other customers waiting for their drinks are busy chatting amongst themselves or with their friends that decided to tag along. I stand in the crowd alone.

I could get on my phone, but I already cleared out my Instagram feed when I was waiting in line to order, I doubt anyone has posted anything new. Or I could just stare ahead and zone out, but then I'll look awkward, just standing there and staring at nothing. I could look around and people watch, but what if I stare at someone too long and they catch me watching? What if I accidentally make eye contact with someone? No, I'll just stick to twisting the ring around my finger and watching my cup, counting down the seconds for my drink to be made. Like a gun signaling the start of a race, at the sight of my drink on the counter I will burst from my spot in the corner and dash to grab my drink so I can run from this place with my tail between my legs.

Until then, I watch as my cup sits on the counter. I have to. This way, I can focus on my drink and pretend that I'm not sticking out like a sore thumb. Like a hawk, my eyes remain concentrated on my cup. That's just sitting there. Doing nothing. I know that the moment I look away, it'll disappear into someone's hands. And if it's taken from my sight then I'll be left in the dark like a moth with no flame and they'll make

my drink and finish it and I won't know. The barista will call out my name and put my drink on the counter, but I won't hear over the crowd noise. Then, my drink will just sit there and age under curious eyes, all wondering who is the person who's not paying any attention, and when I notice that it's my cup sitting there, after the barista has called my name a third time, I'll have to crawl up there apologetically under judging eyes begging forgiveness for wasting their time because I was distracted.

It doesn't happen as dramatically as I feared it would. The barista grabs the cup and turns to make my drink. I watch, mesmerized as they work, unable to understand how they remember so many different drink recipes with such a large variety of ingredients. I would never be able to learn the song and dance that entails the craft of drink making. My two left feet would trip me up before I even started. But still, there is no music, yet the barista makes my drink fluidly, pouring it into my cup before topping it off with a large dollop of whipped cream and chocolate syrup.

For the first time since I ordered, my eyes leave the cup in a panic, glancing around somewhat desperately. The only other drinks being made are teas and hot chocolates, none could be mine. But there has to be a mix up. I didn't- I asked for- did they not hear me? Is that someone else's drink? My eyes return to the cup that's being lifted so the barista can peek at the name scrawled at the top of the cup and I catch a glimpse of the letters, my stomach dropping. Ah. That is mine.

Like clockwork my name is called, and I robotically make my way to grab my cup, hesitating in my response to the barista. My stomach churns as I try to gather the courage to speak up. After hesitating and lingering at the counter for what is probably less than is socially acceptable, I choke out a thank you and turn to leave in defeat. I sneak out, hunch-

ing in on myself as I make my way past judging eyes. I turn and offer one more glance back and see that life has moved on. My eyes glance back down at my cup, and I purse my lips before continuing to walk away. I had asked for no whipped cream.

Kaylin Conley

Superior

Today, the lake was a sheet of glass, blue-grey and calm. The sky was covered in light grey clouds, as was typical for early November here. It would rain soon. I could just feel it. I hoped the roof of the cabin didn't leak.

It might have been generous to call it a cabin. It was a little one-room house built fifty years ago by my grandfather, with wooden paneled walls and a green corrugated roof. It only had one window, which faced away from the lake. There was no electricity, the heat was from a wood-burning stove, and I would have to boil all my water. I didn't even want to think about the bathroom situation.

It was almost enough to make me climb back in my truck and drive back to the city. But Dr. Hayes had told me to take a trip, and my brother convinced me that staying out here would be good for me. Reconnect with nature. Find yourself. Contemplate your failing marriage.

Dr. Hayes said that many couples benefited from some time apart. Absence makes the heart grow fonder and all that. And sure, I was willing to try it. I was more than willing to spend a week away from Sheila.

Marriage counseling had been her idea. Recently I had been spending more time out of the house, hanging out at bars and meeting a lot of women, who were beautiful and interesting and not my wife. That was about when Sheila started getting scared I would leave her and scheduled us a counselor. She really wanted to fix things between us. I wasn't so

sure.

Regardless, I was out here alone for the next seven days.
Just me and the lake.

* * *

The second day of my stay at the cabin, I stood on the beach watching the waves. The first day I had been too tired from the drive to do much, but this morning I felt like going out into nature, so I put on my boots and followed the dirt path to the water's edge.

Today was windier than yesterday, and the lake was agitated. Small waves crashed into the rocks that made up the shoreline, and the gray water was frothing with white peaks as far as I could see. The shore was populated with a mix of evergreen and leafy trees, which were just beginning to turn orange. The forest extended to my left and right as far as I could see along the coast. Behind me, the forest surrounded the little clearing with the cabin and lined the dirt road back to the nearest town. There was nothing but trees around. Nothing but trees, and water.

Before me stretched the largest of the Great Lakes. The grey water met the grey sky, with no glimpse of anything on the other side. It might as well have been the ocean. Lake Superior was the largest of the Great Lakes by surface area, but also by volume and depth. There was enough water in the lake to cover the entirety of South America in a foot of water. At its deepest point, it was 1,333 feet deep.

I had once read about the shipwrecks of Lake Superior. People said that the lake "never gives up her dead", because unlike other lakes, where bodies will eventually wash up on shore, Lake Superior is so cold that the bodies never start to decompose and bloat. They stay sunk at the bottom of the

lake that drowned them.

Far out in the grey water, I saw a dark shape bobbing in the waves. At first glance, I thought it was a body, then immediately felt stupid. The driftwood was gone a moment later, off to float about the lake until it washed up on shore in a week or a hundred years. Maybe that wood had once been part of a ship, or maybe it was from a tree that had fallen in a storm a decade ago. No matter what it had been, it belonged to the lake now.

That night as I lay in the narrow hand-hewn bed, I wondered what Sheila was doing. She was probably in bed, but maybe not. I couldn't imagine she was missing me. I thought that was the point of this trip, to make us miss each other, but I couldn't say I was missing her either. I was mostly thinking about the lake, what all I'd have to do to live out here, and a little about the woman I'd met at the bar last week. I decided that I wouldn't worry about Sheila on this trip, and I'd just enjoy the time alone. It would be a taste of what life could be like if I left her. Good. Free.

* * *

Someone must have been here earlier in the season. I knew some of my uncles used the cabin on hunting trips. They'd left a large pile of firewood next to the stove, so I didn't have to worry about chopping any, thank God. There were other little signs of life. Footprints pressed deep into the dirt. A few piles of fish bones near the water. Someone had left behind a radio, which mostly just got static when I turned it on. A few times it caught snippets of a woman's singing, but I could never understand the words.

I hadn't brought much to entertain myself with, so I found myself spending most of my time at the lake shore, exploring up and down the rocky beach. Half a mile west of the cabin, the beach turned from rocks and boulders into solid

stone, short cliffs standing a few feet above the water. To the east was a long stretch of pebbly beach, and I combed it for interesting rocks and anything else that had washed up.

The fourth day at the cabin, I found a fish scale on the beach. I'd thought it was a piece of plastic at first, but it had a slight sheen of iridescence that caught my eye. It was mostly transparent, slightly flexible, and about the size of a half dollar coin. I had no idea what kind of fish it could be from, but it was pretty, so I took it. I kept it in my pocket, taking it out every now and then to look at it in the weak sunlight, tilting it back and forth, enamored with the faint rainbow glimmer.

The sky was still covered in clouds, and they had been getting darker every day. The morning of day five, there was a wetness in the air that told me the rain I'd predicted would be coming today more than likely. I stoked the fire back to life in the stove and went to fetch water, as was my morning routine.

The lake was a dark grey today, I noticed. The next thing I noticed was the dead bird. I stopped short, and just stared at it a moment. At first I wasn't sure it was dead. There was no puddle of blood or anything. It was on top of one of the larger rocks as if it had been placed there, lying on its side in a decidedly un-birdlike fashion. It didn't move at all, even when I got closer, except for the wind ruffling its feathers. It was speckled brown with a white belly and a thin black beak. Its beady black eyes stared off over the lake, unseeing. Its neck was snapped, head lying at an unnatural angle.

What kind of animal could bloodlessly snap a bird's neck? What kind of animal would leave it here instead of eating it? I looked around, suddenly worried I had somehow missed a large predator nearby. There was a prickling in the back

of my neck that made me want to leave the area as fast as possible.

A fat drop of rain hit my head, and I gave in to that impulse, scurrying back to the cabin without getting any water. As soon as I shut the door behind me, I felt silly to have gotten so spooked, but the rain was coming down in earnest now, so I wasn't going to go back out. I could make do with my emergency bottled water for today.

The bird was strange, but there was nothing to be afraid of. Birds died all the time, from all sorts of things. Maybe it had a heart attack midair and crashed into the rocks, breaking its neck. Maybe it had been hit by a plane. Maybe it had been hit by a boat, and just so happened to wash up on my beach, placed gently on the rock by an oddly large wave. It could happen. I wasn't going to worry about it.

The rain didn't let up all day, and I sat by the window, not sure what I was watching for.

* * *

The next day, when the rain let up, I went back to the lake. The bird was gone. It had probably been washed away or picked up by some animal. The sky had lightened up, and the lake was calm. I found a handful of smooth, flat rocks, and started skipping them out on the lake. Two bounces. Three. Two. Five. One. Eight, my record. Three.

The next one hit the water at a bad angle and sunk like, well, a rock. Past that, far out in the lake, movement. I didn't understand what I was seeing at first, because it didn't make any sense. There was a woman out there in the water. Her hair was all soaked, plastered to her head, and the water had to have been freezing, but she didn't seem panicked. She must have been a hundred feet out, just bobbing in the waves. It should have been too far to see details, but I could

tell she was staring right at me. She was beautiful. Between one blink and the next, she was gone like she'd never been there.

I should have done something, maybe. Should've called out to her. Should've gone for help. Instead, I stood on the shore, swaying a little bit in the wind. I was clearly seeing things. No one would be swimming in the lake at this time of year. They would freeze to death.

I retreated to the cabin, telling myself everything was fine. What was more likely: a vanishing woman swimming out there in Lake Superior, or that my eyes were playing tricks on me? I wasn't going to worry about it. By tomorrow night, I would be back to my wife. We would have another counseling appointment with Dr. Hayes where she would offer solutions I didn't especially want. I would go back to the bar and see if the woman from last week was there. I might finally print out divorce papers.

The rest of the day I was distracted. More than once I caught myself touching the fish scale in my pocket, drawn to it like a talisman. When the sun had set, I laid in bed and tried to sleep. I kept thinking about the woman in the lake. I couldn't quite picture her face anymore. It was like someone seen in a dream. She was beautiful, though, I knew that.

That was the last thought I had before falling asleep. She was beautiful.

* * *
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In the twilight hour just before dawn, when the world is grey with dim light, the man opens the cabin door and walks, trancelike, to the water's edge. The sky is clear, finally, and the full moon reflects on the lake's black surface. There at the rocky little beach is a rowboat. It bobs in the water

invitingly. The man slowly wades into the water, uncaring of the cold. He climbs into the boat and starts rowing. The boat and the man sway gently to a haunting tune, soft but growing louder. When the boat is far from shore, and land is barely visible, the man stops. He stares deeply into the water. Blackness. He leans out over the water, bringing his face down close. He is entranced by it. He reaches out, and his fingers graze the inky black surface of the water.

From the lake, a pale hand reaches back. It grasps the man's hand, interlacing their fingers like a lover. Then, in a fluid motion, pulls him into the water. Down, down, down. Bubbles rise. Then, the surface stills, and once more, the lake is a sheet of glass.

Theodore Frost

T is for Tokyo

The city of dichotomous tradition. Land of Ancient Tradition and Constant Modernity. Such a stark contrast that borders on the oxymoronic that coexists at all times. Comparing things with which we aren't very familiar is all too easy and a lot of people will do it without thinking. Sure, Tokyo is more modern than Kyoto but that doesn't mean Tokyo doesn't hold steadfast to its cultural traditions. It's also a city where old school meets new school in the form of robotic tour guides giving guided tours of Senso-ji Temple in the heart of Asakusa. You can find the smell of grilled fish in the air and the sound of clacking wooden blocks in every corner. But you'll also find many other things that make Tokyo one of my favorite places on earth: a bustling metropolis with endless options for food, an active nightlife scene, and endless shopping opportunities. I don't want to bore you with all my reasons why Tokyo is amazing so I'll just list them: the beauty of Nakameguro a ramen shop at Shinjuku Station where you can watch your ramen being made by the chef in front of you. The convenience of being able to fit in a quick workout before your night out at Roppongi Hills' state-of-the-art gym with a breathtaking view. You can't go wrong with the classic Tokyo Gyoza! For my money, I'd say Tokyo is the best because of its rich culture and history. It has a long list of cultural touchstones that people around the world are fascinated with, such as a bustling nightlife scene that never sleeps, with everything from sake to karaoke bars on offer. Tokyo is a city that is constantly contradicting itself and finding new ways to adapt its old traditions to new ways of life. Experience the cultural fusion that is Tokyo.

Mackenzie Basl

Sommelier

My mother is allergic to wine,
and I am allergic to my mother.
I sip Riesling at weddings
as she asks me when I'll finally get a boyfriend.
I swallow cabernet at Christmas dinner
as she tells my cousins that I haven't found a job yet.
I gulp down chardonnay at brunch
as my friends tell me how sweet she is when they've only
met her once.

I don't know if the bitter taste in my mouth
is from the Pinot Noir
or her pinpoint insults.
I may be the failure who falls short,
but neither of us drinks from the chalice at Communion.

The problem is that wine is an acquired taste.
Not everyone likes the strength of it,
the acrid flavor as it coats your tongue.
Others savor it,
test and experiment to find the best pairing
for their fish and fettuccine and flank steak.

Wine is hit or miss, depending on your preference.
My therapist likes Zinfandel
so I tell him my troubles with blunt proficiency.
My father likes Merlot

so I tell him the good in abundance and the bad in sparing pieces.

My partner likes Sangria

so I whisper sweet nothings in their ear until they're satisfied
I'm happy with our relationship.

But my mother is allergic to wine,
and I don't know how to feed her
a version of myself that she refuses to swallow.

She dislikes change;

Dislikes the path I've chosen to walk,
the life I've chosen to lead,
the person I've chosen to be.

But I'd rather take my chances with wine
than let her wither me into a raisin.

Mildred Nguyen

Tenement Spirits

Every Tet or Vietnamese new year, my mother took the effort to visit a family friend who served on the city's board of education, and she always made me tag along. The alley where the friend lived was too narrow for our car to fit—as are an overwhelming majority of the alleys, nooks, and crannies in Vietnam, where people are determined to carve out a living in even the smallest corner, everywhere there is space. So we parked the car at the alley's entrance and took off on foot, taking in the tubular tenements and electrical wires that loomed over us on either side of the winding path. The friend's house was tucked into the other end of the alley; right next to it was the house of the family that burned.

News reports said that faulty electrical wiring had sparked the fire, that the whole family had been asleep when it happened. Word of mouth said that by the time they were roused by the smoke, the flames had spread throughout the house and were waiting just outside their bedroom. The family had scrambled to their feet, people said, panicking to escape the burning house; but rows of impenetrable metal bars had been welded across their windows and around their balcony, a common Vietnamese deterrent against midnight burglars. How bitterly ironic was it, people said, that the very tool designed to protect the family had led to their doom.

The fire had claimed the lives of six people, including young children, but the house remained. Firm and high its walls stood, still holding the metal cages in place, the black splotches and streaks sprawled across their surface

the tragedy's only surviving evidence. Behind the iron gate barricading the front door—the sole open aperture into the house—I saw a living room devoid of all except for an altar against the right-hand wall, bathed in cyan fluorescence.

Before then I had never considered myself a spiritual person. My mother was deeply superstitious and my brother claimed he had once seen a ghost, while I was stuck in a mundane corporeal reality, untouched by whatever paranormal phenomena they were discussing over the dinner table. Yet as I walked past that burned house, briefly glancing at the altar inside, a shuddering chill erupted across my skin and persisted until we had taken refuge in the family friend's house next door. For the first time in many years, I was genuinely afraid.

Knowledge of tragedy often drives a filter into our brains, so that we are unable to perceive a place the same way as before we came into that knowledge. When tragedy occurs on a large scale and entails catastrophic loss of lives, the place might be irreversibly transformed. Buildings can be reconstructed, memorials can be erected, life can go on, but the place will be associated with tragedy—the World Trade Center; the town of Srebrenica, strugglingly recovering—forever, until there is no one left who can remember it. Such a transformation was laid bare to my mother and me some years back when we visited the Trùng Sơn Cemetery for Deceased Soldiers and found ourselves between rows upon rows of gravestones, many nameless, stretching for acres without end. Over ten thousand soldiers and militia members from the Vietnam War were buried there, permeating the ground with so much death that it soaked into the air, trees, and butterflies.

The same infusion of death and tragedy into a place occurs on a smaller scale, too. Horror movies might have sowed in us the idea that a haunted house can return to normal

once the ghost or occupying presence has been banished, exorcised, or pacified into moving on. That windows only creepily rattle, and floorboards inexplicably creak under the influence of a ghostly source. In that view, the haunting spir-its of the house are just as tenants, or outsiders, as humans are; and houses are naught but inanimate receptacles for our actions whether living or dead, unthinking backdrops to be acted upon.

Not so for the house of the family that burned. It had emerged the sole survivor of the fire, which had scarred and disfigured it, and left it isolated amongst its silent peers. Its twisted façade nestled between the cheery pastel blues and greens of neighboring tubes. Its eyes were sewn shut, its mouth was perpetually open: an eternally soundless screaming, or a gasp transfixed in time. From the cavern of its mouth poured forth that strange cyan light, the source of which seemed hidden deeper than the eye could see, like ectoplasm. Tragedy had fused into the walls, the concrete foundation, the cold light from its heart. Death had become the house.

We walked past the house again on our way back home; this time, I consciously averted my eyes from it. It was horrifying to behold, but also lonely and sad. I have not approached the house since.

Years later, I bumped my way into a fascination, bordering on obsession, with the idea of living houses: that houses are just as capable of thought and emotion as sentient creatures are; they only lack the means to communicate it. When I moved out of my first college dormitory, I whispered tender farewells to my room. Sometimes I thanked the ceiling of my apartment for sheltering me from the harsh elements. I started regarding buildings as another member of the vast domain of life—the kingdom of Tenements thus sat proudly beside those of Animals, Plants, Fungi, Eukaryotes, Prokary-

otes, and Bacteria, albeit without the same vigorous effort at classification. A typical tenement's life cycle goes something like this:

Buildings are born by the hands of their builders, their forms and tissues molded from bricks, concrete, cement, glass, wood, steel, rebar: every kind of construction material brought into existence through human ingenuity. A finished, unoccupied building is not yet alive but in a dormant state, waiting in hibernation for its first occupants. The arrival of humans, then, signals a drastic interior and/or exterior facelift of the building, for the drive to transform our immediate environments to most benefit our survival has been hardcoded into our genes. We deploy floor coverings, paint ceilings and walls, install blinds and curtains, hoard various amounts of furniture, appliances, decorations, and detritus, to enact our ideal vision upon the space over the span of months and years.

Toward the end of this transfiguration, the building less resembles an independent creature and more an extension of its occupants' work and lives. It bears witness to all of our joys and sorrows, our pleasures and crimes, our happiest memories and our most vulnerable moments. Through our behavior within its promise of private shelter, it might come to know us better than we know ourselves, its spirit having entwined with ours. As old occupants depart and new occupants move in, the sum of human experiences accumulate in every corner. Sometimes I find myself alone in my bedroom, staring up the wall and wondering if the apartment remembers the tenants before me, if anyone of them ever mistreated it in any capacity, if it ever had to witness the unbearable extent of human suffering. Like any other living creature, buildings can also be scarred by trauma, and in turn reshape themselves in response to it.

The house of the family that burned has a rather atypical life

cycle. Anyone sufficiently informed about what happened there tends to believe that it has since been haunted by the fire victims' lingering spirits: forever trapped in their cage, able to find neither closure nor peace. That was probably the rationale behind the altar in the living room and the open door, the latter allowing passersby a glimpse into the house's eerie interior so they could pray for the unfortunate souls without trespassing into taboo territory. The taboo territory designation also means that the house might stand forevermore, per the Vietnamese culture's immense respect for the dead. None should wantonly approach a place where spirits abound, let alone desecrate it by threatening demolition. If enough people believe that the house is haunted, then it manifests as a haunted house—the collective consciousness has the power to will anything into truth.

In my imagination the house stands as a grim memorial amidst mundane city life, harboring a host of human spirits within its own agonized tenement spirit. Time is frozen in its bowels, and no one will dare venture inside except to clean the altar, burn the incenses, and procure new offerings for the dead. A building's life comes to an end when it is reduced to rubble; paradoxically, the house of the family that burned cannot die in spite, and because, of the death that seeps into every crack in its walls. It is indefinitely suspended in limbo, reliving the fire's immediate aftermath over and over—tenements are immobile and rely on humans as caretakers, so the house literally cannot heal.

In that static state, the house, cold, lonely, and sad, will always remember that night. When the neighborhood has changed beyond recognition, when everyone who lived through the time of the fire has passed away, when humanity's collective memory has come to an end, still it will remember.

Contributors

Charleigh Haley is a fourth-year student at NKU majoring in Writing Studies and minoring in Journalism. Haley writes in a variety of genres such as poetry and fiction, but she strives when writing creative nonfiction with themes of grief, love, loss, and self-acceptance. She is currently working on a novel about finding herself after experiencing several great losses. Her poem, *We Should Start a Band*, was written in reminiscence of the 2020 quarantine and the time she spent envisioning different lives with her roommate for when the restrictions would be lifted, as well as the heartbreaking realization that their friendship was coming to an end.

Sarah Myers is an upcoming graduate of Northern Kentucky University. Sarah's writing often features experimental elements of form, content, and character. Her work focuses on the oddities of the human condition, living with a physical disability, and the intertwining links of society. Sarah strives to foster connections through her pieces, allowing unique and vivid glimpses of her life between the lines of her writing. In the future, Sarah wishes to implement a private practice of therapy which utilizes the medium of writing as a form of self discovery and improvement, emphasizing creation and the growth of self.

Nathan Wells is a writer/musician from Cincinnati, Ohio. He works mainly in lyric poetry, creative non-fiction and pulls musical influence from blues, jazz and early punk. His musical and spoken word performances are done under the moniker "Babe Wells", a family nickname. He enrolled at NKU in 2022 to finish his creative writing degree with a

minor in Cinema Studies with plans to continue on to get his MFA. Nathan enjoys spending his free time with his wife and son, drinking coffee and watching films.

Theo Sells (he/him) is a first-year English student at NKU, he has a focus in Creative Writing and is minoring in Honors and German. He grew up in a small town in southern Kentucky and turned to writing for an escape. He uses his work to incorporate nature with his struggle and growth with gender identity. He'd like to give a shoutout to Sara Moore Wagner for pushing him to further his journey with his featured piece, *The Boy in The Crick*. You can find Theo on Instagram @theowrites404 and on Twitter @theoowrites.

Eros Ricthie is a sophomore at NKU, they major in journalism and minor in English. They are from Lexington, Kentucky and was apart of the Spanish Immersion program. They enjoy embracing the arts with dancing, writing and playing music. They often write about their feelings and topics about love, death and mental health. They enjoy writing when inspired and hope to inspire others as well.

Hades Whalen is a sophomore at Northern Kentucky University. They have a major in Theatre, a minor in Creative Writing, and are a part of the Honors College. His favorite genres to write fantasy and science fiction. Their favorite poet is Edgar Allen Poe. Hades is often inspired by Poe's dark and mysterious themes throughout their writings. More recently, they have used writing as a form of self-expression and escapism. He uses his identity to explore what it means to be genderfluid and queer. One day, Hades hopes to be a published author, writing novels and poetry books.

Logan Davis Gilb, who writes under the pseudonym last name of "Day", is a 2nd year English student at Northern Kentucky University. He is from Lawrenceburg, Indiana. In his free time, he enjoys rock climbing, reading, writing, thrifting,

hiking, and spending time with his niece and nephew. He pulls a lot of his inspiration from Classical and Renaissance art, and has been influenced by the works of Walt Whitman, Sylvia Plath, and E.E. Cummings. Logan wishes to attain his Master's degree in either Public Policy or English, post graduation from NKU with a Bachelor's degree in English and a minor in Photography.

Kara Ferry is twenty-five years old and attends Northern Kentucky University majoring in Human Resource Management. She was born and raised in the Chicagoland area, moving to Cincinnati in 2019. She attended Cincinnati State and received an Associates of Arts in general studies. She recently gave birth to a beautiful baby girl named Lauralie in November of 2022! In her spare time- between studies and full time parenting, she loves to write! She has been writing on and off since 2012, usually writing in prose.

Mackenzie Basl is a sophomore Creative Writing major at Northern Kentucky University. She enjoys exploring themes of discovery and self-awareness through a metaphorical lens in her work, and she prefers reading and writing pieces that break convention and lean into the bizarre to offer unique perspectives on complex relationships. When she's not writing or acting, Mackenzie can be found tap dancing in her kitchen, overanalyzing the latest episode of Doctor Who, or eating her weight in Reese's cups.

Roma Markle is an English and Creative Writing major at NKU with a minor in Theater. She has been published twice for poetry in the Ambient Heights Anthologies, was invited to read at the Kentucky Women Writer's Convention in 2018, and is a 2019 GSA Creative Writing Alumni. She enjoys all things chaotic, and creating pieces that feed into the chaos that is everyday life, emotions and relationships. Her friends can attest that though she often cannot speak a

single coherent sentence, she is quite skilled with a pen in her hand.

Maia Loiacono is a freshman at Northern Kentucky University majoring in Music Performance. She grew up in South-Eastern Kentucky surrounded by the Daniel Boone National Forest where she spends her free time exploring and drawing inspiration from nature. She has recently undertaken a theater major and is also interested in Spanish and Social Justice. She began writing at age ten when she decided she wanted to write a book which, nine years later, is now in its fourth revision. She loves cats, tarot reading, and singing in the shower.

Ruby Osborne (she/her) is a current creative writing student here at Northern Kentucky University. Her favorite genres to write in are poetry and creative nonfiction. You can reach out to her on her Instagram, @rubyjosborne. She has three cats who she loves very much. She was previously published in American University's online newspaper "The Eagle." She would like to give a shoutout to Sara Moore Wagner and Jen Cellio for being two of her favorite professors. You can view more of her works and get to know her more from her website: <https://sites.google.com/view/rubyosborne/home>.

Chloe Mullins is a poet, writer, photographer, and speaker in a podcast on Spotify called *Spoken Words* where she reads on her own poetry and other works of literature that seem to catch her attention. Mullins is an aunt, a full-time college student, public speaker, and nature lover. She speaks on issues of mental illness such as anxiety and depression, children's books bringing a sense of significance to young minds, and advocating rights of LGBTQ+ and women's rights. Chloe has a working BFA in English at Northern Kentucky University and has received scholarships/awards such as The Commonwealth Scholarship and The National Society of Leadership and Success. Chloe Mullins hopes to write

her own children's books and poetry novels someday, if only she can stop reading other people's works instead.

Grace Pfanstiel is trained in the traditional arts and went through highschool as if to pursue art in college- but life happens along the way and now they are pursuing an Anthropology major with Environmental studies minor. However, art is a use it or lose it skill! So they still do art here and there in their free time. It is a passion and one that they want to continue to flourish- even if it's no longer their main focus.

Evey Cooper (they/she) is a junior pursuing a BFA in photography. They make work featuring landscapes of the Midwest and images documenting the farmland in Western Kentucky where they grew up. They also have an artistic focus surrounding textile art. They have many years of experience working with quilting, sewing, needle felting, and knitting which they use as a subject to document in some of their other photography projects. After graduation, Evey will pursue a career working in freelance photography and they hope to take up a residency making on location work in the future.

Ezra Knapp is a sophomore majoring in English with a minor in Women and Gender Studies. They currently live near NKU, but are originally from Louisville, KY. Their creative writing style switches between ekphrastic poems based on songs and freeform poetry based on a love of nature. In their free time, Ezra loves to crochet and play video games, specifically Slime Rancher and Stardew Valley! They also love to rock climb and can frequently be found at Climb Cincy multiple nights of the week. If you ever see them on campus crocheting, feel free to say hi!

Rachel Little is 19 years old and a sophomore at Northern Kentucky University. She is majoring in English with a Writ-

ing Studies track and hopes to go into editing and publishing. She has been writing since middle school and started out writing short fiction, but transitioned to poetry in high school and has stuck with it since. She tries to write every day and finds inspiration from her own life. She is thankful to her friends and family for encouraging her to share her writing for the first time in her life, and she hopes she can continue doing it.

Luciano Montazemi is a junior at NKU, majoring in Integrative Studies (Psychology, Human Services & Addictions, Creative Writing). His interests lay in the creative and performing arts (particularly writing and theatre) as well as film/television and left-wing political activism. He sincerely thanks his family, friends, dog, and significant other for support in his creative endeavors. Special thanks go to his mother, who always advised him to “leave it on the floor” before performances; in lieu of a stage, he resolved to leave it on the page.

Anna Bohn is a sophomore at Northern Kentucky University double majoring in English and History. She plans on continuing her education and eventually getting her doctorate in English. Anna loves to read; her favorite book is *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, and her favorite movie is the 2005 recreation of the novel (and she will stand by it). When she isn't reading, she is writing or spending time with friends and family.

Kaylin Conley is a 21-year-old Creative Writing major with a music minor. She has a thousand and one interests, and enjoys bringing them into her work as often as possible. She is especially inspired by the search for beauty in small things, and the natural world. She lives in Boone County with her family, two cats, and a group of Angelfish, who are the most polite listeners she could ask for.

Hello All my name is **Theodore Alan Clingman Frost** but most people just call me Teddy. I believe that an education not only prepares you for a career but opens your mind to new ways of thinking and exposes you to different cultures and ideas. Career wise I would love to be a content creator and be self employed making enough money to live off of just my own content creation solely. Overall, I am a friendly guy who wishes to travel the world one day. I don't have career goals as much as I have destinations that I want to see when I am older.

Mildred Nguyen is a senior Journalism major from Vietnam with a minor in Professional Writing. She has been writing creatively for most of her life, but hopes to return something to the world through journalism by informing the public and telling real-life stories of those who otherwise might not be heard. She draws most of her inspiration from the natural world, particularly the night sky, architecture, and the forces that shape human society. Currently she is serving as managing editor for The Northerner, NKU's student news organization.

Hello! I'm **Aubree Ruf**, I'm currently a Visual Communication Design major. I'm inspired by the world around me in the beauty of trivial things, I love drawing things that I associate with unexplainable imagery. I mostly use ink and watercolor for my work, but I have a love for any form of art I can be involved with. I fell in love with poetry and the complex worlds it can create when I was involved in Poetry Out Loud, the way the words could capture the crowds fascinated me. I'm very excited to be a part of that magic!

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