Masthead

Editors-in-Chief
Kt Amrine
Cassidy Crane
William Kelsey
Kee Olandesca

Faculty Advisor
Peter Grandbois

Poetry Editors
Lauren Ehlers, Emily Gryllakis, David Luffman, William Kelsey,
Sofia Monteleone, Kee Olandesca, Ava Reischuck, Emily Toohey

Prose Editors
Kt Amrine, Colleen Boyle, Cassidy Crane, Mia Fischel,
Rebecca Hurtado, Malina Infante, Natalie Isberg, Thea Pederson
Like a rite of life
I take a book in my hands.
In it the earth burns, scorched,
the syllables,
the verses,
the mythical horizon blinded by the sun.
El Cid rides, lost in words,
way of the poem and exile

- Jose Vernon Gormaz

All writers—all beings—are exiles as a matter of course. The certainty about living is that it is a succession of expulsions of whatever carries the life force...All writers are exiles wherever they live and their work is a lifelong journey towards the lost land...

- Janet Frame

Oft him anhaga are gebideð,
metudes miltse, þeah þe he modcærig
geond lagulade longe scolde
hreran mid hondum hrimcealde sæ,
wadan wræclastas. Wyrd bið ful arað!

- “The Wanderer”
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Letters from the Editors

Dear reader,

Welcome to the 2023 edition of *Exile*! Of the three editions I’ve worked on, this one is by far my favorite—and you’ll soon find out why.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit *Exile* hard, along with numerous other campus organizations. Over the past three years, I’ve had the privilege of watching *Exile* rise from the ashes with the help of our amazing editorial team. This year, we received hundreds of pages of submissions: around double what we received last year! As a result, we were able to curate a specific reading experience that tells a story through the organization of the magazine itself. We spent a lot of time creating sections and spreads throughout *Exile* and hope you enjoy reading through them!

I want to thank our editorial team for all their work sorting through our incredible number of submissions. I also want to thank my fellow editors in chief. Kee, thank you for jumping headfirst into your position so passionately and energetically this year. Cassidy, I don’t know what I’d do without your editing brilliance or your WhatToDU wizardry. Will, it’s been such a pleasure working with you in *Exile* and otherwise. I’ll miss having you at *Exile* but can’t wait to see what you’ll do in the future.

Kt

Dearest reader,

Thank you for picking up your copy of *Exile* 2023 and taking the time to listen to our truths. In a world where disseminated “truths” are often hegemonically curated, be it through social media algorithms or bestsellers’ lists, our personal stories are often overshadowed. Arbiters who know little of our identities and experiences decide which of our truths are worth telling.

Even publications like ours are not exempt from this harsh role of juror. But we strive to use our positionality as publishers within the Denison campus to actively seek out creators in this community, providing a platform to amplify their voices and give importance to their truths.

In that vein, I would like to thank my fellow Editors-In-Chief: with Kt’s inspiring energy and drive, Cassidy’s spirited dedication, and Will’s admirable wit and support, I feel safe and brave enough, as a Pinay editor, to express my truth. I hope *Exile* does the same for our contributors.

Our contributors do not hold back in their truth-telling. They courageously grapple with and express their stories and truths. Family history. Pieces of identity left behind or clung to. Nightmares. Parts of self kept hidden, now brought to light. And many more.

The title of our cover art is “Always Running,” created by Caroline Lopez. *Exile* will be always running towards a more diverse and inclusive representation of Denisonians’ truths. We are grateful you are joining us in this pursuit of truth-telling through your role as a reader, a witness, an ally.

Kee
Friends,

Exile 2023 starts with “The Cicada Lullaby” and ends with “Extractions.” Something we as editors noticed while selecting this year’s pieces is that our community is not afraid to get weird. Our contributors have created pieces that are corporeal, that question reality, that connect with nature. We are still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, and Denisonians are writing about how nature can work with us or work against us. From the bugs in the trees to the teeth in our mouths, Exile contributors write about it all.

I believe that literature satisfies us, sustains us. I would like to point to “Essays about Azolla” by William Barnes. “Was I not born to eat?” Putting together this magazine was not an easy feat, but looking at the finished product, I feel like we have collected all of the correct ingredients for a very satisfying - and strange - meal. Thank you to the editorial team for helping us pick the best of the best, KT for your leadership, Will for your wisdom (miss you already), and Kee for your enthusiasm. Thank you Dr. Grandbois for helping me with the behind-the-scenes administration while also trusting us to let creativity reign. Thank you Riley and Lily for your endless support even after graduating. And thank you, reader, for delving into this with all of us.

Cassidy

Fate is inexorable!

What a line. Originating from the Anglo-Saxon poem “The Wanderer” and inspiring the poems of Ezra Pound—from which this publication draws its name—that line describes so much of my time here at Denison. In full it reads “I have tread the path of exile. Fate is inexorable”, it carries you where it may, towards home, away from it. Though one may live for a short time in a sort of exile, some wind will always rise in your sails and guide you—be it back towards home, or to some place far in the unknown. Within the rising tide of fate, exile is just one permanent stop. So it’s here where I must leave Exile, guided by some unfathomable current we call fate to some new land, wherever that may be.

I would like to thank those whom I have met in my brief exile. Riley, Lily, all those editors in chief who came before me, thank you for your guidance and for allowing me to join your fold. KT, you are a visionary. Perhaps the greatest crime of Exile is that we’ll never be able to publish your work. Keep on writing, and I can’t wait to see you published in some magazine. Cassidy, thank you for taking care of all the administrative parts of Exile so that I don’t have to do anything other than reading and having opinions. Kee, we’ve told you this many times before, but you are a canva wizard. You bring a passion and an exuberance into our meager ranks that keeps us going. I am happy to leave Exile in your hands. All my poetry editors, thank you for all the work you put in, you are the real super stars of this publication.

Thank you for walking the path of exile with me, fate is inexorable and I must move on.

Will
The Cicada Lullaby
Rebecca Hurtado

I point to her as proof of God,
intricate insect of design.
Her wired wings traced with golden veins,
her ancient hieroglyphic eyes.
She is Isis, goddess of birth,
mother who molts and mourns below.
Until blossoming from her roots,
she sells her carcass to the crow.
Again, the black-cloaked ravens feast,
a symphony of plucking beaks.
And deep beneath the cyclic scene,
her daughters weep a maple green.
So, when I meet her on concrete,
her breasts all crisp and legs laced dead,
I will see mothers and daughters
for whom cicadas’ screams are shed.
Spineless
William Barnes

Head spun, dismal chords elytra strummed,
and an oozing abdomen twitched about

the grimy trough of green palm.

Legless and flung to the voracious crawdad
kidnapped down by the clay—the locust I tore,

I tore from my lawn.

I mourned that dumb bug for thirty minutes,
Mom said. 'Ripped limb from limb

and life from an insect so regal,

Too numb beyond whiffing tangs of rosy
forb and uncut cereal in the wind.
The Kramatorsk Train Station
Malina Infante

A ragged-looking stuffed horse toy now lies beside the road, abandoned to the heaps of rubble. Fur once ochre-brown is stained a gorish wine along the legs and snout, and shards of wood are stuck within its mane and tail. The station, cold and empty, lives in silence, one that clutches grief against its chest, just like a child’s comfort toy.

The horse becomes my travel confidant across the country towards Poland. When, at last, the journey is complete, I take the horse to soap and water, squeezing tight so crimson stains race down the drain until the fur is ochre-colored once again.
The Ohio River
Annika J. Bruce

I swam in the Ohio River many times growing up. People always joke and say a green pool ain’t safe to swim in and I’ll tell them I have already swam in the river and Lord knows what’s in that. My parents remember swimming in it, too. They could’ve got baptized in the water and been reborn as a hillbilly. I prefer the name hilljack; it’s less stereotypical.

Can someone own the river? If so, who owns the river? Is it God or humankind? Does that mean they own me? Do they own the people who were before me and before those people?

Do the creeks in Lake Vesuvius run into the Ohio river? If so, did the water that flowed through my toes as a child cascade somewhere in Illinois? Why is it that the water that was between my toes at the age of 10 traveled further than me at 20 years old? I’m the one who has feet. But unlike water, I can’t erode my way through the hardest things. I have to dig, pulling only a fistful of dirt out of my path.

When I say I am from Southern Ohio, people think Cincinnati or Chillicothe. I have to draw the state of Ohio in the air with my fingers, showing them the most southern tip: the town known as South Point. My town overlooks the two states across the river, Kentucky and West Virginia.

I remember Kentucky as a Girl Scout: going to Ken-O Valley Day camp, seeing shows at the Paramount Arts Center, exploring caves and riding horses along the trails at Carter Caves State Resort Park. My childhood friend and I would beg our mothers for a trip to Gattiland; our arcade and pizza paradise. In Summersville, WV, in 2015 after my Pops passed, Dad and my stepmother took my brother and me camping to escape Facebook posts and sympathy cards. I enjoyed kayaking through the lake that summer and later going to more places, finding peace on the water’s surface.

At the end of the day, I can’t name one state. I rather tell people I am from the hills that rest along the Ohio River. And when night comes around, if it’s warm enough, we play euchre outside with lightning bugs and candles illuminating the card table. My grandmother tells us stories of growing up and seeing the land and the Ohio River change as she has gotten older. We sit in our lawn chairs at the bottom of nature’s feet, our hills, singing Tyler Childers and drinking moonshine.
Rare, now, are the days
when I drive the narrow roads
out to my parents’ hometown.

But at Uncle Ronnie’s house,
we share a round of the family
label and gather tableside to discuss

*the good dego shit*—prosciutt’
and provolone, Valli and Bocelli,
and slowly, then, slip out the stories

of Rosie and Maline, biscotti and ravioli,
what Grandma saw from the porch
in 1925 – she understood not to ask

questions. It’s there, then, that I can savor
Elena’s embrace, kiss the cheeks
of our shared face,

and, in the darkness of Route 11,
let Sinatra serenade
all the way home.
Business Casual
Georgia Reese Knox
Ring of Fire
Brin Glass

You guide your X-Acto knife
through a thick slab of wood, etching Johnny Cash’s
silhouette, unhindered through the splinters.

I can see your misshapen finger, its peculiar bend—
fallen at the hand of amber autumn-permitting backyard
football. The muddy grass behind the climbing
tree was always slippery. I know you didn’t intend
to split your wedding band—
silver just doesn’t hold up as it used to do.
Wigs for Kids
Robert (Robbie) Garber

In the little barbershop where
    the painted animals smile and stare down
    at me from odd angles
    I wait in a chair,

    one of just a few,
and the only for grown-ups
    – the others being rocket-ships –
for a woman to come cut my hair.

“You remind me of
my son,” she says,
    as she braids it into
    four separate parts.

He’s just out of college,
    a Classics Major,
waiting (tables)
to get his teaching license.

“And you?” she says,
snipping the braids one
    by one and
    sealing them in the plastic bag.

“What are you doing this Summer?”
Passing
Brin Glass

A year ago,
salted water dripped onto my plate
from a white ceramic pitcher.

The Seder Plate sat untouched
in the center of the table.

Mike stood in the front of the room
reciting his annual speech about Moses,
blood-ridden water,
and frogs falling from the sky.

I noticed every uninterested hand,
finger tapping,
spoon swirling salt water.

Mike loved to talk,
to educate.

Two months from today,
when water falls on feathered herbs
who will hold our hunger in their fists?

Will I forget Moses
and the frogs?

Will I forget the feeling of hunger?
Essays about Azolla
William Barnes

Was she not born to eat?

With an overflowing bag of asparagus veering my bike to the left, it poured as I pedaled up my driveway. Grandma picked them from her garden that day, and the second I greeted her for dinner she insisted I take the lot home. Like always, she refused to eat the last corner of her sandwich. I scarfed everything down without a second thought.

I reared my head to the swollen sky. Shrouding the harvest moon, inky clouds swirled and electricity danced about them as though nature’s wicked fingers sought to melt hands to handlebars, flesh to mud. Flickering lightning permitted me to read beyond the bordering woods’ treeline. Through dripping curls and cupped leaves, I could make out the ghastly silhouette of a feeding doe no more than ten feet in. I stopped pedaling to stare. Taking the place of wet rock raking through gravel beneath my treads, molars meeting forb.

They were born to eat.

An atmosphere laden with carbon dioxide-powered intercellular assembly lines, and an endless plume of fresh water brimming with nutrients authorized the construction of quadrillions of cells. Fifty million years ago, *Azolla filiculoides*’ heedless roots sucked up any and all nourishment they could grasp, and the species nearly imploded on itself. The remnants of this are seen today in ten meters of fossilized mud embedded deep within the Arctic crust, but Azolla was always mud. As I see Azolla I see a deer as I see myself, for our most primordial ancestor sprung from mud itself.

I held my gaze on the doe and lightning flashed. Akin to blooming English ivy about a fallen barn, the white of her tail weaved through frayed vines and wood. Darkness took hold. Moments later the woods lit up again, and her stalk-muddied maw now faced me. As though two needles had plunged beyond my orbits, the doe’s stare probed the wrinkles of my soul.

Was I not born to eat?

Agriculture was a staple innovation at the dawn of my species’ worldwide sprawl, and with the passing of every harvest moon, our farming is further refined. When our ability to extract any and all nourishment our grabby hands can reach peaks, it will have already been too late. As we siphon every morsel of water from aquifer to gut, we will gush, and then we will burst. Nature looms over us the
way a buzzard eyes a bloated deer, and the deer reminds me that I’ve always been one with the mud. The doe continued feeding, so I pedaled up the rest of my driveway. The sky lit, rumbled, and ripples of raindrops in a puddle preceded cascading monsoons of murky water up my legs. Slid away, did my back wheel. Tumbling slack-jawed into the mud, one with the mud, and a doe feasted upon asparagus trailed behind.
Walk Home
Abby Conturo
December Yellow
Moriah Aberle

A few years ago at a thrift store in Wisconsin I came across a dusty lamp with a yellow-orange stretched linen drum shade and a candlestick body the surface of old coins. I bought it of course, and proudly situated it on the desk in my dorm room, dust and all. I shut off the overhead lights, pulled the shades down to hide the bleak street lamps outside, and excitedly sat to do my homework underneath the honey-seasoned glow of that $6 lamp.

Cool-toned lighting has always given me headaches. My high school was a nightmare: deafening blue-white fluorescence reflecting off pale eggshell walls in every direction. After school I’d retreat to warmer colors, to a bedroom with a covered incandescent ceiling light and sheer pink curtains draped over the windows.

Researchers have spent some time looking into the ways colors impact mood, mostly in the context of advertising strategies and classroom design. In any sense, the color yellow is stimulating, warm, happy. This led to the old wives’ tale claiming Vincent van Gogh ate his yellow paint in a desperate attempt to make himself happier. I thought it was true for years. It seemed romantic to me. An artist secure in nothing but the impact of art, so enchanted by the emotions provoked by the colors on his canvas that the fear of poison was far outweighed by the eleventh-hour conviction that art could change people for the better, that it was the colors and not his employment of them that made him happy. The reality is far less comforting than the wives’ tale. Old physicians’ notes revealed that Van Gogh did express a concerning urge to drink turpentine or eat lead-based paints, not to absorb joy from any particular color but because he knew they were poisons and he lived a painful life. Whatever geniality the color yellow held, Van Gogh never believed it could save him from the lead.

The bedroom I live in now allured me with the geniality of garnet walls and chestnut-stained wood and topaz sunlight shining in through tall windows. It’s an Earthship, so named because the structure seems to grow out of the dirt, as if it’s no more than the earth itself. A little capsule with the intention of sustainability. My Earthship was built by college students a few years ago on the ashy foundation of a cabin lost to a fire. They duly named it Phoenix and fashioned the one-room cabin with curving asymmetrical walls, a single electrical outlet, and a wood-burning stove for heating in the winter months. Phoenix sits with three other cabins a mile off campus, down a winding dirt road and into the woods. For 45 years it’s been offered as an alternative to traditional dorms. For 45 years students have felt compelled to maintain the cabins, tend to the gardens, rely on fires for cooking and heating: to live a life that challenges a growing culture of environmental nihilism.
Given Phoenix’s namesake, the school’s insurance identified fires in residential rooms as a hazard, so use of the stove in Phoenix was strictly prohibited. In the spirit of sustainability, students opted for a manually-fueled boiler system over central heating infrastructure. The Central Boiler E-Classic 2400 outdoor hydronic heater is a black and gray metal box the size of a phone booth with a tall skinny chimney on top. Our soot-covered phone booth, nicknamed Earl sometime before I got here, stands proudly in a round patch of dirt and ashes some 150 feet from the front door of Phoenix. Earl is a fire chamber connected to a system of water lines that snake underneath and around the cabins to give off heat. During the winter we keep a fire lit in Earl almost nonstop. Five roommates and I take turns feeding the fire, 15 or so logs every 6 hours.

The ancient Greeks believed that fire, the spark that ignited civilization and led to the arts and sciences, was a gift from the titan Prometheus against direct orders from Zeus. As his punishment, Prometheus was chained to a cliff where every day an eagle would peck and claw away at his liver, and every night his liver would repair itself only for the eagle to peck and claw away again in the morning. The stories say Zeus chose such a gruesome punishment because he wanted humanity to be mindless worshippers of the gods. Prometheus was convinced humans had the power to change the world; he just didn’t think they could do it blind and cold on a fire-less Earth. He gave the gift with hope we’d change things for the better.

When Earl’s fire goes out, the temperature in Phoenix can drop to 45 degrees. The greenhouse windows can frost over, and no saturation of warm colors inside can combat the numbing shroud of pale air. It doesn’t always wake me up. When it does, like tonight, I pull my blankets around my shoulders and pull myself out of bed, slip on a pair of boots underneath the frozen glow of that $6 lamp and march over to Earl with the blankets still around me. Lift the handle to open the chimney bypass door, and count 15 beeps, 15 seconds. When time’s up, it takes both my arms to open the main hatch and let the smoke out. The beeping doesn’t stop until the fire’s going and the bypass door can be closed again. There’s something about that beeping when you’re still half asleep; it follows you into your dreams and then inevitably learns to find you when you’re awake, even when the bypass handle is down and you’re a thousand miles away sitting at the kitchen table in your mother’s house unable to hear a word she says over the incessant beeping. I once held up a tuner to the speaker on Earl’s side: it beeps a B. With a blackened shovel I poke around at the logs, to make sure there’s enough space for the flames to breathe. Some day our world will be nothing but fire.

Van Gogh never painted fire, but he painted a lot of wheat fields: gold and bronze soft-cared stalks realized by individual hog hairs on the tip of his brush. Vivid and irregular, they almost looked like the forked flames of a fire. Almost. His blue skies were a little too pale, a little too green to belong
to a fire. At least they were up until his last wheat field, his last painting before his ambiguous death, Wheat Field with Crows. In that one, the sky takes up close to half the canvas with ominous shades of sapphire, ranging from electric almost white to black, laid on thick with fierce strokes. A hot blue, not a cold blue.

My birthstone is turquoise, a cold blue. I was born on the fourth of December, which makes me a Sagittarius. It’s a fire sign, and the constellation looks nothing like the half man-half horse shape drawn over the stars in diagrams. The Greek stories say that the shape is based on the disfigured centaur Chiron, who Herakles accidentally shot with a poisoned arrow. Chiron was immortal but grew miserable by the poison and eventually offered himself as a sacrifice to the gods in place of Prometheus’s sentence. Chiron was killed, Prometheus was freed, and to honor Chiron’s generosity his likeness was cast in the sky to live immortal in the stars. That was before people knew stars weren’t timeless, but it’s a nice thought.

It’s unclear what came of Prometheus after Chiron’s sacrifice. Some stories say that he remains chained to the cliff. When Chiron died, Herakles shot and killed Zeus’s eagle with the same poisoned arrow used on Chiron, effectively ending Prometheus’s torture but not necessarily his incarceration. Other stories say Prometheus, freed, returned to the upperworld to challenge Zeus for the sovereignty. Prometheus was always told with wisdom and compassion and confidence in the power of humanity; it was he who formed the first humans out of mud and introduced them to the fire from which they thrived. Through those stories it feels just that he be the one to rule. I wonder how his story would go if the hopeful storytellers knew his mud creations would, out of both necessity and ignorant insouciance, exploit Prometheus’s gifts and set the world on fire.

When Van Gogh died they thought he killed himself. On July 27, 1890, he was found with a gunshot wound in his stomach. He died two days later giving no explanation for how he sustained the injury, and people assumed it was self-inflicted because of his history with mental illness. Historians and art fanatics still debate the topic, many claiming it wouldn’t have been possible for Van Gogh to inflict the injury on himself. They think he was murdered. I suppose it’s all the same in the end. On July 29, 1890, Van Gogh died. Maybe the world is already on fire.

Van Gogh’s last blue starts to hover over the coals at the fire’s base as the flames take over Earl’s firebox, spilling over the open hatch and reaching out at me. In the fire’s chaos I see Van Gogh himself, fervidly scooping dallop after dallop of yellow lead-based paint into his mouth, licking it off the hog hairs of his brush, eyes open wide searching the black sky behind me for a miracle. I swing the heavy door back into place, trapping the artist inside with the flames. Count 15 beeps, 15 seconds, and as my
eyes adjust to the darkness I turn to the north sky, to where Van Gogh was searching for his miracle. I see the teapot-shaped collection of stars that make up Chiron’s upper body, his arms holding a bow with the arrow drawn, aiming right at me. Or maybe aiming at Earl, at absurd mini-scale efforts to delay the already imminent destruction of our planet, at the stubborn determination to live up to Prometheus’s high hopes despite the overwhelming evidence that too many have already failed at this. Maybe Chiron isn’t aiming as much as he is pointing, signaling: attempting to identify the closest thing to a miracle that a world destined for flames will ever see.

I push the handle down to close the bypass door and end the beeping at least externally, then wrap my blankets around my shoulders a little tighter before making my way back to Phoenix, back to cold air frozen in place over deceitfully warm colors. Someday this world and you and I will be nothing but fire, and still, I’ll make the midnight trek to the soot-covered phone booth the next time I wake up cold because I’d rather listen to that cathartic beeping than face the despondent silence of Prometheus’s misplaced confidence.
Dear Man
Antonia Baylor

Did you expect me to believe it
when you called god The Father?
I may be young, but I have lived enough to know that
Women are the makers of every living thing.
So do not tell me you’ve discovered the divine
constructed in your own image,
between the sheer thin pages of a book
with proud burgundy leather and counterfeit gold leaf.

No.

She was here before the prophets
And the pyramids
And the pantheon.
And your man-made monuments mean nothing to her.
You met her when you cried out
blind and dumb and breathless for the very first time.

You were pulled panting and purple and pungent
from the only maker that has ever been.
But you could not see it because,
to you, she was no god;
Only a Woman.
gilgamesh (fossils in the stream)
Eliana Lazzaro

The Euphrates is kind as the ferryman rows you home to Uruk. The river runs clear today, the bottom dotted with stones—you tell Ur-shanabi to stop the boat. He protests. He would have taken you all the way; you think he feels some sympathy, that you came so close to forever-youth, to lose it in a serpent’s jaws. But you tell him to stop his boat in the shallows. You hitch up your robes and step out into the ancient waters.

Enkidu’s death came on like a sandstorm: the build of his sickness was quick and dark and blinding, raged hard and merciless, scraped the strength from his frame and the sight from his eyes. It buried him under layders of dust, until you wore your hands bloody trying to dig him out. The earth took his body and swallowed him whole, stripped the flesh from his bones and spat them out. You couldn’t reach him.

You’ll never reach him again.

The flow of the river is quick and cool, but you bear the flesh of gods, and your vision (like his, once,) has always been keen. You crouch in the shallows and flip over rock after rock, the way Enkidu showed you, until your vestments are soaking wet at the hems and your fingers are numb and pale. It doesn’t matter: there are things more important than numbness. You will not take your gaze from the bounty that lies sleeping at the bottom of the river.
Once, one of your attendants brought a strange stone to your throne room as a tribute to the king: they found it near the banks, they said. You took it from their hands and examined it: the silhouette of some long-dead, long-forgotten creature was pressed into the rock, veiled in sediment and clay. You stared at it and felt the crackle of your lungs against your ribs and the creak of your joints as you moved. Your heart twitched in your chest like a cornered animal. You sent the stone away.

At last your ice-chilled fingers pull your prize from the riverbed. You stare at the shape outlined on the underside and you think of Enkidu, fallen god-star, turned to clay. You think of the decay of his body and the wasting of his limbs. You think of your own. You press the stone against your lips and cradle it close to your breast like a treasure. You walk towards the Great Cedar Gate.

When you are dead, mortal, these are the remains which you will leave behind: a skeleton, preserved in the earth. A tablet, engraved with the flowing lifeblood of your story. A whispered tale of love and pain to echo across the ages. The walls of Uruk, standing tall, now crowned with a fossil you pulled from the riverbank: its ghost, enveloped in earth and frozen in its final sleep, looks out over the city and proclaims to all that night is coming soon.
Alaska
Caroline Lopez
Legacy, and how it looks like so many faces born for the woods; A branch is crushed; A hare runs to the sound, lost in the pause from one word to the next, hoping to set out "David, there's a poem there." "Yeah, they're all over the place."
a hard day’s work
Mia Fischel
Chili in the Woods
William Barnes

A coat for the tongue, cornbread
with trickles of honey–

a few pieces keeps her flock fed,
and grandma,

with her newspaper, her shtick,
rekindles the pit–

and a chili scoop
careses the gutter.
There She Was
Antonia Baylor

Driving past the park for pick up after school,
You think you see her.
For a moment.
Pushing her little boy on the swings again.
Though it’s been two years.

But there she was:
The woman across from you in the revolving door.
Before you looked away.
And could not look back.

Maybe we got it wrong,
The funeral,
Because I’m telling you,
I am telling you,
God,
Please,
It was her,
just then,
Waiting on the corner for the flashing hand
as we drove by.
Moondrip
Rita Costa
Since I was born, there was another person inside of me.

My parents look at each other and then the doctor in horror. I imagine I’m nearly dropped from my mother’s arms onto the cold, unforgiving tile. But, instead, she tells him the words that would define the rest of my life:

“It can’t be. Not me. Not us.”

“That doesn’t happen,” my father concedes. “It’s the liberal lefties. They’re indoctrinating college kids and making them into adults who think this kind of thing happens. Well I’ll tell you what.” He takes a step towards the doctor. “You’re not pulling that shit with me, okay? I’ll report you to the manager, your supervisor, the FDA. Whoever. Don’t tell me that bullshit. I don’t believe it. It doesn’t exist.”

“But, sir, if this isn’t addressed, it can kill your child—”

“What’s gonna kill my child is if you force this agenda onto her.”

My first memory formed at ten. I had wanted to play soccer. In gym class, the feeling of chasing after something let me escape from myself. In there, I was not seen—we had no numbers, no way of identification. Though you may have been told to cover someone, or critiqued, what mattered was the team. You were just an accessory. Other than that, you could do whatever you wanted and no one cared.

But my parents had told me that was not an option. Instead, I was forced into a confining, bright pink leotard just like all the other nearly elastic, decorative, frilly clothes I had to wear my whole life. Ironically, they put me in a tutu, the one thing I had that let me take up space.

It was putting on that leotard, against the confining latex, that I felt it for the first time. It was like when I accidentally locked the door on my father—his knocking had pounded and resounded into
the house. I had gone to open it, but my mom pushed me to the side in case it was a danger. Instead, he had entered, which wasn’t much better. It wasn’t really his fault—I just felt things would be simpler if he were gone.

“Mom,” I say. “I feel weird.”

“You have nothing to feel weird about. You should be excited! It’s your first rehearsal.”

“But I do. And it hurts.”

“Get in the car.” My father interjects. “And stop being hysterical.”

As I lower myself into the seat, I feel as if something else falls with me. It cascades through the knit interior meant to hold and into an abyss which I could not see or name. I may recognize it at first, but it becomes something I do not know.

—

I excuse myself from ballet. I try to go through the motions, but the pressure and knocking radiating inside of me builds into a wave of sensation. The teacher does not, or pretends not to, notice me until I begin to cry.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I say, because that is the closest I know to what is happening. When she relents, I toddle across the hall and enter the small, tight space that is the women’s bathroom. I sit on the toilet, but nothing comes out. It’s just wave after wave, slowly becoming an ocean. I feel salt in my skin, my organs, in every cell. I begin to push, but that only makes it worse. When I look down to check if anything happened, I get nauseous. I let out a cry, which made things even worse.

There was a single drop of blood in the toilet.

—

“It’s just your period, honey. You get that when you become a woman.” My mommy tells me as she fills the little purple cup with water and pours it over my head. I knock back into the tub, and my mother drops the cup into the soapy water. “What’s wrong?”

“I feel it again,” I say.
“That happens. I’m sorry,” my mommy croons.

“But you said—”

“That’s disgusting,” daddy interjects as he crosses the bathroom to his office. “Kids shouldn’t know about that stuff. Just get her clean.”

Mommy obeys daddy.

—the rest of my school career is a blur. I make acquaintances, sure, and even some people I’d call friends. No one knows about the pushes and pulls that invertebrate through my body. I’m not sure how, because they’ve become a lot worse now. Maybe it’s because it started on the first day of class.

It should have been easy. We go around the room, introduce ourselves. When it got to me, I paused. The eyes picking me apart on all sides of the room made me trapped. Ironically, I didn’t feel seen either. I stared back at them, my ambush only causing a ripple in a movement powerful enough to ambush. The general joins them, reminds me of our plan of attack. If I don’t get this over with, my rank will most definitely change.

The sound that defines me pounds not only into the ears of those around me, but through my body as well.

I double over, grabbing my stomach desperately. The classroom stands. Bodies surround me. The centered one rises, makes them all sit. I rise, and stumble my way down to the bathroom. I can’t see it, but I can feel its pull. It is the women’s bathroom.

My organs are kicked like the black and white balls I would send flying across the courtyard. Feet clap against flesh like the hands of the teacher and my teammates. The feeling is both familiar and not. Supposed to be and not. Wrong and right blend together in this series of movements.

A toe creeps out from under me.

The whistle is blown for a foul I cannot explain.
I fully understood during ‘that time of the month again,’ as my father used to say whenever I was extra moody as a teenager or when my mother wouldn’t have sex with him. Except I seemed to always have it; it was a regular occurrence I’d find blood in my underwear, but no one ever believed me. If they did, they just said it was my period. No matter how many fucking times I told them otherwise, no one understood what I was going through. So I gave up trying to convince them, and would always nod my head whenever my mother asked. She pretended not to notice it was the third week in a row she had to buy me extra pads, and I pretended to eat the chocolate she saved for me after dinner.

The kicks had become a regular occurrence. Whether I was with one person, surrounded by others, in the library, at a party. The only times they ever seemed to offer any relief was when I was alone or on the field. If it had been a usual one, I would have ignored it. Every year it seemed like they grew more angry and volatile anyway. That being said, now they were P.O.ed. But this one was different—like I was trying to let out the world’s biggest shit.

So I walked across the hall and locked myself in the bathroom.

The women’s bathroom.

When I pulled down my pants this time, I had an idea. I’d learned that when you get contractions, you push. As I never had a baby, I didn’t know what those felt like or pretend to, but it seemed like the closest thing to what I was feeling.

So I did it.

The blood flew out of me like the water running towards the sand. For a moment, I thought it would be infinite. The deep red would take me with it and push me towards something that was uncertain, but certain in the sense I would be destroyed. Which I knew even then would be easier. I also knew that wasn’t an option.

It did stop eventually, but that wasn’t nearly enough to assuage my fear. Especially when I saw what looked like two feet.

12:00

I looked around, pushed my laptop shut, and bolted to the library. I do not know if the dorm door slammed behind me. I do not know if I woke my roommate up. I do not know if I woke my RA up. All I knew was the time.
Ignoring the look on the receptionist’s face, the bodies surrounding me, however many they were, and the books around me, I flicked eyes with the computer furthest in the back and took my seat. I got in, and waited for it to load.

I’d learned quickly I couldn’t do this on my personal devices. The last time I tried, I got a parental block and a screaming match from both my mom and dad. All I got from their mangled, fucked up harmony was that ‘those people don’t concern us’ and ‘I didn’t need to know about that stuff.’

But I did. Because it was happening to me.

That’s why I keyed in the search and scrambled through a series of articles:

*The Phenomena: Babies Inside Babies?*

*Scientists Try to Answer Question Horrifying Mothers*

*Man Killed after Wearing a Dress and Seducing Straight Man: Claimed Moments before Death*

*He “Had Just Had a Baby”*

I read all of them, and suddenly my feelings made sense. Why I always felt separate from my body. Why I preferred soccer to ballet. Why the moment I got out of my parent’s house, I burned all my clothing and used pocket money I’d been saving for years to buy a new wardrobe. From the men’s section. Why I never liked the sound of my name or my voice. Why I never understood how people could feel at one with their bodies. Why I never understood that, to everyone else, they weren’t just meat sacks that tied you to the Earth and got you through the day.

I wasn’t even surprised when I felt something fall through me again. I wasn’t even annoyed or in pain when I went to the bathroom and locked myself in.

The women’s bathroom.

I sat on the toilet, spread my legs, and looked down as far as I could. The pain was still there when I pushed. It was less intense even though it took more effort than usual. Less blood came out, but that meant I could see more of the thing inside me finally release itself. I almost wished I had the blood,
but really, this was fine. This shape, pulsating out of me, and then in. This tiny, wormish thing that made me tremble and euphoric and want to throw up at the same time. In spite of its size, it was still obviously throbbing and growing as it went on with its motions. No matter how much I said it hurt, the mindless thing kept pumping out of me until it let out a small drop of a clear liquid. As quick as it had come, it was gone.

I looked at the hole it had left behind as I processed all I had just learned about myself.

—

I had built my life around this thing and lessening the pain it brought. I had purchased larger clothing to hide its body. I had skipped carbohydrates and desserts. I had doubled my push-ups and running. I had confined myself in a latex prison of my own making until I had freed myself through my own mutilation. All these things worked.

Then, I had the needle.

I knew what I had to do instinctively when I got the fat, bulging brown bottle with the word ‘testosterone’ written on it. I locked myself in the men’s bathroom. I locked myself in a stall, pulled down my pants, and injected the liquid into my back.

Then, I pushed.

At first, it did nothing but produce a sensation of grinding inside of me. Then I opened up my hips, waited somewhere between a few seconds and days, and just kept pushing, and pushing, and pushing until I felt its wet, slimy body in my hands.

I was going to be the one to kill this thing. Not nature.

Outwardly silent but inwardly thundering, I flushed it down the toilet.

Maybe other people found out what happened that day. The only thing I really care about is those who understand. Those are the people I bonded with, called my friends. I speak to them daily, telling them my story with as much as a speech or as little as a glance. Either way, they know mine, and I know theirs, sometimes even before they do.
I’m still in pain, and I doubt it’ll ever fully go away. But it’s easier, with these people surrounding me.

With my found family, and found manhood, I finally feel like a whole, singular person.
Bowen Ferry
Georgia Reese Knox
Quando ero una ragazzina,
mia nonna ha insegnato
a me e mio fratello a cucinare i ravioli
con la ricetta dei nostri antenati. Io e lui
sempre abbiamo litigato su chi
dovrebbe appiattirsi la pasta e ho cercato
di rendere i miei ravioli più belli dei suoi.
Mia nonna non ha mai voluto
che litigassimo; ha detto che non sapremo
chi ha fatto quali ravioli quando sono usciti
dalla pentola. E quando furono cotti,
tutta la mia famiglia si è seduta a mangiare
insieme.

A year after my grandpa passed,
my mother drove to Youngstown
to purchase perogii from her childhood
church. She lost the family recipe
when she left home, erasing
Ukraine from her heritage
starting that day.

I could not find
the words to comfort
my mother when I noticed
her crying over the stove – all
her perogii had fallen to pieces.
The Flirt
Antonia Baylor

It’s no secret,
When I thread my arm past hers
And rest it there,
Loose on her left hip,
With a carelessness practiced
In bedroom mirrors.
When shelobs back her laugh
Over the music
At the indelicacy I whisper
There in her left ear,
With a nerve I had to scrape,
Two-handed, from my center.
When I take her chin in my hand,
Now downed and done with its drink,
And lift her by the jaw to admire her
necklaces, and call her grandmother’s heirloom lovely.
And her finger pointing at my chest
Taps out each syllable as she calls me a flirt,
And I say thank you.
Pink Skittle on the Library Floor
Rita Costa
L’Étoile
S. A. Culyer

INT. BALANCHINE’S OFFICE - DAY

*Melanie Roebling, prima ballerina sits down across from George Balanchine. She is young, thin, and nervous. Balanchine is old.*

BALANCHINE: Do you want a treat, Melanie?

_He holds up a platter of danishes._

MELANIE (emphatically): No. No, thank you.

BALANCHINE: Good girl.

MELANIE: Yes, Mr. Balanchine.

BALANCHINE: Now. It has come to my attention that you have been seeing Mr. Mancilla?

MELANIE: Who told you that?

BALANCHINE: It doesn’t matter. Is it true?

MELANIE: We, um. We—

BALANCHINE: I understand that you all need to, as you say, blow off the steam. It has always been that way. I married my first wife because I needed to blow off the steam. It did not last, but that does not matter. We all need someone. I need someone, you need someone, but I repeat myself. In this case, I need you. I need you to be perfect, Melanie. You are twenty-four, how long do you have left?

MELANIE: I’ve never looked better. I’ve never danced better. I’m doing exactly what you told me.

BALANCHINE: You cannot focus on anything else. You can have your time together, but you cannot sleep with him. This is a crucial performance. So many donors! So much to do! You are the principal. You cannot be less than Giselle! He must be Albrecht. He cannot be less than Albrecht.

MELANIE: But, both of us are dancing better than we ever have.

BALANCHINE: I do not care if you are dancing better now, Melanie! You must lose him. You must lose your Albrecht! He is not worth the time. This is your life. My ballet is your life! MELANIE (lowly, weakly): I can’t do it all, sir. I need him. Look at me, Mr. Balanchine. Look at me. I’m about to fall in on myself. I’m going to fall apart if I don’t have him. He holds me together. I need him.

_Balanchine pauses for a few beats and collects himself._
BALANCHINE: Then, after *Giselle*, we may have to assess your employment with my company.

MELANIE: *What?!* Why? You can’t take this away from me. People come to see me! I’ve given you everything!

BALANCHINE: No, no, no. *We* have given you everything. We gave you the stage just across that pavilion, we have given you a generous salary. We have given you fame and a purpose. Myself and my Ballet have made certain that you have a place in the world. We have asked for very little, but you seem to have your own ideas about how you want to live.

*He takes one of the danishes from the platter and eats it violently.*

MELANIE: I fell in love with someone. That’s all. It’s nothing. I promise. I have to have something else. Something besides you, the stage, and the studio.

*He stands up and plants his fist on the desk.*

BALANCHINE: We weren’t given a break at the Imperial Theatre. For seven hours we would dance. Seven hours a day, six days a week. We would dance if they couldn’t find coal for the furnaces, we would dance if the sun burned the grass in the Summer Gardens yellow. We would dance if the roofs leaked or if the windows were broken by the rioters. We didn’t stop dancing until the Red Army came across the River and broke the last stand of the Whites. I walked past bodies riddled with bullets, lodged in the snow on my way to my academy. You will stand here though and tell me you need something else? It is all I had because there was nothing else. I would have starved to death with the other dancers if I had not been good enough to find work outside of the Imperial Theatre. Find that desperation in yourself, or you will never be good enough to dance on my stage!

_Melanie begins to cry._

BALANCHINE (cont’d): Oh, love. Don’t cry.

MELANIE: I’m sorry, Mr. Balanchine.

BALANCHINE: You will leave us at the end of *Giselle*. I’m sure somewhere will take you. As I understand it, there’s a company that formed a few years ago near your home town.

MELANIE: It’s not like here.

BALANCHINE: I would expect not. They call it, what? Cold Country?

MELANIE: *Coal* country. But, why would I finish *Giselle* if you’re just going to fire me afterward?

BALANCHINE: Because you’re a ballerina, my dear. I have known many ballerinas in my time. I know you aren’t able to do something halfway. You couldn’t live with yourself if you didn’t finish it.

MELANIE: I’ll leave you. I will! Goddammit. Dammit all, I’ll leave you now, Mr. Balanchine!
BALANCHINE: No you won’t, my dear. I know you won’t. Why don’t you go downstairs to finish up the rehearsal? It’s two thirty. They should just be beginning the Mad Scene. *Giselle* would be in a bad place if our principal ballerina weren’t there to lose her mind before she dies.

*They look at one another, and Melanie relents.*

MELANIE: I'll let it go. I'll leave him.

BALANCHINE: Good girl. Off to rehearsals with you.

*He pushes the platter of danishes toward her, and she shakes her head.*

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. EATING DISORDER FACILITY - NIGHT

*Melanie Roebling and Jeffery Mancilla sit on the single bed next to each other. The room is small - no larger than a dorm room. There is an N.Y.C.B. poster behind them, one of a slightly younger Melanie dressed as the Swan Queen from Swan Lake. Jeffery is holding her in a Poisson dive.*

*We can see the record that is playing is Minkus’ Don Quixote. Kitri’s first variation, a bright, bounding variation from the ballet plays in the background.*

JEFFERY (gently): Do you know it?

*Melanie shakes her head.*

JEFFERY (cont’d): We don’t have to keep doing this, Mel. The doctors say you should be resting, this isn’t resting.

MELANIE: Just give me a moment. Just a moment.

*We can see she is becoming more annoyed with herself.*

JEFFERY: It’s because you haven’t been eating. It’s why you’re here.

MELANIE (Angry and scared): Not everything can be because I don’t eat sometimes, Jeffery! Even on 3500 calories a day, I can’t remember this!

JEFFERY: Then what is this? We don’t have to do this. We don’t have to run through this every time I visit.

*Melanie looks genuinely distressed.*

MELANIE: I don’t know. I did this one, I know. I can’t remember, though. I did it in front of thousands of people. I don’t know how I don’t know!

JEFFERY: It’s Kitri’s first variation from *Don Q.*
MELANIE: FUCK!

Jeffery edges across her small room and puts his arms around her. Melanie tries to push him away, but he holds her tighter. She realizes he’s crying.

MELANIE (cont’d): Why the fuck are you weepy?!

JEFFERY: I hate to see you like this. You used to be so much happier.

MELANIE: I used to be able to eat dinner without everyone losing their mind.

JEFFERY: You never forgot about dinner, you chose not to eat it.

He tries to hug her, she pushes him away.

MELANIE: Fuck you.

JEFFERY: I love you.

MELANIE: No, you don’t.

JEFFERY: I came here with you! I left Balanchine, and a contract, and I came here because I love you.

MELANIE: You don’t love me. If you loved me we wouldn’t be in a dormitory. We would be at your apartment. I wouldn’t be forced to eat anything I didn’t want to if you loved me. You used to not care about how I ate.

JEFFERY: I do love you, and you love me too. That’s why you’re here and I’m with you. On the plane ride here, we said we’d do it together.

Melanie stands up and shakes. She looks older, more tired.

MELANIE: Maybe I don’t love you. Maybe you should have come back. If Balanchine hadn’t died, I would have left you to stay there.

JEFFERY (low and mournful): Don’t say that.

MELANIE: Why? Because you’ll realize how stupid you are?! Leaving Balanchine, and a paycheque for the fucking City Ballet?!

JEFFERY: I know it’s just because you’re here that you’re talking like this.

MELANIE: FUCK off!

JEFFERY: I know how it—it alienates you from people.

MELANIE: What do they know? What the fuck do you know about it? You haven’t been here!
JEFFERY: No I haven’t so—

MELANIE: You don’t have to be here! (murmuring) Please, please, just fuck off. Please.

JEFFERY: All right.

Jeffery stands up and gathers his satchel. He takes the needle off his record clumsily, and the music stops abruptly.

MELANIE: Wait.

JEFFERY (almost sharply): What?

JEFFERY (cont’d) (softly, now): What?

MELANIE (plaintively): Just, can you sit here?

JEFFERY: Sure.

MELANIE: Can we listen to Swan Lake? End of the second act?

JEFFERY: Of course.

He finds the record in the milk crate underneath the bedside table, puts it on the record player, and finds the track.

CUT TO:

WINGS OF THE NEW YORK CITY BALLET’S STAGE AT LINCOLN CENTER - NIGHT

Melanie is dressed in the costume of the Swan Queen. The red lights in the wings and the white lights of the stage cut her in two. Balanchine stands with her.

CUT TO:

EATING DISORDER FACILITY - NIGHT

Melanie rises from the bed, standing on the balls of her feet. Her arms at her sides, graceful, pale, and trembling.

JEFFERY: Don’t dance, don’t overexert yourself!

She just looks coolly at him, and he holds his hands up in surrender. The Swan Lake Act II finale fills the small room.

CUT TO:

WINGS OF THE NEW YORK CITY BALLET’S STAGE AT LINCOLN CENTER - NIGHT
To the rising tones of the violins, Melanie-Swan Queen makes her entrance, we see her from the wings.

CUT TO:

EATING DISORDER FACILITY - NIGHT

For a moment, Melanie shakes her head. Standing in the middle of the floor, she cannot recall what Odette's port de bras for the end of the second act of Swan Lake was.

MELANIE (In a whisper): I can't remember it. I don't know.

But, she realizes she is sick, she does have a problem, and she will rise above it.

The oboe's note rises, and the dark, low horns repeat them. She suddenly remembers: Melanie pushes her arms to the side, as if she is a swan, peering around a tree in a black forest.

CUT TO:

WINGS OF THE NEW YORK CITY BALLET'S STAGE AT LINCOLN CENTER - NIGHT

Melanie-Swan Queen does the same motion. She stands en pointe, she is strong, and graceful all at once.

CUT TO:

EATING DISORDER FACILITY - NIGHT

Melanie bows her head beneath an arm before she raises it again. She crosses her arms in front of her sternum and lifts them to cover her face. She flaps them together once, twice, three times, she bows her head between her arms again. As the violins rise with the horns for the finale, she shakes slightly. Through the soaring violins, she uncrosses and flaps her arms like wings.

CUT TO:

WINGS OF THE NEW YORK CITY BALLET'S STAGE AT LINCOLN CENTER - NIGHT

As the horns explode for the last time, Melanie-Swan Queen crosses her wings and lowers them to her waist, and she freezes; he felt tears on his cheeks. Melanie bowed her head and curved her neck downward.

Somewhere, von Rothbart the Sorcerer has transformed her back into the swan.

CUT TO:

EATING DISORDER FACILITY - NIGHT

As the moment dies and the music for the next scene begins, she looks up to see Jeffery. He
stands like Prince Siegfried with his crossbow: the scratched record of Don Quixote trembled in his hand. Melanie realizes there are tears on her cheeks.

MELANIE: I’ll be better. I’m sorry. I’ll be better.

JEFFERY: I’ll always love you, Mel.

MELANIE: I love you too. I love you so much.

She teeters, and with a small sob, she falls into his arms. She lets him put his arms around her and hold her together again.

CUT TO:

WINGS OF THE NEW YORK CITY BALLET’S STAGE AT LINCOLN CENTER - NIGHT

Melanie rises in her final pose, B-plus position, the music rises again, and the scene ends as she prepares to bow.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. MELANIE’S APARTMENT BATHROOM - NIGHT

There’s a pregnancy test-- positive-- on the sink. The bathroom is in disarray.

FADE TO:

EXT. CITY STREET - CONTINUOUS

Melanie is walking desperately down the street, bundled against the cold. We follow her as she walks for what seems like hours.

She stops at a coffee shop and looks through the window. In the display case, there are bright red danishes. She goes in to buy one and leaves. When she looks at the danish outside, as she walks along she flinches, and hurls it into a trash can.

FADE TO:

EXT. THE METROPOLITAN PARK - CONTINUOUS

Barring one side of the Metropolitan Park is an Opera House, Melanie’s face is on the
posters overlooking it. She focuses on them, watching them as she walks. She trips over a man, and looks down.

BALANCHINE: Melanie. You look the picture of health.

MELANIE: Mr. B! I mean, Mr. Balanchine, sir.

BALANCHINE: It’s been a while, my dear. You’re still dancing. That boy put a baby in you, though. That could be an issue. Which is why you’re talking to me. Again.

MELANIE: There were times, a lot of times, after I left, that I wanted to talk to you. After you died, especially.

BALANCHINE: I’m never dead, my dear. They still put my pieces on, they will forever. But we’re talking about you. You must know doctors. We all know those kinds of doctors, for when we have those kinds of problems to fix.

MELANIE: I don’t know if I want to do that.

BALANCHINE: Well. Do you want to keep dancing?

MELANIE: It’s all I have.

From the shadow of his coat, Balanchine pulls out a danish, like the one Melanie threw away.

BALANCHINE: Take the danish, Melanie.

Melanie shakes her head.

BALANCHINE (cont’d): Take it. I suppose you’re eating for two now?

MELANIE: Yes. I mean, no. I can’t. Not if.

BALANCHINE: Not if what? Not if you want to keep dancing? Don’t you want it? Are you eating for two, then? Are you eating at all?

MELANIE: No, no, sir. No. I don’t want it. I’ve been eating too much.

BALANCHINE: Good girl. You’ll always have the boy, you know.

MELANIE: Even after you get rid of it? This isn’t about Jeffrey and me, it’s about my career. It’s about ballet. About me. Right?

BALANCHINE: I’m just a choreographer, my dear. I set the dance on the dancer, nothing more. I’ve always been there to give the rubber stamp to a performance.

MELANIE: You were a god to me.
BALANCHINE: I was a god, wasn’t I? But what is God but a rubber stamp for how we live our lives? I could have told you to jump off the highest balcony in the opera house, and you would have done it.

*Balanchine rips the danish apart with his front teeth.*

MELANIE: What do I do, then?

BALANCHINE: That’s up to you.

*Tears glitter in Melanie’s eyes.*

MELANIE: I can’t leave it behind. Even if I have to leave in a few years, it’ll be worth it.

BALANCHINE: Good. A decision is good.

*They look at one another for a time. Balanchine licks his fingers complacently.*

MELANIE (abruptly): Was I ever thin enough for you? Pretty enough, I mean?

*But there is no one else in front of her. She is alone, and the park is impossibly big. She sighs, sniffs, and pulls her coat around her. Melanie looks at her face on the banners, and she turns to go home.*

FADE TO:

INT. MELANIE’S APARTMENT ENTRANCE - DAY

*Melanie is waiting in her foyer. Jeffery lets himself into the apartment, crosses the floor, and kisses her. She does not hug him back.*

JEFFERY: I missed you, how are you?

MELANIE: Fine. How was the production?

JEFFERY: They paid me well, I think we should do it together next time. I know you’re busy with Coppélia, but I think they wanted both of us. Do you want to do dinner?

MELANIE: I don’t know. I’m not hungry.

JEFFERY: Is everything all right? Are you sure you don’t want some dinner?

MELANIE: I just missed you, that’s all. Is it okay if we don’t? I’m not hungry. I just ate a lot.

*He looks at the spotless kitchen.*
MELANIE (cont’d): I just cleaned it all up.

JEFFERY: All right. I might make myself something then. Why don’t we have a nice lunch tomorrow? I know we can’t do dinner together, because of your night rehearsals, but we could go to the café beforehand.

MELANIE: I can’t. I have a doctor’s appointment at that time.

She looks out the window. Outside, the dying leaves are drifting like white feathers one by one, from the skinny, barren trees. The cold, fat sun rolls in an amniotic sky.

FADE TO BLACK.
running on empty
Mia Fischel
His Homeless Heroes  
Cordero L. M. Estremera

I clasped my dog’s face, brushing  
the brown fur with cold—bare hands.  
His black nose nestled in my breast,  
blistered and rotted like moldy McDonald’s.

And I was powerless.

I cradled his bone-thin body  
as he cradled my slowing heart.  
He curled his right foreleg, the limb  
tortured by scabbing.  
A limb sacrificed for my tooth-trapped fingers  
caught inside an abused mutt’s maw.

I laugh, afraid of the passing people  
fashioned in scarlet dresses. They  
reek of cheap cigarettes and white wine.  
Others don suits as silvery as the moon,  
cell phones pressed to their ears.

As they danced,  
piano music snipped the strings  
of my collared coat. It rattled  
my dog’s ears, and he convulsed.  
Our tattered, makeshift blanket of filth  
veiled the ticks burrowed deep,  
the diamond-sized criminals.

A scarlet stream sliced the sky—  
stars clustered on each side.  
An airplane whirred overhead,  
its green dots blinking in and out,  
In and out, in out, in  
And out,
fading into the night.

My dog heaved his final breath,
and I imagined he smiled.

The snow-crusted pavement
froze my toes and soaked
my faded blue jeans.
I wanted to scream.

Police sirens blurred my whimpers.
A man had tripped and snapped his arm,
an attempt to impress his newly-wed wife.
Paramedics lifted the injured fellow
onto a wheeled stretcher.

I cried, the tears
shining and interrogative. But,
the glint on the newlyweds’ rings
seemed filled with more importance—
than my dead friend.

And I plucked a tick sucking his brow.
And prayed, hands pressed together,
and the moon glistened, stared.
Maybe the moon gained the universe’s 21st space dog
or its first tick.

In Iowa City,
the earth continued spinning, snow
slammed, people hurried,
dandelions scattered with the wind,
and I inhaled the smoky scent of bacon.

If someone had ever decided to ask me about the stars,
I’d say, “They’re our ancestors—we were born
out of their snuffed brightness and that’s where we’ll return,
embracing lost loved ones.”
Dear Miss Dickinson
(Response to “Hope” is the thing with feathers” by Emily Dickinson)
Antonia Baylor

I read yer pome.
You said that hope is that thing with feathers
that perches in the soul,
but my brother shot a feathered thing
with the BB gun our uncle got ’em for his birthday,
and it jumped,
and it dropped,
and it landed like a shiny black sandbag on the driveway
in the alley
behind the church.
You said it sings the tune and don’t ever stop at all,
but that hollow bullet’s ring
gave our poor birdie his final song.
So, hats off to you and your high-flying hope,
but mine ain’t any perchy pearl feathered thing,
cause my hope’s crippled enough to get
BB gunned to death on a Sunday afternoon,
in our blackest clothes and shiniest shoes.
Hope asks for all my crumbs,
cause like my daddy said before the wake
“It’s hard work missy”
when hope drops still hot on July cement
and feathers ain’t the only falling thing.
Down with the bird
And the whole damn tree
And the song
And the bullet
And the church
And the beak
And the gun
And the cousins
And the coffin
And the hearse
And the “sorry for your losses”
And your brother
And the tears you cried cause he just killed that perfectly nice bird
On today of all days.
Hope is that thing that’s ugly,
dragged dull and flightless behind you,
burdened headstone heavy in a box
onto daddy and uncle’s shoulders this afternoon.
Drown Ur Sorrows
Rita Costa
My therapist says I suppress my feelings.

The waiter swiftly pops the cork, pouring my father just a sliver.

But I know I feel things, I recognize each emotion whirling through my mind.

My father grasps the stem delicately and swirls its contents three times.

She says I feel only partially, that I need to cry more than a few tears, more than a snifflle.

He brings the rim up to his lips, but pauses, inhaling once before it graces his tongue.

I am not easily rattled. Perhaps I have no reason to cry any more than that.

Very nice, a prim grin settles on his lips. A nod from the waiter, a perfect pour into each glass.

She claims that if I do not process my emotions, they will resurface in time.

I pop the cork. Bottleneck in hand, I bring the rim to my lips.
From where I sit
In the silence of my Honda Pilot
In the driveway of this red brick house
The engine still warm
The windows still down
Summer air sweeps in
Carrying the taste of 1 AM
That smooth, rich flavor
Of sticky skin and polished stars
With a bite of nearby smoke
And a hint of leftover laughter
All interrupted
By the violent vibrations
Of an electric guitar
Leaking from the cracks
Of the crumbling bricks
Through the floorboards in my car
Seeping into my feet, rattling my bones
As if I’m still out on those country roads
Driving the paths I know with my eyes closed
It is those rhythmic beats
Those broken amps are screaming
That cause the crickets to stir in the night
Their chirping a constant plea
Asking for quiet from the storm
That is 125 N Alta Ave
I do not have the heart to tell them
There is never quiet when we are home
“Mommy, why is the sky blue?”

“Well, Alex, once upon a time there was a painter who had his shop in the middle of a town. Blue was his favorite color and so he had oceans, blue jeans, blueberries, and dolphins in the windows of the shop. As people walked by, he kept hearing them comment that blue is such a sad color filled with loneliness, darkness, and sorrow. This sunk the painter’s heart and he decided to show the townspeople what they were missing out on.

“The painter took his brush thousands of miles upwards, and started his work. He decided that if this huge canvas was all one color, people wouldn’t appreciate it as much, just like they thought his shop windows looked sad. So, in patches between his favorite color, he added white and grey splotches, and every 12 hours of work or so he would add pink, orange, and yellow, quickly followed by a deep, deep blue. But most of all, he added lighter blue. In between every other color added, there was always blue. After weeks and weeks of fluffy textures and hands covered with light blue paint, he went back to his town, stood outside of his shop and tilted his head up.

“Now, the painter was a smart man. He figured out a way to get his paintings to rotate. Different splotches of color were seen for different parts of the day. Some things, like the yellow, pinks, and oranges, would show up twice a day. While others, the white and greys were more mysterious, and would show up in different places, different times, and different days. But in between all of these, there was always blue. He figured people couldn’t think of blue as being sad anymore, since there was so much blue beauty right above their heads.

“You see my son, life, this world, and the things surrounding us have a funny way of being connected. Here, the townspeople, the painter, the sky, clouds, storm clouds, sunsets, sunrises, and colors are all connected.”

“Mommy, blue is my favorite color.”

“Thank the painter.”
Seven

“Mommy, why did my classmate say that there are eyes in the sky?”

“Because there are. There are eyes in the sky. Crows, and robins, and eagles, and geese all have eyes. But, honey, your classmate is focusing on the wrong thing. People underestimate bird brains because they’re scared to admit the truth. The birds use their eyes, yes, but the images they see are then interpreted by their brain. Bird brains sort through this information and piece together who you are, what you do, what you like, what you don’t like, what your favorite food is, what you are thinking, what you are hiding. This information is way more dangerous.

“Try to make friends with the birds. Not only do they have eyes and bird brains, but they also have mouths. The birds are terrible gossips, and baby the trees love to listen. The tree’s ears are in their branches, which is why they grow so long, they want to overhear as much as they can. Birds land and build nests on these ears in exchange for beloved information.

“The trees love secrets. Leaves grow just so they can fall and spread your information along to the wind. At that point, your private information, your beloved secrets are whistled along for all who care to listen. And people care to listen.

“So son, yes your classmate is right. The sky does have eyes. If your secrets need to be out in the open, go at night when the eyes are closed and resting. Because the sky does have eyes, but it’s their connections that make them so terribly dangerous.”

Eight

“Momma, I just overheard the preacher tell the butcher that everyone over 80-years-old has dropped. What does that mean?”

“When did you hear that?”

“Ten minutes ago, in the town square. I was sitting on the one bench that’s behind that big oak tree and they didn’t see me. They were talking so fast, rushing to get out every word. I peeked around the tree towards the end of the conversation, and the preacher’s eyes were red and puffy. When they shook hands, the preacher’s hands were shaking. It reminded me of how Tommy looked when he came to school after his cat ran away. I wanted to ask the preacher if I could do anything to help, but when I got up the bench squeaked. The preacher and butcher were at the other side of the lawn when I
rounded the tree. Mom, what happened to the 80-year-olds? What should we be doing? Do they need help?”

“A alex, you always had such a kind heart. Everything is ok. Don’t worry. You know how last month I had to take my coat into Miss Hattie’s shop to get fixed?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I had to take it in because I’ve had the coat for many years. It was still a very good coat and kept me warm, but it had to get some alterations. The one button went missing, and it had a small tear in the right arm from when it got caught in the Jeffries’ door. I took my coat in to Miss Hattie’s and she just fixed it right on up.

“Alex, don’t worry about the 80-year-olds. When you get older, your bones and joints start to hurt. Maybe the 80-year-olds are just at their own version of Miss Hattie’s.”

Nine

“Momma, why do we have to leave?”

“Think of it this way honey, you know when you’ve been inside all day and you have energy you need to let out?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s how our clothes feel, we’re going to take them on an adventure. Our clothes want to travel around, see the world, and be able to feel the soft breeze of a different place. They want to connect with nature in different locations. Now, remember what we talked about. This adventure, let’s call it a game. This game has very specific rules. When I say to be quiet, you can’t utter a word. When I say to run, you run. If I tell you to run ahead of me, go without turning back. Do you understand?”

“Momma, will we win this game?”

“I hope so.”
Nine and a half

“Momma, why did we have to leave Dad behind? Why are we running with less people than yesterday? What is the goal of this game? When will we go home? What is the connection between everything here? Why are...”

“Alex, remember the rules. It’s time to be quiet, not a sound. Move your feet as fast as you can and hold my hand. We can do this sweetie, no talking and...RUN.”

Ten

“Mom, what are those loud noises? The hills have been quiet for two days now. Why are there red streaks in the sky?”

“I guess the painter is questioning his favorite color.”

Eleven

“Mom, is Dad going to catch up to us?”

“Honey, when journeying to a new place, it’s helpful to remind yourself of the way your body is designed. Your eyes are at the front of your head and your knees only bend the one way. You’re biologically made to move forward. That’s what we have to do.”

“So, we’ll keep moving forward, but is he going to catch up?”

“Alex, you need to remind yourself of the connections. Your body, and this journey are connected—”

“—Mom, for once in my life, please just give me a straight answer. Will we see Dad again?”

“No.”

Seventeen

“Mom, are you excited to come see my final training session tomorrow?”

“Very much, you’re going to be great!”
“Is it okay that I’m nervous?”

“Oh Alex, sit down. Of course it’s okay. When you get nervous, your stomach does flips. It does this because it is a terrible drama queen, and wants more attention than you’re giving it. The rest of your body tries to help by getting the attention away from your stomach. Your hands start to shake because they’re trying to wave hi, the pressure in your head is your brain accidentally sending too many encouraging messages, and the thumping in your chest is trying to tell you to lead with your heart. Your hands, brain, and heart, are trying to help. They all dislike the stomach and are trying to lessen its effect. Your body is all connected.”

“Thank you Mom.”

“After your final session, I’ll meet you outside the activity room at the end of the bunker. Knock ‘em dead!”

_Eighteen_

“Mom, why are the red alarms going off? I thought we had more time. The emergency evacuation route is blocked. Is it possible it’s just a glitch in the system that’s making the alarms go off? How much time do we have left if it’s real? Mom, get up. We need to at least try to do something. Mom. Mom. Mom!”

“Alex, close the door and come sit close. It’s happening. There’s nothing more we can do.”

“There has to be something we haven’t thought of yet.”

“Come here sweetie, sit down. They’ve tried everything. Let’s just enjoy what we have left. There’s nothing more we can do. It’s happening. Take a deep breath. I am so lucky to have you as a son, you are so kind, and brave, and smart. I am so proud of you. Can I ask you a question, for a change?”

“Anything.”

“Why do you always ask _me_ your questions?”

“Because they make me feel connected to you.”
Always Running
Caroline Lopez
Mirror Image
Rita Costa
The End is Here
(Response to “I Know the End” by Phoebe Bridgers)
Rebecca Hurtado

Do you remember how the trees caught fire?
How they held the flames like a sacred heart
in a Catholic prayer.
Small particles caught
in electric silence. You said,
“High pressure hugs the sky to red.”
Like the tips of my bare toes pressing
wet footprints into sacred stone.
My goodbye printed on your porch.

Do you remember the words about knowing the end?
The song you played me across the reservoir.
The one you played on my brother’s guitar.
Well, that night it hung in the branches like lightning
hanging low. And your voice struck
me behind the eyes as
I watched you slip inside.
I know.
Your face in the kitchen window.
I know.
“Don’t worry, they’ll dry.” I said,
“I know.”

Why did we let that rumbling weather sing?
Squeezing every blue particle from the sky.
Until the red song burned all it touched,
the trees,
the hearts,
the end.
a little spot of green in a big red world
Maarten Lempia

A thin cloud of red dust drifted slowly through the air. The man tilted his head slightly, a thoughtful expression lingering across his lips. Several months ago, he might have moved inside and sealed the windows, but not anymore. The dust was nothing if not unavoidable here. The mines in the mountains to the west made sure of that. But the land was cheap, and the dust wasn’t too much of a hassle to deal with, at least not once he had grown accustomed to it. If anything, it was only slightly worse than it had been in the man’s old home, back on Earth.

After only a few moments, the dust cloud had dispersed, and the man’s attention was drawn elsewhere. Across the rolling slopes of the foothills, his nearest neighbor was starting up his machinery again. He seemed insistent on using it every day to clear the winding road leading to his house, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the dust was unavoidable. Sometimes the man hated his neighbor for his idiocy, wishing he would just give up and let the mountain sounds breathe from under his constant mechanical droning. On other days he respected his neighbor for his stubbornness, his resilience against the wild, his fortitude and unwillingness to give in. But on most days he just accepted that the neighbor had nothing better to do. Nobody did here.

Beyond the neighbor’s house, the foothills continued to roll south, endlessly flowing into the horizon, following the western mountains as they towered high into the atmosphere. The red rocks and sands were infrequently dotted with homes just like his. Gray two-story structures that sat lifeless and uninspiring in a burning world. When the neighbor stopped running his machinery, the mountains breathed again. The intermittent low rumbles of the mountain mines were like thunder, heralding a rain that would never come. The man leaned his head back against the wood of his chair and closed his eyes. He listened to the low whistle of the wind, carrying with it some of those mountain sounds.

The man thought back to his arrival. His shuttle had touched down late in the red evening, and he had shuffled his way through the massive white complex with the few others that had arrived with him. Transport was provided and he loaded his few belongings on board. He would have brought with him a piece of home, but he had lost it along the way. The transport made its way up the long winding road from the central complex to his new home. Along the way, it passed the many homes identical to his that broke up the endless swath of red sand. Somehow it only made it more monotonous. Men and women who were tired of their old lives filled them all. There were no younger people here, full of
energy, eager for opportunity, ready for adventures. Just old, tired men and women. The man had never learned the names of his neighbors, nor did he plan to. They didn’t matter.

The mine workers lived back at the massive white complex, where life was structured and organized. Their pay wasn’t great, but they didn’t care. They were living out their dreams, engineers who had spent their lives studying, hoping for a chance to one day get their hands on Mars. To shape it into whatever they desired. Building the future of humanity.

“Be a part of history!” The ads flashed bold and bright everywhere. Everyone wanted to go, but no one was willing to leave. They felt safe in the comfort of their homes, in the only world they had ever known. But to some, all it took was the promise of something new. The old, tired men and women. All most of them wanted to do was to relax and wait for their last days to come. Better to die somewhere new than to die in the same place they had lived all of their lives. Better to have something different. Something others couldn’t have.

After a short while of half-sleep, the man sat up again. He scanned his surroundings, the rolling red expanse, half wishing to see something new, though not expecting to. It was somewhat comforting to him, knowing that nothing would change. At least not while he was here. He would be long dead by the time the many corporations of Earth would dig their claws into Mars. Then they would raze the gray houses and raise their glass high rises. But for now, it was just the government. The government and the old, tired men and women looking for the right place to spend their final days. Or perhaps just any place. A different place.

The man stood slowly, stretching his back as he did, wishing it wouldn’t ache. The creak of the porch underfoot did its best, but it could never match that of his joints. He took a few deep breaths, shivering despite the beating yellow sun on the burning red rocks. He made his way across the porch and stepped down the few lonely stairs, steadying himself on the railing, making his way onto the flattened path that led down to the greenhouse.

His boots left light imprints in the dust coating the path, the particles finding a resting place in the grooves on the bottom. The greenhouse was a curious place for the man. A piece of Earth, but not the Earth he had lived in. The harmonies of sirens and the slamming of doors were absent. The air was clear and crisp, not thick and gray. There was no homeless man lying beneath a dirty, stolen red blanket, begging for his change and scowling when he was ignored. No shop owners boarding up their windows and gating their doors before the sun even had a chance to hide. No, it was full of green.
Greens the man had seen all his life, but only through the tv, or through the shop windows. Greens he had never felt.

When he had agreed to pack up and ship himself across the stars, one of the questions the government had asked was if he wanted a greenhouse. The man had no answer, for he had no idea what a greenhouse even was. Nor did he ask. It was something different, so he had agreed. He had no idea it would turn out to be his little corner of peace in his new home.

He closed the first door behind him, turning the handle to seal it shut. The air hissed as it drew out whatever red dust had crept its way inside with him. The panel flashed, and the second door clicked open. He stepped inside. He stood and stared for a while. A little spot of green in a big red world. Not a bad place to be, he thought to himself. Perhaps when he felt his breaths coming slower, and his knees giving out, he would come here and lay on the floor. Staring at the green canopy that wound its way across the ceiling, he would draw his final breaths. Better here than that same burning red.

A noise drew him out of his trance. The man exited the greenhouse and stood outside, staring up. He could see the little traces of flame hurtling across the sky. Like someone had given a child an orange crayon and left him alone. The debris was falling again. No one really knew what it was. No one except the government. Perhaps some waste product ejected high into the atmosphere. Maybe a failed experiment that had broken to pieces. Maybe another government’s military had gotten too close. It didn’t really matter. The debris fell either way.

Some 20 yards from where he stood, a scrap of metal lay half-buried in the sand, smaller than a man, yet still larger than him. The dust it had kicked up carried away to the east, floating along the wind among the mountain sounds. Though the debris had fallen before, it had never come this close. He preferred to watch as it floated slowly down the distant sky and into the western mountains. There he could watch the flowing clouds of dust they kicked up, traveling ever eastward.

The orange trails in the sky were much brighter today. It seemed they had decided to settle among the foothills today, following in the footsteps of those old, tired men and women. The man stood there considering them, his brow furrowed with concern. After a few short moments, he started up the path back toward the house. The basement was 20 feet below, the ground above it reinforced. The government had built them that way. Whether out of caution or out of necessity, only they could say. They had never instructed him whether or not he would need to use it. In fact, they had never even
mentioned its existence. The door that led down beneath the ground had been open when he arrived and had remained closed every day since.

The man stopped. He stood there, about halfway up the path, facing his gray “home.” He cocked his head slightly sideways and stared at it. From a distance, one might have thought he was conversing with it. That momentary feeling of fear had disappeared. He shrugged slightly, then turned around, towards the greenhouse. Another hunk of metal slammed into the dust a short distance down the hill. He paid it no mind. He pushed his way through the dusty red door, which had once been shining and white. He turned the handle to seal it behind him, and air hissed as the dust was once again sucked out. He made his way inside.

He stepped to the center of the greenhouse. Joints creaking, he slowly lowered himself to the floor, extending his legs and laying his head back. He folded his hands together across his chest and let his eyes wander. He followed the vines as they wound their way upwards, wrapping themselves around the support beams. Eventually, his eyes settled on one of the many small flowers that dotted the ceiling, like the stars that ran across the sky, hiding from the burning sun.

The man smiled and closed his eyes. Maybe he would awake in a few hours and make his way out the dusty red door to study the metal that would line the landscape. Or maybe he wouldn’t. Not that it mattered. The debris would keep falling either way, and come the morning, his neighbor would be clearing the road, just as he always did.
Bystander
Anna Northington Jones
Prostrate in an orthodontic chair that managed to be beige and gray and blue all at once, I kept my gangling, fourth-grade body still as Dr. Charlie’s dental assistant placed a gas mask over my face. Its clear tubes trailed gently over my cheeks and down to the floor, and I could’ve sworn in the moment that the nose piece was made to look like an actual nose, although I can’t be certain now. Within a few minutes, light and sound were smudged by the nitrous oxide touring my bloodstream, and currents of electricity roiled beneath my freckled skin, swirling up around my neck before whooshing down toward my feet. By the time Dr. Charlie’s voice boomed in my disembodied ears, letting me know the extraction was about to begin, all of my limbs had stopped responding. Could I move if I wanted to? If I needed to? I laid there, heavy and dumb, and didn’t try to find out.

When I think of teeth, I think of dentists. I think of those foam trays of fluoride they stuff in your mouth two at a time, lukewarm and gooey. I think of blue toothpaste and white floss stained pink by the blood of unbrushed gums. I think of pain. I think of my sensitivities, of cold foods and ice water. Time and again, I picture in vivid detail a blonde woman I’ve never seen before crunching a perfect bite from a bright green Granny Smith, like a stock photo come to life. I’ve never liked using my bottom teeth to eat apples and exclusively use my top, while this invincible woman uses every tooth she has. There’s something strong about her, there’s something healthy, there’s something about an apple a day that’s making miracles happen. I love apples, but I’m too protective of my teeth to ever bite one the way she does.

Maybe this is because, every couple of months or so, I dream about my teeth falling out. Sometimes I lose several, but, most often, it’s only one. The tooth loosens gradually over the course of a day, the impending event of its loss always overshadowed at first by details from other plotlines. But, in the end, the tooth is the center of the story, and I always find myself tonguing the fleshy curve of the jaw it dangles from, maxilla or mandible, in a request for it to fall. Sometimes it feels like I’m a kid again, my fingers prodding impatiently between my lips so I might have something to put under my pillow when the moon’s out, but I’m not that young anymore—in real life or in my dreams—and I ran out of baby teeth a long time ago. Instead, it’s an adult tooth that cracks off in the second before I wake up, and I can’t grow another in its place. The little bone lands between the ones still embedded in my gums, and the resounding crunch brings me lurching back to consciousness. It always takes a few moments for my heartbeat to slow down again.

I’m not really sure what the dreams mean, but I do know how they make me feel and that none of it’s good. However, I also know that the loss of my teeth was once a source of excitement, of magic, of unadulterated financial promise: dump a tooth, get a dollar. The easiest money I’ve ever made was
off the tugging on my gums as one tooth after the next bungeed the open cavity of my mouth from roof to base, the pink anchoring cords stretching taut before they finally snapped. I always pushed and pulled for as long as I could bear until the strain became too much. I remember bedtime apprehension, the scent of crumpled dollar bills, a white square pillow with a pink-buttoned pouch for storing teeth. I think of lime green walls and linen sheets with cats on them. I imagine the Tooth Fairy, and I hear my father’s jocular proposals that my sister and I tie our wiggling teeth to doors he’d then slam so we wouldn’t have to wait another night for her to visit. I smile at the playful lilt in his voice, but I shudder at the idea itself and the sensation my brain pairs with it.

Dr. Charlie boomed again, but I couldn’t make out the words. Miles away, a Latex hand pushed my jaw open wider and the fluorescent light mounted above me turned the room molten orange beyond my eyelids. Metal tools scraped my enamel and tickled the contours of my hard palate; I choked on bone dust from spinning drills and winced inwardly as spit dried in the corners of my lips. Finally, Dr. Charlie went for his first molar. There was a splintering sound and a release of pressure in my gum, before a gush of rusty liquid filled my mouth. I was still entirely immobile in the orthodontic chair, which at that point felt more like a guillotine. The scent of my own blood clogged my nose as the wetness coated my throat, and I was powerless to protect myself against any of it. Dr. Charlie tore out three more and gave them to me in a little yellow canister, shaped like a tooth itself.

As far as I can remember, I only have tooth loss dreams when I’m sleeping in my childhood bedroom. The walls are gray now, the bedding unpattered, but the soccer plaques are still there, along with the stuffy warmth that builds up when the fan on the floor is turned off. The same books form a stack in one corner and the closet still struggles to fit its doors around the clutter I’ve jammed inside of it over the years. The room is bursting with spiral notebooks half-filled, drawers of clothing half-cleaned out. The bed frame comes up no higher than my knee, and the mattress itself holds memories of sobs and sex and stress over slipping grades; it holds bad sleep and good sleep and the imprints of feet that bounced in evasion of any sleep at all because the Tooth Fairy would be coming later in the night. Now those same feet peek out over the end as I dream that my canines are falling out of my face.

In my earliest formative years, I went through a period where my mom had to force-brush my teeth because a particularly condescending dental assistant scolded me so brutally over my unscrubbed inner gum line that I nearly cried. I kept my chin down and eyes low the whole way out of the building so no one could see, and steeled myself every time my mom remembered to take my face in her hands and scour the tissue above my teeth until it bled. So I can comfortably admit that I’ve always hated the dentist’s office, and that matters of the teeth in general make me nervous. But there’s something else there too—something in my sleep, something in my bedroom, something in the little yellow canister
that holds those four extracted molars, their roots intact and crusted with blood the color of marmalade—that brings teeth so often into my mind, only for them to fall out soon after.

I read somewhere once—or in a few places several times—that these sorts of dream scenarios can be rooted in a number of things, from stress and insecurity to sexual repression and fears about aging, depending on who you ask. Infuriatingly, they can also mean everything opposite. I’m most often tempted to decipher in my tooth dreams a loss of agency, but even this isn’t always true. Maybe the only consistency here lies in the shift of my eyes beneath their lids on nights when I’m having the dreams again, which I never see myself but can logically assume. My brow probably furrows in discomfort as my palms sweat, tangled in plain sheets, and I imagine that my tongue runs over my teeth in mimicry of its pointed probing when I was a kid. I bet I look just like I did on that day with Dr. Charlie, when my thoughts ran blind behind my forehead while my arms and legs were stunned in place. Now, the excitement over one-dollar teeth is gone, and the laughing gas dissipated years ago with stories of the Tooth Fairy. All I have now are the memories, the dreams, those four little bones.
Contributors

**Moriah Aberle** (she/her) is a senior mathematics major and an English creative writing minor. At Denison, she’s an ARC tutor for the math and computer science departments and the head mathematics tutor. She plays the flute in a handful of music ensembles and is a member of the Pi Mu Epsilon, Sigma Tau Delta, and Mortar Board Honor Societies. She’s a recipient of the Delta Upsilon Class of 1954 Memorial Award and a Hagan Scholar. Moriah wrote “December Yellow” while living at the Homestead, and drew her inspiration from the ecologically-minded community fostered there.

**William Barnes** (he/him) is a senior biology major. He was—and is very much still—a bug kid, and most of his writing inspiration stems from day-long adventures with his brother through their woods and calm walks with his grandma around the creek. Rummaging through his head for something to write reminds him of the mossy logs he flips in search of cool bugs, and the playfulness between his mind and pieces of paper—or more commonly, Google docs—keeps him writing.

**Antonia Baylor** (she/her) is a freshman psychology and English creative writing double major. She is from Lincoln, Nebraska and one of six siblings. Her favorite poet is Ted Kooser, but she’s always been biased when it comes to poems, stories, music, or art that reminds her of the midwest, so most of her poems tend to center around the theme of family and home. Antonia hadn’t devoted meaningful time to poetry until this year, though she’d like to count her older fondness for songwriting as a kind of poetry. It fluctuates between the guitar and piano, but she also loves to play the drums, ukulele, and sing in different groups on campus.

**Annika J. Bruce** (she/her) is a senior English creative writing and educational studies double major. As an Appalachian writer, she writes on childhood, home, family, relationships, endometriosis, grief, and healing. Annika enjoys reading poetry, drinking coffee, and spending time with her two black cats. She wants to thank Professor Leonard and Professor Weaver for everything they’ve done for her.

**Abby Conturo** (she/they) is a sophomore studio art major and English creative writing minor. Her artistic practice includes painting, sewing, drawing, writing, screen printing, and whatever else pulls her interest. They find inspiration in Denison’s wildlife and scenery as well as topics related to queer identity. Abby frequently sells prints of their work at Denison’s student flea markets.

**Rita Costa** (she/her) is a junior BFA studio art major and communication minor. She is the PR Director for the University Programming Council, Social Media Assistant for Arts at Denison, and risograph TA. In her free time, she loves creating illustrations! Rita’s pieces for this issue of *Exile* are the
result of many brief moments of inspiration she strove to capture on the page. She hopes they are able to transport the viewers to someplace new, whether it’s to a very silly or contemplative place.

S. A. Culyer (he/him) is a junior English creative writing major. He was born both near and somehow far from everything in Cincinnati, and has been writing for most of his life. L’Etoile was transcribed from a scene in his most recent novel. He finds it helpful to imagine character moments and scenes as scripts, as it keeps the action fresh and moving. He is in the midst of finding an agent for this novel, but it has provided the research and study for his senior project, which he will undertake next year.

Lauren Ehlers (she/her) is a junior English creative writing major and this is her first time submitting to Exile! Here at Denison, she works at the Writing Center, writes for the Bullsheet, and DJs for the Doobie. Lauren’s currently enrolled in a hugely inspiring Creative Nonfiction class with Professor Melissa Faliveno, and “Extractions” comes from that. She really enjoys the creative nonfiction genre and is looking forward to exploring it further in the future!

Cordero L. M. Estremera (he/him) is a senior English creative writing major. He co-founded the production Here Us, is an English Fellow, and has worked for ITS service Desk. He is an avid reader, especially authors such as Maya Angelou and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and believes that people are stories.

Mia Fischel (she/her) is a freshman at Denison. She enjoys photography, writing, reading, and spending time outdoors. She’s involved in The Denisonian and Exile and also plays club ultimate frisbee.

Robert (Robbie) Garber is a senior English creative writing and psychology double major. Robbie is the vice president of the men’s fencing club and the epee squad captain for Denison’s travel team. Any weekend Robbie’s not fencing, you’ll find him at Gaming Guild, often playtesting a board game he’s been working on for the past four years. Robbie’s sad to be graduating and doesn’t want to leave so soon. And while he doesn’t know what he’ll be doing in the near professional future, Robbie will be heading to Japan as a CLS scholar shortly after graduation.

Brin Glass (she/her) is a sophomore journalism major and English creative writing minor. Her dad is a high school English teacher, though she hated writing while growing up. Damn genes.

Anna Gooch (she/her) is a freshman cinema major who has a deep love for the arts. On campus, she has participated in 2 different Denison Independent Theatre Association productions. In her own time, she has an affinity for dancing, theater, movie watching and appreciation, creative writing, and crafting. Anna’s always had a love for storytelling and has worked on her own ability in the art through narrative writing in high school. However, during her first semester, she took an Intro to Creative
Writing course that uncovered her hidden love of poetry. She has now spent months cultivating new storytelling techniques in poetic form. Anna’s found a unique comfort in expressing herself through written words. She is proud to be sharing this piece, where she looks back to her chaotic family to form her complex meaning of a stable home, with Denison’s literary magazine, *Exile*.

**Eliza Hughes** is a junior theater major and English creative writing minor. The inspiration for “Mother and Child” was Eliza’s own experience with gender dysphoria, the films Rosemary’s Baby and Get Out, and Stephen King and Jordan Peele’s ideas about how the true monsters are those that we live with every day. Eliza is the current president of Denison Independent Theatre Association as well as a member of Gaming Guild, Outlook, and Ballet Club, and is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and a winner of the Reese-Shackleford prize for Academic Achievement in Theatre.

**Rebecca Hurtado** (she/her) is a freshman English creative writing major. She is a prose editor for *Exile* and is passionate about creative writing across many genres such as creative non-fiction, poetry, and fiction. Music is a major source of inspiration for her work whether that be the ambiance found in film scores or the work of lyricists such as Phoebe Bridgers, whose song “I Know the End” inspired her poem “The End is Here.” “Cicada Lullaby” and “The End is Here” are special to Rebecca because they are the first pieces she workshopped and cultivated while at Denison during her first semester Intro to Creative Writing class.

**Malina Infante** (she/her) is a junior English creative writing and educational studies double major. She is an English Department Fellow, as well as a TA for the Poetry Writing Workshop. She writes both prose and poetry. She spent last summer completing a long-term project as a Summer Scholar and is set to continue that work this coming summer. She plans to complete her senior writing project in poetry.

**Anna Northington Jones** (she/her) is a junior studio art and communication double major. She is a member of the Food Recovery Network, KKG, and DITA shadowcast productions on campus. Anna enjoys drawing, painting, writing, reading, and rollerblading. Her work “Bystander” aims to explore the bystander effect and the practice of “washing your mouth out with soap” to instill regret at speaking and an attitude of controlling what you say. The character fears speaking out or saying something that may have a negative impact on them.

**Maggie Jones** (she/her) is a sophomore education studies major and English creative writing minor. She works in the education department and is a member of Delta Gamma Sorority, where she’s the Diversity Delegate, the Director of DG Dialogues, and the sophomore member of the Honor Board. She loves reading, the outdoors, and board games. One thing that inspires Maggie is her family,
including her four older brothers and four wonderful dogs. She enjoys meeting new people and hearing their stories.

Georgia Reese Knox (she/her) is a sophomore cinema major and English creative writing minor from Los Angeles, California. She has been shooting film photography for 5 years. She’s studying cinema here at Denison, so her life quite literally revolves around film. Georgia works at the Bandersnatch and also won best cinematography for her first short film at UCSB.

Eliana Lazzaro is a freshman English literature and classical studies major with a minor in Greek. Eliana’s always been passionate about ancient literature, and loves writing about it! Stories from antiquity have been fascinating to them since they were little, and to this day, those stories are their main source of inspiration. They love trying to understand the outlook of ancient cultures and connecting with people from ages past. Aside from that, Eliana is a member of Eta Sigma Phi, and is also involved with the DITA production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Additionally, they were accepted to the Summer Scholars program where they’ll be doing research on grief in the Epic of Gilgamesh!

Maarten Lempia (he/him) is a sophomore English creative writing major. He is a member of the Denison Ice Hockey Team and his piece “a little spot of green in a big red world” won 3rd place in Denison’s Danner Lee Mahood Fiction Competition in 2022.

Caroline Lopez (she/her) is a sophomore Earth science and English literature double major looking to find the intersections between the two and bridge some of the gaps between the sciences and humanities. She loves to paint, but is interested in experimenting a little bit more with various mediums and producing work that she’s not entirely comfortable with. "Alaska" is an example of some multimedia work that’s a little outside her comfort zone. Caroline’s favorite hobby is surfing, which she doesn’t get to do much of in Ohio, but always jumps at the chance to do when she’s in her home state.