Exile Vol. LXXI

Authors
Victoria Bambara, William Barnes, Kate Blue, Olivia Bernard, Rita Costa, Jenna Cutlip, Talya Dersu, Lauren Dyer, Brin Glass, Anna Gooch, Moose Hogeland, Emma Hunter, Rebecca Hurtado, Malina Infante, Anna Northington Jones, Ramatu Kamara, Khoa, Liberty Kingsley, Eliana Lazzaro, Maggie Malin, Emily McNeal, Colin Nguyen, Jack Richards, Jules Rizzo, Mia Rubiera, Marissa Sullivan, and Amaya Willems

This entire issue is available in Exile: https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol71/iss1/3
Masthead

Editors-in-Chief
Kt Amrine
Cassidy Crane
Lucy Dale
Sofia Monteleone
Kee Olandesca
Nor Osborne

Faculty Advisor
Peter Grandbois

Poetry Editors
Cassidy Crane, Lucy Dale, Lauren Ehlers,
Nolan Felker, Natalie Isberg, Shaye Phillips, Ava Reischuck, Emily Toohey

Prose Editors
Kt Amrine, Maura Metts Austin, Ella Diehl, Juan Chaides Hurtado, Mia Fischel,
Julia Hughes, Rebecca Hurtado, Malina Infante, Elizabeth Koeppen,
Sofia Monteleone, Nor Osborne, Sunny Tran, Juliana Zeller
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 modcearig
geond lagulade longe sceolde hreran mid hondum hrimealde sæ, wadan wræclastas. Wyrd bið ful aræd!

- “The Wanderer”

Often the solitary one experiences mercy for himself, the mercy of the Measurer, although he, troubled in spirit, over the ocean must long stir with his hands the rime-cold sea, travel the paths of exile – Fate is inexorable.”
Letter from the Editors | 2
Victoria Bambara
Last Pieces | 58
William Barnes
Milking the Morning | 11
The Invention is a Story/a Story is Everything | 22
Kate Blue
Salt | 9
sugar strawberries | 14
Olivia Bernard
Excerpt from Deep Light | 26
Rita Costa
In 2012 | 20
Building Blocks | 39
New Moon | 54
Jenna Cutlip
Shallow Dive | 45
Talya Dersu
Rearview Mirror, June 2023 | 8
Venice Canal, June 2023 | 15
Lauren Dyer
Night at the Opera | 36
Brin Glass
Unintended Renewals | 40
Anna Gooch
The Farm | 6
Moose Hogeland
The Rat King | 35
Emma Hunter
Alone | 46
Rebecca Hurtado
Hialeah Heat | 4
Eurydice | 43
Piano Lessons | 50
ilynchee
W-W-WALL-E | 37
Malina Infante
Mother’s Nature | 5
And from this slumber you too shall wake | 44
Madonna of Monterchi | 56
Anna Northington Jones
Mark Maker | 42
Jules | 49
Ramatu Kamara
Just Love | 7
Khoa
Passing | 16
Liberty Kingsley
Obituary | 21
Eliana Lazzaro
song for san rocco | 12
Maggie Malin
20 | 41
Emily McNeal
Waiting for Butterflies | 52
Colin Nguyen
Dusk at Swasey Chapel | 25
Jack Richards
Among the Stars | 23
Jules Rizzo
A Toast | 48
prayer circle | 53
Mia Rubiera
The Beauty of the Small | 57
Marissa Sullivan
Hollywood Gold Rush Forever | 47
Amaya Willems
XIII: Death | 55
Contributors | 60
Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers,

Allow us to welcome you to the Spring 2024 issue of Exile, a collection of brilliant works from talented writers and artists all across campus. We hope that you enjoy the artistry in these pages as much as we do.

When we joined the board of editors-in-chief, Exile was still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. We are happy to have been a part of Exile’s revival, to watch our submission numbers grow and grow each year and to have seen two issues published for the first time in eighteen years. At the beginning of the year, we doubted if this was even possible: would we have enough submissions, enough time, enough resources to actually make this happen? Lo and behold, our contributors, editors, and English department advisors came through and helped us make this dream a reality. We are so happy to be able to showcase not one, but two incredible collections of stories from this year. We would like to especially thank our wonderful poetry and prose editors, our twenty-eight contributors, and our faculty advisor Peter Grandbois for making this issue possible and for believing in us.

Reflecting back on our three years with Exile, we feel both loss and fulfillment at the thought of leaving. While we are so sad to leave this wonderful publication, we are so proud of the accomplishments we were able to make during our short time as editors-in-chief. We are also honored to leave it in the hands of such capable people. Kee, Sofia, Nor, and Lucy, we know you will accomplish great things, both with Exile and beyond. Kee, we cherish the time we had to work with you on Exile and value your creativity more than you know. Sofia, Nor, and Lucy, we regret not being able to work with you more, but we know you will thrive on Exile’s editorial board and that the magazine will blossom under your leadership.

Whatever you need right now: to laugh, cry, smile, reflect (all things we find ourselves doing at the thought of ending our time with Exile), we hope you can do it within these pages, with these stories, with us.

— Kt Amrine and Cassidy Crane
Dear Readers,

For the spring issue, it’s fitting to comment on the themes of passing time, the endings of cherished chapters, and the beginnings of bright journeys. With the blooming of daffodils around Denison’s campus, comes the seemingly perfect time to gain closure for the school year passed while also leaping full-heartedly onto the next page.

At a college where we are constantly moving fast, focused on creating the futures we desire, we must also take pause to honor the past, which has shaped and expanded our possibilities for the present. Exile has thrived with a community of talented editors and contributors thanks to the inspiring leadership of Cassidy and Kt. Cassidy, you’ve been a pillar that holds us together and the warmth that keeps us rooted. Kt, your bold vision and tenacious drive set a standard for excellence we will strive to uphold for years to come. You’ve both left an indelible mark on Exile, and we are thrilled and honored to carry your legacies forward.

Lucy, Sofia, and I are all so honored to be joining this talented team. We’ve been endlessly inspired by the dedication of Cassidy, Kee, and KT, all of them being such incredibly welcoming and intelligent people. We have big shoes to fill, but I have no doubt we can continue what our past Editor-In-Chiefs have started, and put all of our love and dedication into this magazine. In this edition and the editions to come, we will push ourselves to explore the creative ways we curate the magazine, encouraging our editors to be the best they can be as we take on the beautiful work of our community. We are so excited to continue to generate this collection of the very best work Denison has to offer.

There is nothing like Exile at Denison. It is special, a kaleidoscope of voices and perspectives across our campus. Every year, every edition brings with it new excitement and challenges, and we are so excited to continue this legacy and foster the kinds of poignant, moving, and laugh-out-loud writers in our campus’ creative scene. So a promise from me: every piece of writing that passes through my hands and into the pages of this magazine will be something special, something worth picking up and picking apart. Maybe you’ll read it and find new inspiration. Maybe you’ll find a writer to look up to. But there will be something that speaks to you, because there is always something here that speaks to us.

—Lucy Dale, Ikera (Kee) Olandesca, Nor Osborne, and Sofia Monteleone
Hialeah heat
has a way of dropping kids like flies
swarming to avocados pelted from trees,
slit open and pounded ripe by ferocious little fists.
Miami children know these fruitless victories will be cast
into the cursing neighbor's yard. Will anoint the patio, smeared
by Abuela's broom. Inside, the pool pockets can be worn like sleeves.
Billiards balls plummet down barrels, knocking around the room,
splitting open toes. Up on the table, a little girl perches and pets the evergreen
felt because here, grass grows like barbed netting over ash. Eroded mollusks
and Caribbean cremains wash up for exiled mothers to wipe down from feral
baby heels. She stands, skinny arms her propellers, like the pair that
brought Abuelo to this country where his granddaughter tries to fly.
All childlike pride and idiocy, stuffed with giggles and dares
and bread and guilt and "what if" and rosary beads and
"where can I go?" Without a yell, her foot—wet from the rag,
dry from any coast—slips like wax from the table lip.
Her skull cracks against terracotta tiles.
And the sound is no different than a
scratched cue ball.
Mother’s Nature
Malina Infante

I am not fit to be a mother.
Perhaps the innocent sense something wicked — children squirm free of my grasp,
no butterfly would rest on the tip of my index, even the backyard
doe nudges her fawn out of my path.
I know I’m no Cinderella, no
Aurora or Snow — a blue jay flits outside my window. Her belly, white
as daisies, contorts as she pecks my unwatered grass. Hopping on talons,
thinner than twine, I know she does not see me inching closer to the pane.
A full nest waits for her. She snaps, blue
tail feathers fluster, and she mangles that worm just enough for the hatchlings
to eat. My abdomen feels hollow,
or is it my chest? She lifts off but
I don’t back away. I’d take the full worm for myself.
The Farm
Anna Gooch

The rev of a four wheeler
mixes with the screams
of seven young children
echoing over fields
of gold and blood
festering in the orchard
ancestral trees watching
the sun setting over acres
of hereditary soil
turned by callused hands
belonging to callused hearts
of the family that fights
atop beaten bones
and rotten spoils
the family that laughs
alongside cursed crickets
that keep them awake
until the cows break loose
and the cursing starts again
the family that does not cry
they plead for rain
to feed the grass
but bury the tears that fester
in crusted earth
in order to prove
one does not need rain
to grow hay
There was a smile on my father’s face as he looked at me and me looking past him to whatever lies beyond the barriers of that shot. Both arms gently caging me letting myself live in them. To him, it must’ve felt as if I was not just a baby but a reward from a hunt meant to be presented to the world by capturing it in photo. I heard his firing laughter as my mother said cheese completing the moment.

His hands not only held but shared. Subdued notes of affection towards me. They chased my words to make little corrections on homework that my hands gave to yours. They must’ve anxiously wrote notes for the exam that caused him to miss my hands that played the violin you gave to me with promise. They could’ve tightly held the phone as mine did while trapping my words with something called love.

My father wouldn’t have been able to imagine me becoming much bigger than his arms. To somehow furiously spring out of them. To crawl to walk to run run run. When I am again captured just in photo, side by side we sit gently leaning into each other for just a moment. Afterward, we part, but before I do, I can feel the lingering touch of his hesitate before letting go of what he calls just love.
Salt
Kate Blue

I went to school on a farm. Yes, I still learned calculus, and had English classes, and had to do attendance in the mornings, but yes, we kept animals, and grew produce in the scorching heat of late August, and cooked meals on lunch duty for the hundred-or-so of us on the campus.

Once, when the middle schoolers were on duty, working under the guidance of Katie (or Miss Katie, as I called her when I was two feet shorter), they wanted to make a cake. They baked a beautiful chocolate cake with peppermint icing "as a treat for the high schoolers," I was told.

"Odd," I thought to myself as I took the first bite.

I was right to be hesitant. Their "gift" was a trojan horse for enough salt to make a person gag. Apparently for every tablespoon of sugar the recipe called for, they’d accidentally added—

Salt. It’s the thing I remember most about being in the ocean in South Carolina with my family. The tame waves wrapping themselves around my ankles made an impression as my mom, my dad, and I took tentative steps onto the doused sand into the dark waters of a cloudy day. I remember clinging to my mother’s pool floaty, both of us out of our depth in the chaotic waters, my father towing us along. I remember the thrill of each crashing wave on our makeshift raft, and my growing unease, but most of all I remember being pulled underwater, my eyes stinging, my mouth burning with the taste of—

Salt. It was the taste of my grandparents’ Himalayan salt lamp—delicious, forbidden. It sat on the hutch in their library, my place of residence every time I slept over, glowing gold in the darkness. It spoke to me, sang to me, in the moments just before dreaming. I’m sorry grandma and grandpa, I couldn’t help myself. Half asleep, I licked it and was greeted by the familiar tang of—

Salt. When I think of the kitchen in the home I grew up in, the only place I’ve ever lived, that’s what I think of. The glass bowl of kosher salt sitting by the oven has stayed much longer than any of the primary fixtures. The microwave was replaced before I turned ten, and the old oven has resided in our basement for more years than I can count, replaced by a newer (and much more frustrating) substitute.
My great grandfather built my house and gave it to my grandfather, who gave it to my mother, who intends to give it to me. When my parents leave, I wonder if they will take the salt dish with them. I wonder if the memories of cooking together—of the constant radio of Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong in the background while my father created something delicious—will go with them too. I like to believe my kitchen will still be my kitchen, but I think something will always feel missing.
Milking the Morning
William Barnes

The cat wastes not a second staking his claim
when milk caulks the floorboards.
To the flits of his tongue, she counts
as though she'll eventually reach an answer.
Paper towels—no. Another pint—no. Time—
she has poured so much into
weighing the worth of her floor,
of herself through the lens
of crude men, and
of a life spent laboring
    to not live. Time,
through the clock's restless hands,
is pooled at her feet come night;
the days slip away.
She looks to the cat for salvation.
Falstaff: What is this mess to you?
He peeks at her, a glint of white in his eyes
like a claim to a dime in the street;
a gateway to cheap pleasures and praise.
Stupid. She knows she is worth more
and that the both of them have festered
enough by the hundredth lap of his tongue;
by the hundred odd hairs lost to the grain
made two by the sun.
Let's make this quick. She kisses the cat's brow and leaves him
to finish his meal, lurches
to the door with another scratch on her cheek, and goes
to feast on men again, without having eaten herself,
to make ends meet.
song for san rocco
Eliana Lazzaro

i.

THE EAVES OF NONNA’S HOUSE ARE CROWDED WITH DOVES:

huddled together, shivering a little
in the dense calabrian heat that peels paint and curls
the ends of my hair into soft swirls, like little hearts.
the streets are splitting open with heartache here, but the night
is gentle and quiet. stray dogs shuffle through the weeds.
feral cats slink by. this house sat untouched like so many others:
insides scooped out like pumpkins on the doorstep,
sides caving in with rot. from the metal roof echoes
the sound of birds’ feet shuffling anxiously:
cooing, tapping, eyes wide, feathers ruffled, waiting—
waiting perhaps (perhaps) for me. (maybe.)

ii.

MY FATHER’S FACE IS BRIGHT BUT TIRED, EYES SHARP

but mind drifting miles away: like he is returning to ithaka,
but mind drifting miles away: like he is returning to ithaka,
drifting lost overseas for a thousand years.
the heat does not flush his face like it flushes mine.
the mosquitos, so fond of my legs, do not dare to touch him.
daddy tells me that my uncle used to scamper
up and down the alleyway, pointing. it yawns wide and dark,
beckoning me to enter. i step back slowly and
it touches my side with ghostly fingertips, inviting me to stay.
no, grazie mille,
no, grazie mille,
trips over each syllable,) and i hurry away.

iii.

DOWN THE STREET SITS NONNO’S HOUSE, CRACKED WIDE

and left lying beside the road like an open ribcage.
and left lying beside the road like an open ribcage.
his palms were dark and calloused. before his strokes,
his palms were dark and calloused. before his strokes,
he would take me by my little hand and lead me around the yard;
he would sit on the porch and slice apples with a pocketknife
he would sit on the porch and slice apples with a pocketknife
while i curled up in his lap.
but i know his garden
and the echo of his voice
we linger at broken window
a fig tree sprouts
(nonno taught your daddy
(yes; think of branches
like a second skin.)
the season is wrong, still,
reach elbow-deep
and grasp around,
i don’t remember much of that,
and his makeshift scarecrows
when he yelled across the room.
to look deeper inside:
from the heart of the room.
how to graft, yes?)
with tea towels wrapped around
i study the tree: the figs are not ripe.
i close my eyes tight,
into my memory
longing for the taste.
sugar strawberries
Kate Blue

my grandmother used to wash my hair for me
something so sweet and gentle
i never thought i’d let another soul
love me like that.
nonetheless, you know the secret park
with antique glass littering the hidden bank
glittering green in the sunlight of late august.
you know the way the darkness seeps
from my open closet doors
into my mind,
so you understand why i sleep with
my own manmade sky of constellations
on the longest nights of the year.
after so long,
i’ve found the shape of loneliness
more familiar than most embraces,
but maybe vulnerability tastes like sugar strawberries
made from the fruit i thought was too ripe to eat
Venice Canal, June 2023
Talya Dersu
Lying on my piss-colored banana-patterned hammock, I peered through the bare window frame into a large room furnished with a singular wooden twin bed. A patchy coat of blue paint and white drywall cohabitated the space. So did Grandpa.

***

10th-grade summer.

A bucket of blue paint, a bucket of white paint and Grandpa were sitting in front of me, interrogation-style. I was sitting crisscross apple sauce, comfortable-style. Grandpa said, "Put more blue in. It’s not dark enough."

I took the blue bucket and hurled half of what was left into a steel pail containing a light-blue mixture of paint. I said, "Why do we have to do this? They have those machines now that can make custom paint colors."

"We get more paint this way. Look, I got two cans of paint for the price of one of your fancy ones. You kids are just so damn lazy now. That’s how they get you to spend more money." As I poured in the paint, he leaned over my shoulder and said, "Look at that. That’s the perfect color right there."

His mouth split into a gap-toothed smile. For the last forty or so years, each spoonful of rice always came down with alcohol, not just because it tasted better with it but also because "the shit I drink is strong enough to kill any dirty thing in my mouth. I don’t need them damn toothpaste." A month-long liquid-food alcohol-free diet, a pessimistic dentist, and an even more pessimistic gastroenterologist didn’t make him give up his old ways. The old stuff was evidently not strong enough. He started drinking even stronger shit.

His smile irked me. I wanted to tell him that doing it his way resulted in the volume of one can anyway because we were not going to use the rest of the blue or white paint and that the color in the pail was about six shades darker than what was on his wall right now.

I decided to shut my mouth.

He bought the paint cans, not me. It was his wall, not mine. He could put whatever color he wanted on it. It wasn’t like he could see the difference with his cataracts, and it wasn’t like anyone would come visit him.

***

8th-grade fall break.

My first excruciatingly drabby commute to Grandpa’s house. We had moved closer to him, and Dad decided that driving 2 hours every Sunday out to his farm was more enjoyable than going to church. As I sat in silence and observed the gradually waning bustle of the city, Dad asked,
"Have you seen how big your grandpa’s farm is?"
"No."
"They gave him a large piece of land when he came back from the war. He built the farm from scratch. And he’s gonna give it all away." He clicked his tongue. "That motherfucker’s getting delirious."
"From scratch?" I asked. "Is it a cow farm? Were they brown cows or white cows? Did his cows make milk?"
Dad let out a light exhale. He said,
"I grew up on that farm. I farmed on that farm. It’s mine more than any of the dumb charities he’s gonna give the money to."
He paused to look for cars to make a left turn.
"Hey, since your grandma is gone this week, it’s your job to take care of him, alright? Pretty easy job, in my opinion. Good bonding time, too."
I imagined Grandpa. A man with barrels for arms, brick-wall abs, and naturally tanned from the very top of his rounded nose all the way to the skin covering the intricate bone structure that protruded from his firm feet.
"Sure!"
After about half an hour, we got to his house.
He was paralyzed waist down, gaunt, pale, with a colossal bald spot in the middle of his gray head and a foul-smelling mouth that wouldn’t close. He studied me as I did him—my face, then down my torso and then back up, staring straight into my eyes. His mouth spread into a wide grin. "Hello. Nice to meet you!"
Dad reached out his hand and leaned down to pat Grandpa’s shoulder, positioning himself to block my grimace.
"How are you doing?"
"I’m doing just fine. Your mother isn’t here. She—"
"I heard, I heard." He looked at me. "C’mon now. Wheel him into his room. We don’t wanna keep him in the sun for too long."
I could feel Dad smirk as I wheeled Grandpa into his room. He pointed towards his bed. "I can climb into it by myself. You see, that’s the beauty of independence. There are different levels to it. I may not be completely independent anymore, but I can still do stuff on my own."
His chuckle came with a heavy rasp. He then looked towards me, eyes glimmering, and I let out a grunt. He continued,
"When I was young, I had to do stuff all by myself. Your grandpa—" He stopped and laughed to himself before continuing. "Well, I guess that’s me now. Your great grandpa didn’t care about me. I had to do everything by myself. When I was 13 or so, I was chopping wood, and I accidentally chopped a
piece of my hand off.” I noticed him pausing, so I let out another grunt. “I looked down, and you could see my bones.”

I dropped him off. His slender arms reached for the far side of his bed, and he pulled himself up. He fell back into his chair, but his arms were still stretched.

“Give me a little push, will ya?”

The beauty of independence. I pushed against his two stumps as he tried again. This time, he landed with a thump, seeming unfazed as he positioned his head on his pillow. I started to walk away. Grandpa smacked the mattress.

“Come. Sit.”

I sat on the edge of his bed, facing away from him, to leave him space to move around. That was a lie. I didn’t want to be close to him. He said,

“My dad whooped my ass when I chopped off my hand. You kids have it so easy now. You don’t get your ass whooped, do you?” He tapped my buttcheeks and laughed again. He then pulled on my shirt sleeve.

“I bet your parents always get you new clothes. The shirt I’m wearing, I’ve owned for 10 years. It has holes in it, but who cares? Holes don’t kill.”

I turned on the fan at the end of the bed, but it did little to drown out the noise.

“You feeling hot? I grew up in this weather without fans. We sweated like pigs; I’m serious.”

I pulled out my phone and watched TikToks out loud. He was unbothered. I yawned. I stomped my feet. Once, twice then in an alternating pattern. Still unbothered. I scratched the side of his wooden bed frame. I tapped it, then knocked on it, and then slammed it. Nothing. Nothing could stop that man from talking.

***

**Death, summer before college**

He lay in a maroon casket, his hands covering the very liver that failed him just days before. He donned a long-sleeved, buttoned-up black shirt. His black silk pant legs were filled with newspaper, or perhaps a prosthetic limb; I was hesitant to look because whatever was underneath could make the yellowing of his body that much more striking.

I glanced at him, promising myself it would be the last, the same promise I had made five seconds ago and five seconds before that.

Dad stumbled in, hugged me with one hand and said,

“Come here, kid. I love you so much. Your grandpa’s giving me the house and the farm to pay for your college.”

A familiar stench quickly slithered through the paint cracks on the walls until it became part of the room’s ambiance. I took my gaze away from Grandpa. As Dad’s eyes met mine, they fluttered
uncontrollably, partially concealing his bloodshot pupils. I held onto his torso tightly with my hands and wrapped his hands loosely around my shoulder in case he needed help keeping his balance.

“Grandpa died, and you’re still drinking?”

“It’s a Saturday. Chill the fuck out, kid.”

He leaned forward. His gray stubble grazed my cheek as his head stooped to rest on my collarbone. The weight felt uncomfortable.

“Are you going to sell Grandpa’s farm? I thought you wanted to keep it.”

“I’m making a sacrifice—” He picked himself up from my shoulder and took a step back. He lifted his right arm and shoved his index finger against my nose bridge. “—for you. Be grateful, kid.” I swatted his hand away. His head tipped forward, his mouth stopping just short of my right ear.

“I told you our weekly trips were gonna work.”

His body convulsed as he giggled. He let out a loud burp and stumbled out.

***

After Grandpa.

I took down my hammock and walked inside. Dad was playing poker with his drinking buddies.

“Dad, let’s go.”

“No, no, no. No. Let me finish a few more rounds. I’m doubling your college funds. Be grateful.” He shook with laughter and finished the half-full shot glass beside his lap.

“Your grandpa’s in heaven blessing the fuck out of me right now.”
In 2012
Rita Costa
Obituary
Liberty Kingsley

acrylic is soft to the touch
but hard when you pull it taught,
coarse like the strands that framed her un-
dying face. i may have my dad's
eyes but inside is a
fire stoked by a
grandmother's spirit. i
have never heard a name as beautiful as
Ida. i try to
join the yarn with metal hook but it strains, no
keratin solution could fix the yarn's
locks to look like yours. i know you liked
music, and through its
notes maybe i'll know you better. words from your
obituary sing a story, like the silver clip-ons that
pinch my lobes, and help me know you. was your story ever
quiet? did you too struggle with yarn and the
rough texture of the wool?

"She liked to crochet and listen to music" will be
the only thing i share with you.
underneath your coat i wear my handmade
vest, and the craft reminds me where my
wandering heart comes from. yet, still, i am a
xenos to a mother's mother. when can i truly know
you? can i work the yarn with such
zeal that you feel it too?
The Invention is a Story/a Story is Everything
William Barnes

Forever that boy sat, a fossil in the drift
of time, rolling over each stone in the driveway
that only went so far for what to write of himself—
a creeping trilobite; a snoring seed; the light
downy of Schrödinger’s bird—
and the day the road caught his palm
was the day he caught wind
of the world.
Swept down that road
and into the pasture of hills and glens bound
by the pall of space and the same old rusted fence
where sheep skulls roost with coyote pelts,
he traced the waft of dandelions
blowing petals and rearing leaves
to where, from that brook-bank there,
he’d leap to sit
and see. There he rooted
from florid clay the invention
of the invention
that was him.
Among the Stars
Jack Richards

“IF YOU ENTER SMELLING LIKE POT, YOU WILL BE REMOVED” reads a sticker posted on the door of the Crescent Lounge. Not long after I make my way over to a table and sit down, a comic named Tony, assuming that I am armed with an arsenal of jokes when spotting the loose leaf journal tucked under my hand, approaches me and asks if I’m looking to perform tonight. I inform him of my purpose here. Wearing a black sweater and diamond stud earrings, he flashes me a warm smile as he extends his hand out to me.

“Cool man, any press is good press I guess.” There is but a couple to my left, a group of friends at a table to my right, and a few stragglers at the bar in attendance tonight. I become something of an eavesdropper, Lord forgive me, as I listen to the group of friends next to me. A man, blond, hefty, and wearing a shirt that resembles a Persian rug, seems to be the main character of a group that comprises himself and three heavily tattooed women. I overhear that he is a voice actor. I believe him. For the better part of the twenty minutes I sit waiting for the comics to come out, I hear him regale them with information about the Sourtoe Cocktail, a Dawson City delicacy. It isn’t a metaphor, the drink really contains a mummified human toe. His friends are unconvinced, so he raises his hands up to gesticulate against their doubt.

“No listen, you can’t actually eat the toe or they’ll kick you out, it’s just there to steep the drink, which still probably tastes terrible.”

I see Tony outside on the patio to my left puffing on a joint, sign be damned. An ornate glass chandelier with narrowing, ascending layers like a wedding cake hangs above the tables. The walls are made of black brick, bars and wires are exposed on the ceiling, and lights are posted on rods as if the room were a movie set. A lottery machine looms temptingly in the corner. Tony takes his place on the stage. He starts off his set by welcoming everyone. As I come to find out he is both a comedian and the host of tonight’s open mic night.

“I’m hoping you all can be my friends tonight since I don’t have many. I smoke weed with my mom... when she was pregnant we used to drink together until she quit... I tell all my friends I went cold turkey while I was still in the oven.” Tony walks off the stage amidst enthusiastic applause. The next comic takes his place on stage and singles me out almost immediately.

“What’s up, you doing some fucking homework?” Though I had already known that showing up in this fashion to a show in a small setting would likely seal my fate as a victim of the verbal jousts of crowd work, I was still taken off guard.

“Uh, well it’s an immersion essay, and like we have to go to an event or, umm, experience that’s like ne—”
"OK, I already don’t care," he says flatly. "Wow, what a nerd." I couldn’t think of a more concise answer. Though I can feel my face growing slightly flushed, I laugh at the jokes to save face and show that I am a good sport. Towards the end of his set, he tells us he is in graduate school. "We’re both nerds," he sympathizes while peering out at me from underneath the faded brim of a baseball cap. "Uhh, this is going badly, thank you guys!” He makes his way off the stage, high-fiving Tony as he goes. The next comic, Robert, is short and handsome, like an amalgam of various Hollywood actors, though not quite resembling any one in particular.

"My mom is like a bad pirate, she shares all of her booty." Laughter. "My dad is like God, I only see him once a week when he asks for money... he has diabetes... yea, he actually lost his leg climbing Mountain Dew. Uhh, alright, looks like you guys didn’t like that one." He turns over the pages of his notepad, tilting his head and staring intently at it, then closes it, waves and smiles through pursed lips, and steps off the tiny stage. A brief and tepid applause ensues. After his set, I observe him having a tense and hurried talk on the phone while walking back and taking shots at the bar. The remaining comics are similarly raw and coarse in style. One of them admits he was arrested for robbing a drug dealer but protests that he didn’t think it was "a crime to steal someone else’s crime." He then proceeds to get honest about how boring life is after quitting drinking. The second to last comic jests at the recent loss of his father and finishes his set by casting aspersions on the size of Tony’s manhood. The final comic takes the stage, clears his throat with a big HMHGMM, grips the mic stand, and sways back and forth around its axis.

"Fuck yo Daddy!" he exclaims. This seems to inspire no offense in the grieving comic, as I see his eyes light up and squint in delight behind the oversized wire frames of his glasses as a laugh erupts from him. Maybe he is laughing in the same way I was when targeted, or maybe the permission to not take the loss seriously is cathartic. Afterward, one of the men who was playing darts with his friend during the comedy portion of the night makes his way up to the stage to kick off karaoke for us. He gives a heartfelt and surprisingly skilled cover of a pop-metal heartbreak ballad. Hemorrhage by Fuel, I am told, across the whining crackle of the PA system. "What did you expect to find, was there something you left behind?" he croons.

As the song ends, I see three of the comedians moving toward the door. One of them punctuates their laughs with slaps on the others’ shoulders, another reaches behind his ear to retrieve a stashed cigarette. They stand all huddled together in the little empty parking lot near the pizza parlor and dry cleaners that adjoin the crescent in the strip. A little afterparty of just each other, away from the bright lights and big venues of the distant inner city, not unlike the stars above that are content to shine below the moon.
Dusk at Swasey Chapel
Colin Nguyen
Excerpt from Deep Light
Olivia Bernard

Dear Mx. Alex Bennett,
It is with deep regret that we write to inform you of the death of your sister, Maude Bennett. On June 19, after a two-week search, local police recovered her body in Red Canyon several miles from North Blund Radiance Mine. An unfortunate fall on her daily commute to the mine has been determined as the cause of death. Our investigation is closed.
As her next of kin, we ask that you travel to Blund’s Pass to collect her effects and organize funerary transportation. Please respond promptly to this letter to begin arrangements.
Again, we offer our sincerest condolences in this time of bereavement.
Blund’s Pass Sheriff’s Department
10 Broadway St.
Blund’s Pass, KL.

~

Dear Alex,
I understand that you are the sibling of my most recent tenant, Maude Bennett, who was staying with me for the duration of her assignment. I’m so sorry for your loss. She was one of the brightest people I’ve ever known.
I know this must be a painful time for you, and please let me know if I can assist in any way. If you plan to visit Blund’s Pass in the wake of her passing, allow me to humbly offer my home as a place to stay. Her belongings are untouched. Honestly, I haven’t been able to visit her room. I’m still processing it all myself; and I can’t imagine how difficult this must be for you.
There’s one more thing. I don’t write just to express my sympathies, though they are entirely with you. I also need to express my doubt about the sheriff’s handling of this case. I understand if this is too much to consider at this moment, but I’m worried that there is a devil in the details. Perhaps several. I thought you might share in my trepidation. And I bear you’re some sort of investigator?
Please come to see me soon, or at least, write.
Yours,
Eloise Cromwell
233 S Winder Dr.
Blund’s Pass, KL.

~

Eloise,
I’m catching the next train to Blund’s. Expect me in two days.
Alex
Chapter 1: A Meeting with Eloise

You watch the desert roll by beyond the taxi window, bright and hot. Dust billows up all around the car as its wheels bump, skid, and bump over the rocky, matted sand that counts as a road out here. Pearls of sweat bead in a crown across your forehead.

Maude had once written to you about the desert wildlife: the scuttling lizards, the cactus wrens, the graceful airsnakes that carve delicate trails through the quiet sands and drift here and there on the predawn breezes. *It's not so empty out here,* she'd said. *Not if you see the small things.* But the dry desert beyond the window leaves you skeptical. Everything here is dead and prickly, dull stones and flat grayish spines of dusty agave—not a hint of animal life. Then again, you'd hide under a rock, too, if you heard this damned automobile coming. You lean back in the faux-leather seat, sticky with your sweat, and try not to imagine the cool calm of the Port Fallow morning you left behind. It doesn't work.

You can imagine her, teeth gritted and forehead slick, pedaling along this road like all hell's behind her. Something in the depths of your throat loops itself into a heavy knot.

A coughing and sputtering brings you back to the clattering taxi. The cabbie, an older woman with wild gray hair barely tamed by a colorful kerchief tied across her head, thumps the dashboard with one hand—a mechanical prosthetic, you note with some surprise. The engine wails, whines, and putters to a bouncing stop.

"Godsdammit all," the cabbie grumbles. "To the depths with this old clunker."

"We've broken down?" You clutch the half-drained water bottle in your lap a little tighter.

"We're stuck all the way out here?"

She kicks open her door with one booted foot. "Guess we'll see." Still grumbling, she retrieves a dented metal toolbox from the trunk and stomps around to the croaking engine. A wisp of steam drifts up as she throws open the hood.

Heat presses in on all sides of the stopped car, stagnant and heavy. Bumping, cursing, and clanking noises pour out from under the hood. After a moment's hesitation, you push open your side door. No use staying in this oven of a cab.

Outside, a tiny breeze stirs the sweltering air. You'll take what you can get. Rubbing a little water on the back of your neck to cool it, you make your way to the front, ears still buzzing from the now-absent noise of the engine.

The cabbie, elbow-deep in the engine block, squints at you as you come around the dusty side of the taxi. "What're you doing, kid?"

"Can I give you a hand?"
She coughs out a chuckle. “Reckon you’re a mechanic?”

“Well, I’ve helped my sister before...” Maude was the handy one, always working on this or that gizmo in the garage and picking up late shifts at Spring & Sprocket Bicycle Repair downtown. For her undergrad thesis, she had built her own makeshift radiance detector, able to hone in on hotspots of the powerful substance buried in cliffside deposits. That clunky gadget was part of the reason her underfunded little government survey sent her out here when a portion of the mine collapsed. If they hadn’t, well... you look away.

The cabbie squints at you for a moment. “Sister? What’s your name?”

“Alex Bennett.”

“Oh! Maude’s sib. Knew you had a familiar look about you.” Two silver teeth flash in the sun as she grins and sticks out a brown, grease-stained hand—the flesh one. “Casey Müller.”

Her palm feels tough and calloused. “You know—” You swallow. “—knew Maude?”

“Gave her a lift a few times, sure. Carted her out here to Eloise’s place when she showed up at the station and to the mine sometimes when she had to haul her clanks out. Bubbly sort, that one. Scooting around town on that velocipede of hers.” Casey shakes her head. “Sorry. Heard about what happened. Real shame. I take it that’s why you’re out here, eh?”

You slump a little. “Yeah.” A bead of sweat slides from your forehead to your chin and you wipe it away with a sigh.

“She told me a bit about you,” Casey says. “You’re some kinda gumshoe, right?”

Forensic anthropologist would be the right term—at least, an aspiring one—but something tells you Casey would just roll her eyes. Your friends joke that Bennett’s have a thing for seeking and finding and uncovering. Cousins in archaeology. Grandparents in geography. And Maude chasing the radiance. As for you, well... your late parents, a pair of morticians, had left an impression. You shrug. “Something like that.”

“Well, I’m right bummed to hear, for sure.” Frowning, Casey turns back to the mess of gears and cylinders. “Girl really knew how to work with her hands. Don’t see that in a lotta city folks. No offense.”

“None taken.”

The steam canisters and pneumatic lines in Casey’s fingers click and rattle as she works. You gaze absently into the engine. Between the gears and tubes, a faint blue glow emanates from its depths: the radiance.

On the train ride here, you read that the barren Southern Stretch was teeming with the stuff. Deep in the earth, the natural passages of underground water had reacted with the deep rock and crystallized into veins of rich radiant ore with enough energy to power cities. In Port Fallow, everything—from the streetlights to the airships to the trolleys—runs on the radiance. Blund’s Pass was one of many mining towns that boomed with its discovery—and, like many of those same others, soon
withered as the veins emptied to a trickle under the miners’ drills. Calotype images in the few brochures you could find showed a bustling downtown. But it would be nothing like that now.

“Can you see it from here?” you ask, breaking the silence. “The mine?”

Casey looks up. “Oh, sure. You can spot it from Eloise’s place too. Or just about anywhere in hereabouts, really. There.” She shades her eyes and points with her wrench towards one of the great rocky hills in the distance. If you squint, you can make out black lines and patches on the slopes. “Not many working there now,” she says. “Not much left to work. I heard some city bigwig’s trying to get it all opened up again, but—ah! Atta girl!”

With a low rumble and a hiss of steam, the engine sputters to life again. The blue glow strengthens and flashes as Casey slams the hood down. She gives a cackle and wipes her hands on her pants, leaving streaks of grease. “All right, hop on back in, Alex Bennett. Let’s get outta here before it decides to drop its damned pegs again.”

The car rumbles back to its former speed along the road. In the heat-warped distance, the stony hills shiver and dance.

~

In a screech of tires and a plume of dust, the cab pulls off the main road onto a driveway lined with yucca and agave and finally trundles to a halt in front of a small stone structure that must be Eloise’s home. You could imagine the house growing from the sand itself, if not for the sprawling mural painted across the adobe walls that encircle a small courtyard lined with bristly-looking desert plants and a single spindly tree. Wooden support struts jut from the hardened sides, a few bearing wind chimes as motionless as the weather vane perched on the roof. A small barn stands a short ways away across the field, and the spindly tower of a wind pump rises up from behind the house—must be a well back there. Thank gods there’s water somewhere in this country. You peel yourself from the seat with a disconcerting schlick and step out into the scorching late afternoon sun as a figure emerges from the house: Eloise.

She’s young, you realize with some surprise. Not much older than you. Her skin is a rich dark brown and long black hair falls in a heavy braid over her shoulder, stark against the crisp white of her shirt. She stands with straight, upright posture, chin up, a pleated skirt cinched at the waist with a thin brown belt and polished leather shoes beneath its hem. But in spite of her clean demeanor, you notice the worry lines that crease the space between her thick brows, and that her eyes are sunken above dark circles—almost a mirror of your own.

“Alex,” she says, her voice breaking a little. “I’m glad you came.”

You wipe your palm on your trousers before shaking her hand. “Yeah,” is all you can think to say. Paint streaks stain her fingers, and a little blue comes off on your hand when you pull away. Closer now, you can see small smudges of color around the hem of her skirt.
Behind you, the trunk of the car slams. Casey rounds the side with a grunt, lugging your suitcase. Its straps do little to contain the way it bulges out and stretches at the seams. "Damn, what've you got in here, river rocks?"

"Books," you say. Textbooks, notebooks, handbooks, anything from your studies that could help with the maze of bereavement bureaucracy. (And a copy of Seduced by the Sand Beast, but nobody needs to know about that.)

Casey flashes her teeth at Eloise—not quite a smile. "Ah, look. It's the creative Miss Cromwell. How's the painting, eh?"

"Not the time, Casey. Please."

Casey rolls her eyes. You dig for your wallet and hand her a few bills for the ride. She tucks them into a little latched cache in her arm prosthetic, then gives you a wave and hops back in the cab. "Need a ride, drop by. 412 Ranger's Corner. Not too far from here."

The car wheels around in another dust flurry and bumps away down the road. The two of you watch until it disappears.

"She fancies herself an art critic," Eloise grumbles. "Drives me nuts."

You look off beyond her house, to where the red hills rise past the rocky expanse of cactus and yucca. There—the black stripes of the mine, slightly closer.

"It used to smoke and steam," Eloise says, following your eyes. "When I was a little girl, they were digging out the last bits. You could hear the clanging all the way from here."

"You grew up here?"

"On the other side of town. And only until I was ten. After that I went to live with my aunts in Rivier. Better schools." She gives a flat chuckle. "Or just schools, period. Nothing like that all the way out here. I was the only kid for leagues around." She gives you a sidelong look. "Your first time out here?"

The closest you've been to this barren nowhere was a trip with your parents years ago to visit a few of their funerary friends in Spire Butte, a few hours north of Blund's—but you'd never set foot this far into the deep desert. "Yeah. How'd you guess?"

"Nobody wears a white shirt in the desert." Eloise turns and beckons with a wave of one hand. "Come, let's go in."

You heft pull your pack onto your back and lift your trunk with a click-clank and a grunt, then follow. Smooth slates of stone fitted together like jigsaw pieces comprise the path to the front door. You let out a breath of relief as you pass into the shade under the courtyard's lone tree. Up close, you can make out tiny pink blossoms dangling from the branches.

Eloise halts in front of the door, old and wooden with a tarnished bronze knocker in the shape of a dragonfly. You pull up short behind her and wait for her to open it, but she just stands there, a little too long. A bead of sweat slides down the back of her neck and into her shirt.
In the pause, the reason for your visit hangs as heavy as the backpack on your shoulders. Your sister's presence lingers between you. Should you ask now? You clear your throat, then falter, glancing behind you. "Did you, um, paint that mural yourself?"

"What?" Eloise starts slightly. "Oh, that. Yes, it was my first project when I moved back. This place, it was a real fixer-upper—got it for cheap, though."

She unlatches the door and holds it open for you to pass. Your suitcase clatters and nearly topples over as you all but leap into the cool air inside.

"It's kind of a mess in there," Eloise says, lingering in the doorway. "Sorry. I haven't had a chance to clean..."

It takes a moment for your eyes to adjust to the dim interior. You mop your forehead with one sleeve, then take a closer look around.

This must have been a living room at some point, but it would be difficult to relax here now. The furniture—a mismatched assortment of plush chairs and a couch with a rumpled mauve throw blanket—has all been pushed aside to the edges of the room to accommodate canvases and papers of all sizes, some hanging from the walls, some just propped against them, and several laid flat on a tarp in the corner. An unfamiliar gadget splattered with paint and a few multi-lensed eyeglasses that remind you of the optometrist's office lie scattered on the coffee table.

You drop your suitcase in the entryway and drift into the room, stepping gingerly around the sprawling art. Charcoal sketches of desert plants scrawl beyond their pages and out onto the walls as though overgrown from the paper itself. On the canvases laid on the floor, paint whirls and arcs in waves and coils, almost like the way the tides and currents seem to roll and mix from the bluffs above Port Fallow. In others, fiery pops of paint shoot out in jagged bursts, like ruptured fireworks in the otherwise smooth flow of the color. A few are scattered with dried petals and leaves. All seem to have a physical depth impossible for those flat surfaces. Like looking down into a well. You put a hand to your sticky forehead to stave off a small spell of dizziness—from the smell of acrylic hanging in the air, or from the images themselves, you're not sure.

Eloise breezes past. "Just something new I'm trying," she says. "Don't mind it. You can leave your stuff there." She lifts her pleated skirt and strolls through the maze of canvases, easy as walking down the street. At the other end of the room, she parts a beaded curtain dangling from an arched doorway. "Can I get you something to drink? Something cold?"

"Gods, yes." You drop your backpack beside your suitcase and pick your way after her on tiptoe. "*Anything* cold. Please."

"D'you like prickly pear?"

You've never heard of it. "Sure, I guess..."

The sill of the great round window above the kitchen sink is lined with overflowing planters and glass jars full of moss, while the wooden rafters overhead teem with bundles of aromatic herbs and
flowers. Dented pots and pans hang in rows beside a heavy cast-iron stove decorated with an elaborate bronze grille and gilding across its front. The hazy shapes of picked vegetables float inside the jars that line high shelves on the wall.

Eloise kicks aside a braided mat and pulls open a narrow hatch set into the tiled floor beneath it, revealing a ladder into a dark room below.

"A cellar?" you ask as she disappears down it. A curl of chilly air rises from its depths to caress your face as you peek down after her. The roughly hewn walls look as though they were carved from the bedrock itself.

"This is the only way to keep things cool out here," Eloise says from somewhere below. "Those fancy freezers of yours in the city would just sweat and then break." She reemerges carrying a jar with a pinkish liquid inside and pours some into a chipped glass. "There's a little porch out back. Shaded, don't worry," she says as she hands the drink to you. "I'll meet you there in a minute and we can... well, we can talk."

Your sister's presence again. Heavy between you. You swallow. It could only wait for so long.

Out back, large white sheets block the scorching eye of the sun, and a few rickety chairs placed around a small table comprise a tiny sitting area. The back of the house faces the great far-off hills of the mine, the pockmarked slopes framed by slender, towering cacti. In the yard beyond the wind pump tower lies some rusty equipment: a bent metal pole jutting from the cracked ground down the hill, the frame of some old digger-clank half overgrown with shrubs off beside the barn. As you watch, a flurry of bees swirls up from a rusted-out hole in one of the steam valves and disperses.

You take a taste of the drink—sweet, almost like a melon—and settle into one of the chairs, trying to imagine the hum and toil of the defunct mine echoing across the desert, the distant billow of smoke and steam, radiance sucked up from its depths flashing in its compression tanks as it rumbles down automated lifts to some extraction and purification facility. In the still, silent air, punctuated only by the buzz of insects, it's hard to picture.

Eloise seats herself beside you, clutching a cup of her own—though you note that the liquid inside is more brownish in color than yours. You catch a whiff of alcohol as she swirls it around the bottom of her glass. She takes a sip, then leans back in her chair and sighs. For a long time, she doesn't speak, just gazes into the distance. You watch her out of the corner of your eye.

"This house sits right on top of one of the first mines, you know," Eloise says at last. "Before they found the motherlode over at the Pass and bricked this one up." She waves a hand vaguely across the back yard. "You find interesting stuff around here. Drill bits and spoons and these really vintage Bentley grind-gears with the teeth stripped off. And all these old clanks just lying around, like the miners just up and left." She kicks her feet up onto the low table and tips her head back to stare up at the canopy sheets overhead. A small breeze stirs the fabric. "Most of the actual radiance under here is long gone now, sucked dry. But there's the dregs. You can see the glow sometimes, at night. And there's
enough of it that you can calibrate equipment right from the cellar." She blows out a slow breath. "I think that’s why Maude chose to stay here."

Your sister's name drops like a penny into a deep well, like a flick to the back of your head. A small thing, jarring, even though you knew it was coming. In the silence, you take another sip of your juice, but it does nothing to lessen the dryness in your mouth.

"We were in the same class at Brenbury, actually," Eloise says. She closes her eyes. "Had a few of our gen-eds together. Sparks fundamentals, practical mathematics. But I went into art, obviously, and she was in clank college. Sorry, the Walter Downs Subschool of Mechanical Advancement, I mean."

You can recall the little WDSMA pin glinting on her school bag and embossed on her bike, the proud way she recited the name whenever someone noticed it, as regular as the clockwork she studied late into the night. Under other circumstances, you might have snickered.

"She reached out, and I wouldn't normally take a boarder, but she had a little stipend, she needed somewhere close to the veins, she'd researched this little mine spot..." Eloise gives a flat smile. "And let's just say paintings don't pay the bills too well. She really livened it up, you know—it can be dreary, all the way out here, and she was always chattering about this and that, scribbling away at those word games of hers, and—" Eloise cuts herself off with a sudden, deep swig of her mix. She coughs and rubs one eye. A few strands of hair fall from her neat braid to wave about her face. "Look, she was doing great out here, that's my point. Working in her room and the barn, up to her elbows in grease, even kicking in to do mech repairs on this mess of a house. Some of the former miners in town even took a liking to her, and that's a real feat—they're all grouchy old crabs. And now even they think that something here doesn't track. I've heard them nattering down at the pub."

You find that you've been leaning forward and force yourself to sit back. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I hope I didn't bring you out here on a wild chase, but... ugh." Eloise shoves herself to her feet. "Gods. I need more of this stuff if we're gonna talk bodies." She disappears into the house, slamming the door hard enough that it rattles in its frame. From inside, you hear the sharp clattering of glassware, and Eloise reemerges with a bottle in one hand and her refilled drink in the other. She thrusts the bottle at you. "Mezcal. Want some?"

You shake your head. Words feel sticky right now, like they wouldn't leave your mouth if you tried to speak them.

"Suit yourself." Eloise plops back down and rests her elbows on her knees. She takes another drink. "Okay. Let's see. First of all, Maude never rode past Red Canyon. It's the scenic route. It would've taken her longer."

Chronically early—that was Maude. You swallow.

"The road along that canyon made her nervous. She was afraid of falling. She rode it once at the beginning of her assignment, and then she said 'never again.' Always took the Chuckwalla Rock trail. More direct. And third”—a final finger—"the investigation felt rushed. Really rushed. I'm no
expert on police procedure or anything, but I do know I would've been a pretty important party in the case, right? She was living with me, I saw her last, I was the one who reported her missing. I thought there’d be heaps of paperwork and days of interviews and all that."

You nod. The procedure for these types of cases has been drilled into you. Long interviews with persons of interest, anyone who knew the victim, anyone who had a stake in their situation. Eloise would’ve been a prime person of interest.

"But the sheriff talked to me only twice throughout this whole thing. Once when Maude disappeared, for maybe a few hours, and another time after they found the...the...you know. The body." Her hands fold on her lap and squeeze together tightly enough that the knuckles whiten. "And both times, it was like she’d rather not have been there. Hasty. Eloise pauses a long moment, gnawing her bottom lip, before continuing. "And, well... you’re the procedural type, Alex, and I know this would never count as real evidence, but she’d seemed kind of spooked the last few days she was here, I guess."

You frown. "Spooked?"

"Oh, I don’t know. Said her equipment was breaking, or it was picking up things down there at the collapse that didn’t make sense and she was walking circles... I could be reading too much into it."

You rest your elbows on your knees and swish the pale pink liquid around your cup. "No—that is evidence. Exactly the sort of thing the sheriff should’ve been interested in. Any change in demeanor, anything unusual. She asked you about that, right?"

"Sure, but... I don’t know. It didn’t seem that important. Maybe the miners were just rubbing off on her. Everyone here is so superstitious about the radiance. I got this land at a bargain because nobody wanted to live on the site of a former mine." Eloise shakes her head. "It’s nonsense, really. But maybe someone wanted to scare her away, and when she didn’t go..."

"You think... you think she was murdered?" Your voice comes hoarse in your throat. Splinterly wood bites your hands as you clutch the arms of your chair.

"I don’t know, Alex. I don’t know." Eloise doesn’t quite suppress a shudder. "That’s why you might be able to help. You know this stuff, you’re trained for it, right?" She turns fully to face you, eyes sharp and probing, as though she might read credentials in the lines of your face. "You’re the best bet."

This time, you’re the one who looks away. You’re far from certified, barely field trained. Labs, sure, but that’s a far cry from true work—the real, actual, coyotes-gnawed-this-corpses-eyeballs-out thing. But with the sheriff’s investigation officially marked closed, and the cost of private forensics experts rising far beyond the money either Eloise or your own drained student bank account could scrounge up, you know she’s right.

"Gods." You let out a cracked little laugh and reach for the bottle of mezcal. "I hope so."
The Rat King  
Moose Hogeland  

They look upon their subjects, a sea  
Of tangled creatures dancing in forced synchronicity.  
This royal ball will be defined by  
The multitude of memories left behind.  
As evening cycles from night then to  
day, they falter in their vital movement,  
Their aching feet ready to rest from the eternal merriment.  
Too tired to keep dancing and moving, they take  
Their leave and stumble to rest, finally arriving to  
Their private chamber, picturesque in their disheveled mess.

The rotting sewers, a court of high renown, the  
The Home of vermin, a royal army of rats and roaches.  
A roiling ball of bodies writhing in pain, unable to  
Get free, unable to rest, they dance to survive.  
The Rat King, foregoing the comforts of  
Sleep, drink, and food for the eternal dance,  
Until they never dance again, picturesque in their deathbed.

They look upon their desiccated subjects, a tangled  
Mess of tails, blood, and fur. They  
Delegate, document, and dissect the  
creatures. The court is dismantled, untangled and  
Cleaned. The grotesque, knotted tails are  
Preserved in time to  
Remind those who come long after  
Of the royal ball of the rat king.
Night at the Opera
Lauren Dyer
Under the ochre sky,
I crept through deserted landscapes
that are left behind,
tread by tread
tread by tread
jam-packed
jam-packed
with pointed pieces of metal.
Clanking, a sound,
should have roused
human beings
from their enduring nap,
but none to be found.

The scent of lubricant
hangs in the greasy air,
a type of fragrance
that I would never get to smell
but keeps on flowing in my veins.
I lean forward, gasping for a blast of dust
that carries along the flaming feathers,
whose iron-like odor
of blood and gore
recalls a moaning extinction.

I was alone but surrounded
by the horns of ferrous utility pole
falling apart
as it gets devoured
by swarms of oxygen.
I was alone but overwhelmed
by the huge balls of fire
raining down this way and that,
like the grieving tears
for the eternal loss
of another towering sentinel.

How ironic is
the Voyager Golden Record,
a human's effort,
a time capsule,
on which they carved
the intelligent brain of theirs,
while the aftermath was imprinted
nowhere else, but
on each grain of contaminated sand.

At the emptiness of night-time
carved by the remaining whine
of cockroaches,
"a worker bee"
beavers away, by himself,
packaging trash into giant skyscrapers,
one cube
at a time,
cleaning up traces
of the intelligent brain.
Building Blocks
Rita Costa
Unintended Renewals
Brin Glass

A small spark catches heat and fattens—they haven’t met it yet.
The couple sit on their juniper green couches with tapered oak legs and drink Coke from a can. They don’t know it yet, but that flicker begins to whirl. Making haste, tearing through their attic, from lips of a fireplace exhaust.

The husband rises from cushions to tend to their garden, emerging from the front door. He meets it.

The tiny spark, now ablaze, eats at roof shingles and wind chimes dangling from the third story. He calls for help. He calls for his wife, left on her couch, and she emerges with his half-drunken can of coke.
If I could carve an angel out of stone
I’d make her naked, muscular, and tall
and sitting, focused, carving at a bone
she holds to her chest; then, alike to fall,
I’d scatter leaves around to rough her thighs
to give her lover someplace to attend
to. In her careful labor she would rise,
her broadened shoulders means to stunning end,
though my attempt at sculpture couldn’t move
or breathe the way that sweet my angel's might—
her concentration is that force of love
that opens up her wings and giveth flight.
    I hope that I may sculpt reality—
    that in her craft my angel thinks of me.
Eurydice
Rebecca Hurtado

Our last night together,
he played with my hair
and frowned.
I thought hard to turn each strand taut,
Dreamt of scrubbing it
with rosin
scraped
from pines.
Orpheus, if you can hear me through the melodies in your head,
from the depths of hell,
beneath our bed
is a torn veil.
Bound by twine so tight
is a chrysalis you might
mistake for empty.
But inside
are hundreds of sleeping strands.
Limp
as a loosened bow.
Know that when you found me dead,
my last thought was how they curl,
soft
like water
slipping through my hands.
Like a snake coiled
on the forest floor.
Know that this is what it is
to love an artist:
when you wake alone
to brush your hair,
the strands that fall out
are the only ones
just yours.
And from this slumber you too shall wake
Malina Infante

Your prince-ofsorts promised
to be sober enough to spend the night, but now drops
to one knee

before the toilet. Two
feet away, you sit. You should lift him up,
out of that hunchback —

a lurch. Too late.
Instead, your fingers waltz
the suede of his coat,

some potion of Irish whiskey and English cider —
i need a — you forget
the rag, whip your bath towel

from its hook. His lips, chapped and cracking,

once rose-red but now so pale
they near purple, you dab them

with the towel's edge. Together, you stand and,
his lids too heavy, you wonder
if he's deep asleep before he even meets

the sheets, voice slurring — c'mere
baby — face down in the memory foam. Tuck
his drunk-wandering arms beneath the blanket,
pull it up to his shoulders, and mind
his head, on the pillow,
now. You want to blame some witch,

some sorority siren who slipped a drop
of something into his drink.
Yes, one sip of that poisoned cider

and he'd fall cursed. That cigarette
stench lingers in his hair.
Stay dressed, lie down beside him and snuff

out the lamp. Low breath, he falls
into a sleep like death, lips parted just so. Leave
them untouched.
Alone
Emma Hunter

The trees whisper our secrets,
and the storms are when they gossip,
telling stories of smokers throwing
cigarettes out the car window,
and scouring at the teenagers
who let their wrappers float.
The biggest tree is trapped
by oceans of highway,
smothered by others' branches
tangled amongst its own.
Its leaves dance to snippets of songs,
swallowed within seconds.
They move with the windy exhaust
that floods out of mufflers
and dirties the oxygen in the air.
Maybe someone will catch a glimpse
of it when its body blurs with the others
as cars speed by.
Hollywood Gold Rush Forever
Marissa Sullivan

Beautiful hollywood lips whispered
   Tragedy is the artist's gold

Beautiful girls with knees blistered sift with splintering scarlet nails
   Tragedy somewhere along the river

Beautiful girls upon beautiful girls
   Languish along that river all for tragedy-
   glimmering, golden, gilded

Beautiful as Gatsby dead in the pool, Lord,
   What a tragedy it is to blush,
   to giggle as your blood becomes

Beautiful to those who once would dress your wounds, who now snort
   tragedy like cocaine

Till nothing but suffering is beautiful,
   till your sweat is crystal,
   till your tears are valuable,
   till tragedy is your lover and far more

Beautiful than a white picket fence,
   a rose garden,
   a dog,
   a life.
A Toast
Jules Rizzo

A movie screen to the stars,
golden gate bridge looks on.
Roses have never been my favorite flower, roses
are all I get. Rose after rose after rose
cut by diamonds; we fly
and toss money toward anything that shimmers
and catches the light of diamonds
and things with wings.
A toast to scraping diamond rings
against our champagne glasses.
Champagne turns to wine turns to whiskey;
offer anything that shimmers and catches the light
a bottle.
I stand and stare at rose after rose
after rose on my kitchen table.
We use old liquor bottles as vases
and when it rains, we collect more.
The bottle in my hand doesn’t shimmer
but it catches the light a little too well
these days. The diamonds around my neck
scratch at the skin.
Just play the movie.
Jules
Anna Northington Jones
Piano Lessons
Rebecca Hurtado

_I have hunted three hares,_
_can I be certain I have caught_
even one?

- Rachmaninoff's Recollections
  _Told to Oskar Von Rieseman, 1938_

A boy bites down
so hard
on his index finger,
it leaves
a dent for days.
A bruised half-moon.
Pink,
like a gummy smile.
When you ask why
he says, “This isn't the first time.”
And avoiding the question again,
“Pain inspires.”

You watch the mark.
Consider the bone beneath the flesh.
What his teeth couldn't completely
sink into.
How has it grown since he last failed to bite
clean through?
Perhaps at a different piano,
age eight, fingers
building calluses,
bones growing pains.
You think this is where he first learned the lesson.

_I may have failed to make the best of my life._
Rachmaninoff tells his editor,
who wishes he learned Russian shorthand.
Longs to loop his letters
like a slipknot noose.
To snare the timbre
of his voice,
the accompaniment
of distant frogs croaking
beyond the garden grounds.

“This is how big his hands were. Can you believe that?”
Across 13 keys, the boy contorts.
His tendons traceable
through skin stretched
thin as a bat wing.
You are tempted to kiss
the moon to bone.
But he wants to reopen
his blisters, peel back
the gifted tissue,
say “Look”.
This is what a great man could hold,
here is where a boy falls short.

Now it’s your turn,
lay your hands across the keys.
Let him stretch your pinky and thumb
as far apart as nature will allow.
So, when he covers them with his own,
pressing down your knuckles,
a melody is coaxed out of the thicket.
The white tiles give
out like tiny
trap
doors.

No, not one hare. But all three.
Waiting for Butterflies
Emily McNeal

I do not stay for the daisies
that nod their heads gently to the side.
I do not stay for the sunlight
that warms every inch of my insides.
Not even evading thorny vines,
that snag and rip uneven skin,
hold me to this glen I find myself in.

The encroaching dark woods spew lies,
woody words whispered by leaves too soon.
The trees laugh from their lofty heights,
rushing the end when it’s barely noon.
We have yet to hear the clock proclaim
whether the time is wrong or right.
But the time will come when I meet the night.

While I still bask under the golden sun
I will watch the viceroy lay eager eggs
upon the knife sharp edge of leaves.
Where they’ll awake, with wandering legs,
wandering mouths and wandering minds.
Knowing the time to drop their heads,
waiting to unroll wings like silken thread.
prayer circle
Jules Rizzo

obsessions in orange
lead to freckles in brown;
yours match mine –
the ones on our collarbones
connect.

a celtic knot in my stomach,
a celtic knot in your teeth,
not a cross in sight. the saints
can’t see us now.
the kings don’t share
our queen sized bed.

your fingertips trace prayers
along my shoulder blades –
I’m not religious

anymore

but your words feel soft
through the calluses on your fingertips;
your words bump into each other.
I wonder if your god can still
understand them.

I can.
New Moon
Rita Costa
XIII: Death
Amaya Willems

I made my life a pyre
The loudness of a funeral
Now the ashes are cold and
Dancing in an empty church doesn’t feel rebellious without the gaze of god
Madonna of Monterchi
Malina Infante

Catholic school girl, I know their Madonna all too well. Perfect virginal blue, eyes ever downcast and standing humble left-crucifix on my childhood altar —— she’s a vessel. Hardly woman. But here in the image of Piero’s Madonna, her fresco lapis grown spotty, I see a hint of the girl Myriam, captured veil-sheer. Third trimester, a slim slit in her dress, and of course two angels tug at that curtain, ready to drop. How many women have knelt before her? Icon of fertility, a girl rightly celibate, then made into a house for a man’s God. Those men, they don’t want to see the split, the tear of her perineum skin, the hair-matted hint of crown not yet circled by thorns, so they close those curtains, disguise her as some untarnished thing of myth. But Myriam, she is not for those men to own, for their God, and nor is she for me. For we will never see the well of blood that stained her untouched thighs, that seeped thick through the fabric of her skirt, once like a child’s-sky blue.
The Beauty of the Small
Mia Rubiera
i miss
your fingers
Albina that held
my hair
using clips
to hold
it neatly
and when
you taught
some Ukrainian
and wrote me
for fear
there is
a Ukrainian
but buried,
hair still
attached
to their head
in rubble,
every piece
not worth
conditioning,
curling,
ironing,
coloring,
shaping,
because
there is
no sense
in that
you’ve spiraled
into this
knotted war
and told me
the Ukrainians
are still
beautiful
but will
need help
combing
every matted
strand
Contributors

**Victoria Bambara** (she/her) is a senior English creative writing and cinema major with a narrative journalism concentration. Her poem "Last Pieces" takes her back to all the times her family friend, Albina, did her hair as a child. This piece is dedicated to her, other Ukrainians, and to anyone who is missing a loved one due to war.

**William Barnes** is a senior biology major from Upper Sandusky, Ohio. Save for his scientific endeavors, he is passionate about poetry and fencing. His favorite plant is the common milkweed.

**Olivia Bernard** (she/her) is a senior creative writing major minoring in computer science and philosophy. She’s an aspiring author and future narrative designer and this piece is an excerpt from her senior thesis project. Olivia’s academic work has appeared in Articulāte Literary Magazine and she’s previously won first place in both the Critical Writing and Scholarly Essay categories of the All-Denison Annual Writing Competition. She likes monsters, mushrooms, and video games about talking to people. Olivia hopes they like her back!

**Kate Blue** (she/her) is a freshman creative writing and cinema double-major. She is passionate about writing, filmmaking, rock climbing, and music. In her free time, she attends club meetings for Dead Writers Society, eats mac n’ cheese at the Nest, and works on her novel.

**Rita Costa** (they/them) is a senior Visual Arts BFA specializing in digital media. They currently work as the Risograph TA for the Visual Arts Department, and as an Assistant Social Media Manager for Arts at Denison. Their work focuses on their personal and familial history through digital collage and printmaking practices. Rita wants to thank all the *Exile* members for their hard work! <3

**Jenna Cutlip** (she/her) is a freshman studio art major. Art as a hobby and in general makes her happy, and she believes that with a good balance, it can become her career as well. She’s really excited to learn more from the art professors at Denison and expand her skills in different artistic areas. Jenna wants to thank her mom and dad for their support.

**Talya Dersu** (she/her) is a sophomore cinema and journalism double-major who loves to take pictures of everything so she can have memories to look back on in the future. She is part of clubs like Women in Cinema and Her Campus. She loves working at the Vail Series and UCOMMS where she films content for the official Denison Instagram account. She loves watching movies; her favorite films, "Lady Bird" and "Boyhood," inspire her to create meaningful films that impact people.

**Lauren Dyer** is a senior studio art and communication double major and an interdisciplinary printmaker from Northbrook, IL. Lauren is heavily involved in the art department at Denison and
works as the head technician for the print studio, as well as in the Lending Library and organizing events for the department. Outside of the studio, Lauren plays bass in a band on campus and hikes in local parks.

Brin Glass (she/her) is a junior majoring in journalism and minoring in English creative writing and environmental studies. She writes poetry, but oftentimes, she doesn’t write poetry. Usually she can be found in the J-Space writing for The Reporting Project, slinging ice cream at the Bandersnatch, or organizing the shelves of Kussmaul Gallery in Granville. Brin’s writing inspiration is her father, who is pretty cool.

Anna Gooch (she/her) is a sophomore psychology and cinema double major. On campus, she is intensely involved in student run theater through DITA and on the exec board for Denison’s Coalition for Sexual Respect. She loves meeting new people, sending absurdly long emails, making people laugh in awkward situations, and playing Just Dance on A Quad. Anna would not be here today without the support of her friends and faculty at Denison, in addition to the chaotic genetics that were given to her by her crazy family, which she loves dearly. Anna’s work, “The Farm,” attempts to encapsulate just a snapshot of that family that has molded her into who she is now.

Moose Hogeland (they/he) is a sophomore biology major with a minor in studio art. They love making art of all kinds and are especially inspired by animals in their creative works. Moose has been fascinated by animals and science ever since he can remember, and being able to write something beautiful about things generally seen as gross brings him joy.

Emma Hunter (she/her) is a senior environmental studies and English creative writing double major. She’s always enjoyed writing, ranging from poetry to short books. Emma loves throwing on the pottery wheel and playing the guitar and ukulele.

Rebecca Hurtado (she/her) is a sophomore creative writing major with a Spanish minor. Her work spans across poetry and creative nonfiction. She contributes to various on-campus publications, serving as a prose editor for Exile and as editor of Postscript, an anthology of senior creative writing. Rebecca grew up in North Carolina in a Cuban-American household.

ilynchee (she/her) is a freshman communication major and an international student from Vietnam. She’s a part of DASU and DKDG. Her inspiration for W-W-WALL-E and its main theme about the environment comes from her Theorizing Communication Midterm exam, when she had to write a short semiotic analysis of an advertisement made by WWF Organization. The ad poster aims to raise awareness about reforestation.
**Malina Infante** (she/her) is a senior English creative writing and educational studies double major who writes poetry and fiction. She is currently in the process of finishing her senior thesis project in poetry. Outside of her coursework, she works as a TA for the English writing workshops and serves as an English Department Fellow.

**Anna Northington Jones** (they/she/he) enjoys rollerblading, reading, and anything outdoors related. Their work generally speaks on the lived experiences and unrecognized similarities that can create community between people.

**Ramu Kamara** (she/her) is a freshman computer science major with a creative writing minor. She enjoys kitting, gaming, and attempting to learn bass guitar in her free time. Like many, she has a complex relationship with her parents, so although she felt awkward at first, she found it liberating to express herself through poetry. She considers herself a novice in writing, but hopes to continue to express her perspective through different forms.

**Khoa** (he/him) is an English creative writing and computer science double major.

**Liberty Kingsley** (she/they) is a junior English creative writing major and a theater minor. She has a passion for studying/writing in many different fields of literature, such as fantasy, romantic poetry, and playwriting. She was a recipient of the Judge Benjamin Franklin McCann Endowed Fund in Fall 2023 for demonstrating promise for literary accomplishments. On top of their writing, Liberty loves being involved with theater productions done by Eisner and by the Denison Independent Theatre Association (DITA).

**Eliana Lazzaro** (they/she/he) is a sophomore English literature and ancient Greek and Roman studies double-major with a double-minor in Greek and Latin. They are the Grammateus (secretary) of Eta Sigma Phi and an editor for Articulate. She is also involved in Gaming Guild. Outside of that, he likes to think way too hard about history and mythology, and sometimes writes about it!

**Maggie Malin** (she/her) is a junior English literature major with a minor in American roots music. She's a writer, performer, music lover, and sister of Kappa Kappa Gamma. She first published poetry in the summer 2021 edition of Just Poetry: The National Poetry Quarterly and has since published a comparative lit piece in Denison’s scholarly journal Articulate and an independent research paper on marketing in the British music scene in Arcadia University’s ScholarWorks database. Maggie sonnets to help her organize the goings-on of her life into tidy rhyme and meter.

**Emily McNeal** (she/her) is a freshman biology and environmental studies major. At Denison, she's involved in Outlook as an exec member and the Fiber Arts Club as a knitting teacher. She’s written poetry on and off since 7th grade (when she realized she could read "adult poems" which means not
Shel Silverstein). Poets that Emily will always come back to are Mary Oliver, Robert Frost, and Edna St. Vincent Millay.

**Colin Nguyen** (he/him) is a freshman double majoring in computer science and math with a minor in studio art. He loves making music: he plays trumpet in the wind ensemble and orchestra, and he is going to Vietnam for a summer research project where he will compose a piece using their folk music. He loves to volunteer with DCSA and go to events by VSA, or really anything that this campus has to offer. Something weird about Colin is that even though he loves art, he hasn’t taken a single art class since fifth grade.

**Jack Richards** (he/him) is a sophomore economics major. He grew up in Connecticut and moved to North Carolina in 2022. He originally wrote his piece for a journalism class and felt confident enough to go ahead and submit it after the feedback he received. In his free time, Jack likes to cook, meditate, lift weights, play with his dogs, and sleep in until unreasonable hours when his schedule allows.

**Jules Rizzo** (she/her) is a senior double major in dance and English creative writing. She is also a senior dance fellow and the president of Denison’s ballet club.

**Mia Rubiera** (she/her) is a first year anthropology major currently in Women in Business, Yoga Club, and First Year Council. She loves to photograph small moments in life and has been for about 8 years now. She got her first camera when she was 14 and fell in love with photography, and she has done it ever since.

**Marissa Sullivan** (she/her) is a freshman creative writing and philosophy double-major. Marissa writes for the Arts@Denison newsletter, works at the Bandersnatch, and helps edit Episteme, Denison’s undergraduate philosophy publication. Much of her work is inspired by old Hollywood, classic writers, and beautiful things. She credits Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, Albert Camus, John Steinbeck, and Hanif Abdurraqib as her literary heroes.