



# EXILE

**Spring 2014**

Denison University's Literary and Art Magazine  
Since 1955

You of the finer sense,  
Broken against false knowledge,  
You who can know at first hand,  
Hated, shut in, mistrusted:

Take thought.  
I have weathered the storm,  
I have beaten out my exile.

Ezra Pound

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>warehousing</i> , Alex Carroll	7
<i>In Search of Suburbia</i> , Jillian Koval	8
<i>Long Distance</i> , Kurt Grahnke	10
<i>[kingdoms]</i> , Matthew DeMotts	11
<i>Ice Storm</i> , Nick Holland	12
<i>Coyotes</i> , Matthew DeMotts	20
<i>Honeymoon on Mars</i> , Zoe Drazen	22
<i>Salad</i> , Mia Juratovac	23
<i>Rebirth in Brixton</i> , Mia Juratovac	25
<i>Om Mani Padme Hum</i> , Kelsey Hagarman	26
<i>Between Women</i> , Autumn Stiles	39
<i>A Poem About Why I Don't Write Poetry</i> , Tori Newman	41
<i>Summer Sweet</i> , Kym Littlefield	44
<i>To Jourdan</i> , Lauren Gustafson	45
<i>Guillotine</i> , Mimi Mendes de Leon	47
<i>Home</i> , Emily Carnavale	54
<i>The Nadir</i> , Emmalee Hagarman	56
<i>May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1980</i> , Mackenzie Shaw	57

<i>Lowel Mass, 1931</i> , Mackenzie Shaw	58
<i>overturned</i> , Szu-Yu Jonathan Huang	59
<i>falling</i> , Szu-Yu Jonathan Huang	60
<i>LARP</i> , Helene Griffin	61
<i>Say It</i> , Stephanie Arhin	68
<i>So You Want to Create a Universe</i> , Sam Heyman	80
<i>Revenge</i> , Helene Griffin	88

## **warehousing.**

By Alex Carroll

distance makes a ghost of you  
the road i walk will never end  
i love the things that people do

sweeping forms on vaster fields of green  
structures built to house a wayward friend  
distance makes a ghost of you

i revel in what's fit to glean  
stores of parcels meant to send  
i love the things that people do

emporiums devoid, the grandest i've seen  
people presupposed with cash to spend  
distance makes a ghost of you

amidst those marvels soon i grow too keen  
the days i lost in worlds no world transcends  
i love the things that people do

stalking me, the deathly fog convenes  
again along the sterile road i wend  
distance makes a ghost of you  
i love the things that people do

## **In Search of Suburbia**

By Jillian Koval

The eggshell Christmas lights out too soon -  
Or out too late, or never put away at all -  
Like the old lawn ornaments  
Chip paint like ticker tape  
Onto passing ants,  
Too proud to move or be removed,  
And the little Dutch children too shy to kiss  
Resign to ignore each other  
Until the old lady decides  
That this moribund romance is her best task  
And makes time between tea and Jeopardy  
To make them face each other  
And work out their problems like everyone else  
Who lives on this arrow-straight street  
That only stretches as far as you want it to,  
While I want it to stretch into eternity -  
Spread to the boundaries of outer space -  
Because my world seems occupy the earth,  
And my street stretches into nowhere.  
The telephone lines connect to the nearest star  
And pump the cosmos into our TVs

Where we'll sit for days and never want to ask  
Why there's nothing to watch during the day  
But the soap operas and the infomercials  
Whose merchandise actually sells to people like us  
Because I saw exercise tapes in Mrs. Sandra's trash  
When I was walking the dog,  
Who has catalogued every tree and sign  
Telling us how fast to go where to go  
When to stop and that we're a liability  
When we play outdoors though we rarely do  
Because our yards are too small  
And our fences too short  
And our trees all cut down so we could build a pool  
Which gets green when we abandon suburbia once a year



For even hotter weather down south for a week or two  
Because at least there's a beach and some tranquility  
Because a street is never peaceful with so many passing cars  
And no amount of iced tea could make the neighbors go away  
With their dogs in a fuss and children dripping popsicle juice  
Onto our patio while they stare wide-eyed at the hammock  
Where I like to read my romance novels  
On days when it's not too hot and not too windy  
And not too tedious to participate in suburbia.

## Long Distance

By Kurt Grahnke

With all those poets out there  
How could love & despair ever be fresh-  
How could waves crashing out the west,  
Crashing as the sun sets describe you best-  
Doesn't everyone know already that that's what love is-  
Spinning around hot gas in the evening,  
Currents and a vast space with some wind,  
Clouds conquering and covering up the clarity of it all.  
Are you not all that, my thought of one?

For even the spider who webs between two-by-fours  
On the porch makes me connected to you,  
Like something cosmic that started from one point & spun outwards.  
& the distance between us is like the time in between blueness-  
The once orange and purple will be orange and purple again soon  
& maybe out by you the sun hasn't even set yet  
& when it does it will soon rise by me, soon-  
By me and then again for you.

## [kingdoms]

By Matthew DeMotts

i.

there is a dignity in the rust and brick dust; there is a dignity. it lies in the courts of some abandoned factories on moonlit city limits. there is a nobility hidden behind the chain-link fences embraced by wanton grass and dandelions. there is a majesty in the sleeping fluorescent bulbs dangling like bats over varmint-trodden passages. in every chipped tile and every dry spigot and every tapestry of graffiti spread out beneath bombarded windowpanes there is a monarchy. there is a monarchy in the creaks and groans.

ii.

our coup began before dawn broke, after raucous drives in the rain. petrichor and darkling fog still clung to our noses with tenacity. we were piled into our makeshift war chariot, a tired sedan, belting out half-remembered shanties. we swerved through the gates and stormed the castle with bricks and bottles and baseball bats, glossy-eyed and smiling for war. we battered the porcelain thrones and sinks with our splintering louisvilles, shattered the mirrors with our brick missiles. every window was a target, every corroded pipe a monument to tear down. we stomped on the crusty needles of long-gone junkies and pissed on the walls and all the while laughed and hollered as we pillaged the kingdom. when the sun rose over the puddles, we had already disappeared.

iii.

there is a dignity in our pills and tablets; there is a dignity. it lies in the milk-soggy remnants of our morning cereal. there is a nobility hidden behind our forgotten moments and liver spots. there is a majesty in the looming bills and taxes dangling like bats over our bureaus. in every missing hair and every birthday candle and every broken promise there is a monarchy. there is a monarchy in the creaks and groans.

## Ice Storm

By Nick Holland

*Picture of a winter's day in Ohio. It is a quiet and unambitious farmscape, a field spreading outwards from a series of decaying fenceposts, at each of which the snow divides into neat little divots, like the seams at the edges of a long quilted blanket. A few scattered trees dot the field, and at its far end a great leafless forest rises up in silent rebellion, fibrous and country-dark against the hills and muted dips of a far-off golf course.*

*Past the fenceline a man stands in a broad-brimmed hat and a pea-green coat. His beard is still long and wild and his coat is not yet tattered with wear; this picture is an old one. He stands in the field with his two arms outstretched, but he is too far back for any details of his face to be seen. He stands proud and confident, looking at the camera. Just look, he says. Just look at this place that I have found for us. Just look how far we can spread our roots, at the chance we've got. To pick up our bags and settle back into the cold wild wood. Just look at it. Maybe he is smiling.*

*Overhead, the sky is clothed in heavy winter clouds, ruffled by the wind and streaked with dark fissures. Keep this image in mind.*

1.

By the eighth year of my life, my father's law firm had expanded from a small two-man affair into a prosperous little business, and we had moved out from the mean and mold-haunted A-frame on Bath Road and into a respectable farmhouse on a large plot of land, about six miles to the south of where we had started out. This, as my mother constantly reminded me, was a sign of great progress.

The property was sold to us by a crass and unkind man named Peterson who called it Frog Hollow, which remains its name to this day. While it was certainly a *farmhouse*, it is unfair to characterize the surrounding property as a farm in the strictest sense. It could more precisely be described as the memory of a farm, with its patchwork of half-planned pastures in various states of abandonment and regrowth, its long stretches of once-flat muddy acreage grown scooped and hollow with rain and woodchucks and time. Parts of the north field had already begun to return to its old habits, thick grass and wiry green saplings springing up tall and impenetrable to give it

the unmistakable personality of a young forest. There were two man-made ponds on either side of the property: at the north end sat Campfire Lake (demarcated by an old handwritten sign found in a prickerbush nearby), while at the south by the overgrown foot of our front yard was Crawdad Lake, which was fed by a small stream. The rest of the property was swallowed up whole by a forest that was largely maple and pine and criss-crossed with a spider's tangle of game trails.

During the winter of my eleventh year, an ice storm came down from Lake Erie. My brother and I awoke in the dark hours of the morning to a sound of violence outside our window, and looked out to see the night painted with a glaze of ice, shattered pieces of wood and treebark littering the ground as a black rain pelted us from above, freezing as it touched the land around it and congealing in frozen mounds and pools. The woods were alive with the dry sound of splintering tree-branches. We padded nervously into the kitchen and found our father waiting for us there, wrapped tightly in padded winter gear and carefully tipping fresh oil into his chainsaw, which sat on the table like a terrible silver-red beast, teeth glistening. We stood there for a moment in our pajamas, clinging on to one another uncertainly. My father looked up.

Let's go, he said to me.

*Picture of a camping trip. Trees are green and alive, the air hot and buggy: Flybitten Summer in the Midwest. A small orange tent has been hastily erected in a clearing in front of the trees. Nearby, a dense tuft of cattails hints at the presence of the adjacent man-made pond. My father is beardless now, and kneeling intently at the side of a scrawny, shirtless young boy, teaching him how to properly hold a fishing pole. His face youthful, serious, instructive. A mess of tousled hair and blue T-shirt are all that can be seen of a second child, the two-year-old behind him. The sun shines brightly on the child's hair, giving it a hot metallic sheen.*

2.

When we left the house, it was still dark. My father wore the heavy, full-body warmsuit that he reserved for the coldest days of winter, a thick, camouflage-print skin that lent him the appearance of a leaf-clothed hunter, or of some dark and earthy guardian of the arbor. For my part, I wore my thick down jacket, pudgy and

segmented at the arms, that made me look a bit like a green and waterfat marshmallow. Each of us carried our tools: my father his chainsaw and twin canisters of gasoline and bar oil, and I a pair of hand-operated limb trimmers and my Boy Scout pocket knife. The rain had by this time slowed to a thin spit of ice, and the land around us shone frosting-like as the dim morning light reflected over the frozen wood. It was mostly dark still, and perilously slippery. The gravel path underneath our feet choked by the hardening ice. It was a matter of great concentration to avoid appearing unsteady whenever he looked back to mark my progress behind him, as I dreaded nothing more than betraying my struggle to him in case he should find it necessary to offer me a concerned and steadying hand.

From the house, we made our way windingly into the dark and tree-girded East Path (the only trail towards town large enough for a car to pass through, which served as our *de facto* driveway), our early-morning conversation pressed into silence by the nervous flitting of cardinals overhead and the occasional splintering woodsong of the icebound inner forest. Under the trees, there were sections of snow that had been sheltered from the worst of the rain's erosion, gathering only the token mistings rejected by the canopy overhead, collecting a thin crusted shelf on its surface. This gave my father's footsteps a firm, regular crunch as he broke the snow's surface with each deliberate step. Each of these left a smooth-edged crater exposing the unfrozen powder layer beneath... my feet, by contrast, left only a series of staggered and half-broken dents in the white lunar landscape, and I found myself grateful every time I made my way to one of his larger and more widely-spaced prints to steady myself.

It was not far to the first obstacle: a young downed beech tree neatly intersecting the trail at right angles. We stopped, and he turned to face me:

Before we can begin, (he spoke with a slow, instructive deliberacy) it is important that you recognize that this is not a toy.

I do--

You don't. Listen to me.

Ok.

This is a highly efficient instrument designed to simplify a difficult task. It is a dangerous machine, and it is equally a dangerous collection of fragile parts; if you take its function for granted, try to treat it as a simply-functioning unit, its pieces may come apart, may catch and fail and overheat, and it will fail you. When in doubt, turn it

off.

I nodded dumbly as he lowered the saw to the ground and demonstrated how to start it: three linear, deliberate pulls, a firm rumble of activity, and a quiet hum as he shut it off. He stepped back and motioned me forward, handed me the red plastic jug of gasoline mixture. A dizzy smell of fumes as the liquid poured gurgling into the belly of the machine, my father standing over me impassively. A thin haze of translucent vapor rippling slightly above the point of transfer like woodsmoke, like water. The handle firm in my clumsy mittened hands, the first pull left me off-balanced and embarrassed; second, third, fourth pulls awkward and arrhythmic until I stepped back and watched my father wordlessly start the saw in a single pull. Silver teeth came to life against the snow with a robotic fury, and he began to cut away at the tree.

I watched uselessly as he removed the offending structure in a series of surgical, geometric strokes. Angry humming of machinery, specks of wooddust-- cream-white, stripling bark flecked with olive-brown sheared away like butter, and the tree was gone in a matter of minutes. As I heaved the last sectioned hunk into the woods, he caught my eye with a patient grin, and we continued to move up the path in silence.

*Picture of a newspaper. The page: "Best of Cleveland 2005". My father is pictured in a suit and tie, kneeling in front of a group of five other men and one young woman. All are smiling. At his feet is a young lion cub, tethered to a leash held by the young woman in the back. Above: "Career Highlight for Area Lawman: Lion Breeding Ring Exposed". The caption: "Dr. Dolittle with a law degree". The lion cub's eyes are pearly black, and they stare into the camera with a deep and impenetrable curiosity.*

3.

By the time we reached the end of the West Path, the gleaming and broken new world the storm left behind should have been fully revealed by the light of day, but a thick and persistent covering of ill-humored cumulus kept the forest locked in a pall of early-morning twilight. How many shattered maples, oaks, sassafras had we already cleared away as we rounded the trailhead towards Campfire Lake-- seven? nine? more? There is a timelessness to this kind of morning labor; the persisting moment of freeing a section of the path's frozen

plane from obstruction became mesmerizing to me. I don't think it had occurred to either of us as we rounded the turn that the lake was to be our final destination. We simply stopped for a moment, and I followed him as he turned and began walking into the field at the end of the path, towards the reed-bearded water and the looming obstacle protruding from its center.

The tree was a great two-hundred-year-old maple, a giant of the first order. Unlike the others on the West Path, this was no product of that night's storm. The previous August it had been caught in the teeth of a furious summer windstorm, and terminated its multacenturian vigil half-submerged in the middle of the lake, where it had remained undisturbed until now. It was in fact so uncommon in its size that the possibility of its simply decaying harmlessly out of sight into the water was out of the question; each of the more central branches were so massive as to fasten deep into the muck at the lake's bottom, half-suspending the rest of its great corpse from the water in a spectacular crown of leafless digits that dominated the entire scene and threatened to smother the pond's sole tributary stream. To think of carving it up earlier in the year would have been laughable. The trunk itself was situated at such an angle that any safely executed cut would set the entire mass loose from its earthly moorings entirely, and submerge the still-lifted crown the rest of the way into the water, most likely resulting in the overflow and destruction of the little tarn. But here we stood, triumphant in our faithful stewardship of the West Path. Before us sat the great crown in the middle of a thick apron of ice, accessible and inviting. At that moment, in that twilight-colored rimeworld that seems so alien through the veil of later memory, the challenge of it was irresistible.

I don't remember if there was ever any spoken acknowledgement of our newfound goal; the white-brown treeless field was taut with a subtle electricity as we approached the frozen lake. The air around us was cold and strangely dry, made thick and almost tangible by the clouding of our breath and the song of a cardinal, perching somewhere-- *there*, small and Christmasberry-red on the deep frosted green of a blue spruce. A sense of a rising camaraderie as we crossed the field with a sense of shared purpose, me indifferent to my own chilly fatigue, to the cold air burning in my throat with a prickling insistency. He stopped at the water's edge, shaggy clumps of brown and ice-laced wintergrass lumped cautiously around the darker, deeper ice.



Stay very close to me. There's hardly any danger of falling through this kind of ice, but we always have to be careful.

Ok.

Pay attention to your surroundings. No false moves here.

Ok.

I mean it.

I will.

We crossed the threshold between field and pondwater without incident; the frozen surface was hardly any more slippery than the icier sections of the paths we'd been on all morning. It sat firm and unyielding under my feet, and together we cautiously slithered out to the trunk of the great maple.

The trunk loomed out from the ice with the strange unnatural dignity of a sinking ship. Its base was thick and scaly with a thick peeling bark that parted into curls of rot with every knot and bole in its curvature, and it was no great difficulty for us both to pull ourselves up it and onto one of the larger extending branches. The tree was too big to remove, obviously; our mission was to clear its top section of major branches and then cut back the upper trunk, rolling the cut pieces into the woods as we went and freeing the lake of at least the most visible half of its unwelcome guest. I positioned myself on a stable lower branch as my father sawed from higher up, and hurled each section to shore as he severed it. During this process I remember making some small observation that made him laugh aloud, and it must have been this token show of approval that compelled me to accept his offer for another chance at cutting.

The chainsaw was hot in my hands as he reminded me of the basics of its operation. I watched with nervous impatience as he painstakingly tightened the chain, checked the oil and gas mixture, gave the primer a token squeeze. I chose as my target a small but respectable limb directly below and to the right of my current position; he would hold onto the branch from below to prevent an accident, while I would make the first half of the cut from above before passing the saw down to him.

I looked down for a moment at the ice beneath me. It glinted white and grey in the winter sunlight, an unspoken threat of rotten blue beneath its surface. My grip on the branch, I ensured, was quite secure. The saw, warmed and ready from recent use, started up with no problems, and my shoulders shook tightly with the noisy vibration of the thing as it bit into the branch below me. My father, I knew, was

watching closely for any mistake... it seemed at the time unspeakably embarrassing for the tool to be cutting at such a slow rate during my big moment; I pressed harder, but to little effect. I remember over the din of the motor that I heard my father call out something to me, but my focus was elsewhere, and I began sawing back and forth in an arc in an effort to make the cut more quickly. Forward, and back-- *back*, and I felt the chain catch with a sharp grinding into the grain of the wood, caught fast in the grain as I jerked the saw backwards, my right leg splaying slightly as the chainsaw lurched free, my body thrust back to avoid the angry drone of the toothed blade, sound of my father screaming something...

When I felt the impact of my shoulder against the shattering ice I felt a stab of panic in the nape of my spine, and I remember thinking foolishly at the time that this was a feeling shared in all the world only by myself and the lake itself as its icy surface splintered open, but all thoughts were dashed from my mind as I felt the frozen blackness of the water engulf me completely. I was plunged instantly into darkness, endless fathoms of frozen ink crushing silently at me from all sides while my ears felt deafened by the roar of the running saw. I'd somehow lost it, when had I let go but I *had* hadn't I, and it sinking greedily towards me invisible in the endless black-black of this place and the animal cold boring into my shoulders and crawling through my skull, through the bones of my neck like plague like rats like burning ice--

I have no memory whatsoever of my father's powerful arms gripping underneath mine, of the struggle up and through choppy chunks of surface-ice and the look of shocked concern on his face as he worked desperately to warm my weak and mindlessly panicked body with his coat and hands. I do not remember vomiting out mouthfuls of murky pondwater onto the frozen grass, or the moment I realized that the chainsaw had remained stuck harmlessly in the branch throughout the whole ordeal. I remember only a great and penetrating numbness as I realized that I was lying dripping wet over my father's shoulder as he carried me across the field and back towards home, and the burning silence in my chest as I watched a cardinal burst brilliantly into flight as we passed it by.

*Picture of a winter's day in Ohio. A child stands alone in the tall snowy grass of a young forest, the land around spreading outwards boundlessly, punctuated only by a few rusted and overgrown fenceposts.*

*The child is standing at an odd angle to the camera, at too great a distance for any meaningful expression to be interpreted from his face. He appears distracted, removed from his surroundings, his orange-gloved hand holding tightly to a snow-dusted stick and his gaze fixed resolutely on the taker of the picture. Here I am, he seems to say, here I am, in the cold wild wood. Here I am, and now what? Overhead, the sky is clothed in winter clouds, rough and scattered and shifting fluidly in the wind. Keep this image in mind.*

## **Coyotes**

By Matthew DeMotts

Off the yawning desert highway stands  
A drive-by wedding in some neon chapel,  
East of midnight, deep into the stupor hours.

There's a Winnebago out front, doors ajar,  
Wheels sanded and dusty, the moonlight glinting  
Dimly off her ochre-rusty fender mirrors.

Two in the chapel stumble a little, mutter some,  
Stutter, holler, giggle through hasty vows  
Scribbled on greasy glove box napkin backs.

Outside, lizards dance under the cold cathode  
Indigo and absinthe lights, buzzing relics of a VHS era,  
Singing over ancient rock formations as one.

They sing in honeyed hiss-click tones  
About the coyote who couldn't stop running,  
Chasing after its mate, relentless and insatiable.

The coyote had bolted through the desert,  
And as it ran faster and faster began to tear apart,  
Layer after layer being flayed by bitter wind.

Fur and flesh and sinew shed away like snakeskin  
Into russet desert sand as the skeleton  
Continued to run, driven by dogged desire.

By the time he caught her, many years later,  
The only thing that remained of him was marrow;  
Nothing more than hopeless marrow.

In the chapel is the sudden gasp of a cork  
Being pulled from bottom-shelf champagne  
And a soprano whoop from the bride.

The dawn is erasing the nighttime now,  
And the moon and lizards go back to hiding,  
Staggering back to their stomping grounds.

The neon newlyweds ride off into the sunrise  
In their beat-up honeymoon home of a car.  
Unsure of what to say next, or why, they just howl.

## Honeymoon on Mars

By Zoe Drazen

You gaze at Styrofoam planets as you lie on his floor,  
ask if the solar system is to scale as you take in the array.  
There's no love on Mars, it's named after the God of war.

"It is to scale," he whispers, proud of the childish décor.  
It feels like a sin as you both sip Bombay.  
You gaze at Styrofoam planets as you lie on his floor.

"This time will be so much better than before,"  
he says referring to your breakup of 8 months and a day.  
There's no love on Mars, it's named after the God of war.

His words aren't something you have the right to ignore,  
so you take your hand and trace it up his arm halfway.  
You gaze at Styrofoam planets as you lie on his floor.

Your drink is gone and the wood is making you sore.  
"Let's have our honeymoon on Mars," you hear him say.  
"There's no love on Mars, it's named after the God of war,"

you fire back too quickly, considering a quick run for the door.  
He stares at plastic stars, the gaudiest of the display.  
You gaze at Styrofoam planets as you lie on his floor.  
There's no love on Mars, it's named after the God of war.

## Salad

By Mia Juratovac

It's three in the morning and the kitchen is still lit up yellow from the old streetlight outside, leaking in through the window by the sink. Someone left the blinds tied up earlier, so she can see as she works. Lettuce makes a strangely moist sound when torn. It's organic, so when she has mostly filled the bowl there are only the tiny sweet baby leaves left on the core. She eats them all up in one greedy bite.

Next are the tired peppers and cucumbers, more wet noises and stickiness on the knife blade she grabbed from the sink, too tired to care whether it was dirty. They're just vegetables, they can handle a little dirt. The peppers are soft and some skin slides right off when she slices it. She pushes those pieces off the edge of the cutting board, into the waiting mouth of the composting bucket, half-filled with cucumber heels and lettuce cores and pepper seeds.

When she turns to the fridge for dressing, he speaks from the doorway.

"It's three in the morning," he says.

"You have a staring problem, go away." She fishes the Italian out from behind the Thousand Island, the Catalina, the Ranch, shakes it as the refrigerator door whooshes closed and she turns back to the sad pile of vegetables in the bowl. "I know it's late," she says.

He stands motionless in the doorway. "Why are you making a salad at three in the morning?"

She ignores him, and carefully pours the dressing. "Are there any croutons left?"

"I don't know," he says. "Why the salad?"

She rolls a shoulder noncommittally. She knows there haven't been any croutons for months. She doesn't turn to meet his gaze. "Too late for real cooking, too early for chocolate pudding? Does it matter?" Because he doesn't laugh at the reference, she knows he isn't actually here, that this is a memory. Her imaginary version of him has a much better sense of humor, and also more inane pop culture knowledge. She uses the knife on the cutting board to stab into the salad, gingerly picks lettuce and crunchy cubes off it with her lips and teeth, mouth oily from the dressing.

“You’ve lost control of your life.” He’s slid back in the doorway, now only a silhouette.

A drop of vinegar falls onto her sweatshirt. She pulls a stray hair away from where it has adhered itself to her lip. “Come back, would you?” she says.

But he is already gone. The lettuce is warm, the dressing has pooled in the bottom of the bowl and the peppers make everything else bitter. She dumps the whole of it in the sink with the twice-dirty knife and the memory of him and pushes it all into the garbage disposal. She lets it grind away to nothing but a bad aftertaste.



## **Rebirth in Brixton**

By Mia Juratovac

They splash through the slums of the city, the man and his foreman, who speaks shoddy English but knows the spaces here like they were gaps within his own body. Boots stained with street muck, they slide through the channels, arteries and veins, past the workers feeding the fires of Brixton, past women and children pouring out of factories, coughing through dusty mouths. They step quickly past, choosing muddy alleyways over main roads, slogging ever closer to the center where the fires from the bombing still smolder.

The old red brick building was surrounded by wires leading into and over it. Its ragged rafters rose above the buildings that have fallen apart around it, jabbing at the sky, as if to protect its remaining walls. Like a ribcage, he thinks, ruddy face gleaming. The foreman has gone ahead; he turns, and beckons him on.

Rotted floorboards creak warnings, walls and beams shift with the slightest breath. They cannot tell where the damage from the bombs ends, and where the effect of gravity alone begins. He catalogues everything, tallies here and there, deciding whether the whole structure must come down. Surely they can salvage something.

In the center of the room, where all the walls have fallen, a mound of rubble rises, wet from the fire hoses' vain efforts. Close by, amongst the glint of scrap metal, and in the midst of blackened rafters, they find a living form. At first they think she is dead. The foreman reaches for her gold necklace, and jerks back as she bursts into a fit of coughs.

Now they can see how her chest moves as if with the swaying walls, pushing in out in out, clouds of brick dust settling and lining the many creases in her face. She is frail and dirty, bleeding from something under her many layers that they cannot see or easily get to.

As they stand there, her eyes open, reddened slits. Her mouth curls into a smile. "Are you here for me?" she asks them, voice thin over the complainings of the building. The foreman drops to his knees and starts to pray. She laughs weakly. "It's too late now. Let me go." Her eyes close again. Her body relaxes, though her breathing doesn't stop for minutes. When it does, there is a crash from somewhere behind them. A sparrow picks its way out of the wreckage, shakes out its wings, and takes off through the open ceiling. The men are rooted. Her empty body no longer moves with the walls. How comfortable she looks nestled between twisted wiring and concrete.

## Om Mani Padme Hum

By Kelsey Hagarman

Look at the ring on your index finger. Tarnished silver, turning copper, it fills the space between the base of your finger and your knuckle. There are three segments of your ring:

1. The braided pattern etched in the silver along the top edge.
2. The grey center, made of some material that reminds you of silt. There are shards of blue stones stuck inside the silt, stones you call turquoise because that is the only blue stone you know.
3. The bottom, thicker than the braided top, etched with lines and unfamiliar symbols.

Look at the emerald green stain your ring leaves behind on your skin, the consequence of cheap metal and frequent wear.

\*

“Everybody wants a happy life and a peaceful mind, but we have to produce peace of mind through our own practice.” -@DalaiLama. May 17, 2013.

\*

After your dad remarries, your stepmom gives you a gift card to Moonstones for your birthday and for Christmas, which are only three days apart, so they are lumped together. This gift card is a thin, soft piece of bark with “Moonstones” written in pen over the peeling layers. When you go to Moonstones, you don’t go late at night, your dad walks you down the sidewalks of Pittsburgh to get you there safely.

The store is thick with the smell of incense and things you don’t understand: bumper stickers, statues of Hindu gods, African drum sets. You spend hours there to spend your gift card on jewelry and candles. George W. Bush’s big head looks funny on the stickers they sell here and you want to laugh, but you don’t understand the jokes. Your stepmom thinks this one wind-up toy is so funny: a plastic nun the size of your fist that moves slowly across flat surfaces and shoots little sparks out of her mouth.

“Nunzilla. I have to get it,” your stepmom tells you.

The lady who owns the store wears her blonde hair short and her black skirt all the way down to her ankles. You think she might be a witch. After you touch a stone or a candle, she tells you the qualities

it promotes. Here, smell Serenity, touch Wealth. You finally decide to buy a Happiness candle and a purple stone jewelry box.

Outside the store, your dad looks as tall as the streetlights, but he is all darkness. Except for the embers of the cigar at his mouth. Your hot breath mimics his smoke as it hits the cold air in puffs. Open the paper bag to show him what you bought. He nods in approval, but his eyes are hard to find. Under the brim of his Villanova hat, through the wrinkles of worry, above the dark circles. Even when he tells jokes, his eyes are sad.

You let him hold your cold fingers for a few moments on your way back to his apartment, but when some strangers walk past, you can feel your age like the blush on your cheeks. You're ten years old, let go.

It takes years for you to notice the symbol on the lid of the jewelry box is a pentagram. Point up, the pentagram is a Wiccan star that symbolizes the union of the five basic elements. Point down, the pentagram is a Satanic star that symbolizes earthly gratification and the triumph of the individual over dissolution.

When the lid breaks clean off the box, you forget which way the star pointed when you bought it.

\*

It is estimated that somewhere between ten and twenty million people practice Tibetan Buddhism. The current Dali Lama, who was exiled from Tibet in 1959, is called the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people.

\*

When you try the ring on your finger, you think the base is filled with a random pattern of lines. Holly asks the cashier what they mean because she worries the symbols might summon the devil or something. After the jewelry box incident, you encourage her to ask. Holly buys the same ring as you in a cutesy best-friends-forever kind of demonstration. She is not from Pittsburgh, and you take her to Moonstones as a sort of tourist attraction.

Your stepmom stopped giving you Moonstones gift cards a few years ago, so your souvenir costs you nine dollars. There is a small number nine written on the inside of your ring, but it starts to wear off even that first day. Mostly because you aren't used to the feeling of its constant presence, so you keep pulling it on and off. Your finger suffocates under this metal thing you will become attached to and then frequently misplace. No one gave you a receipt at the store, and

by the time you make the twenty minute trip back to your mom's house, a section of the blue stones has cracked right off the front of your ring.

"You should get your money back for that," your mom warns you when you show her. You explain that you want the ring *fixed*. She rolls her eyes and finds some super glue.

\*

"Just as ripples spread out when a single pebble is dropped into water, the actions of individuals can have far-reaching effects." -@DalaiLama. May 10, 2013.

\*

The beginning of the end of your structured religious education is fourth grade, the year your parents officially divorce. You know your mom feels guilty, especially when you ask why your dad spends so many nights in the two-bedroom apartment above his office, the office that is only a few blocks away from Moonstones.

"He's at work," she tells you. That night you see her crying in the kitchen, just standing there with all the lights on, around the time the court tries to figure out your custody. You never go to court, you aren't called to the witness stand, you don't see your dad in black suits or your mom in sharp clicking heels. Just your mom crying that one time with a stack of white papers on a blue kitchen table.

And your dad telling you about the sleepovers you and your sister can have at his apartment every other weekend. He says you still can get ice cream and rent movies, if you still like to do that. Chocolate raspberry truffle and *Night of the Living Dead*.

You make your sister tell your mom that you don't want to go to your bible study class anymore because your mom would have to listen. Tell your sister to complain that your dad never picks you up on time and your mom would feel it, that guilt.

And she does. Your mom lets you quit studying the bible just like she let you quit playing softball, but she still makes you go to church with her on Sunday. Church is thick with the smell of old lady perfume and things you don't understand: tasteless wafers placed in open mouths, wooden pews filled with singing strangers.

During mass, you and your sister put your hands on your hearts and say the Pledge of Allegiance instead of the Our Father by accident, but the old lady next to you doesn't notice. She congratulates your mom for your "good behavior." You eat Cheerios and stare out the stained glass windows. Even tone deaf people sing along to the

hymns, but you move your lips along with the words every once in a while.

Near the end of mass, your mom slides across the waxy pew to whisper in your ear, "I'll wait for you and your sister in the lobby." She leaves you and your sister to shuffle in the line of strangers on your own because she is not allowed to receive communion anymore, now that she is divorced.

In fifth grade, you stop going to church after your mom remarries. Your stepdad doesn't make you stop going, it's more gradual than that, like you always knew there were better ways to spend your Sundays and he was just the first person in the house brave enough to do it.

They get married on Christmas, not in a church, in a court. You, your sister, and your soon-to-be stepsisters are playing Monopoly and eating apricot cookies when your mom tells you to put on some nice clothes because they are getting married. You scream, not because you're scared, but because you're happy. Now, they have gold rings they say they will never take off their fingers. You don't tell them that you recognize their handwriting on the presents "from Santa" and you don't ask what your mom's ring means this time.

\*

"Om Mani Padme Hum" is a famous Tibetan Buddhist mantra that is associated with the bodhisattva of compassion.

\*

The cashier has thick black dread locks and skin even paler than yours and so many piercings on his face you worry that you stare too much, like he has a physical deformity. You force yourself to smile and act normal, but you smile too much. You wonder where the blonde witch is, the one who learned to recognize your face and name over the years.

This guy tells Holly that yes, the rings mean something. He says the words "Buddhist chant" and "serenity," but you are too busy nodding your head, so all you know is that the chant starts with a word that starts with an "O." He knocks over stacks of political cartoons and ironic greeting cards while he tries to explain all the things this ring can do. When his face flushes against all that metal, you wonder if the metal gets hot. He seems a little too excited, like the ring belongs to Frodo or something, but you buy it anyway.

\*

“We cannot change the past, but we can reshape the future. Young people have the opportunity to create a happier, better future.”- @DalaiLama. December 17, 2013.

\*

It rains at your high school graduation. The ceremony is still held outside, even though anyone with eyes could see those big black clouds. Your white dress dampens, your straight hair expands in the humidity and frizzes just in time to take pictures you will see in photo albums for the rest of your life.

Sit in the same seat in the backs of classrooms, walk the same hallways made from white linoleum floors and white walls. Type at the same computer for four years. Remember alphabetical order, stand in a straight line, walk when you're told, sit down in your seat, listen to badly written speeches and you will get a diploma in the rain.

Then you can throw your cap in the air as high as you want.

Back at home, extended family members wish you congratulations with envelopes of money. While this is party is for you, it might as well be for your mother. These are her friends, and she will collect the money because she knows when to use it. When you are sick of smiling and thanking these people, you walk around your house until you find your mom sitting in the guest bedroom, holding your graduation cap and gown.

“I can't believe he missed your graduation,” she says. You never know how to react when someone cries, let alone your mom. She makes sure that her tears are gone moments later, like they never happened.

Make a joke that your dad probably couldn't find your high school. Don't say that you would rather he celebrate your graduation drunk at a bar with your stepmom than see him in the stands of your high school football field. Let your mom hug you even though she's the one that is upset, and then you can leave to brush your teeth, like every other night.

He texts you the next day to say that he had been there, that he saw you graduate, but couldn't find you in the crowd afterward. So he left. Your mom doesn't believe him.

For your graduation present, your mom gives you an expensive amethyst necklace, earrings, and a ring, not from Moonstones, from a department store, maybe.

“You need some nice jewelry now that you're old,” she tells you.

\*

Since the 1959 Tibetan uprising, the Dalai Lama and the exiled Tibetan government have been located in McLeodGanj, a village within the Dharamshala municipality in India. "Dharamshala" loosely translates to "spiritual dwelling" or "sanctuary."

\*

You learn to ask your dad to stop cooking dinner. Ask him to order take-out instead to avoid angry whistles, banging pots. Your mom's food is on the table by six o'clock, usually earlier, home cooked, with dessert after. Quiet. Share something about your day and fold your napkin on your lap, that kind of dinner. With your dad, you taste whole countries out of Styrofoam boxes. Vietnamese, Chinese, Mexican, and Thai.

A few weeks after you graduate high school, your dad takes you to your first Indian restaurant to celebrate. With him, dinners are loud, sometimes the happy kind of loud. He struggles with the pronunciation of the dishes, but recommends that you try "the green stuff with the bread" and "that orangey chicken one."

Your dad doesn't pay child support now that you're eighteen and he doesn't intend to pay for your college education either. Your mom has complained, cried, and yelled about that. At him in person, at him on the phone, at him through you. She has written texts, emails, and letters because she and your stepdad *cannot afford* the college educations of *four* girls at the *same* time without *any* help.

You only see them together now when you are handed off from one parent to the other. Your mom, shorter than you by a few inches and your dad, taller by almost a foot. You feel irreconcilable differences in that space between. You are the cause of fights, the topic of discussions, and yet they do all of the talking.

At the restaurant, your dad orders a Stoli on the rocks even though he said he gave those up for good over Christmas. Your stepmom lied to you for weeks, not to your face, but through texts, saying that your dad had the flu while he detoxed in his apartment. All the lights in his kitchen were off the night he finally told you what he had given up. It was the first time he had admitted to you that he had a drinking problem in the first place.

The waitress brings the drink he shouldn't need anymore. His glass sweats beads of water that form a ring on the napkin below it. You anticipate the effects of the drink and wonder what brought him back to it. His eyes are shiny when he tells you that he is in so much



debt his cable might be turned off this week and his power might go next.

You remember that your stepmom bought a 3D television and ordered a quesadilla-maker online the other day. You listen because you don't know what to believe anymore.

He tells you how much he spent on groceries this week, on your older sister's college loans years ago, on his beat-up gray Ford that always needs something fixed and veterinary exams for cats that keep getting older.

Not on your groceries. Not on your clothes. Not on your college education. Tell him you don't need to know the details of his debts. You haven't talked back to him since you decided to stop abiding by the "every other Wednesday, every other weekend" custody arrangement settled by the court. You are eighteen and too tired to spend your school nights driving back and forth.

"But you *do* need to know this," he says like it explains everything and your heart pumps with the anger you can't release. He makes you think you should feel this guilt.

His face is red and his voice is loud against the sticky booth and the green walls. The waitress tries to smile but your dad complains about little things to make her more uncomfortable, another basket of naan, another Stoli on the rocks, the television changed from that Bollywood stuff to a basketball game.

All you want is to feel comfortable in a restaurant with your dad. No more blurry eyed looks around the room to make sure strangers can't hear how much everything has cost him. The numbers on receipts he wants you to read.

Your mom fought with your dad and now they don't live together anymore. You don't live with him either. You wonder if they regret having you, this tie that keeps them together.

It always comes back to you.

But if you forget the money and tell him what you want to study in college, he will tell you that he used to write poetry, too. His poems are in a box in the attic of the house he no longer shares with you. He is the only person that smiles when you say that you like philosophy. And he will pay for this warm naan and chicken as though it is all he can offer, delicious and unfamiliar dishes that taste the way love should feel.

\*

“Love and compassion are qualities humans beings require just to live together.” @DalaiLama. October 21, 2013.

\*

You have to go back to school. Your mom usually drives you there, especially on the first move of the fall. But move-in is on a Wednesday and your mom can't call off this early in the school year, at the same job at Baker Elementary she's worked all these years.

Sometimes you forget that she was a single mom for a little while. Her paycheck was enough for four people to live on, plus the child support. Without your stepdad, you probably wouldn't be going to this college or have so many pairs of boots now.

Your dad will drive you back then. Your mom will visit over the weekend to make sure you did it right, even though you know how to cram your stuff into a dorm room by now. Before you leave, your stepdad and your dad shake hands and talk like they don't hate each other.

Look at the car that barely has enough room for all of your stuff. When you were in fifth grade, your mom told you “we” couldn't afford a new skirt. You didn't cry because your parents divorced. You cried because you wanted this blue skirt, a turquoise one from TJ Maxx. The worst part was that you eventually got it.

Your dad seems like he hasn't talked to anyone in a while. Not just to you, but to anyone who will listen. When you realize you forgot your phone and your school ID back at your mom's house, he isn't even mad that he has to turn the car around.

The car ride feels like a two and a half hour conversation. Your dad admits that your stepmom is the one who drinks too much now and gets too angry. You find out that she left him over the summer. Only for a day, but it could have been forever. You don't know if you should feel bad that he is so alone, or happy that he knows how it feels.

When you get to Granville, he decides to stop at the bank before he drops you off.

“I can't take out any more than this at a time,” he apologizes. Without making eye contact, he reaches a hand behind him to shove some bills at you and your sister. You didn't expect anything and you tell him you don't want it, but you count the money anyway. A hundred dollars each. Keep it.

When you get to Shepardson Hall, he says he will do his best to help you carry your things inside. All the things you thought you

couldn't live without, mostly clothes. He has bad knees. Instead of joints, he says it just feels like bone on bone.

Look at your dad. Whatever hair he has left is pulled back in this little ugly pony tail. He says he donates his hair to Locks of Love. Imagine a sick person wearing a wig made from his dull gray hairs. Your friends have never met him because you are ashamed of him sometimes. This is one of those times. You wonder if he knows.

Tell him not to worry, that you can do it yourself. Move all of your belongings, bags, and boxes from the car to the elevator down the hall and into your room. Make your dad wait outside, and when you're finished, he will drive the two and a half hours back home alone.

\*

His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama frequently states that his life is guided by three major commitments: the promotion of basic human values or secular ethics in the interest of human happiness, the fostering of inter-religious harmony and the preservation of Tibet's Buddhist culture, a culture of peace and non-violence.

\*

Your freshmen year of high school, you have this necklace that is only one third of a necklace, really. It's one of those best-friend-heart-puzzle kind of things, where your necklace makes one third of the heart. Hannah has one third, your sister has the other.

Hannah tells you this about her boyfriend: "Ethan almost asked you out at the beginning of the year. It was between you and me."

Apparently you didn't make the cut. You thought you could be friends with both him and Hannah, but Ethan still likes you enough to make Hannah suspicious. By sophomore year, you're not friends with either of them. You stop wearing that necklace and you have this problem where you make guys pay for mistakes they haven't made yet.

Brian, your junior year. A soccer player with a reputation, not a good one. He wants you to come over to his house. You tell him to take you ice-skating. Your sister texts you later that your mom thought he was cute. He always wears gray sweatpants and black hoodies, which are not cute, but he is so much taller and louder than you, which you like at first.

At the ice-skating rink, he wears those skates for people who play hockey and they look like natural extensions of his feet. He makes circles around the rink while he waits for you to catch up. You are not

as good at ice-skating as you remember and you fall on your ass once. He picks you up off the ground, not in a sweet way. He laughs at the wet spots of snow on your jeans.

“You don’t talk very much, do you?” he says when the Zamboni clears the rink of your tracks. You shrug your shoulders. You thought he wouldn’t notice if you asked enough questions and he had talked about the Penguins and his dog for so long. You do not have a lot in common. He offers to buy you a drink but you don’t want him to think you owe him something.

During another hour of circles, he tells you that he doesn’t drink and you try to believe him. You remember the freshman he dated for a while and wonder whose fault it was that they broke up. Later, there is this bridge you have to cross to get to the parking lot. Just because he can, he scoops you up into his arms and jumps onto the edge of the bridge. You scream, not because it’s funny, but because you’re scared. He holds you in his arms like a baby as he dangles you over the creek below.

Tell him to put you down, your body icy stiff in his arms like it’s already hit that water. You can’t see his face when you’re in his arms, only his black sweatshirt and silence. He waits a while before he lets your feet drop back to the ground.

As he drives you home, he takes his hands off the wheel.

“You’re in control now. You have to drive,” he laughs, hands raised up like his eyebrows. The car weaves back and forth across the yellow lines.

When you were little, your dad used to drive with his knees to make you laugh.

\*

Compassion is a feeling of wanting to help someone who is sick, hungry, or in trouble. Compassion is selfless concern for people beyond yourself.

\*

You stand in the kitchen of that apartment where your dad spent all those nights, back when you thought that if you went months without seeing your dad, he wasn’t yours anymore. The two stupid cats that live in the apartment twist through your legs, and when you run a hand down their backs, clumps of their shedding fur stick to your sweaty palms. Your mom is allergic to cats, so she will make you change your clothes when you return home, like you can peel away all remnants of your father from your skin.

A picture is held in front of your face, sepia and faded, of a thin, blonde boy, standing, staring, smug.

“Would you buy a car from this guy?” your dad asks you. You are twelve so all you can think is that you aren’t old enough to buy a car even if you wanted to. After a while you answer: “No.” That makes him laugh. Your stepmom asks you later if your dad showed you “that picture of him as a kid.” You never thought he could be that young or blonde.

Now, she has something in a brown paper bag to show you: a silver chain with a pendant of rainbow stones hanging from it. Your dad bought it for her, probably as an apology for something since it isn’t her birthday and there is always a reason for presents. A dinner with your dad is a gift after you haven’t seen him in weeks. A gift card to a department store is a present that means he doesn’t know you well enough to pick out specific gifts anymore.

Your stepmom doesn’t tell you what he did, but you don’t ask either. The apology has already been accepted, like it always has been, like it always will be.

Maybe all the jewelry, the dinners, maybe they were just apologies, spent and ingested deep so you never have to think about all the things you owe each other.

\*

While the “Om Mani Padme Hum” mantra is often chanted aloud, it said that the written form of the mantra has the same effect on the viewer, so it is often carved into stones and other visible objects. The goal of the mantra is to reduce fixation on the personal self, and instead look toward others.

\*

You wear your ring every day. When you see Holly at school, sometimes she sticks out her pointer finger, waiting for you to stick yours out too, to show that you still wear yours. You always wear it, except for the times when you leave it on cold wet sinks in public bathrooms or the arms of wooden chairs in the library. One time, you forgot to put it on in the morning and you walked all the way back to your room during class just to get it.

You twist your ring around in circles when you are anxious, and when you take it off at night, in your dorm room in Ohio, sometimes you worry the stain on your finger is permanent, that you have some sort of metallic poisoning. You search “green ring finger stain” on Google and think about how different your ring looks now

that you have worn it for a few weeks. Nice rings, they don't tarnish. This one looks kind of ugly now, and you tell people you only wear it out of habit.

When you went back to your room to get your ring, what you were really thinking was that it was bad luck not to wear it. Maybe it isn't about luck.

Look at your ring while you write this, look at it again as you read this. Go back through your memories and ask the blonde witch to find a candle for Forgiveness.

## Between Women

By Autumn Stiles

mornings like these  
your voice is scottish-thick and  
full of sleep

eyes heavy, grey –  
two slabs of sea-washed stone.

nights like last  
I'm sleepless, rubbing  
Edinburgh's perpetual damp from  
your limbs, with wide plebian hands  
so that you can sleep as you now stand,  
naked  
illuminated by the space heater  
so that you resemble – what did Woolf say?  
- a match burning in a crocus  
gold diffused through cream and mauve.

you make us tea the color of my skin and sip,  
august and absorbed in this ritual of morning.  
in this moment, we are possible.

yet this room is not ours, this bed, these cups.

we're just borrowing and  
there is no ritual  
to transform the British floral of your best friend's sheets  
into the plain, Christ-like linen of your dorm set.

we were given one night, now morning's come  
we can't go on pretending, we must go.

but please,  
as we hurtle up North, to the sea and our studies,  
as the rain rolls in 'neath this bruised Scottish sky,  
as we become clandestine, platonic, pretend,

let us remember  
my lips at your temple where the hair is soft and new,  
and the trail of my fingers along the rind of your hip  
- a swallow's wing skimming midnight pools  
because I'll always be there to rub the warmth back in  
and you'll always take your tea the color of my skin.



## A Poem About Why I Don't Write Poetry

By Tori Newman

The best advice I've ever received  
came from my eighth-grade English teacher.  
A wilted flower-child, with a penchant for patchouli  
--even now I can still smell it--  
Who kept a jar on her desk, labeled:  
"Ashes of Problem Students"  
and played Pavarotti while we read.  
Nessun dorma! Nessun dorma!  
She saw my notebook before I could hide it  
under my copy of *The Outsiders*.  
I wonder now if she had been watching, waiting to catch me  
commit the bloodless crime of inattention.  
I had been writing poetry, speaking in

broken

lines

staggering my anger and ignoring my rhyme--  
And I felt so very clever.  
She slid my secret away from me, its pages open  
and exposed and altogether opposite of what  
I had written on the cover in the most permanent of markers:  
"PRIVATE PROPERTY - KEEP OUT"  
She did not say anything, but I knew that meant she  
wanted to see me after class.

Bell rings and I am at her desk and I am already composing my poetic  
revenge,  
when she looks at me and says, "So. You want to be a poet?"  
In the way that only middle-schoolers understand,  
I was too annoyed and ashamed and apart to answer, but  
my silence seemed to satisfy her.  
I wonder now if someone once asked Allen Ginsberg that question.  
Horn-rimmed and Jewish and and even scrawny-awkward as me,  
maybe.  
Did an answer come? Did it all bubble up and spill out over the long  
beard  
--which he had yet to grow--

but remembered from the days when he was called Walt Whitman?  
All of that disgust and delirious beauty that knew it was all unfair  
--all that we call poetry--  
lying dormant in a boy in Brooklyn,  
waiting to wake from a decades-long nap.  
Il nome mio nessun saprà!

“Let me give you some advice.”  
She closed the notebook and gave it to my open palms, the pages  
heavy with something other than the ink blots that were my words.  
The empty room was filling with bodies  
warm from dodgeball or young love  
--it doesn't matter which--  
all to the tempo of Luciano's tremolo.  
I wonder now if they were listening then.  
“Live your damn life, and write your poetry when no one is watching.”  
She wasn't angry, but I was terrified  
because I had never heard a teacher swear before.  
All'alba vincerò, vincerò, vincerò!

It has taken me a lifetime to learn what she had left  
pressing on my ears and burning in my hands.

The notebook was used as tinder that summer  
--I didn't mind--  
the thirteen-word eulogy was preemptive, but prepared.  
Blinking away the smoke of the funny funeral pyre,  
I thought I smelled patchouli.  
And last May, when I was in her room once more, this time paying my  
respects,  
I noticed the jar was still on her desk,  
and it was empty.  
I wonder now if I should've filled it with all that has since been  
pressed into  
my ears and burned into my hands.  
All of the words with meaning and power that tell me I'm worth  
something for knowing  
Vicissitude,  
Palimpsest,  
Cicatrix,  
42

Blackberry,  
No.

I should have filled it with those long-ago ashes  
when I had the chance  
--a memorial to the day my career as a poet ended  
and my life as one began.

## Summer Sweet

By Kym Littlefield

I remember counting *one*,  
  *two*,  
  *three*,  
  *four*, in my head.

Counting my salt—I'm nobody special,  
Each crystal will weigh against me  
after '*a long winter*', as far as Purgatories go.  
I got to eighty-six before my patience exhausted; confirming,  
Reconfirming, and denying what I had forgotten,  
Or already counted.

To itemize  
[like slaves in The Middle Passage]  
          is to be weightless between His thumb  
and pointer, to count sins as sins  
regardless of context.

To weep beneath a shrink's clock.

In an array, I count my tears.  
On a *campito*, the rows grow in the shade of a scarecrow—  
stuffed by a farmer who did not tend an almanac, who knew  
his faith was more profound than his labor, but who  
loved like hell, and nearly fell to it when he cried.  
Because who else is not ready for anything else.

On the scale, naked, weighing, he cannot know if the harvest  
will sustain beyond  
another drought season, if he had saved faith  
but ignored circumstance.

## To Jourdan

By Lauren Gustafson

The first was a new blend,  
A Syrah, ruby wine.

It did not sit on my tongue  
But lifted instead, into my veins.  
When we bought the bottle,  
I told you to follow me.  
We ran through the vines  
Up a yellow hill  
To the old California oak,  
Backs to the lowest branches,

Where I caught my breath.  
Heavy air, and you,  
Like Syrah,  
Syrah, Syrah,  
Spilling down my arms,  
Into my hands, onto my chest,  
Up to my lips,  
For a while,

And oak shadows moved  
on your face.  
In Europe, you said,  
They leave the vine alone.  
It's God's choice, you said.  
Live or die.  
With lucky grapes  
The French mix juices.  
Add water, sweeten, and blend.  
"And here?" I said.

They irrigate them,  
Irritate them.  
But then,  
Pure wine,

From the first press.

“Cheers,” you said.  
To the oil of the grape,  
The life of the vine,  
Its blood on my tongue.

## Guillotine

By Mimi Mendes de Leon

There was always that one day at my grandmother's house in the Netherlands, that one day when the lazy rays of the sun set at night not to return the next day. On that one day of rain, the constant, bitter sheets of it, we were trapped in the guest house—a building we affectionately called the Stall—left to stare out the full length windows at the pool tarp being beaten down by the shower. Our bedrooms were all up in the loft of the old barn, and to stay in bed meant to hear the old wooden frame of the roof creak and groan under pressure. That left us in the foyer, a brown and musty space where we struggled to find a comfortable surface to curl up with our books. We even lit a fire once, but even the flames could not soften the room.

Eventually, we found a solution. In between sneaking bites of chocolate and waffles, my three siblings and I would gather along the long wooden table to play Guillotine. It was our favorite game, one we never travelled without. The small brown box that held the cards always was tucked away in a Ziploc bag in the depths of my parent's luggage. "Win by getting a head"—that was the tagline. The game was based on the Reign of Terror. Each card had the caricature of a member of French society, from the Piss Boy, who was only worth one point, to Marie and Louis themselves, who were each worth five. The goal was to collect as many of these "heads" as possible by moving them with action cards to the front of the line. 'Educational' is what my parents called it, but my siblings and I now see it as dark.

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In between the l's in Guillotine on the game's box was a blade. The letters were a bright red, and stretched out down the cover. It was a fairly accurate representation of a guillotine. The guillotines used by the French were painted red since the very first was used in 1792. Nicholas Jacques Pelletier—its first victim—wore a red shirt as well. Women in the crowd wore guillotine earrings specially designed for the event, and little wooden models were sold as toys to children. Yet despite the events popularity, the French seemed particularly determined not to see any blood.

Pelletier had to wait three months for that day, three months waiting for the National Assembly to decide whether or not to execute

him with a sword or this new invention. And then a little bit longer while they built the guillotine and painted it. From what is known of Pelletier, he was a common highwayman, the usual suspect in a usual crime. For Pelletier, it was the worst timing, destined by a judge to sit and wait for that red shirt.

A year later and Pelletier's executioner, Sanson, did not have to wait. At the height of the Terror, Sanson was responsible for three hundred executions within three days. This is the basis of the card game. And like the game we played, Sanson's executions moved quickly. Sanson could execute twelve people in thirteen minutes. On the splintering wood of the table in the Stall, cards slid across the table and into my siblings' hands. The three rows of four were swapped back and forth as everyone tried to get the highest cards to the front of the line. There was no wait, except in between days when the remaining cards would be shuffled and dealt into a new line, and then our pudgy little hands would again take the symbolic place of the bright red guillotine.

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"It is a certain kind of hell," Delbert Tibbs told the audience. We were sitting, crammed together in the lecture hall, at Denison University listening to Tibbs narrate his time on death row. I was a senior in college now, and it had been almost a decade since I last played Guillotine in the Stall. Tibbs was a part of the 'One for Ten' project: a group of exonerated death row inmates who educate people on the death penalty. Tibbs stood alongside Damon Thibodeaux and Joe D'Ambrosio in the front of the lecture hall. None wore suits, but muted flannels and button-downs that blended in more with the walls than the fall leaves outside the windows. The event was hosted by our school's Amnesty International group, and they had promoted it with sidewalk art and posters across campus. Students packed the room, sipping on the free coffee as a mid-day boost and packing their bags underneath chairs and tables along the sides of the room.

Tibbs had been on death row for two years before being exonerated, and remembers it in detail. His face aged on a diagonal, and now he described how each day added up only in his own mind, how structure simultaneously disappeared and defined his new life, he allowed the words to affect his entire face. He had not hardened; he was not a criminal. But he was not ignorant either, and he believed firmly in a hell that he had already experienced.



In a question and answer session, someone on the opposite side of the room asked how the three men avoided going mad. For D'Ambrosio, it took him twenty-two years to be exonerated—8,170 days. The number was memorized, and every time he said it, he tilted his face forward in anger. Although he had lost his hair in prison, his face had been unweathered by the elements, and he gave a genuine laugh in response to the student's question. All three of the men did. They nodded their heads and D'Ambrosio told us that you cannot avoid going mad on death row. 8,170 days, he said, all exactly the same. With no gossip or sporadic encounters, none of the small, spontaneous elements that separate one day from the next, complete isolation left one destined to moments of self-destruction. None of the three men said how they broke down. Instead they looked in each other's eyes and merely acknowledged that they did.

Listening in, I found a prideful part of myself believing that I would not fall prey to madness, that I could structure my days. I would read books, or work out, or learn a new skill, but watching the way D'Ambrosio's mouth turned up with every mention of the word 'freedom', I know that I would leave as he did, finding hidden parts of myself that haunt me.

Unoccupied time terrifies us. Baggage claims, elevators, grocery stores—all the places we wait without structure have found ways to distract us rather than have us be idle. The Houston airport used to be flooded with complaints about its baggage claim, even though the wait was only five to seven minutes. Rather than speeding up the baggage, in 2012 Houston re-routed its passengers so that it would take five to seven more minutes to walk from their gates to the claim area, and complaints nearly ceased. Elevators now have mirrors next to their doors, and grocery stores fill their checkout lines with magazines. These moments in our lives are small, yet we cannot happily fill them on our own. We crave structure, just as we crave freedom from it.

But death row does not have the benefit of mirrors or walkways. No one tries to distract you from your fate but yourself. Robespierre said "Terror is nothing else than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible." And Thibodeaux said that you cannot see the system until you step outside of it. He certainly did not. Around 5'8", with glasses and dimples, he told us that he was convicted in 1996 for the murder of his step-cousin. He had confessed to the crime after being held for eight hours. His confession did not match evidence found at the scene,

nor did the police find evidence to place him there. He had never been convicted of a crime before, none of the three men had, and fifteen years later his waiting ceased. You cannot not go mad, he told the crowd. He spoke with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders squared up close to his ears. You tap your hand against the steering wheel in traffic, flip through tabloids at the store, and ring your hands talking to yourself on death row.

Tibbs, Thibodeaux, and D'Ambrosio all knew their own innocence. The unstructured days in their cells were given a cause by this, an end goal. If they had faith, there was a path other than the one that led to that sea foam green chair. But there is dread in that too. Not just fear of noises in the night but sitting in the fluorescent glow of the cell as a prison tour takes a walk down death row and thinking, just for a second, that you might lose. That this may be the last year of your life, and you are trapped behind that door for tourists to gawk at.

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My brother, Andrew, and I used to free-play with the cards when the game became too monotonous. We found the cards more fun alive than dead with the deep frown of the Unpopular Judge and the glimmering teeth of the Fast Noble. In between our sneaking sugar cubes from the tea set, Marie Antoinette, in her purple lipstick and beauty mark, would be rescued by the brooding Master Spy as Robespierre tried to stop them.

Andrew and I had the right idea. Those cards were worthless waiting in line to be points in a player's hand. Where the real excitement lie was in having them interact with each other. But those cards on the table could be anyone, and it was in the Stall where we heard about a different type of waiting, one that made Guillotine start to fade from our lives.

We were several years older by then, or at least, we felt old. I was twelve, and my siblings were fourteen, ten, and eight. My grandmother had come to cook us dinner while my parents went out with some friends. She embraced our Americanness that night and had cooked us what was meant, we assumed, to be hamburgers, only they included very little cooking and a lot of red, red meat. My sister, Emilie, whispered not to eat them, that she would put them back on the stove after our grandmother left. But then our grandmother pulled a stool over from the bar. She sat, with her floral skirts hanging around her, at the head of the table, raised up from where we sat on

the benches. The lights from the kitchen behind her cast shadows over her face, and she opened up to tell us a story.

We were lucky, she said, to have never lived through the War. It was always the War, and never the World War II of our history books. She had been only a year or two older than me when the War started, when the Nazis swept through Holland. But her daily life did not change much. Men she had never seen before marched down the streets, but she still attended school, and went shopping, and waved goodbye as her father biked to work.

Her father was the director of the hospital, and each morning his narrow frame would join the mass of bikers peddling off through the streets of Amsterdam. After Nazi occupation, my grandmother's house had submerged in whispers. The whole city seemed to as those men they did not know became more and more frequent.

One day, my grandmother came home to a house deserted by whispers. It was silent as she stowed her bike in the shed, and walked down the hallway to greet her mother. The emptiness she had felt in the hallway grew when she saw her mother, who turned to her and asked her politely to bring her father lunch. It was a simple sack lunch, with bread and milk and cheese, but it was not a simple destination. My grandmother was not headed to the hospital, but to a Nazi headquarters, where her father had been taken that day. She brought it to him, and she remembers him being silent and gaunt, sitting there and drinking his milk. That was the last anyone saw of him. The Nazis would not answer any questions, and the family did not want to risk asking too many. They retreated back to their home, relying on hopes and prayers and waiting to see if he would return one day after the war.

More was whispered to my grandmother as the war went on. Her father had been using his position at the hospital to harbor prisoners of war and Jews by covering them in bandages and I.V.s to mask their identities. She heard her older sister leave the house, not to return for weeks with only more whispers and vague, hushed words. There were rumors that her father had been taken away to a camp, although my grandmother did not know what that meant. Other people reported to her mother that he was still in Amsterdam, in the headquarters. The family waited and waited for the War to end, and when the Canadians marched through Amsterdam, they waited again.

He never came home. My great-grandfather had disappeared, and while my grandmother could put together the pieces, she still

waited, even as she sat there in the Stall. Her round face and daunting cheekbones, the same ones my father had, sat there silently in the shadows for a few moments. The four of us glanced from her to our burgers, which, bun-less, were oozing red juices all across our plates. She continued on with her stories, talking until our plates were cleared and our stomachs ached from a combination of the raw meat and family history.

Two years later, and my grandmother's wait came to an end. Although I was now fourteen, I was still only allowed in the main house for formal dinners, but I have heard the whispers so many times that I can see it happen. A Dutch historical society visited Smeermaas to see my grandmother. In my head, they are a young man and a young woman, dressed like it is 1946 with pea coats and oxfords. They are gentle as the young man hands to my grandmother a laminated document. The young woman places her hand on my grandmother's shoulder. The papers were orders of execution for her father, my great-grandfather. The date was only a few days after my grandmother had last seen him.

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D'Ambrosio, Tibbs, and Thibodeaux all discussed this period after the wait as a wrestling match. No longer is the enemy external. The fight moves inside your head. D'Ambrosio and Tibbs recalled a special trouble with doors after exoneration. Doorknobs seemed like more of a freedom than picking a restaurant, but they would catch themselves, hovering a few feet from the door, unconsciously stopping for someone to open it for them. And their keys, they said. D'Ambrosio remembered the angry glares and annoyed glances he received for the first several weeks of freedom, all because he could not stop rubbing his keys in his hand or jingling them in his pocket. Keys meant authority, and now he had a complete set.

But there is still anger. My grandmother tells her story differently now. Now she is the last to see her father before the Nazis lined him up to be shot. And D'Ambrosio, a veteran, tours with the 'One for Ten' project because after fighting for freedom, his was taken, and now it is just the keys, the keys and a cell phone that holds as much memory as the last space ship he had watched on TV.

With the cartoon sketches spread along the cracked wooden table, skipping and cutting each other, Guillotine does not feel like a game of execution. Guillotine, Uno, Farmer's Bridge—they were all cards on the table. A way to pass time until we could venture out.

In reality, we were only playing Guillotine until the rain stopped, which in Holland was unpredictable. And at the height of the Reign of Terror, those who were beheaded were not waiting long either; not, at least, if you were nobility or royalty, those cards were always moved to the front of the line. They were worth more points. In the same way, those without means, or those perceived to be without means, get shuffled to the back of our system as well. We no longer believe in Robespierre's version of terror as justice, yet we still practice it. Playing guillotine taught me the names of the French Revolution, but it did not teach me about capital punishment. The cartoon faces only instructed me in the meaning of passing time, of being constructive, of being occupied. Laying along the matted fur of the benches Andrew and I took these caricatures out of the game and into a different story. But even our stories were full of violence, the bad guy cards with their furrowed foreheads and clenched jaws being whipped down from the table to the concrete floor, stirring up dust before settling under a layer of it until the next game was to be played.

## Home

By Emily Carnevale

I check the radiators  
and when I tell you they are fine  
You say the clangs resonate between  
your ribs at night.

So I give you my neck, like  
the banister it has collected  
so many dings that I have named them  
after our parents.

You give me palms full of walnuts  
and rub them against my throat.  
“They can fix scratches you know.”  
“Can they?”

At night, when you struggle  
to find that woman in your dreams,  
your head constantly hits the pillows—  
You hit me once.

You woke; the sweat dotted your forehead like  
wax drippings. “What happened?”  
I touched your cheek; knew that earthmovers  
Uprooted the layer of rock you

wear in the day. “You’re so cold,” I said.  
Permafrost has kept your insides  
Frozen in time— a grandfather clock  
that remembers two moments a day.

You apologize and roll  
back into sleep.  
But the radiators in your chest expand  
and consume more than half of the bed.

Like the way the swirls in your hair shrink

in steam, I condense the curve of my spine  
and recede into the pillowcases  
because our sheets never talk back.

You think I don't understand the cavities in your chest?

## The Nadir

By Emmalee Hagarman

It's not the way your fingers plot points  
across the valley of my back that pulls me  
down to the basement's stiff and stained carpet.  
It's just gravity as I take in the dust, and you.

You ask if the stubble on your chin hurts me.  
Already I sense Jupiter's red spot  
spreading across my cheek.

But I tell you Saturn floats in water.  
The air, born from your lips,  
is not my oxygen, nitrogen, and water,  
not my atmosphere, but yours, all yours.

Tonight, before we touched, a mosquito flew  
from me to you. You crushed it—  
a comet's tail of blood staining your arm—  
my blood and yours too,  
the same atoms and particles  
from stars we cannot see. "How's it going," he said, inflecting it as a  
statement rather than a question.



## May 18th, 1980

By Makenzie Shaw

Two peaks north of Mount St. Helens,  
six geologists were consumed  
by research since March, studying  
the dawdling topography  
as the mountain swelled till full bloom,

so that the north slope was displaced  
over one hundred meters toward  
the men. Unable to perceive  
the tension budding, like growing  
until you are grown, they waited

'til the underground heat melted  
the rock, sending a landslide north,  
and a lateral explosion,  
slow moving enough to choose  
to keep data safe, not bodies.

On the East, an acute pre-teen,  
whose old parents divide her time  
between Washington and UPenn,  
demands to go home to see the column,  
to watch it spread inland for miles,

watch pyroclasts precipitate  
on the windshields of Seattle,  
wet cement, glass instead of sand.  
Bedridden with scabs on her lungs,  
she stayed in bed till the shards dried.

## **Lowell Mass, 1931**

By Makenzie Shaw

Shop at Unionmade  
in the Mission.  
Or H.W. Carter & Sons  
in Williamsburg.  
Go today.  
Carter's been there since 1859.  
Well, not in Brooklyn.  
And now the storefront  
reads Gentry.  
But, touch the indigos.  
What's the price of selvedge denim,  
coarse and unimpressionable?

Lowell was distressed  
as industry left town.  
Skunks padded down  
main street, kittens in tow,  
making the queued men  
sick where they stood-  
leaving a stink  
in their unwashables  
and a slick of vomit  
around the soles  
of their Red Wings.

## **overturned**

By Szu-Yu Jonathan Huang

A red Solo cup  
overturned  
left on the wet grass  
overnight  
lite beer frozen  
solid.

She lay at his side  
watching  
the sun rise  
when he turned over  
she was  
gone.

## **falling**

By Szu-Yu Jonathan Huang

The tea sits on the night stand,  
thirty minutes steeped  
in anxious pondering, steam  
curling up into the air.

Sometimes it feels like  
a piece of rubber, stretched out  
and waiting to snap back

Or like Galileo on Pisa  
when he dropped his thoughts  
to see if they had the potential  
to become kinetic energy —  
action.

## **LARP**

By Helene Griffin

*Lyla Stevens is a 17 year old high school student. She is currently in an unhappy relationship with a boy named Brock; he is very controlling but doesn't put effort into their relationship. Calix Carlson, also 17 and in Lyla's grade, is the president of the LARP club; the club's only other members are Calix's friends Ellie and Ted. Ellie and Ted are pretty stereotypical dorks; Ellie wears baggy and unflattering clothes while Ted is a bit stuck up about his passions. Right now, Lyla is sitting on a park bench, waiting for Brock to meet her; he is forty minutes late.*

*LYLA: (sounding embarrassed and apologetic as she leaves a message to Brock)*

Hey Brock, this is Lyla – again. I'm sorry that this is my seventh voicemail and I'm sorry for all the screaming on the third and fifth ones but I was just wondering: did you think that meeting at 5 at the park for our date was a suggestion? Because I totally meant it as a solid plan. Any way, it's 5:43 now and I'm getting really hungry so if you feel like stopping by, feel free! Okay... well, I love you – and I know you don't love me back! You made that very clear in that Valentine's Day card. But still. I love you. Alright. Bye. *(closes phone and sighs)*

*Footsteps come thundering from the side of the stage and there are a couple enthusiastic cheers. Lyla looks over as Calix, Ted, and Ellie enter, wearing long cloaks with silver and gold blue stars on them. They are looking pretty nerdy.*

CALIX:            Alright everyone let's get this party p-p-poppin'! What's our scenario for the day –

*Calix notices Lyla, who is pulling her sweatshirt hood up in efforts to go unnoticed.*

CALIX:            Now hold on just a moment!

*Ellie and Ted grab on to the park bench as if they're holding on, clearly thinking they are hilarious.*

CALIX: Are my eyes playing cruel and beautiful tricks on me or is that Lyla Stevens, clearly trying to pretend she doesn't notice me, on that bench?

*Lyla groans and pulls down her hood a bit.*

LYLA: *(giving Calix a pained fake smile)* Hi, Calix.

CALIX: Well hey there DeLYLA! *(Ellie and Ted snort-laugh)*

ELLIE: Sick wordplay!

CALIX: Thanks, I worked on it for a while and have been waiting to use it. Anyway, Lylabug, what brings you to the park? Heard the announcement for our meeting and decided to show up?

LYLA: *(confused)* What, you mean there's some organization behind you dressing like that?

ELLIE: 'Course. We're the Lincoln High LARP Club.

TED: LARP means Live Action Role Play.

ELLIE: Meaning we come up with a setting and our own characters and act out everything our characters do.

TED: And guess what?

ELLIE: It's friggin' sweet.

CALIX: Guys, Lyla's not stupid; she can tell a cool thing from a stupid thing.

LYLA: *(eyeing the clubs' costumes)* Oh, yes. Yes, I can.

CALIX: *(sitting down next to Lyla)* So, come on, Lylaloops; what brings you to the bench?

LYLA: *(Lyla rolls her eyes at Calix acting as if 'the bench' was some cool hang out)* I'm waiting for someone.

TED: Someone who?

LYLA: *(glaring)* Someone.

CALIX: *(to Ted and Ellie)* I bet it's her boyfriend.

TED: Who? Kyle?

ELLIE: No, she's dating Jack.

TED: Who can keep up anymore? I mean, the girl gets around.

LYLA: Hey!

CALIX: Come on, guys; lay off Little Miss Lyla. She's dating Brock.

*Ellie and Ted groan.*

TED: Brock?  
ELLIE: I hate that kid. Brock isn't even a real name.  
LYLA: Yes it is!  
ELLIE: Oh yeah? What's it mean?  
LYLA: *(struggling)* It means the word rock with the letter B in front of it!

*Ellie and Ted laugh unkindly at Lyla.*

CALIX: *(stern)* Seriously, quit hating on Lyla. She can date who she wants to date.  
LYLA: *(smiles a bit, speaks with a tone of pleasant surprise)*  
Thanks, Calix.  
TED: *(rolling his eyes)* Calix, cut the cute stuff; we got a meeting to get to.  
CALIX: *(clears throat and voice takes an authoritative tone)*  
Right, right! Alright, so I think we agreed that today we're in the Kingdom of Nightingale?  
ELLIE&TED: Yup.  
CALIX: I'll be Ardworf, King of Nightingale. Ellie, you'll be Iris, revolutionary peasant –  
ELLIE: *(this apparently is an undesirable role)* Ugh, kill me.  
CALIX: Ted, you're Deerheart, famous knight and... *(turns to look at Lyla, who is sitting on the bench pretending to text)* Lady Lyla, would you like to be Queen Victoria?  
LYLA: Not at all.  
CALIX: *(slightly whiny)* Come on!  
TED: We've never had a girl in the club to play her!  
ELLIE: *(offended)* Hey!  
TED: *(oblivious)* What?  
LYLA: Guys, Brock is going to be here any minute.  
CALIX: What time is he supposed to get here?  
LYLA: Five.  
TED: I think that already happened.  
LYLA: *(snapping)* I know that!  
TED: Then why can't you play with us?  
ELLIE: Are you too cool?  
LYLA: No!  
TED: Of course she's not; she's the one who got stood up!

*Lyla glares at Ted while Ellie 'oohs'.*

CALIX: Alright, guys, love and LARP, love and LARP. There's no hating here –

LYLA: *(interrupting)* Fine. *(stands up and walks over to the box filled with costumes)* I'll be Queen.

*Calix looks as if he could die happy right there.*

TED: Do you even know how to LARP?

LYLA: Can't be that hard if you can do it. *(slips on a large and poofy pink dress)* My first order of business as Queen is to strip Ted of his knighthood *(Ted gasps in horror)*; you will now be a mere peasant.

TED: You can't do that! On what grounds?

LYLA: *(eyes narrowing, starting to get into the game)* Are you questioning my authority?

TED: Yes. Yes I am!

LYLA: I'll have you beheaded.

TED: You can't do that! *(turns to Calix)* She can't do that!

CALIX: She's Queen.

TED: But you're King!

CALIX: Eh, King Ardworf believes women should have equal ruling power. *(shrugs)* The times are a-changin'.

LYLA: Great! Now, Iris, I hereby appoint you to Knighthood.

ELLIE: *(jaw drops and she stares around as if even she can't believe her good luck)* Pinch me I'm dreaming!

LYLA: Nope, it's all real! Well, sort of.

TED: This is why we've never let girls into the club before.

ELLIE: Hey!

CALIX: Ted, that's enough.

LYLA: You've never let girls into the club before because no girl wants to join the club.

ELLIE: I have been in this club for two years and I am a girl. These are breasts, not fat deposits.

TED: No, we've never had girls in the club before because they always need help. You're a prime example of a girl who can't do anything without guidance.

LYLA: You sound like Brock!



*Lyla gasps and covers her mouth when she realizes what she's said.*

LYLA: *(trying to cover herself)* I mean... like, you guys have the same voice tone.

*The club remains quiet for a few moments. Lyla sits down on the bench dejectedly.*

CALIX: Does Brock boss you around?

LYLA: Yes.

ELLIE: Is this the first time he's stood you up?

LYLA: No.

TED: Is he the reason you're a crazy dictator Queen when it comes to punishing men?

LYLA: Probably. That and because you're an asshole.

*Calix smiles at Lyla and offers her a hand to stand up.*

CALIX: Did you know that standing a girl up for a date is a punishable offense in Nightindale?

LYLA: *(laughs a little and reluctantly takes Calix's hand)* Sure.

CALIX: I'm serious! It goes against the Anti-Douchebag Act of 1543! I believe you, Queen Victoria, enacted it.

ELLIE: You also proclaimed it was child abuse to give your children idiotic names.

CALIX: *(nodding at Ted)* And then you proclaimed that nerds who are too into Live Action Role Play must spend 30 minutes of their day outside socializing, not on their computers or watching Battlestar Gallactica.

TED: Hey, that's a personal attack!

CALIX: *(puts a hand on Ted's shoulder)* It's an intervention; it'll be good for you, I promise.

TED: *(sighs)* I know.

LYLA: Hm. Well, in that case I sentence is the dunce Brock to *(checks her watch)* 50 years in prison, one year for every minute of his tardiness! And to his parents, Lady Rita and Sir Jeff, I sentence them to a trip to Ye Ol' Hallmark to find a scroll of baby names to rename their son something less stupid. And to the peasant Ted – I mean, Deerheart – though you clearly need to see the sun

more (*pointing at his pale skin*) I will show mercy on you.

*Ted rolls his eyes.*

LYLA: I sentence you to get to talk to a girl and actually get to know her; she may not be as helpless as you assume.  
TED: Where am I going to find a girl to hang out with?  
ELLIE: Seriously, I promise you all that I have a vagina.  
LYLA: Ellie would be fine.  
TED: Huh. I always viewed you as kind of gender-neutral.  
ELLIE: You really are an asshole.  
CALIX: Well, I must say, Queen Victoria is getting more work done in this Kingdom than has been done in about seven meetings! (*turns to Lyla*) Normally we just run around and poke each other with plastic light sabers. You're really good at this, Lyla.

*Lyla is oddly very flattered by this compliment and grins at Calix.*

LYLA: You think?  
CALIX: Yeah, you're kind of a badass!  
LYLA: No one's ever said that about me before.

*Just then Lyla's phone rings.*

LYLA: Hold on, just a second. (*answers phone*) Hello? Oh, hey, Brock... oh, you were at B-Dubs? Yeah, I guess their wings are hard to pass up... No, I'm still at the park... Yeah, I guess that is kind of pathetic (*tries to laugh along with him but then starts to get angry*) Wait, actually that's really pathetic. You know, I've been waiting for you for an hour? Just sitting on this park bench, cold and hungry. You could have at least called. You could have at least come for a little bit! You could at least not be such a douchebag all the time; like, doesn't that take energy out of you? You live two blocks from the park, you could have at least drove by and shouted out that you weren't coming. It's okay though; I made new friends. People

who actually want to hang out with me. So don't bother coming now. Good day.

*Lyla hangs up and Ted, Ellie, and Calix applaud wildly.*

TED:            Alright, that was kind of cool.

CALIX:         Hey, we still got about another half hour of the meeting. I know you probably have other things to do, but you're welcome to stick around and keep playing with us for the rest of the meeting.

*Ted groans. Lyla thinks for a moment before smirking.*

LYLA:            Quiet, peasant *(she takes a sword out of the box)* or I'll have to fight you.

CALIX:         This is awesome.

*Lyla and Ted begin hopping around one another, flailing their fake swords. The group is all chanting and cheering; it's good times for all. Calix begins to run offstage.*

CALIX:         Victoria, lead the way! *(turning to Ellie and Ted)*  
Onward, gentlemen!

*Calix and Lyla exit, running off the stage.*

ELLIE:            Do I need to tie an 'It's a girl!' balloon to my wrist or something?

TED:             Don't worry, Ellie; I definitely know **you're** a girl.

*Ellie looks confused before Ted swoops in for a very awkward/uncomfortable looking kiss. They both enjoy it, though.*

TED:             Sorry 'bout all those boy jokes, babe; sometimes you gotta hurt 'em to get 'em hooked. *(He gives a hair flip that looks more ridiculous than cool and walks offstage. He is definitely not suave at all)*

ELLIE:            *(totally charmed by Ted's nerdy ways)* I love LARP.

## Say It

By Stephanie Arhin

Her mother had committed suicide.

Claudia could say it.

And she'd been saying it. Every night. For the past three months. It was basically a routine. She would wake up as a cool wash of sweat coated her entire body, the perspiration soaking through her sheets. She'd clutch her hand to her chest, her heart thumping as if it was trying to beat out of her torso. She would slowly allow her eyes to open as she reached for her desk lamp. Carefully. And then she'd say it.

It was a simple truth that she'd resigned to. Despite the fact that she wasn't at the scene of the event when it took place, she heard her father mention it to her grandmother once. The 'drowning' that had taken place two summers ago in North Carolina was no accident. Her mother had deliberately swum out too far. She never planned on coming back. Claudia knew this.

And she could say it.

"Wake up!" Her father theatrically sang. "Brunch is in twenty!" The curtains flew open and the sun leapt into her bedroom.

On reflex, Claudia threw her pillow over her face, nearly suffocating herself in an attempt to escape the ferocious and relentless rays the sun provided. Spring mornings in Delaware were always like this, and maybe if her mother were still around she would've appreciated them. But she wasn't. And she didn't. And Claudia refused to sit through another shallow Sunday brunch on her family's estate without a fight.

Especially since he couldn't say it.

"Claudia! I let you sleep in for an extra half hour."

How kind, Claudia lowered the pillow from her face. Her father loomed over her, his hands folded over his puffed chest and an overall look of disconcertion plastered across his face. He never used to look this way. He used to always dress in flannel shirts and work boots. He never used to shave, the bristles of his beard pricked Claudia's cheek every time she gave him a hug like pine needles tickled her skin on Christmas day. Back then he smelt like wood, sweat, smoke, and the outdoors. He always grinned in the mornings, ruffling his fingers through her hair as he read the newspaper.

A frown tugged at his lips.

"I'm awake." Claudia tossed the pillow beside her and sat up. "See?" She widened her eyes, hoping that perhaps her own vision would pass over to her father.

Her father nodded slowly. "I do." He began to look around her room, his eyes averting her gaze. "Get dressed, okay? Company will be over soon." He quickly exited, failing to shut the door behind him.

Company was always over.

Company was always on their way, about to leave, and staying for a few weekends. Her father constantly entertained them. He had parties, hosted dinners, and supported tennis tournaments. Caterers bombarded the house on a daily basis, and the house always wound up smelling like an overpriced five-star restaurant. The house was a constant chorus of unfamiliar voices, unfriendly faces, and unimportant people Claudia would never get to know. She didn't wish to get to know them.

Company filled the house, but the house was always empty.

Besides, the one person who Claudia wanted to show up was always missing. Her mother never showed up to the brunches, benefits, or tennis tournaments. She hated caviar and every other revolting dish that rich people ate to impress one another. She liked the quiet things, she wished for time spent with less people and less money. But she was dead, and no amount of company was going to replace her.

Claudia walked over to the door and slowly closed it, watching as the latch clicked. Her mother had abhorred the concept of brunch, and often times ditched vacations to Delaware altogether. She would coax her family into going on an alternative trip. Two years earlier she had somehow convinced her family on going on a five-day, totally secluded camping trip in North Carolina. She was ecstatic when they made s'mores on the first night. She beamed as she placed a marshmallow on a nearby twig. Her eyes sparkled as she focused all of her concentration on roasting the gooey confection. The natural fire illuminated her radiance, her teeth shining as she laughed incessantly. The embers danced around her body like glitter, an angel lightened by campfire. Her image was brightened in Claudia's memory.

Claudia sucked in and zipped up her dress.

Not that she expected her father to know her exact measurements, but she wished the clothes he bought didn't fit her like a sausage casing. The dress was a body constricting, white lie of a garment. The thin straps dug into her skin, nearly cutting off her

circulation. The dress wrapped around Claudia's whole midsection like industrial toilet paper, forever mummifying her into a person she couldn't even recognize. She exhaled a shortened breath before unzipping the dress and dropping it to the floor. Her total ambivalence towards looking presentable prompted her father into buying her feminine, noticeably frilly, nausea-inducing apparel. Clothes she never wanted to be caught dead in.

"It's just what they do here," he explained as he dumped sacks of shopping bags on Claudia's bed. "My mother used to do the same for me when I was growing up."

Of course she did. It was Claudia's grandmother who suggested they move back to Delaware and live with her after the funeral. It was she who suggested her father start looking 'presentable' again, purchasing a wardrobe complete with button-up Oxfords and dress shoes. She threw away the flannel, the work boots, and he shaved off his bristly pine needles. He was unrecognizable, the old him was buried away with her mother and the weeks of mourning.

Her grandmother said it was time for them to start anew.

Starting anew meant learning to forget. It meant discarding the incident altogether, to abolish the word 'suicide' from the family vernacular. It meant that Claudia's father was allowed to go on dates; he was allowed to drink and laugh with women whom he hadn't known for eighteen years. And Claudia was urged to 'socialize,' to spend time with teenagers who were far too interested in getting high and spending money to discuss anything of substance.

Starting anew was a joke.

Claudia slipped into a comfortable skirt and loose fitting shirt. She could actually catch her breath in this particular ensemble. Her mother had purchased the skirt for her a few years ago. At the time it was too big for a young Claudia, it would drop to the floor every time she tried to put it on; the image made her mother smile. She told Claudia to be patient, that the skirt would be hers when she was older and more mature. Claudia had looked forward to it.

She walked over to her window and peered outside. Her grandmother's estate was a red brick, two story colonial mansion. Four large sturdy columns stood in front of the house like guardsmen, indicating the public of the large supply of wealth that resided inside. From her window, Claudia could see the pathway that led from her grandmother's backyard deck to the private lake. Lanterns lined that path that was accompanied by a wooden railing. The walk took three

and a half minutes, a comfortable distance from the life Claudia chose not to be a part of.

She backed away from the window and left her room. Once Claudia finally made her way out back to the deck, the party was already in full swing. It always was. She could hear the chatter of rich, inevitably amused people before she walked out onto the deck. She slowly made her way through the crowd of people, observing everything and everyone as if it were her first time. She found the entire charade primal: an almost National Geographic account of high society. She surveyed the scene.

Claudia's grandmother lived for the Sunday brunch. It was her idea after all. "I just think it's a good way to get acclimated to the community," she said; she had enough self-respect not to reveal the true intention for the brunches; the social power that she gained with each wealthy guest, the adrenaline that circulated through her veins every time someone would bring up "Sunday at the Hixson's" in good favor. She sat in the crux of the scene. She wove her champagne flute in the air as she chuckled gaily at some self-obsessed man in his sixties.

Claudia's grandmother was the nucleus of the whole operation, and no matter where Claudia stood; she could see that the whole affair revolved around her. Directly across from her grandmother's table was where the mid-life crisis brigade sat. Claudia's father could easily be a member of that table if his mother wasn't inextricably tied to his life. Those men were in their mid-forties. Every Sunday consisted of them showing off their new cars and even newer girlfriends. They always brought in some new energy, a youth and vitality not even found in young people. If Claudia had to choose, they were her favorite. At least they were entertaining.

Next were the women in the bright hats.

Every Sunday they would clamor around one table with their necks shortened and their voices hushed. Gossipers. They assumed the disposition of vultures, eyes dodgy and shoulders hunched while they stalked their prey. Their hats were always intricately designed; each the hue of pastels, and each ostentatiously adorned with feathers, pearls, and tinsel. They gabbed on incessantly, pausing only to push a morsel through their gaping mouths.

Claudia couldn't take her eyes off them.

Particularly Mrs. Montgomery, who took hats to a completely new strata. On that particular Sunday, she wore a bright yellow bee

hat that shone brilliantly in the sunlight. Vivid flecks of shimmer made her look like a starburst or a disco ball, her head the main source of entertainment to the Delaware elite.

Claudia shoved a piece of croissant in her mouth as she walked past them and their eyes immediately gravitated towards her. They always did. She was “the eater,” the female specimen who came to brunch and *ate*. Claudia tore off another piece of croissant with her teeth and eyed them as she continued to walk on. She walked past the giggling newlyweds and the snotty ten year olds. She walked until the party was out of earshot and headed to her one place of comfort.

She ran her hand against the wooden railing as she walked down the path to the lake. She always walked slowly, taking in deep breaths as she ventured closer to the water. Before her mom’s death, she would spend every spare moment she had in the water. She dived, played water polo, and just swam whenever she wanted to. After her mother’s death, she never ventured back.

It was too unpredictable.

Letting go of the railing, Claudia stood at the edge of the dock, her toes hanging over the edge as the deep blue water lapped closely up. The lake was always empty on Sunday mornings. The water was a deep, peaceful blue; the horizon was stretched far in the distance as the water gently rippled. The breeze lightly whistled and tussled the bottom of Claudia’s skirt as she craned her head toward the sky. The familiar chatter of birds singing in the distance soothed her, their high-pitched chirps full and cacophonous. They were always out near the dock on Sunday mornings, and the fact that they didn’t stop singing meant that they knew.

And they could say it.

Their twinkling, twittering symphony was native to Claudia. She held up her head to the location of the sound, soaking in any light they offered. They reminded her that there was at least *some* beauty in Delaware. And up there, where her mom was, was a place where she could still send down joy.

A tear rolled down Claudia’s cheek.

“So you ditch the party to come out here and cry?”

Claudia immediately whirled around; she had been out on the dock for so long that she’d forgotten she was in the vicinity of true human interaction. Once she noticed she was in the presence of a young, manufactured, male mini-socialite she raised her defenses and



faced the sky again. She dropped her jaw and extended her neck as a wave of tenseness showered her body.

“Are you just going to ignore me?” The boy walked closer to her. She could smell his putrid, over-priced cologne wafting through her peaceful air. The aroma was throttling. “Everyone says you just keep to yourself.”

“I come out here to think.” Claudia immediately grunted an explanation. “It’s quiet here.” Her voice muted as she spoke the last words, her eyes filling with an overwhelming abundance of tears. She was nearly blinded by them, each drop rose up in her eyes to complicate her vision, the world before her becoming a smudged assortment of watered shapes and colors.

“Claudia?”

“What’s your name anyway?” Not that she cared, but at least she could put a name to the voice and display of try-hardness breathing down her neck.

“Bryant.” The boy’s tone softened. “Bryant Calloway.”

“Well, *Bryant Calloway*,” Claudia tightly closed her eyes to hold back any tears that persistently fought to swim out of her eyes. “I don’t spend a lot of time with other people because I like to have time to myself.”

“So why are you crying?” Bryant stepped closer, but Claudia’s back was still turned. She could feel him reaching out, the twinge of desperation aching in his voice. He wanted to say something, to say the right thing – but he was still searching for the words.

What did it all mean anyway? The fact that her father never spoke about the suicide didn’t mean he didn’t think about it. She knew he thought about it. He had to. He thought about it in the way he avoided the lake and took five-minute showers. He thought about it when Claudia caught him staring at her mother’s picture every morning. The unspoken blame hung in the air, the ‘what if’s’, the ‘we should’ve been with her’, the ‘we could’ve done more’s’.

But never the words. Never the ‘she committed suicide’ and never the truth.

The reality hung from Claudia’s lips every day. It dangled mid-air, a ghost that she was always close to catching. She remembered the first time she said it. It was right after she heard her father confide in her grandmother. At first she couldn’t repeat it, but in the middle of the night she sat on her windowsill and looked up at the stars. Their brightness was a clear reminder of the camping trip two years prior.

So she said it. She expected herself to feel lighter, less heavy to not be bogged down by lies and inconsistencies. But it still hurt and she still needed to say it every day.

“Claudia?”

She couldn’t answer. She hung one foot over the edge of the dock. The chilling tongue of the lake licked her toes, playing with her before inviting her into the bitter bath. She exhaled gently. She wanted to know what her mother felt, how she jumped, what she thought; she needed to know something. She could feel a light spray of mist teasing her skin, her feet sprinkling with tiny droplets of water. She could see the memories luring her into another swim. She hadn’t done it in so long. She drew a long breath.

And jumped.

“Claudia!”

Her head submerged into the chilly lake, immediately sending shivers up and down her ribs as her shirt clung to her torso. Her arms slowly waved up to her sides as she bobbed her head up, popping her eyes open when she finally resurfaced. Under the cloud of tears and water she could make out the physique of Bryant, mouth agape and stance stiffened.

Claudia tossed her head back and howled with laughter, her stomach fully filling with uncontained amusement. She could see everything: the Saturdays spent in the garden, the salon nights they’d spend on the couch, she could smell her vanilla shampoo. In the water, her image came to life. She could see her on the last night, swimming too far from shore. She was coming back. She was alive.

Claudia’s mouth completely opened and her top lip curled under her top row of teeth. She laughed so hard that tears began to burst from her eyes, her softened howls turning into sharp, shrieking screams as reality overtook her.

The image was fading, the embers disappearing into darkness, the glittery angel fading into one indistinguishable blob of light.

“I can’t!” Claudia gasped upon realization. “I can’t see her anymore!” She splashed her hands on the water, complicating her vision once more.

Her mother was gone. She disappeared. She needed to see her.

Claudia splashed wildly, losing the image of her mother in her own mind. “I can’t see –” the word *her* disappeared into Claudia’s panting breaths. She was sobbing; her body shaking as tears overtook her body.

Bryant leapt into the lake.

"I can't!" Claudia hiccupped. Claudia could feel pain stab her body from every direction as tears rushed out of her eyes. Bryant's arm circled her waist as he scooped her in one swift motion and carried her back to shore.

The birds continued their symphony.

She could feel water drip from Bryant's nose as the palm of his hand stuck to her back. He was taller than her, his eyes focused on the crowd above her and she imagined that the top of her head was still in his peripheral. Her lips were pursed tightly shut and she exhaled heavily from her nose. She wrote the story in her head; she was an untrained animal, a puppy who jumped into the deep end, and he was the responsible owner who rushed to save her.

Bryant pushed Claudia through the throng of partygoers, all of their eyes magnetically attracted to her image. She hugged herself tightly, water trickling off her arms and onto the lush green grass below. She could hear the whispers, the hatted vultures inspecting her with full expectation, but she continued to press on. Bryant's strength was impossible for her to challenge.

She held her head to the sky.

Their eyes threatened to burn through her skin; accusations penetrated her from near and afar. Her clothes weighed down with each step she took, and the bottom of her skirt dragged behind her. She continued to place one foot in front of the other. She had no other choice. Stopping was a sign of weakness, a sign of embarrassment.

She wasn't.

"What the hell happened here?" Claudia's father immediately leapt from his seat and towards his daughter. He was wearing his 'smart glasses,' the clear frames that perched perfectly on his nose while he spoke about financial accounts and 401K plans.

Whatever.

Bryant removed his hand from Claudia's back and stood beside her. He looked down at her expectantly as all anger washed from his face. It resurfaced with another emotion, a hesitation and trepidation that Claudia was far too amused by. Her father began to rub his hands up and down her shoulders like he used to do when she was younger and she complained about being cold. He attempted to cocoon her in a warm, almost maternal human blanket as water continued to drip from her nose. It was a sweet gesture, a not-too-distant reminder of how things were in the past.

“Bryant.” Her father’s voice was sternly searching for an explanation. His face was stoned and darkened with every word he spoke. “What the hell were you doing with my daughter?” There was a fear in his eyes, a fear that couldn’t be assuaged by Sunday brunches and upper class socialization. It was a fear beyond his control.

Bryant glanced at Claudia for assistance. He slumped his shoulders when he fully understood the extent of her silence. He shuddered as he began to speak. “Mr. Hixson, I can definitely explain...”

“I jumped.” Claudia swallowed. Her eyes were fixed on her father. “And I started freaking out, so Bryant came and got me.”

Bryant exhaled a deep sigh of relief. Life saved.

Her father tensed. “What do you mean you jumped?”

There was an audience now. They took no attempt to hide it. Claudia could hear their yelled whispers. She could feel their disdain. Their judgment. She straightened her back as she performed. “I jumped in the lake, dad. I sprang, leaped, bounded – *fuck*, I jumped in the lake.”

Say something. She concentrated on his cool eyes.

“She was struggling.” Bryant felt the need to clarify. “Sir, she was hysterical.”

Her father’s deep eyes widened as he looked down at his daughter, a softened rage highlighting the contours of his sharpened face. The words that left his mouth were feeble. They strained to reach his lips. “What were you thinking?” His forehead crinkled as his tone hushed.

Claudia shrugged.

“You know...” he dropped the words as quickly as they came. He buried them with paternal scorn. “You know better, Claudia. That was completely irresponsible.”

God. Claudia rolled her eyes toward the clouds. Her father’s hands were heavy on her arms now and she wriggled to break out of them. He met her eyes with a frown as she wrapped her arms around herself, a symbol for the route their relationship had taken. They stood in silence for a few seconds. The absence of the sound was louder anything either had heard before.

“Claudia!” Her grandmother ran up with a beige towel. She wrapped her granddaughter up, never mind Bryant’s sopping physique. “Baby, you’re gonna fall ill.” Her grandmother was in full

performance mode. She quickly rubbed Claudia's arms, undeniably causing towel-burn.

"Grandma. Stop." Claudia insisted. She now felt the significance of Bryant's presence for perhaps the first time all morning. "Please."

A woman arrived and handed a towel to Bryant as Claudia's father continued to search for words. He looked at his daughter with a new display of sadness. She could feel it. She could also see the bright red tinge of pain shading him as she spoke. "I haven't been in a lake since mom – and I guess I just wanted to know she felt – before she..."

Her father's eyes widened upon realization.

"Claudia," her grandmother's arms tensed as she hissed a whisper. "Now is not the time."

"Then when is?" Claudia's tone rose. Murmurs broadcasted from all directions. "We *never* talk about it." She took one step further, there was an audience after all, "you know, sometimes I think you never liked her. You're probably happy she did it. She hated your bullshit society."

Her grandmother retreated.

Her father's eyes continued to widen. "Stop." He urgently choked. "Claudia. Stop."

"Stop what?"

"Claudia..."

"Stop what?" She needed to hear more.

"You know what you're doing..."

"Tell me!" She was powered by adrenaline. It was insatiable. If Bryant hadn't jumped in to pull her out of the lake, she wouldn't be having this conversation. "Tell me." She repeated.

Her father looked to his own mother for assistance, but she had already recoiled into a shell of embarrassment. He sighed deeply and focused all of his attention on Claudia. "You really don't want to have this conversation right now."

"Why not?"

More broadcasted murmurs.

"Claudia..."

"Say it." She demanded for the first time. Her tone was unwavering as she held her father's gaze. It was as if all the people had vanished and they were the only two on the planet. She could feel the power in her own words, and she was charged by them. They ignited an intense electricity that was relentless and shocking. "I had to find out on my own! You never said *anything*."

“Come here.” Her father grabbed her arm and pushed past the crowd. The women in the gaudy hats and her father’s peers watched as Claudia was led down the pathway to the lake. No one followed. Claudia’s heart thundered through her chest as the sun followed her like a spotlight. Her father never let go, the film of sweat between his hand and her arm kept them connected like invisible glue.

They walked to the dock in silence.

The water was a deep, peaceful blue; the horizon was outstretched far in the distance. She looked up at her father’s eyes. They were focused and wet and his hand still gripped onto her wrist. Somehow the birds had stopped singing. Once the two reached the edge of the dock, he let go. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked out to the horizon. To Claudia, the lake was endless, just like the one in North Carolina. Her mother could still be swimming out there; she could still be alive.

“What did you want me to do?” Her father finally spoke as he placed his hand on the back of his neck. He didn’t bother to look down at his daughter.

“I want you to say it. I don’t want you to hide things from me and act like nothing happened –”

“I was trying to protect you.”

“From what?” She challenged.

“From the pain, Claudia.” His bottom lip trembled. “She left a note.”

Claudia felt her mouth open as she struggled to find words.

“She’d been planning it for a while,” he sighed, his voice breaking. “I had no idea. She set up the entire trip to North Carolina on purpose. She wanted us to have good memories of her.”

“No.” Claudia shook her head. “She would’ve told us!” She sniffed as tears washed her face. She would’ve said something. They would’ve known.

“Claudia...” her father reached out and pulled her into him. He wrapped his arms around her and held her to his chest, rubbing his hands up and down her arms like he did when she was younger. She was shivering; she suddenly began to feel the coldness that had overtaken her clothes and skin. And she couldn’t stop crying. The glittery angel no longer danced in the embers of the campfire, her fate had already been sealed. The truth lay right in front of Claudia.

Claudia shook her head. “She would’ve said something!” she screeched.

“I’m sorry.” Her father whispered as Claudia’s chin trembled onto his chest. Claudia looked out at the lake and the way she couldn’t see anything past the horizon. There was nothing else out there, no one was going to turn around and swim back. No one was going to swim to shore and say anything.

## **So You Want To Create A Universe?**

By Sam Heyman

Scene One:

*The play begins with GOD and THE ONE WHO CAME BEFORE on stage. GOD is seated in a chair, and THE ONE is standing a few feet behind him. A spotlight should hang over where GOD is sitting, and THE ONE should be mostly concealed by darkness. As he delivers his introductory monologue, THE ONE should pace the floor, a la a military briefing.*

The One Who Came Before:

So, you want to create a universe? You think you're cut out to be the one your people pray to in times of great need, the being your people curse and plead with when things aren't going so hot, the Almighty, Eternal, All-Seeing, All-Knowing God?

*THE ONE pauses for dramatic effect. GOD tries to jump in.*

God: Y-Yes?

The One: That was rhetorical. I ask only out of formality, you don't have a choice in the matter. You have been brought here today, to the Green Room Beyond Time, because you are the best of the best. The cream of the crop, the top of your class—or at least you would have been if you had had any classmates. Seriously, a class of *one*? Were no other deities born in your eon?

God: Actually, they all dropped out. A lot ended up going into community theatre.

The One: Figures. Softies. It doesn't matter, we don't need em'. This next Universe needs a God with real grit, none of that namby-pamby planets made of frozen gas crap. If you're serious about being a Creator, you're going to have to get creative.



God: I'm ready!

The One: I'm talking planets orbiting supernovas, (Yeah!) planets full of sex-crazed cat creatures, (Sure!) planets whose moons occasionally threaten to crash into them!

God: That doesn't sound safe, but okay!

The One: You've got a lot to learn, kid. Fortunately, you've got me to teach you.

God: And who are You, if I may ask?

*Lights go up more fully, and THE ONE steps forward to where GOD can see him.*

The One: I... am The One Who Came Before. In addition to teaching you how to do your job, my purpose is to remind you that you are not special, that just because you're capital-G God now doesn't mean there wasn't a capital-G God just like you that's done everything you're about to do. Also, I'm here to keep you company, at least until you get settled into this whole, forced monotheism thing you've gotten yourself into.

God: What, is it bad?

The One: Oh, no. I mean, you're a virgin, right?

God: *(embarrassed)* I mean... yeah.

The One: Then don't worry about it. You won't know what you're missing.

*THE ONE takes a flask from a pocket on his person and unscrews it, taking a swig. His mood markedly improves.*

God: What's that you're drinking?

The One: Oh this? Just holy water. It's kind of like a cocktail of Muscle Milk and absinthe, for ethereal beings. Puts hair on your chest, if you so deign to have one.

God: Sounds disgusting.

The One: Yeah, well, it serves an important function. A variety of functions, actually. Want a sip?

God: Oh, I don't drink.

The One: C'mon, it's only holy water.

God: You just said it's like a cocktail of Muscle whatever and Absmith.

The One: And you clearly don't know what either of those things are, so don't worry about it.

*After a moment of hesitation, GOD takes the flask, and takes a sip. Almost immediately, s/he spits it out and crumples to the floor. Gripping his head in agonizing pain, GOD shouts:*

God: Eternity wrapped in fuck-rope! I'm blind!

The One: Correction! You have now traded your common sight for something a bit more befitting of your new job. You are now All-Seeing.

God: Then why can't I see anything?!

The One: Simple: there is currently nothing for you to see.

*The pain subsides. GOD regains his composure.*

God: Oh. So now what?

The One: Now, you create.

*Fade to black.*

*Lights up on THE ONE, sitting on the ground, reading from a book (a Bible, if you can get one), clearly amused. The stage around him has garbage and things strewn about. After THE ONE lets out a burst of laughter, GOD enters the scene, looking haggard and exhausted from some eons of universe maintenance. While THE ONE speaks, GOD busies himself cleaning up the garbage.*

The One:       Come over here, you have to read this. This is incredible.

God:            *(with a sigh)* Define incredible.

The One:       I swear, no matter how subtle you are at taking an active role in creating a species, some navel-gazing kook always manages to catch on. Remember that ball of clay you sneezed on a few millennia ago?

God:            Sure.

The One:       Yeah, that wasn't a ball of clay. I figured you had to get off regulating entropy some time, so I gave you a little nudge. Surprise! It's a humanity!

*GOD would be fuming if he weren't so exhausted.*

God:            Alright, okay. Yeah, okay that's fine.

The One:       So they wrote like a town's worth of libraries of books about you—*Really* cute stuff, though a lot of ritual sacrifice in the earlier ones—and I get to this one, and it's like, "Wow, Champ, you should be really proud of yourself. You've got kids that think you're the greatest."

*GOD flips through the pages of the book, not really appreciating it, while THE ONE takes his flask out of his pocket. After he takes a swig, he continues.*

The One: I mean, when I was you, I was lucky to get a civilization up and running at all, let alone get them to recognize my role in doing it.

God: Yeah, well, you seem like you can appreciate it a lot more than I can. How about we trade roles?

The One: Wait, whoa, hold on there—What's gotten into you?

*Confrontation time! Experiment with physical movement and grappling.*

God: What's gotten into me? The entire ever-expanding bloody stupid universe!

The One: That was your idea, need I remind you, not mine. And it's not that bad, is it? I mean, you can pause the expansion of eternity any time you want.

God: But I'm working all the time just trying to keep everything from falling to pieces! The structural integrity of the outer three dimensions is full of holes, there are stars dying all over the place —

The One: That's what nebulae are for—Come on. You're freaking out about nothing, guy.

God: No, I'm freaking out about *everything!* (beat) Oh.

*God plunks down on the floor, defeated, while The One paces about behind him. His tone is calm, solemn. Slightly bitter.*

The One: Contrary to popular belief, you can make a perfect soufflé. You cannot, however, make a perfect universe. So stop beating yourself up and running yourself ragged over something that's going to end soon anyway. Enjoy what you have done while you can.

*The One takes another swig from his flask. God senses the change in mood and turns to face him.*

God: What happened to your universe?

The One: It ended, just like yours will. I'm over it.

God: You don't drink like someone who's 'over it.'

The One: The wording of that statement is ambiguous and I refuse to acknowledge it.

God: Come on, admit it! You're still upset about what happened to your universe and you wish you could do it over again.

The One: Keep going! I love to be psychoanalyzed.

God: You don't have to be ashamed of it. It hurt you and you wish you could forget it, so you drink,

The One: That's where you're wrong, kid. Out of all of the species in all of the universes I've known, only humans drink to forget things. That's not to say it's the stupidest or most shameful reason I've ever seen. The one who came before me had a species in his universe that drank because they were taught, by Him, I must add, to be afraid of their livers. Needless to say, they didn't live very long.

God: Wow. What a jerk.

The One: Yeah, Gary was a horrible guy. Partly because he was an amorphous blob God. No spine, no sense of decency.

God: So why do you drink?

The One: *(wistful)* Because I don't want to fade away.

God: Well that came out of left field.

The One: Gods like us, we don't die. We just ease out of existence after a while. After that, nothing and no one can find us

again. And since our universes can't outlive us, we're lost without a trace.

God: Wow, that's... that's like a mondo bummer.

The One: It's driven greater men to drink, that's for sure.

God: But... I'll still be around to remember you.

The One: For a while, sure, but give it another few eternities. You'll be gone, too.

*GOD tries to get the flask out of The ONE's grasp, but THE ONE easily keeps him at bay (this will be easier if GOD is shorter than THE ONE, but it could be funny regardless of their heights).*

God: Not if I drink holy water. If I do that, I can keep us alive, and then,

The One: Kid? First of all, to clarify, holy water's a euphemism. You wouldn't know how to make it, and I'm not going to tell you. Second of all, face it. You can't handle your shit. And you're better off for it.

God: *(at a loss)* So what am I supposed to do? Come to terms with the futility of my existence? Wait around until the universe stretches as far as it can go and then coast into existential retirement?

The One: No. You're supposed to enjoy it. Gary may have been a horrible person, but he did what made him happy. Every time one of his worlds exploded into shards of screaming earth, I could see his mucus membrane practically trembling with glee. I'm not saying that's the sort of God you should be, but if you're going to create a universe, make it yours.

*THE ONE picks up some of the garbage from the floor and hands it to GOD.*

The One:      Make something extraordinary. Don't hold back.

God:            Even if it seems unsafe?

The One:      The more perilous, the better. We've come a long way from putting little blue planets just light-seconds away from death by solar radiation.

God:            I guess you're right.

*GOD shapes the garbage into something spherical. The sound of a cacophony of cats meowing fades into the scene (a couple hisses in there wouldn't hurt). THE ONE smiles, flattered.*

The One:      You actually took me seriously?

God:            If Gods wrote Bibles, this world would get its own book.

*Fade to black.*

*End.*

## Revenge

By Helene Griffin

Eddie squat down behind the 1997 Ford F-150 truck and opened her purse. She pulled out a plastic bag which contained six melted snickers bars, all mashed together to make one ball. I grimaced as Eddie took out the ball and shoved it into the exhaust pipe of the truck. We both stared as a bit of the melted chocolate mass began to drip out of the pipe and onto the ground. Eddie sniffed.

"What kind of name is Candy?" she muttered to herself, staring at the blob of snickers now on the ground.

"I don't know," I shrugged, drawing circles on the ground with my sneaker. "I don't think it's that uncommon, though. I had a tap teacher once named Candy."

Eddie snorted.

"Was your tap dance teacher a boyfriend stealing skank, too?" she asked.

I tugged a bit on the black hat Eddie had told me to wear.

"Well," I mumbled. "I'm not really sure."

I was quickly finding out that the 'girls night' my cousin Eddie had promised me was not going to be how I envisioned it. That much probably should have been obvious to me when Eddie had insisted I wear all black and told me we wouldn't start our evening until eleven o'clock. Still, being a mere twelve years old and easily manipulated by my older and wiser cousin, I could not be blamed for tagging along as Eddie waged revenge on her cheating boyfriend. I watched as she began gluing candy hearts on to his truck.

"Have you thought about how he might figure out you're the one who did this?" My voice shook with nerves. I was trying to calm myself down by reminding myself that it was dark and no one was outside to catch us, but I couldn't do it. All I could think of was the risk Eddie was putting herself at and all the trouble that would surely ensue should someone see her.

Eddie scoffed at my question and though the dark of the night prevented me from seeing her, I could feel the condescending eye roll that she was surely giving me.



“No,” she said, drilling in as much sarcasm as she possibly could into one syllable. “I guess I figured he wouldn’t even notice that his car looks like Little Debbie shit on it.”

I could see her shake her head.

“Of course he’ll think it’s me. I want him to.”

My mind was screaming at me to tell her that if she wanted my help she should watch her tone, but I relented. Being in sixth grade, it wasn’t like I had some really hot party to be at instead.

“What do you think will happen to the exhaust?” Edie asked suddenly after a few moments of tense silence. She shook up a can of whipped cream and wrote a certain two-word phrase with it on the windshield. “You think the Snickers will ruin the whole engine or just the exhaust and muffler?”

I shrugged.

“I really don’t actively seek out articles about the effects of candy on car engines, so I wouldn’t know.”

Edie raised an eyebrow.

“Getting a bit bitchy in your old age, are you?” she said, nodding. “Guess I deserved that, though. Here.”

She tossed me some supplies.

“Pretend this is art class. Let the Nerds be the glitter to your syrup’s glue.”

I rolled my eyes but uncapped the bottle and went to work. There was something about being the one that Edie had chosen to accompany her on this adventure that was, for lack of a better word, awesome. Despite my original complaints at being lied to about the night’s events (I had been told I was being treated to the movies), I knew that I really didn’t mind being duped. Sitting down for an eighty minute, two star movie couldn’t have compared to spending a night spearing marshmallows with a car antenna and painting hot fudge onto a truck with my favorite cousin.

When we did all the damage we could possibly do with candy store items, Edie took out her camera. She snapped a couple photos of the car while I held up a black blanket she had brought along to help conceal the flash. We then sprinted from the truck to our own car, which was parked two blocks away, to admire the fruit of our labor in private. Though a part of me still felt sorry for this boyfriend who Edie would only refer to as ‘Joe Dirt,’ I couldn’t help but giggle at the whole mess we had created: destruction perfected in every detail, licorice

tied like on Christmas trees and stuck onto the rearview mirrors with caramel.

I turned to Edie to compliment her on these bows. Her long blonde hair stuck to her face making me notice the tears now quietly running down her cheeks. Unable to avoid my gaze, she swallowed and turned to me, staring straight into my eyes.

"I hope one day you love someone so much that when they hurt you, it feels this bad," she told me, giving my hand a soft squeeze.

I thought about her words, repeating them over in my head. I wanted to tell her that if anyone was to hurt me then they might not really love me, but I bit my tongue. Instead, I put my arms around Edie and hugged her, because despite all her flaws and her hotheaded ways, I loved her and never wanted to see her sad.

I let Edie gather herself before I spoke again.

"You know," I said quietly, desperate to make things light again. "You are pretty creative to put together such an extravagant plan."

Edie laughed.

"I was originally going to do it all to Candy," she said, wiping away her tears. "But as much I really want to blame her, his actions aren't really her fault." Edie smoothed out her hair and flashed me a smile, one that I returned without hesitation.

"Well, I think that's enough of Joe Dirt," I said after another minute of silence. "We have a lot of candy left and I know you have more ex-boyfriends to visit."

Edie looked at me with wide eyes before snorting.

"You know," she smirked, "I don't think there's anyone else in the world I'd want to smear candy on cars with but you."

And as odd as that statement was, I think that if I had to describe Edie to anyone I'd say just that - there is no one I'd ever want to smear candy on cars with but her.