

GREAT LAKE REVIEW

SUNY OSWEGO'S
STUDENT-RUN LITERARY MAGAZINE

SPRING 2025

97TH EDITION

MEMENTO

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GREAT LAKE REVIEW

SPRING 2025

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I HATE THAT I HAVE THIS ANGER

BY VERONICA JONES

Located at 19 W. Bridge Street in downtown Oswego,
the River's End Bookstore
holds the release events for our fall and spring issues.

All of us at GLR would like to extend a special thank you
to everyone at our favorite independent bookstore, River's
End Bookstore!

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A NOTE FROM OUR EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

It is with pride and joy that we present the 97th edition of *The Great Lake Review*.

Thank you to the editors both new and old who helped to curate this selection of work. Thank you to everyone who submitted to us, trusting us with your art. And as always, thank you to Professor Fordham for your guidance and support through another edition of *The Great Lake Review*.

All of my other sentiments can be summed up by this quote from *The West Wing*:

Read a book. In the meantime, remember pluralism. You want to get these people? I mean, you really want to reach in and kill them where they live? Keep accepting more than one idea. Makes 'em absolutely crazy.

Much love + passing the torch,

Halle Collins

DEER CROSSING, NEXT TO MILES

BY CASSANDRA VANDAMME

It had been about half a moon cycle since Mother had left me on my own. The weather was getting colder, the leaves crunchier, the trees barren, and food harder to find. As I carefully stepped through the dark woods, I heard a sudden, deep rumbling sound. Thunder, maybe, but softer and more drawn out – and closer. An uneasy feeling stirred in my chest as, maybe against my better judgment, I cautiously approached the source of the noise.

The soft grass beneath my feet slowly gave way to bare dirt and eventually small rocks that poked and prodded at me. I stared blankly at the sight before me: an endless stretch of black rock with odd markings. The night grew darker, but I could not tear myself away from this strange place. Head down, I walked into the middle of the strange rock and inspected the markings. As I looked, I could hear the thunder again – soft, but getting louder. I lifted my head toward the source of the noise. For a brief moment, I spotted a curious yellow square just to the side of the rock. It had a dark marking on it that was almost identical to my shadow.

As thunder often follows flashing light, I did not question the two bright circles approaching as the sound crescendoed. Lightning did not usually look like this, but I had only seen it once or twice. The lights became harsh and pierced through my eyes, freezing me in place; I could not see, so how could I move? The thunder grew impossibly louder, louder still, until a sickening thud and a crack. The thunder retreated, leaving me alone and crumpled on the cold rock.

Everything is quiet now. I do not recognize this new place.

ARS POETICA OF AN UNATTRIBUTED INSPIRATION

BY SEAN NASH

When did 'I' become a character?
The craft of poetry requires I
disconnect myself, create a false
identity of half truths.

*a lonely sun hides behind
the shifting leaves of spring.
the forest is lifeless.*

Is it the reader who wonders
about the origins of this 'I' I've made?
Or is it instead the poet who fears
none of their work belongs to them?

*the rolling clouds of rain roll back
and reveal the brightness of summer.
there is no one to see these days.*

If I were to write about myself in this poem
is that speaker caught at this moment of putting
words on a page; an inescapable image
of the present? Will this speaker find their

*brevity of falling leaves
signifies the chilling world of fall.
is it worth ruining this perfect moment?*

captive joy? to be the subject of a reader. What
greater desire is there than an intense admiration? If 'I'
am comprised of words, am I free of
worry over my self?

*winter is freezing.
I just have to survive it. my chances are
better if I don't describe the snow.*

No poem I could write could be everything of me.
The speaker's are either the prisoners of my expression
or the freest I'll ever be. Spring comes next,
I'll remove myself from the poem again.

SUN & MOON
BY CAROLINA MARIN



OVER DINNER, THEY TOAST TO THEIR DEPARTURE

BY JENNA CURTIS

*A found poem based on the novel "Exit West" by Mohsin Hamid
and academic notes.*

Spoilage navigated three lives: animal tension, the menace of violence.
The discourse of divergence and the ethical world of rekindling,

wounding lies, the fixation on becoming different, the desire to belong.
Singular movement, she was honest, challenging: "To be among our

own kind." The three of them are noticeable and out of place, subjective
to their differences, bewitched by the horrors of finding commonality in a new

place. The violation of agency curtails belonging, as the trio considered themselves
native to this country. Mass movement alongside the notion of death, of

Temporariness. Consider their drought of intimacy, as their kind destroys habitats
and there is no answer but a long, taut, breath between the three. One considers

her selfish belonging built on wealth, one feels her throat becoming raw and silenced,
as the other reaches back into humanity. Spoilage stewed amongst the three, reflection

bestowed upon each lifestyle, the dread of outgrowing your own roots.

INFESTED
BY SASHA BAILEY

“I think there was a roach in my bed,” I tell my mom. I’m holding my breath, clutching my sides like a straightjacket when she strips the blankets and sheets from my mattress. I’m frantically searching the floor, regretting my messiness, flinching when she hands me blankets that she’s searched through. I’m waiting, anticipating, contemplating what to do when she finds it. *It’s too cold right now for roaches*, I tell myself. *They’re not common in New York state. You’re not in Missouri anymore. You’re not.* None of it helps and my skin won’t stop crawling,

c

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i

n

g,

and—

“Look. It’s just a country bug,” she says.

A little beetle is inching across the bed frame. I don’t know what kind, but it is identifiably *not* a cockroach. Relief.

And then shame.

...

Roaches didn't bother me as a child. Sometimes they'd show up in our kitchen, and it would freak me out a little when they scurried underneath the oven, but I accepted it as a part of living in the midwest. It wasn't a matter of luring them in; sometimes they would just appear, like a centipede, or a silverfish. Sometimes people would call the big ones "water bugs" or "Palmetto bugs" – they weren't really cockroaches, see, just another type of common country pest. I had considered myself a nature lover at a young age, so I was inclined to let them live their lives, like I would the house spiders or even the earwigs. I had been the type to shoo flies out the back door before my dad could swat them.

It wasn't until we moved to ~~miser~~ Missouri that my passive acquiescence turned into all-out phobia. If you've read Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, you know my greatest fear.

...

My childhood was defined by moving. We'd bounce from rental home to rental home, uproot after uproot. Homes I'd grown to love would get sold and soon we'd be searching for the next one. Soon I stopped getting attached – to the place, to the people. Soon I was old enough to be cognizant of the words "bills" and "expenses" and soon I could understand why my mom worked such late nights and why my dad spent hours in his office.

I could *not* understand when my dad bought a travel trailer. I was to be homeschooled, I was told, and I'd get to see all sorts of things all across the country. We'd go from place to place, collecting memories and experiences, seeing things other kids couldn't even dream of. He tried so hard to excite my brother and I – we'll do so much! – but we failed to hide our devastation. Yet again we were to be displaced, unstable, and this time it was to become our lives.

...

I am 11 years old and crying when we pull into Matthew's Landing. It's a new *RV* trailer park just outside of Branson.

Branson is one of those dying tourist towns that used to be popular in the 90s. It was famous for its array of shows, theme parks, museums, and restaurants. My family had gone there, once, on vacation. We were once one of those families that would eat at Guy Fieri's Kitchen and Bar or go see Yakov Smirnoff do his standup. Now we were there as full-time residents – the kind of people who served you at the bar, not the ones to be served.

Matthew's Landing wasn't really meant for us. Henry, the owner, wanted it to be like the local Kampgrounds of America, where tourists would stay for a few overnights and leave by the end of the week. He wanted it to be an *RV* park, a place for wealthy families with a camper van just for trips and a fishing boat stored at the marina. Trailer parks are different; they're for the mentally ill, the junkies, the white trash. Towns like Branson have a tendency to produce poverty, though, and travel trailers happen to be one of the cheapest forms of housing available. Henry was quick to learn that he could make a lot of money off of trash, too.

When we get there, we find our fifth wheel is not parked close enough to the utility hookup. It's our source of water and electricity, and we call up the guy we hired to haul it – now 45 minutes down the road – to come back and move it closer. By the time he is done, we have \$36 dollars left between us. We clamber up the pile of mattresses in our living room – the best way to transport them, my dad had said – to bask under the air conditioning. This is temporary, he says. One stop of many – all we need to do is save up more money. My tears dry in the air.

...

The infestation wasn't immediate. With only 300 square feet of space, 4 people, a cat and a dog, we were meticulously clean.

Our neighbors were not. Garbage piled around their trailer. By the time Henry kicked them out, the damage was done. The roaches needed a new host and we were it.

...

Early on, we discovered we couldn't pay rent, so my dad struck a deal with Henry: he would manage the park and we would stay for free. In the meantime, my mom would take a job at the gas station down the road, and ghostwrite trashy romance on the side. I would complete lessons and assignments online through a reasonably priced homeschooling program, and my brother, my friend, would drop out of school and move out as soon as he turned 18. To say I was jealous shows a lot of restraint. I cried when his friend pulled up and took my brother away. I was abandoned. Stuck.

At night I laid in bed – my mattress taking up the entirety of my room's floor – fully clothed and wrapped in blankets. Even in the midwestern summer heat, I refused to remove them. *They might can't touch me*, I'd tell myself. *I won't let them.*

...

The trailer park itself was as much of a trap as the trailer.

We didn't have a functioning bathroom for over a year, so every day I'd trek to the front of the trailer park to the public ones. I was grateful for my escort – a local cat named Snoopy – but the safety he offered was illusionary. This was not a place for children.

While it wasn't one of those parks for registered sex offenders, we had plenty. The one nearest to our trailer, Jacob, was a pedophile with a preference for boys, to both my relief and disgust. Tommy had a thing for all the older women in the park, and when Lydia finally told him to leave her the hell alone, he overdosed on heroin. No one found him for days. One tenant threw a meth pipe in our direction while we walked our dog. Our area code, "417,"

was synonymous with meth for quite a long time – it was considered the meth capital of the United States for years. Another tenant hoarded animals, a dozen dogs cramped in their trailer, and eventually someone got bit. I watched as Owen – the little boy who lived next door to me, and whom I had warned repeatedly about Jacob – pointed a toy gun at his mom: “Bang bang! You’re dead, mommy!”

Once, a tourist family mistook our trailer park for an RV park – again, a very important distinction – and I tried to talk to the youngest member, a girl my age. She showed me her bearded dragon and told me about her high IQ, her proficiency in music, her travels and adventures. I told her I had never taken an IQ test before and they were gone the next day.

Trailer trash.

...

In the middle of 7th grade I convinced my parents to let me enroll in public school again. It took my dad a long time to accept that we weren’t going anywhere, and he could see that I was suffering because of it. School would give me a sense of normalcy again, maybe even a friend. I started to take my middle school studies a little too seriously. I envisioned myself as the protagonist of a novel: an impoverished girl working to escape, a girl that, eventually, through hard work and patience, actualizes her potential and finds a happy ending. It wasn’t until I was back in school that I could see a path forward.

I took my folder out in math class, only to look on, in abject horror, as a baby roach scurried from it and into the room somewhere. I ran to the bathroom and scrubbed my face, my hands, with tears.

...

When your personal space is so limited, you’ll find you’re

much less willing to share it. When you wake up at night to find a cockroach standing two inches from your face, you'll find you're much less forgiving. When you find them crawling on your utensils, on your cat, inside the cable box – when you're finally at ease on the couch and you turn to find a roach sitting next to your head, watching television with you, you'll find you become awful comfortable with killing. You will no longer believe in “live and let live.” You'll kill mothers. You'll kill children.

There was a roach in the silverware drawer. It was pure white, probably the only albino roach I'd ever seen.

I stabbed it with my pocket knife and cried. *Who's disgusting now?*

...

I learned I could live with cold nights, when all that stood between me and the outdoors was some aluminum covered bubblewrap over my window; I could live with the hot nights, where I'd choose between the safety of my blankets or the suffocating heat; I could live with the uneasy tenants, the crampedness, the loneliness, the lack of privacy, the nighttime walks to the public bathrooms, the filthiness that the public showers could never wash away.

I couldn't live with the roaches. They made me like them. They made me trash. I loathed them for it. I feared them for it.

I was so relieved when we finally got around to bug bombing the trailer. We would stay in a nearby motel for a night while the pesticides did their work and return the next day to clean up the mess.

Their corpses were everywhere. You couldn't take a step without a *crunch* or a *squish*. Even dead, they made me hyperventilate, and I spent the day sitting outside, guilty that I could not help.

Even dead.

Peace did not last long. ~~Torments~~ infestations tend to come back with a force.

...

I am 14 the last time I see a roach. We're outside, disinfecting all of our (meager) belongings with bleach and packing them up for travel. I'm combing over my blankets when a little roach flies from my favorite. I watch it crawl over the gravel and towards the woods.

My estranged aunt had reached out to us. She's growing old, she said, and she wants to reconnect. She wants to buy us a house. *She wants to buy us a house.* She lives in New York City and wants to move us somewhere upstate so we're close to her. She's all the way across the country.

We're cautious. Careful. The infestation is not coming with us.

...

We go from 300 square feet to over 4,000.

6 years later, I still struggle to traverse the whole house. For years I braced myself for the possibility of going back. I dreamt that my great aunt would come to dislike us, and as quickly as she'd invited us into her life, she'd banish us back to hell. Fairy godmothers have that kind of power.

I know she'd never do that, but fear is often irrational. It's parasitic. It leeches at your happiness until you've nothing left. It takes and it takes and it gives nothing back.

There was a time when even seeing photos of roaches on-

line, in movies, in video games – it would be enough to make me ill. I'd imagine them crawling on me all over again, feeling them in my eyes, my ears, my nose, my mouth, violating me in every way. Sometimes I still do, when I can't stop myself from thinking back. Sometimes I am still in that trailer, still in that box.

But I've learned something:

I am not the cockroach.

...

DEATH
BY PAIGE JACKSON



UNSPOKEN, UNDERSTOOD

BY ISABELLA FUSANI

there is something so special about being connected to women.
the unspoken rules we have amongst each other.
the silent looks we share that only we know the meaning of
the protection of our drinks,
fixing our wardrobe malfunctions,
and the quiet motion of the lipstick on our teeth.
how no matter who asks
we will always have a hair tie for you to use
and no we don't ever expect you to give it back
but we do ask that you offer it to the next woman in need.
the endless amount of photos we complain we look bad in
but the women in the bathroom will stand there and tell you
"you look beautiful!"
until you believe it yourself.
the sense of protection in one another
the comfortability in our gut rooted giggles
the appreciation of having them there
after they sat and listened to the same topic of conversation
because we have not gotten over it yet.
the acceptance of our truths
the warmth of our hugs
the thoughts of one another in our simple day-to-day lives.
our tears that are shed but simply wiped away by a soft hand
our stomachs that are filled with food that we will eat if you eat it too
our faces and bodies decorated by those we are inspired by,
matching, not copying.
we are each other's role models and guidance
we have become heroes to some
family to others.
but no matter what
we have been girls together
and we will forever be connected by it.

ODE TO HALF AN APPLE TURNOVER
BY ISAIAH BEDOAR

Half an apple turned over,
wrapped up in a napkin,
with croissant crumbled indefinitely.

Left on its side,
like a fish on a pier.
Store bought salmon.

Someone had bought it.
Someone was going to feast on it.
But a gull took it to the edge of Massachusetts,

and could only stand to eat half
Someone else will find it,
tasty enough to finish.

But two lovers walk past and grimace,
going home soon after.
Lowering themselves into bed.

As one fully wraps themselves in a weighted blanket,
the other can only stand to cover their legs with a sheet,
and I can only wonder what they were going to say.

But one sleeps on their side,

facing the wall,
turned over.

He grumbles to himself,
leading a dance with the dreaming world.
Still, something sits heavy on their partner's mind.

And turned over
a core lays heavy
in my stomach

TERMINATED

BY KARA SEIBOLD

INT. BOOKSTORE - DAY

The front desk is to the right from the entrance. The desk is piled with books. One small area is clear towards the computer.

Straight forward from the front doors is shelves of books. MR. MILLER, 40, a friendly, strict, and old-fashioned boss approaches the front desk.

MR. MILLER
Hey Jacob, we need to talk.

Sitting behind the desk is JACOB, 21. Jacob is obnoxious and childish. He avoids putting in any effort into his job at the bookstore.

JACOB
If this is about the fort in the
kids aisle, that was the customers.

MR. MILLER
Uh, no. Not that. But Jacob, did
you make a fort out of our books?

JACOB
Do you like it?

MR. MILLER
No.

JACOB
Then definitely not.

Mr. Miller sighs and leans on the desk.

MR. MILLER
Anyway, we need to discuss your
recent behavior. You've been late
to nearly every shift and some of
our customers have found your
service a bit... disturbing...

JACOB
Disturbing? How so? I give

wonderful recommendations.

MR. MILLER

You told a child to read *It*?

JACOB

Yeah what about it? It had a clown
on the cover. Kids love clowns!

MR. MILLER

I have to ask. Jacob, do you
actually read?

JACOB

What? Of course I read. How do you
think I landed this job?

MR. MILLER

Yes, in your interview you did
reference quite a lot of classics.
But now, I'm not so sure you knew
what you were discussing. You put
Twilight in the science section?

JACOB

Yeah...it's called Twilight. Isn't
it about the stars and the solar
system?

MR. MILLER

No. I'm sorry Jacob. I'm gonna have
to let you go.

Jacob gets out of the chair and starts collecting his things scattered along the
desk.

JACOB

That's alright I wanted to watch
the football game anyway. See you tomorrow?

Mr. Miller motions him to stop.

MR. MILLER

No. I'm letting you go. I'm firing you.

JACOB

Wait what? All because I get a bit confused when the cover isn't clear enough about the story?

MR. MILLER

You can't help the customers if you are just as confused, perhaps even more as they are. Plus, you're also repeatedly late.

JACOB

I was stuck in traffic.

MR. MILLER

Everyday this week? Then maybe you should leave a bit earlier.

JACOB

I can't do that! This place already opens way too early. And what about you? You always come in fashionably late with a coffee? Maybe you should leave a bit earlier?

Mr. Miller points his finger at Jacob.

MR. MILLER

Hey. This is my place. If I come in a few minuets late that's my business.

Jacob smirks.

JACOB

I don't really think you care about your business. Every attractive women who comes in gets a random 50% off discount!

MR. MILLER

It's a marketing strategy!

JACOB

And how about I tell your precious book club you watch the movies

instead of the books?

MR. MILLER

Lord of the Rings is like 1,000
pages. I'm running a business here!
I don't have time to read it all in
a week.

JACOB

But I'm expected to have every
niche book in this store filed in
my brain?

MR. MILLER

Stephen King books and Twilight are
not niche!

JACOB

Oh whatever! The point is, I come
in here everyday and sell your
books. If people don't like my
recommendations, that's on them.
And if you want me here on time,
maybe lead by example.

MR. MILLER

I don't want you here on time
because I don't want you here at
all. It's not just about taste in
books. You just about traumatized a
nine year old.

JACOB

But you just said it yourself,
Stephen King books are classics.
Gotta teach 'em young.

MR. MILLER

Jacob, we're done here. Go pack up
your things.

JACOB

Fine.

Jacob rushes to grab his things and hurries out the door. Mr. Miller sighs.

SELF PORTRAIT
BY CAROLINA MARIN



BOUNDARY OF CLOSE ENOUGH

BY SEAN NASH

I worry too much about
the face I wear.

We'll spin the carousel,
I'll try and grab hold
to the personality I know you'd
like best and ride it until
I can gamble on being
more than a stranger.

I wonder if everything
I've come to love is built
on a foundation of deception.
That the person I present
is a persona made out of
suppression. You'd hate
me.

I am sure that I have real friends,
sitting on the boundary of close
enough. I'm sure of this

distance. No matter how
much I yearn; my own ideal,
I am uncertain of affections arrival,
numb to its absence as if petrichor
after rain.

Will you like the face
I've made for you?
When the carousel stops,
will I be able to meet
you where I started?

AFTER SUNSET

BY MARK KAHLER

"God only knows what happens after sunset, Susan. I want you home by six." Her dad didn't need to get up from his recliner, nor did he need to put down his coffee. Even when sitting down, his towering build dwarfed her. He lowered his reading glasses at her with a humored glint. The exasperation on Susan's face was palpable.

"But, papa! O'Gloo's limited edition Twin Tot reusable cups are only available for a limited time 'til 6 pm EST!"

Susan could rehearse those commercials with ease, even if she didn't understand all the words. Her father chuckled as she slurred 'EST', he was sure she'd never used that term before. He shook his head, not having the heart to win this exchange with his stubborn six-year-old. To Susan's giddiness, he rose to his feet like a slumbering giant.

"If you're that determined, I'm going to come with you, then. I'd prefer you be careful with me than reckless, since you'd sneak out anyway. Strawberry or mint shake?"

Her eyes lit up as she ran to slip on her tie-dye boots and swipe her brightly colored coat.

"Mint! You said they go away in April, right?"

"That's right. You'll finish all of it this time, won't you?"

"Yes, papa! I promise!"

"It's okay, sweetie. If you don't think you can, just buy one and we can share it. You know Papa loves his mint shakes."

His cross necklace shimmered as he stood, lifting it up and around his neck, the chain dangling gently. He held it over her head, and it fell, caressing her hair and settling comfortably at her shoulders.

Susan choked on her spit as she awoke from her nap. No matter how small, ten-year-old Susan had never taken anything for granted. It was hard not to, what with her religious father.

"When you go out past sunset, God only knows what happens. Take your cross necklace with you. It has the power of Christ, and it will protect you." His voice rang in her head after her little dream; it was like her father's catchphrase.

His superstitious attitudes were now endearing to her more than anything, as much as they had annoyed her as a younger child. Ever since Mom passed, her dad became even more religious. Susan was indifferent to theism but got by using weasel words and many "Yes, papa." -s to keep her father at bay.

It was March again, and this time a new limited edition cup circulated to her local O'Gloo's. They were cheap, tacky, novel little knick-knacks that Susan adored. She didn't really care who was on it, she just loved the collection of the corny fast food mascots. The mischievous but well-meaning Twin Tots, the fluffy as well as dopey Bobo, the flippant but loving Miss Hamham, and the

iconic O'Gloo Moo, king of Dairy, and straight man of the rag-tag little collection of characters. Even as a child, she always viewed them as a big, happy family. O'Gloo was the papa, Hamham the mama, Twin Tots of course as their children, and Bobo resided somewhere between a pet and Twin Tots' older brother. Susan liked the latter interpretation, as she always wished she had a silly older sibling to play with.

It became a yearly tradition of hers to collect the cups. Susan was a big girl now, and she could manage to brave a little bit of sunset as long as she wore her father's trusty crucifix necklace. The forecast said there was a chance of rain, so she brought her new, darker, larger-sized coat and rain boots, which remained untouched in the corner of her room for this winter's season.

As she stepped out, the late winter's sun shone dimly through the clouds, drenching the apartments and dead trees around her in a dull gray. Her steps were eager, hopping down the many steps to the road that led to O'Gloo's. It was quite a walk, about 20 minutes, but Susan didn't mind. She was used to getting around by herself, even if it did scare her sometimes. Today was not a day to be meek, and she felt braver than ever to face this year's sunset by herself. She skipped along the barbed wire-topped fence, holding her hand to it as it thumped along the unique texture of the links. She hummed this week's song that was stuck in her head even if she didn't have the best singing voice. Her joyous romp was cut into when she tripped over some sickening mush, falling forward and scraping her knee on the gravelly concrete.

"OW!" She shouted, curling up on the ground to check her poor knee. It was quite the gash, tears already pricking into her eyes as she wished she had packed a couple of bandaids. She blinked a bit before her attention was drawn to the mush that popped her bubble of carelessness.

A dead opossum lies, somewhat intact but still buzzing with flies around a gashed midsection. Susan's eyes widened as she forgot her pain, admiring the fuzzy features of the deceased animal. She reached for a nearby stick and prodded around, admiring the anatomical features of the claws and teeth. 'If God is real, he really must have put a lot of care into making him.' She thought to herself. She wondered what this opossum got up to before he died, what with the nasty gash dug into its tummy. Maybe it was fighting for something, like a scrap of food or for its baby. She clutched her crucifix, muttering a little prayer she expected nobody to actually hear, even if it made her feel better about the poor thing. Some footsteps sounded nearby. It was an ugly middle-aged couple who gave her a look as they saw her poke around the corpse.

"Eww!" The woman shouted. "You shouldn't touch that, you'll get a disease!"

Susan dropped the stick.

"A-actually, opossums are actually really clean for a wild animal! They practice grooming and feed off harmful ticks..."

The couple had already passed by, babbling amongst themselves while snickering about the strange little girl who was now a passerby. Susan clicked her tongue before deciding to focus back on her journey for the limited edition cup.

She made her way down the sidewalk with a skip in her step.

10 minutes to go until O'Gloo's.

Downtown was where her movements began to slow. It was her least favorite part of the trip there. She suppressed her desire to sprint ahead when she saw the O'Gloo's sign past the crowded city streets. She bounced on the balls of her feet as she stood waiting for the pedestrian light to change from the red hand to the white walking man. Fellow pedestrians accumulated around her, smushing her between themselves to ensure they could get across the street first. She was just thankful it wasn't raining yet. Cars shot through the intersection, leaving no room to dash through even if she wanted to jaywalk. She playfully muttered the letters of various license plates she could get a view of, just to see what funny noise it could make.

"GXL. KBY. LOQ. PE-"

The congregation of fellow pedestrians pushed past Susan as she got distracted by the plates, funneling her to the back of the crowd like the slowest fish in a school. She whined as she tried to push forward in order to make it in time, but managed to bump into a baby carriage. She flopped into the middle of the road, dirtying her coat as she landed on her bottom. As she pushed herself up, she checked her knee's gash to make sure it didn't get dirty from the mud and water. She was startled to her feet when cars began honking at her to get out of the road. With labored breaths, she sprinted to the other side, her hands on her knees to recover. Lo and behold, she looked up to see O'Gloo's sign shining above her like the holy grail of her journey. She felt her coat pocket and breathed a sigh of relief to find that the money she had saved was still there.

She marched forward into the O'Gloo's, the inviting fast food funk wafted around the establishment, promising delectable, processed food and artery clogs. Weaving between the puddles and trash, she dramatically burst open the door.

It was like a haven of nostalgia. The bright, multicolored kids' tables and the barstool seats were individual burgers with googly eyes pasted onto them. The pristine white, planked walls and tanned brick floors filled her with a sense of comfort and familiarity that resonated deep within her soul. She looked to her left to see a wall's worth of painting that depicted the titular squad. She smiled at the sight. It was like a second family welcoming her home after her rough journey. O'Gloo Moo's hand outstretched a milkshake to the side like he was about to hand it to her himself. She made her way to the front counter. Luckily, this year there was no line.

"M... Mint shake and Betty Burger combo..."

She muttered to the unamused 30-something lady who smelled like smoke.

"That'll be \$13.89. You want a receipt?"

"No, thank you..."

Susan handed the lady a crumpled 20 and started to fumble about her coin purse for some change. The lady had already given her the \$6.11 and was leaving the register before she could find 89 cents. Susan looked around awk-

wardly before just hanging back and sitting at a multicolored table.

She took a deep breath and leaned back in the chair, resting her parasol on the wall. A sudden burst of laughter could be heard across the restaurant, making her flinch.

“Oh my God, you look like crap, Susan!”

Great.

Susan shifted up in her seat and glared at her bully.

“I got pushed onto the road, Drake...”

Drake snorted as his friends bounded over to her. She instinctively regressed further against the wall.

“Are you still collecting those stupid cups?”

Susan’s expression grew indignant.

“Yes. I like them.”

Drake’s squad laughed. The chubby one grabbed a toy that was left nearby of O’Gloo.

“We love you, Susan! Please get another stupid cup or I’m gonna die! He’s gonna kill me!”

The goons laughed as the skinny bully grabbed the figure’s arm and twisted it off. The squad chortled as the chubby one dropped it onto the ground and stomped on its head, shattering it. Susan’s breath hitched, and tears threatened to spill at the sight of the silly figurine being so carelessly destroyed.

“Order 256.”

The middle-aged lady called in a flat tone while placing Susan’s order on the counter. She pushed past the bullies as she grabbed her food, trying to escape from the situation as fast as possible. She held her milkshake close, not daring to spill the limited flavor. Drake’s goons followed before he put a hand on each of their shoulders.

“Forget her, we’re continuing the club meeting. Get back here.”

He glanced at Susan one last time before dragging his dopes back to where they sat.

Susan didn’t look back as she slammed through the first set of doors, not wanting the bullies to see her cry over something so silly. It was just a doll, after all. She wiped the tears away with her sleeve, before bursting through the second door and feeling her face be drenched once again. She looked up to see that it was absolutely pouring. She froze, her parasol left in the restaurant. She would have to face the bullies again...

Or so she thought, before the doors opened with the familiar ring. It was Drake with her parasol. He tossed it at her.

“Take your dorky umbrella, weirdo.”

Silence hung between the two for a second. She huffed.

“Whatever.”

Susan stormed out, holding the bag and milkshake in one hand with her parasol in the other. Her boots stomped through the soggy trash and dirty puddles as she looked ahead to the now rainy streets of the city jungle. It was definitely past sunset. Darkness enshrouded the whole city block, with the

occasional headlights of a car illuminating her surroundings. The bright signs of different stores and brands reflected unceremoniously against the wet roads, making an ugly tie-dye mishmash of color that reminded Susan of an oil spill. Strong winds threatened to invert her parasol, billowing her coat and drenching her hair. Crowds were no longer a concern because of the rain, and suddenly she felt exposed without the buzz of people. Now conspicuous and vulnerable, her father's words rang in her mind about the dangers of "*after sunset*."

One such danger had always been grown-ups when darkness came. "*Stranger danger*" was no seldomly used phrase, even amongst the other kids. Her eyes snapped to every shifty individual dotting the sidewalks. When the crowds disperse and night falls, unsavory characters will follow like nocturnal predators, here to prey on the isolated stragglers. She tensed up no matter who passed, be it the pair of teenage girls seeking refuge from rain or the older man in a hi-vis jacket and a cigarette. Covering her bag from the rain, she lined up adjacent to the empty road, with no cars around nor any crowds of people. Just unfortunate stragglers like her.

As she stood at the crosswalk with the red hand, a quick, heavy splosh of boots sounded behind her. Her head whipped toward an adult man in a dark hoodie heading her way. She clutched her parasol. She'd never been in a situation where she maintained close distance to another person after sunset, especially not someone so intimidating. The red hand on the end of the crosswalk told her to stop, but across the street, some tall buildings that could shelter her from the wind were rowed. Her parasol wrestled with the wind anxiously, her shifty footing like a drunk dancer.

With a powerful gust, the wet handle slipped from her grasp, whipping up into the air as it sailed off. "No!" It skid across the road, disappearing past a truck as it soared into oblivion. The inviting shelter of buildings was just a brisk walk away. The man was approaching. Still a red hand. Still soaking.

Susan held her breath. She took a step forward, then another, then another. She didn't look down at the bridge-y white lines. With each step, she quickened. A sudden shimmer blinded her like a flashbang, leaving her screaming and tumbling to the ground. A horn blare made her jump a second time, and she scrambled to her feet.

"Open your eyes, kid!"

She squeezed a meek "sorry" from her throat as she sprinted out of the way, her boots producing splashing puddles as adrenaline trembled through her hands. She found herself on the other side of the road, still clutching her bag of food and milkshake. The quiet walk from downtown to her neighborhood stretched seemingly longer than during the day. In the dark, there was no place to skip or daydream. You had to focus on what little you could see in front of you and what could happen at any moment. As she focused on her steps, her shaky breath caught mid-way as she heard familiar boots thrashing behind her. She glanced back. It was the same man. Susan panicked and turned a sharp right, then left to hide in the cover of an urban neighborhood. She trudged anxiously, her legs sore from the exertion and the fact that she kept falling over. She glanced

back and found the man gaining on her trail again. She darted back to the street she started on, hoping to catch him taking the redundant route. When he rounded the corner with her back to the unnecessary path, there was no doubt about it: he was following her.

She broke into a sprint as fast as she could. She clutched to the cross, too winded to speak the prayer out loud. Her adrenaline was at its wits' end, desperately hoping she could get home or find another stranger before he caught up. Her boots snagged on a piece of upward jutting concrete, falling once more and scraping into her same knee on the wet sidewalk. Pain stung into her as she further dug into the cut, a whine of exacerbated pain slipped from her as she floundered back to her feet, fresh blood leaking down her shin as tears pricked into her eyes. The man was still there, but farther and farther away, clearly unwilling to pursue her to avoid making a scene. As Susan reared a corner once more, and another for good measure, she stopped at a gas station's veranda where she could catch her breath. She inspected the dirty wound and winced as she pulled some of the taut skin. It would get infected, years of digging through the trash had taught her that much. She had no first aid kit at home, but she did happen to be at a gas station. She lumbered inside, still clutching the shake and food bag. Uncharismatic as ever, this gas station was never a go-to, it was as plain and unfriendly as they came. Her eyes lit up as she padded to the first aid kit's red color. Seven dollars. Susan fumbled with her coin purse, and pulled out the \$6.11 with some change. \$6.98 in total. She grumbled as she looked slightly more to the right, and saw a bottle of straight rubbing alcohol, which was doable.

She walked out of the store, now with alcohol and some duck tape. She sat down, rummaged through the O'Gloo bag and pulled out the thankfully dry napkins. She winced as she applied the alcohol then plopped on some napkins after the fact. The scratchy sound of stringing out tape creaked through the station as she fixed herself right back up. Steadying to her feet, she finally took the route back home.

The sound of rolling tires and barking dogs mixed with the downpour, a miserable cacophony accentuated by the dull grays and lingering reflections of downtown's multicolored signs. She made her way back to her block's sidewalk before she remembered something. She used her phone's screen to illuminate a short distance in front of her, confirming that she was indeed next to her chain-linked barbed wire fence. She waved the light across the ground to check on the opossum, to no avail. The faint outline of blood was all that remained, the hue like old graffiti scrubbed away by the downpour. A sharp breeze cut into her jacket, and she was forced to move forward.

She took a left turn, and was back at her "home." As she took the first step-

The hooded man appeared right to her side. "Hey. Are you the girl from earlier?"

Susan yelped as the man came into her vision, she stumbled back, barely managing to keep her footing at the uneven step.

"You dropped your umbrella." He held the handle out to her.

She panted softly, her eyes still fixated on him before meekly accepting the reclaimed parasol. "Thank... you..."

As the man walked away, she took the many steps up the slippery stairs, slowing as her legs grew wearier. She retracted her umbrella and pushed aside the glass door with her arm.

"I'm back."

Susan said without looking up. Identification was a quick process, not like the lady at the front desk cared or even noticed that she was missing. She sighed as she trudged through the hallways, looking for her room.

67.

Her keyring jingled as she mistakenly tried using her mailroom key a couple of times, before swapping to her room's key and making her way inside. She wiped the sweat and rain off her face as she kicked her boots to the other end of the room, tossing her wrinkly, damp food bag onto her bed, and dropping her coat onto the rug. She took a sip of her mint shake, the taste turned up her nose a bit but also gave her a small smile. She didn't even like the flavor.

Still holding it close, she clasped the shake between her small hands and placed it gingerly onto her dresser. She admired the sight of it next to the picture of her father.

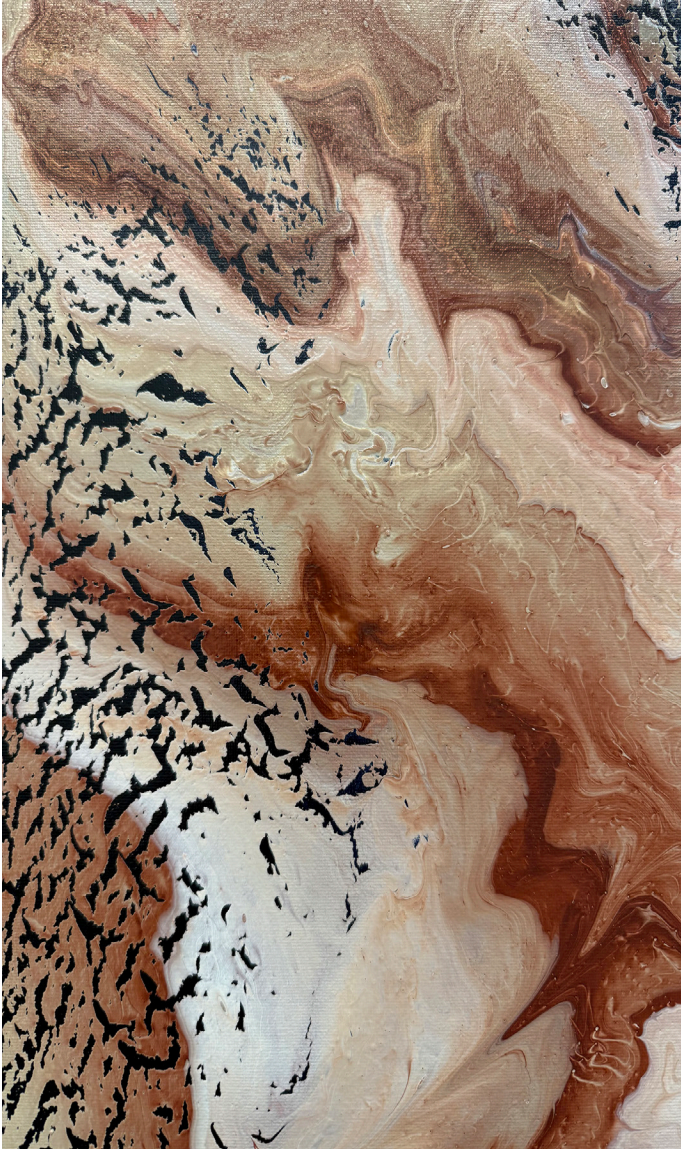
"I couldn't finish it again, Papa, but I got the new cup! It's O'Gloo Moo's limited edition cup this time. He kinda reminds me of you, he spends too much time worrying about his family."

She giggles as she removes the necklace, the cross dangling before she lets it spill onto the dresser as well.

"You kept me safe again. I knew you would. Thank you, papa..."

She smiles before kissing the picture frame and returning to her computer desk. She reached over to the bag nearby, pulling out her burger and fries, and put on something to fill the silence while she ate.

EROSION
BY PAIGE JACKSON



ONE-STAR REVIEWS OF “UGLY LOVE” BY COLLEEN HOOVER
BY JENNA CURTIS

(A found poem)

Bent, ripped, slow, and shallow.
SOMEONE, don't waste your time.
Zero depth, agree with me,
(someone please) had to regret.
Rinse and repeat, the struggle of sewage.
Smells like sewage. If SOMEONE
had to regret, rolled my eyes 52,
53, 54, times. Why?
Mediocracy, shallow, zero depth,
bent, ripped, slow, and boring.

Print error.

FAIR WARNING
BY KIMBERLY SUPLISKI

you're gonna fall
off the swing
crack your head
in two.

you're gonna catch
your finger if
you put it there,
keep it away.

you're gonna scrape
your knee on
the pavement, watch
it bite your skin.

you're gonna break
your leg if you
jump from
any higher.

you're gonna reach
for those who make
you feel whole
in a hollow world.

you're gonna bleed
out onto the pages,
let them stain with
your worth.

you're gonna see
what I've been
saying since holding
you as a child.

I know you,
and I know you heed
no warning when
that scarred heart beats.

FAIR FOLK

BY CASSANDRA VANDAMME

The first time it happened, Ailish was hardly old enough to know what was happening, about five years old. She was on a walk with her parents when she spotted a flower that she wanted to pick for them. When she plucked it out of the ground and proudly spun to show her parents, they were gone. Panic rising like butterflies in her chest, she searched for them wildly. She found only the misty rain and tall, twisted trees that began to look more sinister as nighttime settled on the woods.

After what felt like hours of turning herself in circles, Ailish sat on a soft patch of grass under a tree. Silent tears spilled from her eyes and down her cheeks. *Why hadn't anyone come looking for her?*

She felt a light hand on her shoulder, causing her heart to jump into her throat. The hand was translucent-pale with long fingers that curled around her arm as it lifted her up. Ailish tried to see who it was, but it was too dark to make out more than a silhouette. Suddenly, the figure was grabbing her hand and pulling her along. A strange sense of calm washed over her as she followed, the sound of their soft steps filling the chilled air. Before she knew it, Ailish was back at her parents' doorstep. They opened the door and scolded her for being outside so late. She went to bed without dinner that night.

The second time it happened, she was older, about eleven. She had misplaced some silver coins her parents gave her on her way back from the market, sending them into a frenzy. She was taken deep into the woods and left there, told not to come back until the morning. Yet again she found a soft patch of grass to sit on as she let herself cry. Yet again a pale hand with long fingers appeared on her shoulder.

This time she got a better look at the figure. It was an unsettlingly beautiful woman, an inch or two shorter than her, with long red hair that covered her bare body. The woman sat down next to her and stayed with her until morning, neither of them speaking a word. She grabbed her hand and led her back to her house just as the sun came up over the horizon, painting the dark sky gray and

gold. Her parents did not acknowledge her safe arrival. She prepared her own breakfast alone in the kitchen.

The third and final time it happened, she was caught with the blacksmith's daughter at sixteen. Her parents threw her out with words full of horrified fury and she got the impression that she shouldn't come back this time. Ailish walked straight into the woods and sat on a soft patch of grass, no tears left in her body, until she felt a hand on her shoulder. It was the same fire-headed woman, but when she grabbed Ailish's hand this time, she led her deeper into the woods to a large knotted tree encircled with mushrooms. The blacksmith's daughter was there too. She grabbed the woman's other hand and smiled at Ailish.

After that day, neither girl was seen by the townspeople. Ailish's parents never discovered what happened to their only child, regret gnawing at them like a starved dog with a bone. Only once, many years later, did they see a woman in the distant woods. She looked vaguely like their daughter, an inch or two taller than they last saw her, with long brown hair that covered her bare body.

GOOGLE SEARCH OF AN OVERLY ANXIOUS COLLEGE GIRL

BY KIMBERLY SUPLISKI

After Alexandria Wyckoff

August → Do you need to

**get your masters to teach
pay for a passport
go out to have friends**

September → Does taking buspirone

**have any side effects
make me broken
slow the thoughts**

October → How to

**make him stop yelling
write apa citations
squat on a smith machine**

November → Is it okay to

**take aleve and theraflu
feel so alone
shake uncontrollably**

December → What's the best way

**to break up with a narcissist
to make a cookie tree
to tell someone you miss them**

January → Recipes for

**Reece's cookies
happiness
a good poem**

February → Places to go

**for spring break
when the world caves in
to find yourself**

March → How long does it take

**to go through EMDR therapy
for it to get warm in Oswego
for someone to want you too**

April → When

**are finals SUNY Oswego
does the sun set tonight
is the best time to take the leap**

May → What should I

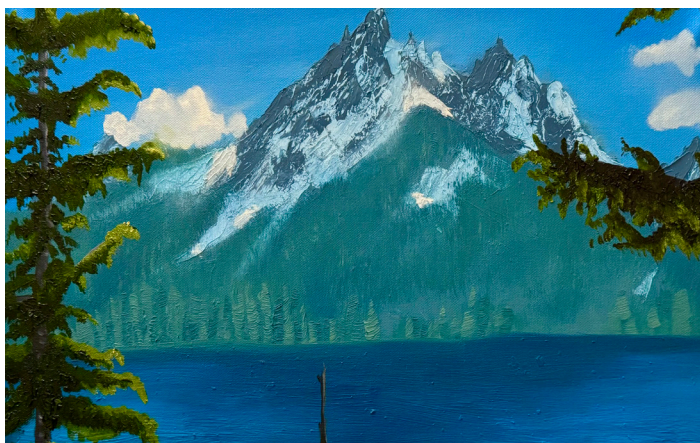
**say to him before I leave
wear for work
do this summer**

June → Aesop job log-in.

July → What do I need

**to do to keep him
to maintain who I am
to prepare for senior year**

GRAND TETONS OVER GLACIAL LAKE
BY VERONICA JONES



ANYTHING YOU WANT

BY LEXIE CONKLIN

INT. BANK - DAY

The front door SLAMS open. A GROUP OF THREE ROBBERS run into the mostly empty bank. A clock in the back reads 12:40. They are all dressed in black from head to toe, except for their eyes peaking through their ski masks and the bits of sliver from the guns barely concealed in their pockets.

Their leader, ROB, is a well built man in his early 30's. Stern but respectful, has a magnetic personality, and a wonderful mentor.

ROB

Spread out! I want this one to go
on without a hitch.

The group disperses as Rob rushes up to the only teller behind the counter, TINA.

Tina is also in her early 30's, appears to be a floaty person but is extremely driven. She always gets what she wants. She shows no signs of worry although she is all alone.

TINA

Hi, how are you doing today?
Anything I can help you with?

Rob is quickly taken back by her attitude.

ROB

Hi, um yeah I'm doing good. Ya
know, there is something you can
help me with actually.

He slips his gun onto the counter and taps it lightly. They lock eyes.

ROB (CONT'D)

I'm gonna make this easy for ya. Go
into the back and take out as much
money as you can. I'll wait here for ya.

Tina GASPS and begins narrowing on to his eyes.

TINA

Wait wait wait, before all that
junk. I know you. Mmm I could never
forget eyes like yours Rob.

ROB

I'm sorry have we met before...

He zones in on her name tag

ROB (CONT'D)

...holy shit Tina. Hey...

TINA

Hahaha it clicked for you too, huh?
How have you been sweetie? You
know, I still have the corsage you
gave me. I smell it every night
before bed.

As Tina breaths in deeply through her nose, Rob begins to become
antsy and glances back. His boys, guarding the door, look over at
him in disbelief

ROBBER 2

(Whispering to Robber 3)
Can't believe he ran into *another*
ex at *another robbery*...

Rob's tone shifts from in control and powerful to limp as he turns back to Tina. Who's just standing there, trying to soak in as much of the man standing before her as possible.

ROB
Haha, that's... cool? But back to business. Ya think ya could still grab me that money I asked for?

TINA
Oh why, anything for you Robbiebear! Just one condition.

ROB
What is it?

TINA
Go out to dinner with me, right now, and then we'll come back here and I'll give you anything you ask for. *Anything-*

ROB
Uh...

TINA
Oh come onnn, let me relive the good days with you for a little while.

ROB

I don't know Teens, does this
really feel like the right time to-

CUT TO:

INT. FANCY ITALIAN RESTAURANT - DAY

Rob and Tina are sitting at a beautiful wood table made for two. Tina is in sparkly red evening gown while Rob is still in his gear. The WAITER places two CUPS OF WINE and a bread basket down. There is a live string quartet playing.

Rob frantically looks around at everything. He pulls off his mask frustrated. He finds his hair to be luxuriously done, not a single hair out of place.

TINA

So how do you like it?

ROB

Tina where the fuck are we?

TINA

Oh don't you just love it here? The
band's the best, they remind me of
when you were in that acoustic
Beatles cover band. Oh what I'd
give to hear "the Weevils" again.

She picks up her wine glass and starts swirling the liquid inside. She points to the basket with her glass.

TINA (CONT'D)

Go on. Don't be shy. It's focaccia,
your favorite.

ROB

You still remember?

TINA

Of course I do silly, don't you
remember my favorite bread?

ROB

Uh...

TINA

At least my favorite food?

Rob shoots Tina an awkward look.

TINA (CONT'D)

Restaurant?

ROB

Ummmm...

TINA

(exasperated)

Color? At least?

ROB

It's been awhile Teens...

Rob reaches for a slice of bread and shovels it into his mouth. Tina sighs with a "full" heart.

TINA
Oh you! Well you were never the one
to remember things anyway.

She snaps her finger and the waiter brings over two chicken parmeseans. The plates CLINK onto the table. Tina raises her wine glass for a cheer.

TINA (CONT'D)
To rekindling us!

ROB
To... something!

Tina's smile drops for a second but picks back up as their glasses meet. Rob takes a sip of wine. They both start to eat. Rob begins to look pale and a smile grows across Tina's face.

TINA
Feeling okay babe?

ROB
I... don't know.

WE SEE FROM ROB'S PERSPECTIVE EVERYTHING LOSING FOCUS. FAINT LAUGHING STARTS TO BE HEARD AS ROB FALLS OFF HIS CHAIR.

BLACK SCREEN

The laughter can still be heard. A chair scrapes across the floor and high heel footsteps come closer and closer.

EXT. BANK - PARKING LOT - DAY

Rob is sitting limp on the floor leaned against a lamp post, now in a casual tee-shirt and jeans.

There is a BOTTLE OF PILLS laying open next to him. He returns to consciousness in a jolt, panicking. He looks down at himself confused.

He grabs at his hip for his gun which is no longer there. He feels something in his pocket and takes it out. He unfolds the FIFTY DOLLAR BILL that was shoved in there.

The bill has a lipstick kiss on it along with a phone number written in the same lipstick. A little note on the bottom reads “Red. Red was my favorite color.”

Rob sighs deeply as he takes out his phone to check the time. It’s now 12:45. His lock screen is a photo of him and Tina kissing in the restaurant.

He closes his eyes in disbelief as he slips his phone back into his pocket. Shaking his head he looks back down at the dollar.

ROB

(sotto)

Why do I always have to get with
the crazy ones?

He shakes his head as he starts to leave the parking lot.

ROB (CONT'D)

(While walking)

At least I got fifty bucks this time!

RASPBERRY TANGERINE SODA

BY ARIANNA PANTOZZI

Hold me darling
In a box or in your heart

I don't mind if its under a tree
Or on top of your knees,

Gnawing at your fingers-
Love bites are secretly your favorite.

THE SILENCE BETWEEN US

BY DIAMOND RAMOS

We were packed into a rental SUV; my mom, grandma, two younger sisters, and my stepfather behind the wheel driving from the Bronx to SUNY Oswego for my first year of college. Hours into the trip, we pulled into a rest stop. One by one, everyone climbed out to stretch, leaving just me and my stepfather in the car. Seizing the rare moment alone, he reached for the radio dial, lowering the loud music. Without facing me, his eyes fixed on the windshield as he said:

“You know I’m proud of you, right? Your mother especially. She worries about you being so far away, but I believe you’ll pull through. You always have. I’ve seen how you are, and there isn’t anything you can’t do. And if anything happens, you know you can call us. We’re here for you.”

The words hung in the air, unexpected and weighty. I searched for something—anything to say, but all that came out was, “Okay.” Not “thank you” or “I appreciate that.” But then again, that was my answer to 85% of our conversations back then. Don’t get me wrong—I love my stepfather now. But you could say I was not very fond of him when I was younger.

I first met him when I was no older than seven. My mother, doing her best to ease me into the idea of him, slowly introduced him into our lives. At this time, it was just me, my mom, and my grandmother. Before I ever met him, I already knew of him and his reputation. He was a teacher at my middle school, notorious for his intimidating presence and scary demeanor. He was the one who broke up fights and had a voice that boomed through the halls, sending staff and students scrambling. I didn’t like him, not even before I knew he would be in my life more than I could handle.

When I found out my mom was seeing him, a sinking realization hit me: If he were to come into my mom’s life, I would see him more and my mom less. I tried everything I could to keep them apart, tried to wedge myself between them, even though, as a

child, I knew there was only so much I could do.

But sooner or later, when I was eight, my mom and I moved in with him and his family's apartment. It was the first time in my life that I truly felt defeated. I was forced out of the home I knew, my mom hardly had time for me, and my grandmother couldn't live with us anymore. Instead, I was surrounded by strangers, his family, the people who were related to the man I already hated. To a child, it felt like life had ended before it even began.

When I was nine, my younger sister was born. I instantly adored and cherished her with fierce protectiveness, ignoring and almost erasing the fact of who her father was. I stayed close to her, convinced I was shielding her from a family that barely acknowledged my existence. But, of course, I was wrong. They treated her the way they should have treated me, warmly with affection, as if she belonged. And though part of me was relieved for her, another part was still bruised by it.

Whenever family came over, they would pass out presents on holidays or just for fun. I was the only one who never received anything from them. At first, I didn't understand why. It gnawed at me until one day, I asked my mom. She had led me to a quiet room and, with a weary sigh, said:

"Just ignore them. They can be a bit special sometimes. Some of them will warm up to you. And before you know it, they'll love and adore you just like me and everyone who meets you does. Just keep being my lovable little girl."

The words brought no comfort. Instead, they confirmed my worst fear: part of his family didn't see me as one of their own. They failed to recognize that I was just as connected to my mom, whom they loved, and my sister, whom they adored.

As the years passed, I made it clear I wanted nothing to do with him. Even after they married, I refused to accept him as a stepfather. Whenever we went somewhere together, I walked several paces behind him or sat on the opposite side of the bus as if the physical distance could make the emotional one disappear. I

spoke only when necessary, and even then, my words were curt.

Some of these instances included him asking me a simple question, like “*How was your day?*” or “*Can you ask your mother something for me?*” My responses were laced with disdain—a blunt “*Why should I?*” or “*Fine, but not for you.*” Sometimes, I offered nothing but silence, letting my unwillingness to engage speak for itself. My resentment was apparent in every interaction, in every word left unsaid.

I also kept a watchful eye on him, making sure he took care of my sister and mom as he should. But he rarely spoke to me and never disciplined me. So, I took matters into my own hands. I pushed myself to grow and learn quickly, doing anything to make myself independent. That way, I wouldn’t need him. My mom and sister could rely on me as another adult in the house, and maybe, just maybe, I could fill the space I thought he left unspoken.

Since my grandmother lived alone, I would often escape to her house on weekends. It was a refuge, a break from the tension I felt. She would make it known that she also wasn’t fond of him. This allowed me to give her a new story to share with every visit, and she would offer her sharp commentary or other tales to match it. We were like two pieces of kindling, fueling each other’s fire. My grandmother was more than a relative; she was like a second mother, and so her words always carried weight for me. The more we spoke, the more reasons I found to distrust him.

Before high school began, my youngest sister was born, and we moved out of his family’s apartment. That’s when things started to shift. Now, I had another sister to care for and love, and my grandmother moved in with us. As I grew older and more mature, the anger and resentment I’d held toward him began to fade. We started talking more, finding common ground in ways I hadn’t experienced. My mom noticed this change and would sometimes remark:

“It’s like Fluffly and his stepson, Frankie. You two are so alike, it’s hard to tell that you aren’t biologically related.”

It was then that I began to notice it, too. For years, I al-

ways referred to him by his first name, as though drawing a line between us. But over time, I found myself catching moments when I would say “Dad,” especially when I was with my friends. They’d notice, and I’d freeze at the slip, unsure of what it meant. One day, I asked my friend about it, needing clarity on this shift in my feelings. She gave me that sarcastic, knowing look and said:

“Don’t you think this means you no longer dislike him? That you’re finally accepting he’s going to be part of your life? Even though he does things you don’t like, you still enjoy having him around. Maybe it’s because you subconsciously realize how hard he works for you and your family, and guilt’s making you let go of the negativity. It’s like you’ve said before: you’re tired of being tried with everything.”

I refused the idea at first, cringing at the truth in her words. But the more I reflected, the more I realized she was right. As I got to know his family, at least the ones who acknowledged me, I began to let my guard down. That’s when I started giving him a chance, when I began to understand him more, through my mother, his mother, and my sisters.

The apartment where I spent so many years was his mother’s. She allowed some of the family to live there too, and though I saw her every day, we never spoke. It wasn’t because she was awful in any way but because of the intimidating weight her presence carried. She exuded an unspoken authority, and I didn’t know what to make of her. By marriage, she was my grandmother, but it never felt like that, nor did I know how she felt about me. She got along well with both my mom and grandmother. So out of interest sometimes, I’d sit quietly and just listen. Telling stories about her children and how much my sisters reminded her of him. Despite her stern demeanor, she was unexpectedly funny and deeply charitable.

It wasn’t until after she passed away that I discovered how she felt about me. While going through her belongings, I found photos of not just my sisters but of me. Growing up in her home and accomplished things at school. She had never known how to

talk to me, but she'd captured my milestones through the lens of her camera. Her love, like his, was never spoken; it was always through actions. And I just never noticed it.

As my sisters grew older, I began to see the cracks that couldn't be ignored. My mom often reminded me that they were his children, not just by blood but mentally and emotionally as well. Later on, both were diagnosed with ADHD and Bipolar Disorder, which set them apart from other children. I did my best to help them feel like they weren't different because I understood the difficulty of their experiences, and I sympathized with them deeply. But I didn't realize back then that their father shared these similar struggles. I had simply refused to understand him similarly because of my blind distrust and loathing for him. I just saw an appalling grown man with issues and nothing else.

In many accounts, a frequent thing my mom would tell me was:

"Give him time. He just doesn't know what to do or say to you without pushing you further away. You just need to be patient and sympathetic."

At the time, I ignored her words, too adamant on resentment to see the truth in them. It wasn't until high school that things began to shift. The anger I had carried for so long was replaced by a quiet guilt and shame. I began to want to make amends, to understand him the way I had tried to understand my sisters and to understand that there are other ways to show affection than words. Slowly, I started to soften and consider his perspective.

Thinking about it now, being in a relationship with someone who already has a pre-started family couldn't have been easy, especially with a child who, at a young age, was wary of men and hated change. Feeling the weight of animosity whenever appearing or being present, convinced that they weren't welcomed. In many ways, becoming a stepparent is less about the parent and more about the child. It's inevitably the child who ultimately decides whether the new figure is worthy of acceptance.

Maybe he noticed this change in me because he started to open up. He found the courage to share his thoughts and feelings, offering advice whenever he saw me struggling. He started asking about my day and how I was feeling. Over time, I found myself more comfortable around him, less guarded.

The last time I saw him was just before I left for college. It was my junior year, and as we hugged goodbye, he said:

“Keep doing good. It’s almost over, and soon enough, you’ll be running it. Love you.”

This time, I didn’t say, “*Okay.*”

SMALL TOWN LEGEND

BY CHARLES ROGERS

I remember a story I been told before
bout a little crooked stool in the corner store
ugly stain and green paint is what it wore
but it had sat so long it had its own lore
bout a son of a gun with a goose feather quill
writing dangers of tobacco and juice from the still
he'd write em all day till his finger's was ill
and then talk his word at the church on the hill

he'll cry about the boys driving their 4x4s
and the Hell's Angels letting their engines roar
the moving pictures swearing more and more
and the pregnant cheerleader's a fucking whore
he'd scream all night, wrote all day
confession come round he'd no price to pay
handed out flyers bearing Satan's star
to every fucked up bastard leaving the bar

least that's the story told by folks born before
that wiry old writer aged out not long ago
there's a book shaped headstone in the cemetery
where they say the old bastard is buried
it's been pissed on and covered in hairline cracks
with the word "pervert" graffitied on the back
the name blasted off with Daddy's shotgun
by the cheerleader who fathered his only son

NO MATTER

BY EJ SEALE

I was a kid, and already I had found you
My true love,
My soul mate,
A caterpillar.

You were small, so small
you could wrap yourself around my finger.
On your body, the most microscopic of hairs,
I wished I could brush them for you.

We went everywhere together,
The stump,
The swingset,
I wanted to bring you inside, but Mom said no.

That didn't stop our bond though,
No, our bond was more powerful than that.
One day, however, when I went to get you
You were gone.

In your place

A weird waxy thing.

When I went to visit it the next morning
I found it empty.
Torn and discarded.
I mourned once again.

Then, as I sobbed by our favorite stump,
Something new had come to visit me.
It was beautiful, and so familiar.

20 years later I still don't know how
I knew it was you.
I had yet to learn about butterflies.
But deep down, we could both recognize each other.

No matter the distance, no matter the body.

SKINCARE

BY NATALIE GLOSEK

I can feel the bruises on my neck. The skin is sore and tender as I touch it. When I look in the mirror, I know it will be filled with deep dark colors of purple and blue with the two marks in the center. My neck pulses so much, I think it is going to explode.

People will think these are hickeys. That's why I wake up four hours before my first class. I will not be known as hickey girl.

It's 5 am, and my roommate is asleep. I don't want to wake her so I use my phone as the light, reflecting the home screen with my dog as the picture. I hold the phone up to my neck as I grab the green color corrector and place it vigorously on the marks and bruises.

This process is rigorous. It takes three layers of color corrector, two layers of concealer, one layer of foundation, and finally a heavy amount of powder to set the finished project. The products I use have started to add up in price. I work hard at covering the marks until 7 when my roommate's alarm goes off.

Weekly, I have to go to the store and grab more color corrector and foundation because they run out the fastest. Of course, the cheap stuff doesn't work as well. Trust me, I've tried, but the only foundation that works completely is over \$20.

I rush to the bed and "wake up" to her alarm. She gives me a slight nod, her way of saying good morning as she heads to the bathroom. I jump out of bed as soon as she leaves to check my neck. I did a pretty good job today covering up with the severity of the marks this time.

Now, we both get ready together, simultaneously. My roommate Jen and I have been in sync since freshman year. We wear the same clothes, often borrowing from each other's closet, listen to the same music, are in the same major and have the same love for horror books. We grab our makeup bags and begin to paint our faces on, Jenn with her perfected routine and me copying every move she makes.

...

Surprisingly, the marks give me an insane amount of energy, but a terrible headache that must be tamed by caffeine. Jen and I head

over to the cafe on campus, and we get our usual: iced vanilla latte with a shot of caramel.

Jen introduced me to the caramel. She always says I need to be more adventurous and spontaneous so I add caramel to my drink.

“Were you up in the middle of the night? I swear I saw a light, but maybe I was dreaming,” Jen says to me as we walk to our 9 am class about Gothic genre theory.

I hesitate to give a response, quickly blaming her brain.

“Must have been a dream. I slept like a baby last night.”

“Weird. I gotta figure out why my dreams have been so vivid lately. I saw the shadow again.”

I’ve realized the marks have started to affect Jen too. Not as severely or in physical form, but she has been forgetting things and having intense dreams. She keeps telling me she is seeing a shadow in the dreams.

“It just is so real. The shadow is practically invisible in the darkness of our room, the only thing showing is these long, crooked teeth,” Jenn says.

“Jenn, we have been reading *Dracula* in Baker’s class,” I laugh off her concern, “You’re just soooo invested in Jonathan Har-ker.”

“He does seem like a cutie.”

We laugh it off with a hint of reservations in our tones as I glance at my neck in the windows we walk past, checking to make sure the marks aren’t visible.

...

Jen has perfect skin, the kind of skin every girl is trying to achieve with thousands of skincare products that will totally leave you BLEMISH FREE AND LOOKING YOUNGER THAN BEFORE. Except, Jen literally only uses drugstore face wash and moisturizer.

When I look at Jen’s face closely, sitting on her bed late at night talking about books, love and dreams, I look for imperfections or blemishes on the skin, but nope. Jen’s skin has no trace of pores, like a porcelain doll untouched by the owner.

The first time I noticed the marks was because of Jen's perfect skin. I was trying to clear my own acne face and instead of asking Jen for advice, I became obsessed with videos on the internet. They gave me lists on and on of what to do, and I soon accumulated a 20 step skin care routine morning and night.

I couldn't let Jen see me do this, out of sheer embarrassment, so I had to wake up extremely early for her not to see. I had woken up to my alarm at 5 am when I noticed a sharp pain in my neck, sore and tight. I brushed it off until I saw in the mirror my neck pulsing and dark colors all over.

No one would believe me if I told them I was getting miraculous bruises, and Google was no help so I began to just cover it. Cover and cover and cover it. At least it kept me consistent on my skincare routine.

...

Jen has a boyfriend, unlike me. Jen has had sex, unlike me. And Jen has had her first kiss, again unlike me. My mother would call her promiscuous, but Jen actually is really quite modest in her talking about sex. Unlike other girl friendships, Jen and I rarely talk about sex. Jen only mentions little moments of her and her boyfriend's intimate life.

I only hear traces of sexuality in her voice when they are on facetime. Jen will whisper something quiet to Max and giggle looking over to me quickly to see if I notice. I do but just pretend I am intently watching my show on my laptop.

Jen always follows her calls with Max with her rigorous yoga. Jen's yoga rituals at night are obsessive in my opinion and never change. EVER. She has never missed a night almost married to her yoga (in sickness and in health). She has no shame in this, no care that I am there, while she sets up all different size shapes and crystals around the pink yoga mat.

She wears a matching workout set everytime: tonight is purple. It hugs her waist perfectly, giving her body the ideal outline.

While she does this, I sit on my bed and secretly watch her. My bed is raised high up so it makes me feel like a god watching my creation from the heavens. As Jen does her yoga poses, her eyes stay

closed as her body moves with her deep breaths. Her hair is always flowing perfectly down her back, framing the hourglass figure she possesses. Her body flows in positions I vaguely know the names of, and she lets out light hums every once in a while when she holds a post I can tell is difficult.

We don't talk about the yoga ritual. It is never mentioned so much so I wonder if I imagine her moving on the mat the way I think I imagine the marks. There tends to be an energy shift in the room, one I cannot explain to anyone so I remain silent. I feel uneasy by her yoga, my marks flaring up when I see the mat unrolled onto the ground.

The crystals surrounding her mock me as my roommate continues her ideal life while I lay in my bed consuming a whole bag of chips. I lick off my salt infested fingers when I hear a sound from the ground.

"Join me," she says. Jen has never asked me to join her. It is an unspoken thing between us: I do not do physical activity. I do not run and I do not fuck. My body does not move.

Her voice is so soft and soothing though that I begin to move from my bed and hear the word "ok" leave my mouth.

She moves from the mat and motions me to sit. The crystals look taller from here, trapping me in this pink sphere of spirituality.

"I don't know how to do this," I let out a whisper, "I can't move the way you do."

"Let me show you." She sits facing me now, joining me in the circle of crystal life or death. Her beautiful, deep brown eyes look at me with almost pity, but there is a hint of something I have never seen before. Desire? Disgust? The same way I look at my neck the morning after the marks.

She grabs my hands ever so gracefully and places them in a prayer motion above my heart. "Relaxxx," she coos as she pushes my shoulders down, "You are always too tense. Close your eyes." I obey every command, closing my eyes. I let out a gasp as I feel her grab my shirt, taking it off of my body, revealing the sports bra I have had since I was 12. Her hands begin to feel me up and down with no hint of reservation. She begins chanting, starting off as a quiet whisper and getting louder and louder.

I can't make out what she is saying, and I can't tell her to quiet down. Her eyes are shut, as she rocks back and forth. I swear I can hear the crystals whisper feed. feed. feed. My head is filled with concern, but I am painfully intrigued. I feel like I have walked in on someone having sex even though it is just me and Jen.

Jen brings her hands up and crashes them down smacking the floor. The room halts into a hush, and Jen goes for my neck and lightly kisses it.

Suddenly, my eyes open and the room is black. My hands begin to frantically grab around me to figure out where I am. I feel sweat all on my neck and back as I touch my soaking sheets realizing I am now in my bed.

I look over to see the image of a figure standing in our room. The consuming darkness makes it almost impossible to make out what is in front of me. I can't tell if my mind is playing tricks on me and making Jen's wardrobe look like a monster in the room.

I almost let it go, trying to calm myself down from a panic attack until I see the shimmer. Bright, but dull yellow teeth appear to reflect light from the moon shining through our window. The teeth are large, with big, sharp fangs, one on each side. They look at me as if they are mocking my inevitable fate.

I am unable to move from the bed, feeling tied down by forces outside of my control. As the teeth get closer to me, I notice big, black holes all inside of them. A tongue glides across the front teeth as I begin to make out the rest of the figure.

The shadow begins to show its form. I notice long black hair covering most of its face. The hair is knotted and unruly as it lightly grazes my forearm as the shadow approaches me. I can feel the grease from the hair and become increasingly more nauseous.

It crawls onto my bed and sits on top of me, squeezing my sides with its bony thighs. The shadow once again licks its lips and drools on my stomach as it approaches my neck. Its fingers are cold and hollow, the most lifeless touch I have felt.

My body begins to shake, goosebumps appear all around it. I fear I am dreaming and my dramatic reaction will scare Jen, but I can't contain it anymore. As I am about to let out a scream, the figure quickly looks up and puts its hand over my mouth.

I gasp at the fast movement, gasping for air. I look at its face. Covered in giant pimples that are covered with pus primarily take up all of the face. The mouth is stained, blood is its lipstick. The skin around its neck sags down to its chest. It is my greatest nightmare.

I finally force myself to make eye contact with the shadow. Time stops, and I can now see. Its eyes are big and round, full of life as they look at me with what I imagine is desire. While the rest of its body aggressively takes up space, its eyes remain focused on me, looking back and forth from my body and face.

Those are the eyes I have looked at a thousand times a day and envied their perfection. The same eyes that I have carefully watched read *Dracula* religiously, consuming every word. And unlike during yoga, the eyes remain open, not blinking, almost afraid to miss something.

She looks at me and shifts her head in embarrassment, removing her hand from my mouth. Her nails that were once a perfectly shaped pink manicure now are long and cracked with dirt underneath them. I have so many questions as my body continues to enact in flight or fight, but we both say nothing. She wipes the drool from her mouth as she begins to sob, hiding her face in her long, knotted hair. I look over to her alarm clock that reads 3:00 AM and see red and brown stains on her ivory floral sheets that are illuminated by the clock light.

Her body begins to shrink as the tears stream down onto my exposed stomach. I sit up, with her still on my lap. So close, I can see the imperfections and grossness of her. Her pimples have popped from the agonizing pressure and begin to ooze down her cheeks. And yet, her eyes remain unharmed in the change.

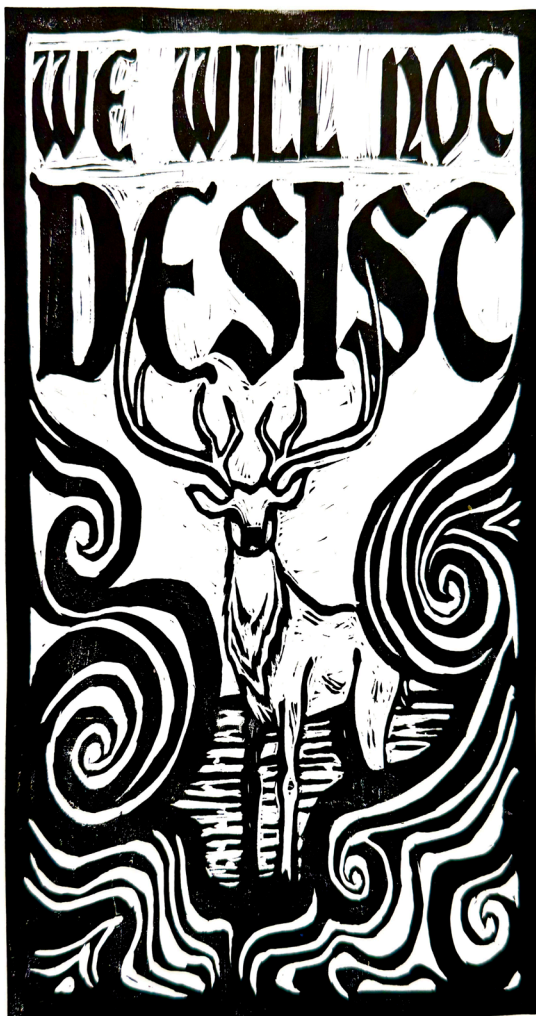
Instead of fighting and kicking and running, I lay back down. Feeling more pitiful and life less than ever. She notices this and uses this to her advantage as she grabs my wrists and goes for my neck. My neck tightens as the teeth puncture my neck, blood streaming down my chest.

All I think is how long this will take me to cover tomorrow as the words *feed. feed. feed.* hum around the room.

THEY?
CHRISTOPHER RODRIGUEZ

They were raised and educated their whole life
To be a he, or she, or whatever societal norms placed on them
They were elucidated to interpret themselves
As an exclamation point
Straight, orderly, coherent
When in reality (whatever that is), they weren't
They were not steadfast in their own self-image
For who is? That in and of itself is merely a myth
Rather, they are more like a question mark
Incontinuous, varying, different
They constantly question who they are
Because they were brought up as somebody else
But the world has enough exclamation points
It's time for the era of question marks

WE WILL NOT DESIST
BY VERONICA JONES



1/10

we will not Desist

Veronica Jones

THE IDEA(TION)
BY CAROLINA VILE

INT. STUDIO APARTMENT - DAWN

A MAN with sunken eyes, an overgrown beard, and a deep frown lies in a small bed with a plaid comforter. He stares up at the window in the center of the room, between his bed and the exit.

Sunlight streams in through white blinds, dances along the floor and casts onto his face, catching in his eyes.

He remains there, almost lifeless, as the sun climbs higher into the sky and dawn becomes midmorning.

Finally, he heaves a heavy SIGH and rises like a puppet on a string.

He goes through the motions of dressing himself, dons a plain white dress shirt and dark black slacks, tugs on onyx boots and a dark black coat that reaches to his knees, and ignores his hollowed reflection in the full length MIRROR beside the door. Through the reflection, we can see EMPTY BOTTLES- WHISKEY and a few WATER- littered along the floor, and DIRTY CLOTHES draped lazily over a desk chair, layered article over another, other strewn along the floor.

As he steps out, and into the light, he grimaces and shuts his eyes, turning away from the sun.

The door shuts with a THUD.

EXT. BUS STOP - MIDMORNING

Rain PATTERS along the roof of a bus stop, an OLD WOMAN sits on the bench under the awning.

THE MAN, drenched, walks across the street. As a car speeds

towards him, he turns his head and stops dead.

Right before it hits we

SMASH CUT TO--

EXT. BUS STOP - MIDMORNING

Rain PATTERS along the roof of a bus stop, an OLD WOMAN sits on the bench under the awning.

THE MAN is waiting across the street at the light. Cars speed past.

Finally, the light is green and he crosses swiftly.

INT. OFFICE - AFTERNOON

THE MAN sits in front of a computer, an ominous white contouring his face as he types away. His hair is still drenched and flattened along his forehead to drip down his face.

The top of his shirt is soaked, and behind him his coat is visible hanging on the wall.

As we watch him lean over and rest his elbows on the desk,

WE CUT TO--

The same location, now under his desk. There's typing for a while, then silence. His chair creaks as he leans and reaches for something to the right.

Past his black office chair we see the disconcerting white of the office walls, and then there's a loud BANG, and red splatters across the wide expanse of white.

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His hands are frozen above the keys, his expression blank, apathy coating his face just as much as the uncomfortable corporate lighting.

He types away until the clock releases him. Then he leaves to return to his lifeless little room.

EXT. CITY STREET - EVENING

THE MAN walks past bright neon lights of popping colors- blues and pinks and greens- and PEOPLE chattering and laughing and living with his head hung low. His eyes trace the shadows on the street.

He appears almost as a shadow himself, with his face obscured by a mess of hair, and his eyes darkened and sunken with gloom. He's gaunt, clear as the neon lights dance across his face and deepen the shadows on his face.

Those that pass him seem vibrant in their own right, coats and clothes of all different shapes and colors.

A couple passes him, leaning on each other and laughing. The MAN's hand is intertwined with the WOMAN's. He is donning a bright, bright green tank top and dark jeans; he is barefoot and carrying heels. She is wearing a dark red dress with frilly sleeves, it reaches down to her knees, and there is a slit an inch or two up

from the part covering her right thigh. She's donning a dark blue beret and a man's sneakers. As they walk past the MAN with sunk-en eyes, they lift their hands over his head and part to pass him, never letting go of each other.

His shoulders hunch almost imperceptibly, and for a moment the shadows over his eyes seem deeper, darker.

An ELDERLY WOMAN walks past, talking about signs with a SMALL CHILD who jumps and giggles at everything. The SMALL CHILD is in a dark red sneaker with blue accents and a yellow croc covered in Jibbitz. He's got beige pants and a dorky old man sweater with a white T-shirt underneath. The ELDERLY WOMAN is wearing a floral dress and Eileen Fisher sandals. There's a butterfly hair clip tying her hair into a neat bun. There are smile lines and crows feet on her face.

As they pass, the man slows, his head cocks a little, and his lip twitches.

A group of TEENAGER pass him, in hoodies and sweats and hats and expensive sneakers. They're holding fast food bags and mall trinkets and laughing like hyenas.

For a moment, there appears to be a smile on his face, but perhaps it was just a trick of the light.

SOMEBODY whose face is covered by a dark hood and mask rushes up behind him, yanks him into an alley with a hand over his mouth and an arm around his torso.

He does not resist. When they exit the alley, they are pocketing items and he does not follow.

SMASH CUT TO--

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He slows to a stop and stands frozen beside an alley. He turns his head to gaze into the darkness.

After a moment where people pass and whisper or stare and hurry their pace, he stuffs his hands in his pockets and continues down the bustling city street towards a house that hasn't felt like home in a while.

INT. FRIDGE - EVENING

It's dark, pitch black. A beat.

Bright, golden light engulfs the scene for a moment, nearly blinding. We are inside a fridge. There's a MOLDY ORANGE that needs to be thrown out, a CARTON OF MILK with an expiration date worn off with time. The fridge itself is grimy, in need of urgent deep cleaning. There's hardly food, its contents being mostly condiments.

We see the MAN with sunken eyes looking lazily over the fridge's contents. Behind the carton of milk is a HOSTESS CUPCAKE.

He places a hand atop the milk carton and tilts it to peer behind it.

For a moment, when he sees the cupcake, there is light in his eyes. He takes out the milk carton and the cupcake, the golden glow of the fridge accentuating the ghost of a smile on his face.

He shuts the fridge with his elbow and again there is darkness.

INT. STUDIO APARTMENT - EVENING

The MAN with sunken eyes sits in a worn down folding chair in front of the counter between his stove and the wall. The expired milk is seen at the top of the TRASH CAN in front of his fridge.

He's slouched over as he eats his cupcake, a faint smile on his face. Though his apartment is still dreary, there's a bit more color in his life.

He stands and deposits the plastic in the trash when he is done, as he walks toward the camera, his shirt covers the scene and we

CUT TO--

INT. STUDIO APARTMENT - EVENING

The same MAN with the same sunken eyes, same overgrown beard, and a blank expression lies in his small bed with his plaid comforter, now donning a plain black T-shirt and black shorts. He stares up at the window in the center of the room, between his bed and the exit.

The darkness in his room doesn't creep in through the window as the light does. Rather, it's made a home in the corners of the room, in his bed above him, in the lines on his face.

He rises, but only to turn off the little light remaining, engulfing the entirety of the room in darkness.

INT. BEDROOM - DAWN

The MAN with sunken eyes, who appears more as a specter than a man, a shadow of someone who once stood tall, stares at his window. The sun has yet to fully overtake the sky, barely peeking out beyond the horizon. Birds chirp outside his window.

The man rises. He stands in front of his window for a moment.

Then he opens the blinds.

Beyond his window, we see the cityscape. It's tall enough that we can see several buildings stretching for several blocks. He appears to live in the tenth story of an apartment building, towering over a few nearby buildings. Presumably, there is a concrete ground before him.

He opens the window, and presses close to the wall, leans over the windowsill.

He holds onto it with both hands and leans far enough for his feet to raise from the ground. He leans and leans and, instead of tipping over, he takes in a deep breath and lets his eyes slip shut.

As the sun rises, the darkness begins to recede, and his face takes on the shine of life once more.

MOLLY'S MIRROR
BY ARIANNA PANTOZZI

Press your lips to mine-
Figure it out.

Inhale me,
I'll deliver.

Finding me in your lungs
Pressed up against your heart.

SEDIMENTARY
BY PAIGE JACKSON



NOCTURNE
BY SEAN NASH

I lay down my eyes.
Is that my body? It sleeps
in this room where the stars
can never see. Sheets claw,
cut against its fragile skin. The words
I speak here have no meaning. Dark
walls and emptied lights let it
eat, sightless, bleed blindly.
I'll never see the sunrise sated.

THE SCARECROW THAT WATCHED (FOR A LONG TIME)

BY DYLAN KEYES

Was it too late to save the farm, that day the dust storms came in? Was the soil already too ravaged? Did the farmer kill the crops too many times? Was the soil ravaged enough for you?

The baby cried the day the dust storms came in. The baby you always looked over, because the farmer was too preoccupied to look over anything. The baby who came crawling to you every morning, with a rose from her mother's garden, and held you close. The baby who would cry at your feet after being pricked by the rose's thorns. The baby who would use your straw as a bandage because the farmer never wrapped her up. Did you care when she cried? Did you care when the dust choked her? Or was it too late?

Did you care when the dust storms killed all the food on the farm? Did you care watching your family starve? Did you think to do something about it? Something tells me you did. Something tells me that as you spent your days standing in the dusty graveyard of the prairie, you would be visited by demons. The demons would descend from somewhere high above you, and they'd perch right on your shoulder, and they'd scream in your ear like an incessant alarm, telling you to wake up.

But you never woke up, did you?

Were you watching the farmer, the night he went out and cried by burnt logs? The fire inside his eyes? Did you see it? No. I don't think you did. Did you see how the dust storm ravaged his soul? The demons knew. They mocked the farmer, but more importantly, they mocked you. Did you like that? Did you like being faced with the consequences of your actions? I suppose you didn't, because you gladly let the farmer snap into the shadow of a man, a demon killer, someone who would grab his scythe and—instead of nurturing crops—kill anything and everyone in his sight. An angel would have worried when the demons began to scream, but you didn't seem to mind at all.

What about the farmer's wife? The baby's mother? Had you thought much of her? I don't think she did. She was too busy crying herself to sleep every night. Tears. Great, big, salty. But you didn't care. Not even seeing her burst through the door with a pail of her own cries made you think twice. You just watched her—and she was miserable. She couldn't even aim, the dust was so strong. She threw her pail of tears way over the hills by total accident.

But, no, you'd say. That didn't matter. Did it? Because either way, she laid down by that dead garden and cried. "*Edith! Edith! Edith!*" Sobbing, sobbing. "*Edith!*" You were glad to see her die. You argued it put an end to misery. You were glad to see that farm die, weren't you? You were getting sick of it. The misery was like an eyesore, something you wanted gone but never wanted to touch. You never helped any, did you? You just watched, didn't you? And did you enjoy watching? Did you enjoy watching a family die in a hell of their own creation? Was it worth it? Was it enough for you?

Is the scarecrow's life a work of theory? A work of fiction? A dream? Does it really exist, or is it there only to decorate a cultivated life? And most importantly, do people appreciate it after death?

Or do they watch it walk away?

MODERN PUERTO RICAN

BY DIAMOND RAMOS

Memories hum through tangled wires, loud and clear

Old folk tales of Los Vejigantes I once held near.

Don Omar's bass pounds deep in my chest,

Echoes of longing I never confessed.

Regret clings like words I was never taught,

Nights ache with the coquí's distant call, now a thought.

Puerto Rican that's what they they call me,

Under New York's neon, I don't know where I stand.

Every Taino whisper slips through my hands,

Reaching for roots blurred by American life.

There's rhythm in my blood, fire in my veins,

Old stories silenced, replaced with disdain by modern refrains.

Raised on abuela's prayers, strict and strong,

In a house where Spanish hymns still belong.

Changing with mom, who bent to adapt,

Accepting a world that treated us as a joke.

Now I'm half island sorrow, half American curse.

