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TRIBUTARIES

## A Note from the Editor

Being on staff with *Tributaries* for the past three years has taught me that we stay true to our *modus operandi*: we consistently celebrate the great writers who inspire us while showcasing the amazing talent of emerging artists. We wouldn't have a journal without our inventive and original contributors whose work continues to surprise us. The hard work and dedication that I have seen from our student staff, combined with the help of our wonderful faculty advisor, has inspired me. I hope that the collection of invigorating and multifaceted fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and visual art that we've selected this year can do the same for readers of the current issue.

This year we publish one of the briefer journals we've curated in recent years. The unprecedented effects of COVID-19 are far-reaching, challenging us in turn. Last year, this crisis caused us to make the difficult decision to cancel our annual release party. I am happy to announce that this year, it will be reinstated and hosted remotely on Zoom and Facebook Live. The editorial staff and I are elated that we can celebrate the writers and artists who make our small, student-produced journal possible.

I have had the pleasure of mentoring our current Managing Editor, Olivia Ryckman, who will be taking my place as Editor-in-Chief next year. She is bright and committed, and I look forward to the exceptional journal I know she and next year's staff will put together. I'm confident that the integrity of *Tributaries* will be maintained, and I can't wait to see what will come next.

—Ally Pate

# T. TRIBUTARIES

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# T. TRIBUTARIES

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GRANT LAWSON

**YOGA SODA**

Insta pics of fresh  
American Eagle  
shorts made to be the most  
ridiculous neon yellow  
seen across town,  
oranges printed in  
asymmetric patterns  
trying to assault  
every sense—I swear  
I can smell the orange.  
And you, nine nautical miles  
away, set sail and head  
for the Spratly Islands—  
please, as you take  
your me-time to contemplate  
the Four Noble Truths,  
let me know if  
the glare's still visible.

BAILEY GILLIAM

**Sea Scene**

Two prismatic blobs of pink and blue  
waggle among seaweed,  
fleshy fish and broken coral.

Under opalescent umbrellas,  
strands of poison writhe  
through the waves.

They entwine and the water  
lights up, electric—  
a shocking song slaughtering

the pair. Not even the piss  
of a virgin can save  
these lovers now.

GRANT LAWSON

**BROKEN CODE**

Not all who wander are lost.  
—Tolkien

We're lost but  
that's not why  
we wander.  
Needles stick  
empty in  
the park's dirt  
surrounding  
us. George is  
still young, un-  
broken. He's  
seeking tricks,  
cocks to suck.  
Frank offers  
but keeps on  
insisting  
he doesn't  
like men. Me?  
I just want  
to find one  
safe place to  
pee that won't  
end with me  
stuck in jail.

A.F.J. Goggins

**Of unfortunate women and misfortunate events**

Some people get their panties in a twist, the idea is as ancient as speculation among  
the idea that pussy is sold. Why not? It's only cat, let loose among

us and not a pirate's treasure, among  
all the other goods America sells among

houses of pleasure, not something dragged in, not a scientist among  
orangutans, or apes or chimpanzees that might escape Cape Canaveral, among

carnival time, *can you dig it?* among  
the people who can't sing or dance so put your great grandma in  
blackface and perform a minstrel show among

the debutante's ball, or some man scratching his balls, among  
a waltz, and the painful glitter of a cracked glass slipper's sole beneath

a pressure too great to bear. Which begs one question among  
a barrage of others from among

the throng of matrons weeping in an uproar because, among  
the confabulation, you see that he is just an octoroon among

the whites. Even if we are in Nevada, and sheltered among  
what all the other pussies often pay to a pimp as a hedge against freedom

which is just a boat ride away *¿De verdad?*  
*Y tú* patriarch, who is a mark and rummages through his purse among

the unruly crowd in front of the man who calls himself *El Coronel*  
among

murmurs that he is not a gentleman, just high yella' and her dad. One  
possibility among

the many donated the cells. My point? Do not mock prostitutes,  
because among  
the uncertainty of time and attitudes being what they are you ain't  
one,

yet.





SARAGA, Teresa Hoang, Photograph

REBECCA DECKER

### Weights and Measures

I watch my mother sway back and forth, suspended inches above her bed. Her body is folded efficiently—if inelegantly—into the medical sling provided by hospice. I steady her sway and search her eyes.

“Don’t you ever get tired of doing this?” I ask.

“What else am I going to do?”

Ask anyone else what she said, and you would get a blank stare and a slow shaking of the head. By now, my mom has a well-developed “A.L.S. voice.” As the tongue muscle loses its dexterity and strength, so do the muscles around the larynx and the oral sphincter. The result is a poorly modulated, heavily slurred voice. At first, it is simply difficult to understand. As the disease progresses, it becomes next to impossible. No amount of staring at their lips, concentrating, or having them repeat themselves will bring their words to life.

I understand my mother’s response better than anyone else. I have spent nearly every day of the last year bathing her, dressing her, feeding her, sitting with her, praying with her, coming to terms with her. It is not just a matter of lost freedom—no longer able to go when and where she wants. Nor is it a matter of having to depend on someone else for food or to make her appointments. Her current reality demands that she not be left alone at all. What if she were to fall? Her weakened muscles would make it impossible for her to get herself off the floor or even roll over. Her atrophied diaphragm would leave her unable to call out loud enough to be heard even in the next room. This isn’t a hypothetical situation. This was the precise event that necessitated around-the-clock care a year earlier.

October 13, 2010 changed both our lives. My mother went to the chiropractor suspecting a pinched nerve and left with a death

sentence. Our small-group bible study that week was focused on the Book of Job, the Old Testament figure who loses his home, his wealth, his possessions, all of his children, and eventually his health. In the midst of his suffering, Job praises God: “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” How fitting that my mother would receive her diagnosis during this week. With the long-suffering Job as our inspiration, we decided that we would be okay, whatever *okay* might look like. A patient fights cancer, hoping treatments will be successful in at least prolonging life. With A.L.S., there is no treatment. Doctors work to make my mother’s life as comfortable as possible as she approaches death.

This morning, I continue washing, dressing, combing, brushing. In silence, I wheel her in front of the picture window in the living room and arrange her limbs in her wheelchair. She has always enjoyed watching the birds. Outside, several feeders entice them closer. I prepare her smoothie and medications. Half a banana, a handful of berries, and a few scoops of vanilla yogurt—I plop it all into the blender. Harsh whirring fills the room.

Growing up, it was so important to my mom that my brother and I could take care of ourselves. As a ten-year-old, I cooked dinner, cleaned the house, mowed the grass, got myself up and ready for school. If something ever happened to her, she didn’t want to worry about anyone having to take care of us. My mouth moves into a small smile as I stare, unseeing, at the blender. *Well, Mom, you did it. No one is going to have to take care of me.* The bananas are indistinguishable from the berries. I switch off the blender.

Silence. Even when she could still communicate clearly, it took a lot of effort to get the words out. Energy is like a pitcher, one of her doctors had told her. The pitcher can only be filled up with sleep, and you only get so much a day. She could use her daily allotment talking or she could use it chewing, swallowing, and breathing.

Because of this limitation, my words to her are measured, not wanting to make her feel like she has to respond. Even typing responses out on her iPad consumes precious reserves.

We sit, not just in my mother’s living room, but at a defining moment. Behind me are the more than three decades spent with her. Ahead is a future where she will not go. The two timelines set against each other—how would they measure up?

*You had eighteen years to shape me, to form me, to pour into me. I did all the things you wanted. I performed all the tasks. I checked all your boxes. What did I get? More lists, more ultimatums. When I told you, I was getting married, the first words out of your mouth were, “Eighty-five percent of marriages between people that live together end in divorce.”*

*Thanks, Mom. But, as predicted, I got divorced. A few years later, when I told you I was going to remarry, the first words out of your mouth: “Half of all second marriages end in divorce.” The very first words. A pitcher of energy has to last all day, and a pitcher of love sometimes has to last a lifetime. I eye the level of my pitcher with doubt.*

As I ponder this, it becomes apparent that our thoughts are coalescing. Her whys and her tears start flowing simultaneously: “Why didn’t my dad care about me? He loved my brothers, he was proud of them, he talked about them all the time. Why not me? It was like I wasn’t even there. And when I got older...fourteen-year-old girls shouldn’t be having sex. Did he even care? I just wanted someone to love me. Anyone. Why couldn’t *he* love me? What was wrong with me?”

I listen to the shattered, uncontrollable voice airing its grievances. I stroke her hand while the sobs shake her body and drain her energy. Unbeknownst to her, we grieve together. I offer up no advice. I can only give her my presence, the touch of my hand. After a time, she calms down. I rearrange her limbs. A male cardinal collects seeds as his mate looks on. My mother falls asleep.

I gaze into her slack face and wonder: *Why didn't you care about me? It was so important to you that I be independent and able to take care of myself. I was always on my own, figuring things out. The only freshman in a group of 300 at college orientation who was there without a parent. Touring the campus alone. Wading through financial aid forms. Waiting my turn to talk to the advisor. Visiting my dorm room. You worked five minutes from the campus but couldn't be bothered to come with me. Several years later, after dropping out of college, I told you that if you had just gone with me and supported me, helped me out just a little, I thought it would have made a difference. You looked me right in the eyes and said, "I wouldn't have done anything differently."*

I look upon her sleeping face and remember a conversation just a few months after her diagnosis. We had been sitting in her living room. She brought up my brother, her parents, her husband: "I had years to say the right things and ask the questions. But I didn't do it, and now my voice is going to be taken away."

I shake my head. So much for *real* words. Her gurgling breath lets me know that her throat muscles need help clearing the collected mucus from her airway. I retrieve the portable aspirator from the bedroom and gently wake her. Her eyes see the plastic tubing and she opens her mouth obediently. I move the straw-like device around the inside of her mouth and as deep in her throat as possible without triggering the gag reflex. A thick mucus collects in the chamber of the machine. She breathes more easily as I clean the aspirator and return it to the bedroom.

A medical lift, an electric wheelchair, and a portable aspirator. This is what dying looks like. Along with a vial of morphine on the table by the bed, for the panic that rises when her breath won't come.

She sits patiently as I trick her disobedient tongue into taking her medicine. This time, however, the tongue will not be fooled regardless of how much chocolate pudding I use. After several attempts,

I dig the crushed pills and pudding out of the crevices of her mouth and teeth. She laughs and tries not to gag or bite my fingers. Her laughter turns to tears as the recovery mission drags on. I queue up the aspirator and rid her mouth of the bitter pill dust. At this point, does she really need blood pressure medication?

I dry her face and put her arms and legs through their mobility exercises. I bring over her Kindle and settle on the couch to stare out the window. *"The sins of the father will be visited upon the sons, even to the third and fourth generation."* My mom did not feel loved as a child. I did not feel loved as a child... I wonder how loved my grandparents felt as children... I have three children. I look at my mom's face as her eyes follow the chickadees and woodpeckers outside. I watch the window, too.

Her husband, my stepfather of the last twenty-eight years, returns home from work then. I tell her goodbye and leave to pick my kids up from school. We both know I will be back the next morning to lift, wash, dress, comb, and sit. Then the next, and the next. What else could I do? I walk down the sidewalk to my car. I buckle in, grip the steering wheel with both hands, and stare up at my childhood home.

My mom would die in May 2013 at the age of fifty-three. I'd known she was dying for two and a half years, and even that Thursday morning I knew it was coming. But there is a big difference between "dead" and "dying." My mom was dying, but now she is dead. Any opportunity to go over the whys was gone. The conversations wouldn't have happened anyway, but now they never *could*.

"I love you. It will be okay." The last words she spoke were to me; for me. No one else would have understood them anyway.

With four decades behind, and possibly that many in front of me, I have reached midlife. I hold my hands out to either side of me, like

a set of scales. In one hand, my husband, my kids, my future. In the other, forty years with my mother.

I'm a girl again, sneaking into my mom's room at night, balancing carefully on the side of the bed. As close as I can get without touching her, hoping she won't know I'm there. I just want to lie there with her for a few minutes. Feel the warmth and nearness of another human being. I know there's something wrong with me, something unlovable. My own dad hasn't wanted to see me for years. But here, in the dark, in the silence of the night, all is suspended. The soft velour of the waterbed's bumper caresses my face. I can hear the comforting sound of her breathing beside me. I close my eyes and pretend I am there invited. And in that moment, I am her daughter and I am lovely. Just for a moment. The spell is broken when she jerks awake. "Why are you in here? Go back to bed."

*Winner of the 2021 Prize for Poetry*

HEIDI KLEIN

### **Man with Cat**

The balding man with one dread  
for a ponytail smoothed bear grease  
through his scraggly hair. He was  
emptying his clogged septic tank  
and stroking a scrawny cat that screeched  
over a bowl of curdled milk topped  
with cold, burnt coffee. The pump squelched—  
I had to come up close so he could hear me,  
so close I could smell the cat: jolly ranchers  
ground through a pencil sharpener.  
We stood in front of their  
mobile home behind the junkyard full  
of moldering car parts, glass shards,  
chain link. I'd come to tune the baby grand  
that reigned in the living room.  
Over the slurp of the septic,  
he told me to go right in, winking.  
The cat glared at me, and the man snapped,  
"Drink your coffee—you need it, Snooks."  
He finished with the septic tank. As I closed  
the lid of his Bechstein, he wafted in.  
The cat bumped its head against my ankle:  
watermelon hard candy blended  
with the odor of feces.  
"Prepping for a concert," he said,  
smoothing his dreadlock with slimy fingers.  
"Want to hear?" "No," I said,  
"I need to get going." He shut the door  
behind him. "Alimony put me here,  
but I've got a lot of love left."  
I grabbed my bag, but he stopped me.



“You need your check!”  
I nodded, but as he went into his bedroom,  
I pressed my back against the door,  
one hand on the knob.  
As I drove away, I looked over my shoulder.  
He slouched on his cinderblock step,  
and, even from there, I could see he was crying.



*Issei Noro 2*, Catie Lainhart, Digital Art

A.F.J. GOGGINS

## Amuck

“You have cancer,” my handsome doctor cries climbing onto my hospital bed. “Don’t worry, you’re in the best of hands.” He wriggles his eyebrows like Groucho Marx. Should I be angry, at the cells run amuck?

Scanning medical books lost by unwary interns, I want answers. Yet there’s nothing real and although they grow larger and more intriguing, my life is a sustained joke. I still want to smoke and negate the fact of my diagnosis. But can I get these cells unstuck after they’re running amuck?

My throat swells, sizzles, burns. It’s not the flu. However I could not deny without reason, if I were a body politic, this would be high treason—Take aim fire, at the multiplying cells. An answering volley of troops with guns raised to the sky. And unlike Elmer Fudd, instead of wabbit, I hunt a skunk. Amuck?

Hungry cells clamor for dinner, exhorting my senses while the cancer cells divide, multiply, and party in my body: “Sugar, sugar, more sugar,” the hungry cells scream. They are as cold as Attila, ruining China. Amuck.

Werewolves, banshees, and vampires threaten the empire and, should the terrorists overflowing my body abort the issue of malignant tissue, the cells will harry like dogs hunting duck. Amuck.

“Sabotage, sabotage, sabotage,” wheezes my tobacconist. “Your doctor deals only in conjecture.” But my life is now an off-color pun. I think he was drunk, which made his advice lousy, even more amuck.

I do not complain, and my team all applaud me. They say, “You are brave.” What is the gain in crying? I lit the tip of the cigarette. I worshipped the flame that framed me in its light like a hunter framing bucks and I stood by, as calm as Heracles. While wild cells stunned me. Amuck.

But I can count with a microscope the foreign cells that high-

five as they pass each other in the hallways of my body, as if they’ve won. They have not. It was radiation and chemo that killed them all while one by one they were shucked. No longer amuck.

ALYSSA ALTIERI

### Reincarnation as Punishment

Step out of the old body,  
fingertips edgeless and eyes without color.  
Split open the shell like a pastel egg.

Stumbling over—  
nothing? No replacement vehicle.  
A saw-dust cloud of leftover neurons  
firing last signals, the twenty-one-gun salute.

But now there's no fleshy limbs  
and the light that you should have met  
at the end of the tunnel  
is replaced by a swallowing black hole.

That was either thirty years ago,  
or thirty seconds.  
A dial spins—it has every outcome you've ever pondered.  
A door opens—it's the one you pleaded to the split second before-  
hand,  
and atoms collapse with jeweled fragments.  
They create stars meant to guide those who must relive.

One trembles,  
holding steady not to shrink  
at those whose hand they are assigned  
because they must watch them  
pale at the thought  
of dying again.



*Paracosms of the Mind*, Julia Jackson, Acrylic Paint

### Instinct

When I realize my cat Juniper is pregnant, I cry. My baby drapes herself across the furniture with a dramatic malaise, stretching her claws into the pastel upholstery. I notice her rounding belly and deafening purr. In a day, she is changed and now carries a few little lives in her primordial pouch.

Mental illness and a penchant for philosophy are my inheritance—neither are very helpful. I hit my pipe and look at the time on my dash. The car is hot and I'm stalling. I hate family events. I've just dyed my hair blue. I can already hear the inane jokes tumbling out of my dad's mouth. I walk slowly into my Nana's house. It's chaos. Half a dozen kids are running in three different directions and agitation is visible on Nana's face. When my little cousins see me, they barrel towards me, through a forest of legs, tripping over the shrieking poodle. I am suddenly covered in kids, unmoving as barnacles. I hug them and nod enthusiastically while special toys are thrust within an inch of my eyes. Proclamations are made from lips that still trip over consonants and my right arm is now sticky. Zoey has new dolls. Katie got bangs. Mia is now a big sister.

Juniper's frame looks even smaller now that her belly hangs down, slowing her nimble walk. She crawls up my mattress, creeping up to my shoulder, curling herself around me. My baby clings to me, following me from room to room, purring loudly. Her purrs seem different—the contractions wrack her body, rolling down her back in waves. I try to move her to her box. Her body stiffens. I keep my arm around Juniper, and she labors—I don't know if I'll be able to help.

I've never delivered an animal. All I can do is hold her.

I peed on the white stick again. My period is too late, and I know what it will show me. A hazy blue plus sign appears in the window, a mirage. I can't breathe. My knees sink to the vinyl floor. I throw the test down. I throw myself down. I'm angry. No—terrified. How did I let this happen? "I can't have a baby. I can't have a baby," I sob into my hands, my body bowed in prayer to a god that gives life—too much life.

"Mia is a big sister?!" I mirror their excitement. My aunt offers me a fragile six-week-old. Juliet is the smaller of the twins. She keeps her eyes shut and sleeps, her small chest rising and falling almost unnoticeably. In this moment, I believe I will never have a child, never hold my baby. Is this something I want? I won't cry in front of everyone—this is embarrassing. I pass the baby back to her grandma because I can't stomach this pressure of premature loss building in my chest. This loneliness will dry heavy like cement.

Juniper's heaving breathing becomes a pant as her body vibrates with new life. A small sac emerges from beneath her quivering tail. She pushes the kitten out quickly and then wraps her body around the hamster-sized mass, licking it and removing all vestiges of birth. I'm in awe that my pet carries these instincts in her DNA. She births two more kittens, then leaves me as quickly as she came. Juniper carries her babies to the box by my mattress and wraps her weakened body around them, peering at me with the eyes of a dragon curled around its gold. I lower fresh water into her box, and she reflexively tightens her tail around her shrill kittens. The days of craving my attention, my protection, have ended. Now something clings to *her* for life.



I ask Drew what he wants to watch and when he doesn't respond, I put on "Arrested Development." Every time a joke lands, he laughs and dances in his seat, shaking his head. I laugh too, but I'm imagining how our son—my son—will laugh.

My sweaty thighs stick to the vinyl floor. The afternoon sun streaks in through the dirty windowpane, sunbeams move across the beige walls. Propped against the sink, my mind races—me, raising a baby—no, getting an abortion, but could I be an ok mom? How much does an abortion cost? Am I supposed to be happy? I can't afford a baby. I call my mom. We sit in silence.

"Mom?"

"Yeah?"

"What should I do?"

"I don't know...I'd hate to be in your situation..."

I sink my fist into drywall. My vision blurs. The hot tears won't stop. Mascara runs down my blotchy, freckled cheeks. "I can't do this!" I scream to no one, collapsing again on the floor. I wrap my arms around myself, holding my body together.

The counselor, Theresa, smiles as she re-enters the small room. "You *are* pregnant," she says.

"I can't have this baby," I say aggressively. Her big eyes meet my gaze.

"Why?"

Because I can't do it? Because I can't afford it? Because I'm not sure who the father is. Because I'm sure that no matter who he is, I don't want to have a baby with him. She hands me a pamphlet for the abortion clinic and begins explaining the dangers and expenses of the operation. The white paper on the exam bed crinkles beneath me

as the nurse squirts warmed lubricant onto my still-flat belly. I can't fathom how a seed could find root in my body, the same body I starve and poison over and over until it passes out on friends' couches. The nurse presses the wand deep into my belly, searching for life. She begins a guided tour of my reproductive organs, examining ovaries en route to the uterus. Then it's there, on the monitor—my gestational sac.

"See here? This small dot? Your baby attached itself to the wall of your uterus." Implantation cramps are what I've been feeling, not the late period I prayed for. I push myself up by my elbows, craning my neck to see the screen, eyes burning with tears. I apologize, embarrassed by my uneven breath and snot dripping to my lips.

"That's my baby?" I whisper, as if saying it any louder would make it more true.

Two tabs of acid on my tongue, and Taylor throws me a pregnancy test. "I'm not pregnant and I'm not taking a test." My period will start any day now. She goads me until I put the joint down and go to her dirty bathroom to pee. What does it say? Positive—but it's an expired test. It's a false positive. My head feels lighter than it should and my mouth dries.

I'm not pregnant. It's a false positive.

*Operation?* I decide I'm at least five weeks pregnant after spending three minutes staring at a calendar, straining to remember the last time I used a tampon.

"Your baby is the size of an apple seed," Theresa says.

She reaches out to comfort me, taking my hand in hers. Am I a god, to give and take life? On whose authority do I extinguish it?

I know what I'll name him. Ezra. I'm six weeks pregnant, and I know

it's a boy. I can't explain why. I just know.

I watch Juniper with her three kittens: Elliott, Princess Peach, and Rousseau. They are perfect little specimens, bathed by their mother's tongue. They haven't opened their eyes yet. Juniper knows how to care for them, how to protect them. Motherhood is in her nature—it is woven through her genes. Her instinct leads, and she obeys. I wonder if I have those instincts.

When Ezra cries, I feel a physiological response: my body tenses and my heart beats a little faster. There is a language in our eyes, in the way he mirrors all my smiles. His head bobs—he still fights to hold it up, but my hand is here, at the base of his neck, ready to catch him.

ANNA KLITCH-HARRELSON

### **A Feast, A Defeat**

Your sense of self  
perspires out—  
dark rivulets oozing  
onto the skillet of  
your brow.

You cook, every inch,  
every iota fevering  
into a collapse,  
a chrysalis of your guts  
transforming into a  
metamorphic feast of  
thorax and thighs.

Your head, on a platter,  
watches as your heart is eaten,  
a praying mantis paying mind to  
dinner etiquette  
as your arteries serve  
as the appetizer  
and your brain the main course  
in this corrupted food chain.

REBECCA DECKER

### **Dedication**

The limestone slab was hot on this July afternoon, making any skin-to-stone contact difficult. Difficult, but not impossible, at least not for a five-year-old boy. He lay flat on the rock, his upper body suspended over the surface of the pond. Unlike most country ponds, which are usually covered with a slimy green sludge by this time of year, this one was springfed and cool with enough movement to discourage algae. The surrounding pasture was in the fall rotation, so the herd of cattle had been absent for nearly a year—last season's deposits of patties almost completely returned to the soil by the resident insects.

The light shined off the rocky ledge, and off the dusty blond hair of the small boy at the edge of the pool. The summertime sere-nade of cicadas droned out a blanket of white noise. The boy grabbed fiercely at the water, alternating between yells of encouragement and frustration.

The object of his attention? A frog. Darting from the bank into the water then back again in a fight for his life. Five-year-old boys are not known for their gentleness or compassion, and the frog seemed to sense this. "Come on, frog . . . Freddy. You're Freddy." Another sharp grasp at the water. "Oooohh, Freddy. You can do it." Tense, pregnant pause. "Right here, Freddy . . . I won't hur'cha." Then in a singsong voice, "Fre-dee . . . gotcha. Oh!"

The boy shifted on the ancient slab, getting both arms over the edge and into the water. It was fortuitous that this particular edge of this particular pond was not visible from the house, or he would soon be hearing his mother's disapproving voice. As it was, she

thought he was in the woods behind the house, so it would be a good long while before she would be outside calling for him.

The old wives were right—two hands are better than one. His grabbing attempts were no longer flailing as he got closer to his goal. Trouble was, he was just too far away, and the edge of the stone was digging into his chest and underarms. If he could just get closer, just a little bit...

The boy slid off the rock onto the stone ledge down by the edge of the water, crouching on his heels. "Now I gotcha, Freddy. You're coming home with me. Geez, you're fast!"

Freddy was fast indeed. He had found a small hollow under a rock shielded on two sides by the packed earth of the bank and from below by the surface of the water. The frog sat in his lair—which was looking more and more like a crypt—waiting patiently, expanding the breathing bubble in his throat regularly, unaware of the danger that lurked above.

Two hands *are* better than one, and a hand came steadily and deliberately toward each side of the stone crevice. The control and focus of the boy were astounding in one normally so impulsive. Impressive, really, how steady his hands were as his fingers gently combed through the water to close on the front of the opening. "Gotcha!" the boy whispered with pitched glee.

He had Freddy, but now what? The boy's eyes darted back and forth as he considered his next move. He chewed on his lower lip. He eyed the big sycamore on the far edge of the pond. Good shade, lots of sticks on the ground. He would build Freddy a house. A frog house. "Here we go, Freddy." The fingers of one hand slipped carefully beneath the rock and around the frog. As his fingertips encountered the smooth, living flesh of the frog, the boy's eyes widened. Both hands gently closed around the frog, and the boy exhaled heavily. He brought his cupped hands up to his face and peered, wide-eyed as he

carefully parted them: "I. Got. You."

He ran-walked around the pond, keeping his hands pressed tightly but carefully together, breathing purposefully in and out through an O-shaped mouth. At the base of the tree, he searched the ground for a container of some kind. Seeing no frog cages here in the fall-rotation cow pasture, he remembered his pockets. What could be more perfect? He smiled and gently squeezed the frog into his front pocket.

Patting Freddy ever-so-carefully, the boy scurried about gathering sticks and small stones from around the tree. Sycamore leaves are so satisfyingly large—a great carpet for a house. But if Freddy peed in the house it would puddle on the carpet. Freddy wouldn't pee on the floor—would he? He needs a bathroom. Put the leaf carpet in the living room, but leave a dirt floor in the bathroom. When Freddy has to pee, he'll go into the bathroom and it will soak into the ground, and it won't puddle on the floor.

"Easy, Freddy. Here we go."

It was hard to kneel on the ground and keep his pocket flat at the same time. There may have been times when the pocket squished as the boy bent his leg to reach just a little further. And when he went to lay flat on his stomach, like little boys do, he caught himself after only four or five seconds and sat back up, straightening out his leg. "Sorry, Freddy!"

After only a short while, there was a respectable lodge constructed in the shade of the sycamore tree, right on the lapping edge of the springfed pond. A lush green sycamore carpet covered the floor and flat, sturdy rocks served as cornerstones. He had considered a door opening but quickly discarded the idea with a half-smile and a shake of his head. What frog would go through a door into his house? He would just jump right over the sides. He's a frog! So the boy built the walls solid all the way around and—of course—no roof, so that

Freddy could jump into the house from any direction. The boy sat back and proudly surveyed his creation. It was good.

"Freddy, it's finished!"

He slid a hand into his front pocket and closed his fingers around the soft flesh of the frog. When Freddy came out of the pocket, he was breathing calmly. The boy brought Freddy to his face, and lovingly rubbed cheeks with him before kneeling fully beside the little house. He placed the pliant little frog in his house. And he waited. The frog sat still, and the boy waited.

After an agonizing fifteen seconds, the boy poked the frog with a finger and pulled it back quickly. The frog sat still. This time the finger gave the frog a firm scoot, but still he sat. The boy's lips pursed and his eyebrows furrowed. He grasped a leftover stick, placed it under the frog and gave just a little nudge. Freddy stepped forward to balance himself. The boy gasped with joy. "Oh, Freddy, you like it! I knew you would. You're the best frog. The best friend."

He placed a few small stones in one corner of the house and said, "Look, Freddy. A chair. A frog chair. Do you want a bed?" He snapped a stick into short lengths and placed them in another corner of the house, making a small frog-sized platform.

"There, a bed. Try it!" After another long pause and another ineffective poke, the boy picked the frog up and placed him on his new bed. "Don't pee the bed, Freddy." Freddy stepped down from his new bed and sat still in the middle of the house. The boy giggled.

The boy lay on his belly, watching and sometimes nudging the frog. Making furniture and going through home-making scenarios took up another hour of the waning afternoon. At the end of their time together, there was a frog barn off to the side of the house, and a defensive wall around a small foxhole (froghole?) by the tree. Squirrels and crows had no chance against these fortifications.

"You're my forever-friend, Freddy," the boy said. "I'm here

for you, you're here for me." The boy stroked the frog's head with his fingers.

"Wilder!" his mother called from the house. Then, more sternly, "*Wilder*."

The boy hopped up: "Coming, Mom." As he turned toward home, his shoe knocked into the corner of Freddy's house, scattering the stone foundation. The stick walls collapsed. Wilder leaped over crusty patties, stabbing his hands in the direction of flitting dragonflies. Can dragonflies breathe fire? How does the fire not burn up their little throats? He stopped and stood with his arms held out at his sides, waiting for a dragonfly to alight.

HEIDI KLEIN

### **Catching Minnows**

We had a net, a stick, and plans.  
I'd scare the fish to him—he'd scoop  
them up in the butterfly net, then quickly  
turn the net inside-out over the muddy  
five-gallon bucket. We'd switch sometimes,

but I usually ran along the steep bank  
of the county ditch, hoping the tangled  
grass wouldn't plant blood-hungry  
ticks on my bare calves.

I saw a school, scooted close and jumped  
into the water, *whacking* behind them.  
"They're coming your way!" I yelled,  
making sure no garter snakes  
were squirming up to me.

He caught one, and we stood over  
our bucket like big-game hunters  
taking snapshots with a felled lion:  
two farm kids, soaking wet to our waists,  
squeezing algae between our toes.

"Can we cook it?" I asked.  
He said it was too small, not worth the time.  
I watched him dump the bucket  
into the creek with a terrific glug-glug.  
I carried the empty bucket.

He carried the net with a bit of watercress  
tangled in the mesh, telling me what it  
was like when he had tested the electric fence  
with a blade of grass—a feat of bravery I wasn't up to.

But I could walk barefoot on our gravel drive,  
my feet extra calloused since I'd  
broken my latest pair of flip-flops.  
We rinsed our feet off at the outside faucet,  
laughing when it splashed the dog and he sneezed.

We forgot that we'd been lonely yesterday  
and that it only takes a few years  
for siblings to grow up and leave.

KENNEDY HAGNER

### **Capsized**

There is an unnatural, guttural thumping in my chest. It is offbeat, like my heart is misfiring. I am twelve years old. I am twelve years old and I am sitting in my seventh-grade English class and I am dying. My hands are clammy and cold, but my skin is on fire. It feels as if a grown man's fist is closing around my heart so tight it can barely pump hard enough to push oxygen to my brain. Are my lips turning blue yet? I am a capsized ship and I am drowning.

I drift beneath the water as I listen to my teacher, droning on about verb tenses or something. Mrs. Cheek is the head of the drama department and she does not typically drone. I'm sure she is up there bright-eyed and passionately singing grammar songs. My body is heavy, it sinks through the floor like a bag of bricks.

I want to scream for someone to call 911, someone to get me out of here. I'm sure I'm having a heart attack, but my lips are glued shut. The most I can do is wring my hands together. I am squeezing my arms trying to force blood to circulate. It feels like dumping buckets of water out of a boat that is already damaged beyond repair. I take deep breaths but there is no air in the room, or in the building. There is not enough oxygen on the planet. It is only first period and I am suffocating. The bell rings and my classmates exit the room. I finally raise a hand. The other grips the desk tight, leaving a sweaty palm print on its shiny surface.

Mrs. Cheek rushes over, eyebrows furrowed. She touches my shoulder and hands me a life preserver. "Let's get you to the nurse's office. You look a bit pale."

Later, the nurse, eyebrows raised, wields a stethoscope and a ther-

momometer as she glides over to me in her rolling chair. Her lilac scrubs have dark purple hearts on them. She measures me calmly and carefully. I don't know how to tell her what is wrong with me. Her daughter Catie is in my class. The nurse looks so much like her daughter, with a light dusting of freckles and a small, pointed nose. Catie and I used to be friends, but we aren't anymore. Catie has new friends.

"My heart hurts and I can't breathe and I'm scared." There is a boa constrictor wrapped around my neck but she does not see it. Her eyes are watery blue and kind, like my mother's. She rolls away from me in her chair and she does not call 911.

She stands up from her chair for the first time since I arrived and rounds the corner into the next room. She brings her office phone with her, spiraling cord pulled tight around the wall. I wonder who she's calling. Maybe she is getting an ambulance and doesn't want to scare me. The ambulance will come and they'll strap me to a gurney like they do in the movies. They'll shock my chest to revive me, and they'll yell, "Clear!" She talks in hushed tones without urgency. I no longer think she called 911. When she returns, the phone is clutched to her chest. She eyes me closely with something like pity, a hint of judgement. She does not offer me a life preserver. She sits down next to me and says my mother is on the phone.

Mom's voice is calm, a cold plastic phone pressed to my ear. It's called a panic attack. You are not dying. Ice cold water fills my lungs. It's perfectly normal given your situation. When did your father ship out? Just relax. Drink some water. He's going to be fine. Lie down for awhile. No, I'm not coming. It's not real, nothing bad is going to happen to you. Mom, please. Yes, she's sure. Please don't cry. She sounds exhausted as she asks, do you think you can just go back to class now?

I sink straight down to the bottom of the ocean, where I cannot hear her anymore. My vision is cloudy and dark. They say

we know less about the depths of the ocean than space. They say the bottom is ice cold and pitch black. Will I ever make my way back to the surface? Will I ever see my father again? I am outside of my body, far away from it all, completely still.

A nudge from the impatient nurse catapults me back from the depths of ocean. I emerge from the water, and I realize I have somehow survived. My blood is pumping hard, a mixture of adrenaline and shame.

"I'm sorry, I can go back to class now." I cannot feel my legs beneath me as I stand up. My body glides down the hallway in the direction of third-period science, but my brain is elsewhere. I knock on the door of the classroom, bracing myself because this class is half-way over, and I know everyone is going to stare. Mrs. Hayes opens the door and ushers me in. Hesitating, I take a deep breath, secure my life jacket, and cross the threshold back into reality.



**Sailor**

It was five days before Christmas when I found out you were gone. Sprawled on the chaise lounge in my mother's living room, I smelled herbal tea and Lemon Pledge. She was watching "Christmas Vacation" for the third time, the fake fireplace crackling beneath the glow of the television. The tree stood tall in the corner of the room, a towering presence of light. Emerald, sapphire, and ruby gems sparkled between artificial branches.

Last night, you asked me if I could buy you a fifth of James-on. I said no and told you to go to bed. You were already wasted as it was, slurring your words, seasick the night you left this earth. You had a problem that presented itself in four half-gallons of liquor, bought weekly. Crinkled dollar bills scraped together in exchange for as much alcohol as possible. In the bottom of each bottle, you attempted to find peace. You were the only person I ever met who worried as much as I did. It amazed me how you always appeared to be put together—freshly-ironed corduroy pants and horned rim glasses resting neatly on your pale face.

When Don texted me that following day and told me you were gone, I didn't believe him. We were so young, both freshly twenty-one. I called your phone to tell you it wasn't funny. But you didn't answer. My phone felt increasingly cold pressed against my cheek. Your uncle answered, and I knew. Denial—freezing water flooding in. I felt a wave swallowing me whole. We were supposed to get breakfast that morning.

I picture you at sixteen, gray-faced in the back of my car after you had drunk yourself sick. Cristine and I had hoarded a handful of gift cards from the holidays and headed to Edinburgh Outlet Mall to

treat ourselves to clearance crop tops and dark cherry lipsticks from MAC. You came along for the ride and drank Evan Williams by yourself in the back of my Pontiac Vibe.

Within twenty minutes of picking you up, you were hanging out the window with your glasses crumpled beneath your patent leather shoes. Later, with vomit streaked down the right rear window, you mumbled apologies while I found my mother's favorite lime green beach towel in the trunk, and we carefully cleaned you up. We made you lie down in the back and forced you to eat cold McDonald's French fries and drink lukewarm water. You made feeble protests and said you were fine. That night you were fine.

I picture you—sun reflecting off your bright hazel eyes, now captain of that sailboat you said you always wanted. You dangle your feet off the edge of the boat just above the water, your face pink and kissed by the sun. Perfect salt crystals and grains of sand caked on everything in sight. You don't mind the mess.





*Tokischa Trapterretre*, Natsu The Shimazaki, Digital Art

ALEXUS HAMMOCK

### **Defying God**

My friend once told me that she went to church to feel near God,  
but instead of preaching love, they taught her to fear God.

Biblical verses spun to children as heartfelt horror stories.  
A father forced to sacrifice his son? Your message is clear God.

Still, she held onto hope, trusted in the only Father she knew.  
but when she was raped, why didn't you interfere God?

As she lay there she cried and screamed and begged,  
But no matter how hard she prayed, you didn't appear God.

Her faith in splintered shards, abandoned, broken.  
Right before your eyes, you watched her disappear God.

Omnipotent—nay, negligent. All-seeing but no-doing.  
Although you turned your cheek away, she will persevere God.

ALEJANDRO RAMIREZ

### Jupiter

My formative years formed the basis for this—  
let's call it *perspective*.

I loved, left, reunited, bound and unwound.  
I return once or twice a year.  
Without tickertape, the floats, the fanfare,  
trumpets blaring, triumph  
on the tip of everyone's tongue. Well,  
at least my mother smiles before I get the snap of her wrist.  
My shoulders dismiss each blow.

The state's motto is apropos. The sun shines  
and endlessly shines  
with no hills, the thin palm trees leave  
little shade to hide.

With no hills, you would think  
you were in Kansas, Illinois, or maybe Minnesota  
but there is less salt in the air  
and the grass doesn't feel like a teenager's overly gelled hair.

You don't find Easter-egg pastel walls elsewhere.  
Similar colored polos? Always in stock.  
These are not biblical times, but sandals are in abundance.  
You hate the snowbirds and I hate being associated with the flock.

I didn't just step out of the shower,  
the weather will do that to your glasses.

CLARISSA HOGESTON

### Roanie Jo's Subservient Dreams and Walnut Wishes

As a child, my world extends as far as the property lines. Out the front door and down two cement cinder blocks pretending to be stairs. Down the dirt lane past the rusted corn bin on the left, clothesline on the right. Past the little shed that houses a busted eight-wheeler, a rain barrel, the ladder to our deflated swimming pool, and an assortment of containers and terracotta pots. Nineteen steps to the big shed, the broken angel fountain, a big tractor tire. Past the hog pen, and two pink friends that always snort at my jokes and bite at my red rubber boots.

I'm a scrawny child with knobby knees. My fair hair always floats in wisps around my head as if the air is always charged with static. I stomp past the big shed to the wood line. Big oak limbs extend over the path, the doorframe of a leafy cathedral. Sweat makes my bare feet feel gross in their rubber houses and the summer bugs are screaming an annoying racket. The path beneath me is slippery from last night's rain. I hop carefully from one broken tile to the next, tiles that are the leftover pieces of my grandfather's attempts to keep his fields from flooding. Stop to poke a little two-inch stream, rings form and fade away. Then ten long strides until the shade of the trees dissipates into an airy meadow and saturated green cornfields.

I collect walnuts from the ground as I approach a bunch of scrap-wood boards laid haphazardly across two steel bars cemented in the sides of a ditch (otherwise known as the infamous architectural feat named, "The Corn Needs Plantin' and We Need a Way Over the Crick Now"). The bridge sits over a narrow, twisting creek browned with muck and fertilizer runoff from the cornfields. A slow-flowing creek, but high enough after a good rain to be worrying. Mom makes

us stay in the middle, so we don't get hurt.

I step clumsily in my boots, heel to toe, as close to the edge as I am brave enough to venture. I whisper a wish upon a walnut, close my eyes. *Thwoop*. Submerged in the creek for a second before popping up again and bobbing along. I walk to the other side of the bridge and watch the walnut follow the tiny currents of the lazy water. All my fingers crossed, I whisper a hope that it doesn't get stuck in all the weeds and the muskrat hideaways. I watch until it turns the corner at the end of the field. A green dot off to a different world. I turn back to the other side. Another wish. The afternoon turns to sunset and cicada-songs, and my hands are stained with green and the earthy smell of walnut.

Outside, I am an archeologist with a serious collection of rocks, leaves, and discarded insect wardrobes. Or an aerial ballerina, turning full backflips on the trampoline. Sometimes my older sister, my dad and I sleep out on the trampoline under open sky. Then I am an astrologer. An ancient storyteller. I am an adventurer, scaling trees and rooting through the glass bottles and old VapoRub containers in the dump on the other side of the field. I am the founder of Fairyland and the architect of all the little sprites' homes in the woods. My bike becomes a horse, and I test its agility on the gravel down toward the dead tree at the curb in the driveway. It is the chocolate tree, and Mom says that's as near as I'm allowed to the main road.

I am an excellent hostess of garden tea parties. My dolls and my teddy bear, Beary, are always pleased with the spread. Water in little plastic cups: tea and grape pop. Water poured onto little plastic plates: potato soup and spaghetti. Blades of grass as a garnish. If it's a special occasion, mud as chocolate cake.

Suddenly, I must take off my sunhat and don my official cardboard detective's badge. Someone has stolen Beary's favorite necktie! I excuse myself from the occasion and trek down toward the woods. I

walk along fallen trees and crawl under the nastier patches of thistles. By evening, I am covered with little red scratches on my arms and legs, but I have the satisfaction of returning the missing item to my client.

I am also a princess. I live in a castle in the woods, where tree branches, like fingers, reach for the ground beneath it. A rainfall will conjure the stream near my castle where the mermaids play and sing and fall in love with fishermen. Drier days transform the river into a canyon where the brownies play hide-and-seek with the sprites. Notched tree trunks are carefully crafted fairy homes. I place acorn doors and stick windows on each house while the fairies are away. All the duties of a good princess.

Sometimes I sigh and stroke the handlebars of my horse, telling her that I hope a prince comes to save me someday. If she feels like talking, she'll ask me what he's supposed to save me from. And I say I don't know, but I like princes and that after he saved me, we could go throw rocks off the bridge. My horse asks what we'd do after that. And I say, then we'd get married, and have babies, and I'd make him eggs every morning because I know how to make eggs now. My horse whinnies and agrees that it sounds wonderful. She doesn't tell me that I'm wrong for wanting those things. That wanting those things is pathetic. She doesn't say that I am weak. And she probably doesn't know the word "subservient," because I don't. She doesn't stop me from dreaming.

Neither does my mom. She is a chef, gardener, counselor, teacher, librarian, nurse, tour guide, and coach. Sometimes she is the deputy to my sheriff and the unicorn charmer in my travelling zoo-train. And the other half of my trapeze act. When she can't play with me, I see her through the kitchen window. She turns the music up real loud while she sweeps the floors and the porch and runs a wet rag over the windows. This time, it's Alisson Krauss and Union Station. She

dances and claps her hands to the fiddles and the banjo rhythms. I see her at the stove, stirring pots and opening the oven to prod something with a strand of uncooked pasta. Or bent over in the garden, wrestling weeds and wiping her brow with the back of her wrist. She makes me lunch and sits with me at the kitchen table over a school worksheet. Then she's back on her feet, pounding bread dough to the beat of a song and pushing vegetable scraps into the big silver bowl that she'll take out to the hogs later.

My dad comes home from work, and I scrunch my eyes when he kisses mom in front of the door. An officer at the correctional facility, Dad's uniform is always dirty from days of leading work crews in the ditches. Still outside, Dad takes his boots off and leaves them on the porch by the dog. He comes in and leans over the stove before asking my older sister and I if we know how hot our mom is. Eye rolls and groans. We have supper, and then Dad leaves to work in the shed.

I sit out in the kitchen and watch my mom dance to another song while washing dishes under the glow of the light above the sink. Later, she is beside me in bed with a book and an adventure. Yesterday, we found Treasure Island. Tonight, we meet Peter Pan. Mom looks worn out, but she's smiling. She never tells me that she is pathetic. Or weak. She never calls herself subservient. I wouldn't know what that means anyway. But she does.

The ladies on the TV called her that once, I think. Footage of women in pencil skirts and suit jackets against black-and-white tapings of silly, frivolous housewives. I sit at the kitchen table, running a Crayola sky over a blank page. A woman asks Mom what she does all day. It is my grandma, a nurse. Maybe it is one of my aunts, both teachers. Or one of many female family friends: factory worker, dental hygienist, supervisor at a manufacturing plant. They say that they could never stay home all day because they'd be too bored. One says that her husband wanted her to stay home with their kids and

that she said, "No way, are you crazy?" And then they all laugh and nod their heads and say, "Mmmhm, ridiculous!" My crayon slows to a stop, and I look up from the picture. My mom laughs too, but not the way she laughs at home. A half-smile appears on her face as she shrugs and tells the woman that she finds plenty of ways to pass the time. She never tells me that she's ridiculous. I show her my picture. Crude outlines of Mom and I with crowns on our heads beside a tiny castle with a moat. She never tells me that my princess is ridiculous.

I like to play with Dad, too. We like to climb trees and go fishing at the lake. Everybody is always impressed when I bait the hook by myself and don't scream when the taut skin bursts and yellow juice squirts from the worm's wriggling body. Dad calls me "Roanie Jo." He used to call me "Riss," and then "Rissy Roan," then "Rissy Roan Bone." Now it's just Roanie Jo. Everybody says I'm really great at soccer, and Dad always sets up cones for me to dribble the ball around in the yard. People also like to hear about how I'm faster than most of the boys on my team, and how I usually score the most goals. They ask me if I want to be a soccer player when I'm older. I say no. What do I want to be, then? I tell them, a mom. Then they ask me what I really want to be.

One sunny day, I am under the bridge and ankle-deep in thick gray muck, the clay soil that lies layers beneath the topsoil of the fields. The creek is running higher than usual, the best time for gold mining. But I am not a prospector today. Today, I am a potter. I pick up a fat chunk of muck in my hands and gingerly pull away the weeds stuck in the clump. I set the mound on a sun-warmed flat rock and move my palms slowly around the outsides until it becomes a smooth ball. Just like my mom taught me, I dip my hands into the water before returning to the surface of the ball. I lean back from my creation and nod, then pick up my new bowl as I would a baby bird. I place it on a rotted board, next to the fragments of the bowls my mom had

made as a child.

When my bowl dries, I will carry it home. I will sit on the porch next to my muck bowl and pick at the scabs on my knees with pink fingernails. Bluegrass music will be coming from the kitchen, and I'll hear my mom's footsteps on the kitchen floorboards. Maybe somebody from the outside world will stop by and ask me what I have. I'll show them my little bowl. Then they'll ask me if I want to be an artist. I'll say maybe, but I want to be a mom. Then they'll ask me what I really want to be.

My mom will come outside later and sit beside me. She'll point to the muck and ask what I've made. I'll show her my little bowl. She'll tell me how pretty it is, and what a great job I've done. My dad will come home soon after and tousle my hair. I'll show him my little bowl. He'll say it's really cool and ask me what it's for. I'll tell him it's a soup bowl for Beary, and how I'm making him chili for supper. My dad will chuckle and say, "That's great, Roanie." My mom won't tell me that what I've dreamed up is pathetic. She won't tell me that I'm wrong. My dad won't say that I am weak. And he won't use that word...subservient. When they ask what I want to be, I'll say that I like a lot of things, but that I really want to be a mom. Because moms get to do everything. They'll tell me that my dream is a bold and brave one—to be whatever I want to be.

BAILEY GILLIAM

### Letter to My Professor

I wrote a note in scribbled text, the ink  
so thin that a lorgnette is needed to  
decode the script of thoughts I couldn't say.  
And neatly folded seven times in half  
(you can't do more than that), it's tucked inside  
of your Steinway below the thickest strings.  
*True tenderness is silent.* Caked in dust  
and noting notes, that paper spy reports  
to none. The dead cannot dance lying down.  
It waits for you to play Prokofiev  
nine hundred times—dislodged it rattles so  
you notice your own name scrawled on the edge  
of yellowed paper. Unfold it seven times  
to coax my emissary's last confession.

ELIZA MCGUIRE

### Ice Cream and Ashes

The wind from the car window whips my hair around my face, creating a lethal weapon. The only other choice is to roll up the window and lose the fresh air. I face that double-edged sword each car ride. Our destination is a mystery. We tend to just pick a direction and see where it takes us. Usually, though, he thinks of some cool place he's visited in years past and wants to share with me. This time we are heading south. The weather has just gotten warm, and we figure we might get a few more degrees in that direction.

*The windows are up, except for the crack that lets the cigarette smoke escape. My hair hangs in my face, masking any emotion there might be. My mother is driving. The earth is getting cold. Winter is coming. The trees are bare, the grass is brown. Everything is dying. We are heading north. I wonder if the miles will make a difference in the chill.*

As always, Mike is behind the wheel of his wine-red Chevy Malibu. His left hand controls the car while the right rests on the gear shift between us. We are going more than the recommended speed, and today, we aren't holding back. I know his face well, I've spent so much time with him, but I know his profile even better. I could map out the moles on the right side of his face with my eyes closed. I could draw the shape of his ear in the sand. I notice each new wrinkle as it appears, especially in the corner of his eyes. The detail that sticks out the most is the one J-shaped hair that has made its way out of his nose. It has been there for quite a while, but I don't have the heart to tell him

about it. I've almost grown fond of its strangeness.

*She keeps the car close to the white line of the highway, wary of other travelers. The wine-red Malibu keeps at just below the speed limit. I study the ashes on the dashboard. They have been collecting there for more than two years. There are melted cough drops in the cup holders. I might need an ice pick to get them out. The accumulated gravel of many places shifts under my feet. I hold on to the seat belt so it doesn't crush me under its weight. I stare at the ice cream stain just above my grasp.*

He watches the road and passing landscapes with clear blue eyes that sit under incredibly bushy eyebrows. His square black eyeglasses sit on his nose, which is sizeable, yet somehow fits his face perfectly. Deep lines that come down from his cheeks frame his thin red lips. He sings along with "Candle in the Wind" on the radio. It's from "Love Songs," an album we spend countless hours listening to while playing cards. He is doing a great Elton John impression even though he doesn't think so. His white and gray hair, which he unsuccessfully tried to smooth down, sticks out in all directions. It is only slightly less unruly than his eyebrows. Moles pepper his face and arms like paint splatter. He is half a century older, as I always tease him. Exactly fifty years separate us, and he is the best friend I've known in my short nineteen years of life. The Elton John song ends, and he switches the radio to our other favorite station before it is out of range. George Ezra tells us about Budapest and Mike joins right in. So do I.

*This road we are taking is familiar. We drove it just last week: State Route 28, take a right, straight on to Portland. I'm not sure if this one is worse than the last, a goodbye followed by a hello. The last trip held something I didn't want to acknowledge—this one is forcing me to live with it every day. I walk into the doors of the funeral home. It feels like the earth is*



*holding my feet in place as I stare past the rows of chairs to the box at the front of the room. My mother is right beside me, talking to the director. I can't hear what they are saying.*

*That is until I hear, "Right this way."*

"Have you ever heard of UDF?" He asks me after the chorus.

"Nope, what is that?" I ask with eyebrows raised. He always knows of the coolest places.

"United Dairy Farmers. They have the best ice cream. Wanna try it?"

Never one to turn down any kind of sugary treat, I indeed want to try it. I go back to watching the houses pass by. We are on some backroads. He avoids interstates to suit me (they make me nervous). The houses have turned into rustic-type buildings with striped wood siding unique to the area. Each of them is set back in the woods, most seem to be on stilts. Southern Indiana always holds that peaceful "at home" feeling.

Mike lights a cigarette. Within moments, ashes are swirling around us in the vortex of air created by the windows. He takes a drag and rests his hand back on the gear shift. He starts talking about some world disaster or another, a conversation we've had many times before. It is what started our friendship so many years ago: four hours of talking about the awful state of the world and our mutual love of Michael Jackson. I offer my opinions and the trees pass us by.

*I follow behind my mother. She is already crying. I am not. My legs are turning to a mix of rock and jelly. She reaches the cardboard box first. And that is all it is, a cardboard box, printed on with thick black ink just like any other. It is roughly six feet long and just wide enough. There is no hinged lid, just the kind that goes on top of a shoebox. I think he deserves better, but this is what he wanted.*

Before long we are in Bright, Indiana, and the United Dairy Farmers sign looms above us. Ice cream is my first love. We end up with front row parking and are perusing the ice cream freezer in no time. There has to be twenty or thirty flavors to choose from. He chooses a boring, regular flavor: chocolate. I've narrowed it down to about three choices, with no idea what kind of cone I want because they also have about ten varieties for that. After serious deliberation, I decide on a blue monstrosity aptly named "Cookie Monster." The lady behind the counter scoops a ridiculous amount into a chocolate-covered cone, then we are on our way to the register. I'm certain it probably costs more than it's worth, but he never seems to care.

*He's in jeans and a plaid long-sleeved shirt. The same outfit he wore two days ago at Thanksgiving (he never was one for regular bathing). His shoes are missing. He wouldn't like that. He was always self-conscious of his feet. His glasses are gone, too, although I can see the indentations at his temples of where they should be. His mouth is half open and his tongue is stuck to the roof in an odd shape, like a half-formed wave. There is a deep indentation running from the corner of his mouth up towards his eye where the intubation tube was left too long. A useless piece of machinery that couldn't save him. He does not look like he is sleeping.*

Once in the car, he tells me he knows a beautiful place we can eat our ice cream. He takes so many turns there is no way I could find my way back to the gas station. We end up in some industrial-type place, where fences line the roads on each side. They make me rather uneasy, but I trust him. Behind the fences stand large factories. They block out any visible greenery. He drives deeper into this demented-looking concrete city, until we hit a dead end.

"Well, that didn't work. There used to be trees here." He says

as he turns the car around, trying to keep up with his melting cone.

“Oh well, let’s just keep going. Where are we going, anyway?” I ask, losing my own battle and inevitably getting some on the seatbelt of his car. Oops.

“Aurora. I think you’ll like it.”

*She is touching him, his face, his arms, crying and talking to him. I just stand there, by his waist, and stare. I can’t touch him, I can’t talk, I am not crying. This image of him will be there every time I close my eyes. Closure? No. That is a pipe dream. My best friend is in a cardboard box, stiff from rigor, and I can’t do anything about it. He does not look like he is sleeping.*

I like the name already. I am grabbing napkins, trying to clean up the growing mess I am making. Bits of cookie are stuck to my fingers. I don’t want to know what is on my face. Let’s eat ice cream in the car, what a wonderful idea. With great determination, I get the blue mass below the cone line thinking I am in the clear. Nope, the waffle is not made of reinforced steel, so it starts leaking goop as well. Damn it.

We head back towards the main part of town. I’m happy to be away from all that concrete. I’m also glad he knows where he is going. Then again, he seems to have an innate sense of direction, something I am envious of. I trust him completely. Well, mostly. There was that one time when we went round and round the roundabout, forgetting which way lead out of the city. Now he says he did it on purpose, but I’m not so sure. It doesn’t matter, I will tease him about that forevermore.

*The director asks us if we would like some of his hair. Such an odd tradition, I think. But, I say yes anyway in case I forget what color it was later. She turns away from him to talk to the director about some other useless*

*detail. I take a step forward and touch his hand. It is cold. They must have replaced him with one of those wax figures. None of this is real. He does not look like he is sleeping.*

Due to my concentration on keeping the melting mass of ice cream under control, it doesn’t seem to take much time before we are entering the city limits of Aurora. It is almost like a movie scene: mom-and-pop shops housed in old buildings line the streets, and American flags hang from every light pole. I’m not sure how big this town is, but it feels quaint and homey. He doesn’t miss a beat with his turns.

Up ahead, something is blindingly shiny. I can’t quite make it out yet. I turn my attention back to the buildings, trying to take in as much as I can. There are antique malls, art stores, diners—all the things that make up Small Town, U.S.A. We pass the town library, one of my favorite places in any city. A couple shops show off the flowers they have for sale, and one proudly calls itself “Golden Rule Bible Center”. It isn’t the Midwest if there aren’t plenty of churches and bible stores. When we are close enough to make out the shiny thing, I realize it is a river. It seems like it stretches a mile across and goes to the end of the world in either direction.

“That is the Ohio River,” he tells me.

“Oh,” more than a little awe struck, I’m not sure what else to say.

*I think back to that first trip to Portland while focusing on the ice cream stain. It has been less than a week since then. I see him in the box every time I close my eyes. But now it is accompanied by an even more gut-wrenching visual.*

*This is our last trip to Portland. The last trip in the wine-red Malibu.*



There is a little, oblong parking lot directly in front of the river. He parks there. I am out of the car before he turns the engine off. I'm not really sure where to focus first. It is beautiful everywhere. In front of us, there are a couple of red picnic tables. I start towards one until I notice a steep hill to my right. I change direction too quickly and stumble over my own feet. Correcting my balance, I almost run towards the hill. It is paved, but it would be nearly impossible for any normal car to get down and back up again without stalling. It leads straight into the river. I have to slow my pace in order to stay upright.

I stop just short of getting my shoes wet and watch the water rush up to the shore then race back out. The shear width of the river is enough to blow my mind. My entire town could fit inside and there would be still room left over. The current is sweeping whole trees down the river, along with trash left by uncaring humans. The river feels mighty, like it could wash away all the bad things. I hear Mike coming down the hill behind me, I turn around and smile at him.

"This is so amazing!" I tell him.

"I knew you would enjoy it. I haven't been here in a long time. There is a sign up there that tells you about all the times it has flooded here and how high it went up." He fills me in on all the information.

In true Mike fashion, he managed to memorize the entire sign in the time it took me to reach the shore.

"Interesting," I say in a not-so-interested voice.

*As with most every other human being, I wish there could be just "one more" conversation, hug, laugh, word. There won't be. I can see him. See him in his box. See him getting pushed into some great inferno where all the dead people go. It was his wish to be cremated, but it doesn't make it any easier when the images force their way into my brain. I can see his box catch on fire first, slowly burning down until the flames reach his*

*flesh. Then, unnaturally, they work their way up from his feet until they frame his face and there is nothing else left. His face frozen in that odd expression left from being intubated. I cannot stop this brain-made movie from playing and replaying.*

I am too busy looking through the shells on the shore and in the water, and all the stuff that has washed up. There are mismatched shoes, which makes me wonder how many bodies might be in the river. Broken dishes, I wonder if there was a boat wreck, like the Titanic, where the goods have washed up. With each new object I find, I come up with some elaborate tale behind it. There are carcasses, mostly skeletal, all around. Their bones tell a story I'm not sure how to read, but I invent it anyway. River monsters way down in the deep where the sun doesn't reach, fighting for their right live. Some like the anglerfish in the ocean, with their built-in flashlight. I find an old baseball and pick it up for my nephews. It looks pretty rough, but they won't care. The ball brings images of a "Sandlot" group of boys playing a summer day away, ultimately losing their prized possession to the murky water. Eventually, I realize Mike isn't by me anymore. I've walked quite a way down the shore.

"Aren't you coming?" I almost have to yell.

"No, you go on. I'm just gonna sit here." He takes a seat on a fallen tree and looks out at the water.

Once he takes his attention off of me, I pull out my phone and snap a picture. It would become one of my favorite photos of him. I continue on my treasure hunt, turning around to check on him every once in a while. He seems content, sitting there in his striped t-shirt and blue jeans, cigarette in hand.

*When we reach the funeral home for the second time, my brain is in autopilot. I do not have to think about the steps I'm taking or the papers*

*I'm signing. I think about that picture I took of him. He looked peaceful. The director informs me that Mike's niece came and picked up some of his ashes. I respond as expected, but I wonder which piece of him she took. An eye? A finger? Maybe a part of his kidney? I will never know. The director brings out a new box, except this one is small and black and plastic.*

After I am sure I have found all the cool things there are to find by the water, I make my way back to him. I take a seat and look at what he is seeing. We watch a barge pass, then dock on down the river. Unloading something or other we assume.

"Want to head back up the hill?" He asks me.

"Sure."

We make the trek back up the hill. In fact, I'm fairly certain it increased in steepness while we were down by the water. By the time we reach the top, we are both huffing and puffing, trying not to pass out from the exertion.

*Back in the car, I study this new version of Mike. The box is simultaneously smaller and larger than I thought it would be. How can a whole person fit in such a small box? How is there so much ash left over after the burning? And why is it so heavy? How is a whole person so light? The box declares "NORTHERN INDIANA CREMATORY" in big, black, bold letters. Just below that first line, Mike's whole name is printed. I wonder why they couldn't have put the name of the deceased first. It would be more respectful.*

"Picnic table?" I ask him through labored breathing.

He nods. I didn't want to leave quite yet, so I'm glad he agreed. He sits on the side facing the water, I straddle the other bench, facing him and the river. He lights another cigarette. We start talking about all the important nothings that make up life as his smoke dissi-

pates into the atmosphere. I stack the pretty flat rocks I found in the water to keep my hands busy. I tell him about all the murders than I'm sure have been committed based on the number of mismatched shoes I found. He tells me I'm demented. We stay like that until the sun sinks towards the horizon.

*All the way home, the weight of the box sits heavy in my lap. He takes his last ride in his wine-red Chevy Malibu. He is not sleeping.*

Sometimes when the weather is as perfect as it was that day, I think I could find him there. If I could feel the sun warming my skin and making the water a flashing signal to the heavens, he would be sitting on the fallen tree, waiting. It doesn't matter how much time passes or how many times I visit the places we used to go, that is the place where I know he resides. Yet, I haven't been back.

*The little black box sits on my dresser.*

## CONTRIBUTORS

ALYSSA ALTIERI graduated from Indiana University East in December of 2020. She earned a degree in Psychology with a double minor in Creative Writing and Neuroscience. Poetry is her favorite genre to write, and she frequently spends her time working on other creative writing projects.

REBECCA DECKER is a in her senior year at IU East. She lives with her husband and three children on their hilltop homestead in Lawrence County. A business owner and violin player, she enjoys writing nonfiction and short stories.

BAILY DANIELLE GILLIAM currently studies Professional and Technical Writing at Indiana University East. She has another bachelor's degree in piano performance from the University of Alabama at Birmingham where she studied under Dr. Yakov Kasman. Her performance credits include the Winston-Salem Symphony, UNCSCA Symphony Orchestra, Green Mountain Chamber Music Festival in Vermont, InterHarmony International Music Festival in Germany, Ticino Musica Festival in Switzerland. Bailey is a first prizewinner in the Greensboro Women's Club Music Competition in 2011 and received an honorable mention at AMTA in 2016. In 2017, her musicological research on Sergei Prokofiev resulted in a lecture recital of only Prokofiev works, featuring both solo piano and piano duet.

A.F.J. GOGGINS writes poetry and short stories. From Chicago, Illinois, she currently lives in Gary, Indiana. Goggins has been published in *Spirits* and *Tributaries*, which are both Indiana University publications.

ALEXUS HAMMOCK graduated from Indiana University East in December 2020 with a bachelor's in English. Outside of school, she continues to pursue a love of reading, as well as writing poetry and nonfiction.

KENNEDY HAGNER is twenty-three years old and majoring in Professional and Technical Writing at IU East. Hagner was raised in Franklin, IN, which is half an hour south of Indianapolis, and has been writing since she was five years old. She lives in Muncie with her partner and three huskies, hoping to move to Oregon in the near future.

TERESA HOANG is currently a junior at IUPUI majoring in Visual Communications and Design (VCD) at the Herron School of Art.

CLARISSA HOGESTON is a sophomore in Churubusco, Indiana, pursuing a Bachelor's in English Professional and Technical Writing. Hogeston wants to do little else but to write, to listen to life and the world to try to capture what she hears with a pen tip scratched into a notepad, and to worship God freely. She thankfully finds her fullest passion to rest in each of these.

JULIA JACKSON attends Indiana University East. In her work, she enjoys letting her creative mind loose. She likes her pieces to have no set meaning, instead being free for the viewer to interpret in their own way.

HEIDI KLEIN is a senior at IU East, getting her bachelor's in Secondary Education with a concentration in English. She enjoys reading, writing, playing the piano, singing, going to church, and

watching movies with her family. When she's not somewhere at IU East doing more school than is good for her or doing the aforementioned activities, she is probably rescuing socks and pencils from the jaws of her beloved dog.

ANNA KLITCH-HARRELSON is currently a senior from Connersville, Indiana, majoring in biochemistry at IU East. She reads and writes poetry as a hobby, finding inspiration from the strange to the mundane. Klitch-Harrelson enjoys utilizing both to describe what we all go through as people.

CATIE LAINHART is currently a student at IU East who is working on a Graphic Design degree. She is fueled by her imagination and love of music, with the band Casiopea being a big inspiration. Issei Noro, the lead guitarist, is featured in her artwork.

GRANT LAWSON is a senior at Indiana University East double majoring in Creative Writing and Accounting.

ELIZA MCGUIRE is currently enrolled at IUE as an English major with an environmental science minor. Eventually, she would like to become a fiction author. Until then, she will continue taking as many writing courses as possible.

ALEJANDRO RAMIREZ is a student at Indiana University East. He currently lives in Los Angeles, juggling school, work, dreams, in the pursuit of a screen writing career. Ramirez lives by the notion that any progress is good progress.

DAMARIS SCOTT is an English major who occasionally writes creative nonfiction.

NATSU THEN SHIMAZAKI is a senior in Mathematics at Indiana University East. They were born and raised in the Dominican Republic and is half Japanese. They are fluent in English, Spanish, and Japanese. Natsu's hobbies include fine arts photography, graphic design for video game development, and mixed media. In the past, Natsu has worked as a math learning assistant, Spanish-English translator and transcriptionist, and as an undergraduate researcher in a biochemistry laboratory.

*Jurors' Statements*

ANGELA PALM HOPKINS

POETRY

**Winner: "Man with Cat" by Heidi Klein**

In "Man with Cat," wreckage and remains meet grandeur and small talk, reminding us that everyone has a story and, miraculously, music and cats help carry us through. The narrative poem comes alive through idiosyncratic details--a cat that smells like "jolly ranchers ground through a pencil sharpener." It's at once a human, poignant, and realistic read.

FICTION

**Winner: "Dedication" by Rebecca Decker**

"Dedication" awakens the senses with the sights and sounds of summer, and it awakens the heart with everyday pursuits and motions of boyhood, inviting readers to poke and prod nature's offerings as well as wonder at its plain joy. The story evokes a strong sense of place, yet names no place as its setting, projecting a coveted innocence and a timeless connection between humans and nature. A delight to read.

NONFICTION

**Winner: "Ice Cream and Ashes" by Eliza McGuire**

In "Ice Cream and Ashes" the braided narrative form allows the writer to process the prismatic experience of loss and the power of remembrance as we move through the then and the now, the familiar and the unknown, the real and surreal nature of mortality. Strong physical descriptions and startling observations gently move the reader towards tenderness, inviting them to savor the fleeting passage of time and the precious nature of life's ordinary moments.

ANGELA PALM HOPKINS wrote *Riverine: A Memoir from Anywhere but Here*, winner of the Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize and a Kirkus Best Book. Her work has been published in *Tin House*, *Longreads*, *Ecotone*, *Creative Nonfiction*, and elsewhere. She's been a finalist for the Vermont Book Award, Indiana Emerging Author Award, and Stanford Library Soroyan International Writing Prize.

## ALEXANDER LANDERMAN

VISUAL ART

### **Winner: *SARAGA* by Teresa Hoang**

While looking through the phenomenal submissions for this year's publication, I was immediately struck by the starch framing of Teresa Hoang's piece "SARAGA." The once-mundane act of traveling to a supermarket with one's loved ones feels like a heroic and dangerous act in these uncertain times. The harsh full sunlight is palpable and the space feels familiar without being specific. As I reviewed the submissions, I continued to circle back to this image. It became imbued with more personal significance. I am thrilled to offer this award to Teresa Hoang and look forward to seeing how her photography continues to develop.

### **Runner-up: *Paracosms of the Mind* by Julia Jackson**

### **Honorable Mentions: *Issei Noro 2* by Catie Lainhart & *Tokischa Trapterretre* by Natsu The Shimazaki**

ALEXANDER LANDERMAN utilizes letterpress printing and drawing mediums to explore relationships between humans and animals. Landerman completed his Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2-Dimensional Art at the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point, and Masters of Fine Art in Printmaking at Indiana University. His work is represented throughout the United States and internationally; he has participated in numerous residency programs such as the Jentel Artist

Foundation and the Petrified Forest National Park AiR program. He is currently faculty at Indiana University where he runs the Letterpress Studio and continues to create work combining traditional drawing techniques with emerging digital practices and letterpress printing.





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