SOLILOQUIES 26.1

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We would like to acknowledge that Concordia University is located on unceded Indigenous lands. The Kanien'kehá:ka Nation is recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters on which we gather. Tiohtià:ke/Montreal is historically known as a gathering place for many First Nations. Today, it is home to a diverse population of Indigenous and other people. We respect the continued connections with the past, present and future in our ongoing relationships with Indigenous and other people within the Montreal community.

Written by Concordia University's Indigenous Directions Leadership Group in 2017

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foreword

This semester at Soliloquies was nothing if not challenging. When we began our journey as editors-in-chief, we were surrounded by uncertainty. We didn't know where the pandemic would take us, what the school year would look like, or even what awaited the anthology. With limited answers and very few team members, we had to trust that we could make things work. We had a responsibility to Soliloquies, a publication that has now been around for almost 25 years, and to its extensive readership—and, somehow, we made it to the finish line.

After a period of moderate engagement due to the pandemic, we were overwhelmed by the support and interest we received this semester. With a total of 696 pieces submitted for this issue, we would like to thank everyone who shared their work with the journal, and congratulate the authors whose pieces we have chosen to publish. Thank you for trusting us with your work, and for giving us so many incredible stories to read.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without our amazing team of editors, who constantly inspire us to do better, our web content creators, our social media manager, Candice Brown, our artistic director, Catherine Sauvé Dowers, and the best managing editor we could have asked for, Sarah Lotfi (with the "t" before the "f"). You all inspired us to keep going when things got difficult, and encouraged us with your continued dedication and compassion; we hope you realize the impact you've had on making this anthology come to life, and that you're able to take pride in it.

We would also like to thank Soliloquies' previous editors-in-chief, Abigail Candelora and Claire Chodos-Irvine, for helping us navigate our new and intimidating roles, as well as the wonderful folk that run the Arts and Science Federation of Associations, who made this journal possible through their continued moral and financial support.

It has been an enormous privilege to lead Soliloquies this year, and we look forward to doing it all over again next semester. Whether you're a first time reader of the anthology or a long-time supporter, we want to thank you for taking the time to get acquainted with us; we hope you enjoy Soliloquies 26.1.

Sophie Villeneuve and Paola B. López Sauri Editors-in-Chief

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Content Warning: Detailed account of a painful, degenerative genetic disease in my feet, multiple discounting encounters with western physicians, and my will to find a way where one doesn't exist

Revelation from the Sole

Isha Strasser

To walk as You walk, scarred and yet strong, this is my consecration to You, Holy Mother. -from an old Polish Prayer

I'm in a bathroom the size of a coat closet clinging to my big toe, bent awkwardly to the side, body curled in a question mark. I strain to see the bottom of my foot. There it is, faintly recognizable, like a whale on the edge of the ocean on the sole of my foot. A little humpbacked bump rising from the freshly scarred skin. Losing my hard-won balance and breath, I fall.

My husband watched me idle awkwardly around the kitchen a thousand years ago this morning. I was learning to walk again, to trust my feet. He was happy to see me on those scarred feet. However awkward, he knew the price I paid. He paid it too.

For years he was the one by my side when I couldn't walk at all. He heard me gasp in the morning when my feet first touched the floor and watched me wince with every step. He sat beside me through countless appointments and listened to the familiar diagnosis: they were sorry there was nothing they could do. We welcomed this response, compared to the countless others that infuriated, misdiagnosed, or shamed me: the doctor who smirked, said

there was no way I could have multiple neuromas in addition to fibromas, until he looked quietly at the ultrasound and avoided eye contact; the doctor at NYU who, after having ordered MRIs and postponing my follow-up for three excruciating months, told me to Google another option; or the team of doctors at Calvary Hospital in the Bronx, who, after we'd waited four long months to see them, examined me and said, "Well, at least you have a pretty face," and escorted me out on jagged glass and electric fence, a one-way prescription ticket for opioids in hand.

I was used to hearing there was nothing they could do—except from my husband. He stood by me for every vacuous defeat and said: "We'll find a way."

Before he was my husband, his shoulder soaked up seas of my tears, my strength dissolved. At night in our little Jersey City apartment, he'd lay breathless beside me, while I grit my teeth and cried myself to sleep. Every morning he kissed me goodbye as I limped stoically out the door for work, and kissed me hello every night as I hobbled back home, hurting. It went on like this for years and still he said: "We'll find a way."

And we did. He refused to give up on me: carried me to the car after each surgery; placed pillows around me so I wouldn't bounce around in the backseat; hauled me up the long staircase to our apartment; chuckled at my weak jokes; handled me with care as I vomited his carefully prepared dinner. He offered an arm as I struggled to take my first post-surgical steps, rolled my wheelchair in and out and back into the bathroom, watched out of the corner of his eye as I grimaced through physical therapy with the Rocky

IV soundtrack blasting in my headphones. At the end of every long day, he tucked the blankets around me just right.

And this morning, after having finished eggs and crunching toast in our darling new home, we strode out for yard work—victorious—we made it. Our new life. Together, we had passed through a burning ground. Together, we emerged on the other side.

"Isn't this the most perfect day?" I asked, walking softly on my scars across our South Jersey lawn, smiling widely at the fresh-faced daffodils.

"It is," he replied.

It was.

Until later that afternoon, when my hand nonchalantly swept the bottom of my foot and found it. That one little bump, rising upon scar tissue from the previous surgeries, but rising still like the back of a whale cresting in the distance. Surgery is contraindicated, my doctor had said, the tumors may recur. But at this point if you want to walk you have no other option. My hand froze and my heart fired off like a rocket jolting me to stand, the tumors may recur, a flock of birds bolted from the tree as I shot up.

"Do you need anything?" I called back from over my shoulder, racing to the coat closet bathroom.

* * *

The most unexpected guests go unseen, unnoticed. Little bumps emerge beneath the bland, fleshy details of daily life. Newly diagnosed cancer patients discover this everyday. I don't have cancer, not that I know of. What I do know is that life may seem to turn on a dime, but behind every mundane minute of the day, little cellular angels of creation weave destruction--in time they tell. Some weave

slowly, some with great speed, but our eventual destruction is their creative guarantee. Mine rose like a whale on the sole of my foot.

* * *

The first bump appeared twenty years ago. It was a strange place to grow a pimple; on the arch of the bottom of my foot. But I was eighteen—and at eighteen—anything goes. I let it go, no big deal.

What I thought I let go didn't let go of me. That little bump grew, spread and stretched and morphed beneath the soles of my feet, ensconcing the connective tissue, atrophying the fat pads and multiplying nerve tumors in the balls of the feet. The loose diagnosis was Ledderhose Disease, but that didn't cover a fraction of my debilitating symptoms.

I tried everything I could get my feet on since surgery was not an option—contraindicated I'd been told. Thousands of hours of massage, acupressure, acupuncture, physical therapy, rolfing, yoga, meditation, mindfulness, zen, contemplation, somatic therapy, trauma release techniques, rebirthing, Feldenkrais and Alexander Techniques, talk therapy, walk therapy, horse therapy, dog therapy, flower therapy, all-available- species-therapy, past life regressions and exorcisms, and anything else I could find. Nothing could thwart the current, the builders were well into their work.

* * *

I had been a traveler, a connoisseur of the road, within and without. From Cincinnati, I moved to Boston, to New York, to Venice Beach, up to Boulder, Colorado, and back down to New York, and then found a port in Jersey City before landing in Glassboro.

Travel was fun, but my inner-world was my favored terrain. I had discovered J. Krishnamurti and the wonders of yoga and meditation as a teenager in the 90s. As a lifelong trekker upon the spiritual path, I thought I knew a thing or two about the ways within. Twenty years of spiritual practice taught me that there was a difference between pain and suffering, needs and wants, desire and detachment, will and surrender, many other truisms to live by. And yet, all my mighty ancient platitudes were shredded like prayer flags in the winds of experience: pain left nothing to hold onto.

I had moved back to New York for my dream job at a non-profit, found my soul's purpose fulfilled in the rigors of working for a cause larger than my own. But the condition in my feet became increasingly inflamed and burst into chronic pain. All sentient beings avoid this. We are biologically programmed to avoid pain and seek pleasure, to preserve and save ourselves from suffering at all costs. Pain demands fight or flight; but with chronic pain, there is no escape, only the gnashing torment of being crushed by a force larger than oneself, endlessly.

Although the American Academy of Pain Medicine recently released a research report stating that almost two billion people worldwide suffer from moderate to severe chronic pain every day, pain is a place you go alone. Actually, it's more like a place that consumes you whole. Devours you. Swallows your entire life when you're looking the other way, when suddenly, you turn to find you're living in the belly of a whale—a liminal land. It only minimally

resembles your life. Everything feels different and the ones you love are now on the other side—the side without pain. You can only touch them through whale flesh and wish you were on the other side.

* * *

Still, I was sustained by my inner alignment. I pressed through, moved out into each seemingly impossible day with slow, careful steps, intense inward focus. First, make it to the bus stop:

Step outside. See the curb ahead, step one foot down, step foot two. Look ahead and breathe. Ten steps to street cross, count by two. One two, one two. See the next curb, step foot one up, step foot two.

Gone was the sway of my hip and the swing of my step. These city streets had been the sea of my saunter. I'd sway and step and steep in delight, until. Until the dis-ease got worse. I got slow. At first a little limp, a slower sway. Until no sway was left. Only short, cautious, careful steps. Step up. Step down. Step foot one. Step foot two. That's it. Just keep stepping foot two.

Pain is a force, a propellant, a blunt shove in an unexpected direction. No matter how care-filled my steps, pain shoved me in a direction I never could have imagined.

* * *

By the time I finally surrendered to surgery, wads of bristling scar tissue, bone protrusions, and radiant nerve tumors covered the bottom of each foot. Surgery was contraindicated, yes I know, but so was every step—every step on jagged glass and electric fence. Chronic pain broke barriers to the rest of my body, shot up my legs, back, brought migraines, vertigo, insomnia. My face broke out in

boils and melasma, my eyes diagnosed dry and always scratchy; there were never enough tears.

And time had told: over time, pain devoured my life. I felt dangerously close to begging for death to find me in that dark night. And yet, my life was made anew over time.

Anew, like this day, when I woke up in my new home with my new husband in my New Jersey town, having made it through three reconstructive surgeries on my feet in two years: feet now scarred, yet strong. Me, scarred and yet strong, the promise of my chosen prayer.

* * *

Pain is a force, a propellant, a blunt shove in an unexpected direction—but I crossed through that threshing ground and came back. I'll come back again.

My husband knocks.

I stand up on my feet in the coat closet bathroom, scarred and yet strong. Pain ignites an ascent, inward and upward to the liminal realm, a domain of threshing transformation, a place I am headed again.

"Honey?" he says softly through the door, "We'll find a way."

I know we will, I want to say.

But I'm silent. With each dive, I go deeper into the whale of pain where I am distanced, separated, dismembered, from others and myself, swept further from the surface of living into the depths of being. Is this what dying feels like? A hushed knowing that you're drifting silently from all you love, swept up and inward to a domain where no one can reach and nothing can touch—where I can't even reach my husband through a bathroom door?

Revelation from the Sole

Or is this what living really is? Is it a process of being shattered into fragments, and scattered across a path of pain; a path traveled one step at a time, one foot two, unmarked door of toward an at-one-ment transformation. or another unmarked door of dismemberment and death. Which is which? Either I make it through the door at-oned, or I go through the other door, fragmented, lost, swept away in the whale. Which will it be? "I'll find a way. I know I will.

Poster Ad Girls

Nicholas Y. Shi

1. Inspiration

Midday in a dim bar illuminated solely by the sunlight through a nearby glass window, a lady in a moss green cheongsam handpicked to highlight the curvature in her body puffs out a lung full of ashy-white smoke after taking a slow drag of her cigarette. Her lips perked up ever so slightly as if placing a kiss on the cheek of her gentleman lover.

This is the image my head conjures upon hearing the phrase "poster ad girls." The vision of classical feminine elegance embodied in a package referred to with nostalgic fondness as "the old Shanghai."

So, imagine my surprise to discover through a late 2000s entertainment news article that two of the models for the iconic poster ads were in fact men in drag. I suppose I shouldn't have been. Like many other countries, Chinese theatre has a history of female roles inhabited by men. A woman's place was not to flaunt herself in public, be they daughters or wives. Still, this discovery aroused a mixture of surprise and fascination, and years later I would recall that feeling when I looked for a subject for my first endeavor into novel writing. On top of the poster ad girls themselves, I've always been interested in their place of origin: the glimmering Shanghai of the 1930s. A time and a place that still captures nostalgia inside the hearts and minds of Chinese descendants to this day.

I plunged headfirst into research diving through what I can find of their stories, their lives, and how they connected

to the society that birthed them. All in hopes of gaining a better understanding of who the "poster ad girls" are.

Right now the novel-writing process has been put on an indefinite pause. I am not yet a novelist. The task of creating the novel I pictured so vividly inside my head has proved daunting.

But during research, I was able to come up with characters and some semblance of a storyline for them. They were my avatars, through whom I attempted to form my image of 1930s Shanghai. A time period that was a majestic concoction of beauty, fantasy, and tragedy.

2. The Siren

In the age of the Internet, "Shanghai Women" has become a buzzword used in the late 2000s to describe aggressive, opinionated, ignorant, or tempestuous women. A phrase that incites reactions of distaste while also serving as the punchline for the jokes of many Chinese comedians. "You think my life is good? I married a Shanghai woman!" Cue the applause and laughter.

Take it back several decades, however, the spirited ladies of Shanghai were icons of fashion and beauty. And the poster ad girls shined the brightest among a sea of stars.

The main character for my novel is named Su, a girl of seventeen and a singer at a nightclub. She also does poster ads modeling on the side. Both factors garnered her many admirers. Her image is crafted to be on the very edge of fashion, which of course means her figure is most commonly spotted adorning cheongsam, traditional Chinese dresses. But not the kind designed decades ago that loosely draped over women. The kind she wears retains the

stylings of the traditional cheongsam but looked to the West for adjustments that would fit a modern woman. Much tighter at parts revealing the finer intricacies of the female form. They are canvases of color, with beautifully sewn patterns scattered throughout the cloth. Colors of gold and silver dancing in red and blue. Sexy but still retaining the modesty of tradition.

"女人如水," a classic Chinese saying comparing women to water. It is cited to come from the Chinese classic novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*. From this comes the idea that many qualities of womanhood are comparable to the many forms of water. The delicate beauty of water droplets, the encompassing love of a mother akin to the width and depth of the ocean, the giggly liviness of the river, etc. Even the name given to the seductress leading men off the path of righteousness is given the name of troubling water, "红颜祸水." Good or bad, the writers and poets have found a connection between the traits of a woman with the language of water.

The poster ad girls are no different. Streamlines traverse their bodies, illustrating river-like curvature. Their faces, delicate and bright, radiating the glow of clear water basking in the light of the morning sun.

They present themselves as the ideal modern women, the alluring beauty of the new era. Distinctly western in their mysterious sex appeal, with elements of the innocence associated with eastern beauties. Their smiles are captured with colors artists mimicked from Disney cartoons, with rosy cheeks rivaling that of Snow White.

They were icons for modern women, painted under the brush of men. They were not people. They were the pretty images painted onto calendars to advertise products. Like the many sayings comparing women to water, those poster ads represent expectations of womanhood. And expectations often reflect only a narrow slice of reality.

If you want to search for real stories of these women, I hope you have better luck than me, because I didn't find any. They did not live for their stories to be told.

Su is one of four leads, all poster ad girls. I wrote her to be the one who most embraced modeling. Her image embodied everything artists wanted, the golden standard for a "modern woman." Yet I wanted her reality to reject the male fantasy. She is forward, opinionated and proud. She was raised by her mother to be obedient and proper, someone whose sole purpose was to be the ideal bride. She intentionally drew scandal upon herself to break away from her arranged marriage and her family. She freed her hand and, by becoming a nightclub singer, offered her hand for everyone to see. She allowed herself the agency to choose, which she had so long been denied.

I wonder sometimes when people equate "women are made of water" to "women should be soft and demure," have they forgotten the weight of a waterfall or turbulence of the Yellow River?

I decided after writing down Su's storyline in an outline, to give her the nickname of "The Siren." For her singing. For her embrace of the western. For being everything that's not what she was raised to be.

3. Union of the Western and Eastern Sky

The male characters were a bit harder to create. Unlike players of a Beijing Opera, their performance of drag was not a publicly recognized profession or art form. And though it could be the case, there's no evidence suggesting that they took pleasure in the act of dressing in drag. In a way, they tiptoed on the edges of society's construct and lived Shanghai's illusion. And for that, their truths were ignored and tucked away.

But when I thought harder about it, I realized they are just people trying to live the best lives they could, making money however they could. They were common folks trying to get by in the big city by exploring the careers shadowed behind the city's glamour. Then it came to me. Men who dressed in drag for poster ads represented the reality behind Shanghai's fantasy. A reality people chose to ignore despite how obvious it was, in order to indulge in their obsession with said fantasy.

So for two of three male characters, Liu and Qin, they would be migrants, who were drawn to the shining city of Shanghai.

"Paris of the Orient," that's what they called Shanghai back in the early 20th century. With architecture modeled after those of Paris, the old Shanghai era was truly a marvel to behold. The night glittered with lights, the buildings glimmering in a golden aura and the people never seemed to rest.

Liu and Qin would be brought to the city of Shanghai by the glimmering aura, to shed the world of the old and enter the world of the new. Yet they would not become elites of this city. They would forever be stuck within the lower social class.

Their stories are inspired by the stories of actual artists who created poster ads. Those artists became some of the most wealthy people in Shanghai. They bought the finest of things, but could never buy their way past the barricade of high society.

But that won't stop Liu and Qin from having fun. With their savings they dive headfirst into the glamorous side of Shanghai nightlife.

When researching, I came across the fact that young socialites who weren't as rich would, instead of buying a shirt, choose to make a fake shirt collar to tuck inside suits to pretend like they're dressed fine and proper. I knew right away that would be something Liu and Qin are into. They're pretend-elites living the dream of Shanghai's promises.

Such a way of living could've only existed in 1930s Shanghai, where the West met the East. Boundaries of tradition remained yet people lived out the freedom of the West. Where reality inched closer to the realm of a dream.

It was a time when the icons of female glamour didn't have to be female. Where every household purchased poster ads featuring girls doing what's unattainable to the masses: riding on bikes and motorcycles, posed in front of a mountain or the Eiffel Tower. Yet in the reality of Shanghai, and in poster ads, it didn't matter.

What is the pain of reality inside the realm of a dream? "The Shanghai Dream," shining with a beautiful fragility.

They lived knowing not to mind the exclusivities of high society; to ignore being banned from regions held by the British and the French in the same manner as dogs were. They could never close the gap of social class, cross the borders of embassies, but they could live like kings as long as they saved up enough money to throw around.

And if someone could never save enough money, they could still buy the poster ads—accessible fantasies for the common folk.

4. I Dreamed of A Butterfly

The last member of the main cast is named Zhu.

A bit of a self-insert character. He's a writer, seeking to write his masterpiece to encapsulate the decade in which he lived. In a moment of inspiration, I decided to give him a recurring dream, a dream of a butterfly.

Dreaming of a butterfly is one of the earliest philosophical ideas in Chinese history.

It tells of a man who dreamed he was a butterfly and then awoke. Yet he was left wondering whether he was a man who dreamed of being a butterfly or a butterfly now dreaming of being a man. The line dividing dream and reality is a thin one.

It is not a coincidence I designed Zhu to be the only one who had a clear want and goal. Where the other three lived in Shanghai, he lived for it. He dreamed of capturing Shanghai as he saw it to pass it down to future generations. Bathe in the decade's glory before it is lost to the waves of time.

Butterflies flew in the night of Shanghai where street lamps lit the way. They didn't fear being lost in the dark when everything seemed so bright. Every one of them flew away from someone in this city, from their chambers, and the part of their minds where their dreams were fabricated. Some of the butterflies will fly with their wings glowing in the night sky and land at their destination. Some would just continue flying.

Zhu's butterfly would never stop flying. Its destination elusive, its flight path confused. We'll get back to that later.

I am told aggressive self-insertion works against writing more often than not. I'm not sure if I went too far with Zhu. I, too, have a butterfly dream. Though mine is a bit different from his.

I stopped many times during my writing process. I am much too amateur of a writer to put down the images in my head and describe Shanghai without just repeating the words "glamor" and "glamorous" over and over again. So I would stop and stare and start to daydream.

I imagine myself at the Paramount in 1934 Shanghai.

Then I close my eyes and let a butterfly appear in the dark and lead me there.

This is the decade where the nightclub culture in Shanghai came to blossom. It is said that the parties thrown at those night clubs every night could rival the parties thrown by the Great Gatsby himself. And the Paramount was the best in the business.

A live band in shining white suits, playing meters away from the floor swarming with fashionable men and women, swinging to the tune, breathing the alcohol in the air, drunk without ever touching a glass.

I might go on the dance floor if I could ever overcome my social awkwardness. Surrounded by dim, atmospheric lights casting shades of all colors, vision blurred by the alcohol-induced ecstasy, spinning around, swinging my arms. Caught halfway between dream and reality. I'd bump into people. Maybe even intentionally. Have a "chance encounter" with whoever else on that floor. They probably would be beautiful. Famous actors, musicians, rich folks and poor folks, anyone with a romantic dream inside their heart went to the club and on the dance floor.

The sunlight would eventually creep through my eyelids and take me right back to the middle of the writing process. The bad thing about daydreaming is that the light can always give you a rude awakening.

Though it's probably a good thing that I couldn't stay. When you stay long enough there's always the chance of a blackout, followed by a dead silence. Then the sirens start and terror lets loose. Japanese airplanes would've been dropping bombs on the city of Shanghai.

5. Rude Awakening

I know how the story will end, I've known since I started on this venture.

When dreams are weighed on the wings of butterflies, they are fragile; easily crushed, and ripped to pieces.

Shanghai's fantasy was preceded by an invasion from the Japanese army and only maintained through a truce held together by a thin thread. Always on the verge of snapping, subjected to the whims of the invading party.

All the glamour, the elegance, the parties, and the alcohol-induced fantasies would be shattered, by the roaring of the bombs, the thundering visit of the fighter planes, and the sounds of destruction that would drown out the cries of misery. Invasion. The fragile truce was broken. World War 2 would ravage the land.

Lights no longer dim. They were bright red, cast by the flames among smokes. Everyone caught in between coated with the glow of yellows and oranges. The modern ladies would not exist the same way as before, even after World War 2 there was a Civil War, not soon after that a Cultural Revolution. None of them permitted the existence of their glamour. They were flowers caught within a burning garden, dwindling in the wind, denying the flames until they were consumed by it.

I've written down the ending soon after I wrote the first chapter.

An ending where the poster ad girls become relics of the past. Of a decade that seems unreal to the people, after the war and revolution had hardened them. All four of the main cast would've left Shanghai in one way or another, being forced to give up the life they paved for themselves in the glimmering city. A life that they had once foolishly thought was promised to them. It would seem the tale of the poster ad girls would end right then and there.

Yet today, poster ad girls still exist as part of nostalgia. And in this ending there were still those who would look back on these escapist fantasies with the same fondness as those who nowadays would study these ads; as those who would buy boxes of chocolate with the girls' faces printed upon them; as those who would be tempted to write a novel about these girls despite having zero prior knowledge going in.

But I'm still not sure if I'll ever finish this story. Maybe like Zhu in his ending, he will never finish his masterpiece, as I might not ever finish this novel.

Poster Ad Girls

However, going back to Zhu. In this ending, he turns and realizes that his Shanghai didn't need a masterpiece to preserve its glory. The decade was already encapsulated, in all its escapist spirit, within the frames of the poster ads.

Poster ad girls ceased to exist by the end of the 1940s. Cultures have changed, the way we advertise has changed along with it. Yet we still remember them. We still print their faces onto chocolate boxes and postcards. They continue to live as part of a time past, a fantasy of a bygone era, and icons of what was old Shanghai.

Maybe the idea of telling stories of the poster ad girls, by itself, contradicts the conclusion of my research into them.

For what matters about the poster ad girls, was not how they lived.

Was not how they died.

It was how we remembered.

The Measure of Grief

Elaine Ferrell

"Your dog has cancer."

A sentence that should not exist.

First there is shock, then disbelief. It's not fair, my brain swirls, she had such a rough life before she came to us. She doesn't deserve a rough death as well.

I know life isn't fair, but that knowledge doesn't tame this thought.

"Canine oral melanoma," the vet tells us over the phone - a common cancer in dogs over ten years old. But Bella is only eight.

Six years ago, my husband and I went through the process of adopting a dog through the local shelter. We read descriptions online, squealed at the adorable faces, filled out applications. Bella was being fostered at a large home in the country, about 40 minutes from our house. We made plans to drive up and see her. In the backyard, the foster mom, Jean, called her name, and Bella came prancing out from the house. Her black face lit up with a big smile, one ear flapping as she ran over to us. "Yes," my husband and I said to each other – we knew instantly she was the dog for us. Securing our spot with Jean and the shelter, we headed to the pet store to buy supplies, and made reservations at a local dog training center. She would be the first dog for both of us, and we wanted to do everything right.

But that didn't seem to matter, I think, as the veterinarian lists our options over the phone. Due to how many spots they found in her mouth, surgery isn't viable;

radiation is also not possible. So really, there are only two choices - chemotherapy or palliative care.

Bella is a Labrador-Chow mix, though looks entirely like a Lab. She has just started getting whiskers of white around her mouth and neck. Otherwise, Bella is entirely black, including her tongue, which evidently is indicative of the Chow side, as is her curled tail. The Humane Society had seized Bella from her former owner because he did a lot of horrible things - nearly starved her to death, bred her (which makes no sense; she is a mutt), and also may have tried to dock her ears. The left one sticks straight up while the right one remains floppy. Her ears are my favorite part of her. They seem to be others' favorite part as well. Often on walks, people will point out her one floppy ear. I will often sit on the couch next to her, playing with her ears, immersed in their softness, their pliability.

As the doctor prattles on over the phone, I think that I need to scratch her ears more often now. I need to spend as much time with her as possible.

I listen as the vet discusses Bella's prognosis - six months even with treatment. One to three months without. What's even the point? I think. But it matters to her! And to us, really - three months can make a big difference.

Apparently medical science is not precise. Even though the vet needs to know the dog's exact weight to compound the drugs correctly, cancer treatments do not rely on precision. They can adjust the amount, they say, if it's not working out or if she has a bad reaction. But I need precision. I crave a clear answer in order to make a rational decision. But that is not possible; after all, this is a veterinary practice, not a veterinary mastery.

I ask questions via email the next day, suffocated by guilt. Bella had to have teeth pulled last week, and that's when they discovered the cancer.

I think back to the day of Bella's oral surgery. We made the appointment because she was licking her lips more often than usual, drooling excessively, and had halitosis. The vet said she probably had a bad tooth, and would have to have it pulled. A normal procedure, they assured me. But a few hours after I dropped her off, the vet called back. "It's worse than we thought," he said, "Looks like four teeth are infected. And there are spots on her mouth. We need to do a biopsy."

I tell them to do it. But when I retrieved Bella that evening, she was whimpering like I'd never heard. Usually an easygoing dog, she was clearly in unbelievable pain. At pick up, the vet tech had warned me that she would be more vocal than usual tonight. What does that even mean? I asked myself. I wish now that they had been more direct: Bella will whine, they should have said. At least that would have prepared me. They probably didn't know that Bella never whimpered; she barely even barked unless there was someone at the door.

And the painkillers they gave her clearly did nothing. After listening to her whimper on the couch for three hours, I hand-fed her. She had refused food earlier that night but was now lapping it up, confused because her mouth was hurting yet her stomach was empty. Then I went to bed and cried.

That was a week ago. Now she has cancer. It's almost like having teeth pulled didn't matter. I put her through so

much misery that one night, in a life that she may not have much longer.

Another email exchange. I bargain with the vet for a better outcome, though I know there's little he can control. "Could it be benign?" No, the vet responds; it's already metastasized to her lymph nodes. "What are the costs of chemo?" There's an X factor, he says - we don't know how long she will live. But he gives me a monthly ballpark that ranges between the acceptable and the obscene. "Can you tell what stage the cancer is in?

"That's a good question," he remarks.

I couldn't care less.

"The biopsy doesn't tell us about stage," his email reads. "Staging involves figuring out where the cancer has spread to."

More decisions to make. How can I possibly be expected to make a rational one when my mind is clouded by emotion? I just want someone to tell me what to do.

I talk to my husband, knowing that his logical brain will balance out my emotional one. We decide on chemo, since Bella deserves the longest life possible.

Meanwhile, I set up an appointment for her x-ray and research "canine oral melanoma." I learn that it can affect any breed of dog and that tumors can be found anywhere in the mouth, including - in Bella's case - the hard palate. They are aggressive. "Malignant melanoma is the most common oral tumor in dogs," one website reads, listing out the "overrepresented breeds," one of which is Chow Chow. I don't know how much Chow is in her. Too much, apparently.

I think back to the first summer we had Bella. She was anxious around other people (unsurprising, given her history) but warmed up to us immediately, probably because she was food-motivated, making training quite easy. We took her with us on our yearly beach trip, thinking she would love the water – what Lab doesn't? But we were surprised when she cowered away from the ocean. She was perfectly content lounging on the deck beside us, though, and enjoyed getting into tussles with other dogs who walked by. One thing she never fully learned was not to pull on her leash. She got over excited around other dogs.

I think about the fact that we regrettably never took her to a dog park due to this as the vet tells me the x-ray has come back clean. The cancer has not metastasized to her lungs, at least. But the doctor still can't determine the stage. The vet wants to do an ultrasound.

I don't want any more tests, especially since that may not tell her the stage either, though tests may help guide treatment. I don't understand. Why isn't this a linear process? Why can't someone just tell me what the next step is?

So I say no to the ultrasound, partially out of not wanting to spend more money on tests, partially out of the time tests take away from treatment, and partially because Bella hates car rides; the vet is half an hour away. But mostly, I say no because the more time she spends at the vet, the less time she spends at home with us. That would be diminishing her quality of life as well as ours.

But then I wonder: Was that the right decision?

The vet orders chemotherapy. The drugs will be mailed to our house.

The pharmacy calls us to confirm our address and the dog's weight. (I don't know her weight. I'm using the measurement the vet gave me. Does anyone know their pet's weight?) They will take a week to arrive, they say. I'm simultaneously angry and sad. What if she gets worse before then?

The drugs come, and we follow the regimen. A chemo pill every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning. Rimadyl, an anti-inflammatory, every other morning and every night. What day is it? I wonder sometimes. How do I know if the Rimadyl is working?

Is Bella in pain? She isn't whimpering, so I tell myself she is comfortable. Bella, I wish you could talk. If you were a person, would this be easier?

I put the meds in her food - soft food now since she no longer has the teeth for kibble. For the first couple of weeks, there is no issue. Then she stops eating. Does she not like the food? I wonder. But Bella eats anything, even green beans we drop at dinner. Does her mouth hurt? Or is she just done with life? I wonder.

I buy different food. I place it in her bowl one spoonful at a time. She eats it slowly. Because she likes this food or because she is starving? There's no way to tell. I feel like I'm taking care of a human baby.

I watch her throughout the day more often. I'm looking for signs of pain or weakness. But what do I look for? This entire endeavor has no clear answers. I watch the tumor on her lymph node to see if it's grown or shrunk. It seems like it is growing, though I do not use a ruler. So much for precision.

I gauge that she is still feeling well because she still hops up onto the couch, still possesses her equine-like prance while on walks. We have people over in the backyard a few days after she stops eating, and she appears happy hanging out with us while under the patio table, hoping for food scraps. Bella still stretches out in her favorite non-couch spot – her yellow blanket in front of the hearth - and sleeps deeply. Is she sleeping more often?

When she stops eating regularly, I keep trying to hand-feed her. I've given up on dog food. She eats Cheerios out of my hand (not from the floor – is she getting picky? Or does it hurt her jaw to be at that angle?) but manages just a few bites. I feel like I'm force feeding her, which may be just as bad as starving her. And she refuses her medication.

After about four days of this semi-routine, I notice her right side is damp and smelly. "Bella, did you puke on yourself?" I ask her, petting her head to let her know she's not in trouble. I grab a towel to dry her off, trying to discern where the fluid has come from. I don't see it on her blanket, where she had just been lying. I look at her side again. Did she roll in a puddle? But then I see the source of the fluid. The tumor on her neck (no question it has grown - to about twice the size) has popped open and there is liquid slowly oozing out.

Oh shit oh shit, I mutter to myself, zigzagging across the room as if being chased by a crocodile. I need a logical mind.

My husband is mowing the lawn. I go outside to tell him our dog is leaking. It is an illogical sentence.

"Call the vet," he declares. Why didn't I think of that?

I do, and explain the issue: "Hi, my dog's tumor is leaking."

The vet is not available, but the vet tech tells me this is an end sign. How is she so composed? Did she not hear the strangeness inherent in that sentence? Compounded with Bella's lack of eating and low energy, the tech tells me it will soon be time to say goodbye.

I'm glad that my husband has taken over the conversation at this point. I cannot cope with this right now. I am an onion: there is a layer of depression, a layer of denial, and a very tiny layer that is satisfied that my intuition was right – the tests didn't matter. Then that satisfaction melts into anger.

You told me six months with treatment! It's been five weeks! I want to scream at the vet tech, even though I know it's not her fault. In my head, I'm bargaining: She still gambols up the stairs! She still enjoys our walks!

In my haze of rage and despair, I don't hear her list medications that will help Bella feel more comfortable. But my husband is listening. He doesn't want anti-nausea medication. He doesn't want an appetite stimulant. He wants an antibiotic for the dripping fluid and steroids to make her last days more comfortable. I agree, but I cannot think.

Later that night, after we've cleaned Bella up again and have had time to digest the facts along with our dinner, we decide we want control over the situation. "Bella's quality of life is gone," my husband states, "We can't drag out her life any longer."

I want to plead with him, but I know he's right.

He calls the vet again to make an appointment to put her down the next morning. I cannot bear to carry out this task.

That night, I try not to act any differently. I don't want Bella to know that we are going to kill her. It's out of compassion, I tell myself. Letting her get sicker would be inhumane. Would it, though? I'm not sure.

I try to spoon feed her dinner. She takes two bites. A few hours later I give her a cheese stick. Usually her favorite treat, she can barely eat half. Is she telling me she's ready?

I'm still not sure she's in pain. Aside from that one night, Bella has never whimpered. Why can't you just tell me how you feel, Bella?

But I stare into her deep black eyes and know they are sad. Her behavior has changed. She lies on the guest bed now, a completely new habit. She seems to wander around the house without purpose, as if in an existential crisis. She's licking herself like a cat - in an attempt to self-soothe? And while she still enjoys walks, she no longer jumps four feet into the air while I get the leash out. Before cancer, her leash was taut. Now she doesn't pull at all. She just doesn't have the strength.

Bella's quality of life has diminished, no question. But enough to end her life? I tell myself yes. It makes the decision easier.

The morning of our final appointment. My husband and Bella are in the backyard, after having gone on one final walk. I watch her eyes follow a cicada crawling across the patio in the late May heat. She does not nip at it, does not paw it.

Five weeks and two days after her diagnosis, it is time.

Like Bella's cancer, I could never fully understand my grief, could never measure it. The emotions come at you from all angles at any time. Much like a diagnosis, grief is not linear. It is circular. You do not know when it will ebb or flow, when it will metastasize or shrink. You do not know when you will be utterly overcome by it: a stray hair on the couch, the limp leash hanging uselessly by the door, an expectation of her waiting at the bathroom door when you get out of the shower and then feeling your shoulders slump when you don't hear the once inevitable tippy-tap of her claws on the hardwood.

We arrive at the vet on that final day of Bella's life. It is the Friday before Memorial Day. We will have a dog-less summer.

They take her to the room where, supposedly, they do this all the time - this theoretically humane act of ending an animal's life - to set up an IV in her leg, then call us back. Bella seems energetic again - but it's a ruse, I know; she just wants to leave. We had brought her yellow blanket, and bid her to lay down on it. We pet her back and her ears, and tell her she's a good girl. I like to think that while the vet inserted the drugs that ended her suffering, her last vision was of us providing her comfort.

Bella's eyes are still open when we're told she's gone. The vet leaves us to mourn.

My husband covers her unmoving black body in her yellow blanket and we wrap our arms around each other, sadness enveloping us like a weighted blanket. We cry.

STS-107

My Experience with the Columbia Space Shuttle Recovery

John T. Morgan

Journey to East Texas February 2003

It was late in the afternoon, and I returned to the office from dropping off some samples at the state environmental lab about an hour from my office. I sat down in front of my computer to catch up on my emails. To my surprise, I had an email from one of the office managers looking for scientists available to leave early the following morning for Texas to work on the Columbia space shuttle recovery project. It was less than a week ago that the tragedy of the shuttle breaking up on re-entry occurred. At the time, the company I worked for had a contract with the EPA and was occasionally called upon to help during specific national crises, such as the falling of the world trade center towers and the anthrax incident at the pentagon building. There were no details in the email, only that they expected the deployment to last about two weeks. According to the email, the scientists working on the project would be leaving around 7 am the following morning. I thought to myself that it would be quite an experience and certainly a worthwhile and noble cause. It just seemed so abrupt. I was used to a lot of advanced planning. However, three hours later, six co-workers and I were attending a briefing, where we were informed what they anticipated, but to be ready for almost anything; Primarily, the main goal was to find out why the shuttle failed.

As I got off the plane, I was greeted by another team already stationed in Texas. It was a three-hour trip from the Dallas/Ft. Worth airport to the city of Palestine, where I would be stationed for the next three months. There was an 8 pm meeting with the EPA and NASA to brief us that night, so we had a couple of extra hours to spare. From offices across the country, about a dozen of us made a pitstop at the local Applebee's. None of us had any idea what we were in for and what to expect when we arrived in Palestine. Little did we know, this was our farewell dinner from anything resembling normalcy for a while. We each had a big meal and chased it down with a drink or two, and I learned about the vast differences of people from east Texas compared to people from west Texas from a guy that resided in Abilene (west Texas). We discussed our backgrounds and where we called home, and what our expectations were. None of us had a clue about what was in store for us for the next few months. We left the restaurant and began our three-hour drive to the base. As we drove down the highway, I noticed a small "mom and pop" auto repair shop on the side of the road. Out front underneath the sign that read "AL's' Auto Repair " was another sign. The sign read, "We screw the other guy and pass the savings on to you." "Where am I, and what am I getting myself into?" I thought.

We arrived at the NASA balloon base in Palestine shortly before 8 pm, just in time for a project kick-off meeting. We were all anxious to get some information. Unfortunately, most of our questions were left unanswered. It appeared this would be a "figure it out as you go" process, which in hindsight, is understandable. This sort of tragedy

doesn't happen often. After the brief meeting, the EPA representative directed us to a hotel to check into our rooms; then, we were to meet back at the balloon base early the following morning for more details and pick up our vehicles to use while in Texas.

Check-in at the hotel was nuts. One hundred and seventy scientists were trying to check in to their rooms in one hotel, at the same time, with one eighteen-year-old kid behind the counter. The kid informed us nobody told him we were coming and normally it's very quiet during the week. I have to give him kudos for not just walking out the door. It turned out they had booked us two in a room. That occasionally happens for large groups of people from the same company; however, most of us worked in different offices spread across the country and have never met each other. The movie Planes, Trains and Automobiles came to mind, and I became a little concerned. My hotel-mate turned out to be a decent guy and, once we unpacked, we both began to review the eighteen pages of space shuttle specifications that were specifically declassified for our task at hand.

Day One

I lived in Montana for over a decade, and I had never hiked like this before. No trails, just thick brush and swamps. The first day was brutal. Half the scientists, including me, wore steel-toed boots, which were initially identified as a must. A few of the men were laughing at a guy wearing chaps. "What a Gomer!" One guy laughed. Even I thought that was overkill. But, to each his own. This guy clearly just wanted to look like an experienced

outdoorsman. We thought it would take hours or even days before we found anything. Less than five minutes into searching, we found our first piece of tile. This was just the start of locating a great deal of shuttle debris, witness statements, and other information that would eventually bring everything together. We were no longer in the planning stages, and we were actually doing something out here. This was it.

Day Two

Every day starts the same. Get up at 5 am, shower, and drive to the base by 5:45 am for check-in, briefing, and breakfast. After breakfast, we would pick up our bag lunch and head out to meet at the drop-off around 7:30-8 am. I felt like I was in an episode of the X-files driving down rural dirt roads following a line of six unmarked white vans with tinted windows. Locals would walk out on their front porch with bewildered looks on their faces. Sometimes days go by without a vehicle passing some of these houses. Then, it's on foot the rest of the day until around 6 pm, then back to the balloon base to debrief, unload debris, eat dinner and arrive back at the hotel hopefully by 8 or 9 pm. As a scientist, I had much better accommodations than the forest service workers who had to pitch tents inside a large warehouse building at the base and sleep in sleeping bags. Every night as I left the base, dog-tired, I couldn't imagine crawling in my sleeping bag on the concrete floor and trying to get enough rest to be ready for the following day. To be sure, these were pretty long days; ten to twelve hours in the field and a few hours of meetings. However, the 7000 calorie forest service rations kept our energy levels high and

our pants snug. I learned early on that I didn't really need to eat all that was in my lunch bag. So, at the end of each day, I would toss the excess candy (which was given in large quantities) into one of my bags for later consumption; if anything, I wouldn't have to buy candy at home until next Halloween. The most prized item in the bag lunch was the uncrustable PB&J sandwiches. Those were a hot commodity. So, this was the protocol seven days a week. The first week almost everybody gets sick from being completely rundown. Probably from not drinking the recommended twelve bottles of water a day. It turns out hiking ten-plus hours a day through thick brush in the subtropical Texas climate could dehydrate you quickly, and some crew members learned the hard way, passing out due to heatstroke.

Each crew consists of twenty people from the forest service who typically fight forest fires, three scientists, and usually one person from NASA. Each person from the forest service had a nickname that usually told you something about the person. Rooster, Marbles, and Mad Joe all had stories behind their names, and to each person, their nickname was their identity in the group, and they identified with it proudly. Similarly, members of NASA were like a large family and this accident was like losing a few of your brothers and sisters. In addition to the personal loss, the members of NASA had to consider the possible loss of their livelihood. They didn't have to state out loud that the future of NASA was at stake.

Later the First Week

The subsequent days began to blur together. We were hiking through brush so thick you couldn't see the crew around you for hours. You just knew they were there from their voices. We trekked through swamps with water waist deep, snow, sleet, and ice storms that left an inch of ice covering everything. Rarely did we hike on an actual trail.

We occasionally stopped at homes and talked with the residents. Some of the locals told stories of hearing an explosion, then coming out of their homes to see fireballs hurtling toward the ground, followed by small glittery pieces that came down slowly, fluttering in the wind. These trailing pieces would be what remained of the heat shielding tile.

Every piece of the shuttle we found was extremely light. Every ounce costs money to send into space, and that cost doubles with each flight. So, all the material used to make the shuttle was very light but very strong. Many of the pieces we found were small, but our group did find a pretty valuable part of the fuselage the size of two car doors. The piece itself was so light that one person could easily pick it up. The heat shielding tiles resembled fragments of chalk, only much, much lighter. The tile protects the whole thing from the heat generated during re-entry, from the friction of the shuttle traveling through our atmosphere at such high speeds.

We were also introduced to the local wildlife: ticks, mosquitos, and snakes. There were lots of snakes: snakes that climbed trees, snakes that swam in the water, and snakes you couldn't see but hear moving through the brush as you walked by them. Indeed, the most memorable snake

encounter was while climbing up a steep ravine; somebody said, "Watch out for the cottonmouth!" I said, "Where!?" They said, "Right in front of you." I jumped down into the water just in time. I'm not a fan of snakes.

There was also larger wildlife of concern: angry dogs, large Texas-sized bulls, and wild Russian Hogs. There was always a particular emphasis of concern when people discussed the wild Russian Hogs, and I didn't see the reason for concern until one day I stumbled across a dead hog in the woods. The thing was the size of a Rottweiler, only all muscle and four-inch tusks. I quickly developed a healthy respect for these hogs.

Third Week

After many weeks of strenuous hiking every day, I was beginning to be in much better shape. In addition, I was not only wearing chaps but a face mask, gloves, and a hard hat. With my newfound muscles and my piecemeal body armor, I could actually run through the thick thorny bush that envelopes most of the forests of east Texas. I felt invincible.

Which led me to think I didn't need caffeine anymore. I'm a hardcore coffee drinker, and what better time to quit than when you're working 14-hour days hiking through the woods? I believe I have to say trying to quit cold turkey was one of the worst ideas I've ever had. The first day I had a headache. The second day, the headache throbbed, and I felt like I had the flu. I gave up after two days. My thoughts of invincibility were shattered. I'm never going cold turkey again.

Fourth Week

One night a small group of us decided to treat ourselves to a steakhouse. Upon arrival, we noticed a lot of looks in our direction and pointing fingers. As I began to look at our group, I realized we were all wearing Environmental Consulting or NASA logos on our shirts or hats. We had become the center of the towns' gossip and, unknown to us, local celebrities. By the end of the evening, we all had several rounds offered to us and even signed a few autographs. The attention felt both odd and flattering; But, overall, it indicated the importance of the work we were doing and what it meant to NASA, the space shuttle program, and the country.

Fifth Week

We were now over one month into the project. We were finding a lot of debris and feeling some accomplishments. Throughout the days, NASA employees and astronauts would walk and talk with us as we worked. NASA was actually a relatively small organization in terms of people. These people were passionate about their work. One of the most memorable conversations I had with a NASA member was one with a safety team member, who was asked, just before liftoff, if they made everything safe for their mission; he stated that they had. The guy felt a lot of guilt and sadness and desperately wanted to discover what caused the failure during re-entry. Our assignment producing answers was crucial for so many people and for so many reasons.

To emphasize that importance, a few days later, while searching in the woods, a member of our team found

tattered remains of a patch the astronauts wore on their uniform to identify them and their mission. We all stood surrounding the patch for a long time, all reflecting on the gravity of what we had just found. Most of the fire crew on my team were part of a Native American tribe and asked to hang back for a bit with the patch. The rest of us moved on ahead while the tribe performed a special ceremony with the patch that honored the lost astronaut. Half a dozen tribe members gathered around the patch in a circle, arms locked together, each taking turns speaking to pay tribute to the life that was lost. It was an extraordinary ritual that granted the lost astronaut the respect and reverence they deserved and emphasized why we were out here. We needed to find out the cause and we could not let this happen again. We spent the next six weeks desperately trying to find these answers.

Day Eighty-One and the Journey Home

The project was wrapping up, and it was time to pack up and go home. I was on my 2nd pair of Kevlar chaps, and they were on their last leg. We had accomplished everything we could. I disseminated all my information and data at the base and then returned to the hotel to pack. I put all my clothes and other belongings into my suitcase and then put my excess candy I had acquired in a carry-on bag; it was bulging.

On the four-hour drive to the airport, I noticed the auto repair shop sign again, "We screw the other guy and pass the savings on to you." It had only been a few months since I arrived, but it felt like a year ago when I first saw that sign. When I arrived in Texas, I was out-of-shape and relatively ignorant of the situation at hand. Now, I was leaving in good shape, with a strong respect for the members of NASA and the loss of life, not to mention the brutal blow to our shuttle program. Our task wasn't just to search for debris but to help piece together clues so that this disaster wouldn't happen again. Our goal was to find 10% of the shuttle's debris. In the end, we actually found 33%, ranging from the size of a thimble to a table. These pieces helped investigators deduce the cause of the problem, which was determined to be a failure of the heat shielding tile upon reentry. The United States space exploration program has given our citizens a sense of pride since we first landed on the moon, and since then, we have been the worldwide leader in space exploration. Losing this leading status was a significant blow to our pride as Americans.

Since the four of us were flying out today and one shuttle, I arrived at the airport three hours before my flight. I took a seat at a sports bar, ordered a cold beer, and watched the various television screens. I had brought a book with me but hadn't opened it at all during my stay. I considered doing some reading but found myself reflecting on everything I'd been through. Before I knew it, my plane was ready to board. I gathered my bags and headed toward the boarding line where the airline was doing random searches of people and their carry-on bags. Of course, I was selected to have my bags screened. The lady opened my backpack with a slightly surprised look on her face and then looked at me questioningly. "I've got a sweet tooth," I responded.

Eighteen Years Later

Looking back, had we known then that this event would mark the beginning of the end of the space shuttle program? It would have been devastating to NASA and all the scientists working down there in the spring of 2003. However, now that almost two decades have passed, I can appreciate, with pride, the accomplishments the space shuttle program made during its existence, both scientifically and culturally, and those will never go away. We may no longer have a space shuttle program, but we can stand on the shoulders of the former astronauts and scientists involved with the space shuttle program and do things now that we wouldn't have even imagined two decades ago. Nowadays, we are collaborating with other countries, working together instead of in competition. Thus, there is a silver lining after the tragedy of the Columbia Space Shuttle; it just took us a decade or so to come to fruition.

Farewell to Xinzha

Timothy Pruett

I left Xinzha knowing I'd return.

After three years, it was time to say farewell, just not a final farewell. Not yet. Line two of the Changzhou Metro was scheduled to open within a year and I was curious. Curious to see how the subway rewrote my understanding of city's geography, how line two would tie together Changzhou's east-west corridor from the distant reaches of Tianning district to the streets I was familiar with. Curious to see whether the subway would spark development across the city, to see whether line two would start to sprout shopping malls and well-manicured parks and destination coffee shops. Curious to see how the subway transformed Xinzha.

Not that it was actually connecting to Xinzha, but there would be a stop in the vicinity of Xinzha, close to Xinzha, or at least close enough.

I wanted to discover how Xinzha wove itself into the fabric of the city, how it blossomed from a collection of fields and villages at the intersection between suburban Changzhou and its surrounding countryside into a well-integrated component of Yangtze River Delta metropolitan sprawl.

But as much as I wanted to see Xinzha connected, as much as I wanted to fantasize about the ease with which a Xinzha resident could transport themselves to the heart of the city, part of the reason I had stayed in Xinzha for longer than a handful of months was that I liked its remote rural inconvenience.

I enjoyed the thirty-minute bus ride to downtown, enjoyed tucking myself into a window seat and perusing a paperback. I enjoyed the routine of waiting for bus 258, watching trucks rumble past and dogs scurry across the street. I enjoyed figuring out the logistics of going from Xinzha to more distant, more exotic locations, scheming the precise combination of bus transfers and walks needed to arrive at more internationalized locales.

I liked living in Xinzha, walking through the villages, crossing the bridge over the canal and stopping for a quasi-refrigerated soda at a convenience store, impressing the shopkeepers with my ability to pronounce numbers in Mandarin. I liked exploring the edges of Xinzha's fields, watching the remnants of China's older generation clinging to what remains of their agrarian lifestyle persisted in rapidly suburbanizing Changzhou. I liked living in a China that my American-bred, American-raised, American-educated self understood as the China-that-was, liked telling myself that I was living in a more authentic representation of the country still untainted by capitalism and globalization and corporatization.

I didn't move to Xinzha with the countryside in mind. I moved to Xinzha because I found a job at a school in Xinzha that wanted to pay me to look not-Chinese so that parents would appreciate that their children had a foreign teacher and pay higher tuition fees. I moved to Xinzha because here, I had no measurable professional responsibilities, because I was free to teach what I pleased, because I had found an uncompetitive environment where I could simply be without fretting about being good or being better or being best.

My designated coordinator at school showed me around the area over my first few weeks. Here's a field that's actually a future construction site. Here is another field, also a future construction site. Here is the gym with the Olympic-sized swimming pool. Here is a village like the village that was bulldozed to build the school and the state-of-the-art gym. Here are the bullet train tracks racing to bigger cities. Here is how to call a cab in case you want to leave the countryside and go to the land of Starbucks and McDonald's and imported drinks.

Over the next few months, I studied Xinzha. I learned where I could walk for a cheap bowl of noodles. Within days, the restaurant owner could recognize me as the area foreigner. I learned where I could get cheap, off-brand bubble tea within fifteen minutes' walk of campus. Soon, the women in charge of the shop had memorized my order—medium bubble tea, half sugar no ice. I learned which roads were more scenic for nighttime strolls and which roads were just long flat stretches of nowhere broken up by the odd traffic light, the sporadic factory gate. I learned where people might attempt to photograph my exotic features, might approach to ask which country I hail from, America or Germany or England or Australia, and where I could be alone.

I brought my camera with on many expeditions around Xinzha. I spent long afternoons standing in fields, listening to music, waiting for bullet trains to come roaring by. I spent long afternoons experimenting with the correct angles and focal lengths to frame images of the locals against the aging brick buildings of their villages. I spent

days pacing up and down dirt paths, dialing in the focus as I composed images with blooming rapeseed flowers and post-harvest stretches of tilled soil, experimenting how to orient my frame around laundry hanging from clotheslines and children racing around courtyards and dogs loping across fields.

I did not rush to photograph Xinzha. I assumed that Xinzha would last. If Xinzha had survived to 2017, if it had survived into 2018, 2019, then surely it would weather the following decades, the subsequent centuries.

This is China, I reasoned, a land built upon millennia upon millennia of tradition and culture and history and heritage. China lasts.

* * *

About a year after I moved to Xinzha, fences appeared in one of the fields next to the north-south highway passing by campus; my then-favorite field to stand in while waiting to photograph bullet trains. I watched the fences grow, watched as the sheet metal panels were covered in posters proclaiming a phone number interested parties could call to learn more about the residential opportunities coming to the area.

Soon, the developer behind the project had purchased advertisements throughout Changzhou. Everywhere I went, I saw posters boasting of the convenience of the forthcoming development, adjacent to Lotus Park, adjacent to a school (my school), in close proximity to the scenery of the canal (mostly industrial scenery near Xinzha, but still a canal), located on the future subway line four. And, sure, line four is not scheduled to be constructed until after line one is extended both north and south and line two is

extended both east and west, not until after both lines five and six break ground and complete tunneling and complete construction and complete testing and open to sprawl their criss-crossing path across the city. So, okay, it will be at least another fifteen years, if not twenty years, if not more, before the subway comes to Xinzha, assuming that the current metro plans don't change, assuming that the lines don't get moved around, assuming that the subway remains financially healthy. But, still. It is planned, the stop appears on government maps of planned construction, and when I look at those maps of Changzhou's urban transportation by the year 2050, I zoom in on the corner of the city that used to be mine and I feel excitement and pride for Xinzha.

I imagine how well-connected Xinzha will be, how modernized it will become. I imagine taking the escalator from the chill air-conditioned underground halls, bursting above the ground, and arriving in the Xinzha I knew, arriving in a quaint, quiet village with two-story buildings and narrow streets lined with small businesses and fruit stalls. I imagine Xinzha persisting as it was, as it used to be, an oasis of quiet between the more developed suburbs directly to its south and directly to its north.

I imagine and I assume that Xinzha will remain Xinzha.

I imagine and I assume that decades after I cease my expatriate existence and settle down as my parents tell me I must, I will be able to return. I will be able to fly across the Pacific and take a train into Changzhou and take the subway and emerge into the neighborhood I remember.

* * *

About two years after I moved to Xinzha, the field behind my school was bulldozed. I had been unaware of any need to bulldoze a flat, empty field occupied mostly by weeds, but evidently it was necessary. Patches of crops and little rises of dirt were erased, any trace of farming or agrarian living was razed into a barren plain. I had never stepped foot on the field—it was surrounded by fences and I didn't want to trespass, at least not too blatantly, for fear of threatening my residence permit—but I loved looking at the field from my window, loved the expanse of sky above it.

I asked my Chinese colleagues whether they knew what was planned for the lot. They told me they didn't know. Perhaps another school, possibly affiliated to ours. That might be nice. Perhaps another neighborhood like all of the other neighborhoods throughout Changzhou, throughout the province, throughout the country. Probably apartments. I asked if they were curious what the field would become, but most of my colleagues were indifferent. It didn't really matter, after all. Just another field meeting its fate.

Shortly after the bulldozing was completed, the developer started putting up fences. First the fences were mere scaffolding, and I felt sorrow but of a tolerable sort.

Within a few days, the scaffolding was covered in metal, metal that creaked and groaned whenever a wind blew, and my view of the sky was blotted out.

With my horizon destroyed, I realized it was time for me to leave Xinzha.

* * *

Other people left Xinzha throughout my time at the school. Colleagues departing for other schools throughout Changzhou closer to their apartments. Colleagues departing to other cities to be with spouses and in-laws and extended

webs of relatives. Colleagues departing for better-paid positions, for less stressful positions, for more convenient lives.

My one-time coordinator, the person who had first told me about how the fields near the school were doomed, moved from teaching middle school in Xinzha to teaching college students at a university in the southern half of Changzhou, and then started a doctoral program at a far more prestigious university in Shanghai.

I applied for and was accepted to a job in Shanghai. I moved from working in a school to working in private educational consulting. I moved from a job free of competition to a job predicated on competition. I moved from a job free of measurable performance metrics to a job rife with acceptance and rejection.

I told myself that I was moving up in the world. That I was upgrading my life.

* * *

A year after my move from Xinzha, I returned.

The opening of Changzhou Metro's Line 2 was scheduled for a few days before the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party of China, one of many subway lines opening that week in recognition of the centenary. In Changzhou and Xiamen and Xuzhou and Zhengzhou and Suzhou and Xi'an, freshly built subways were soon to be powering beneath the soil, connecting formerly unconnected zones of housing and commerce, propelling the mighty People's Republic onward to the next era of its history.

My colleagues in Shanghai couldn't understand why I was excited for this line, specifically. I had been on Chinese

subways before; surely, line two of the Changzhou Metro would be more of the same, more similarly patterned stations, more track piercing through undecorated concrete.

You don't understand, I explained. This line is mine. After years of riding buses, the B1 and B23 and 258, their routes diverting around subway construction, after years of navigating around patches of sidewalk overrun by temporary barriers, after years of dreaming of the convenience of having a line two to connect me to downtown, I needed to experience it.

To get a taste of what could have been, had I stayed.

I was returning to Xinzha, but I decided against staying in Xinzha. With the help of my Shanghai salary, I booked a hotel in Changzhou's tallest building, forty floors above the ground, looking down at the city I had once called home. I stared out the window, tried to find my former corner of the city, but my room faced north instead of east.

Besides, I'm not sure if Xinzha has enough distinguishing features to differentiate itself from the other components of mid-tier Chinese urban development at such a distance. Whether Xinzha has enough unique characteristics to mark itself as a unique locale distinct from all the other patches of highway and factory and subdivision.

* * *

On the day of my return, I permitted myself to sleep in. I had an expensive-for-Changzhou brunch of Western food, drank a coffee, entered the subway. I was excited; I always am, entering a new Chinese subway line, exploring a new dimension of a city.

Line one to Cultural Palace. Interchange at Cultural Palace, up the staircase, wait for line two, taking pictures of the station's reflective gray floor tiles, watching as the digital display counted down to the train's arrival.

A ten minute ride later, the train reached its terminal destination, Qingfeng Park.

Not quite Xinzha, but close enough.

I had forgotten how long a walk it was from Qingfeng Park to Xinzha.

I walked to the canal, where I took photos of the apartment buildings under construction. They had sprouted in my time away, growing taller, thicker, more abundant. The air was clear, and looking down the canal towards downtown, all I could see was variations on the same midrise architectural scheme, repeating patterns of rectangular windows, repeating patterns of rectangular buildings all of similar stature.

I continued north. A once-abandoned plot of land had been carved into a park. I took photos, remembering its former desolate appearance, remembering the walls that used to separate the lot from the highway and sidewalk, remembered standing on tiptoes to try to photograph the lot, never once managing to capture an image that I found satisfying. I liked the new version, liked how I could see more of the sky. I appreciated how I didn't need to tiptoe to see the lot, although when I checked my pictures later, I discovered that I had once again failed to take a satisfactory photograph.

I continued north, continued as the highway and accompanying sidewalk dipped beneath the bullet train tracks, a tunnel I had passed through more times than I

could count. Today it was empty of the homeless who occasionally sought shelter there. Perhaps they were just gone for the warmer summer months. Perhaps, unlike me, they'd move back in.

A train passed overhead, roaring. I thought about taking my camera out so I could try to photograph the next train, but I decided against and continued my trek.

I wanted to see Xinzha. To see my old school. To see the old sidewalks with which I was so familiar, to see the fields surely verdant at summer's peak.

* * *

I emerged on the other side of the train tracks.

The construction site next to the highway had blossomed. The towers had gone from boasting story counts in the single digits to story counts in the dozens. The construction site behind the school had similarly erupted into growth. Apartment towers approaching their full height soared dominant over the landscape, blocking the sky behind a scrim of bamboo scaffolding and protective netting and cranes lifting construction material ever higher.

The brick buildings, the fields I had once wandered, were gone. In their place, piles of rubble under netting. I only knew that a village had once stood on this ground because I had lived near it, once.

I took my camera out of its case and made my way into the piles of rubble, climbing over them, testing scraps of brick and scraps of concrete to make sure they would hold my weight. I didn't know if it was safe (it probably wasn't safe), but I wanted to document what I saw, wanted to ensure that my memories lived not just in ephemeral and malleable within my neurons but unchanging within my SD card, within my computer's hard drive.

The sky was gone. I had loved its vastness, its enormity, and it was gone.

I walked up to my former school. I couldn't go in. I was no longer an employee, and with heightened security post-COVID-19, I didn't want to test my luck with the school guards. I didn't know whether they would condone an uninvited white person wandering campus, making foreign observations on the teaching buildings, the dormitories, the enormous statue of Confucius standing before the cafeteria. I couldn't tour the classrooms I'd once managed, couldn't drop in on the offices I had once inhabited, couldn't walk up to the apartment that had housed me for three years.

I walked up to the fence around campus, poked my camera through the bars. Here was the school track, a track that I had once loved for the openness of its vistas. A track where I had spent many a sports meeting hanging out with the students as they enjoyed their lone day of relative freedom from the normal restraints of their crowded, questionably air-conditioned classrooms. A track that was once bathed in near-constant sunlight, now shadowed by the city's future development, by the unending march of Changzhou's suburbs.

I took photos. I wanted to remember.

I thought about lingering there, in Xinzha, in the places I used to know. I thought about walking all the way around the school, about walking to the off-brand bubble tea shop and seeing if the owners still recognized me, about walking down Xinlong Road across the canal and waiting for bus 258 to whisk me downtown.

Farewell to Xinzha

But I knew I couldn't find the memories I was looking for.

But the humidity was oppressive and I wanted a cold Starbucks to soothe my nerves.

But unfinished towers loomed above me.

I called a taxi back to Qingfeng Park subway station.

This time, it really was farewell to Xinzha.

POETRY

Content Warning: Brief mention of sexual violence

dans la lune

Kyra Pedro-Czako

A ball of ditz, tangled ribbon and lace a lulling head clueless of its shoulders and sky above. Gravity! a theorem in pink glides off her styrofoam body, rollerblading — *Vroom!* — up to the stratosphere, launched from its pull inside her vehicle; seashells and pearl-claw fingers, a sliiiiippery steering wheel, she lands her glitter-spaceship, grooved in the crater canyon of Miss Moon.

Sugar and *spice*, everything nice: head full of air, thought-bubbles floating from a deflating dodgeball, sunk-socket eyeballs; a little sad, maybe. A little sagged. But those dizzy dreams on meteors, riding high on clouds of smoke— *Ta-da!* snip-snap, her holograph skin doused in moonshine, purple gin! tight jeans and boobie heaven! mashin' cotton candy in cotton mouth, feeling nothing but a little down!

Sexy see-through, cellophane craze, all wrapped up like a present! She hears the hungry refrain of the goblins of the Market, the plastic smiles on their gobble bobble-headsThey tease her at the bow, tugging and tearing her by the hair, picking and passing around her skull-bowl of lollipop sweets; trick or treatin', suckle and sucking, aluminum crinkles and bubblegum rips: the never-ending chorus of unwrapping. *Cricket*— dying in silence. (She doesn't say much, does she?) Collecting their stickers and pins, glossy stamps pasted to her skin, but words can be so fleeting and she keeps forgetting; she is just so—— forgetful.

Stuffing the cracks forming at her stitch with white fluff and pillow feathers, she sews up her body tethers and squeezes her chest back together—but, she is only a sum of her parts, hung out to dry on the moonline. A rag of woman-skin drip-droppy and worn-in.

Now here come the unicorns galloping in — *spin, spin!* off the fading coast of the sunlit horizon.

Come on now— and she's off to Lalaland!

Eat my dust then! she taunts:

Kiss-me-on-the-lips-catch-me-if-you-can!

painting chemtrails under cerulean clouds,
leaving behind pearl-beams and moon crumbs

with the sprinkle-sparkle of just her thumb.

dinner him my father cries after i read speaks over me at Kristin Gustafson poem, but

disappearing until you are you are supposed to as thin as air not be seen lips upturned like cheshire cat pierce only with your smile, found, but not, girl lost girl

when given the sea lament, beyond the grave you will call all of the stars by your own name

after asking for a voice, mourn your silence, go forth as a ghost and haunt the men who made you this way

a life trying

Oluniyi

she has spent a life trying convince me to believe in a sunset oh god my mouth opens on reflex

Bridget Huh

I at the front of the line mostly covered, even tho ud think being a sack, a thing fenced in by bare skin was enough to be a shelf, maybe. It's ambitious, I know. Blue loafs of bread. Canned tuna. Soft purpled apples. Hand lotion. My hands are always fabric ripped and bleeding somewhere. Skin is so fuckin useless.

I at the front of the line was hugging an armful of toilet paper to my chest.

We r always thinking about the bathroom for some reason. Let me tell u, this paper: where the greatest words of any language

will ever be written. My fans r waiting for the next drop ping. Bro, we are all such noble and principled artists!

Look at all this shit, so much it's bulging out of the plastic shopping bags like the last thing I bought at Loblaws which was ginger ale, which was gross and idk why I bought it.

Well be it's literally who I am, bitch. Bitch is me. I'm bitch. Butch is also me, even though it was a typo.

I wish it was something more fitting for this poem, like idk, tampons.

Does Loblaws sell tampons? Brb going 2 go get a mouthful of tampons from Loblaws.

Ok, fuck it—it's tampons now. The tampons bulge.

Once, when I was looking to buy a thing, I introduced myself with "Sorry"

which is to say I fill as much space as a shopping cart. I refuse 2 be pushed around.

Except when I don't refuse, except when I'm literally the refuse yes like garbage

yes I'm actually asking you, pls n thanks, to push me the fuck out

of my shelf, except when. Which is to say I've grown wheels by now.

The Loblaws employee was like Excuse me, sir, you need to stand

on the red tape. He, the sir, the standing guy, smiled, ever gracious,

and rolled himself out of the way

to show her the tape under his feet. Then she was like Oh, I'm sorry about that.

Shit, did I say he? I meant me. Sorry about that.

The first time someone called me sir and meant it, I rushed to the bathroom to find

this dude inhabiting my face. Talk 2 him, see if there was anything

I could get him. Coffee. Diuretics. Antidiuretics. Wanted him to feel at home. Wanted to buy him

things. And also buy him so that he would belong on my shelf. Look at me

spelling out my direct object

indirect object line breaks. Fucking LOOK AT ME maybe it's smth about being

in the women's bathroom but he refused to show his face.

I wonder if I can sell my vagina on Amazon. Earth's biggest selection? My ass. No,

my pussy. To be clear I mean I would sell it as an organ separate

from the rest of the shelf—I am not using it as synecdoche for the female body. God, I hate saying 'the female body'.

What if we just said pussy instead?

I also hate the word 'simp'. Why do str8 dudes like to derogate desire that demands

dothing in deturn? This is why the entire manosphere.

Am I, myself, according to the strict definition of the word, a simp?

That's not relevant here.

The second time someone called me sir and meant it I was buying bottom shelf scotch because it was a good day. The lcbo dude sounded really happy to see me, was all like How u doin, sir? Fuckin beautiful day we're having can i help u w/ ur shit sir??? When he asked for my id

When he asked for my id idek if he registered my birth date was the today date or if he just saw the F and went oh, F uck me. I feel like it was the latter. Like as in wow thats mortifying i wish U did not exist. But where's my happy birthday, sir???

And also I'm sorry for ruining your day, sir.

My friend who has transcended the skin of gender tells me their judgy nurse friend wants me to know that I am destroying my liver.

I replied, I would like ur friend 2 know that I do not have a liver

I have a dier. I thought I was very clever. I thought I was dying maybe.

Every day I wake up and choose dying. I choose violence in the sense of an object being violenced, like I have any say in the matter. My say is: ok, do what u like.

The matter is: I forget. That was 2 whole lines ago.

Or maybe the matter is where the fuck is Loblaws in this dumb city? Proviget the hell out of here with your imposter looking ass. Says me whose ass looks decidedly like a man's. Or so I'm told. Ok, well the matter is uve caught me at a desperate time. I'm out of I'm needing to buy I literally cannot live without toilet paper.

Phoebe Bridgers Sings About Pelicans Circling

Stuti Pachisia

Not seagulls, not vultures, not hawks: nothing seeking prey. Something filled with promise, a heavy heart carried in a mouth sutured shut. In Cadiz, you said

You stood at sea to see on a clear day the contours of Morocco, a continent away. I was not there, but I retell this memory like it belongs to me.

And perhaps it does. In the summer, you told me that there was a plant where I lived that pricked like a spindle, but its soothing remedy grew next to it. Within the hour, I'd walk headfirst into the plant, guided by prophecy, willing you to appear next to me.

How much longer do we eke out maps to each other? How much of the measures of our love are obsessed with crossing borders, oceans and bodies; how long before the stubs on our backs

finally evolve into wings? On a rainy Sunday, we sat in Pret, our arms encircling the other like our lives depended on it. And perhaps they do.

There were younger couples there, ones that had possibly admitted love without cheapening its meaning. We, enemies of our own devices, have conflated it with every alternate ending, because how else

do we describe the awkward shapes of our bodies as anything but an albatross around our neck; what else do we make of our mouths, inflamed with desire. But what pelican wants to drop a heart from its mouth?

Whenever you return from Tokyo, your hair is salted. You carry a stamp that signs your name in Kanji. You emboss it on paper and lift it, and I see you in a version I will never be able to read, that will always escape me.

And perhaps you will. In Cadiz, you stand a lone figure, your skirt flapping around your feet. You are planted firmly to the ground, but your eyes are skywards. They always have been. You don't know me yet, but there are pelicans, circling.

Swimming Alone

Lyndsey Kelley Weiner

in a pandemic: A year ago someone threaded police tape through the latches

of each locker, sealing them shut. Pink insulation tufts through ceiling tiles in the fluorescent light of the shower room.

The blue metal door to the pool, kickboards and pull buoys in their cages.

The scoreboard lights up with a pop and echo. Rushing red numbers

cast on the water, muddled with sunlight from windows 20 feet up.

It's winter. Stray hairs drip-drop over a drain 12 feet deep. Behind the lifeguard chair a red knob over a placard—In Case of Emergency: Press Button.

Vitality

Alanna Budden

Powdered pectin and assorted mason jars
Citronella candles and stale cigarette smoke
Calloused feet crush thumb-print cookie crumbs
Coloured card-stock and raffia ribbon
Instant Maxwell House coffee spiked with Bailey's Irish
Cream
Heirloom china saucers stained brown
Church bulletins with grocery lists in the "notes" section
Dog-eared Louis L'Amour paperbacks
Cat fur on the couch, but no cat
Scandalously large hoop-earrings

Walking in her house (even when she's not home) is lifegiving.

The cycle continues.

Anthy Storm

eyes crossed with silver coins palms arched, fingers twirling drilling purple holes into the bones of my thigh joints popping in prayers that are not heard how do I tell my grandmother that no one listens? my grandfather cries at my graduation we spend two days hauling dirt to cover fresh graves and my father chases dogs and chases insanity and catches one of them we visit him at Thanksgiving he is pale, we play cards and all his veins have holes and he says he is getting better I hope he is getting help but there is a hollow rancid sludge that bleeds through his words and my mother can't look him in the eye and I know this is but one more skin to be shed, one more apology to be put on the pile and that he will be back home before Christmas

Myrna Joy

Megan Wilkinson

when she lives here the fourth engine's long arrival serrates a swamp evening meets her pouring roast roux into a faded neapolitan tub saved to save she havens to this bedroom rinses from delicate skin a little powder some rouge moon's breeze ghosts past the window screens and the younger daughter who remembers knocks tenderly to rub vaseline over her thickened heels they murmur in mirliton tones of thickly braided roots beneath a family cyprus softly of crowned sparrows who squabble to swallow her tomato flowers and of a ceramic owl imitation hunter to dissuade them when I live here warmed beside her

Myrna Joy

grown grandson naked in this walnut paneled room her life is somewhere assisted and the train she knew horns its way into my strange calliope mornings I stretch to the sunroom and survey all I've planted amaryllis in honor roses of sharon I feel her she studies me there the owl

Realm

Samantha Malay

I am late June in a hillside apartment windows held open with rain-swollen phonebooks where sparks fly as streets intersect and buses break free of overhead cables

I am sunbeam on beer bottle that starts a grass fire bumblebees in nettle shade

I can give you a haircut sew a button back on show you the shape of the city by night and how close we are to the water

FICTION

Content Warning: Suicide/attempted suicide, sexual content/imagery, nudity, strong language, body image issues/body dysmorphia.

The Bath of Venus: Goddess of Self-Love

Dinu Mahapatuna

I feel dirty long before I twist the tap open.

There's something wrong about having clothes on in the bathtub. This place wants her naked. My t-shirt is heavy from steam, my padded bra chokes my chest. My best panties, I can get away with, but the leggings? They don't belong here with me and I don't belong in here with them. But that's all pedantic. What matters is that I've clothed her and I've done it for you, because no one deserves to see something they don't like.

Water pools around my feet, pinching needles into thick skin. It's painful to separate, but here I am, struggling to leave myself behind and put her in there, alone.

Warmth curls up my ankles and tickles my calves. My leggings grow heavier and darker, weighing down my limbs. I lie to her. These are tears in space and time, the openings where her soul will fly out and down the drain with the rest of the greywater. We both laugh through tears.

She trembles in the bathtub and I'm ankle-deep with her, debating between eucalyptus salt or a gold-crush bathbomb. Serenity or pizzazz. Gold is flashy, but cool blue isn't who I am or who she'll be. Really, I'm deciding whether the headstone will read "Died full of herself" or "Died full of shit", as if both aren't equally true. God knows Thoth could do worse to my name. These final arrangements are as

much of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for her as they are for me.

But don't worry, I didn't leave everything to the last minute. In place of a will, I have black sharpie on white plastic trash-bags. One is labelled "Stupid Idiot" and the other "Mommy Dearest". The former barely contains its glee: cans of spiked lemonade, overpriced highlighters, a heatless straightener, and a dragon's hoard of fairy(not furry)-smut. The latter trash-bag is the tragedy, only halffull, its contents: none of your fucking business. I stapled handling instructions to the bright orange ties of each. One bag should fetch a handsome price on the blackmarket and the other will receive the admiration of museum-goers for centuries to come. Everything else is a free-for-all of nonsense which, as some wise asshole put it, is worthless in the end and, therefore, deserves to remain buried under dirty clothes.

While I was still considering whether or not to add my souvenir condom collection to Stupid Idiot's lot, I got a whiff of something horrible. Fresh rot, like the kitchen bin after one day and one night of doing its goddamn best. The age-old stench of chicken carcasses and fuzzy blue strawberries from a plastic bag, only recently sullied by paperbacks and leftover booze. Turns out our trash-bags are scented. They promise to smell like industrial plastic plucked straight from a field of lilacs. Instead, we get fresh rot, lilac-accented rot, that makes flowers smell like rancid meat, because whatever rot touches, it brands. It touched our freshest, floweriest plastic, and we got fresh, flowery rot. It's true what they say: Flower-scented trash bags

become trash-scented flowers when you go outside and retch at the smell of spring.

So, I decide against the eucalyptus and the gold-crush. I don't want Mum and Thoth crying at smelling salts and bath-bombs because of her. Their lives are hard enough already without taking pretty colours and good smells from them too. Plain old hot water will do fine at growing cold when she does. And it's not like they can boycott water in my name. They wouldn't survive two days without water, fresh rot or not.

If I was a little more patient, I'd take the next few years to reduce her to nothing. I'd stop asking for second slices of cake or refusing to watch Friends. I'd stop trying to fix what's broken and wanting more than what's not. I'd stop liking and hating altogether. I'd exist without a life. And then it would be as if they lost nothing at all. You can't miss nothing. You don't miss the shipwreck if it's a rusty paddleboat without treasures or ghosts. You don't miss the captain if he was an old dude with no family, no friends, and no ambition besides looking for tuna to fuck over.

But spirit-erasure won't be enough. The problem is her body. Corpses are the worst of bad jokes. They'll die at the bottom of the lake, then rise to the top, drifting like morbid pool floaties. Not to mention the gas. Even the most lady-like of the newly floating can't help the farting and burping while grandma weeps that she was the sweetest girl there ever was.

I won't pretend to know how she'll look after the water. All this talk of bloating and gas releasing makes me see her very differently, like abstract strokes of flatulence and flesh. But different doesn't mean bad. I don't mind that she'll

change the longer she floats here. If anything, I'm looking forward to the floating bit. Puberty 1.5 I call it. Your first and second puberty are emotionally and physically annoying. Pimples, and acne, and libido, oh my! Wrinkles, and weight gain, and hot flashes, oh why! Puberty 1.5 is neither nor. Puberty 1.5 is the cheat code, the latest in a series of technological advancements and teenage dramatics and invisible illnesses, why oh my? Because someone else will be in charge of making you look good. You won't have to stress a thing! Because you won't be able to think. I think?

That's the genius of my plan. I dressed her to be found. I might not be able to save her skin from the onset of Puberty 1.5, but I'll sure as hell try to preserve what's left of her dignity. And that dignity isn't even fullt hers, so I have to be extra careful and wipe off the back massager before I return it to the neighbour.

I have Mum and Thoth to think of. Mum and Thoth, who don't deserve to be subjected to my naked body, newly floating bloaty or not.

I guess there's no better time than now to confess:

Forgive me FatherTM, for I have sinned! Thoth saw me lapse once and I'll never forgive myself for it. She walked in when I was indulged in the viciest of vices: I had been flirting.. With a girl.. In the mirror... Naked!

Oh forgive me FatherTM, for I have succumbed to lust, sodom with Gomorrah, and vanity to make three's company! Holy fucking trinity! Fuck me, I'm sorry! Sorry, fuck me! I know gods don't have patience for up-and-coming entrepreneurs, but I had very important business with the girl in the mirror. It was essential for the well-being

of our firm that we strategize, reconstruct, and unionize a rapport that had fallen apart in recent years. Girl-talk you know? Dirty, dark, slutty, diplomacy that is mine and mine alone. In corpora___ terms: pure animal sexuality.

I held her hand and reassured her, "Today's going to be a good day."

She answered back, shy, but proud, "Any day is a good day when it's spent with you, beautiful."

And then I took her by the hairy arm and walked her down the beach, where Frank Ocean serenaded us, and I shook my stretch-marked ass for her, and she winked right back at me. I wooed her to the point of self-seduction, led admiration to the plumpness of my thighs and warded scrutiny from the thick puff of her stomach, crowded gaze at my birthmarks like stars in a creamy sky and feigned blind to her bacne like warzones on a global map. Until, eventually, I was there, with her, in a way that felt harder and harder (yes I make things hard;)) to try. Me and the girl in the mirror danced and smiled til we forgot the age-old tensions between us. Call it the union of mind and body.

Then the bathroom door swung open and judgement was wrung upon us.

Thoth stood in the space between life and divinity. She said nothing as my respect for the girl in the mirror withered to ash. No laughter, no grimace, somehow worse was Thoth's cold indifference, her face unchanged as my dignity seized into a creature of shame. She looked and heard and left, but before she left, she turned the lock on the door and slammed it shut behind her, correcting my mistake.

When I turned back to the girl in the mirror, I saw what Thoth saw. And it was all too much. It was the moment after the maggot-infested fruit, when Eve's cheeks are burning because she realizes her tits are hanging out, but you're not sure why that's problematic because Adam's are out too.

"Thoth!" I called out after a moment too long. I heard her feet trail down the corridor and the stairs and then her voice greeting Mum's in the kitchen, as if the worst hadn't happened. "It's only weird if you make it weird!"

The next morning, she knocked on the bathroom door which I had locked. I stopped rubbing at panty lines in the mirror, pretending to straighten my collar when I turned the doorknob.

"Morning," I said, keenly aware that we now existed in a post-fall world.

She side-stepped me to stand in front of the sink, turning on the tap to run her toothbrush under a fizzy stream. I combed my fingers through my hair despite not needing to, parting and then flattening, and then re-parting.

"Has anyone told you," she spoke casually, "that you have a body like that painting?"

A body like that painting. A body like a painting? A body like a painting! Life in art is ugly reality corrected and re-shaped, smoothed over with a soft brush. It's what we all want to create ourselves, but cannot. Think Sisyphus and the rock. Think humans and eternal happiness. Think Dorian, sexy, crazy-hot Dorian who did nothing except be too pretty.

"What painting?" I asked, hope coaxing my voice.

"The white girl in the oyster. The one who's all..." Thoth arranged her free hand over her crotch and brought her shoulder to her ear like she was answering a phone call.

Her rendition of Botticelli's Venus was coyer than Garfield, post-lasagna.

"It's a clam," I corrected her, a little smug in my knowledge. "And she's a goddess."

Suddenly, I couldn't see why self- affirmation had to precede external validation. This was the best of worst case scenarios. Sure, we had both been traumatized by the day before, but traumatized in the cute way in which afterwards everyone gets the beautiful happy ending. At least until the younger sister smirks.

"You look like her, Phlemingway." Her eyebrows danced on her head, her smugness meeting my own in a challenge that made me second-guess the aesthetic value of any portrait.

"Is that a good thing?" Doom seized me by both legs as I realized who my beholder was.

She took her time, rinsing her mouth twice before she deigned to respond. "Maybe."

"So... Yes?"

"Sure," she shrugged, "If you like that sorta thing."

And without further ado she skipped out of the bathroom, my dignity a limp, vicious beast crawling after her.

I thought again of what she had seen the day before. Embarrassment isn't enough to recall the dizzying pain. Nausea rose up the back of my nose, threatening my stomach with the pungent odor of decay. My bare body was little less than a frog dissection. Too much of a dead ugly thing. Too much frog. I had shown too much body. I had shown too much human. The world had let too much body and too much human show. It should have all blurred

together like divine light, should have conveniently blinded the idiot mortals and prevented them from seeing truths beyond their comprehension (ex. God's pubes). Instead, she had gotten it all. Too much detail. So much so, I could only find solace in the possibility of never taking off my clothes again.

When I remembered to breathe that morning, I locked the bathroom door, then tested the lock, and locked the door again.

And again.

Today, I haven't locked the door. Mostly because I don't want to make retrieving her a hassle, but also because I'm ready this time. I've forged my own divine light from thick, disfiguring polyester. In this outfit, you could pass a frog for a goddess, or at least an A-cup frog for C-cup frog, no problem.

I'm satisfied with these preparations when I begin to lower myself into the water. I'm so satisfied I almost, almost, don't notice it. That dirtiness from long before. It breaks over my skin like sudden rainfall.

I breathe in, then out, crouching down into the tub until I'm kneeling, praying at the faucet. Water thuds onto the basin all the same, splashing lightly onto my face and skin. My waist is skirted by clear heat, a gushing liquid sensation overtaken by the embrace of collective warmth. My t-shirt has drifted up at the hem, swaying in the water like a wayward flag. The exposed skin of my belly tingles within my pond.

I can't shake the feeling that I've made myself a perverted baptism.

Stop it, damn you! Stop it, I say!

I close my eyes and inhale. My eyelids submit. Air floods my lungs. I remind myself of why I'm here. Or I try to. I'm distracted by the sounds of the faucet. Soft spraying, rapid whooshing, and then the pounding. Water collides with itself. Pounds and pounds and pounds.

The sound makes me cold.

I run my fingers into the water. I try to think of her in eternal grace. I think of the peace I'm looking for and why. Except I can't remember. My hand's drifting too close to the stream. The liquid thrums into my palm, warm, heavy, forceful, trying to penetrate my skin without a please. And I'm even colder. I sink to my knees and water strokes my lowest ribs.

The realization washes over me like a tidal wave.

I'm going to die turned on.

Everything I've done to avoid bringing my dirtiness with me and I'm going to die turned on.

You know of men with purple faces, red hard-ons, and tie-coloured rope around their necks. They're pineapple-flavoured cum and anal beads, all very risqué but only for a generation that is not mine. I'm part of the pillow-humping generation, the active chasers. We're aware of magical beasts like snow leopards, blobfish, and female orgasms. We're aware that we don't need to feel bad about awareness. That is until you feel turned on at the brink of death. That's a problem, even on a biological level. Your body doesn't want you to associate pleasure with the end. Then we'd be ending all over the place.

But I'm not trying to kill off the main character of my story for an extra-good orgasm. Shame on you for assuming I'd give easy answers when I could watch you squirm, sexy. I try to breathe through the lack of reason coursing through my veins, try to justify the lust away, but the feeling continues to explode under my skin, summoning small celebrations in preparation for a much bigger one. Or two. Or three. Like I said, magical creatures. Now made even more magical by the chemical panic seeping into my brain. The water, hellish fire, has barely risen to my ribcage and I'm already contemplating a return to old, bad habits.

A couple of minutes, I'm thinking. A couple of minutes with my legs wrapped around the faucet and I'll leave the world in bliss.

Nol

Please?

Stop it! Not happening!

You sure?

This is the end, not the climax!

Breathe, breathe, as the faucet runs. The water is filling up the basin. Soon she'll join it completely.

The good news, I try to reassure myself, is that no one will ever be able to tell she died horny. That's the thing about women and looking at them. All the stuff anyone wants to see is on the outside. All the sick, real shit from our brains, we let fall within. Within are the frog dissections, the ugly mirror girls, and the stench of clean garbage bags. Within is knowledge that I've failed to fail right.

I lean back into the water, letting myself float. My thumbs pinch into prunes. Oceans roar in my ears. Steam burns my nose. Water-damage pocks the ceiling. Someone should really get that fixed. No one's fixing me. Saltwater spills across the sides of my face.

"Angel!"

Mum. Her concern slices through a fickle bathroom door. My head is heavy in the water.

"Angel! please don't do this!"

People tell you about moments like these, about the person who saved them from doing the worst thing at the exact right moment. The most horrible thing and with such a stroke of luck. It's like comedic timing to save someone from slitting their wrists. You either have it or you don't.

"Mum," I cry. There's a coldness to the water that makes the warmth in me shiver.

"Angel," she sighs. I can't tell whether she's weary of me or whether she thinks this is all too straightforward. We don't usually talk about off-ing ourselves.

"Mum." The words bubble at my lips. "I'm not sure what to do."

"Seriously?!" She sounds a little hysterical and I can't blame her.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just don't do it."

She's right, but not for the reason she thinks. I can't do it now. I can't put my head under the water while she's waiting right outside. It'll traumatize her. It'll rot her memory of me. It'll prove that Thoth is the one who always listens but ohhh nooo, not me. Never again, me.

"Just get out," she says with a sternness that I don't expect for the situation.

Perhaps shock has made me malleable, because I turn off the tap and rise, sliding a weighted blanket of water off my body. Black spots dot my vision where haze does not, air thick through my fingers. When I step out of the tub, every movement is slippery and uncertain. Water sloshes

heavily against the sides of the basin, cursing me for wasting its time.

"I'm out," I proclaim, my feet forming warm puddles on the bathroom floor. "I'm sorry."

She's silent for a while and I can't blame her. It was too close. I have no good reasons, or bad ones. What comes next won't be easy for either of us.

"You don't have to apologize," she sounds hesitant. "I know you guys have urges."

I never pictured Mum to be the callous kind, but she has a point. I'm not special.

"I hope Thoth doesn't."

"Me too." And then as an afterthought. "Don't call your sister that!"

I hear her footsteps fading away from me.

"Wait! Mum!" I stumble towards the bathroom, still woozy from the bath. Pots and pans start clanging in the kitchen, making their way into the dishwasher. I open the bathroom door and stick my head out.

"Mum!"

"Yeah!?" She's screaming.

"Uh," I'm not sure how to thank her. Or to make it up to her. Or both. Instead, I offer up an excuse.

"I love you!"

"Yeah!" she yells back, "You too!"

"I won't do it again!" Or try not to.

"You better not!"

I laugh, a short surprised sound, because everything changed so fast, and I owe you no fucking explanation.

I close the bathroom door, then walk towards the clouded mirror. I look like a wet trash-bag with my clothes

drenched, gathered into thick bands around my elbows and knees. My shirt, I wrestle off, letting my skin collect humid air. My leggings are a battle, but, when they come off, the flesh underneath is sleek and sensitive, raw like I've gone through a fire. Slowly, I peel the rest of my clothes off. Unclasping my bra, then curling off my panties, until all I feel is my body, all I see is my body. No girl in the mirror. Just me, face bloated as expected, but very much alive. I guess I do look like a painting. I guess the bathroom door doesn't make enough sound when it swings open.

"Jesus! Thoth!" I yelp, wrapping an arm around my tits and placing one hand on my crotch.

"Jesus yourself, Phlegmingway. You scared the shit out of Mum." She smirks, eyeing the bathtub.

"Yeah, I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize to me. Apologize to the environment."

I'm confused, but I nod anyway. Maybe she's in shock too. "Right. The environment."

"Yeah. That and the water bill." She says turning the lock on the door.

"Okay?"

Right before she slams the door, she leaves us with eternal wisdom, words anyone can take to the grave.

"Dude, there are so many better ways to jerk off."

Hot Meat

Alan Keith

1

"You've reached the voice mailbox of-"

The robotic voice is kinder than most of the women Bugsy has known. After a delay, his son's voice chimes in.

"Jordy O'Neal."

Then the female returns, instructing Bugsy to leave a message after the beep – as if, just because he's turning eighty next month, he doesn't know the drill.

"Jordy, it's your dad," Bugsy says in a tone stronger than he feels. "It's the 17th of July, three-thirty in the afternoon. Listen, gimme a call, would ya? I've been tryin' to get a hold of ya to see if youse wanted to do somethin' for your birthday. Listen, call me, will ya? Okay, talk to you later."

Bugsy squints at the phone, finds the red hang-up button and presses it with his index finger. He dials a different number, finishing his beer as it rings.

"You've reached the voice mailbox of-"

Bugsy slams his fist on the table. "Oh, for Christ fuckin' sake!" A few people at the bar turn their heads, but not in surprise.

"Jimmie." The female voice returns to tell Bugsy to wait for the beep. It infuriates him, but he puts on his healthy voice and speaks.

"Jimmie, it's your dad. It's the 17th, about three-thirty in the afternoon. Listen, I tried gettin' a hold of your brother – what the fuck is wrong with the two of you, huh? Can one of ya call me back, please? Talk to you later."

He knows Jimmie won't be the one returning his call. The bartender walks over.

"Need another, Bugs?"

"Yes, mam," he replies, handing her the empty bottle. "This one had a hole in the bottom."

She smiles at the rehearsed joke. She's the same age as one of his sons, but Bugsy can't remember which; he then realizes he can't remember her name, despite impulsively using it yesterday. As this sets in, she returns with the new bottle.

Bugsy fiddles with his phone. He's only had it a few weeks, but already he hates it. It's essentially a giant screen that can slide up to reveal a computer keyboard beneath. Bugsy knows the keyboard is for texting, but he doesn't know how to do it and doesn't care to learn. His sons tried teaching him on his old flip phone, but it was too much; they couldn't teach the old dog a new trick.

Bugsy slides the phone up and down, back and forth. He misses his flip phone. You didn't have to press a damn button to answer it – you just had to open it and talk. It was simple. And that phone had a picture of his boys on it, sticking their tongues out. Jimmie had set the picture as the background of the phone and, though Bugsy feigned irritation, he really liked it.

The old man considers phoning them again but doesn't want to appear desperate. Hell, he isn't desperate; he just wants to see his boys. But his kids aren't keen on his company, particularly the little one, and Bugsy knows it; he knows they need to be spurred to visit him.

There comes a point where even one as stubborn as Bugsy confronts his own mortality. Bugsy wasn't there yet, but he was close. Already, he had the sense that he'd done things for the last time; he'd caught his final fish, fucked his last virgin and might never get into another street-fight. In a way, life was already over.

He wants to beat his boys in billiards while he can still somewhat bend to line up his shot; wants to drink with them while he can still remember good stories. Bugsy doesn't like admitting that his memory is hazy – that sometimes, halfway through a sentence, he'll forget why he's saying it. He slides his phone up and down, back and forth, then takes a drink.

A young man sits at his table, more tattoo than skin.

"What can I do for you, Tony?"

"What can I do for you, Bugs? You got an order?"

Bugsy thinks for a moment, then speaks. "Yeah. Yeah, I do. Listen, Tony. Get me, get me two T-bones, two ribeyes, six filet mignons, the same shrimp as last time, plus my usual order."

"Shit, Bugs. That's a lotta meat."

"It's for my sons."

"Sons? You got sons, Bugs?"

Bugsy snorts. "I've more kids than there are people in this bar!"

Tony knows there are two-dozen people mingling between the bar and back patio, but doesn't comment on it. Instead, he says, "I'll have it by eleven tomorrow," and rises to shake Bugsy's hand. Tony never writes his orders down but he always gets them right, and Bugsy likes him for this. He's old-school, and very respectful of those who came before him.

He's the same age as one of Bugsy's sons, but he forgets which one.

2

The next day, Jordy answers his phone.

"Jordy, it's your dad. Listen, I'm sittin' here with a buncha hot meat for you and your brother. I've got ribeye steaks, T-bones, a whack of filet mignon—"

"Where are you?"

"The bar. Come get this meat. It won't all fit in my freezer."

"Where'd you get it from?"

"A booster. I told ya, it's hot. Good cuts, though. Ribeyes, T-bones—"

"I'm at work till six," Jordy tells him. "But Jimmie can grab it."

"I've already phoned the bastard. He hasn't been answering-"

"I'll text him. He's off today."

Bugsy drains his beer and signals the bartender over. She's wearing jeans so tight Bugsy can't imagine how she got in them.

"Leaky bottle?" she asks as she takes the empty.

"Try and find one without a hole in the bottom, dear." He watches her hips sway on the walk back to the bar. He hasn't been with a woman that young in quite a few years.

Bugsy's phone rings. Knowing it's Jimmie, he has half a mind to not answer, but he does.

"Yeah?"

"Hey, Dad. It's Jimmie."

"Did you get my messages?"

"No. Jordy texted me."

"Listen," Bugsy says impatiently, "I'm at the bar with a bunch of hot meat. Come get it before it spoils."

"Hot? Hot like cooked?"

"No, shithead," he growls. "Hot like hot. Come get it before it spoils."

"Okay. I'll bike over. See you in, like, twenty or so."

"You're not taking the streetcar?"

"No. I'll bring my backpack."

Bugsy sits at his table for ten minutes, then joins Tony's small group at the bar. He knows Tony and his brother, Peter, but not the others with them. They eye him warily until Tony introduces him as 'a mobster from the sixties' who went 'way back' with his grandfather, Frankie.

There was a time when everyone in the bar knew Bugsy, if not by name, then by reputation. In the 70s, Bugsy could sit where he liked, flirt with whomever and drink like there wasn't a tomorrow. He could fight in the alley, walk in still bleeding and order a pint on his tab. Now, he could hardly find people to sit with unless he was introduced. It was like being the new kid in school, though Bugsy couldn't relate because he was hardly schooled.

His son enters twenty minutes later, a bit of sweat glistening on his forehead. Bugsy waits until he's seen, then leaves the group of young folk for an empty table. He meets Jimmie there and shakes his hand.

"How's it going?" Jimmie asks.

"Fine, fine. Want a beer?"

Thirsty from his bike ride, Jimmie orders a Coors while Bugsy steps out for a smoke. Then, Bugsy shows him the meats, telling him what's for Jordy and what's for him.

"Are you keeping any yourself?"

"I've got a few steaks in the freezer. Don't worry about me."

Jimmie is more impressed by the labelled prices than the cuts of meat. "Where'd you get 'em from?"

"They're boosted."

"You stole 'em?"

Bugsy sighs. "No. A booster did."

"But how? Do they work at No Frills or something? Like in the shipping department?"

"Somethin' like that."

Jimmie nods and, unsure what to ask next, drinks. He looks around, meets the bartender's eye and takes another swig. Then he looks at his father. "How's the weed Jordy gave you?"

Bugsy notices that his son's eyes are red and glazed. He's stoned, but doesn't smell like it. "It's workin'. I haven't taken my pain meds since."

"Good. Do you need more?"

"Oh, no, what Jordy give me is plenty. I just take one hit in the morning, and that takes me to the afternoon. I have another hit in the afternoon and one more in the evening, for bed."

"Do you use your pipe?"

"No. I rolled it to a joint."

Jimmie stares at his father's gnarled hands. "Nice. Do you add tobacco to it?"

Bugsy sips his beer. "Yep."

The bartender walks by with two plates of undercooked hamburgers and fries. She brings them to the back patio and returns with an empty pint glass, flashing Bugsy a smile as she goes behind the bar. Uncomfortable in the silence, Jimmie asks him how the marijuana helps.

Bugsy explains how he used to rest three times on his walks from the bus stop, but that he now does the entire thing in one go, even with groceries.

"But sometimes I get these dizzy spells and I have to sit down a minute."

"Shit! That ain't good. What else?"

Bugsy squints. "What are you, a doctor?" Laughter erupts from Tony's group at the bar, but Bugsy pays it no heed. Jimmie sips his beer as Bugsy clears his throat to prevent a coughing fit.

"Few days ago, I was at Maureen's watchin' the Jays. Go to take a piss. Look down, there's red. Blood. Blood in my piss. I called Maureen in to take a look at it and she says to me, 'my God, Bugs, we gotta get you to a hospital.' So I go, but end up just sittin' there an hour, so I went home. The next mornin' there was red again, but a little less. It was very red that evening, but less the next day, and today it was hardly red at all."

"What the fuck? That's fucked."

Bugsy sips his beer.

"When are you going back?"

"Where? Maureen's?"

"The hospital!"

He looks at his son. There's something on his face Bugsy hardly recognizes – concern. "I might go back in on Tuesday."

"Dad, it's Thursday."

Bugsy clangs his son's near-empty bottle with his own.

"You want another beer?"

"Uh, no. I'm good, Dad."

"Alright. Fuck-off, then."

Draining his beer, Jimmie packs the meat in his bag and brings his empty bottle to the bar. He takes out his phone, which is just a giant screen, and pokes at it with his thumbs while Bugsy walks him to the door.

"Listen, let's get together for Jordy's birthday," Bugsy says as casually as he can.

"Okay. I'll text him."

"Alright. So long."

Bugsy watches his son unlock his bicycle and merge with the Gerard Street East traffic. He sits alone and finishes his beer, then waves the bartender over.

"I spilled my beer," Bugsy tells her. "Gonna need a fresh one."

"Sure, Bugs." When she returns to his table, she asks who the boy was.

"That was my son," Bugsy says proudly. "Chip off the old block, eh?"

"Oh, wow. Didn't know you had kids, Bugs."

"Sweetie, I've got more kids than you've got teeth in your mouth!"

She goes to talk with Tony and Peter, leaving Bugsy alone. He's glad Jimmie doesn't see him now, as he is -a lonely old drunk. He slides his phone up and down, back and forth, watching the keyboard light up each time. He misses his old flip phone.

Hell, he misses his pager.

Harbingers

Julia Bedell

This isn't the first time I've imagined how it would feel to be back here again. To drive into the parking lot, stand next to the entrance ramp that hugs the side of the modest rest stop building. To see the mountains before me, glowing pink the way makeup companies say a cheek should, effortless.

Standing here again, it's funny to think that only I could see these mountains. I never imagined what your view had been, what you'd looked at over my shoulder as my arms wrapped around your waist. I never realized that the mountains were behind you, that you'd probably only seen this empty field. Maybe your eyes were closed. Maybe you just wanted it to be over already. While I had to soak it in, stay in that moment, make time stop.

* * *

Eschatology, you said. It was morning, or perhaps later. The hour didn't matter on a Saturday. We were in bed.

Eschatology, you repeated. Do you know what that means?

I was sleep-drunk and languid, my head on your chest beneath the flannel sheets you had in your second apartment. You lived alone off-campus, a luxury.

Mmm, huh. I paused to think. Eschat... scat... so maybe, the study of shit?

Is that your answer?

I've heard the word before. I'm just not totally sure what it means.

Ooo, I finally know a word that Sam doesn't!

Harbingers

You shifted and my head fell to the pillow. You got up and walked to the sink.

And from a Religion minor, surprising.

You know plenty of words that I don't, I said. The bed was cold now.

Usually those are proper nouns, though. That's real knowledge, you said.

You came back and pressed down on top of me. The warmth returned.

But then, you lifted. Want to know what it means? Sure.

The study of the end of the world, you said.

Eschatology. The eschaton. End of days, the end times.

All around us, glaciers were melting. At the one nearby with the easiest access, rangers marked where the ice's edge had been five years ago, ten years ago, fifty years ago. Our professor called this the glacier's "retreat," which always made me think of wartime tactics. As if the glaciers have been in battle with us for eons and are finally realizing Earth is a horrible place to occupy. So they're going back home, wherever that is, leaving us to collect bodies from the rubble.

It's true; I should have known that word. At the same time, given how food reaches the end of its journey through us by passing out as shit, my guess wasn't too far off.

You were a year older but we were both in the Geology Department, both selected as glaciology summer research fellows. You'd technically already graduated, just a week before, but needed a few final credits for your scholarship. You had a job lined up for the fall with an oil company in Colorado. Your girlfriend was planning to move there with you, she was home with her family while you stayed up here.

Your girlfriend always liked me, I think. She and I both worked in the student writing center, shared a shift there the previous spring. She was kind and very pretty, her pale hair straight and fine as silk thread. She wore a silver cross high on her neck. I was heavy into my oversized flannel phase that semester and had dyed my bob a drugstore brand's dark red. The 90s were cool again in Palmer, Alaska, apparently. She and I must have looked funny sitting next to each other at that table in the library. But it turns out her kindness extended to me, too. Every week I'd take the library newspaper's crossword. We worked on it together between helping stressed-out freshmen come up with paper topics and proofreading senior theses. She told me she wanted to be an editor but was applying to jobs in marketing in the meantime. She told me about you, mentioned you were also studying geology, and asked if I knew you.

Of course I knew you in that of course I knew who you were. You were the senior who'd won the research prize before your final semester, which was unheard of. You were a tallish mass of wavy hair, amber skin, and a smile that cut ice. You were you, and she was Caroline, and I was Sam, short for Samara, a name best known as the possessed child who killed innocent humans across the Pacific Northwest.

Before she left campus, Caroline touched my arm and said, take good care of him, yeah?

I made a joke about how you didn't even know who I was. She squeezed my wrist, said of course he does.

A few days later, we were in the conference room having lunch during orientation for our summer position. They'd brought in those large foil trays, placed an order with the Italian restaurant. I remember it was a nice spread: lasagna, chicken parm, penne. I sat down about to eat and saw you standing, one of the last to get your meal. You were at the salad tin lifting a pile of leaves with those clear plastic utensils. Your plate was already full, and I watched as you dumped the lettuce directly on top of chicken and pasta. I looked at my own plate, carefully trisected into protein, greens, and carbs. I looked up again and wondered if you planned to pour the dressing on top, too. But my tablemate turned to me, asked me a question. By the time I saw you again, you were seated at a different table, too far for me to scan your plate for evidence.

Then we were in the same canoe paddling out to our first field visit, an overnight trip to study the sediment in a glacial lake. It was the two of us and one of the younger interns; somehow we made you take the middle seat and insisted on doing the paddling ourselves. I was in the stern, got to stare at your head the whole time. You leaned back once, goofily, all the way back so your face was upside down and your body arched across one of our drybags. I can still picture your smile from that angle, turned over, somehow intact and not silly at all.

That night I watched you curl up in your sleeping bag from across the cabin. The stove fire had died, and it was cold. You looked cute, content, a slug wriggling in your casing of synthetic down. I shivered, wriggled myself.

When we got back to town, you invited me over for dinner. You'd secured a gig taking care of the plants in a professor's house while he and his family traveled. The house was on a lake ringed by black spruce. I think Caroline told you to hang out with me; she knew your friends had already left campus. I later wondered if she felt I was "safe," if she suspected I was gay. We made pasta together and you stirred the sauce with gusto, pieces of eggplant falling onto the burner. I salted the water, set the timer, tested the noodles twice and placed the strainer in the sink before carefully pouring out the boiling water.

We talked about politics, philosophers, and gender presentation. Your eyes were soft. I knew the pasta was good even if I was so nervous it pained me to swallow. You watched me twirl my fork, the sauce clinging to each strand.

Later that week, we submerged. You'd gotten free passes to the float tank, one of those sensory deprivation chambers that were trendy back then. There was only a single chamber, so we went one at a time, the other person sitting for the 45-minute session in a waiting room staffed by a goth teen. You plunged first. I was scared while I waited. I tried to make small talk with the teen, probably only a few years younger than me but it seemed like more. Time can pass so quickly and then not at all.

When you came out, you were radiant; your skin glistened. That was incredible, you said. Well, I don't remember what you said, exactly. It was something similarly joyous, and banal.

The goth teen must have messed up when they cleaned the tank before my float. The water was too cold and I spent the entire session shivering, trying to convince myself it was peaceful. Halfway through, the Vaseline covering my ripped hangnail slid off, and the salinized water burned like acid.

So, how was it? You asked as I emerged, sodden. I think we had different experiences, I said.

We got dinner after, at TGIFridays. I liked it, and wondered if this had become a date. Wondered if you'd also thought about me being naked inside the float chamber the whole time you sat on the couch; wondered if you'd stared at the teenager's choker necklace, wondered if it was leather or instead, if the teen was a good vegan goth, plastic.

* * *

A week later, I came over to the big house again. It was your last night there before the professor and his family returned. We googled what to do when you overwater a Monstera, the blackened liquid oozing out beneath the planter onto the pale carpet. That was your mistake, not mine. I am good with plants. I still have no idea why the water was black.

You were on the phone when I got there, so I waited. I stared at myself in the hallway mirror and noticed a pair of reading glasses on the bureau below. I put them on and my eyesight blurred. Tan sweater, purple jeans, everything else fuzzy.

You went over and lay down on the couch, beckoned to me. We were going to watch something, some show.

I remember being nervous, my stomach knotting as I moved closer. Come here, you said, waving toward the couch with your hand. You wanted me to slide next to you, beneath the blanket. You held your hand up and I saw something there, in the muscle beneath your thumb.

Your father had flown up to see your graduation. You'd told me about him, about how he challenged you when you were younger. How he and your mom split, and he traveled

the world by himself until ending up back in Seattle working as a checkout clerk at Whole Foods. He sounded tough, I said, when you mentioned him grilling you on Kafka, Socrates, Nietzsche while your mother prepared dinner before her night shift at the hospital. He sounded like a proud man, wounded. For whatever reason, probably all of those, he scared me.

I thought about your father then, in that moment when I wavered between joining you on the couch or choosing a different seat. I saw him there, an ugliness, in your hand.

I remember the heaviness. My body inescapably pulled; a current.

I walked over, lay down. You put your hand around me and brought me close. I felt the weight in my chest and sank into you.

* * *

The nearest glacier was retreating faster than ever, up to 10 to 15 feet per day. Scientists in Greenland had recently discovered a vast river system beneath a floe there. The water melted the ice from the bottom up, further hastening its exit.

I'd started sleeping over at your place most nights, even though my roommate was gone for the summer. We'd make dinner and then watch something. We fit our bodies together, mostly just cuddling. That wasn't really cheating, maybe. We were two people keeping each other warm.

I loved the way you felt, your muscles liquid and in sync with mine. One night I let myself move down and put you in my mouth. I heard you groan. I'd never done that before. With one hand, I stroked you at your base and with the other I touched your thigh, your hip. I let my hand wander,

caressed you, then slid a finger into your asshole. I pressed against the near wall like how I read online. It felt familiar in some ways, and my hand moved with you. You groaned again, said wow, said keep doing that. You came violently, shaking, my mouth filled with salt. I got up to spit in the sink and poured a glass of water.

When I came back to bed you were still lying there, on your back with your arms spread wide. I lay down next to you, ready for sleep.

That was incredible, you said. Then, does this mean I'm gay?

Your voice was gentle. I knew you were kidding, but I also knew you weren't. I thought of the things I could say. We're all a little bit gay, sexuality is a spectrum—indeed, I'd only ever been with girls before. Also, you idiot, you have a prostate and it feels good when it's touched.

I don't think I said any of those things. It's funny; I rarely recall what I said in my conversations with you. Only your lines stand out. You had a loud voice, a presence. You got annoyed when you thought someone wasn't listening to you. This was your dad again, I figured. I poked fun at you a lot at first and joked about you being self-serious. But at a certain point, the jokes stopped.

No, this doesn't mean you're gay. Your girlfriend is a Christian and probably a serious prude. You just like butt stuff. Or yes, maybe you are a little bit gay, maybe I'm a little bit not gay, maybe this has nothing to do with gayness at all.

* * *

One evening we borrowed kayaks and paddled the river after work. I overheard you end a call with Caroline as you pulled into the parking lot with the window down. Your voice was low, forceful. I watched you shake your head and exhale.

We paddled through braided streams in silence until you maneuvered your boat beside mine.

What is it that draws you to certain books, certain works of art? You asked.

I thought for a minute. Thought about my favorite passages, what I underline, the scenes I rewatch and screen capture and think about still. Two figures sitting on suitcases waiting for a bus, the dream sequence when everyone on Earth discovers their soulmate, the woman wading into water, stones in her pockets.

I dunno, I said.

I guess it's stuff that reminds me of my humanity, those moments of connection. When it feels like the artist reaches out and touches me, and for once I'm not alone but instead held, suspended, floating on a cord of light over the vast emptiness between us. (I didn't say that part. Maybe I should have.)

Just, whenever something makes me feel, that's what draws me, I said.

I mean, duh, you said. Sure, that's obvious.

So stung I wanted to cry, maybe did cry, a little. Why did you ask me that question? Why did I feel like I failed? How else does one answer it?

Okay then, I said. What about you?

Oh, vou said. I'm not sure I can articulate it.

When a chunk of ice breaks off of a glacier and into the water, it's called "calving." It's funny because calves are also

baby animals and usually babies are associated with birth, new growth. But glacial calves won't ever grow into bigger glaciers. Instead, they get smaller and smaller as they melt and become ocean and erase any hopes of the Federated States of Micronesia's political domination. Here, calves mean death. Secular harbingers of the eschaton.

I had a dream that I was pregnant and you weren't there to help me raise the baby. Instead, Caroline flew back up, she was there for the birth, she took care of the child while I finished school.

* * *

Near the end of the summer, you and I went to the movies to see that latest Wolverine one. You kind of looked like Hugh Jackman sometimes, especially when you needed a haircut. The film was sad. Wolverine was old now; he wasn't able to heal properly after his transformations. His body cut him from the inside and he needed to sedate himself constantly, sometimes even with heroin. The world was a harsh place and he was withering within it, barely able to save his family, trying to hang on long enough to give the next generation a chance.

The credits started rolling, and I was a mess. I'd been crying since one point near the end, I think when Wolverine learned he had a daughter. I lost it. We walked outside and you suggested we get milkshakes. Society was going on as usual, meanwhile Wolverine had suffered his whole life, at war not only with humans but now with his own body, just to collapse there at the end, broken.

I wiped my eyes and you asked what was wrong. I couldn't answer. I just started crying again, weeping, the wounds of the world collecting behind my eyelids and

pouring down my face. I think you tried to comfort me. It didn't work.

We only had a few days left.

That weekend we camped across from the glacier. The sky was gray and so was I. There was nothing I wanted to do. I just wanted to sleep.

In the morning, we took a kayak and paddled right up to the ice wall, listening.

You can hear the creaking, you said.

People die if they're too close when a glacier calves. They get tossed off their boats by the ensuing wave, drown in the ice-cold water.

It would be cool to see a calf right now, you said.

I don't know if I'll ever see you again, I said.

On your last day, I drove with you out to the highway, in separate cars. I would have kept following you forever, all the way to Denver. But you'd said I could only go this far. We'll park at that rest stop, say goodbye.

We got out of our cars and walked toward each other, embraced beneath the pink mountains.

I haven't seen you since.

* * *

The invitation came in the mail several months ago; a request to give a talk to the Geology Department. It was addressed to Dr. Samara Carpenter, Ph.D. I hadn't been back in over a decade. At first I wavered, putting the letter aside.

But my wife found it while searching my desk for the credit card receipts. She said she'd always wanted to visit where I'd gone to school. Said I spoke so fondly of it. She

teased me. She said that my stories made it sound like it was my one true love; that I cheated on her with this place.

So we went. When we passed the rest stop, she pointed and asked if we could pull over. I stood outside and she walked in to use the bathroom.

The place hadn't changed much; it looked like they'd updated the access ramp to get into the building, but everything else seemed pretty much the same.

I jumped as she tapped me on the shoulder.

That man in there was positively Lynchian, she said. This whole place is, actually.

I smiled, nodded.

What a great idea for us to stop here, she said.

Yes, I said.

She wrapped her arm around me and nestled her head against my shoulder. The sun had passed below the trees, and the mountains began to shimmer.

Yes, I repeated. I can finally see it now, through your eyes.

* * *

You're a young boy poking your head through a gap in the waves, grabbing a lungful of air. The river is roiling; you're in the part just before the rapids. A mere ten years old, limbs almost too small to break the pull. You look up and see your dad on the opposite shore, waving, beckoning you to swim across the whitewater. You see his thumb, the muscle taut. You hear him yell; his voice carries.

C'mon son! Come here. We only get it once, this life. What will you do with yours? What will make you worth your days?

Harbingers

You take a breath and close your eyes. The water swirls and sucks you down into darkness, a tunnel of black and blue below the white. You pull with your arms, swim until your body hovers just above the gravel, rubble, dirt. You move with and against and after three pulls it's calm. You emerge, eyes open, beneath mountains pink like cheeks in warm arms. Mine, yours. We embrace.

Content Warning: Homophobia

Brilliant Boys

Anna Stacy

It's hot. Hot like slow motion. Hot like stuck. Hot like when Damocles would shuck his clothing like a breath, back golden brown and damn near glistening, and look over his shoulder at you, saying with a grin, "Come on, I haven't let you drown yet, have I?" Hot like nerves as you shed your clothing too, because he'd never let you drown, not yet, not ever. Hot like sand. Hot like the horizon, shimmering like a fever. Hot like your burnt feet scabbing, scrabbling over sharp shells and rocks. Hot like the shock of water, shivering dark and deep. Hot like arms, strong, there. Hot like hands. Hot like hair. Hot like faces pressed together. Hot like laughter hidden in your mouths. Hot like chests. Hot like teeth. Hot like rough palms, holding, stroking. Hot like whispering Gods, yes, just like that. Hot like all the places where your thighs touched his. Hot like copper. Hot like sweat. Hot like slick and skin and tongue and skin and tongue.

Hot like that.

It's hot.

You feel a bead of sweat drip heavy down your chin and watch it splat squarely onto the windowsill, which is something new to look at, at least. Behind you, you know, your father is still working. Stretching out the corkwood frames again and again to check some invisible parameter that you've already checked. Tacking down the canvas edge with starch and spittle. Reinforcing the arm bands – tighter,

looser, closer to the hand. You've seen him do it a thousand times. A thousand days. Done it yourself. You know the sounds – the gentle scrapes of wood and thread, your father muttering "Almost," and "Not quite." It breaks your heart somehow to hear your father work, and work, and work. The man who can fix almost anything. The genius. Your dad.

Without thinking, your hand shoots out, arm thrust through the stone frame of the tower window. You rotate your fist and open it to find a feather (seagull? plover?), downy grey and barely anything. You bring it to your father and say, "Here."

He takes it from you wordlessly. You crouch down beside him and the two of you squat there, squinting at the wing, heads tilted. He turns the feather this way and that above its brothers fastened to the cloth. He moves it a fraction of a fraction of an inch, then looks up at you with all the respect of a collaborator. "There, you think?"

It suits the grain, aerodynamically sound. "Looks right," you say, and rise to fetch the candle festering in a shaft of sunlight cast upon the floor.

The brim is nearly melted, almost transparent. Your father dips the quill into the wax and tucks the feather neatly into place. It disappears into the quilt of plumage instantly.

Then he stands and cracks his back. "This one's yours," he says, pointing at the wing.

"It's beautiful," you tell him, and it is.

He smiles. "It was your idea."

You shrug. "You made it," which, in part, is true.

He stretches again and wanders to the window, all seven paces. He leans his elbows on the sill and glares up at the sky. "Tomorrow, I think."

Your heart ticks fast. "Tomorrow?"

He nods. "The light looks good. The clouds – no rain. The wind should take us where we need to go. And we'll be safe."

You picture the route mapped out, the tracks of air connecting your tower to the world beyond. The sea stretching on, unfathomably deep. The shores of Delos, though you've never seen them, glittering somewhere there, below. "Tomorrow," you repeat, and you feel sick.

Your father is still looking out the window, his silhouette made visible by the dimming light of almost-dusk. He looks old. Looks tired. His chin is obscured by a thick, scraggly beard that he'd never had in the outside world. It gives him a crazed, unkempt look that doesn't suit him.

"Dad?" you say. Your throat is scratched and dry.

He turns around and looks at you. "Son?"

You don't know what to say. How to say it. "I'm. I'm really sorry," you try.

He closes the distance between the two of you. "No," he says, warmly, his eyes brimming already. Your father is a crier. "You did a good thing. A wonderful thing. I'm proud of you. Never apologize."

You still want to. You still have things to apologize for (the maze, the lie, the person that you love), but you want your father to be happy for as long as he possibly can, and you don't want to fight or cry tonight, so you let it go and wait for your dinner trays.

It's bread, again. You head to your cot hungry, and the cell grows dark.

You can't sleep.

Your father is always out like a light. Wakes up with solutions he's thought of in his dreams. But you, you can't sleep when you're nervous. Never could. Damocles, he calls it whirring. Would wake up like he did that last night to find you lying quiet as the nighttime, still as a stone. Would roll over, bright skin shining in the moonlight, and say, "I can hear you whirring. What is it?"

"Just thinking," you said.

Damocles propped his head up on an arm. "Now, you know what I told you about thinking," he teased, but it didn't work. You're always thinking.

Damocles could tell. He kissed your shoulder softly, gentle lips. "You think they know it's you?".

You nodded.

He shook his head. "How could they know?"

"They do."

"But your father told them he was the one who—"

"My father is a brilliant man," you interrupt, "but a horrible liar. You remember."

That look on your father's face when you had introduced them. The waver in your father's voice when he had said, "Of course, I've heard so much about you." The way he had flinched when Damocles had called you "love."

He did remember. For a moment, his face was tight with the memory of it. Then he shook his head and grimaced. "We can't all be perfect."

Another day you would have pointed out that he was perfect — he was everything, everything good. But that

night you couldn't do it. Your vision swam with images of death. Of torture, pain, or worse, isolation. Nothing to do but whir and try to sleep. Away from everything, away from Damocles. You couldn't think of anything worse than that. And you're always thinking.

"For the sake of argument," you said, the whirring starting to frenzy in your chest, "let's say they know. Let's say they don't care if it was me or if it was my father who helped Ariadne with the maze and they decide to just punish us both. So – so what then?"

Damocles sat up meditatively, the sheet swimming around his legs. "They wouldn't kill you," he reasoned seriously. "Either of you. With minds like that? They wouldn't let you go to waste."

You sat up, too. "Imprisonment?" you wondered aloud. Damocles looked at the ceiling, thinking. "I can see that."

The whirring turned to terror. "And then what? We'd be trapped there? Forever?"

Damocles shook his head. "You? Come on. You could get out. You could do it."

You laughed hysterically, your throat all the way out of your mouth. "Get out? Of prison? The king controls the sea, the land, everything. He controls everything."

And then the thought thunked into place.

"But not the air. He can't control the air."

Damocles laughed like you were joking, then stopped. "Oh, you're serious."

You nodded. Thinking. Damocles looked on.

"I could make something," you mused. "With my father's help. I'm sure I could."

"You could."

You looked up at Damocles. A curl had fallen between his eyebrows. You brushed it back and he smiled selfconsciously. Your heart ached.

"I wouldn't be able to come back," you whispered.

The smile faded. He took a breath. "I know."

"And my father, he'd – he'd want me to stay with him. Go with him, together, wherever we end up going if we escape."

"Do you want to? Go with him?"

"I want to be with you."

"Okay."

The two of you sat there, the night cold and clammy all around you, the air like salt and sweet rot from the sea.

"I'll find you," Damocles promised. "Wherever you do end up going – I'll be there."

You shook your head. "It'll be months from now. Years, maybe."

"It won't be years," he said. "And I will. I'll be there."

And that was months ago. Years, maybe. You stopped counting. It hurt too much.

"He'll be there," you whisper aloud into the night. Your father snuffles in his sleep. You try it out again. "He'll be there."

It doesn't feel true.

"He will."

You sleep with your limbs tucked close to your chest.

The morning comes too quick. Your father wakes you in the middle of a dream and you're up in a flash. The sun is already high, already blazing, the mornings having come earlier and earlier these last several weeks. The air is hot,

your skin is hot, and your heart is pounding like a dying thing. It'll work. He'll be there. He will, he will, he will.

You and your father prepare wordlessly. You tie the straps around your father's forearms and wrists, then he does the same for you. The wooden frames trace your bones, more prominent and shallow now than they ever have been. The canvas drapes across your back like a cape. Regal, almost. But the feathers – they bristle and shine like blades of grass, tiny prisms glinting in the light. They flutter as you extend your hands in front of you, fanning out on individual waxen joints. In spite of your terror, your breath catches. It's beautiful. More art than science could ever hope to be.

The wings have inspired posture in your father. He stands proud, his chin high, his spine and shoulders straight, and he looks like he did when you were a kid. He's taller, somehow. The feathers softly brush his body as he walks over to the window.

The two of you stand there, noses in the air. The sea breeze blows wild and brackish: north-northwest.

"You ready?" your father asks.

You're not, but you nod anyway.

Your father kisses you softly at the spot where your hairline meets your forehead. "It'll be okay," he promises. Then he turns to the window again. "I'm going first."

"Dad—"

He shakes his head. His eyes are fierce and bright. "I am," he says firmly. Then he grins and steps onto the ledge, crouching awkwardly. His hands are on the sides of the frame. He teeters experimentally. "Whew," he whispers nervously, excitedly.

"Wait, dad."

He turns over his shoulder. "Son?"

You wrap your wings around his waist. "Love you," you tell him.

He glows. "Brilliant boy," he beams. "I love you."

And then he launches himself out the window and plummets out of sight.

"Dad!" you scream.

But he glides easily back into view. On the other side of the tower for the first time in ages and ages and ages. His face shines behind his unkempt beard.

"They work!" he calls. "They work! Son, we did it! They work!"

A bubble of unbridled joy rises in your throat. "They work!" you bellow back, damn near hysterical, and the two of you holler and crow and cry and laugh until you're both hoarse.

"Come on!" your father shouts.

You place your toes on the rim of the sill and step into place.

Below, the sea teems, crashing onto the rocks at the base of the tower, the water deep and dark as eyelids.

"Don't look!"

You imagine yourself plummeting into the ocean, your flailing body turning heavy and limp and waterlogged.

"Come on, son, don't look!"

With gritted teeth, you tear your eyes upward, your stomach pitching and reeling. Your father is gently pulsing his wings to stay aloft, the way Damocles would tread water.

"Let go," your father urges. "The wings – they work. You can do it! Come on."

And before your brain can stop you, before you can think, you rip your shaking fingers from the sill and push yourself out the window.

You fall, the wind shearing the kites of your ears, the waves growing closer and closer.

And then you soar.

Your wings sail along some trail of air and you ride it easily. It carries you to your father as your legs just dangle. You are out of breath and ecstatic with relief.

"They work," you say again.

Your father says, "Let's go."

You get the hang of it in an instant. Every movement corresponds to a lilt, a lift, a curve, a turn. The way Damocles had promised swimming would be. The water had made you feel swallowed up and vulnerable in your insignificance, and you fought it. But the air, this sky – you're small but part of it, a microcosm of the breeze, moving with it, not against it. A triumph of simplicity.

Below you, the world stretches wide. Wider than you remembered — big and open like arms. The hot sun shimmers on the sea and the sight of it makes your heart swell.

You howl. You ache.

Then in the distance, land.

You speed up to catch up with your father.

"That's not it," he tells you, but you know. That's Delos.

The sea boils and bursts below. The edge of it beats at the shore growing closer and closer.

"Okay," you tell yourself firmly, and with your father behind you, you shoot ahead. You make arcs in the clouds. You loop forwards, loop backwards, somersault in the sky until your stomach is shot. Everything you can think of that's big and loud and clear.

"Alright," your father laughs. "Alright, son, that's enough."

But you need more time. You don't feel ready yet. You trace circle after circle in the hot, seething air. You're terrified.

"Son!" your father yells, his desperation cutting through the blue like lightning. "Son, please, be careful!"

And you shoot upwards. The sun looms larger and larger, your skin scalds, your lips singe.

"Icarus, no!"

Your hair is burning.

And then you fall.

It happens slowly. Your arms, unburdened by the wax, drift upwards like a dance. Your chest caves back. Your legs unfurl above you and your head tilts towards your heart. Your mouth is open wide.

Then the world picks up. Your feet churn, searching for purchase, your hands grasp, your eyes stream, your lungs bellow, your blood screams through your veins faster and faster as the water, cold and endless, opens its wet jaws to swallow you whole and you never learned to swim, you never learned, and your brain is white-hot beneath your blazing hair and there's wax on your fingers and feathers in your mouth and your body is small and unimportant and so, so breakable—

And it crashes into the ocean like a brick through a window.

Against your will, you gasp. Your airway fills with salt and you cough more into your nose. It's in your teeth, your throat, your ears, your lungs. You're sure your bones are broken, every one, and your fingers grab and scrabble at nothing and somehow, still, you're falling, down to the black parts of the sea where the Gods have trapped their rough-draft demons: the bone-white sunless crabs that feast on bodies of the dropped dead, the phosphorescent fish with teeth like shattered limbs, and you, the Gods' first feathered man, a monster of pride and arrogance and love, such love, such stupid, idiotic, terrifying, fatal, love.

Something catches at your shoulders. Your brain feels like it's made of sodden bread. Feels like it's leaking out your ears.

Something takes hold of your wrists. Shakes your arms. And then you're moving up.

Your skin sears at the burnt away places.

But still, you're moving up.

Your face breaks into the air and you breathe. The ocean rattles in your throat but you breathe. Your body trembles with the effort. Your heart thuds and you must be alive.

And his hands are on your waist. His arms hold you, strong, there. His chest heaves. He presses his forehead to your sun-burnt cheek.

"Come on," Damocles whispers. You feel him smile relief against your face. "I haven't let you drown yet, have I?"

The Things We Tell Ourselves

R.B. Miner

On my thirtieth birthday you kissed me on the lips for the first time. It was a brief kiss and your girlfriend was right next to you, but I still felt the same sort of tingle I would have had you slid your fingers along the skin of my stomach, just inside the waistline of my skirt. In fact, that's what I imagined you'd done when I thought about you later that night.

We drank a lot and had so much fun and I felt the heat of your stare the whole evening. You winked and bought me drinks and smiled at me from across the crowded room. It wasn't so strange that I had captured your attention—it was my birthday, after all—but I still felt special. I still felt seen.

But when midnight rolled around, you and your girlfriend said goodbye and then you were gone and I was left at the bar with all my other friends when really I just wanted to be in bed with you.

* * *

All three of us are close, it's true, but I can't help imagining life without her. Maybe it would be better if we just traded places. She brought you into my life but now I resent her for keeping you. I fight against that resentment because I love you both but the struggle is constant. It's especially hard when you hug me and your hand feels so sturdy against the small of my back. Just once I wish you'd keep it there and pull my hips tight to yours. It's hard when I tell you a story about the state of my love life and you

listen to me like I'm telling you the most important thing you've ever heard. Or when I see the way you treat her and I'm left comparing you to the date I had last week or the one before that, knowing that no one I meet will ever measure up.

Can you imagine what it's like? I think you could. I think there must have been a time when you loved someone who couldn't love you back. Maybe you've even thought about us together. Maybe you've waited until she left the house and then savaged yourself to an imaginary movie of us fucking until you had the most intense orgasm of your life. I've done it. Would it be so strange?

Sometimes you tell stories when we're all out together. You'll drink a little too much and laugh about all the girls that came before her. She laughs too, in all her confidence. I watch you talk and think how gorgeous it would have been to be one of those girls. Even one of the ones who only got to have you for a night.

Veins pop out in your neck when you've been talking for a while. When you get excited about a funny part in the story you're telling, you gesture with your hands and I can see the strength of them, one gripping your glass, one that would fit nicely around my throat. I think you'd use the right amount of pressure. You'd let in just enough air to keep me conscious but my vision would start to narrow. Moans and gasps would mix together. If you started to ease up, I'd grab your wrist and keep you there.

One time, when I was listening and fantasizing, I realized I had stopped breathing. I had to take a deep breath so that I didn't get dizzy.

You asked me if I was okay.

I said, Oh yeah, just breathing.

You laughed. You said, Keep at it.

We don't spend much time alone together. I'm a girl and you're a boy with a girlfriend and it wouldn't be proper, even though we're friends and we like each other's company. I think you make it that way on purpose. When we do find ourselves alone, you're quieter than normal. I think you do that on purpose, too. You're afraid of saying the wrong thing, afraid of words you actually want to scream out loud accidentally slipping out, whispered from between your very kissable lips. You're afraid that if you complimented my clothes I'd rip them off and bury you inside me right there in my living room or your car or the middle of whatever bar we happen to be at. What you're most afraid of, though, is how bad you want that to happen.

That's what I think, at least. You're afraid because you've got too much to lose.

* * *

You texted me yesterday. Just me, not a group chat or a three-way with her attached. Your name appeared on my phone and I snatched it up with so much haste that I almost knocked over the coffee cup next to it. My mind went through a thousand iterations of what you might have written before I opened the message.

The possibilities started in the realm of fantasy. Come over. I love you. I need to have you. They settled into the banal. What was the name of that restaurant? Let's all get together this weekend.

I cradled the phone in both hands like I was trying to keep water from dripping through my fingers. I stared at the notification, focused on your name, not yet ready to open it and dispel the limitless possibilities of what might be contained inside.

In the end it was somewhere in between. You wrote that you had seen this picture and thought of me. You thought of me. The image was of a baby elephant. I don't know how many other people know that they're my favorite animal. I don't even know how you'd know. I certainly don't remember talking about it, though we must have. And of course you remembered.

It's embarrassing to admit but I started to cry a little. I fanned my eyes to keep the really heavy tears back. Don't feel bad, it's not your fault. How else was I supposed to respond to such a perfect and adorable representation of our connection?

I wrote back, OMG I'm in love.

So, sort of the truth.

* * *

I went on a date tonight. He's in the bathroom right now. My bathroom, actually. We're at my place.

It's not like I'm totally hung up on you. Other guys get a chance. This one was nice, really nice, and he listened when I talked. He actually asked questions.

And I really need to have sex. I'm starving for it. When he gets out of the bathroom I'm going to kiss him as passionately as I can. I'll reach down his pants and he'll be ready for me right away. I won't have to wait. It won't be fantasy. He'll grab my ass and try undressing me right in the hallway. I'll let him. We'll set fire to each other and slam into walls and nothing will exist except the present moment and the way his hands feel on my skin and the glistening wetness of our sweat and our excitement.

I'll keep my eyes open the whole time. I won't imagine it's you inside me. I won't almost call out your name. Not again.

* * *

God, I fucking hate you.

I couldn't quite get there last night. Right when I thought I'd be able to come, the last few millimeters just kept escaping me, dodging and hiding so that I remained balanced on the edge of ecstasy. It was excruciating.

So I closed my eyes and thought of you. Dug my nails into his chest and sent my head back so I could imagine your body underneath me. That finally did it. You win again.

He thought he'd done a marvelous job. He might have, honestly; it probably wouldn't have mattered if he was Don Fucking Juan with a vibrating dick that shot champagne. Apparently there isn't room enough in my heart (or my vagina) for anyone else but you.

You know what, though? I'll see him again. What's the alternative? Another night on Tinder or Hinge or Bumble or Match? He deserves a chance to exist as himself, not some mannequin draped in a mask of your face. He really was very sweet, after all.

* * *

My boss asked me out today. I couldn't believe it. For a minute I just stood there with my mouth open, trying to smile with my eyes through the embarrassment and the fear. You've probably never experienced fear when someone asked you out, but you have to understand what it's like to be in that situation. I don't want to sleep with my boss. He's not always nice to me and he's not all that attractive and

what sort of asshole puts a girl who works for him in the position of having to say yes or inevitably find another job?

I'll admit, I panicked a little. I told him I was flattered but I had a boyfriend.

He said, Really? I've never heard you mention him.

I said, It's new but we're very in love.

He asked to see a picture of him. A strange request, I know, but this is the type of guy we're dealing with here. Instinct took over. Maybe my subconscious knew that if I offered up an image of Don Juan from the other night, my boss would have scoffed and redoubled his efforts to get me into bed. So I showed him your picture instead.

He grunted and glanced back at me before scuttling off back to his office.

First thing I did was tell your girlfriend what I'd done. See, I'm in love with you but I'm also a good friend. The guilt I felt gnawed at my ribs and I knew I'd have to confess. And there was always the chance he'd see you two together. The big city never feels big enough when you don't want certain people to meet.

She said I'd done the right thing and not to worry about it. She always knew the guy was a creep. I could use you as an excuse anytime. As a matter of fact, I could take you off her hands right now for all she cared.

My tongue got very fat in my mouth and it was hard for me to ask if anything was wrong but I managed to get the words out.

I barely listened while she talked. As she described your relationship in peril, I thought about my path into your heart, about what it would be like to see you and smell you and know that you were unattached, ripe and available to

give yourself to me and me to you. For the moment, I was able to ignore the realities of how I might explain it to our mutual friends.

All I could offer in response was, I'm sure it'll be okay. She needed more but she'd have to get it from someone else.

* * *

You're on my couch.

I'm in the bathroom, hiding, but I don't have much more time until you realize I've been gone way too long. You showed up at my door, clearly holding back tears, and asked to come in.

I asked if everything was okay.

You couldn't answer out loud. You only shook your head to signal that it wasn't.

When you found words, you said you didn't know if it was going to work out with her. You didn't realize that relationships were this much work.

That's when I had to excuse myself. You needed someone to listen, not jump your bones, and I needed time to collect myself. I thought about masturbating, in hopes that a quick orgasm would dampen the desire I felt flickering around my pelvis, but then I worried all it would do was stoke the fire.

Instead, I'm just staring at my reflection, willing myself to stay strong. If I'm going to make you mine, you can't think I'm taking advantage of your vulnerability.

When I come back to the living room, you're still where I left you on the couch. I sit next to you. It's quiet in the room and I can hear the cars going by outside and the buzzing of the refrigerator.

You sniffle.

I say, It's going to be alright.

I rest my hand on your knee. By some miracle, you take my hand in yours and squeeze it. I see the muscles in your arm move and tighten. Little bolts of electricity shoot through my forearm to my elbow. For the first time all night, you look into my eyes.

Behind you is a window. The street is dark and still, no cars or people. We might be the only two people left in the world. Your face practically glows against the blackness.

Finally, in the damp hazel of your eyes, I see the truth. Where there should be—Where I want there to be desire, there is sadness. Instead of satisfaction at our moment, I see desperation in the wake of dwindling hope.

What you want is her.

All at once, I'm overwhelmed by guilt. It feels like endless pin pricks across my skin. I fight against my whole body to let go of your hand. I walk to the kitchen and get you a drink of whiskey because I know you like it. The drink isn't meant to strip your defenses, it's meant to calm you. I hand it to you but I don't sit back down. I stand in front of you in the middle of the living room.

I say, You make her happy. She makes you happy. The work may be hard but it's not complicated.

I say, I wish I had what you two have. Don't give it up so easily.

When I say that part, it's hard to keep the tears back.

After you've gone, I assume, back to her loving embrace, I lay down to sleep. As I'm drifting off, I see your face. Then your face dissolves. I sleep until morning.

For the Birds

Mimi Sherman

I've been living on the beach for six months now and I've only just figured out how to get comfortable enough to sleep through the night. I'm dreading winter, I don't know how I'll manage in the snow. I wish I could fly south with my friends.

I've made myself a shelter out of tree branches and padded the inside with anything soft that I could find here. It's mostly abandoned beach towels and picnic blankets, but they do the trick to keep the light out and the heat in. The seagulls live on the rocks nearby and keep me company. Sometimes, when I'm especially lonely, I swear they're calling my name. It takes a certain degree of isolation before "haw, haw, haw!" begins to sound like "Lark, Lark, Lark!"

As the sun rises over the lake, I prepare myself mentally for the arrival of young families, groups of friends and couples in love. The fact that those are all things I'll never have hurts almost as much as their stares. I know I look different. I've looked different all my life, and it has kept me isolated from everyone outside of my immediate family. It became too much of a mess for my parents, so I've had to leave the house. That's why I'm stuck here. Who's going to lease an apartment to someone who looks like me? I guess to landlords it's not worth my rent payments to have a live, uncaged bird roaming free in their properties. There was that one older woman who rented out her basement to me, but she was mostly blind. I'm pretty sure she just thought I had a cockatoo with separation issues.

It's not my fault my head is a heron. You read that right. My head is a heron. No one knows how it happened. It's just how I was born. It was just a chick when I was born, but as I've gotten older it has too, and it's become a liability. I'd say it has a mind of its own if I didn't know that all it did was encase my brain. It's complicated. It can't think or function on its own, but it does all the things that a bird would. I need to feed it — it eats before it lets me, so I have to eat twice as much — and then it digests the food and... I'm sure you can guess what happens next. Therein lies the mess.

The beach gets noisy as happy people crowd in to enjoy the sunny August morning. As soon as picnics begin being laid out, my gull friends bring me morsels they've pinched from the humans. Sometimes it's single French fries, sometimes it's half a sandwich. This began almost immediately after I moved here. It seems like they believe I'm their king. To them, I must be a bird who has taken over the life of a human and for a seagull that's an incredible amount of power. They're half right since most of the time I feel completely powerless.

It's a slow day, all I get are a few grapes and French fries, so I'm forced to go fishing. There's a secluded rocky area down the beach that's a good, quiet place to do so. I grab my pole and bucket and begin making my way down to my spot. To get there, though, I have to walk through the throngs of beachgoers. This is where my day usually goes south. Adults whisper, teens laugh, children cry. I don't blame them. I am a freak of nature and I completely deserve it.

I ignore the jeers of a man who thinks he's a lot tougher, smarter and funnier than he really is and I keep walking to my fishing spot. He doesn't bother following, though. A creature like me is not worth his time. The heat of the sun on my back is hard to handle, but I know that when I get where I'm going I can take a dip in the lake without drawing any unwanted attention to myself.

I get to my spot and sit down on the rocks. I miss the radio. And my mix CDs. I lost all of them with the rest of my possessions when the old lady I rented from died and her kids cheated me out of everything I owned.

Fishing can take hours sometimes. Often the fish I catch are tiny, or they're not interested in the worms I dig up to lure them to me. I don't have access to the fancy lures that most fishermen use around here. When I fish I try to let myself relax. The only sound around is the distant call of the gulls and the soft flow of the streams. It's one of the only times in my day that I can really breathe.

Before I can truly decompress, though, a cool weight falls onto my back and begins to drip down the curve of my spine. It's a feeling I know all too well. I swear under my breath. I want to wash it off in the lake, but I know that I have to sit here covered in my own bird crap until I catch my fish, or else they'll be scared off by my splashing. Of course, by the time I can get in the water, I have a dried crust on my back.

I usually wait for the gulls to retreat to their nests before roasting my dinner. I build a fire as the sun sets and let it warm me up while I wait for them to retire for the night. I snack on the last few grapes and fries and watch as they tuck their heads beneath their wings with their partners and

settle in for the night. I'm jealous of the peace they find together. 'Together' is not a realistic goal for something like me.

I found a good, thick wood plank from a fallen tree a few weeks ago that I've been using to cook my fish on and I close my eyes to listen to the crackling of the fire. A few wild herbs grow nearby and I collected some on the way back from my swim. I got tired of plain fish very soon after moving here, and experimenting with herb mixes is one of my few pleasures. Very soon, the aroma of wild mint and peppergrass fills the air. That's usually all I can find since I don't want to eat anything I'm unfamiliar with and might be poisonous. The smell of the herbs is a comfort. My mom always smelled like peppermint when I was growing up.

Nighttime beach stragglers stay away from my fire and I finally feel completely alone. It's strange how I value being alone, but I hate my perpetual loneliness.

At night I dream about flying south to a land of people like me.

Sometimes I wish that my head would fly south and leave my body behind.

Contributors

Creative Nonfiction

Elaine Ferrell lives in Silver Spring, MD. She is a Communications Specialist at a non-profit organization. Elaine also enjoys baking and spending time outdoors. Elaine has been published in *Months to Years Magazine, The Santa Ana River Review, Small Leaf Press* (UK), and *ellipsis... literature & art* out of Westminster College. Follow Elaine on Twitter <u>@FerrellWithAnE</u>, or find her at elaineferrell.com.

"STS-107" is a work of non-fiction and is the author's real-life account of the events while working as a scientist on the Columbia Space Shuttle Recovery Project. The author **John T. Morgan** grew up and lives in western Michigan. He has a bachelor's degree in Environ-mental Geology and Social Work and has strived to work on projects that better the lives of people and the world in which we live.

Timothy Pruett is a graduate of the University of Virginia. He has lived in Virginia, Minnesota, the Chinese countryside, the developing city of Changzhou, and now the internationalized metropolis that is Shanghai. He works as a consultant and, in his free time, indulges in writing fiction, nonfiction, and the occasional attempted screenplay.

Nicholas Y. Shi is a man who, after a moment of enlightenment inside his bathroom, realized that writing

about his troubles is much more helpful than silently screaming them at the bathroom mirror. Aspiring novelist, webcomic creator, and blogger. He is willing to explore many avenues to tell the story he wants to tell. But worry not, his work doesn't only consist of the rantings of a young man who cannot withstand the pressures of having to be a functioning adult-human thing. Only four out of five of them are.

Isha Strasser (she/her) received her Master's in Writing Arts in May 2020 from Rowan University where she received the Medallion Award for Outstanding Master of Writing Arts. Her writing has appeared in national and international newsletters and publications with the nonprofits she served in New York and Philadelphia, and she is just beginning to share her creative nonfiction with the world. Read more of her work at www.inviolatearts.com.

Poetry

Alanna Budden is a poet from small town Ontario currently studying English Literature and Creative Writing at Concordia University. Her work has featured in the poetry anthologies *Dusk*, *The Pluralist* and her fiction in *Progress*.

Kristin Gustafson is a poet and editor from Cleveland Heights, Ohio. Her work can be found in *Contemporary Verse 2*, *Progenitor Art and Literary Journal*, *Meniscus Literary Journal*, *Something Involving A Mailbox!*, and various other journals.

Bridget Huh is a queer Korean poet based in Toronto, and is in her second year studying English and Creative Writing at Concordia University. Her work is interested in the paradox of being simultaneously raced and erased, both painfully seen and unseen. In her spare time, she enjoys riding her favourite bus routes back and forth, going nowhere.

Samantha Malay's work recently appeared in *Goat's Milk Magazine*, *SHARK REEF*, and *Tinge*, and will soon be published by *Kind Writers* and *Five South*. She was born in Berlin, Germany, and grew up in rural northeastern Washington State. A graduate of Seattle University's sociology program, she is a theatrical wardrobe technician by trade and a mixed-media artist. Her published poetry can be found at https://thistleandhasp.wordpress.com.

The author believes that love is the most revolutionary act, and, so believing, his nom de guerre is **Oluniyi**. He is a PhD candidate at a university in America. He has taught in the U.S., the Middle East, and China.

Stuti Pachisia is a doctoral candidate and poet based out of Cam-bridge, UK and Calcutta, India. Her previous work has or will be featured in *Plainsongs, Polemical Zine, Sheepshead Review, Up the Staircase Quarterly, MOIDA Quarterly, Claw & Blossom, The Rialto, Capsule Stories, The Seventh Wave, The Alipore Post and Cleaver Magazine.*Currently, she is Contributing Poetry Editor at *The Seventh Wave.* In 2020, she was a finalist for the prestigious

Srinivas Rayaprol Poetry Prize, a national award for Indian poets. Twitter: @steewtweets.

Born and raised in Montreal, **Kyra Pedro-Czako** is in her second year at Concordia in Honour's English Literature and Creative Writing. An avid dreamer and reader, her poetry seeks to understand and communicate the complexities of womanhood, self-development and sexuality.

Anthy Strom (they/them) is a poet from Alberta, Canada. Although they have been writing since they were eleven, it was only in the past year that they began writing poetry. When they aren't writing, you can find them crying over college essays and hyper-fixating on this week's random craft.

Lyndsey Kelly Weiner is a graduate of Stonecoast MFA and teaches writing at Syracuse University. She blogs at haikuveg.com.

Megan Lynn Wilkinson is a poet, writing teacher, and cultural enthusiast who is currently pursuing a master's degree in creative writing at The University of Southern Mississippi. In her endeavors to convey human experience through language, she considers ideas of womanhood as they relate to environment, empowerment, and generational progression.

Fiction

Julia Bedell is a writer and public defender partial to conifers, biking, and good breakfast. This is her first published fiction piece; her nonfiction and puzzles can be found in such places as *Brokelyn*, the *American Indian Law Review*, and the *Tongue in Cleat* newsletter. She currently lives in Anchorage, Alaska, on Dena'ina land.

Alan Keith is a supply teacher working out of Toronto, Canada who has been published a whopping five (5!) times. He tries to keep his writing honest by only writing about what he sees, but if he's being (really) honest, he actually makes a lot of it up. Alan has printed two short story collections and a novel; they sit anonymously on his bookshelf... A poetry collection is his next project! You can profess your love for his work, or verbally harass him, at writeralankeith@gmail.com.

Dinu Mahapatuna is, unsurprisingly, a first-year English literature student at Concordia University. Her fiction has previously been published in *S.P.A.C.E.* magazine and shortlisted for *The Walrus*'s Youth Short Story Award and *The Malahat Review*'s Open Season Fiction Award. She has also worked as an editor for *The Plant* newspaper and *S.P.A.C.E.* magazine. You can find her staring at you.

R. B. Miner is a New York City native, Army veteran, and occupational dilettante. While he has held several professional roles after his time in the service, he aspires to only one more profession: writer. His work has

appeared in Rock and a Hard Place Magazine. He lives in Kansas City with his wife, daughter, and dog.

Miriam (Mimi) Sherman was born and raised in Montreal, and is a student in English Literature at Concordia University. She loves reading, cooking (and eating), and her three cats.

Anna Stacy (they/she) is an actor, writer, medical student, and multi-tasker from New York. Their writing has appeared in *Calyx*, *Perennial Press*, the *Santa Fe Writers Project Quarterly*, and *Academic Emergency Medicine*, as well as onscreen in the award-winning series *Dead-Enders*. As an MS4 at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, Anna's focus is on access to care in Emergency Medicine. Offstage and outside the hospital, Anna loves horror movies, regardless of quality.

Anthy Strom (they/them) is a poet from Alberta, Canada. Although they have been writing since they were eleven, it was only in the past year that they began writing poetry. When they aren't writing, you can find them crying over college essays and hyper-fixating on this week's random craft.