

The background is a complex, abstract composition of swirling, concentric patterns in shades of black, white, and grey. Interspersed within these patterns are vibrant, multi-colored lines in red, blue, yellow, and green. The overall effect is one of dynamic movement and depth. Several rectangular frames, outlined in blue and red, are overlaid on the image, highlighting specific areas of the pattern. One frame in the upper right contains the text 'ISSUE 35'.

ISSUE
35

THE CYPRESS DOME



ISSUE
35

**THE
CYPRESS
DOME**

The Cypress Dome is an annual undergraduate publication at the University of Central Florida. UCF students who are interested in learning more or wish to submit should see our guidelines at cypressdome.org.

The editors would like to thank the UCF Student Government for providing more than half of the funding that makes the publication of *The Cypress Dome* possible.

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Original cover art by Nathaniel Ratón: *Fractigma*.

Original cover design by Hannah Ragsdale.

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Cypress Dome Society

The Cypress Dome Society (CDS) offers an outlet for artists at UCF. We chose to name ourselves after the beautiful cypress dome ecosystem that exists on the UCF campus. In the same way that cypress domes create an environment based in biodiversity and rich land, we hope to foster a space that promotes diversity and rich creative work for students. We set our roots in the deepest parts of the literary community and surround ourselves with students eager to participate in the arts. Every year, we engage with our community by encouraging students to submit to our literary magazine, *The Cypress Dome*. Our intention is to remind artists on campus that their writing and artwork are a critical part of UCF. The Cypress Dome Society gathers various styles and genres of work from writers and artists with different backgrounds, cultures, and identities.

The Cypress Dome Society aspires to expand our impact through various events and activities that invite the student body into our world. We host an open mic night once per month to set the stage for students to shine. With donated books, we facilitate book sales on campus as a source for book lovers around UCF. From workshops to collaborations with various literary-based Registered Student Organizations (RSOs), we create and organize, all leading up to the grand CDS launch party at the end of the year. There, we present the newest issue of *The Cypress Dome* to our community.

If you're interested or eager to join a group of creative students or participate in the events we host, there are many ways to get involved. Follow us on our Instagram @cypressdome for updates on our events and book sales. Always be on the lookout in the fall semester for open submissions to the latest issue of our literary magazine! If you want more information on how to submit to the magazine or join The Cypress Dome Society, please visit our website at cypressdome.org.



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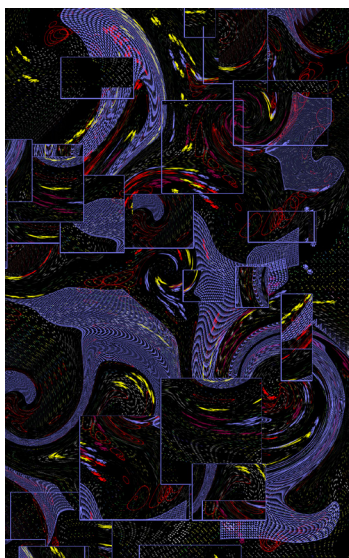
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About the Design

In designing the cover of *The Cypress Dome*, I aimed to lean into the chaos and patterns in *Fractigma*. The artwork provided inspired me to create a layout that intertwined the patterns with the text for the cover. By adding blocks of color on the black and white artwork the design appears layered, creating a sense of depth. Use of shadows and bold colors throughout the design create a sense of mystery and intrigue that invites the viewer to explore further. —**Hannah Ragsdale, Cover Designer**



Letter From the Editor

The 35th edition of *The Cypress Dome* was created through the collective efforts of the editorial staff to select work that reflects the everchanging, evergrowing and everliving world around us. The writers and artists in this edition weave sorrow and loss with the beauties of nature, the first form of new life.

The idea that emerged through this collection is *preservation*. The first step to preservation is to remember. In order to live in our present and forge a new future, we must recall history in gruesome honesty. These works are reflections of their creators' innermost workings. Whether it comes from conversation on a dock, a number between one to ten, or Paris from a distance, these works illustrate the beauty of what dwells inside.

These moments are small, but significant. Without them, we lose sight of who we are now. Who would we be without that random Tuesday night? Or that one conversation we never replied to? Who would we be without the events we look back on and laugh—or sob—to? We simply wouldn't be the person reading these words right now. Our dawns—late nights where we realize we've survived our toughest battle—will always be brighter than our days—the moments when we felt we were burning from the inside out.

So let us look to the future. We are the activists, artists, leaders, writers, researchers, and poets of the next generation. We are capable of bringing about change, not only for ourselves but for the broken women, men, and children who need it. The contributors of this year's edition of *The Cypress Dome* call on you to remember history, yours and others, to light the path to a shining future.

Yours Truly,
Lorlie Louis
Editor-in-Chief

Contents

Editor Awards

Open Mic Winner: windwitch , S. Kali	10
Fiction: The Memory Bank , Ashley Francke	12
Poetry: THERE WAS A STATUE OF DAVID, TOO , Tara Crowe	18
Nonfiction: Not Quite Mankoski , Samantha Lefebvre	20
Art: For Love , Daniel Otero	29

Fiction

Grave Diving , Max Rainey	41
Fallen , Juan Morillo	57

Nonfiction

The Hand Life Dealt , Nicole Del Prete	80
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Poetry

Seirenes , Sophia Cardenal	33
the great american romance , Farah Mara Shah	35
Visitation , Aja Moncrieffe	36
addendum to our conversation by the sea , Farah Mara Shah	38
Portrait in Watercolor , Aja Moncrieffe	48
The Constellation of Me , Kaitlyn Pottinger	50
THE ENDING OF A POEM I NEVER WROTE THE BEGINNING OF , Tara Crowe	51
A Woman Who Cannot Be Raped , Lydia Robbins	73
Sisyphus at 15 One must assume she is in love , Peyton Worsham	76
How to Grieve Your Dog , Aja Moncrieffe	78

As the World Collapses Around Us We Find Ourselves

Planting Nasturtiums, K.A. Basilisk	79
HOUSEWARMING PARTY, Tara Crowe	89
pursuit & crash, Gian Arellano.....	91
House, Bella Riley Love	93

Art

The Heart of Paris, Lais Guimarães.....	30
Remembrance 1, Ambar Santiago.....	31
Smitten, Mariana Nagy	32
Brief Self, Danielle Deptula Pokrandt	53
Metamorphosis, Erik Leon.....	54
La Paloma del Mundo, Daniel Otero	55
Diverging From the Past, Danielle Deptula Pokrandt	56
Process, Emily Liu	85
Remembrance 2, Ambar Santiago.....	86
Fractigma, Nathaniel Ratón.....	87
Lady Raven, Nishtha Tikalal.....	88

Content Warnings

In consideration of the mental health and safety of our readers, *The Cypress Dome* team has included the below content warning guide. Applicable warnings will be denoted below the title of each piece by their respective letter demarcations.

Alcohol	A
Death	D
Domestic Violence	DV
Medical Trauma	MT
Racism	R
Sexual Assault	SA
Violence	V

windwitch

by *S. Kali*

Open Mic Winner

CW: R, V

my father,
black with the soot of Nevis,
walks through oceans, coating coasts in ash
legs moving like pillars of the darkest salt through seas,
finding solace in the north before burning the end of the wick
I,
his child of brimstone
bleed Black over
beaches
next to windwitch and soda ash
burning the wick until it's
three
fifths
gone

I will stretch over the east until I cover oceans
and fill no more than a droplet
beneath me
my legs, with the sharp edge of the Moon, will be split into two and shatter
when I have learned of the reason,
they will be sewed back to me using scars as
thread, tying themselves through me
above me
my mind will be cast into clouds
my thoughts will be thunderstorms
my fears will be light showers
I will be taller than my yesterday

shorter than my today
and always cutting down my tomorrow

I will live through cars, drinking smoke
using nails as stitches, doubling as keys
locking doors that are not my own
and live through condos, drinking breath
watching peacocks and cranes dart back and forth between each other
walking for miles just to hear another Voice

and live through luxury, cleaning blood from every part of me
blood that I would've never dreamed,
would be spilled on beautiful marble tiles
nevertheless I sit
stunned
staring at it, emancipated from where I knew its home was

and live in foyers listening to hips against thighs through glass walls
for what is the experience without the sound
the feeling could be needles
I just wish to
remember what they said

and live in closets closed-off pitch-black, writing using echolocation
scribbling words I will never read again, writing
letters to those who I will never see again,
crying Tears I will never cry again, bleeding
blood that was not mine but has had no owner since I
thought of it, until my tears my blood
my words

and my letters cover the east and fill oceans
without taking up more than a droplet
maybe reaching the north to breathe in
windwitch again

The Memory Bank

by Ashley Francke

Editor's Choice in Fiction

CW: A, D

"I'd like to make a deposit, please."

My first client of the day presents an olive-green necktie. If it could speak, no doubt it'd whisper about war—mostly about winning it. It'd sing jukebox tunes and whistle at the pretty girls on Victory Day. It'd coax its way onto someone's bedroom floor in celebration of love and liberty. Near the knot, the fabric is particularly worn—a smudge of lime in the frayed olive-green—and suggests years of a hand pulling the tie's wearer in for a kiss. It suggests a wife.

Without looking, I take the topmost deposit form from my pile. "My condolences," I say, handing it and a ballpoint pen to her. "How long has it been?"

Her bespectacled eyes stay steady on the page, intent on remembering the conditions designed to make her forget. "Clearly, not long enough."

She's got me there. "Clearly, ma'am."

During this part of the process, we are silent save for the occasional question Mrs. Abernathy—according to my preliminary peeking at her form—asks me: *What's the interest rate? When does the interest begin to accrue? When can I collect it?*

"These matters vary for every account holder," I explain, indicating with my index finger—with all its paper cuts—the fine print she strains to see even through her thick bifocals. "Only time will tell."



Mrs. Abernathy is only the first grieving widow out of dozens. After her, there is Mrs. Connolly and Mrs. Webster—and then even widower Mr. Redman. A tarnished wedding ring here, a yellowed family photograph there. Mr. Redman's exceptional fishing pole with its snapped line. *In the beginning, I taught my sweet Abigail how to fish*, he tells me, his penmanship

growing shakier with every spoken syllable, *because she knew how much I loved the quiet of it.*

In between the spouses, there is everyone else: the parents toting Peter Cottontails and other well-loved toys, the college students shouldering more than their bookbags, and the soldiers with enough dog tags jingling in their fatigues to name every canine in the city. By early afternoon, my blank deposit forms are no longer a precarious tower in danger of demolition by the mere bump of my elbow.

The next person, young and brunette, steps forward. “May I make a deposit?”

No one’s asked me that before. Everyone in my generation knows the ins and outs of this place—they grow *up* learning about it. A wealth of knowledge, from textbooks to even coloring books, has been dedicated to the universal understanding of our slogan: *From Pain, You Gain!* For no lack of resources, those like Mrs. Abernathy, born in a generation before the bank but already well-acquainted with the human desire to polish sadness into happiness again, understand our work here—and were among the first to use its services, too, their treasures the first to tarnish.

Once my mouth recovers from gaping, it settles on, “You may?”

My newest client is too busy marveling at the gilded architecture—the ornate pillars, the towering statues erected to honor the fathers of the field practiced here—to notice how my answer reverberates as a question. While her eyes are elsewhere, I straighten my posture, awaiting her inevitable appraisal of me.

Too airily for her stuffy surroundings, for the clients begging neighboring tellers to unburden them of their brokenness, she says, “I’ve never been here before.”

“A first time for everything.” The cogs in my head begin to turn, then: This *shouldn’t* be her first time. “Were you absent the day of your school’s field trip? As you know, it’s obligatory for every—”

“The Memory Bank—wow!” Her face is round and bright like the moon, with no sign of any earthly knowledge eclipsing it. Finally, her lamplight eyes shine on me. “How do I open an account?”

What? “You don’t simply *open* an account.”

Her light flickers. “And why not, Mr.—” She zeroes in on my embossed

name tag, squinting like Mrs. Abernathy did; Mrs. Abernathy didn't lean across my counter, though, challenging me. "—Finn?"

"Just Finn is fine."

"Why don't I need to open an account, *Just Finn*?" She wags an accusatory—of what, I'm unsure—finger at me. No paper cuts, though dirt cakes her cuticle.

I can't blink hard enough. "Because you already have one."

"But as I said, I've never been—"

"Here at the Memory Bank, your account is your birthright!" Sensing my coworkers' open ears, I clear my throat and hopefully any lingering unprofessionalism along with it.

My outburst has inspired a toothy grin from her. Through it, she says, "My birthright?"

That, along with her dubious hygiene, may as well confirm it: She's been living under a rock.

"Birthright." I readjust my nametag despite it already being perfectly pinned onto my lapel. This strange woman—not to mention the line steadily forming behind her—has begun to make my suit feel two sizes too tight. "We're only human after all."

For a long while, she chews on her bottom lip. I have half a mind to beckon the next client over when, at long last, the victor of her internal battle emerges. From her messenger bag she withdraws a teapot, of all things. Everything—from its silvery spout to its porcelain belly full of *Myosotis sylvatica*, their bright blue frothing over—is unbroken. More than that, it is perfect.

"I want to deposit this," she says, and from there, I learn that her name is Saoirse.



The next time Saoirse makes a deposit, three years have passed, and it is another bouquet of *Myosotis sylvatica*; this time, however, its receptacle is a mason jar full of fairy lights and moss.

"Why call them that?" she asks me once the Latin has left my lips. Marveling at the flowers' glass house and lights that show no sign—despite their sourceless power supply—of dimming, I couldn't have helped but name them. "Why not call them by their nickname? I call *you* by *your* preferred

name.”

I feel my face cross into incredulous territory. “Their *nickname*?”

“Yeah, y’know, forget-me-nots.” Her eyes are very brown, dark like the fresh dirt under her nails. “Why not remember them the way they’d *want* to be remembered?”

“And you’re the expert?” I ask, eyebrows raised to my hairline. “You know the flowers?”

“We help each other grow,” she says, “so I’d like to think that I do.”

I surrender over everything that requires her hand. *Springtime in a jar*, she writes in the description box on the deposit form. I hadn’t been aware that a season could be contained.



After another seven years, Saoirse returns with seven champagne bottles, the bluest of forget-me-nots spilling from their necks. Not even the original labels appear torn or aged despite their years. I wonder who might’ve helped her empty those bottles, who might’ve celebrated each new year with her.

“Were they quite the showstoppers?” I ask.

She is effervescent, drunk with recollection—it’s my first time encountering someone who drinks to remember—when she asks right back, “Who said they ever stopped?”



It’s true, the parties must not ever stop. Each year from then on, Saoirse’s deposits increase in frequency. The music boxes, the picnic baskets, the *ballet* slippers of all things—each inexplicable one stuffed to the brim with forget-me-nots. Each time, I only push the pencils—never any buttons—necessary to serve Saoirse. On the contrary, each time she presses me for information that exceeds my capacity as a simple teller: *Do bank employees have accounts, too? What’s yours like? What sorts of things have you deposited?*

“Please don’t tell me ‘office supplies,’” she remarks one day fifteen years into our transactional relationship, eyeballing a burst ballpoint pen as it bleeds blue from my hand down onto her most recent deposit form—no place pertinent, but blemishing all the same.

“We’ll have to start fresh,” I say. Avoiding her question—always, always avoiding—instead, I try to destroy the form, render it into finer pieces. Before

I can tear past the margin, though, I'm stopped by the way she shakes her head at me from across the counter.

"It's fine, Finn," she insists. "Just fine as it is."



When its ink is twenty years dried, I'm required to fetch Mrs. Abernathy's manila folder from the bottom of my filing cabinet and stamp a begrudging *DECEASED* on its front. Without Mrs. Abernathy there to collect the tie—it's taken all this while, but finally, that lime-green thumbprint has disappeared from its knot—the account closes. My coworker clears out its contents just in time for lunch.

"Are you coming?" he asks me once nothing remains. "I'm *starved*."



Three decades since our initial meeting, Saoirse is flowerless when she requests to collect and then close her account. Despite the enormity of her request, she carries only herself, no bag or anything else supplementary in sight. For the first time, her fingernails are clean.

"A complete withdrawal?" I've only known her to give, not take. "You're sure?"

It doesn't touch her eyes, but she smiles all the same. "Yes."



Unlike the decadence of the entrance hall, the adjacent lifts are cramped, fitting only our two bodies and nothing else. I pull on our lift's lever and down we sink into the bank's basement. These days, Saoirse's vault occupies the lowermost level. Not unusual for an account with so many assets, so much interest accrued over the years, yet—

Interest. What might Saoirse's look like? What could she have to collect? What lessons of grief would be learned in time's telling of them?

The lift rattles open. After we disembark, we walk together in somber silence. Down the winding corridor, the forget-me-nots greet us, steadily and then not-so-steadily, from the ceiling above to the metalwork all around. When we reach it, delineating the vault's door—where once they may have peeked from its gaps, they are now bold—their blue is brighter than any gold. Even in the stagnant air, their petals wave at us.

Reaching out to them, Saoirse says, "I've never needed to repair anything—just collect on the good, whenever I was ready."

Now is the culmination of our thirty-year transactions, of her forget-me-nots and their perfect vessels exchanged—her good memories—for what? Safe storage? Compounded happiness? It doesn't make sense. It never has.

"Why never the sad?" I finally ask. "Why never the broken?"

She is flickering again—sad, happy, sad—like the flame belonging to a long candle. I watch, entranced, as her breathing buoys her, fans her bigger.

"Who decides that every sad thing is broken?" The forget-me-nots delight under her touch. "Why shouldn't each sad thing stay with us? Make *us* whole, instead?"

I don't answer. Rather, I remember Mr. Redman's fishing pole, its line that's long since been mended. I have and never will fish—but I contemplate on its quietness, anyway. On Mrs. Abernathy and her tie's silenced jukebox tunes, I also contemplate.

She presses on, "Do I look broken?" And suddenly the line on Mr. Redman's fishing pole snaps again: then and now, the past and present simultaneously occurring. Every moment, with Mrs. Abernathy alive—her tie singing sad songs, but songs all the same—existing.

"No," is all I can say. I clear my throat, and this time, it isn't for being unprofessional.

Her hand travels the plaque on the door to Saoirse W.'s birthright, the wildflowers still welcoming her fingers like old friends while the perpetual paper cuts on my own fingers itch.

At me, she spares a sideways glance. "So, how about us humans, *Just Finn*?"

I mirror her movement. "What about us?"

In the garden of fine hairs around her face, gray has blossomed. Someday the rest of her crown won't recall what color it ever was—not even another thirty years of planting forget-me-nots there could change that.

Again, she smiles. She is glowing. "Are we just fine after all?"

THERE WAS A STATUE OF DAVID, TOO

by *Tara Crowe*

Editor's Choice in Poetry

CW: D, DV

When I remember the humid and sticky summers
of my youth, I remember you
and the way we would water the garden in the soft evening light,
how the water, warm from sitting in the hose all day, would spray
in rainbows across the wood of the front porch, and how I would hop
barefoot across the stones to pick those small black seeds from the flowers.
That I could tell you the way I miss it, like a storm on a
sunny day, the sound of thunder and rain on a red tin roof,
watching the things you planted grow
year after year.

The way I miss the banana tree in the backyard and carrying away
its massive leaves come autumn.

The way I miss the dignified sprawl of
the jasmine vine flowering on the porch, and the hibiscus, sat by the stairs,
and all those days of sitting in the sun and in the shadow, staring
into the crumbling eyes of that lichen-spotted statue of David.

I miss what you built more than I miss you. That is to say—
I miss your potential more than your reflection, the thought of you
bitter and thorny, planted elsewhere and given the space to grow sweeter
and happier, and more gentle in time,
velvet like the curl of a sprouting fern.

I know some of us are still looking for what's left of you
in the long shadow cast behind your statue,
still struggling with how to love you in a world tilted on its axis,
post apple and snake and fall, but I think you buried yourself, long
before we ever could, in pieces in the garden, planted yourself
in acrid soil too deeply and couldn't leave when the time came.

I think you carved your headstone in the snow,
by the crocuses. I think if I dug up the hydrangeas, I'd find you
tangled in the roots.

Not Quite Mankoski

by *Samantha Lefebvre*

Editor's Choice in Nonfiction

CW: MT

Doctors love the Mankoski scale—or as we patients tend to know it, the “one-to-ten” pain scale. Not just doctors, actually; if you’ve ever even been to the nurse’s office at an elementary school, you know precisely what I’m talking about. You go in and sit down, holding your limp wrist in your other hand. Maybe it was a bee sting, maybe a splinter. You sniffle a little and try to ignore the throbbing heartbeat that pulses heat from your thumb.

“How bad does it hurt on a scale of one to ten?” she’ll ask, looking it over. You think about it for a while. It’s not as easy a question as you might think. What’s her metric of one and ten? Does she mean ten being the greatest pain *you* personally have experienced, or the most pain *anyone* has ever experienced? You’re not qualified to answer that sort of question; you just tripped on the playground and now you’re missing out on social studies. What constitutes a one? Is it the same as a zero? Is one like a papercut, or like stubbing your toe? Some toe stubs are pretty nasty, so it’s hard to say. What about five? That’s squarely in the middle, so it’s important, but it’s hard to qualify pain with numbers. You got knocked flat on your back one time while playing kickball and all the air rushed out of you like it couldn’t leave fast enough. That was pretty bad, and it scared you. Five? Or maybe even closer to a seven? But then, are you factoring in the fear? Are you only supposed to consider the pain? What about a ten? Could you even *survive* a ten? Or would you be screaming your head off, begging to be sedated, even unable to scream at all? Now you begin to understand that rating your pain on a scale from one to ten is not an easy task.

Ask anyone with a chronic illness and they can tell you where they’re at in a second, without the philosophical debate. We’re used to the pain scale question; we’ve waxed poetic about what it means to be at a one and whether a ten is *my* ten or *the* ten. We’ve been asked the question a million times and

gotten comfortable with assessing our bodies at a moment's notice.

This is why, when the nurse comes up to check my IV and ask me what number I'm at, I've already closed my eyes and started to work my scan from the roots of my hair down my forehead, over the planes of my cheeks, my throat, cascading down my arms to settle in my fingertips, continuing down through my chest—good so far. I take a deep breath and revel in the feeling. Everyone knows the cold, sharp smell of a hospital; antiseptic, the bitter tinge of artificial fragrance in the hand soap, the powdery vinyl gloves, and if you're in a *really good* hospital, just a touch of peppermint to hide the smell of sickness. The breath kind of hurts going in, but I love it. It feels like taking a Magic Eraser to my sinuses. I move my internal scanner down a couple inches, and—yeah. Fuck. Of course. I always have to stop right about at my navel to get a better feel for the pain. It sits just below my belly button like a festering hunk of meat.

“Hey, sweetie,” the nurse says as she turns my arm over to look at my IV placement.

I snap my eyes open and offer a tight smile. I've been watching too much *Grey's Anatomy* lately; when I look at her, I half expect to see Meredith Grey herself scribbling in my chart, mumbling something under her breath about swearing off men. Of course, it's not. It's a pretty young girl with mousy brown hair and perfectly manicured eyebrows. She doesn't look much older than me. She's got a small chip on one of her front teeth, and her breath smells like cappuccino as she leans over me. For some reason, this makes me like her more.

“I'm Phoebe; I'm the head surgical nurse. Can you tell me about the procedure you're having today, Miss Samantha?” This is probably the twelfth time this morning I've been asked this exact question. “Or do you prefer Sam?”

“Either is okay.”

I try really hard not to look at the IV. As long as I've spent in doctor's offices, having cold metal things put in, on, or around me, I've never been good with needles or fluids. I grit my teeth.

“I'm having a laparoscopic excision for endometriosis, an explorative hysteroscopy, Liletta IUD insertion, presacral neurectomy, and possible laparoscopic appendectomy.”

She blinks at the speed with which I fire off my response. Hell, *I'm* a little impressed with how fast I say all that. *I* could be Meredith Grey.

“And could you describe that surgery in your own words?” She holds my fingers, partly because they are icy cold and partly to keep them from shaking.

“They’re going to go in with a camera, inflate my abdomen, and cut out all the lesions. They’ll go into my uterus with another camera and check for... I dunno, shit in there. It’s too full. They’ll scoop it out, and put in an IUD to prevent further growth. They’re going to cut—”

I pause for a second and swallow. She squeezes my fingers.

“They’re going to sever the nerve that connects my uterus to my brain. And maybe they’ll take out my appendix, if it’s covered in endo. They won’t know until they get in there.”

I clear my throat. It’s cold in here, and dry. I wonder if all of Atlanta is like this, or if it’s just the hospital. I think, for the hundredth time, of how weird it is to travel out of state for surgery, for things to be so bad in my body that I need a specialist. Nurse Phoebe sits on the corner of my bed and looks over my chart again.

“You seem to know what you’re talking about!” she says. She folds her hands. Her nails are a robin’s egg blue, and they make a perfect almond shape. Ian’s favorite color is blue, and Phoebe was the name of my best friend in high school, so I try to mark this nurse as a good omen for today. I tense my muscles as hard as I can to keep from a tremulous shiver.

“Yeah, I’ve had surgery for this before.”

She nods, unsurprised. It’s on my chart, so I get the idea she’s just trying to make conversation. Maybe to distract me. I’m grateful.

“Well, not *this* surgery, but something like it. I had an ablation and a DNC for endo when I was nineteen.”

She nods again, eyes trained on mine. They’re the color of what her breath smells like: soft, milky coffee. She looks like a good nurse. I try to stop the words, but they bubble up from my throat and tumble off the end of my tongue before I can choke them back into me.

“But it didn’t work. The first surgery, I mean. The endometriosis came back. Within a year.” I just keep tacking on the end of the last sentence. Her face doesn’t change, but I see her fingers just barely tighten around each

other in her lap. There's a question now, unspoken, hanging in the air like an ugly gray cloud of smog.

Will it come back again after this one, too?

A muscle in her jaw jumps like a fish, and I just look at her hands. I wonder what Meredith Grey would say to me. I wonder if, in this episode of *Grey's Anatomy*, I'd be the A story.

"You're in good hands," she says. I can see that she means it. "Right now, right this second, how would you rate your pain on a scale from one to ten?"

I didn't even notice her pick her pen back up and poise it over my chart. I was trying too hard to come up with what I would name the episode. I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and conjure up my own scale.

1. I am sitting next to my boyfriend, Ian. Date night was my job today, and I have to say, I'm pretty pleased with myself. I set up a movie night with concessions and string lights and handmade tickets and everything. I zero in on the subtitles—it's a gory Korean zombie movie, and I'm so invested that the mere idea of missing a line of dialogue makes me a little pissy. Ian's warm, so I burrow the top of my head a bit deeper into the crook of his neck and sigh. My stomach is full of watermelon Sour Patch Kids and pizza and an IPA that Ian recommended we try. My pain is a dull buzz inside me. It feels like how an AC unit sounds in the back of a grocery store; unless I put all my thought into it, I hardly know that it's there. There are good pain days and bad pain days, and I'm at a point where I give the good days full recognition for the relief they give me. Ian tightens his arm around me and the buzz is gone.
2. COVID sucks. I mean, I don't have it, but the whole world shutting down thing *really* sucks. Luckily, I live five minutes down the street from my best friend Brian. We never acknowledge each other as best friends—that would be odd. Would I do anything for him, including take a bullet? Let me specify—*nonfatal* bullet, maybe a good shoulder shot? Without a doubt. Is he going to be my best man at my wedding? One hundred percent. But sometimes, you get to a point of closeness with people that doesn't need to be said. Acknowledgement of that affection seems almost incestuous. It would be weird to point it out, because it just feels...

natural. It's my senior year of high school, and we're riding our bikes through his neighborhood in the jovial absence of any traffic. I do not yet know the word endometriosis, nor the impact it will have on me in a few months' time. As we pedal through the streets with a fervor that would make our parents reach for a Xanax, we throw our heads back in laughter and ignore the beads of South Florida June sweat that roll in fat droplets down our backs. The air is sweet with orange blossoms, and—*ouch*. I wrinkle my nose and stand up on the pedals to take a break from pumping my legs. There's an odd pinch, sharp and immediate, just to the left of my belly button. It's gone the second I notice it. I doubt for a moment that it was ever there. This isn't the first time I've gotten one of these—actually, since April, I've been getting them about twice a week. Brian calls me a slowpoke for falling behind, and I jet forward on the bike fast as I can, thighs burning, the pinch forgotten.

3. I love Halloween Horror Nights, but *damn*, all this walking is killing me. I hustle a few steps to catch up to my dad, who is weaving his way unaffected through a crowd of “70s themed” hippie Woodstock vampires. I feel the all too familiar twinge behind my navel and my pace slows. I duck out of the crowd and huddle next to the Mummy ride. This one's not too bad—I know my endo well enough to know what each pinch and cramp means. This is just some organ surface pain; the endometrium is growing on the wrong side of my uterus, and is now deciding to shed off into my abdomen. My organs are peeling, essentially. It'll pass. This must be lesion pain, because it's so specific. It feels like being stabbed deep with a mechanical pencil. I see my dad turn around, a head above the rest of the crowd, looking for me. When I catch his eye, I put a hand on my lower belly and frown. *I'm fine, just a minute*, I mouth. I try to ignore the look on his face as he fights backwards through the crowd to get to me.
4. I launch the ball across the field to my teammate, flexing my shoulders to try and divert blood away from my pelvis. It's a pretty good throw; he catches it with ease and palms it right through the goal, shouldering past the defender and slamming his whole arm through the hoop along with the ball. The sidelines erupt with cheers. As I'm turning to book it back to my side so I can defend our hoops, I feel the pain ignite behind

the drawstring of my shorts and I screw my eyes shut against it. Even though running makes it worse, I lean forward into a dead sprint so I can get back to the hoops faster. *Power through. One more, and then next offense you can call for a sub.* I clench my jaw and bounce on my toes, growing more uncomfortable by the second. I stand with my back to the hoop, one hand up high above my head and one hand in front of me. Stretching up like this makes it worse, too. It pulls on the scar tissue webbing through my abdomen, which tugs on my organs. A ball goes whizzing past my ear before I have a chance to react and I hear my teammates from the sidelines shout a warning a half second too late. I blink a few times, clutching at my stomach, and raise my hand to the sidelines. “Sub! Sub!” There’s no pushing through this one, even for me. I shuffle off the pitch and sit down on the bench, muttering an apology to my team.

5. I am a freshman in high school. We’re doing *The Odyssey* in class today, and although my friends are bitching about it, I’m actually really excited. Rather, I *would* be excited, if the fist clenched around me would lighten up at all. I only have about a year of this whole period thing under my belt (ha ha), and I guess I just haven’t gotten used to it yet. It’s felt like Sylvester Stallone has been white-knuckle gripping my pelvis since I woke up this morning, and as I shift around for the hundredth time to try and make it go away, I realize my teacher is staring at me. My brows are furrowed in an expression of both frustration and discomfort, and he stops writing some Greek guy’s name in the middle of it to quietly come over to my desk. I peer around his shoulders and try to write it down, but it just says “Agamem.” He asks me if I’m okay. I bite down my pride and ask to see the nurse for some Tylenol. For the next seven years, I don’t forget the horrid look she gives me when I ask her to lay down because my period hurts so bad I can’t focus in class. Her face twists with disapproval until she looks like that weasel in the painting of the lady with an ermine.
6. It’s a hot summer, unfortunately. Hotter than it’s been in a while. There aren’t enough lifeguards today—a few of the newer guards passed out because of the heat. Hungover, dehydrated, or maybe both. This would be fine, except today, it means I can’t go home. I shift uncomfortably in

the tall white chair, trying to focus on the gross feeling of my sweat-stuck thighs peeling off the plastic rather than the growing hornet's nest in my uterus. This time it's accompanied by a sharp pain in each ovary. I wonder how built up scar tissue and internal bleeding can resemble a buzzing hive of pissed-off insects. It would be fascinating if it didn't hurt so much. Doing my job to the best of my ability despite the twinges of pain, I count the people in the pool. *Mom, two kids, that's three; group of old ladies makes seven; couple that's making out under the fountain—ow, nine; baby, ten; his siblings, twelve—FUCK, that hurts. Twelve in the pool.* The couple gets out—thank God—with their fingers interlaced, headed towards the vending machines. *Ten. Ow. Ten. Ten in my pool. Twelve minutes left until rotation. I can use my heating pad inside. Ten in my pool. Ten in my pool.*

7. I can't believe I'm on my period for the first time, like, *ever*. It would almost be cool, except for the fact that I woke up to *The Shining* elevator scene coming out of me. I thought originally that I had wet the bed, but no—that would be far too easy to clean up. It's so... red. And it's not a cartoon kind of scarlet red; it's dark and foreboding. There's so much of it, it went halfway up my back and down the inside of my thighs, almost to my knees. I can't believe I didn't get it until now; I'm almost out of eighth grade and literally *everyone* I know got it before me. The crime scene was this morning, and Mom and I have since thrown everything in the wash and hydrogen-peroxidized the hell out of my mattress. Now I'm getting why everyone hates it so much. I'm curled in a ball in front of the TV, watching *Sharknado* while Mom strokes the top of my head. The heating pad is so hot it's almost scalding. It's leaving red blotchy patches all over my stomach, but it's the only thing that takes the edge off the pain stewing in me. I feel hot tears prick at the corners of my eyes and try to draw my legs up tighter to my chest. Screw whatever's happening in the movie; I feel like there's a *Sharknado* inside of *me*. If this is what being a woman means, I'm certain I don't want it.
8. I'm sitting on the couch after Thanksgiving dinner the year after my first surgery. I've been trying all evening to figure out how I'm going to break the news to my mom. At first I thought it couldn't be true, that it couldn't be back. I mean, I had surgery to have it removed, how could it

just *come back*? And in less than a year? But as I sit on the couch, legs crossed, hands tightly clasped in my lap, and watch my cousins play *Just Dance*, I know that it has to be back. Some people say they *just know* that they're pregnant, before it's ever possible for them to know. It's like that. I. Just. Know. I remember what the pain felt like, and here it is. I have to hand it to myself; I'm doing a pretty good job of not freaking out. I'm sure I look a little stiff, and it's definitely ringing odd to my relatives that I refused to do the Cotton-Eyed Joe, but I'm using every fiber of my being to make sure that nobody can get a read on my face. I feel the muscles under my stomach twist like an oily snake inside me. I catch my mom's eye from across the room, and she furrows her brow. I see her mouth move. *You okay?* I swallow thickly, try to banish the tears threatening to roll down my cheeks, and slowly get up to walk over to her.

9. It's the morning of my first surgery. I'm nineteen, scared out of my mind, and pissed off. It's December, but I've been on my period since October—how's that for a Merry Christmas? I try to focus on something else by thinking about Christmas morning, which was three days ago. Dad has already insisted we take the decorations down, which is part of my reasoning for being cranky. It's no use; I can't really think about anything but the pain. Pain and hunger. I haven't been allowed to eat since eight last night and I'm starving. Hunger is gnawing at my belly the same way the ache gnaws outward from the inside of me. You know how when a coyote gets its leg caught in a trap, it'll chew its limb all the way off just to get out? I'm the coyote. And the trap. It's not a good metaphor, but I'm in so much pain that I'm pretty sure I'm allowed to make bad metaphors. It's hard to think about much else, but on the bright side, it makes the IV insertion seem like a breeze.
10. Ironically, a ten out of ten is the hardest to remember. Pain has a funny effect on the human brain; people either tend to remember things in perfect clarity or in a fog with little detail. All I remember about my ten out of ten is that I passed out in a bathtub with water so hot it made me turn blotchy red and stung my skin. I thought the heat would make me feel better. It didn't. I woke up almost right away, sobbing and gasping for air and trying, ironically, to comfort my mother. I thought I was dying. I remember laying naked on the bathroom floor, not caring that my own

mother could see me bare-chested and dry-heaving. I remember taking a hydrocodone and fading in and out of consciousness as *Grey's Anatomy* played on a loop in another room of the apartment. The drugs never took away the pain—just put me to sleep or made me too high to care. I try not to think about my ten out of tens if I can help it.

“Four,” I say to Nurse Phoebe when I open my eyes. “I’m at, like, a four.” She nods thoughtfully, her ponytail bobbing over her shoulder.

“Not for much longer,” she remarks cheerfully. She pats me on my non-IV arm and shuts my chart clipboard. “The surgical team will all come together in about ten minutes. We’ll do one last check in, and then you’ll be in surgery.”

I nod and smile, a little more genuinely than last time. I feel a twinge in one of my ovaries, but it’s gone as quickly as it came. Ovulation pain, probably. It would be cool that I can identify specific types of pain and their causes, if it weren’t for the pain part.

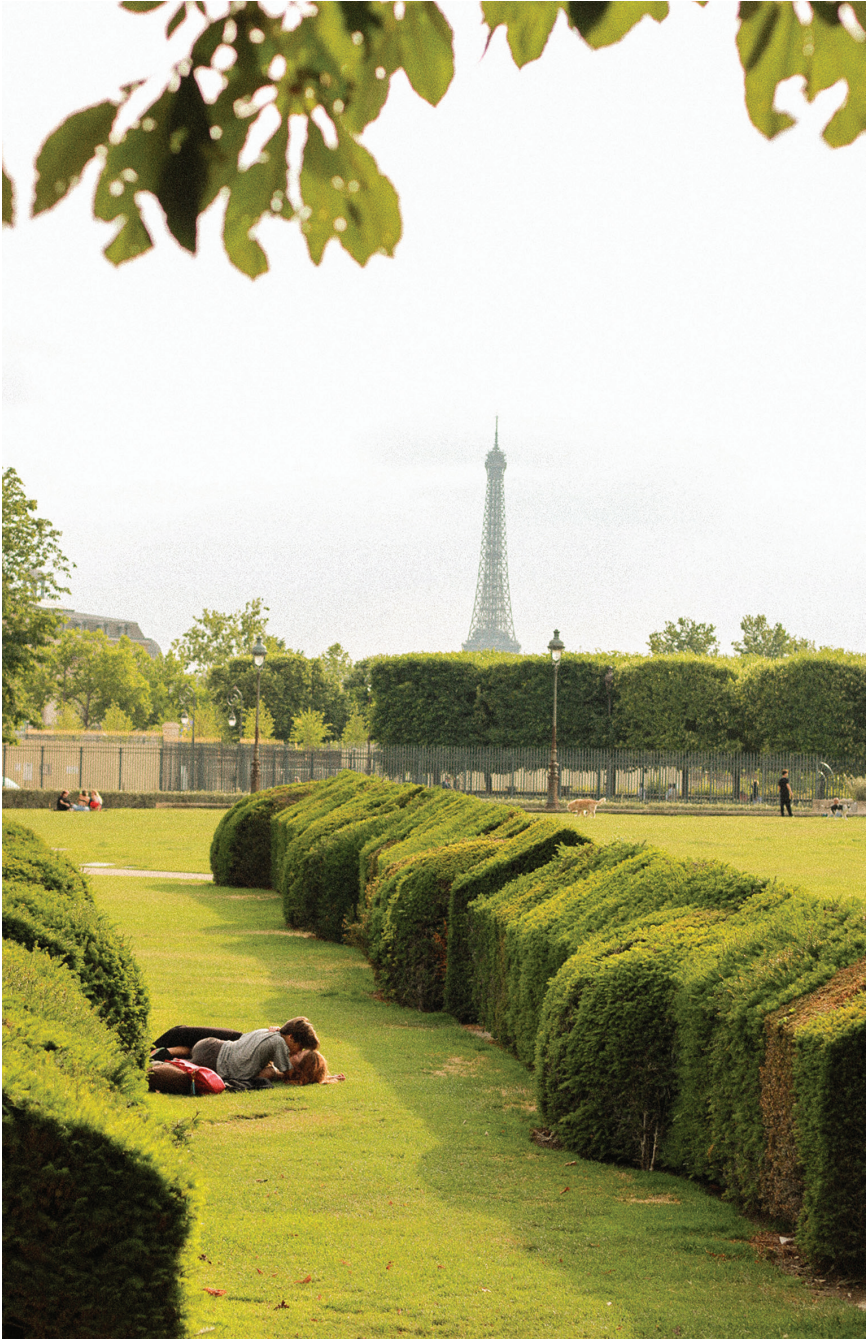
“Thank you,” I say, but I’m not looking at her. I’m trying to do my scan again, paying close attention, trying to memorize what it feels like in my body. Who knows—maybe, in a couple of hours, I won’t even remember. In a weird way, I wonder if I’ll miss it.

The last thing I think about while they’re asking me to count down from ten is what song would play over my surgery, if I were the star patient on an episode of *Grey's Anatomy*. I fall asleep wondering if anyone would root for me.

Editor's Choice in Art



For Love Daniel Otero, acrylic painting



The Heart of Paris *Lais Guimarães, photograph*



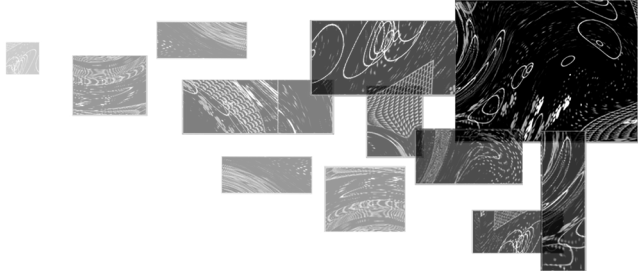
Remembrance 1 Ambar Santiago, acrylic painting



Smitten Mariana Nagy, watercolor and colored pencil

Seirenes

by *Sophia Cardenal*



I.

My curves were born from sea foam
Carving my sides with the ceaseless crash of the waves,
Careful imperfections pressed to my figure like the print of a shell on sand.

Smoothed over like sea glass,
My bare shoulders intentionally torment,
Hidden in sparkling waters and the most seductive of intentions.

My being is an abundance of harsh sensitivity,
Bare and supple like the cool of aloe rubbed on raw skin.

My eyes glare with light-like fury from the sun and sea,
Washing open waters with gilded flames.

II.

My veins rush with saltwater,
Blood like brine.
Drink me up like saving grace and
Spit me out like a burning curse.
I am the red sky in the morning,
Taking delight in drowned desires
That bleed crimson on the clouds.

You take my anguished cry
And make it your song
Because if the roar of breaking waves
Mutes thunder's protest,
The eye of the storm is
Blind to you.
You steal my kiss
With no shame or reserve.
Bleach me ghostly white like coral.
You gut me like a fish,
And make me a shark.
Baptizing the gore sprayed across your
Hands and face
As nothing more than glory for the ichor.
You fill empty flesh with rocks,
Sinking towards my hushed watery burial.
Let it pull me back
Like the silver Moon and its tender Tide.
You wish for tears of precious stone from me
To ornament your remorseless reward.

III.

Make me your temptress of the sea,
The rightful sacrifice for the sins
That make gods of men and
Sirens of mermaids.



the great american romance

by *Farah Mara Shah*

CW: V

marred by miserable desire, a desperate hunger for love that makes you ashamed. cautious of your own expansive stomach, your inclination towards the kind of satiating violence that leads you here, blue and bruised but oh so beautiful, half yourself but oh so loved. what is this bloody transformation, this cannibalization of the self? becoming the kind of woman who is easy to swallow, the kind of feminist who spits at her own reflection. metamorphosis or murder? i keep thinking of the theoretical framework surrounding the bloodbath evolution of woman to wife. i wonder if you could graph the exact amount of force necessary to turn me into a bride, perfect and plump. scoff at the whims of good girls with their pasty pink frills and yearning for their great american romance. i pseudo-intellectualize my loneliness, take it to bed with me like a long-distance lover, preach that Domesticity breaks the spirit clean in half and buries it in a shallow grave (but i still crave it, still seek it out in the crevices and hold it tight in my hand, the candlelight warmth that comes from imagining myself new and shiny, the kind of woman you could want, bones and all), refuse to admit there's a carnal desire deep within me for the kind of connection that dizzies the soul, the kind of connection that makes a believer renounce their higher power and an atheist believe in one again, i mean the religion of romance, the strongest God. how all my writing is different ways of saying love me/want me/take me with you, how every story about me ends with someone else.

Visitation

by Aja Moncrieffe

My sister and I are two toddlers,
stuck in time from lack of care,
both born well after your parenthood had dried up.
A pair of buoys beached by the current,
seawater still dripping off of our faces.

Leo, she says. You're staring again.

The front window of your house faces a street
you never told me the name of. I am jealous of its sunset.
Sure, my mother's apartment lets the sun send its gentle rays
through flat, wide panes, warming your old dog's
well-worn spot for his daily nap. But the crystal
beveled in the cursive metal of your new hardwood home
dazzles me. How lucky am I to watch the little spectrums
swim through the window, up the wall,
and to the ceiling as the day bids me his goodbye?

My sister is bright, a bit too bright for me, glaring high noon.
Like her, my big sibling skills still have baby teeth.
My voice cracks under the pressure of pretend nurse
and my hands tunnel crooked cornrows down her scalp.
I am depthless—but so is she. Her shine to me
is blinding to you, so much so that you rarely leave
the shaded corner of your room to raise her.
You let everyone else handle the rearing for you.

Leo?

I am like a seaweed rooted in your sand-beige couch,
swaying in the light. With my head bent over the arm,
I wash my face in the sun as it floods your living room floor.
I'll stay here for days and let my summer swim away.

When she asks me—her least strange sibling,
us two born a mere eleven years apart—why we look so different,
what am I meant to say? Do I follow your lead and deafen my ears,
or do I sit her down and do your job again?

Leo. She pokes my cheek.

I look at her and open my arms. She climbs onto the couch,
into my lap; I am a shell around her. We watch the sun rush in
without you, bobbing back and forth under its waves,
anchored in each other.

addendum to our conversation by the sea

by *Farah Mara Shah*

CW: A

super moon,
and i'm thinking of
the dock,
the slick tar water underneath the wooden boards.
how in between the pauses of lapping waves licking at our toes there was
my electric pulse,
your steady voice,
shaking.

what is it about the night?
the way it
blankets the truth/
sweetens lips
/like cherry wine,

how it feels like you could grab
the crescent edge with both hands,
take a swig of moonshine
right from the tap.

the kind of liquid courage needed to face the truth,
or at the very least acknowledge
the infinite chasm of space between our hands shrinking by the second

(a dance of inching flesh)

the silence that comes right before the golden morning.

the water makes kaleidoscopes of liquid obsidian beneath us,

churning and pulling,
desperate for our bodies to slide in while the tension
dissipates into ocean foam,
(nothing but seashells in place of our awkward limbs on the shore)—

instead we anchor ourselves to the dock's edge,
talk circles around the firefly warmth in our chests,
ignore the massacre that shares a name on our tongues, the messy crash
of our fingers that find each other in the dark.

we refuse to look down,
refuse to acknowledge the night is emboldening this butterfly of a feeling—
we are holding hands
and staring forward, the world a muted lilac in the darkness,
our breathing heavy.

conversation ensues. words leave our mouths dim attempts at normalcy—
i choke back answers to questions, heart pounds on the inside of my lips
and my cheeks turn shades of
wild berry jam/
strawberry-pink winter frost
/red apple candy floss

it is so sweet it's sickly,
it's nauseating, it is making my palms sweat
and my voice weak—

my stomach is twisting in the kind of knots that take two hands to undo.
our rigid bodies
juxtaposed with the swift-moving serpent of the ocean below,
you,
golden and immovable.

untouched by that silver sadness,
(the kind of moonlight that makes
winter static in the summer heat.)

your arm outstretched, fingers pointing out
jupiter and venus,
the twinkling giants,
our eyes glued to the sky
instead of the small universe that exists between us,
the nebula forming in the grooves of our clasped palms.

deep trenches of star soldiers blink back at us
while we discuss the military strategy of constellations,
how it looks like a battlefield of darkness
littered with bullet holes of dead light.

we do not discuss how it feels like the oxygen we are breathing is molasses,
slow and sticky,
or how our hands have been cramped in the same desperate grasp,
the refusal to release our grip in fear the moment will slip back into water,
drowning underneath the waves.
we don't name the small glances we steal between conversations,
the way i break the moments
by focusing on the grooves in the wooden boards of the dock
instead of the way my mouth tastes like
strawberries and pennies

(the sweet metallic tang of housing your heart in your throat.)



Grave Diving

by Max Rainey

CW: D

This is the dumbest thing you have ever done, my brain repeated for the hundredth time since the parking lot. It isn't too late to turn back, you know. They probably haven't even noticed you're gone yet.

The darkness skittered away from the beam of my flashlight as it led my way. Ancient tree roots jutted out like worms before vanishing quickly beneath the carpet of foliage. The leaves crunching beneath my boots normally would have been satisfying; however, in my current mood, it was more grating than anything else—every crackle and snap mocked me. The November wind slashed at my skin like claws as it passed, blowing my frozen breath back into my face. The bare branches of the trees weaved the ghost of a canopy above me, whispering amongst themselves in the breeze about this stranger that now wandered below. Like the rest of my family, I was no stranger to being the subject of gossip. It just came with the territory of being a large tragedy in a little town, so I didn't pay it much mind. The girls at school had better material, anyway.

You can't even handle scary movies with the lights on, but an actual haunted cave in the middle of nowhere will be different.

I tugged on the straps of my backpack angrily; my misguided resolve only strengthened in the face of a valid concern. I never was very good at taking criticism, self-inflicted or otherwise. I was frustrated, cold, and already exhausted, but I had to keep going. My hand tightened around the flashlight I'd borrowed from the moving van parked in the driveway, loaded to the brim with all the pain and memories that I had here. Tomorrow, Mom would be driving us off to a fresh start, like Dad had a couple of years ago after they split.

I didn't have any more time to think about it. It had to be tonight. I had to find her tonight.

The moon was hidden behind ever-darkening clouds, like it was unable to watch me embarrass myself. It was hardly the first. My poor mother deserved an award for everything I'd put her through for the last decade of my life. The smug smile that snuck onto my face quickly faded as I tried to ignore the writhing mass of guilt building in my stomach. It would be okay; I'd just wake up early tomorrow and make Mom breakfast as a surprise, and an apology.

Not that I ever wanted her to find out about this. Not that it would make any of this right.

Sorry, Mom.



I heard her before I saw her. Her howl ripped through the forest, bouncing between the trees as it desperately searched for a way out. She appeared to me, pulling back the veil of night that had shrouded her. I was here.

Gaia's Maw.

I wrestled the shitty old tape recorder off of my belt, already annoyed with it, before hitting the red button.

"I made it to the cave mouth. Micah said it should be just another thirty minutes from here if I kept a good pace, or I guess that's what his dad told him," I reported, knowing nobody beyond Micah and myself would ever hear it. The only thing Micah Fitzgerald and I had in common was our first class and the mutual solitude of being the only kids with no friends, which had been good enough for us to get attached at the hip. Micah was a good guy but was what Dad had once called an "acquired taste," which earned him a light slap on the wrist from Mom. His dad worked as a forest ranger, and he told me a ton of stories about idiots who managed to stumble out here and get stuck. Mom never wanted me to come here, with or without the Fitzgeralds.

Maybe I'd make it a double helping of breakfast.

I secured the recorder back to the makeshift holster I'd fashioned and approached the cavern's entrance, subconsciously shrinking into myself as it seemed to somehow keep growing.

Gaia's Maw was, in all honesty, one of the scariest things I'd ever had the displeasure of seeing in person. The pictures online didn't do her justice, as I was now quickly learning. In reality, she was only one part of a much

larger cave system discovered sometime during the 1800s, but that wasn't what she was known for, and that wasn't why I was here. Around nine years ago, a couple on a hike had seen the body of a girl floating in one of the natural pools in the cave. One of them, the husband, stayed behind while the wife rushed back to the mouth to get cell service and call for help.

What happened next depends on who you ask. The facts are that when the local rangers got there, the husband and the body were nowhere to be found. Three days later, the unlucky guy stumbled upon a search party, dehydrated and dazed. The body never turned up, and the husband has always maintained that he had no idea what happened or how he ended up in the woods. The investigation went cold, as it always does with cases like this. There's still a reward being offered by the city council for anyone who can find anything about her—Gaia's Daughter, we started to call her—though it was mostly empty words at this point. It always felt too cruel to rescind it.

Some people in town say that it was just a drug-fueled delusion, that the hikers had taken something and tricked themselves into seeing some spooky specter that wasn't there. It wasn't unheard of for kids to forage for mushrooms and be a little stupid now and again.

But that didn't explain the picture.

The picture was the only hard evidence from that day, taken by the couple while they posed by the water's edge. Right behind the woman's shoulder, what looked like a head could be seen floating in the water; a pale, outstretched arm reached towards the happy pair. According to speculation, the police tried replicating it countless times to disprove it and move on, but nothing ever came close. The picture had never been made public, with only a select few having ever seen it. The police said it was to keep it out of the print cycle and out of respect for those involved, which was all the confirmation most people needed to know that this wasn't just some ghost story. Plenty of people had posted supposed "leaks" of the picture online over the years, but no one else had ever seen the real deal.

No one, except for Micah Fitzgerald and me.

I hadn't believed him when he'd said that his dad had been one of the rangers to show up that day, and I hadn't believed him when he'd said that his dad had one of the only copies of the original picture. At least, I hadn't until he pulled me into his room during one of our sleepovers and shoved a

manila folder in my hand. He'd printed it straight off of his dad's computer and, sure enough, there she was: Gaia's Daughter.

I'd seen her once, and now I was going to see her again.

Standing at the mouth of the cave, my hand brushed over the plaque they'd installed for her: "In memory of the young woman, found and lost in Gaia's Maw. May Gaia keep her safe, wherever she is."

The cave seemed to swallow the light of my flashlight. The abrupt cutoff was unnerving, to say the least. The tips of my boots kissed the Maw's edge and my legs refused to move for a moment, though it was hard to tell if I was willing them to or not. The raised, frozen metal of the flashlight's hefty handle stung like needles against my skin, reminding me where I was. What I was here to do.

What I had to do.

Gaia's breath pulled me from my wandering thoughts, though I couldn't tell if it was trying to push me away or pull me in. Stalactite teeth hung overhead as I inched closer, the freezing water dripping like drool from their points seeming to aim for my eyes. She'd eaten others before me, some of which she never spit back up. I kept my fingers against the wall as I began to walk, crossing the threshold that a deep part of me knew I couldn't double back on.

I was all in.



I hugged the far-right wall for what felt like years, just like Micah had told me, following the damp, winding trail and running into way more rocks and ledges than I was willing to admit. Every sound seemed twice as loud and three times as creepy coming from the dark around me. A shiver snaked up my spine at the thought of the creatures that dwelled out there. I wasn't exactly thrilled about the idea of taking a flying bat to the face, but knowing my luck, it wasn't off the table. Eventually, it became white noise as I continued my trek, my thoughts drifting elsewhere.

I thought a lot more about Mom than I wanted to as I walked. I thought about how disappointed she'd be in me once she found out about this—because she always found out—and about how selfish I was even coming to this stupid place. Everyone else wanted to be done with it, to move on and let it rest. But I couldn't do that, not to her. I couldn't leave it alone after what

this cave took from us, took from me.

Izzy.

It would be ten years tomorrow since she went missing. Ten years since my family was broken in a way that I could never put back together, no matter how hard I tried. Ten years since I forever became the “dead girl’s little sister.” I could still hear mom’s terrible shriek as she discovered Isabella’s empty bed that morning and the countless phone calls that went unanswered. Her phone was eventually found in the ranger station outside the forest, and that was the last sign of her. I think mom sees her whenever she looks at me. Hell, I think they all do. All I’ve ever heard is how I look more and more like her every year, which eventually culminated in the infamous box dye accident of ‘15. The floor in the guest bathroom is still stained that ugly green that kind of looks like mold.

Izzy hated the color green.

No one could say for sure it was her, of course. Maybe it was just a coincidence that a couple of cavers happened upon the body of a girl roughly the same age as the one who vanished earlier that month. Maybe it was just a coincidence that the police spoke to my parents so many times that I learned to tell which cop was at the door based on the jingle of their keys.

Maybe it was just a coincidence that one of the last things my parents ever agreed on was what to make her headstone out of in the family plot. It was pink granite.

Izzy loved the color pink.

I’d been forced to sit and listen for years as my big sister became nothing more than a ghost story, a local legend that out-of-town idiots came hunting for. I’d scrolled countless forums, watched countless videos, desperate for something, anything, to give me answers. Gaia’s Daughter, that’s who they talked about. Not one of them said her name. Not one of them mentioned the honor student who hated the color green but slept in bright green pajamas because mom had gotten them for her as a joke, who loved her little sister, who would have never just left me behind.

I wiped my face clean, quietly cursing those dumb rocks and their stupid dripping, as my flashlight’s reflection appeared in front of me. I found myself on the rocky shore of what could only be described as a lake, stretching out into the abyss without ever seeming to stop. This was it. This was where

they found her. If I wanted answers, real answers, I knew I'd have to get them myself.

"...Hello?" I called out, my voice mocking me as it echoed through the cavern.

I set my bag down, shoving the cold, metal flashlight into my mouth—gagging a little—as I began to fish around inside for what I needed. My hands finally wrapped around my holy grail, gingerly pulling it free and unwrapping it from its plush protective case: a camera. A very, very expensive camera that I knew Mom would be very, very mad that I took.

It belonged to my dad, once. It was one of the only things he left behind when he left Mom and me after we lost her. He'd wanted to do photography professionally, once—or so Mom told me—and Izzy used to go with him to take pictures all the time. Mom tried to return it, I think, but he never took it back. Last I heard, he even blacked out the camera on his phone. I didn't know, though. I hadn't seen him since.

I cleared my throat and spit the flashlight out of my mouth, grimacing as the sensation against my teeth and tongue lingered. I stared at it for a moment, feeling the weight in my hand, before I experimentally snapped a picture. The flash filled the chamber before dying away. I was ready.

I shifted the flashlight and slipped it into my pocket before I flipped the switch, plunging the cavern into darkness. I didn't know how long I stood there, soaking in it, before I finally started the tape recorder.

"I'm looking for Gaia's Daughter," I called into the cavern. I received no answer beyond my echo. The camera in my hand snapped a picture with a flash of burning light. Nothing.

It had to be her. It had to be.

"I'm looking for my sister." *Snap.* Still, nothing. I tried again, and again, and again.

I couldn't be wrong. I couldn't.

"Goddammit, Isabelle. Please!" My voice wavered along with my confidence. The fears and grief I'd convinced everyone I didn't have were beginning to leave burning tracks down my cheeks.

The mangled scream that left my throat sounded nothing like me as I sank to my knees, curling in on myself like a child. This was stupid. This was stupid, and so was I.

Izzy was gone. She was gone, and she was never coming back.

I let the camera go limp in my hands, the dying echo of my cries becoming buried in the silence along with my sister as I knelt beside her grave. She was dead; my sister was dead. The air settled into a suffocating blanket around me, still and stale. Each gasp burned my lungs, but I just continued to weep. I hadn't cried at her memorial; I had felt no need to.

"I'm sorry." I mouthed the words more than I spoke them, burying my face in my trembling, numb hands. "I'm so sorry, Izz."

I knelt at the water's edge for a long time, staring at a reflection I couldn't see. I eventually picked up the camera when I felt it shift against my leg. The harsh glow of the screen singed my eyes as I stared at the "evidence" I'd gathered. They were nothing; the kind of pictures you'd delete without a second thought. It was the same every time—an empty lake, an empty lake, and another empty lake. I let the camera rest against my knees before something new popped up. It was a close-up of the water's edge, where I was kneeling. I saw myself, or at least, what I thought was myself.

At first.

The more I looked, the more subtle differences I saw: where the hair didn't curl quite right, where the nose didn't line up with the one I couldn't stand seeing every day. A sense of dread built in my stomach as my eyes finally managed to tear themselves away from the screen and look out into the water, where a soaked girl in bright green pajamas gave me a smile that was supposed to be warm, but sent chills down my spine.

"You know, you look more and more like me every year."

Portrait in Watercolor

by Aja Moncrieffe

I was born upside down,
head slipped under tepid water
before I could utter my first cry,
deprived of warm hospital light,
my first glimpse of the right side
a murky blue and muffled cries
from my mother above me.

Now, I pass a darkened store window on the street.
I see a body warped, flesh sticking out
for others to pinch and poke.
Hair growing against gravity—
my roots exposed to the sky.
Inside, I stick my sore thumb down at the security monitor.
The person on the screen glares back.

In the future, my fat will sag low on my hips.
My breasts will flatten and shrivel
and I will no longer feel I should hide them.
I'll live in my house on Topsy-Turvey Avenue
with its second-floor basement
and seats nailed to the ceiling.
I'll sit, hand in wispy hand,
with my clear mirror reflections
as we say Sunday grace.
They will go wherever I go.
I'll make a home out of any place.

Until then, I'm at the family reunion.
The Aunties prod at my curves, as per usual;
they slip me suggestions on how
to smooth and slick my hair down.
I'm squeezed into an ill-fitting one-piece
(shoplifted from the store)
and the glassy surface of Grandma's pool,
a lighter blue than my birth tank,
is crimped with ripples that carry me to its concrete edges.
The water spreads me thin till I disappear from view.

The Constellation of Me

by Kaitlyn Pottinger

CW: R

Among the Constellations, You Are Nameless
black child, backside of the moon
your skin
corrodes
to
ash
in the limelight.
you were meant for kindling,
not limerence
because he will only love you
in the twilight moments
where removing your clothes
is to unstitch a shadow
and when he leaves you
moon marked and cratered,
you learn then
that the stars
do not glow
for you.
so you stole the sword
from Orion's Belt
to slaughter the sun,
but you swung too far
and that's why Mars
is always
bleeding.



THE ENDING OF A POEM I NEVER WROTE THE BEGINNING OF

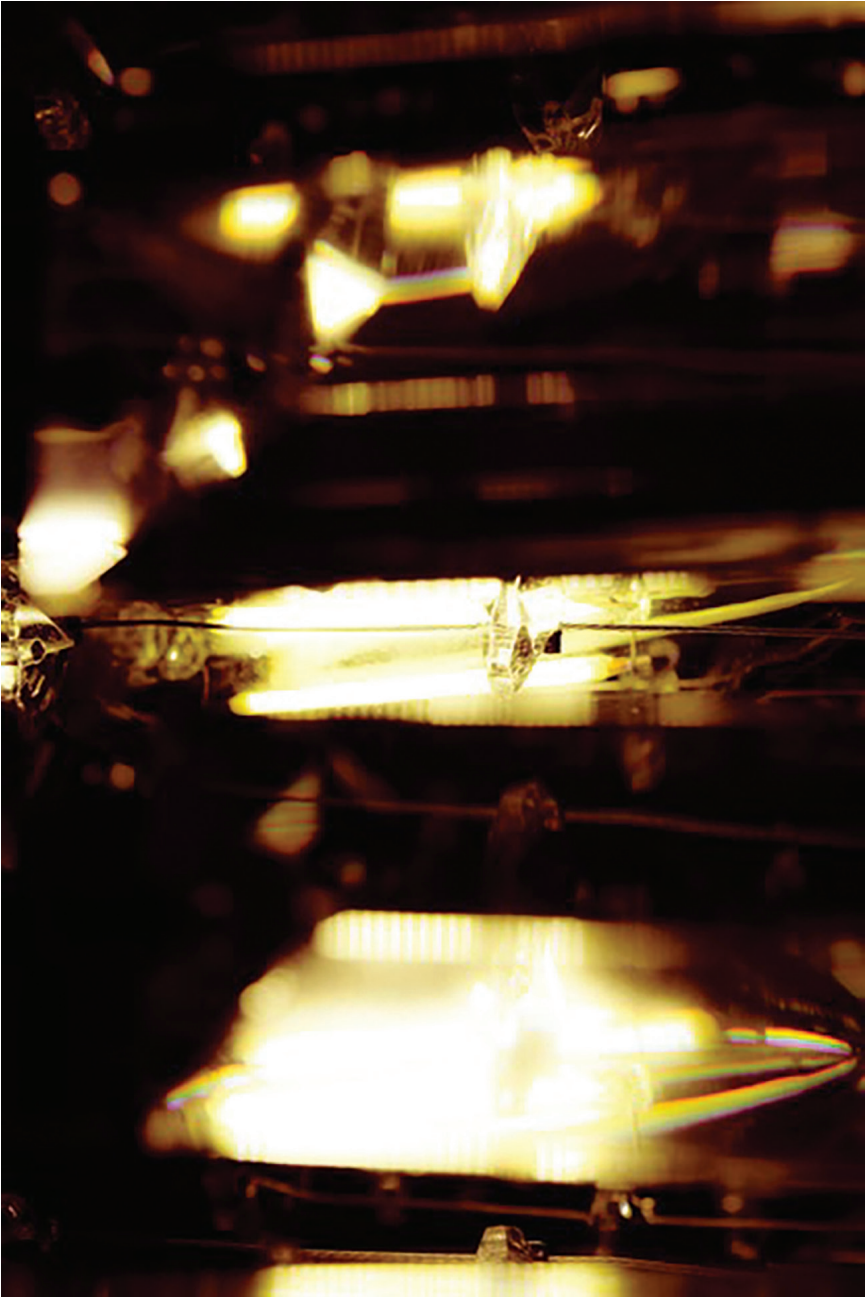
by Tara Crowe

CW: D

That night in the woods, I sat next to the spot where I had died and watched the fire the person I once was had stuck their hands into earlier. I tried to find the remains of my youth in the shapes traced by the flames, but all I could see were the bent shadows, and you, running through the field under the cold light of the moon as my ashes fell like snow around us. The scar is gone now. Healed, actually, a long time ago. But you'd think dying would leave more of a mark. You'd think the funerals we give ourselves would last just a little bit longer.



Brief Self Danielle Deptula Pokrandt, acrylic painting



Metamorphosis Erik Leon, photograph



La Paloma del Mundo *Daniel Otero, acrylic painting*



Diverging From the Past *Danielle Deptula Pokrandt, oil painting*



Fallen

by Juan Morillo

CW: D, V

It was autumn, and the trees of Eden were ablaze. *The colors are striking this year*, thought Valentin. Gold, crimson, and even purple all painted the landscape with the colors of death. On the ground, newly sprouted saplings rioted through the foliage. Their branches were slender and their leaves small and few, but they still had a certain quality that charmed Valentin.

He knew it was too late for them. Come winter, and with their size already this time of year, they would be too weak to withstand the cold. They would die, as any animal who was unfit to survive died—the impaled antelope, the wing-torn pheasant, the trout that was too slow to escape the bear’s snout. Their lives would go as quickly as they had come, and there was nothing he could do about it.

He lay idly on a tree branch, toying with the thought. His body was tilted so that the back of his head rested on the wood and his feet dangled in front of him. The wings on his back hung loosely on both sides of the branch, and he could already feel them growing numb.

“Death,” he whispered, watching as a breath of cold air came out of his mouth.

He wondered what it felt like, the thing that would happen to everything that carried the breath of life within. A thought bothered him; angels, too, were living beings, and yet they were deathless. Why was this so? They had been created to serve the Heavens for eternity and yet, their immortality meant that the liberation of death would never grace them.

Valentin turned his eyes back to the garden, trying to escape his thoughts. He looked past the patch of trees to the vast open fields of Eden that stretched endlessly on the horizon. Golden weeds had long replaced the summer’s grass, and they gleamed under the sunlight like fields of ripe wheat. Eden was often described as a lush, verdant place, but Valentin knew—and

prized this knowledge highly—that the best time to visit the garden was in fall, when the garden died.

“You did not come.”

His brother’s voice took him out of his head. Valentin turned to him. He was standing at the root of the tree, looking up at him. He wore a full set of armor, and in his right hand he held a spear—just sharpened, by the looks of it. His wings were still spread out behind him, and they trembled a little with the residual excitement of flight.

Valentin took a deep breath. “I am sorry, Azrael.”

Azrael looked sideways, avoiding his eyes, but Valentin saw right through him. He had long learned how to hide his true emotions, and so he knew how to read them in another’s face. He sensed anger in Azrael, thick and pure.

“You’re not sorry,” he said. “You said you were going to be there. You’re a liar.”

That hurt, a little. Whenever his brother got heated, he tended to raise his voice and call others names. He was transparent like that, Azrael, an open book to anyone who was willing to read him. While it was childish, Valentin had often envied that in his brother. He envied the way his emotions flowed outwards like water, how he wore the purity of youth on his sleeve.

“Everyone was there,” Azrael continued, tears welling in his eyes. “Every angel, old and young. Everyone was there except you.”

“I said I was sorry.”

“And you lie!” Azrael shouted, stomping on the ground. He kneeled and covered his face with his hands. He wailed loudly, like a lamb crying out to his mother.

This was too much for Valentin. He rolled his eyes and started his climb down the tree. He landed with a thud and walked towards Azrael, sitting beside him.

“Come now, Azrael, you are acting like a hatchling,” he said, patting his back. “You know I didn’t miss your ceremony because I wanted to.”

Azrael looked up from his knees to Valentin. Sniffing, he asked, “Why did you, then?”

Valentin gave himself some time to put his thoughts into words. He grabbed a little black pebble from the ground and threw it over the edge of

the ravine. Azrael's eyes followed the stone as it fell into the abyss. "I don't like the angels."

Azrael chuckled; his tears were drying. "You talk as if you are not an angel yourself."

"I am not like them, though. You know I'm not. I am not like Michael, or Gabriel, or Raphael. Hell, not even like—"

"Don't say that."

"Sorry," Valentin said. "I was going to say, not even like you. The warmth of Heaven drips from you."

"But everybody is different, Valentin," said Azrael. "So you are a little quiet, and maybe a tad more brittle. What's the problem with that? You are still an angel, and our brother, and we still love you all the same."

"But that's you, Azrael," said Valentin. "You don't judge people, it's not in you. Have you not seen how Raphael looks at me? He hates me."

"No, he does not."

Valentin groaned. "You wouldn't get it, Azrael," he said. "Nobody ever will."

"Well, maybe I would if you told me what it was," Azrael said, standing up. "But you never tell anyone anything. Not even me." He turned to look at Valentin, and his silhouette was darkened by the sun behind him. "Come, try it. Try telling me what is on your mind."

A rush of fear invaded Valentin. Pain followed it, a heart-aching kind of pain. There was nothing he wanted more than to tell his brother the thoughts that were inside him, the fierceness of them—how they sometimes flashed in his eyes during Sunday worship, how they kept him awake at night. But they were dark thoughts, immoral thoughts, thoughts that would make not only Azrael squirm, but all of Heaven.

"No," Valentin said.

It was a hard no, and had it been heard by someone other than Azrael, maybe it could have passed as a simple one. But something died there between the two brothers. Something, perhaps a speck of brotherly love, had been destroyed by Valentin's tone.

Azrael's smile faded. "As you wish," he said.

He grabbed his shield and spear from the ground and walked past Valentin to the ravine's edge. There he spread his wings, first his right and

then his left. The joints bent upwards like a bird's wings in preparation for flight. An explosion of feathers burst forth, and the cold wind blew them off like dandelions.

Something choked Valentin as he watched his brother, as if a scrawny hand was holding onto his throat and stopping him from screaming, *Azrael, wait!* His mind spun, trying to find something to say.

But there was nothing.

Azrael exhaled. He did not turn to Valentin, but he angled his face so it was visible to him. "I did not come to you looking for pity," he said. "I came because I thought you would be curious as to what my errand was."

Valentin felt strange—guilty, although he could also feel anger, and maybe even self-loathing. He had not even asked his brother about his errand, the thing he had been looking forward to all his life and finally received today. Most angels in fact, did not get errands, and their lives became bleak, repetitive cycles of worship and battle practice for as long as they lived. Such was the luck Valentin expected for himself.

"Well, what was it?" he asked, faking his distant tone.

"The message was strange, just a few words," said Azrael. "I did not quite understand it, nor did Michael, when I showed him. He said I should go to the Silent Brothers and ask for guidance. That's where I am heading now."

That got Valentin's attention. "That is not possible, Azrael," he said. "Michael always says we should never go near them."

"Not unless it is a matter of great importance."

"How important can your errand be?" Valentin asked. "What did the message say?"

The amber in Azrael's eyes sparkled as the sunlight filtered through them. "Death to the firstborns, it read. Egypt was mentioned."

There it was, Valentin thought. Death again.



Not long after, night fell upon the garden. The colors changed with its fall, and a gentle, silvery light bathed the groves of olive trees and myrtle growing along the banks of two of Eden's great rivers. Even in the dark, Valentin could see the fickle waters of the Tigris, sometimes calm and sometimes fierce, flowing along the gallant course of the Euphrates, birthing in its wake thousands of swamp lilies and lotus flowers.

He thought of Azrael's errand as he came upon the Euphrates, the sound of running water a continuous hum in his ears. *Egypt*, he thought. *The land of the pharaohs, and of the pagan deities of the Nile*. His skin prickled as he recited their names in his head: *Ra, Anubis, Isis, Osiris*. They sounded foreign, evil, and the story the angels told of them was enough to plant fear in his heart. They had deserted the Lord, claimed the land of Egypt, and ruled it like gods themselves. They had forgotten their Father, and in the process turned into blasphemous, cruel beings as ferocious as the animals whose heads they wore. Dread crept slowly inside Valentin as he pictured their bestial eyes looking back at him through the gloom.

Death to the firstborns, Azrael had said, and Valentin repeated the words in his head over and over, trying to give them meaning. If indeed the Almighty had sent him on this errand, surely it was because He knew Azrael was capable of succeeding. That logic eased his mind, but still he could not let go of the thought that Azrael was in danger.

Valentin came upon a wide circle of statues carved out of pure white marble. From afar, they all looked alike, but if you stepped closer and took a moment to appreciate them, each was as different from the other as the moon was from the sun. They were old statues, and the weeds covering them were a testament to that. Despite their age, no angel Valentin had asked seemed to know how they had come to the garden.

None except Michael. In his infinite wisdom, he had told him that the statues had been created along with the garden, and that for years the early angels had marveled at them, oblivious to who they were or what the names in their epitaphs stood for. In those first days, when Eden was still young, when the world was still young, only two of the statues had been identified, one whose epitaph read "Adam" and the other whose name read "Eve." These had been the first people.

Then, as these humans had children, and their children had children, and then those had yet more children, the angels began to develop a meticulous knowledge of who these people were, pieced together by the great deeds of God's men and women. Statues like Noah's, with the little white dove perched on his shoulder, or Abraham's, with his young son Isaac standing in front of him and grabbing him by the hand, were favorites in Heaven.

But one of the statues kept Valentin coming back to that petrified menagerie. He approached it and stared up at its face. The statue did not wear armor, nor did he hold a spear or a sword, but Valentin knew it was the statue of a warrior. It was in his eyes, he thought, eyes filled with the quiet strength of a soldier. Eyes that invited, nay, defied the watcher to look upon them. Yet nothing in his face was harsh or coarse—there was a softness to it that revealed the blind determination of a youth who has lost nothing, and who is therefore fearless.

Valentin looked around, then turned back to David. Hesitantly, he brought his hands to the statue's face, touching its features delicately, as if they were made of powder. He caressed the eyebrows, soft like cotton, and felt as though he could hear the thud of his heart as his fingers danced down to David's lips. They rested there for some time, tracing their frame. His hair had always been Valentin's favorite part, a wild mane of curls that swirled gracefully, almost savagely, over his face and the sides of his head. He suddenly let go of the statue, ashamed. He sat in front of David, listened to the hum of the water, and closed his eyes. There, in the solitude of sinners and saints, he let himself cry.

A black creature showed its face from the back of the statue. It slithered through the weeds until it managed to climb to the base. The animal coiled its body around David's leg and climbed to his torso and then his right shoulder. Valentin heard the sound of slithering flesh and looked up. The animal had curled up and lifted its head so that it was face to face with Valentin. It hissed a perfect sound that tickled his ears.

In the darkness, the serpent looked at him. Its eyes were a void of blackness, two shiny beads of obsidian. They held no thought inside, for they were the eyes of an animal, but in that precise moment Valentin believed they held a knowledge of the world, of the condition of the living being, that rivaled that of God.

They looked at each other for a long time.

Its mouth did not open, but a sound came from the animal. "Valentin..." it called, with a hiss so delicious he closed his eyes in pleasure.

When he opened them, a woman sat where the serpent had been. She looked strange but extraordinarily beautiful, with a tall, strong body and dark hair that blew in the wind like slender fingers of ink.

She came down from the statue, so close to Valentin that he could smell her, dead flowers and blood. Her hand came to his chin and rested there for a moment, the naked touch of her fingers sending a shiver down Valentin's spine. Then they squeezed his cheeks and turned his face toward the ravine.

He saw, more clearly than ever, the contrast between the two realms. The black mist of the abyss collided with the white clouds of Heaven, mixing in swirling strokes of gray and silver haze. Beneath, the darkness looked so black and vast that it seemed to swallow the rays of light that came towards it from the Heavenly City.

"Here," she said. "Here, the legions of fallen angels perished against Michael's host. Armies five hundred thousand strong on each side."

Valentin could still see the remnants of the chaos. Broken spears, jagged swords. Butts of arrows emerged from the grimy battleground. He saw the severed wings of the dark angels piled atop countless mounds along with other torn extremities. Trophies of victory.

Valentin shut his eyes, turning away from the horrific sight.

"Michael," said the woman, rage growing with each word, "down he came upon the king. He seized him, planted his sandalled foot on his face, and with a single pull, tore his wings clean from his body."

Valentin opened his eyes. Visions of the war came to him—clashing swords, thrusting spears, arrows blocking out the sun. It was carnage. He turned to see the woman staring back at him with serpentine pupils, the black slit over the poison green.

"Who are you?" Valentin asked.

"I, like the one that seeks you, was rejected."

Who rejected you? he thought, but did not dare ask.

Valentin saw as her eyes traveled from him to the statues behind them. They fixed on Adam hatefully, like venomous fangs on tender skin. Valentin could not remember a woman who had been rejected by the first man. Eve had always been the first. Or had she?

She walked towards the edge. "Valentin," she said. "The king of shadows cannot come to you. You must go to him."

He would be diving head-first into the place young angels were warned never to go. He would be going against everything, all that Heaven had instructed him not to do. He wondered why he would be doing it, and in his

head, Azrael appeared, although he did not know why.

“Does your king help people in need?” he asked.

But there was no one. The woman had vanished.

He closed his eyes and jumped.



Valentin spread his wings a few moments before he reached the ground, letting them catch the air and halt his plummet. His sandals sunk into the filthy soil, his face contracting in disgust. The first thing he registered was the smell. He brought his hands to his nose and mouth, trying to drown the foulness of it. It reeked of sulfur and burning, putrefaction eternal.

Unlike Heaven, there was no opulence to this place, no high walls made of precious stones or houses carved out of the purest marble. Everything here was built out of dark gray stone, plain and poorly assembled. There were people here, but while they looked like humans, they lacked everything the statues in the garden had: the beauty, the courage, the individualism. They seemed more like ghosts than people, wandering the lonely streets like blind worms.

There seemed to be many trails in this place, some leading to grand monuments of black stone, standing ominously in the darkness, and some which led nowhere. But one of the trails, one which seemed to be made of a wet, flabby substance resembling flesh, led him toward a river. He came upon its banks and his stomach churned at the putrid smell of the water. He saw faces inside, with blank expressions and eyes that watched him from the depths. There was a trail of them, too, and his eyes followed it until he discerned a black figure in the boiling water. Half of his body was submerged, each extremity and muscle trembling with pain.

“Morning Star.” Valentin’s voice broke the eternal silence of the inferno.

The wingless figure did not move. His head hung low.

“Lucifer,” Valentin spoke again.

He raised his head at the sound of his name.

Valentin gulped. “Do you still speak the heavenly tongue?”

Lucifer exposed the side of his face. “Did I not speak it before you, little brother?”

He had thought Lucifer’s voice would be deep and menacing, fit for a commander of legions, strong enough to place fear in the hearts of even the

mightiest of angels. But the voice was youthful and tender, almost playful. It reminded him of Azrael's.

"I need help," said Valentin. "Azrael, my brother— I fear he is in danger."

Lucifer chuckled. "He is doing pretty well for himself, if you ask me." He tried to wade, causing ripples in the water, but his body remained immobile. "It is his soul you should be worried about."

His soul? "What do you mean?" asked Valentin. "Why is his soul in danger?"

"Now, now, little brother. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. You are not really here for Azrael, are you?"

"Why would I come here if it was not for my brother?"

"Oh, Valentin," Lucifer said, turning to him. "I could tell you, but are you ready to listen?"

No wonder the angels thought he was the most beautiful; he looked more like the statues in Eden than a real, breathing being. Yet nowhere in his face did Valentin find the softness of Heaven; all his features were sharp, alien to what he had seen in any angel. He was, as the angels said, beautiful, yet so far removed from all the symmetry and perfection of the Heavens. His face was one of melancholy and pride in absolutely equal measure.

"You and I are not that different. We both question the Word of the Almighty."

That much was true. How many times had he disagreed with scripture? How many times had he, in secrecy, traveled to the vast deserts of Egypt and stared in amazement at those pyramids? How many times had he laid his eyes on David's statue, feeling his heart plunge into fear and shame, and wondered, *Why?*

"I am not like you," said Valentin. "I did not force my brothers to fight one another."

Lucifer's eyes focused. "Forced?"

Valentin could feel rage brewing in his voice, although he kept smiling.

"Forced, you said?"

Lucifer's eyes grew wide, his body tensing like an animal responding to a threat. He tried walking out of the water, but something held him there—not chains, not locks, not any other restrictive device. Nothing held Lucifer in his lake of fire but himself.

“It is funny, you know,” Lucifer said, “how Heaven adheres so strongly to its morals, yet is so quick to change history. I did not *force* anyone into my legions. All those angels, all of them, from Astrionis to Thalassiel to Radielis, chose to side with me. Those three, and the thousand others who joined us, did so willingly.”

He looked calm, but Valentin noticed a subtle change in Lucifer. His jaw was trembling, and faint wrinkles had appeared on his face where Valentin had seen smoothness. He continued, as if agitated by a new thought, “The preachers of Heaven will tell you that everyone has a choice, that everyone is divinely endowed to either do good or do evil.”

Valentin tried to follow his words, but Lucifer seemed to trail off. His eyes were distant, not addressing him at all.

“But evil is not an outside force, little brother. No, evil is inside. It lives in the heart and breaks bread with good. And in some of us...” He tilted his head, signaling a sense of kinship with Valentin. “The voices of one side speak louder than the voices of the other.”

A chill spread through Valentin. “Why are you telling me this?”

“You really are clueless, aren’t you?” Lucifer’s patience was wearing off. “You and the rest of your brothers have been conditioned to believe that Heaven is a community, a brotherhood of angels. But the moment the higher-ups spot a difference—an angel who is more bright, more brittle—they fear it. They label us as evil because we are unlike them.”

Now Valentin *was* afraid; Lucifer was growing angrier, bolder, as if the leader of legions was calling back to him from the depths.

“And why are they afraid?” continued Lucifer. “Tell me, if the Almighty is so just and kind, why is everyone so scared of Him? The scriptures command us to fear the Lord, yet how vain is a life full of fear?”

Valentin’s throat grew cold. He sensed truth in Lucifer’s words, and that truth scared him.

“For I know you are fearful, Valentin. You fear what the Almighty will do to you. For your impure thoughts, your wretched nature—”

“Stop.” Valentin’s voice echoed. Lucifer was approaching uncharted territories here, dark mental lands only explored by Valentin in his solitude. “You know nothing about me.”

The dark angel smiled. “I know more than you want me to know.”

At that moment, Valentin hated him.

“But it doesn’t have to be that way, brother! With my brightness and your intellect, we can create a new world together, a world where His eye no longer looks down on people like us. A world where you can stare at those statues freely. Where you can marvel at David’s hair in complete and utter peace.”

“Stop it!” Valentin shouted. He closed his eyes, bringing his hands to his head.

“No.” Lucifer’s voice deepened. “Feel the hate,” he said. “Let it consume you.”

Valentin tensed. The visions returned to him: death and blood, feathers and bone, all hailing from the sky like rain after a drought. For a moment, he saw himself, as luminous and mighty as the sun, standing atop all creation. Lucifer stood beside him, and they both smiled pridefully while Michael and his angels whimpered at their feet.

“It would cost us everything,” Valentin said.

Lucifer lunged forward. “A fair price for freedom,” he said.

“Angels will be cast out. *I* will be cast out.”

“Rebellion has a price, brother. It always did. It always will.”

Far away, a strange, shapeless figure caught Valentin’s attention, a headless pile of flesh, with many hands and feet. They grabbed and kicked and bit at each other, twisting in morbid pleasure—or was it pain?

Lucifer stretched his arm out to him. “Come, brother,” he said. “You need only to help me out of this pit.”

Valentin looked at Lucifer’s hand. His fingers twitched with excitement. Heavenly screams rang in his ears, shouts of war and of death. He glanced from Lucifer’s fingers to his face. It had changed, turned uncanny, unangelic. Demonic.

“No,” Valentin said, with the same tone he had used with Azrael.

Lucifer’s smile vanished. “What do you mean ‘no,’ little brother?”

“You said it yourself. You had good in you, Lucifer. For you were once bright and beautiful, but instead of doing something with that good, you chose the side that brought pain and death to the ones who loved you. You chose the wrong side. I will not.”

Lucifer seemed to twitch. His face grew older and uglier. His mask was

wearing off.

“Leave,” he said, his voice deep and hateful, so different from the tender way he had spoken at first.

Valentin looked at him with pity; he was his brother, after all. He spread his wings, his heart giddy with the thought of leaving this place.

“It is a shame that you must look down on me when our Father is the true enemy,” Lucifer said, stopping him. “But you made your choice. And if there is one thing I have no power over, it is your will. Do, however, take this advice with you.”

“And what advice is that?”

The dark angel smiled. “Go to Azrael,” he said. “He should be back from Egypt. Go and see how the Lord’s errand has changed him. And if you look upon your brother and still believe that Heaven is more righteous than me, then you are just as evil as I am.”

Azrael. Back from Egypt. Changed.

Those were the only words Valentin registered. His wings flapped, taking him off the ground.

“I used to think this was your punishment,” he told Lucifer, “but now I realize: this is the only place where you can call yourself a king, even after defeat.”

“Better to lead the inferno than to be a slave in Heaven,” Lucifer said. “Yes, someone will say that again one day. Tell whoever says such a thing to come feel the boiling sulfur on their skin, to come dwell in this solitude.”

“You created your own Hell, brother,” answered Valentin. “You brought this upon yourself through your own folly. Your hate and pride.”

“This is my purpose, Valentin. The world of humans and angels needs an adversary, a contrary voice to tell them there is another way. Otherwise, where does freedom lie? What role does the sweet release of the forbidden play in your heart, if you do not think what you are doing is wrong? I cannot escape from my prison now. I took the risk and was defeated. But you, Valentin— you can complete my errand. To bring Him down from His throne and bring justice to the world. I once thought I would be the one to do it, but now I am lost.”



Valentin reached Azrael’s dwelling just as the sun peaked its head

over the horizon. His brother's body was lying in a red puddle in front of a statue of Michael, his stone wings extended, although curved over Azrael protectively. Valentin almost crashed into him.

"Azrael!" he cried.

He checked his garments, his hands working clumsily, staining themselves red.

Valentin sighed with relief. "You are not wounded, brother."

No answer came from Azrael. His eyes were empty, looking back at Valentin without warmth or affection.

"Azrael, whose blood is this?" Valentin asked. "What happened in Egypt? What did you do?"

Azrael stiffened. He spoke only in answer to Valentin's voice. "I killed them," he said. His words sank in the silence.

"Who did you kill?"

Valentin remembered the message: *Death to the firstborns.*

"Not one," came Azrael's voice. "Or two, or three. All of them."

For an angel to murder a human, a child of God, was a crime punishable by exile. Valentin could not even fathom a punishment fit for killing many.

"It is well, brother. I will vouch for you. It was not your fault."

"Valentin, don't you get it?" asked Azrael. "That—that was the errand."

Something broke inside him, though he could not say what, or where.

"The firstborn," his brother continued. "I was sent to claim their lives."

Azrael's dark glance sent a shiver down his spine. The dwelling dimmed; something was blocking out the sun outside.

"The pagan gods," Azrael continued. "They have been angered. Their children are dead, and they thirst for vengeance."

Valentin looked up. Through the windows, he could see the darting shadows of the angels. The flap of their wings was as loud as a cloud of locusts.

Azrael smiled at Valentin. "But worry not, brother. The Lord will bring His army upon their land, and we will conquer. Egypt shall be no more."

Valentin pulled away, his blood boiling. His chest felt heavy and his hands clenched his own robes. His body and his wings stiffened. His teeth pressed against each other in unquenchable fury, threatening to shatter.

Valentin looked back at Azrael and noticed that his mouth was moving

in silent speech. Valentin moved closer.

“And now he is come,” his brother whispered. “Azrael, Angel of Death, Destroyer of Realms. Come to Egypt to fulfill His will.”



Valentin soared beyond the citadel, beyond the clouds, until he reached the great abode that lay atop all creation. It was quiet here, like a crypt, and the only thing Valentin could hear was the sound of his own feet landing on the jasper floors.

A bridge of gold separated the entrance from two titanic doors, and on both sides of the bridge's entrance, he saw them.

The Silent Brothers stood guarding the throne. It was said among the angels that they would not flinch before striking a brother, if he came too close to it. But Valentin did not fear them now. He did not see the way their many eyes turned to him, how their many wings flapped in sync as he crossed the bridge. Perhaps they were afraid, or perhaps they thought he was no threat at all. He came face to face with the doors. He needed only to push them open to reach the throne of the Almighty. He placed his hand on the door; it was made of glass and cool to the touch. Whatever was behind them was so bright Valentin could not even make out a solid figure.

“Valentin.”

His heart jumped. He lowered his hand from the door.

“Step away.”

Valentin did not turn to him; he did not want to look Michael in the eyes. “Let me talk to Him. Please.”

“I cannot do that,” Michael said.

Valentin's voice was calm and steady. “Why not?” he asked.

“Because you are not allowed to enter. No one is.”

Valentin turned to face him. “Why?”

Michael unsheathed his sword, the sound of slicing metal loud in the air. “Please, brother,” he said, his breaths quick. “I don't want to fight you.”

Valentin met his eyes. When he was very young, he had admired Michael. He was his older brother, the great protector of Heaven, and everything evil in the world was weak because Michael existed. Valentin had loved him then, but now he could see through the cracks. Everyone had cracks, no matter who they were or what they had achieved.

Valentin looked away from Michael. “You subject us to rules we can’t comprehend, rules you can’t even explain.” Valentin gulped. “The more I think about it, the more I think God created the Heavens just to cast everyone out.”

There was silence again. Valentin rubbed away his tears. His head was pounding, his throat burning. The odyssey had taken a toll on his body, and it was finally changing him.

He thought wildly at that moment, that a gentle hand would come to his face. That either Michael or the Almighty would caress him with the love he craved so desperately. He thought that a voice would come and soothe his pain with kind words that would give him an answer.

But the only thing he heard was Michael’s stern voice. “You need to leave, Valentin.”

In the silence that followed, Valentin remembered Lucifer’s inferno. He remembered the darkness, the putrid smell, the steam, and the sorry sight of the people there. He hated what he remembered, but when his mind traveled to the Heavens—to the light, to the angels, to the sweet music of their harps—he could not see anything better.

“I reject both,” said Valentin. “Heaven and Hell.”

Valentin walked away from the doors and stood face to face with Michael.

“I renounce my position,” Valentin said, “for my heart has traveled to the deepest depths of Hell, and the highest heights of Heaven and found no virtue.”

Michael stared at him, unfazed. “What will you do with your life instead?”

“I wish to go to Earth to live and die as a human. As Noah and Abraham. As David.”

Michael looked away and then back at Valentin. There was a new softness in his eyes that Valentin had not seen before, and beyond it, grief. “You know what that entails, what it means to be human,” Michael said. “You will die, Val.”

Valentin smiled. “There was once a time when I yearned for death,” he said. “Now that I have seen it, spoken to it, the prospect does not quite excite me so much.” His face lit up. “But I think I would like a life where I am not

stuck to one place, where I can be free. And Earth seems like a place for that.”

Michael brought a hand to his eyes, wiping away a silent tear. “You cannot be forced to love Heaven,” he said, looking at the throne. “If that is what you wish, then so be it.”

He gripped his golden sword tightly. “Kneel,” he said.

Valentin did as he was told and spread his wings.



He awoke under a cloudless, blue sky. There was sand underneath him, and it was hot to the touch. His throat had never been dry before, but now it cried in mortal need of water.

In the distance, he saw a man running towards him through the dunes, drawing a camel with a rope. When he came near, the man crouched beside him and gave him a waterskin.

“By the gods!” the man said. “What is your name, youth?”

Valentin drank desperately, the water cooling his throat and then his stomach. He handed him back the waterskin and wiped his lips.

With a wide smile, he answered, “My name is Valentin.”



A Woman Who Cannot Be Raped

by Lydia Robbins

CW: D, SA, V

They walk the suspiring shore
where man made woman legend.
Rejoicing while weeping
for the child who went to sleep
in her chrysalis, dreaming
of the woman she wouldn't be
and for a woman who was.

They turn to her blue horizon, too vast
to be marred by man's invention
and time's progression, where they
think they can almost see:

young pioneers set sail
to conquer a new frontier.
Sailors who never thought
they could catch the fever,
who mounted a woman on the bow
and despaired the one on deck.
Who vowed to tame the waves
and grew feverish with passion.
Who lost themselves in her depths
love lost in vain in waves.

Men sink, while women weep
for a woman who cannot be raped.

Glittering scales are pulled from my grasp
the little ones thrown back
sink bleeding from their mouths.
Tiny little creatures that scurry in swarms
buzz like bees in my mouth;
they too are raised out of my reach.

Sentient, sunset-colored cities
home to all the vibrant things
frenzied with all their busy-work.
Now they cough up putrid smog
and slip through streets slick with waste.
No matter how hard my tempests rage,
I cannot wash it away.

The Moon shines on me,
a blackened sea, slick with oil reflection.
When she turns her gaze towards me,
she only sees her own face.

My mouth tastes sour, and my blood begins to fever.
The chemicals that rush through my veins are not the same.
I will be here until the total expansion of the sun,
but I do not know for how much longer
I can be called water.

I do not know when I became aware
of myself beyond my function.
I do not know when I began to grieve
the child I didn't know I was.
I will never again be
what those who knew me as:
a woman who cannot be raped.

What you do not realize,

as you turn your ever-seeking eyes
to the Red Planet above your heads,
and as you sail your ships to raze the sky,
is what only I and the Moon
are old enough to recognize:
that the Red Planet was once blue.

Sisyphus at 15 | *One must assume she is in love*

by Peyton Worsham

CW: DV, SA

Your hands are two half-hitches and
my mouth is rich with the stench of gasoline from
your tongue, cool with calluses, boiling with
blood, kiss my scraped knee seasoned with sweet
stones and keep going, don't stop, gnaw at
these gesso bones, they writhe with your company.

Cheeks burning velvet with radium and
Arabic gum, the scarlet stains your sheets, and I'm
wailing apologies, it's my first and I've never bled like this before,
your hands are half-hitches scraping into a cradle of china ribs.

I set the shower water to soothe the ails of
you, with your teeth and rotten tongue, the corner of your marble
counter bruises these old, old dogged bones, the stench of
sweat and skin and gasoline strangles my tongue till
it is flesh barren of blood.

Welts and blisters and burns and scars upon sullied
lips and my hands have gone blank from the half-hitches, the sheet
bends, I used to be louder than this, but I can't speak
around the apple stuffed in my mouth.

I roll my heart up your porch steps to a door
notched with inches of you ticked in by hands now
vacant; my stone plummets
in my stomach when I ring the bell.

This must be love, there must be more than your
hands holding me together.

Your hands are two half-hitches, prison
to the rhythm of hair in pigtails, dressed as your favorite
virgin ball-gagged, pink with ringworm, running
cold under your covers, keep going, don't stop, devour these
bones, they've grown numb with you next to me.

How to Grieve Your Dog

by Aja Moncrieffe

CW: D

Lift him slowly and hold him at the base of your stomach.

He's smaller and denser than before, so be careful.

Walk with a faint limp. You are his legs now.

(Which leg was it again? The leg that kept him leashed
to the top of the stairs when you came home,
idle in his anticipation of your arrival. It's the left one, right?)

Take him to his favorite spot in the house, your futon.

Lay him there, and feel him sink into the seat.

Look closely: you can just barely see the imprint of his ribs,
embossed in the emerald cushion of the couch-bed.

(He's here, breathing through your lungs. You can feel it, can't you?)

Sit with him, and stretch out enough so he yawns and grumbles,
as he often does. Pass the time until he slips into a dream.

Let your eyes close, your leg twitch, your breath grow,
as deep and as low as the rolling hills he is running across.

(Don't stop when the damp, gray air tickles your nose.)

Leap and bound, bark from the base of your stomach, unbidden,
and listen for the sound of his echo.



As the World Collapses Around Us We Find Ourself Planting Nasturtiums

by *K.A. Basilisk*

We sit at our desk in our apartment
weeping.

We go back to bed
whet sharp stones with our anger there
and in the morning our cat is on top of us, purring
and it brings a smile to our face despite it all.

Another day and more is taken from us.

We go back to bed
heavy with grief
slow with it
and when we wake, the morning is a bright, cool blue
and the spider in our cup of water
scrambles onto our palm.

And we get the feeling that our life has recently gotten fuller
despite everything.

We treat ourself to a packet of seeds.

Round bodies. Crevice without edge
to take our mind off the death of everything.

And as the world collapses around us, we find ourself planting nasturtiums.

The Hand Life Dealt

by *Nicole Del Prete*

CW: A, D

The worst hand in Texas Hold'em is a 2-7 off suit. It statistically gives the player the lowest probability of winning the hand. It backs the player into a corner, forcing them to fold or go all-in. It forced *me* to go all in, but looking back, I just feel like I folded.

My father liked to play poker. Every weekend he would drive to Fort Lauderdale and wouldn't come home until he won. And he did win, every single time.

Watching my father get ready for a poker game was one of my favorite pastimes, and this game was a big deal. It was the World Series of Poker Open in Coconut Creek. If he could make it through this tournament victorious, he'd qualify for the final table in Vegas. This was his newest dream. My father had already done so much in his lifetime, seventy years of accomplishments, but this one was the most special.

It started with the sound of the espresso machine. It was old, close to broken, and rumbled like a train as it poured. My father would routinely leave the machine on for hours after he used it, accelerating its imminent death. He would drink his espresso out of a green shot glass with Christmas trees on it, despite the holiday being six months away. He would grab a bottle at the back of the cabinet filled with sambuca to spike his coffee. He would offer me a sip and I would oblige, already knowing I'd hate the taste.

On occasion he'd ask, "Do you want me to make you a cappuccino?"

To which I'd immediately reply, "Yes! With cinnamon on top?" He frothed the milk inches high, and never forgot the cinnamon.

The smell of his cologne circles around the house, citrus and bergamot and cedar. The scent fills my nose at the thought. I watch him sip his espresso, hunched over the kitchen island. His routine is mundane, nothing special, but it means everything to me.

Next, I help him pick what to wear. My father has the style of Soprano, the looks of Pacino, and all the machismo of DeNiro. His closet is lined with short-sleeved button-ups, matching dress pants, and loafers: the quintessential wise guy wardrobe.

He sets up the iron in the den, where the sunlight pours in, and starts to iron out the creases in his shirt: one of my favorites, a black, short sleeve button up with two white stripes stitched down the front. Later, he'll ask me to check and see if the hem of his pants touches the floor with his shoes on. Every detail is important.

As he moves through the house, I watch his mind move a thousand miles a minute. He is making a mental checklist of everything he wants to bring. This is a whole affair for him, a sacred (borderline superstitious) routine, a hobby that brings him much joy. I love to see him so happy.

He packs some water in a cooler bag and makes quick work to funnel cognac into a flask. I watch him the entire time.

"It calms my nerves," he says, motioning to the now filled container in his hand. He never has to explain it to me. A man of his nature would never admit he suffers from anxiety.

He starts to grab his things. I know he's almost ready to go. I grab his leather jacket off the back of the chair in the dining room. As I follow him outside, I swipe his wallet off the counter. It's the same color as the granite and blends in often. My father can never find it. As if on cue, he asks, "Nikki, do you have my—"

I hold it up before he can finish his question and watch him smile sheepishly.

I follow him into the garage, smacking the button that opens the door while he walks towards his car. I wince at the squeal of the tires as he backs his old S600 Mercedes-Benz out onto the driveway, the engine roaring the whole way. It holds timeless beauty, with its shiny beige paint and cream leather interior. This car makes him feel young again.

I open the car door and put his things down on the passenger seat for him. When I come around the front of the car, he is holding his arms out, waiting for me to say goodbye. I'm so excited for him.

"Good luck, Dad. I love you."

"I love you too, honey. They're not gonna know what hit 'em tonight!"

He makes me laugh, not because it's funny but because I know he's right. He'll come home long after I've gone to sleep and be overjoyed to show me his winning hand in the morning.

He ducks down in the car and winks at me. And then the door closes, he backs out onto the street, and drives away from me.



It starts like this: a phone call from my father while I'm at work. I feel my heart sink before I even answer. It's already unusual for my father to call me in the middle of work. He knows I'll be home for lunch because our morning text conversation confirmed it. It's an hour before he's expecting me home. The caller ID sends me into fight or flight. The tumultuous night before, spent treating his chilling fever, does nothing to calm my nerves.

"What's wrong?"

Gasping for breath, my dad begs me through the receiver to take him to the hospital.

I find myself in a whirlwind of anxiety, no longer in control of myself and moving on autopilot. I'm in the parking lot before my supervisor can even ask why I'm leaving. I'm asking to be pulled over on the drive home—cutting off cars, running a stop sign, and going twenty over the speed limit.

When I stumble through the front door, my father is sitting on the couch taking his blood pressure. He'll take it about twenty more times between now and the hospital, but that won't help him. We hardly say a word as I search for an emergency room to take him to. The one with the shortest wait time is also the one that seals his fate.

I move quickly to grab some of his things. Water, cough drops, his cheap dollar store glasses, and his wallet. He's always forgetting his wallet. Through wasted breath, he reminds me not to forget the mango flavored sports drinks he likes. I messily pack everything and help him up from the couch. On the way out, I grab whatever jacket is hanging by the door. It's this oversized varsity-style sweater with Mickey Mouse on the front. He grips my arm, starting towards the car on shaky footing.

The emergency room takes him right away. The Delta variant is on the rise, and they need to move with urgency. The quickness in which they take him equates to the time I have left with him. The hourglass flips over, and I watch the sand begin to trickle. I find a spot to wait in the lobby, but the

nurses refuse to let me stay, for risk of infection. I sit in the parking lot for two more hours until my dad texts:

“I’m ok. Go home.”

I don’t come back until that evening.

I take my chances walking back into the emergency room. The nurses assure me that my dad is fine, but if it’s not an emergency, I need to leave. Visiting hours close in ten minutes and they don’t want to waste time talking to me any longer than they need to. Their emergency room is full of hypoxic patients, and they don’t want me to become the next one.

I look through the reception window for any other sign of life to plead to when I spot a dark red head mulling over a clipboard. I try to grab her attention as best I can without shouting at her. When she chances to look up at me, it’s with kind eyes. She tells me she’s the head nurse.

“My dad, his name is Michael Del Prete, I’m his daughter. I just want to talk to him, please let me see him—”

She cuts my ramblings short with her laughter. “That’s your dad? He’s funny.” Her tone turns somber then. “But I’m sorry sweetie, he’s in isolation. Don’t worry though, he’s going to be moved to the main hospital overnight, and you’ll be able to visit him there.” I’m sure she knew as well as I that after he left this place, there was no telling when I’d be able to see him again.

I feel the tears before I realize I’m crying. “He’s all I have.”

She’s quiet for a moment before saying, “I can give you five minutes and that’s *it*.” She disappears from the front window to open the ER doors for me. His room is the first one on the right. “Wear your mask the entire time and do not go past the doorway.” Then she opens the door.

I stare at him through wet, blurry vision, my heart racing. He’s in a hospital bed with more tubes attached to him than I can count. He has a nasal cannula that, for how helpful it’s supposed to be, makes my stomach churn.

“I love you!”

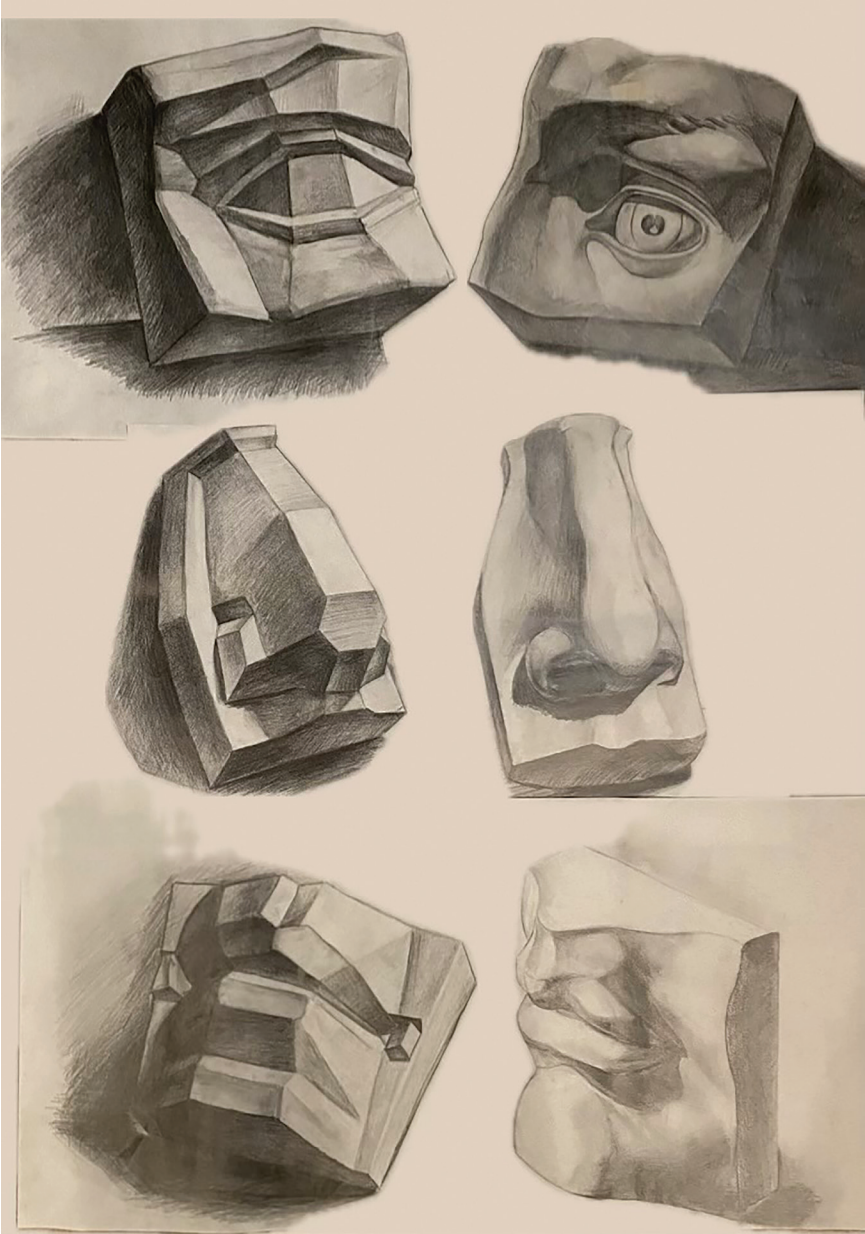
The words tear through me. I never thought I would be saying this to him in the threshold of a hospital room.

He strains to smile. “Everything will be fine, honey! I’ll be home by tomorrow.”

The nurse escorts me back into the lobby. She looks at me apologetically

and hands me a piece of paper; it's the number for the hospital they'll be moving him to. She tells me to call in the morning for his room number and gives my arm a soft squeeze for comfort. I thank her and walk out into the parking lot. I start the car and drive away, the life I once knew in the rearview, and walk through the door of an empty home.

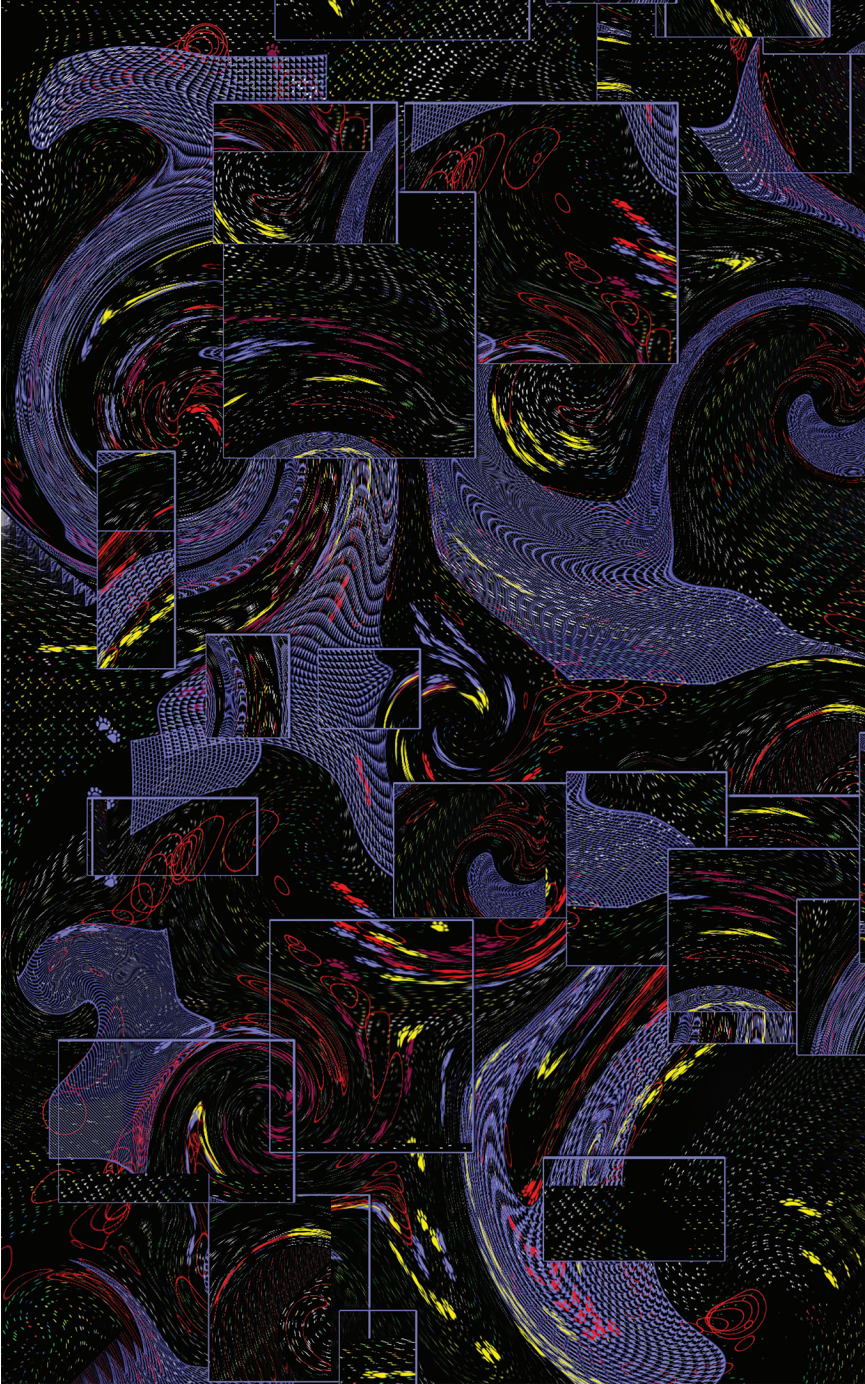
My father dies twenty-four days later from COVID pneumonia. It takes that long for the dealer to shuffle the deck. In his last moments of life, I am tossed my hand. It isn't until after I leave the hospital that I glance at my cards: the worst hand in Texas Hold'em.



Process Emily Liu, graphite pencil



Remembrance 2 Ambar Santiago, acrylic painting



Fractigma Nathaniel Ratón, digital art



Lady Raven *Nishtha Tikalal, photography*



HOUSEWARMING PARTY

by Tara Crowe

CW: V

You are crawling around
on your hands and knees,
alone
in your empty house and there is nothing
left to clean up, in the excoriating
light of the morning-after sun,
nothing that needs to be cleaned up, no
blood on the cupboards,
no dirty towels in the closet,
but you are drowning
in shame
choking on it, coughing little bits of it up
when you brush your teeth
and remember last night—
when you lay down to sleep and
remember—
You tell me, *Brother*,
when I say I have been fucking ruminating
about the way bits of you spilled onto the floor
that night, poured like demons
from a locked box labeled ‘Do Not Open’
You tell me it feels apocalyptic,
knowing that they know
that you feel, like any other man on this Earth,
Lord, you feel and you’re sorry for that
For the monsters in your blood
that like to bang on closed doors

and all those ghosts
that walk alone in your long and empty hallways
You try to sleep but
you remember—the fields are burning
The fields are burning, and you
are burning, and so too
are the flowers you love best and the secret
graves on which they grow



pursuit & crash

by *Gian Arellano*

CW: D, V

it felt like mommy unfurled the Earth when she
bought the playmat tattooed with a practice city and its
figure-eights of roads that cinched metropolitan guts—my hands
were flesh nets that dragged plastic cars (practice killing machines)
down fuzzy streets (practice killing sites) and I toggled between
emotions as they collided, settling on giddiness at their mechanical
pursuit and crash—vehicles crumpling like punctured cans,
blooming with wreckage then stitched back up and rammed
again and again and again and again (practice makes perfect),
all while I laid, ragdolled and innocent, with the kissing cars,
imagination pooling around me

Wear your seatbelt. Check. Adjust your mirrors. Check.
Use your blinker when you turn. Check, check, check, check.
Avoid the highway when you can. Mother's orders.
Pretend you are on the rug only now you are the car and car, you—
humanoid yolk in a metal egg.
But instead of carpet, you will spill onto an asphalt tongue.
Barricaded, collected, and then tossed.
Passersby will complain of the traffic.
Do not crack the egg (do not crack the egg).

at 2:50 A.M., returning from *Pride &* cushioned by rainbow innards,
a white blur jetted between my car and another before the ground blew up
its tire, like a hammer does a skull, and the seconds filled me like
gallstones as I replayed the smear that had cometed down the street

and struck me from behind on this route taken instead of the highway
(mommy, mommy, where am I safe now? burn the mat and
hide me in the ley lines of your hand)

-----X



House

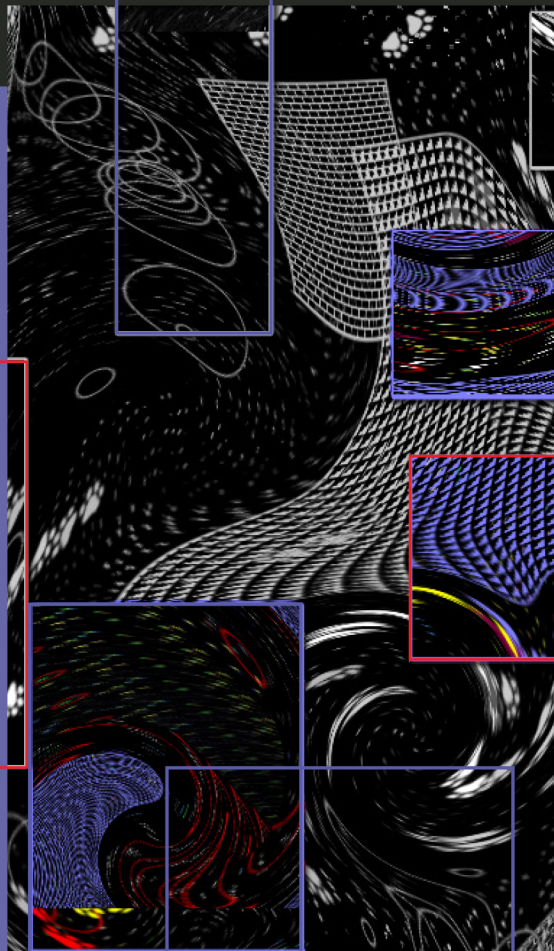
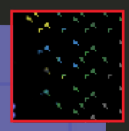
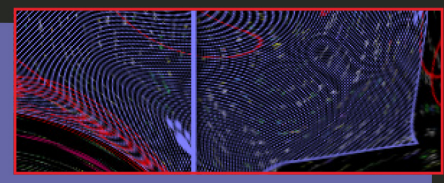
by *Bella Riley Love*

She had a past before me.
Too-red blood blotted out the creaky hardwood floor
that never sat right on the earth,
flexed too much with the changing weather,
rotted out from the inside,
mold creeping through,
corrupting her veins,
the lifeblood that sang the melody of
birthday parties and first steps and dinner table conversations.

The house grew with me,
but she grew wrong.
Her bones crushed under the weight
of our celebrations, our fights, our lives.
Her skin stretched with mine,
but while I grew into knobby, freckly knees
she warped and thinned
until I fell straight through,
curling my own body to fit into her.

In short, the house ate itself.
She took our refrigerator drawings,
our berry-stained fingerprints,
our dimmed-down Christmas lights,
and sucked them into the earth with her.
I see her sometimes,
in brown grass fields,

in hollowed-out eyes and too-skinny wrists,
in the ridge of my nose from the split bone that was never given
the space to mend itself.
I see her in me.



- Gian Arellano
- H.A. Basilisk
- Sophia Cardenal
- Tara Crowe
- Ashley Francke
- Lais Guimarães
- S. Hali
- Erik Leon
- Emily Liu
- Bella Riley Love
- Aja Moncrieffe
- Juan Morillo
- Mariana Nagy
- Daniel Otero
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- Samantha Lefebvre
- Haitlyn Pottinger
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- Max Rainey
- Nathaniel Ratón
- Lydia Robbins
- Ambar Santiago
- Farah Mara Shah
- Nishtha Tikalal
- Peyton Worsham

