

Glass Mountain is a literary journal edited by undergraduate students at the University of Houston. Dedicated to showcasing the work from undergraduate and emerging artists around the world, *Glass Mountain* publishes volumes each fall and spring.

COVER ART

“A Selection of Reality”
Greg Headley

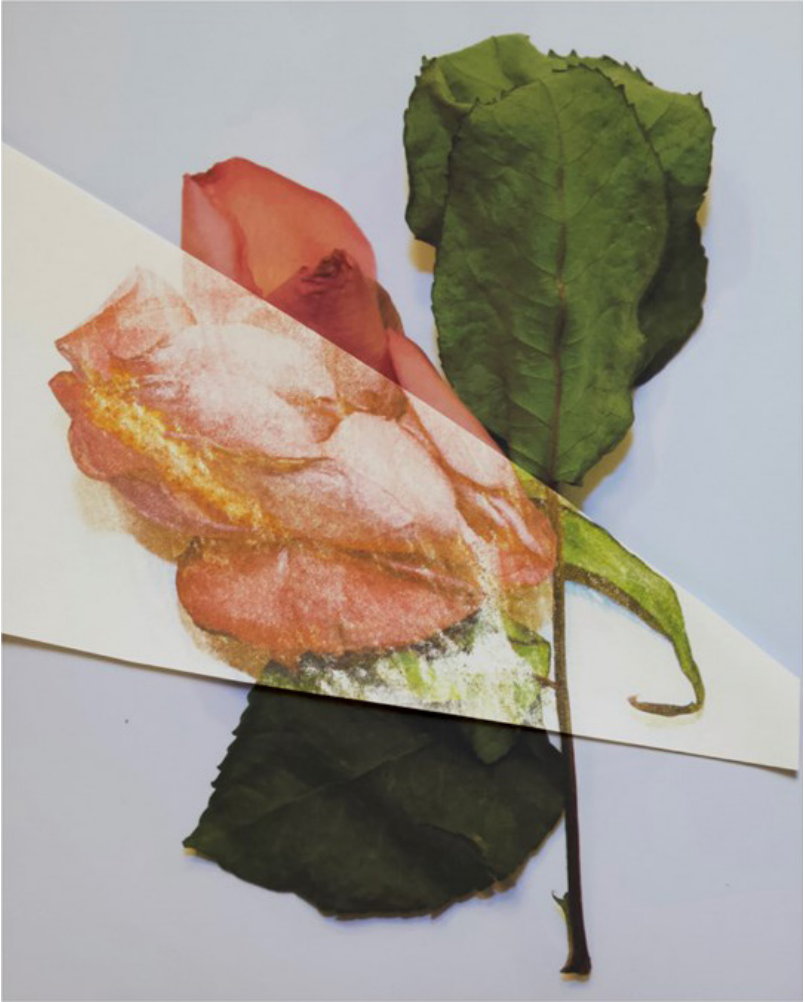
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*Submission guidelines can be found at
www.glassmountainmag.com/submit*



A Selection of Reality

Greg Headley

Photographic prints & solvent photo transfers on paper

glass mountain

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Dedicated to those you don't expect.

“To climb the glass mountain, one first requires a good reason.”

—Donald Barthelme
1931-1989

Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

Recently, in one of our weekly meetings that are always part fun, part productive, and mostly chaos, our faculty adviser Audrey posed a question. It was the type of question that lies on the hard side of existential, the kind that makes you take a big step back to examine every choice you've ever made leading up to that moment. "Why are you here with *Glass Mountain*?" she asked. I paused. There are plenty of reasons. I could give you a laundry list of reasons. I'm learning how to read creative work critically, I'm gaining leadership experience, I'm being exposed to new styles and types of writing every day, I'm seeing every angle of publishing. Quite frankly, it looks good on a resume. All of these are true, but I think I'm really here because challenges never end.

Glass Mountain has faced an almost-comical number of challenges this year. We moved offices (arguably the biggest challenge of the bunch), we swam to said brand-new office through Tropical Storm Imelda, and our readings always competed with something: first a storm, then the Astros playing in the World Series. Nearly every obstacle that could exist did.

We're not the only ones. As I read through the writing and pondered the art in Volume 23, I was struck by the challenges that exist in them. All shapes and sizes of challenge breathe in and between the lines of these pieces. Through eating disorders, distorted body image, addiction, deep and intense trauma, and more that exists off the page, these writers and artists have battled. Their work reflects unimaginable challenge, near-insurmountable difficulty.

And yet, and yet. We create. We are here. Volume 23 is here. You're holding it in your hands. And the people you don't expect to be here are too. The kind of people who inspire you until you're in tears because oh my, how do they manage it? The people who commiserate with you over misused dialogue tags, the people who can and will spout dinosaur facts on command, the people who write with you over home-cooked dinners because guess what, you're important too. They're why I'm here. Because challenges never end, and yet people still overcome.

So, I say, keep creating. Keep moving. Keep being unexpected in unexpected ways. Use Volume 23 as inspiration. *Glass Mountain* is behind you, and so am I.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Melinda Mayden". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Melinda Mayden
Editor, *Glass Mountain*

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Robertson Prize Winners

Christopher Allen Poetry Winner

Christopher Allen is a first-year MFA candidate in Poetry at Oklahoma State University with a BA in Creative Writing from the University of Houston. His issues with P.T.S.D.—and the effects it has on his family—colors most of his work, while the rest centers around contemporary fears and frustrations. “Portrait in Apocalypse” was crafted at Boldface 2019, inspired specifically by craft talks given by poets Niki Herd and Justin Jannise. He has been published in *Defunkt Magazine* and *Inkling*.

Portrait in Apocalypse

Deep-fried by the Texas Sun,
my skin boils more than it burns.
I say howdy and I don't much know
any strangers. From around the corner,
my baritone projects the image
of a much taller man. I wonder,
will they recognize me?
While the cows remain in pen
the grass in the pasture grows.
They isolate themselves until
released. The field they gather in delivers
a sermon, each blade of grass
a preacher, prophesying sustenance.
Scotch burns, swells my belly into a barrel.
My first drink is always after last-call. Before
my barstool spins around the sun
I'll pen the perfect painting.
I prefer to write on parchment
which is being pulled into a paper shredder.
The green blades pass through their
seven stomachs before being decomposed, deconstructed,
combined into a plaster—
the cow dung which calls forth
the descendants of the field.
I always take two scoops of ice cream.
Whatever flavor we have
in the freezer is my favorite.
Fun is the only abstraction
I feel I ever earn. I wonder,
from what pasture does my pint originate?
Instead of brain-freeze
I get chest-chills, when eating spoonfuls
too fast. I always empty the carton.

Eryn O'Neal **Nonfiction Winner**

Eryn O'Neal, PhD, is a criminologist and emerging creative writer who has published research in a variety of scholarly journals, including *Justice Quarterly*, *Violence Against Women*, and *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. Her fiction and satire has appeared or is forthcoming in *DUM DUM*, *High Shelf Press*, and an anthology edited by feminist writer Ariel Gore. Eryn is an assistant professor in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Sam Houston State University. She has received six national awards for her research contributions to the study of gender and crime. She is currently working on a bookette/zine, forthcoming from Microcosm Publishing.

Rape Cris-ish

after Elissa Washuta's "Consumption"

What can Society do to prevent sexual violence?

Society knows boys will be boys. So, it should encourage young girls to travel in packs—warning them of the dangers of dark alleys and African American male strangers—and how to position their keys between their fingers à la Wolverine's adamantium claws. Society can help a bestie get ready for a night out on the town by reminding her that dressing promiscuously only makes her a tastier target. "Come on, Jane. What type of attention are you asking for with that whorish lipstick?"

What can Society do to prevent sexual violence?

It can wear a "Consent is Sexy" t-shirt. Society's friend thinks "consent is mandatory, not sexy." Society says that slogan doesn't look as cute on a t-shirt. If Society wants to really make a statement, it can post a selfie with the hashtags #metoo and #timesup. Society was catcalled on a bus once; that's like the gateway to rape, right? When Society is feeling especially righteous, it can sign an online petition to "Stop Rape Now" and share it on Facebook. If anyone tells Society that its activism is closer to slacktivism, Society can respond with, "Would you prefer I do nothing?!" What can Society do to prevent sexual violence? It can argue that prevention efforts aren't necessary because sexual violence isn't really a problem. Out of sight, out of mind; am I right? How is Society supposed to know the extent of the issue, anyways? There is a huge discrepancy between official reporting figures—like police complaints and university statistics—and self-report data like the National Crime Victimization Survey. How can Society know which figures are correct? Society heard a rumor that a friend was raped at a frat party last year; Society's friend never told it about this alleged assault. Shouldn't Society look at the facts? The university Society attends released its college crime statistics last semester; the report indicated that only two campus rapes were documented in the spring. This number doesn't seem so

high.

What can Society do to prevent sexual violence?

It can design college intervention programs aimed at correcting the behavior of at-risk victims. Society lives in a culture where some college men rape. As long as college football players insist on raping, Society has a responsibility to teach female students how not to get raped. Colleges can't stop frat boys from roofying their dates, so Society must teach young women to take their cocktails with them wherever they go. Yes, even to the toilet.

Society can ask colleges to educate their students and make class enrollment contingent on taking an online sexual violence awareness training. Unfortunately, Society can't force colleges to include a training-knowledge assessment. The university administration is worried about testing fatigue; students are required to take so many exams. Colleges don't want to stress students out with more tests. This decision is out of Society's scope of work.

Society can make faculty members mandatory reporters, telling professors that it's their responsibility to report sexual misconduct to the Title IX office or other campus authorities. Society should also train educators how to awkwardly interrupt students who have just disclosed a traumatic experience midconversation, so they can inform the student that everything they divulge will be on the record. Society should also warn faculty members that dealing with disclosures can be very time consuming, so better to appear overly authoritarian and cold in the classroom. This especially applies to female faculty members who teach sensitive topics like gender and crime. In these cases, if a professor acts too caring or too human, they may have to deal with weekly sexual assault disclosures. This can take a scholar away from working toward their tenure requirements.

What can Society do to prevent sexual violence?

Society can offer voluntary trauma-informed education to police officers. It can't make the training mandatory; that would take too many financial resources and manpower. Scratch that, Society can place pamphlets about trauma-informed response in agency lobbies. Society knows it can't prevent the informal socialization that occurs between veteran officers and rookies. It would simply take

too much effort to change officer attitudes, on-the-job behavior, and police subculture now. Plus, the police have more important things to worry about, like the black teenage boy standing on the corner with his hands in his pockets. It's a thin blue line.

Society can teach police officers about real rape so they can easily assess victim credibility and identify false reporters. This way, the police can focus their efforts on the real victims instead of being distracted by attention seekers, girls with buyer's remorse, and scorned women. Real rape involves a weapon-wielding stranger perpetrator who uses physical violence to subdue his victim. In real rapes the victim resists. I mean, this is supposedly the most horrible thing a woman can experience—why wouldn't a victim fight back? Real rapes result in gross physical injury. Bruises, genital trauma, and strangulation marks will be present. Victims will have bloodied faces and missing fingernails. Real rape victims are female—always. If Society adequately teaches police the facts of rape, as outlined above, officers can easily detect liars. Overall, Society should teach police that they need to be skeptical about all rapes that fall outside this description.

What can Society do to help sexual assault survivors?

It can give its friend a slippery nipple shooter the day after her high school crush coerces her to perform oral sex during Friday's lunch break. Society can tell her it's not really rape if it's only a blow job. That will make her feel better. Society can remind her friend that she had a crush on the football player, so didn't she want to suck his dick? Society can ask her if she resisted or said "No." Society will say, "He's not a mind reader. 'I'd rather go back to school' can be interpreted in many different ways. 'Let's just go back' might sound like 'let's just go back after I finish getting you off.'"

Society can convince its friend to keep her experiences secret. Who would believe her? Not her friends. Not her family. Not the police. Especially because she agreed to go to the football player's house for lunch. Especially because she consumed that wine cooler. Especially because she was wearing that low-cut blouse.

Society can help its friend get over it already. It's been five months. Society can tell its friend that she needs to

stop ruminating on something that happened so long ago.
Society can remind its friend it's always there for her.

William Seward Fiction Winner

William grew up in Houston, Texas. He earned a Bachelor's degree in Earth Science from Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and worked in Houston chemical plants as a lab technician and a warehouse operator for six years. He is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Literature from the University of Houston-Clear Lake and teaching seventh grade English at Northbrook Middle School. He is an avid soccer player. He lives in Houston with his girlfriend and their three cats.

Clean it Again

They ate from trough-sized tupperware—greasy lasagna, fatty brisket, whole rotisserie chickens—with the ferociousness of wolves tearing the entrails from a fresh kill. The lunchroom, shared by maintenance workers and operators, was missing several ceiling tiles where the slow drip of roof leaks had invited mold to devour the fiber boards, exposing the metallic ductwork and causing the dreary hum of the A/C to echo upwards in a ghostly howl. The linoleum floor was scuffed and scored, bearing the scars of contaminated work boots and night shift shenanigans. The twelve men were scattered among five warped veneer tables, slouching as if they had been poured like cement into their hard plastic chairs, each accompanied by a personal Igloo cooler large enough for a family trip to the beach.

Trevor was standing by the wall-mounted time clock used by all of the plant workers at PowerCat Chemical Company. He was squinting at the faint digital numbers to make sure his punch had gone through when he heard a high-pitched voice call, “Homeboy!” from over his shoulder. He turned to see Alvaro from maintenance waving at him from his seat by the microwave with wide sweeping arm gestures that exposed the sweat stains in his heather gray XXL Alvin Riverdogs t-shirt.

Trevor tossed him a skeptical eyebrow. “What do you want, gordo?”

“Damn, homeboy, who pissed in your Cheerios? I got something to tell you, bro. So y’all, listen to this,” said Alvaro, turning to address the room. “I’m worried, right? My wife is always complimenting my balls! I don’t get it! She’s all like, ‘Oh honey, they’re like two juicy grapefruits, I just want to lick them, mmm,’ and I’m like, ‘Damn baby! Okay, whatever turns you on,’ you know what I’m saying? But then afterwards, you know, I’m thinking about it, and I’m like, damn dawg, why don’t she ever compliment my cock?”

There was a ripple of snorts as the guys looked up from their lunches to elbow each other’s ribs and roll their eyes in Alvaro’s direction. Alvaro’s shoulders jumped up to his ears, mouth agape,

dark eyes full of enjoyment. “Come on y’all, I’m serious!” he pleaded, unable to hide the dimples from his shiny red cheeks.

Trevor let his eyes rest on Alvaro for a second, then he shook his head, grinning. “Dude, maybe you need to buy your wife a fucking microscope.”

“What are you saying, homeboy? You mean I should get more creative with like toys and shit?” Alvaro wanted to know.

“All I’m saying is, my cock gets plenty of compliments, if you know what I mean,” Trevor winked.

“You’re stupid, dawg!” Alvaro bellowed delightedly, as Trevor left on his way to the locker room.

In the hallway connecting the lunchroom to the locker room, there was a fenced-in area of metal shelves stocked with fire suits, ropes, air tanks, stretchers, ladders, and other emergency equipment. In the nook off to the side of the emergency area, there were two men sleeping with their backs to the wall next to a lopsided table that had been sequestered from the lunchroom. They were reclining in ancient, discarded office chairs that were leaning so far back and suspended so low they looked like they would give way at any second. The men showed no signs of being disturbed by the voices echoing from the lunchroom or by the clanking of the channel locks against the flashlight in Trevor’s pockets as he walked by. Their heads were inclined slightly toward each other, necks twisted with chins resting on collar bones, in an awkwardly open and intimate gesture. Their eyes were shut tight beneath furrowed brows, and their lips were slightly parted, jaws slack and askew, like the faces of boxers absorbing a knockout blow, releasing that final, defeated grunt of surrender.

“Them motherfuckers are out like a light,” Trevor said as he entered the warehouse office where his co-workers were already eating lunch on corners of desks, keyboards with missing letters and geological layers of paperwork pushed aside.

“Who? Eustace and Jake?” asked Paul.

“Yeah, man. I don’t know how they can take a bullshit twenty minute nap like that. Fuck that, man. It takes me more than twenty minutes just to get to sleep.”

“Every day. Like father, like son.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah, you didn’t know that? Jake is Eustace’s boy. Seems like both of them have been working out here forever.”

“Hey, you know where Jake lives, right?” Avery interjected. “Fucking Diboll, man.”

“Diboll? Where the fuck is that?” asked Trevor.

“Oh, it’s north of Livingston,” said Jesse, “south of Lufkin, on the way to Nacagdoches.”

“What the fuck?” said Trevor, looking it up on his phone. “That’s practically in motherfucking Arkansas!”

“Fuck yeah, it is,” said Avery. “That motherfucker gets up every day at 3 AM, drives two and a half hours to work and two and a half hours back.”

“What the fuck for?” asked Trevor. “He’s gotta be losing money just by coming to work.”

“I don’t know, man, he says there isn’t anything closer that would make it worth his while. That’s where he’s raising his family and he doesn’t want to move.”

“Fuck that,” said Trevor, but he faltered slightly as he went to take his lunch out of the fridge. He had never seen Eustace and Jake exchange two words in passing, would never have made the connection, just saw them as two tired old guys who needed to take a nap every day. He never understood how they could sleep so soundly right next to each other, in plain view of passersby, with conversations, footsteps, and laughter bouncing off the walls. The startling stillness of the men in the hallway reminded Trevor of a time when he was six years old, on a hunting trip with his dad, when he had strayed from his father’s side, gone wandering alone through the woods, the wild rattle of cicadas ringing in his ears, twigs snapping beneath his light-up velcro Power Ranger tennis shoes, and stumbled into a clearing that was surrounded by a stand of cedars where there were two thick green ponds, completely hidden in the shadows. Trevor had imagined, then, that there was something sunk beneath the water of this secret place, someone else’s treasure that was cursed and meant to be left alone. He had wanted to know what was down

there, what whoever was trying to hide, but as he parted the shroud of branches and reached into the fog, just before his fingertips broke the pond's glassy surface, he heard his father call his name, the voice grabbing his throat in a vice grip, his frantic heart scrabbling against his shallow ribs, and he went running dizzily back through the trees.

"I could never work with my dad," said Paul. "Too awkward."

"Hey, Daniel," Avery said, "Why don't you go take a nap with your daddy?"

"Because I'd have to sleep with one eye open," said Daniel, whose father was the maintenance supervisor. "Last week I fell asleep in his recliner after eating my mom's gumbo and he farted right in my face. That woke me up."

"Now we know where you get it from," said Paul.

"Yeah, and that's when he's in a good mood," said Daniel. "I know him when he's mad, and believe me, it's better for us to keep our distance around here."

"The maddest I ever saw my dad," Trevor said, feeling like he was back on solid ground, getting relaxed to tell his story, "was when I was like seven or eight? We were out in the yard cutting the grass, and my dad put down the weed-whacker to talk to the neighbor across the fence. Well, I was just curious, you know? So, I picked up the weed-whacker while he had his back to me and squeezed the trigger. Well, I mean, the weed-whacker was bigger than I was, so I sorta lost my balance and fell forward still holding it. Cut the back of that man's legs like a fucking whip. He jumped around to see me holding that thing, and the look in his eyes would have stopped a charging bull in its tracks. I damn sure got the message. I dropped the weed-whacker, ran to my room, and waited. He took his time, didn't come to get me until later that night after dinner. He opened my door without looking at me, and said so quietly I could barely hear him, 'Did you clean your room today?' I said, 'Yes, sir.' He nodded and looked around the room. He walked over to my bookshelf, placed one hand on top of it, then pushed all my toys and tee ball trophies and shit onto the floor. He went down each shelf pulling all the books off and letting them drop. He went to my closet and tore all my clothes from the hangers and kicked all my shoes into

the center of the room. He took each drawer from my dresser and turned them upside down onto the pile. He came over to my bed and yanked the sheets off so that I slid down on my ass. He made to leave the room, but he stopped and stood in the doorway with his back to me. He said, ‘Clean it again.’ And that was the last time I crossed the old man.”

The door to the break room opened, and a tall brown man with a long beard leaned his turbaned head across the threshold. “Shipping and receiving?”

The guys shifted uneasily and shot each other nervous glances as the turbaned man surveyed the room for eye contact. Paul scooted his chair forward and said, “Yes, sir. Whatcha got for us, sir?”

“Ethyl acetate.”

“Any volunteers?”

After a few seconds of collective silence, Trevor said, “Fuck it,” and reached forward for the paperwork.

“You can wait at the scale,” said Paul, smiling at the driver. When he’d left, Paul said to Trevor, “Better hold a mirror under his truck.”

“No shit,” said Trevor.

As Trevor walked through the warehouse, the giant industrial ceiling fan breathed on him like an upside-down volcano. The warehouses were open-air metal buildings that swallowed dust and heat from the brutal Houston summer and digested them into an atmospheric fire that crawled into Trevor’s clothes and danced underneath his hard hat. He arrived at the back of the warehouse where the truck was waiting on the scale, recorded the weight, and directed the driver around to the tank farm. Trevor’s father had been a long-haul truck driver who was killed when Trevor was nine when he missed the runaway ramp after his brakes gave out on Colorado’s I-70. It was something Trevor told people straight out, because he wasn’t ashamed. In fact, he was proud of having to be his own man from an early age. He couldn’t imagine working in the same plant as his dad. As he cut through the production unit, sidestepping roaring pumps and ducking under steam-sputtering valves, he wondered what Eustace and Jake talked about during their daily lunch break, or if they ever talked at all. When he reached the city of storage tanks

that made up PowerCat's tank farm, Trevor looked up at the sky. The cloud cover was nice, he thought, as he put up barricades to stop traffic from going past while he was unloading, and the driver reversed his trailer into place. The humidity was going to be a bitch in the acid suit.

In the air-conditioned haven of the tank farm shack—an old garden shed that had been outfitted with a wheezing A/C unit and donated for the warehousemen to cool off and fill out their paperwork while their trucks were unloading—Trevor pulled on the rubber suit over his clothes and exchanged his chewed leather work shoes for floppy, rubber boots. The suit was thick green neoprene from head to toe, and it made Trevor feel like he was about to ignite and erupt out of his own skin.

When Trevor stepped out of the shack, a hazy slice of sunlight jabbed him in the eyes, and the humidity beat down on him like a hammer. The turbaned truck driver had gotten out of his truck and was walking around its perimeter. Other than the turban, he was wearing a checkered work shirt, jeans, and Timberland boots. He caught Trevor's eye and raised an inquiring thumbs-up. "You are going to unload?"

"Yeah, man. Listen, you might wanna stay in your truck. If the safety man sees you out here without a hard hat, he's gonna shit a brick factory."

The turbaned man watched Trevor with large hooded eyes. "Okay, I will stay in my truck."

"Right on. I don't think you could fit a respirator over that fucking turban either. Ain't you hot under there?"

"I am a Sikh."

"That's not like ISIS is it?"

"No."

"Alright, man. Just checking. You know how it is."

"Yes. I know how it is." The Sikh man held eye contact, waiting for Trevor to look away.

"Cool, dude," said Trevor. "You can wait in your truck."

Trevor turned his shoulder to the driver and pulled the straps of the respirator over his head. The face shield fogged up with

condensation, and the mouthpiece tightened over the bridge of his nose and his jawline like the gloved hand of a masked assailant silencing a screaming victim. With no peripheral vision, no dexterity in his stiff rubber gloves, and no stability in his wobbly boots, Trevor had to watch the ground as he walked around the trailer, stepping over hoses, pipes, and the dike of the chemical sump, and then constantly swivel his head to look at everything he was doing face-on and at close range. He worked at an efficient pace, hooking one end of the green chemical hose to the line that led to the ethyl acetate tank and the other to the discharge point at the rear of the trailer, but with each passing breath that he sucked in through his respirator filters, he could feel the air on his face expanding with heat and the weight of the thick rubber jacket collapsing around his shoulders like heavy folded wings.

When Trevor was on top of the trailer hooking up the air line, he could see Jake through the small window of his face shield cruising down one of the plant roads in a golf cart, which was all they ever seemed to do in maintenance. Trevor wondered how that gravy train tasted, driving around the plant all day, while he was stuck up here in the acid suit with sweat running in streams down his arms and legs and pooling inside the fingers of his gloves and the toes of his boots. He also noticed that Jake had driven the golf cart through his barricades. It seemed to Trevor like the warehousemen were the only ones who were ever held accountable for following pointless rules while the rest of the plant walked all over them like pieces of shit they could scrape off their shoe.

Trevor climbed down from the trailer and opened the valve to the air line. He went to the rear of the trailer and pumped the pneumatic valve to build pressure. Then he turned the discharge valve that opened into his hose, and felt the hose grow heavy as the liquid started to flow. He walked back to the ethyl acetate line, turned the levers for both valves to open it. He saw the pipes give a violent jerk as the pressurized liquid was pushed through. Trevor peeled off his respirator and pushed his sweaty hair out of his eyes. He was looking forward to sitting in the shack for the next hour and maybe catching a little nap, but he realized he had forgotten to write down

the starting tank volume before unloading. He went over to the tank gauge with his clipboard and peered against the sun's vicious glare to check the readout, but the faint digital numbers weren't moving.

"Fuck, man." Trevor tapped on the plastic with his pen. He didn't want to think about how long he would be stuck out here if he had to file a work order with maintenance and wait around for them to fix the gauge. He was about to call Paul on the radio to see if he could get away with unloading without the gauge when he saw Eustace riding his bike around one of his barricades.

"Hey!" Trevor shouted. Eustace nodded at him through his inscrutable tinted safety glasses and kept riding as if he hadn't heard him. Trevor started jogging after him. "Hey, man, I'm talking to you!"

Eustace coasted to a halt and turned slowly over his shoulder to look at Trevor. "How's it going, Travis?"

"Hey, man, don't you think I put these barricades up for a reason?"

Eustace looked around him with his arms spread and a bemused grin on his liver-spotted face. "I've been riding my bike around this place for thirty fucking years. You think I don't know when it's safe?"

"Dude, I don't like it any more than you do, but I gotta put them up and you can't be riding through them."

"Aw, hell, I don't have time for that horseshit." Eustace leaned over his bike and spat a glob of rust-colored tobacco juice onto the shimmering pavement.

"Well, listen, man. While I have you here, come look at this gauge for me."

Eustace shrugged and swung his bike around to follow Trevor to the ethyl acetate tank. He sidled up to it and frowned at the stationary numbers. "You sure you got flow?"

"Yeah, man. That bitch started humping as soon as I cracked her open."

"How much pressure you got on that trailer?"

"Fifteen psi."

"Hm," Eustace's frown knotted into something deeper and less

certain. “How much room you got in that tank?”

“Should have plenty,” Trevor said.

“You mean as long as this piece of shit is correct.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Okay, I think we better shut her down until we can get a good reading,” said Eustace, nodding at the gauge. “I think we’ve got some more of these in the shop.”

As Eustace rotated his bike around, Trevor shook his head and begrudgingly began to fit his respirator back over his face. “Fucking bullshit, man,” he muttered into the muffling mask.

Just then, there was a pop like a shotgun, and Trevor wrenched the mask off to look up. Ethyl acetate was spraying from the pressure release valve at the top of the tank, like a horrible rancid rain showering the tank farm, the fumes of its sickly sweet scalp-tightening vapor sending colorless ripples through the air.

“Shut it down!” Eustace was yelling hoarsely. “Shut the motherfucker down!”

Trevor dropped his respirator and ran to the rear of the trailer, disengaged the pneumatic valve, and frantically turned the discharge valve closed with his slippery hands. Liquid was running down the sides of the tank like the rivulets of sweat coating Trevor’s face. The ethyl acetate fumes were stinging his eyes and singing his nose hairs. Eustace was now riding back toward Trevor, staring open mouthed at the leaking tank. “What the fuck did you do?” he said.

Then there was a flash and a wave of heat. Eustace and Trevor raised their arms to shield their faces. The flames materialized as if they had been waiting in ambush. They hovered at the edge of the chemical sump and swayed steadily to a lethal rhythm, licking the air with a ravenous appetite. Trevor’s eyes skittered from his scorched and sticky rubber sleeve to the flames swimming in the sump to the ethyl acetate tank, which was now a towering column of fire and black smoke. Out of the corner of his eye, Trevor saw Eustace hobbling toward the safety shower with the sleeve of his right arm engulfed in flames. Eustace pulled the lever with his left hand and held his arm beneath the deluge of dirty water. As the flames choked into steam, Eustace began clawing at himself as if he was covered by

a swarm of crawling insects. It was only then that Trevor realized that Eustace had been screaming.

The next day, the lunchroom was more subdued than usual when Trevor went to clock out. Alvaro gave him a brief jut of his chin, but kept his eyes on his food. Eustace wasn't in his usual spot in the hallway, and neither was Jake. Trevor had spent the whole morning answering questions in incident investigation meetings, and he was late getting to lunch. Eustace was at Clear Lake Regional, receiving treatment for the burns on his arm. The fire had made the news. Emergency response teams from five of the surrounding plants had worked into the night to put it out.

When Trevor sat down in the warehouse break room, no one asked how the meetings had gone. He joined them, chewing in silence, until Daniel looked up from his phone. "My sister was arrested at a Taco Bell in Lake Charles last night," he said. "Funnily enough, I had some misunderstandings with the law myself at that very same Taco Bell a few years back. You know we must be kin."

"This one time," said Trevor, happy to break the silence, "It was like 3 am, and me and my buddies were leaving Big Texas, and we wanted a burger, you know? So we went to that Whataburger off of Fuqua, and everybody placed their order, and I told the lady I wanted a number two with no lettuce, tomato, or onions, right? Well, lo and behold, our food was brought out, I opened my burger, and that bitch was loaded. So, I took it back up to the counter, and I said, listen, lady, I ordered this burger without all this shit on it, can you please make it right? And she said, 'Oh, I'm so sorry, sir, yes, we'll have that right out for you.' And I said, 'Okay, no problem,' you know? So, a few minutes later, they bring the order back out, and I open it up, and guess what? Loaded. So, I took it back up to the counter, and I said, 'Lady, I'm sorry to bother you again, but I don't know how fucking hard it is...' and I threw that son of a bitch as hard as I could at the menu screen. The patty flew back into the kitchen, and the bun was sliding down real slow, leaving a smear of mustard and mayo, and there was lettuce and tomato and shit all over the counter. Well, unbeknownst to me, HPD was sitting right there at a table behind the ordering line. They walked up to me and

asked, ‘Is there a problem, son?’ and I said, ‘Um, no, sir.’ And they said, ‘Well then, you better clean up that mess you just made, or your ass is going to jail.’ Well, I looked from one officer to the other, and I said, ‘Either of you boys got a ladder?’ My ex still has pictures of me up on that ladder wiping that menu off.”

One or two of the guys forced a laugh, but everybody was packing their lunches away and putting their hard hats on, getting ready to go back to work.

On his way home that day, Trevor was at the red light on NASA Parkway and Highway 3 when he decided to make a last minute stop. As soon as the light turned green, he gunned his Silverado across the railroad tracks and into the right turn lane, inciting a chorus of angry horn blasts. He rolled down the window to brandish his middle finger behind him as he swung into the parking lot of Clear Lake Regional.

After he signed in, a nurse walked him down a hallway past patients either in wheelchairs or walking gingerly and using the wall for support. Eustace had his own room, but there was a privacy curtain drawn and voices coming from behind it.

“Just do whatever she did yesterday. Yeah, them right there is the good bandages. Them other ones stuck to me, and, darling, I have known no greater pain.”

Trevor’s nurse peeked around the curtain. “He has a visitor. Should we come back later?”

“Oh, I think we’re almost done,” said another woman’s voice. “Yep, that should do it.”

“Okay, well, thank you, dear,” said Eustace.

The two nurses walked past Trevor as he stepped around the curtain.

“Well, look who it is,” said Eustace. He was diminished by the hospital bed. Stripped of the armor that he had worn every day at the chemical plant, his body looked like a discarded pile of bones covered halfheartedly with a white gown and a thin blanket. His right arm was wrapped loosely in bandages and resting on the bed by his body. The day before, he had been a spry sixty-something.

Now he looked about a hundred.

“I came to apologize,” said Trevor.

Eustace shrugged with his left shoulder. “Shit happens. We all take shortcuts, and we all take risks just by coming to work every day. If those electricians were worth a fuck, that gauge would’ve been working. You didn’t bring me flowers, did you?”

Trevor’s face broke into a smile. “Nah, I just wanted to see how you were doing.”

“Well,” said Eustace as he pushed himself up in bed with his left hand, “I still got my face and I still got my dick. I reckon I’ll be alright.”

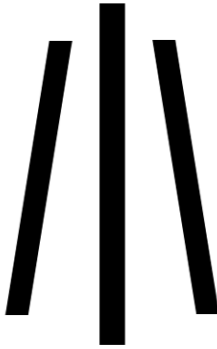
“That’s good to hear,” said Trevor.

“And you,” Eustace said. “You’ll be alright too. You picked the wrong truck to fuck up, alright, but don’t beat yourself up about it. You’ll make amends and move on, just like everyone has to do at some point or other.”

“I’m surprised I still have a job.”

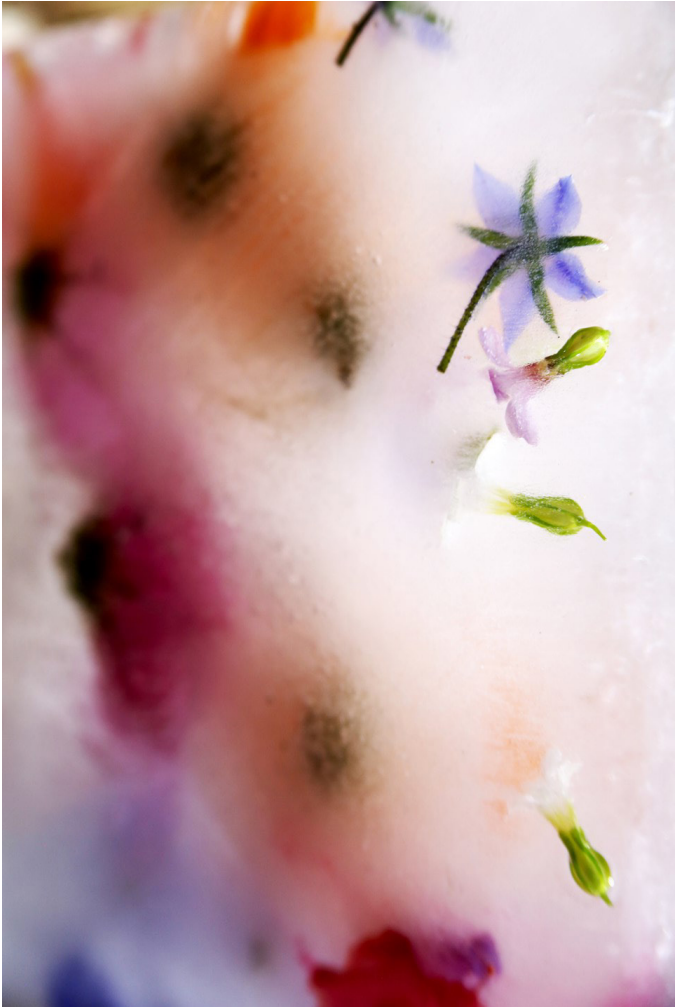
“It’s the chemical business. Accidents come with the territory. It’s the company’s job to clean up your mess, just like it’s these nurses’ jobs to put bandages on my arm. There’s no point in trying to clean it again.”

Trevor walked out of the hospital, got in his truck, and started the engine. He sat there in the parking lot for a long time with the engine gurgling and the radio mumbling. He saw his father’s hairy legs—old tennis shoes with no socks—and the weed-whacker lying in the grass. He saw his crumpled clothes and his open books on the carpeted floor of his bedroom. He saw the flames rushing up to meet him at the edge of the chemical sump and the smoke rising into the sky over PowerCat, visible for miles across the city. He saw his own blue eyes in the Silverado’s rear view mirror and was unnerved to see that they looked exhausted, bewildered, and hurt. They were his eight-year-old eyes waiting for his father’s approval, his nine-year-old eyes waiting for him to come home. He sat up straight in the driver’s seat and gripped the steering wheel with both hands. He looked back into the mirror and said firmly, “There’s no point.”



Art, Prose, & Poetry

Icebergs
Fabrice Poussin
Photography



Tiny Miracles

Lucy Simpson

(for my mother)

My mother had thirteen
miscarriages, one stillbirth,
and one crib death.

It was the woman's fault,
an unwilling uterus,
a cold disposition.

Certain old women advised
that she must have transgressed.
Like the ancients:
find the sin, root it out,
make a sacrifice.

A Messiah could not
gift her a child.
He was the one-shot miracle.

Each Christmas
this is reenacted
with tiny, plastic
Jesuses, their arms
outstretched.

In old fairy tales
logs, well-tended,
swaddled in bunting,
became babies,
upright citizens.
Snow became maidens,

with icicle ribs
and blue, eastern
night winter sky eyes.

Why not tiny plastic Jesuses
with their painted eyelashes?

The German creche,
sits in the corner.
Even after three daughters,
she tells me her womb
still feels like a coffin.
At five I imagine the coffin in her,
the wood, the satin, the bones
weighing her down.

Empty/Full

Maggie Hart

I feel the most like my mother when I am hungry. My mother sees hunger like pride, like strength, like, “It’s six PM and I just ran six miles and I’ve only had a granola bar today,” like not even the good kind of granola bar, like the kind without chocolate, like the kind that crumbles when you look at it, like the kind that tastes like chalk, like the only kind I allow myself to buy because that’s what my mother eats, because I want to feel close to her, because I want to feel like her.

To my mother, strength equals empty.

I wonder if she felt empty with me, when I was in her, when my body and its developing felt heavy and weighty in her womb. Did she hate feeling full when it was me filling her? Did that feel like weakness, too? I was expanding and so was she. I don’t think she liked the growing.

“I wanna be like you when I grow up,” I said to her, when I was pigtailed and gap-toothed, youth and summer popsicles rounding my cheeks. “Be careful what you wish for,” she said back. Mother knows best. Mother knows that being like her isn’t easy, isn’t the grown-up and dressed-up ideal to look up to. Mother knows that being like her means being hungry, means chewing each bite twenty times, means feeding too much to the dog, means feeling guilty for being too spacious. Means thinking of worth in terms of spaciousness.

Google thinks I’m a cannibal because one night I searched “how many calories in human skin.” I’d bitten and chewed the skin around my fingernails so much I felt full. Full like weak. My fingertips were shredded and raw and throbbing in tandem with my heartbeat, throbbing on the keyboard keys as the screen tinged my grey skin blue. My fingerprints were so torn I couldn’t unlock my phone without the passcode. Google thinks I’m a cannibal. Maybe I am. Maybe I want to consume myself so I take up less space. Worth in terms of spaciousness. Start with the fingers. Chew and bite them

instead of anything else. Start there. I don't know where to end, where to go once the fingers are eaten. I don't know how to end. Maybe it doesn't end. Good at starting things, not at finishing. Just like my mother.

Nothing is ever lost until my mother can't find it. She could find my lost-forever shirt in less than thirty seconds crumpled underneath my bed, my it's-due-today paper buried beneath dirty laundry on my floor. She'd find the paper and do the laundry and I'd come home to my socks and t-shirts folded on my dresser and my bed made and forget to thank her. She would never mention it, but I know she remembers. I know she remembers every time I've forgotten to thank her. There are too many.

She would find everything and do everything for me over and over again, with no expressions of gratitude in return, because she loves me, she loves me in spite of me occupying a body just like the one she's spent years hating, spent years and dollars and energy trying to change. She loves me but hates the shell I'm in. I wonder if she loves herself the way she loves me, wonder if she loves her inside even though she hates her outside.

I wonder if the inside and the outside can really be separate. You cannot change one without changing the other. Can you love one and loathe the other?

My mother. The Finder of Lost Things. It is her superpower. I never learned how to find things, only to look for them. Only to ask my mother to find them for me. Now, I am always searching.

My mother taught me how to hate my body. She gave me the vocabulary. We were changing into our swimsuits in the bathroom at the pool when I was young, and I watched her stare at her naked body in the mirror. My mother hates her body. Then, my body was a child's, all smooth and chubby and taut and hairless. I didn't understand why she hated going to the pool. I understand now. I use her excuses, tell everyone that I hate swimming, that I don't know how to swim, that my skin is hypersensitive to chlorine.

I miss swimming. I love being surrounded by water, love the silence that accompanies submersion. But I cannot bear my body in a swimsuit. My body has grown to look like hers. My mother must

hate my body.

If A equals B and B equals C, then A must equal C.

In the bathroom at the pool, she looks at her naked body in the mirror and pokes at it, grabs the flesh around her middle section, the flesh that kept me warm, the flesh that stretched so I could grow. She grabs her breasts, breasts that expanded and filled with milk to feed me, breasts that are saggy and wrinkly now, from age and three children. "I am so ugly," she says out loud, and I hear her.

I have heard her every day for the past fifteen years.

I am so ugly I am so ugly I am so ugly like a heartbeat, like a mantra, like an apology, like a confession, like a proclamation, like a declaration. She gave me the vocabulary. It's ringing in my ears.

When my father catches me in position, head over toilet and fingers in throat, he yells. He's confused, but my mother is not. She comes and sits on the edge of my bed, her eyes puffy from crying. *Where did you learn to do that?* she asks. I didn't have to learn, I want to say. It was in me because I was in her, because I am her flesh and blood, because her hatred of her flesh is as real to me as the flesh itself, because the hate and the flesh formed at the same time. *I used to do that too*, she says, and I pretend I didn't know. I pretend the "used to" isn't a lie. Like Mother like Daughter. Everyone says I look like her, sound like her, think like her. No one should be surprised, then! I want to say. The writing, *this* writing, is all over these walls! It has been for years! Look at it!

You shouldn't do that, it's bad for you. Show me how not to, I want to say but don't. *How long have you been doing this?* Use your motherly intuition, I think. *Why would you do it, you're beautiful.* I don't think you mean that, I say. She cries.

I am lost. I am waiting for my mother to find me. I'm afraid she won't be able to. I'm afraid she won't try.

Nothing is ever lost until my mother can't find it. She is the Finder of Lost Things. I wish she'd taught me finding instead of fasting. Maybe then I could find what I am, where I am, I could find something to be other than hungry.

When I miss my mother, I don't eat. I can feel our stomachs churning and yearning together. I feel connected to her, like she

and I are one again. I feel most like my mother when I am hungry. I wonder if she feels it too, if when her stomach rumbles, she thinks of me. I wonder if she feels full.

Lilacs & Trains

Maryann Gremillion

A little girl with lilac eyes stretched out her hand.
Inside an apple green, for the monster in the shed.

She believed him to be a spirit in need of kindness.
He took the apple and ate, juice streaming through
his dark beard.

Lilacs bloomed. Trains bellowed.

He disappeared one night, left a patch of blood in the hay.
That was when she stopped speaking.



WOMAN

Cassandra Green

Photography

Baking Soda in Madrid

Rachel Kaufman

This summer the ants came in hordes.
Little parcels and parasols in tow,
they marched through cracks in my walls
and deposited their bodies
in my constant line of vision—
I sprinkled baking soda and sugar
on their wiry backs
and washed them down the drain
but each morning there were more,
searching for lost mothers and sisters,
grains of rice and signs of memorial.
I cried most nights
and dreamed of winged ants
floating in a sink.
Two days later, on the bus
from Gran Vía to the community pool,
the bus driver dropped his sunglasses,
the bus swerved a little,
and my neighbor's bag
opened and spilled
hundreds of seeds, black and small.
She was going to a cemetery,
liked planting poppies
on the hills, red tissue enclosing
little black eyes.
Sometimes, she told me
while gathering the seeds,
the poppies seem too small,
but other times, they make up
a kingdom, roads and moats
and little shops where honey is sold.
I got off the bus, and swam, and lay

in the sun, and ate an ice cream sandwich.
Back home, the ants had found
two crumbs from breakfast
and were hosting a party.
The queen wore a hat, and so
I found mine, white and floppy,
brought from home, and joined the parade.
They feasted until morning.

Privileged

Benjamin Watson

“I am going to be crowned Privileged.”

That phrase had permeated Julia Lynch’s life for as long as she could remember. She’d spoken it to her parents every night at dinner.

“How was school today?” they’d ask.

“Good. I learned things that will help me be crowned Privileged,” she’d reply.

She’d spoken it to everyone in school: her friends, her teachers, even her bullies. It was her answer to every question she’d ever been asked.

“Why don’t you ever look at people when they’re talking?”

“Because I’m going to be crowned Privileged.”

“Why do you keep twitching like that?”

“Because I’m going to be crowned Privileged.”

“Why do you think you have any chance of being Privileged?”

“You wouldn’t understand. You’re not going to be crowned Privileged, like me.”

“*Why* do you want to be Privileged?” they would ask.

“Because *you’re* not going to be,” Julia would reply. Many assumed Julia was being cruel, but her answer was born of pure, apathetic honesty. She spoke as a shining intellect, drowning in the oppressive sea of normalcy.

Let the others have their petty squabbles over what to eat or what to wear, their senseless attention to the excruciating details of what color went with what and how soft the couch was and how pretty the artwork on the wall appeared to be.

Let them compete over who could run faster, or jump higher, or lift more weights, or who could kick a ball or shoot a ball or tackle each other with the most gumption.

Let them spend hours upon end discussing their emotions, the oft-repeated phrase “I feel” sounding like a dissonant screech in Julia’s ears—as if she cared about the vain, irrational sensations that passed through the fickle hearts of humanity. No, Julia would

rise above all of that and find her place among the brilliant, if only to escape the intellectual stench of the rest of the mundane human race.

The Privileged were the best and brightest of society. They would understand, as Julia did, that there was more to life than the omnipresent trifles of sentiment.

Unlike many childhood dreams, Julia's desire only intensified as she grew older. She didn't just study. Instead, she turned her assigned reading into a full-fledged war: Julia vs. the teacher—who could carry a greater mastery of the material?

The answer was always Julia. Her teachers weren't going to be Privileged, like her.

It didn't surprise Julia when she was marked higher than any of her classmates, when she received perfect score after perfect score on every exam. It came as no shock when Julia was scouted by the Descartes' Institution for Fledgling Geniuses at the age of fourteen. Such was to be expected for one like Julia.

Her parents shed many tears over the departure of their only child, but Julia left home without sparing her former life a second glance. Julia's parents were as steeped in the cesspool of human inadequacy as the rest of the unprivileged.

Julia found more of a home in Descartes' Institution than she ever had in her pitiful public education. The teachers pushed students far past what seemed moral or decent, as if they were trying to find the children's breaking points. Hours upon hours of homework, surprise tests and exams, accounting for massive portions of the students' marks—asinine requirements that had almost nothing to do with respectable education...

It wasn't enough for Julia. The standards were far too low, and the students and teachers stank of barely-concealed stupidity. She could smell it on them, every time there was a delay in their responses, every time their faces would furrow in concentration to get their ice-slow brains to function, every time they looked down on Julia for the way her head constantly twitched with impatience, waiting for the world to finally challenge her. Julia would prove her superiority. She drafted essays that were filled with the most complicated rhetoric

known to man, asked questions that would stump even fifth-tier educators, and every day, in every class, vocalized the constant, unrelenting complaint:

“Professor, I’m sorry, but could you find some way to make this material more challenging? I’m going to need a lot more of a push from you so I can become Privileged.”

She was an outlier. A blemish of sheer excellence on the face of Descartes’ Institution. The faculty threw their best, most vicious educators at Julia, and none were able to dent her unrelenting resolve and her penchant for making even the most brilliant minds of her day feel insufficient.

Unwilling to admit defeat to a now sixteen year-old girl, Dean Walters of Descartes’ Institution did what any self-respecting chairman would do: he issued Julia the Test of Privilege six years early.

This Test was the exposition of human brilliance, the culmination of raw intelligence. It pushed, poked, and prodded the human intellect in order to judge its worth. As Julia sat in the pristine metal classroom, fingers flying across her keyboard, eyes scanning the page with the precision and speed of a motion-sensing camera, Dean Walters felt confident that the test would finally humble the irrepressible Julia Lynch.

Forty-two minutes into the three-hour test, Julia stood and approached the Dean. “Giving up?” he asked.

Julia’s head twitched, and her mouth twitched into what could almost be described as a smile. Her cold brown eyes stared at the wall behind Dean Walters, her gaze as sharp as an eagle’s. A small alert sounded on the Dean’s pad. He swiped his finger across the glassy surface, and Julia’s results shone through.

She’d scored ninety-eight percent.

Dean Walters stared at the numbers on the page, trying to comprehend it. She’d passed the Test of Privilege—a test so impossibly difficult that Einstein himself would’ve failed. She was something different. Something completely, utterly inhuman.

“Dean Walters?” Julia said, her head twitching again, her tone laced with condescension. “Clearly my intellect is insufficient. I have

much work to do.”

“Child, you *passed*. With this score, you can—”

“I have no interest in hearing you grovel,” Julia said, still glaring at the wall. “You are clearly incapable of expanding my knowledge. I will search for the answers I need, and in a week’s time, you will administer the test again.”

Dean Walters staggered. “But with a ninety-eight—”

“I do not intend to be *ninety-eight* percent Privileged,” Julia said. She turned and walked out the door without sparing Dean Walters a second glance.

The Dean—normally quite agnostic to any religion—stared up at the sky, silently praying that after one week, Julia Lynch would never again darken the door of his institution.

She was not human. She was a fiend, sent from Hell to torment those who thought themselves clever.

Julia spent the rest of the week in complete isolation. She was absent from every class and she skipped every meal. The only indication the faculty had that Julia was still alive was the sound of fingers pounding on a keyboard, desperately seeking the secrets behind the one test question that had the audacity to fool Julia Lynch.

The cooks, fearing that the girl would starve, left food outside her door every night. The plates were untouched.

After four days, Julia emerged from her room, her cheeks sunken, her eyes bruised by several sleepless nights. Amidst stares from the other students, she strutted down the hallway, her head twitching, her strict, rigid posture exuding confidence and strength. Her eyes, barely visible from beneath her long, raven-black hair, passed over the other students, as though she judged them unworthy of any form of acknowledgment.

Julia didn’t have to find Dean Walters; as she expected, he came to her as soon as she left her room. The man met Julia at the end of her hallway and led her into an empty classroom. No words were spoken as he set up the test. Even a respected educator like Dean Walters was insufficient to warrant Julia’s attention. She was to accomplish far, far greater things.

Thirty-seven minutes later, Julia rose to her feet. She walked past Dean Walters, moving towards the door.

“Don’t you want to see your score?” the Dean asked as she was leaving.

“We both know what it is,” Julia replied. “Prepare a shuttle for me to leave within the hour. I desire to begin my Trial today.”

“Ms. Lynch, shouldn’t you get some rest?” the Dean asked, a trace of pity in his voice.

From deep beneath her steely expression, a small chuckle escaped Julia’s lips. “I’ll sleep when I’m Privileged, Dean Walters.” Julia shut the door behind her, leaving Dean Walters alone in the empty classroom. His pad beeped at him, then displayed Julia’s test score.

She’d aced every question.

Fifty-seven minutes later, Julia found herself alone on a trans-continental shuttle. The stainless steel walls glistened beneath the Pennsylvania sunlight, the cool glass windows peering out into the gorgeous silver streets of Lancaster.

As the shuttle hurtled through the town and across the Atlantic ocean, Julia reclined on the leather seats, imagining her future. She was to become great. A towering intellect, capable of matching wits with the greatest intelligences the world had ever known, a crown of Privilege resting atop her head.

It would be everything Julia had ever wanted. And she expected no less from a world that proved insufficient to truly challenge her.

The shuttle deposited Julia deep in the heart of the South African jungle. As she stepped off, Julia was met with an entire forest of metal trees, shaped so delicately that they seemed even more authentic than their wooden counterparts. The brown velvet carpet on the ground cushioned Julia’s bare feet. The man-made forest seemed a testament to the sheer power of human ingenuity, a spectacle that proved man’s dominance over nature.

Julia strode past the trees without giving them a second glance. If this was the best that man could do, Julia would have no problems surpassing it.

Julia encountered a building among the metal trees, made

of a soft, shiny bronze. She opened the large brass doors without knocking and entered a small room, barely larger than her dormitory room. A white fluorescent light shone dimly against the metal walls and floor, revealing a few words engraved on the wall next to an archaic wooden door.

“IF YOU DESIRE TO BECOME PRIVILEGED, ENTER THROUGH. BUT KNOW THAT THESE DOORS OPEN ONLY ONE WAY. THE THINGS YOU LEARN CANNOT BE ERASED. YOU WILL NOT ESCAPE THE PERSON YOU WILL BECOME.”

Julia smiled. “I have no desire to,” she said aloud. She was certain that the Privileged were watching her, judging her worth.

Julia pulled the door open, and as she crossed the threshold, it swung shut with a resounding click.

On the other side of the door, Julia found herself in a larger room, filled with the noise of rushing water. Julia spotted a river running straight through the center of the metallic floor, gallons of water roaring past.

As Julia approached the river, she felt indentations beneath her feet. She bent over and read the words on the ground:

“YOUR FIRST TASK IS TO CROSS THIS RIVER. HOW WILL YOU DO IT?”

Julia smiled. “I expected more. I will cross over this river by using the bridge you will provide me with.”

The ground shimmered, and the engraved letters shifted, forming new words.

“EXPLAIN YOUR REASONING.”

“The gap is exactly twenty feet across—too far for any human of any level of strength to jump. The river is flowing at approximately eighty miles-per-hour, and judging from the tones of the noise, it’s at least thirty feet deep, meaning it would be physically impossible for anyone to swim through the river.

“You could’ve hidden some form of tool in the room, but that is far too obvious for those who passed the Test of Privilege. No, the only test that would pose any challenge is one where the solution is to do nothing.”

The letters faded, leaving one word behind. “CORRECT.”

The air around Julia shimmered, and a sheet of solid metal formed over the river. Julia strode across without hesitation. Those who ran the test would never let someone as valuable as her fall.

Julia opened the door, leading to another empty room, this one completely dark. She stepped forward, her footfalls careful and deliberate. As she expected, she felt more engraved letters beneath her toes. Julia slid her feet across the ground, her mind forming the letters into words.

“MY NEXT QUESTION. HOW DID I FORM THE BRIDGE?”

Julia paused for a moment, the gears whirring in her brain. This test was much harder than the last. She was being asked to explain a technology she knew nothing about.

After pondering for almost an entire minute, Julia spoke. “The bridge was created by the transformation of the molecules in the air.”

The words shifted beneath Julia’s feet. “EXPLAIN.”

“The matter could not have been brought into the room by some form of teleportation because if instantaneous relocation of matter were even possible, it would require enormous amounts of energy and there was no sort of discharge in the air. It couldn’t have been invisible, because the sound of the river was distorted by the arrival of the bridge.

“The shimmering in the air also supports my theory that this occurred through some form of transformation. Because matter cannot be created or destroyed, transformation is the only logical conclusion, though admittedly it could’ve been transformed from a source of energy rather than matter, the lack of discharge in the air would tend to suggest its base was, in fact, material.”

Julia’s voice echoed through the empty metal room for a few moments. The room abruptly filled with light, and Julia shielded her face from the illumination. When her eyes adjusted, Julia looked forward and saw letters made out of pure white light floating in the air in front of her.

“CORRECT.”

Julia allowed herself a small smile. This test was nowhere near her expectations.

The door in front of her swung open, and Julia strode through to the next room. As the door slammed shut behind her, Julia didn't spare it a second glance. No use in lingering in the shadows of what she would eventually accomplish.

Another plain, metal room greeted Julia. She stepped forward and read her newest set of carved words.

"IN THE YEAR 2542, A MAN NAMED LAURANCE GREYSTEEL INVENTED THE TECHNOLOGY YOU JUST WITNESSED, REFERRED TO AS MATTER SYNTHESIS. BY REALLOCATING THE MOLECULAR BANDS AND REAPPROPRIATING THE PROTONS, ELECTRONS, AND NEUTRONS, ANY MATTER CAN BE TRANSFORMED IN ANY WAY."

"Fascinating," Julia whispered.

The words vanished, and new words appeared. "YOU MAY PROCEED TO THE NEXT ROOM."

Julia frowned. For the first time in a long, long while, she didn't understand what was happening. "Why aren't you testing me?"

"YOU HAVE MISUNDERSTOOD," the words replied. "YOU ALREADY PASSED YOUR TEST. THIS IS YOUR TRIAL."

Julia reeled back as though she'd been slapped. She'd *gotten it wrong*. From everything she'd been told of the Privileged, she'd anticipated some immensely difficult challenge for her Trial. Instead, she was learning—the easiest thing in the world for her.

"Forgive my misconception," Julia said, stepping through the next door.

She entered another small room, this one filled with what seemed like impossibilities. A metal ball floating in the air with no push. A pool of some silvery substance that constantly fluctuated between solid, liquid, and gas. A wall that continuously shifted between wood, metal, and soil.

"Matter Synthesis," Julia said, nodding. She spotted more words written on the far wall and inspected them carefully.

"THREE QUESTIONS, JULIA.

"1. WHAT IS THE POWERING MECHANISM FOR THE MATTER SYNTHESIS PROCESS?

"2. WHAT WAS THE IMMEDIATE RESULT OF LAURANCE GREYSTEEL'S INVENTION OF MATTER SYNTHESIS?"

“3. IS MATTER SYNTHESIS COMMONLY USED TODAY?”

Julia immediately recognized the difficulty of these questions. She closed her eyes, her mind cycling through every scenario, desperately grasping at the answers she required.

It took her almost twelve minutes to arrive at a conclusion.

“The powering mechanism is human intelligence. The immediate result was that Laurance Greysteel was required to build some form of restricting mechanism, programmed to allow for external control over Matter Synthesis. And Matter Synthesis is behind most of our buildings, structures, and productions, but is not used commonly, due to the rarity of the individuals who can use it.”

The words reformed into the exact response Julia expected.

“EXPLAIN.”

Julia smiled, wetting her lips in anticipation. “Matter Synthesis must be fueled by intelligence because you’re telling me about it. Only the brilliant are Privileged, and from what I’ve experienced here, only the Privileged can utilize Matter Synthesis.

“The immediate result is likewise extremely obvious. Perhaps Laurance Greysteel himself was brilliant enough that he could fuel the Matter Synthesis process he invented, but due to the nature of what he accomplished, it could only have come as the result of extreme funding and logistic support. That means he was carefully watched by the global government every step of the way.

“Matter Synthesis could rewrite the world itself, creating a slew of social and ethical dilemmas. The only way the government would allow his machine to exist is if they were certain it could be contained, most probably by some sort of inhibiting device.

“Matter Synthesis also explains several things in modern society that as of yet have remained inexplicable to me. The proliferation of metal, the sudden boom in creative, complex architecture, the solving of starvation at the turn of the twenty-sixth century, even the metal forest I walked through to arrive here...all are evidence of Matter Synthesis.

“However, Privileged only account for a minuscule portion of the population. This means that Matter Synthesis can only be accessed by a select few, such as myself.”

Julia caught her breath, unable to hold back a grin. With almost no information, Julia had just given an exposition on a technology she'd discovered mere minutes ago. This is what she'd lived for: the thrill of complete intellectual superiority.

New words appeared on the metal wall. "YOU ARE CORRECT IN THE REASONS YOU FIRST LISTED. YOU MAY PROCEED TO THE NEXT ROOM."

Julia frowned. The words implied that there was an error somewhere in her analysis. Her mind churned, trying to discern her mistake.

The wall shifted, revealing new words. "PROCEED TO THE NEXT ROOM, JULIA."

Julia shuddered and did as she was told. The person creating the text was one of the few people in the world who had the authority to command Julia Lynch.

The next room was bare, much like the last. More engraved words greeted her on the wall.

"THE BASIS FOR MATTER SYNTHESIS CAME IN THE FORM OF A LANGUAGE KNOWN AS HUMAN BINARY. MUCH LIKE A COMPUTER RUNS ON A SEQUENCE OF ONES AND ZEROES, HUMAN MINDS RUN ON A SEQUENCE OF WHAT ARE REFERRED TO AS NODAL CONNECTIONS: ELECTRIC ENERGY MOVING IN INTRICATE PATTERNS THAT DENOTES A SEQUENCE OF INFORMATION. THESE ELECTRIC IMPULSES WERE CATALOGUED, TRANSLATED INTO LANGUAGE, AND WRITTEN INTO A COMPUTER CODE. THIS ALLOWS FOR A DIRECT INTERFACE BETWEEN MAN AND TECHNOLOGY."

Julia blinked. In all her life, she'd never conceived that such a thing was possible. Perhaps there were still individuals in the world who could challenge her intellect.

For now, anyway.

"YOU MAY PROCEED TO THE NEXT ROOM," the words added.

Julia gave a stiff nod and stepped forward, entering yet another cramped, faceless room.

"THROUGH MATTER SYNTHESIS, THE ELECTRICAL IMPULSES IN THE BRAIN ARE HARNESSSED TO BEND MATTER TO THE WILL OF MAN. BUT THESE SAME IMPULSES RUN EVERY FUNCTION IN THE

HUMAN BODY.”

Julia nodded, then hesitated. The word ‘but’ stuck out as though it had been bolded. “What do you expect me to do with this information?” Julia asked.

“THIS IS YOUR TRIAL,” the words replied. “YOU MAY PROCEED TO THE NEXT ROOM.”

Julia closed her eyes. There was something there, some dark secret engraved on the wall. The same impulses that run the technology run the human body. What did that mean?

“What happens if I refuse to move forward?” Julia asked.

“THEN YOU WILL STAY HERE,” the words replied. “THERE IS NO GOING BACK. YOU WERE WARNED OF THIS.”

Julia nodded. “I am to become Privileged,” she said, clenching her teeth.

Julia walked through the door. She tried to hold it open, but it flew from her grasp, slamming shut and locking in place. For the first time, Julia turned back towards the door, only to find that it was gone. She faced solid metal walls on three sides. The way forward was the only way at all.

“EXPLAIN THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WHAT WAS TOLD TO YOU IN THE LAST ROOM,” the words said.

Julia shuddered. “*You* explain it to me. Nothing will be gained from my deduction.”

The words shifted. “THE DOOR WILL NOT OPEN UNTIL YOU DO AS YOU’RE TOLD.”

Julia took a long, deep breath, as though something in the air might clear the cold, shivering sensation running through her heart. She knew she could find the answers.

But she was afraid of what she might discover.

“It...it means that excessive—or perhaps any—usage of Matter Synthesis causes the physical body to break down. The cells of the user begin to decay from the lack of neuroelectric energy,” Julia whispered.

“INCORRECT,” the words replied.

Julia breathed a sigh of relief. It was wrong of her to assume the worst. Mankind would never have invented something that—

“IT DOES NOT MERELY CAUSE CELLULAR DECAY, IT BEGINS TO SEPARATE PARTS OF THE BODY, PIECE BY PIECE, FROM THE USER’S MIND. MATTER SYNTHESIZERS LOSE THEIR FORM, BIT BY BIT, WITH THE EDGES OF THEIR FRACTURED EXISTENCE MARKED BY CONSTANT, EXCRUCIATING PAIN.”

Julia choked on her breath. Her world knew no war, no hunger, no desire. Julia could scarcely remember if she’d ever felt pain. All was given and all was provided. Such cruelty could not possibly exist among humanity.

“WHEN YOU ARE READY, YOU MAY PROCEED,” the words said.

“Ready for what?” Julia asked.

“TO FINISH YOUR TRIAL.”

Julia stared back at the blank wall. She saw in it everything she’d seen in the world, everyone she’d ever known. But they were just shadows. Images of what might’ve been, what would’ve been if she’d been anything other than Julia Lynch. She searched her heart for something she’d held dear, for some deep, hidden desire that could make her regret her fate. But her frenzied mind could only provide her with a single, penetrating phrase.

I am going to be Privileged. I am going to be Privileged. Come what may, I am going to be crowned Privileged.

Julia gritted her teeth, fists clenched in determination. She threw the door open and stepped into another room, small and cramped as the first.

In front of her sat a man, slouched in a metal chair. His features were truly horrific, as though some terrible creature had bitten off large chunks of his skin. His face was riddled with holes and bare flesh, the stench of rotten flesh permeating the room. His hair, still long and black with youth, grew out in patches, and his hands and feet were gone, only stumps remaining on the end of his limbs.

As Julia stared into the man’s eyes, she saw intelligence that far exceeded her own. And she also saw pain. Pure, indescribable pain.

Without any movement from the man, words of light appeared in the air. “YOU WILL BE FITTED WITH A MATTER SYNTHESIS DEVICE WITH A CLAMP. IT WILL CAUSE THE DEGRADATION I CURRENTLY EXPERIENCE. YOUR MATTER SYNTHESIS WILL BE USED TO CONTINUE

SUSTAINING THE WORLD.”

Julia closed her eyes, her heart inflamed with pure, unadulterated rage. “You *lied*,” she said through her teeth.

The man stared at her, his grey eyes twitching in the dim light. New words appeared in the air.

“EXPLAIN.”

“The Privileged are promised a life of prosperity. They’re promised safety, and respect, and greatness. I did *everything I could* to become Privileged, and you’re *killing me for it!*”

A single huff of air escaped the man’s lips, almost like a chuckle. “YOU HAVE MISUNDERSTOOD,” the words said. “THE PRIVILEGED ONES ARE NOT THOSE WHO PASS THE TEST. THEY ARE THE ONES WHO FAIL IT, OR BETTER YET, THOSE WHO NEVER TAKE THE TEST IN THE FIRST PLACE. YOU, JULIA LYNCH, WILL NEVER BE PRIVILEGED.”

The words slammed into Julia, and she staggered under their weight. All her life, everything she’d ever worked for... And she was insufficient. Too intelligent to be Privileged, too blind to comprehend what it really meant.

The chair turned and carried the man towards the end of the room. A new door appeared in the metal and swung open.

“Wait!” Julia called, her voice breaking. The man continued on his way.

“Which is it?!” Julia bellowed, her voice screeching through the cold, metal room. The man turned and spared Julia a second glance.

“You will be fitted with a Matter Synthesis device with a clamp,” Julia quoted. “*It*’ will cause the degradation’. So which causes it, the Matter Synthesis device, or the clamp that inhibits it?”

The man stared into Julia’s eyes, then turned his back on her. “Tell me!” Julia screamed. “What’s going to kill me?!”

The man opened his mouth and spoke, his voice as weak and raspy as a dying man’s last breath. “You figure it out. You seem like a smart child.”



Esoteric Art

Jodie Filan

Acrylic & ink

Henson

Clara Leo

She was so certain that she wrote in your book in red pen,
Circling “love,” “you,” “so,” writing
Your
Full
Name
And misspelling, and for all I know,
It could be for reasons I don’t understand
Which I’ll never understand because my hand
Is not bold like hers, and when you lent me your book, saying
“Excuse the red ink,”
All I could think was how, if this book were mine,
I would circle and underline, and write
In smudge-away pencil to understand because to me
Poetry is translation. Poetry is to work my marks
Between the lines to make it
Mine.

But it’s not my book.
It’s yours.
And hers.
And so all I can do is tear a pallid, tiny scrap
Of mass-produced blue-lined paper,
Place it between the pages of the poem “Hiding It,”
And “Polite Plea,” in which she boldly circled “love”
And hope that you interpret my scrap
Like I interpret your poetry.

Kiss Me Like An Uppercut

Joshua Borders

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

—1 Corinthians 6:19-20, ESV

#20. I'm working on myself for myself by myself.

—“20 Inspiring Quotes that Make Going to the Gym a lot Easier” YourTango

I. He's Trapped!

In this story, Narcissus is an American male, circa 2019. He is now a member of a very fancy gym. In fact, this gym is so fancy that it's not even called a gym—Narcissus belongs to a health club. Let us enjoy his journey together.

During his first visit, a girl with smooth skin and dark eyes greets Narcissus as he swings open the heavy glass door. The lobby is hazy, rich chestnut walls and soft sepia lighting, fugue-like and swirling. In the corner, an essential oil diffuser spews eucalyptus; it reeks, like a koala's vomit. Narcissus rests his forearms on the front desk, and the dark-eyed receptionist hands him some forms to fill out, a waiver to sign. He brandishes a credit card, and the receptionist asks if he'd first like to try out the health club and see if he likes it. It's not cheap, after all.

Narcissus shakes his head and flashes a smile, his teeth blindingly white. He thinks he'll like it here, he says, reaching across the counter to brush the receptionist's wrist. She giggles and says that the club is open twenty-four hours, swiping his credit card and entering Narcissus's first month of dues. If you change your mind within a week, she adds, you can get a full refund.

She returns his credit card and points to the left, a corridor with MEN'S plastered above the entryway. She tosses him a cobalt blue towel and implores him to enjoy.

Narcissus takes the towel and buries his face in it, huffing the freshly-laundered cotton, his stubble wiry against the fabric. He walks down the hallway to the locker room, noticing the chic inspirational wall art hanging every few feet. A black box with white lettering: *No pressure, no diamonds*. An orange sculpture of a man mid-bicep curl, a caption digitally projected below: *Life has its ups and downs*. Finally, above the locker room door, a spiral of metal: *The best project you'll ever work on is you*.

Narcissus enters, finds his assigned locker number—thirteen—and changes into a muscle shirt and shorts that fall just above the knee. He sits on a cushioned black bench, ready to don his kicks. Just then, he glances to the right and sees a full-length mirror at the end of the locker room. He moves closer, then closer, then closer, until he is standing a mere five feet away, awash in the glow of his reflection. His muscles ripple, his hair is perfectly coiffed. His eyes could cut stone.

Narcissus cannot believe it; in his search for perfection, he found himself. How could he look away now?

I am not afraid to say it: I love spin class. I know it makes me one of Those People™, the type that talks about GMOs and HMOs and HBO and names their children Brynnifer and Xander and has strong feelings about Whole Foods. But here's the thing—I watch HBO, Xander is a baller name, and Whole Foods is a wild and wonderful place stocked with foods I've never even had the gall to imagine. Camel's milk? Where do I suckle?

Spin is a booming enterprise. From national chains that are meticulously hardass about their brands, like SoulCycle and Zyn22, to local gyms that have a few bikes in their musty basement, American cycling studios average revenues of three-hundred-fifty thousand dollars a year, seventy-five percent higher than non-cycling exercise studios. Spin entrepreneurs are pedaling their stationary bikes all the way to the bank.

We took our first spin class at that FullPcycle in Uptown Dallas. The first one was free, as we are zealots for complimentary exercise classes. The type of class doesn't much matter: we have been game

for Zumba and Pilates,¹ boxing and yoga. We are connoisseurs of workout studios, experts of the membership dodge, and above all, seekers of sweat. You had mentioned—always off-hand—wanting to spin for a few years now, but no one in our family responded with enthusiasm, no one said, *Yeah, that sounds like a good time; when can we go?* So, you sat there, waiting years to directly vocalize your want. This is how you’ve always been, though: you’ll only do something if you can co-opt your brood.

One day last year, we were sitting in the kitchen. I was perched on the granite countertop, dangling my legs off the side, and you were seated at the bar. Again, you mentioned wanting to go to spin. I said that sounded cool. There was a silence, only punctured by me peeling a barely-ripened banana. You asked, *Will you go with me?* I said sure. In the end, it was not difficult to convince me; all you had to do was ask.

II. Pillsbury Shameboy

Our culture is full of shame. Fat-shaming, smart-shaming, slut-shaming—even shame-shaming. How is it that I feel shame while admitting to feeling shame? The Avett Brothers: *Shame, boatloads of shame*. Zadie Smith: *Writing is a shameful enterprise. Who are you to write four hundred pages on anything? Why should anyone have to read it?*

Since we no longer slink around like Puritans and make the cross with our fingers to actually “shame” people,² it is now an implicit motivator. The health-and-wellness industry revolves around this backgrounded beast. With seventy percent of women and forty-three percent of men between the ages of eighteen and thirty saying

¹ Only the sans goat variety, though. I don’t want to be in vulnerable poses around a farm animal that is like, raised-by-the-streets mean while I’m supposed to be surrendering to the stretch and bringing balance to my organs.

² If shame ever returns to the forefront of our culture, there will be many people, Lululemon-ensconced, that must first set down their vegan non-fat ice-whipped dominatrix-lite mocha latte and place Cesario back in his designer crib in order to free up both hands for the making of the forefinger cross. This is how I envision spending most of my life.

they dislike their body,³ there is money to be made. The promise: if you dislike your body, you can change it. Adding a social component introduces more shame.⁴ *Your friends are changing; they are growing. Why can't you?*

As a college student living on campus, opportunities to exercise are abundant. My apartment is just a minute walk from the university's sand volleyball courts, which themselves are adjacent to the campus rec center. Six days a week, I go to the Rec and get at least one sweat in—running, biking, weightlifting, or some combination thereof. Sprinkled throughout the week, I play volleyball, basketball, and racquetball with my friends.

Beside the racquetball courts is an encased poster; the picture inside is of a thin white guy wearing thick spectacles, a white tank top, and a white-and-red striped headband that keeps a head of wispy and kind of grungy-looking hair out of his eyes. He's scrunched up his nose, the wrinkles on his cheeks like valleys. His arms are crossed. There's no way around it—he screams *nerd*. Traced around his frame is the outline of a body with muscles, and the caption is simple: *Got goals?*

Even on a college campus—the supposed front-lines of progress, tolerance, and acceptance—the message is clear: some bodies just aren't good enough. All are equal, but some are more equal than others.

I have never known a time where you weren't fit. Most mornings, you would get a workout in far before the sunrise. There was that stage where you did Curves even though you were way too young

³ <https://thebodyimagecenter.com/education-awareness/eating-disorder-statistics/>

⁴ The dynamic of group fitness is fascinating. Before the proliferation of chains like Gold's Gym in the eighties laid the groundwork for the explosion of exercise classes, the only time people worked out in large-ish groups was if they were part of the military or a sports team; i.e., you were required to both be present and "give it your all." If you were/did not, there were consequences ranging from minor (demoted to riding the pine on the junior high baseball team) to the literal life-threatening ("If you don't perfect this hand-to-hand combat technique, some foreign soldier will beat you, and your ass is grass, Private"). Exercise classes must therefore raise the stakes of the workout to keep people attending and engaged. Enter shame.

to do Curves, the mornings you would walk around the high school track and crack jokes with the football coaches, the months you and other women lifted weights in someone's weird and cramped barn. Then you'd come home and make breakfast, see your kids off to school, and go to work.

The discipline with which you cared for your body astounded me. You'd forgo an extra piece of cake, eat salads for lunch, and purchase (and actually eat) flax seed. Flax seed!

When I was eight years old, I asked you if I could borrow one of your exercise videos so I could start working out. You looked kind of annoyed, like you were confused by the premise of the question. We were sitting in the kitchen again, which is where we so often sit and talk, and you sputtered out, *What? Why? You don't need to work out.*

I told you I thought I was kind of fat, and you said first, *No, you're not*, and then, *Your weight doesn't matter*. You then explained the difference between being thin and being healthy, and that they are merely correlated, but being thin doesn't automatically mean you're healthy, and being fat doesn't automatically mean you're unhealthy. *Health is what we're going for*, you said. *Health is what matters*.

I'm not sure if I believed you then, but I know I don't believe you now. Nobody can see and judge my blood pressure or my resting heart rate,⁵ but they can see my pillowy torso, my flailing pasta arms. I know I shouldn't care, but I do. When I take my shirt off to play sand volleyball or go swimming, I can't help but think, *What do they see?*

Let us return to our main man, the star of the show—Narcissus. Two days have passed, but Narcissus remains still, transfixed. The other health club members have largely ignored him, busy changing and showering and talking loudly on their cell phones. In the background, the whirr of toilets flushing.

His eyes are bloodshot—red veins polishing the whites—and though he looks different, he is still the epitome of beauty. His cheeks have sunk; his side is hurting. He has not had a drink of water in forty-eight hours. His mouth is dry, so dry. But Narcissus is his

⁵ 127/73 and 51 beats per minute, respectively, under ordinary conditions.

own oasis.

We know how this story ends. Another day passes, then another, and another, and another. His skin, gaunt and yellow, barely contains his protruding skeleton. His muscle shirt, once flattering and snug, now drapes over his frame like a curtain. But he cannot stop looking at his body, devouring itself.

When Narcissus dies, the last face he sees is his own, pale and sickly. What, we may ask, is his final thought? As he succumbs to Death, as Life flickers from his eyes, as his lungs squeeze out a final breath, what is he thinking? Does he consider himself lovely?

III. Asylum Jailbreak Disco Party

After you asked and after I said let's do it, we went to our first spin class at the Dallas FullPsyche, located right beside a boutique shopping center and a place that serves Australian-style espressos.⁶

Shelby, our instructor, greeted us right when we opened the glass double doors. "How y'all doing?" she asked while dancing over, straight blonde hair spilling from underneath her snapback. She looks plucked straight from the beaches of Cali; if I didn't already know her,⁷ I would expect her to start lecturing me with anthropological intensity on the differences between neighborhoods in L.A.

You said we were very excited for our first spin, and I nodded along. Shelby grooved back behind the bright white counter and checked us in, then asked what size shoes we needed. I walked to a locker and put my sandals up, then slipped on the spin shoes, which are like a hybrid between sneakers and water shoes, a plastic strap running across the top. They have a metal divot on the sole that clips on the bike's pedals, keeping the rider snapped in place.

The cycling studio itself was around the corner, a heavy blue door with the word "Asylum" scrawled in red on the plaque. We entered the "Asylum" and saw a darkened room with tiers of bikes, the instructor's front and center. We found our assigned bikes in

⁶ It's the type of coffee bar that probably deserves the ritzy "Shoppe" moniker.

⁷ She's the daughter of my dentist and the mother of a little boy from whom I once bought lemonade.

the second tier and hopped aboard, and you talked to some of the middle-aged women around you as we waited for Shelby to start the class.

Spin classes take on the personality of their instructor. Some classes have instructors that spout so many platitudes and exude so much charisma that they could, in another life, be cult leaders. Shelby is not one of those instructors. She's simply an enthusiastic and incredibly fit young mother, and the class reflected that. Her rap-heavy playlist⁸ boomed through the loudspeakers, and she incorporated a good mix of fast-paced songs for sprints and slower-paced beats for recovery.

At the end of the forty-five-minute ride, I unclipped my shoes and disembarked, my scarlet shirt so drenched with sweat that it became a darker shade, a crimson. I walked out of the studio⁹ and grabbed a cold towel that smelled of lavender, dabbing the back of my neck. In the lobby, you and the other middle-aged woman talked about what a workout that had been, how intense it was, how crazy you are for doing spin. My legs shook as I wobbled out to the car and climbed inside, anticipating a piece of lemon pie waiting for me at home.

In his Netflix special *Hitler's Dog, Gossip & Trickery*, the comedian Norm Macdonald riffed on restaurant dining, finding humor in the way desserts are presented by waiters:

Desserts are different nowadays. When I was young, the waiter would come around and go, "Would you like the apple pie or the cherry pie?" and you'd say, "I'd like the apple pie." Now desserts—oh my Lord! The guy shows up, and he's got a big tray and every confection known to man is on it. And I don't like the way he talks, because he

⁸ Migos, Cardi B, Future, Rihanna, that song about Jordan Belfort, etc. etc.

⁹ By the way, conflating exercise with artmaking via the use of "studio" as a fanciful substitute for "gym" or "cycling room" is not accidental. Part of the allure of these places—these "studios"—is the sense that you're forking over money for an almost transcendental exercise experience, something you can't get from, say, riding your bike in the park.

doesn't have the pork chop talk anymore. Now there's, all of a sudden, all these sexual undertones. He's like, "May I tempt you with something?" "Do you like decadent things?" "I hope you left some room in your belly." Wait a second, are we still talking about desserts here?

It should not be surprising, but it is: the same language that surrounds dessert is the same language that surrounds exercise. There is no reason to call a spin studio an "Asylum," just like there's no reason for a chocolate cake to be modified by "Devil's." This language is a bait-and-switch, a way to make the quotidian feel edgy and exciting, like self-indulgence is not our default setting. *Did you pedal a stationary bike for forty-five minutes? That's crazy. Or, Did you eat two pieces of that chocolate cake? So naughty.* Anything to keep us coming back for more.

After our third or fourth spin class, we sat in your Honda and on the drive home, talked about our family: my brother's addiction, my sister's rashness, my dad's tiredness. We spoke just loud enough to be heard over the gale-force air conditioning, our shirts sticking to the leather seats. Our voices—a loud hush.

I said it was a time of transition for us all; we each are in that stage of life where the ground beneath us looks steady, but we still can't stop swaying. You said, *I get it, I really do, but I just don't feel like myself.*

I wonder if you feel how I do when I look in the mirror, and I mean truly *look*, after months of only glancing, months of perfunctory tooth-brushing and eyebrow-taming. I lean in, press my hand against my jaw, trace the stubble, and wonder, *Have I always been like this?* And then I look away.



Speak No Evil

Aroh Arzate

Acrylic & ink on wood

An Ode to Childhood Innocence in Iambic Pentameter

Isabel Armiento

When sultry mermaid tail bask'd on slick rocks
With whispered chants, resounding spells unbound
And roving through the vale, dark-cloak'd warlocks
Besprinkl'd honeyed dust on eager ground,

With opalescent scale and gleaming claws
Would fiery lungs of igneous lizard bray,
And filigree once wing-like hung; the gauze
Of flight that decorates the backs of fay,

Then magic thrived; 'fore sense ate poetry
Once glaz'd with mystic, now in beauty scant
'Fore sluggish minds burn't wand with rosary
And shunn'd with wizened age aught which enchants.

When years usurp'd ecstatic souls of youth
The wisdom lent by time unveils the truth.

Afternoon Drift

Elizabeth Landrum

Come with me for a quiet kayak afternoon.
Let's share tales of our childhoods,
let our blades break the placid straits
and glide
past purple sea stars and urchins
clasped tight to the rocks
while a kingfisher rattles his disturbance
and gulls join a discordant chorus
in their herring-ball congregations.

Now let's turn back,
drift a while and listen.
These shores remember the smoke,
the cedar, the salmon, the welcoming poles.
The midden remembers the mollusks,
and the mollusk remembers its gills.
Those stumps remember the ten-foot
two-man saw. These lichen remember
the breezes of eons, and that black
pocked rock remembers the molten center.

Let's train our ears to symphonies
of the deep and her creatures,
listen for tales from our ocean home.
She remembers her ice ghosts
and bones—whales, nets, gunwales,
sailors—subsumed in silt and salt.
Let's skim the surface together.
Our tiny boat,
our sliver of time.

Thunder Road

Megan Conley

*the screen door slams / Mary's dress waves / like a vision she dances
across the porch / as the radio—*

I am kissing the boy in the front seat, and I am seventeen. I am kissing him, and my dad's favorite song is on the radio, and I am thinking about the nuns. Yesterday the nuns said to never fuck a man who was not your husband, and the girls cackled in the bathroom after class, legs crossed over the heater, skirts rolled short. Watching them, I suddenly knew that they had already been fucked. That they were not only unknissed, but also uncoupled.

The girls laughed and texted and howled in the bathroom where the nuns could not see them, because the nuns had never fucked anybody, so I finally said yes when he offered me a ride home. Even if I didn't really like him that way, I said yes because it was a guarantee, what he wanted. I didn't tell him my address, and he didn't ask for it, and we both know the parking lot behind Boscov's is empty because it's four in the afternoon on a Tuesday.

*Rooooo Orbison singin' for the lonely / hey that's me and I want
you only*

I am kissing the boy, and I am thinking about being in love with him. He's not my boyfriend, and I don't need him to be because I am seventeen and yes, I want to fuck him, yes, it's spring and graduation and leaving and too much for a body to bear all alone, and we all need a release, then, from the body—his hand slides up my blouse while the other tugs my wrist into his seat and then, I'm holding him, warm and stiff. I am thinking of the nuns and the girls and then, of nothing at all.

*show a little faith / there's magic in the night / you ain't a beauty
but hey, you're alright / oooh—and that's alright with me*

*you can hide 'neath your covers / and study your pain / make
crosses from your lovers /
throw roses in the rain / waste your summer praying in vain /
for a savior to rise from these streets*

*well now I'm no hero, that's understood /
all the redemption I can offer, girl, / is beneath this dirty hood*

His fingers slide through my hair and I love it, maybe even love him, if he keeps that dizzying grip on the corner of my jaw, I might even love him through summer. I don't know what he tastes like. I don't have time to think about what he tastes like, because all I'm picturing is the next thing, the thing I wanted to do so I could roll up my skirt and sit on the heater and not care if the nuns confiscated my phone, so I could have something to say when the girls looked at me, like they would tomorrow, when they asked about after. He tugs on my hair, just a little, and I want to say harder, but I will wait until after, save it for the after, after, after.

*with a chance to make it through somehow / hey, what else can we
do now? /
except roll down the window and let the wind roll back your hair*

*well, the night's busting open / these two lanes will take us anywhere /
we got one last chance to make it real / to trade in these wings on
some wheels*

climb in back / heaven's waiting down on the tracks

He doesn't want to kiss me again. I start tracing his features—a white boy's straight nose, those double-hooded eyes. I almost want those things, and not in the way I had just gotten them. My finger twirls all the way down the collar of his white polo shirt, around the golden "R" embroidered on his chest, the same "R" on my own polo, on the sweatshirt in the backseat, on the bumper sticker of nearly every car in town, at the center of the football field he's already played his last

game on. I ask him if he's decided where to sign yet. Commitment Day is already a month away.

well, I've got this guitar / and I learned how to make it talk

While he talks, my hand continues slowly falling, now flat-palmed against his stomach, feeling through the waffleknit for the muscle I imagined under there, to check off the girls' first question, always asked through a strawberry-scented echo, handed down like ritual every day: Did he have abs? My hand finally meets the hem of the polo, and I'm nodding while he's talking, smiling as I raise it just a little bit, greeted by the yellowed healing of a bruise over his hip. My gaze pauses and skips down farther, looking for the bruise's beginnings—only to suddenly think of Thanksgiving blimps, of my neighbor's inflatable Santa sagging in the melting snow because they never bother to take it down until March.

and my car's out back / if you're ready to take that long walk

I am thinking about how the spring sun is so warm here, in his Jeep, how it filters through the windows and makes clothes unnecessary, the sunlight as warm as any cotton underwear, and how he doesn't even seem to notice, and how strange boys really look, in broad daylight. How this right here, was at the center of everything those nuns and girls were really talking about. My hand abandons his shirt to reach out and grasp it.

In the same moment, his head deflates onto my shoulder, and I am holding him, gently, patiently, only to realize I am still waiting for after, for repayment, in some way. Instead, he asks me if the coach wanted to know.

I say no, it just seemed like the thing to ask, but his voice comes the same way he did: fast and hot, against my neck—

and I know you're lonely / for words that I ain't spoken

—and he's saying that when his top choice school rejected him, his

dad wanted to kill him, like really kill him, like threw him down the stairs because now he's playing D2 and how the fuck did this happen, why did they spend all that money on the best private school in the county with the best football program in the state if he wasn't going to end up good enough, how was the family supposed to face everyone on Commitment Day, while all his teammates were signing to Ohio State and Michigan and Duke and Penn State, and who the fuck gets scouted out of a D2 school and what the fuck did he do wrong and even all these months later, he can't sit next to his dad in the car. They take separate cars to church.

*there were ghosts in the eyes of / all the boys you sent away /
they haunt this dusty beach road / in the skeleton frames / of
burned out Chevrolets*

This close, his breathing overrides the music—hot, heavy panting, almost heaving, and besides where his cheek meets my shoulder, he is not touching me. Dust motes glide in from the window, and I watch them float over the clenched fists on his knees. I wait for his breathing to slow. Not because I am patient, but because I don't know why he's telling me this. We have English together every day for fifty minutes, where I sit in the third row and he grins at me from the fifth, and at the end of every class, he walks me to my locker down the hall and tries to drive me home. I know his sister takes AP Geometry with my little brother. I know his Jeep Wrangler is the same color as my cousin's. I know he mostly parties with public school kids. I know he posts to Instagram every weekend from someone's garage, throwing up a pointer finger and straight-mouthed gaze to the camera, beer pong table in front of him. I now know he has bruises, and where he gets them from.

He inhales deeply and sighs, like a final note, and I know my turn to speak is coming faster than I can come up with something. What do you say to a boy you barely know?

*they scream your name at night in the street / your graduation
gown lies in rags at their feet*

Later, when I am older, after I have already left, there will be many other confessions hissed into the crooks of my body. Men will think me a confession booth, which is what, I suppose, the nuns were trying to tell us all along: Take notes, study up. Learn how to absolve any man who comes before you.

I couldn't imagine the other girls here, in this position. I'd imagined them on twin beds while a party blared downstairs, or secreted away to motel rooms on the boardwalk, or on some couch in a basement. I had, for the most part, pictured them comfortable, taken care of. Today, in this car, I had expected to be the one unfolding, to be picked apart and unraveled in the same way every girl was, but here he was—unspooling like a video tape you didn't mean to unwind so quickly, spilling out of his case, this hard shape of a football-playing church-going boy.

He says he just doesn't know what happened.

He says he wishes he was good enough.

And that, at least, is something I can understand.

*and in the lonely cool before dawn /
you hear their engines roaring on*

I tell him I'm sorry, and that sucks, and I get it. I cup one hand over his fist, swipe the other over his forehead, pretend I am giving penance, and rest my chin on his shoulder. I tell him it's okay, parents suck, mine are kind of the same, they never stop screaming and asking and...and hounding me for questions, which schools I got into and which schools my friends did, how much money did they get in scholarship compared to me, and all that bullshit, when shouldn't we just—be enough? We're all doing so much all the time, and they just don't get it, they just think we're fucking investments and all this is so easy, like we don't get miserable too, like we're not—trying hard enough—

*when you get to the porch, they're gone /
so Mary, climb in*

He pulls away. Zips his pants. He does not look at me. The music swells.

*it's a town full of losers /
I'm pulling out of here to—*

For the rest of the drive, the music rises like a wall between us, piano keys smashing and trilling, the saxophones cacophony embodied, guitars riffing and freestyling, a construction site of wild, happy sound pouring from the speakers, and even when it's already loud, I reach out and turn it up, to blockade our silence while he speeds down Route 35. If I did something wrong, I assume I will never find out. With each jolt of those giant wheels over winter potholes, I can feel him barely move, already a boy-shaped statue, unable to say or hear anything.

Something tender bubbles up my throat, and even though I am not in love with him, my hands still remember how soft he really is.

He drops me off at the bottom of my driveway, because of course he knew my address. Everyone knows which one's the coach's house.

As his car pulls away, I look over at my neighbor's yard where, yes, there is a patch of dead grass, where that inflatable Santa came, and went. I look down at my skirt and swallow the tenderness, because there, right at my hip, is the same exact spot, and as I trudge up home, I try really hard not to think about badges. And Girl Scouts. And doing things I didn't really care about just so later I could say, *See? I did this. I did this too.*

"Thunder Road" song lyrics by Bruce Springsteen



Man Sitting on the Ground with a Cone on His Head

Aroh Arzate

Acrylic & ink on wood

9/11 Eve

Phoenix Kendall

Dear beings, I can feel your hands. I can feel your tongue
sliding down my throat and
making a name for itself. I can feel the hair
on my legs grow into a skyline and
I can feel the forgotten
syllable in Bjork. Dear beings, I can
feel the page turning cheek turning
meek shotgun wedding of paranoia and
priesthood. Dear beings, I am praying for you
to call CPS on Uncle Sam. Dear beings, I am afraid
I am America's ashtray, although
nobody smokes cigarettes anymore. Dear beings,
dear being is
alive enough to turn off the clocks
one day maybe hopefully
I don't know

Little J.

Layla Lenhardt

I remember un-peeling you like a clementine
under a full moon at the Jersey shore. You were
topless in a beach house kitchen and it hurt
harder than all the skinned knees of my childhood.

We fed each other pocked strawberries, but I never
digested them, they were better stuck between
my teeth. My fingers were in your mouth, my mouth
was on your chest. We were silver and white,
a spider web on a queen-sized bed.

Later, I was in a bathtub, watching my hair
float in curls around me like a noose. Your name was a spell
I cast to make myself remember that all the demons under my bed
were silenced when I was under you.



Set Me Free

Farah Hashmi

Digital Huion tablet & clip studio program

This Will Only Hurt a Little

Stephan Sveshnikov

The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft a-gley.

—Robert Burns

At 16:42 on February 2nd, 2458 CE, Edgar P. Bean caught a common cold. It might be more precise to say that it caught him. To be yet more precise, that which caught him was a specimen of Human Rhinovirus C19, prototype strain CL-Fnp5, whose malportentious classification was first proposed by Briese et al. in 2007, and later confirmed by McIntyre et al. in 2008. Under an electron microscope, HRV-C19 appears small and round, with a shaggy surface like a bionic-weave carpet from the mid-2300s.

The event transpired thusly: Mr. Bean, having finished his shift at 16:30, was about to catch the hover train when he felt a slight itch in his eye, and, taking his hand from the railing momentarily, he indulged in scratching it, thereby transporting some small number of HRV-C19 viruses to his own system.

Why was HRV-C19 present on the railing, so meticulously cleaned every hour by Maiselle, the cleaning cyborg? What had happened was this: A security guard on the city border, assigned to keep out the slum dwellers, noticed a young boy trying to slip under the fence, and, at the precise moment that the security guard's boot connected with the child's ribs, the boy sneezed. Specimens of HRV-C19 CL-Fnp5 exited the boy's mouth at 4.5 meters-per-second and lodged firmly on the lower half of the security guard's jacket, which happened to brush up against the ill-fated railing after his shift was over at 16:02, dislodging some of the offending virus. Maiselle, surprised by an impromptu visit from her lover Pierre, who sold cleaning brushes, was in no state to respond until 17:01, at her next officially-scheduled wipe down. The security guard, having received last week's vaccine, even had he ingested, inhaled, or eyed any of the virus (which he did not), was entirely safe.

Not so Mr. Bean. The next morning, at 6:00, he awoke to

an unpleasant and unfamiliar sensation. It was as if there were a dreadful weight, a heavy and wet weight in his nostrils, as if they were filled with moistened tissue paper or liver pâté. The back of his throat itched, as did his eyes. Mr. Bean did not know quite what to make of this.

For his sake, it is perhaps worth explaining some of what, for him, needed no explanation. By 2453 CE, sickness had been eliminated from most U.S. cities. In Richardson, a suburb of Dallas, where Mr. Bean lived, there had been no reported illness for the past two-hundred-and-thirty-three years, and no common cold for even longer than that. The elderly were peacefully and entirely voluntarily euthanized at the age of eighty-five, in a ceremony known as “Serene Surrender.”

The common cold had proven particularly difficult to eradicate. In the 1950s, scientists first attempted to create a rhinovirus vaccine, only to realize, over the next few decades, that there were over two hundred viruses which, singly or in combination, could cause a cold.

In the 1980s and 90s, scientists experimented with vaccines that tried to guard against a common trait by which all of the viruses could be recognized. Still, there was always one that would slip through. It was not until the early 2000s that scientists tried the simplest trick of all: create a vaccine with every single virus in it. To everyone’s surprise, it worked. But it stayed in development. The pharmaceutical company that owned the research wasn’t willing to fund clinical trials, preferring to get rich off cold medication rather than risk billions on a vaccine that would end up cutting profits in the long run. So they sat on the cure.

Thus it wasn’t until government nationalization of Pharma, in 2050, that the vaccine could finally be noticed—and completed. It had to be modified every few years, of course. Some rural Americans refused to be vaccinated, as did the homeless, who had to be moved outside of the cities. It was against them, mostly, that the unnamed security guard had been posted. The danger of his position meant that he received an updated vaccine every week. Not so Mr. Bean, whose position in the center of the city was much more secure. Until that fateful day.

Mr. Bean did not think of calling in sick. He may have read that phrase in one of the old books, but it would not be one that could come readily to mind. Instead, he thought the following:

I must be dying.

—thought Mr. Bean.

He lay in abject misery for some long moments, staring at the ceiling in underwhelming gloom, feeling the entire tragedy of the medieval situation sink in: young, unmarried, with parents and siblings who would grieve for him, with co-workers who would miss him, Mr. Bean was on his way to a Serene Surrender fifty-eight years earlier than planned, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Throughout the day, holograms of friends and family visited Mr. Bean's bedside, wishing him all the best, as tears (poorly rendered in the holographic projection) ran down their cheeks. Finally, near sundown, the doctor arrived (a certain Dr. Fitzpatrick). He wore a hazmat suit and glasses. He was there in his capacity as a public safety officer, and his foremost concern was ensuring that Mr. Bean would not infect any other citizens. Dr. Fitzpatrick spoke as gently as a 500-pound titanium-alloy robotic medical droid could.

"I'm so sorry," he said.

"What is it, doctor?" asked Mr. Bean. "Am I dying?"

"I'm afraid so," said the doctor. "All of your symptoms point to one illness: the common cold. Unfortunately, this sickness is untreatable."

Dr. Fitzpatrick's protocols were set to prioritize two things: public safety and an end to suffering. He had of course been programmed with the knowledge that Mr. Bean would recover full health within a matter of days, but only after a bout of suffering that, according to his empathy protocols, would be unacceptable to admit to a patient. Furthermore, Mr. Bean would be heavily contagious during that period, and such a breach of public safety could not be permitted.

Mr. Bean himself was more than ready to be convinced. Today had been an experience worse than anything he had before imagined.

Not knowing how to blow his nose, Mr. Bean had swallowed a great deal of mucus, which in turn had upset his stomach, and he

had vomited, also for the first time in his life. A fever which had now subsided nevertheless left him feeling uncomfortably warm, as his personal climate control seemed to have stopped working. In short, Mr. Bean was ready to go.

“I’m so sorry,” said Dr. Fitzpatrick again. He pulled out a hypodermic needle and rolled forward on his rubber-kevlar wheels. “Close your eyes and think of a happy memory,” counselled the doctor. “This will only hurt a little.”



Hangry

Marbella Alberto

Acrylic on canvas

Highway of Tears

Kirsten Fedorowicz

*Dozens of women missing or murdered, cases unresolved, in
British Columbia*

an indigenous woman was once going somewhere,
headed south on the highway, standing on the soft shoulder
in sweatpants, thumb sticking up in the air.

there are dozens of graves along the highway,
graves made from marble, names and dates,
pictures of dark-haired women with ghosts of smiles.

and deep within the coniferous trees,
between the mountains' sloped bodies,
there are the graves no one has ever found.

names marked on pine needles and carved into trunks,
chirped by the birds who saw everything,
who cry out her name in the hopes that someone might hear it,

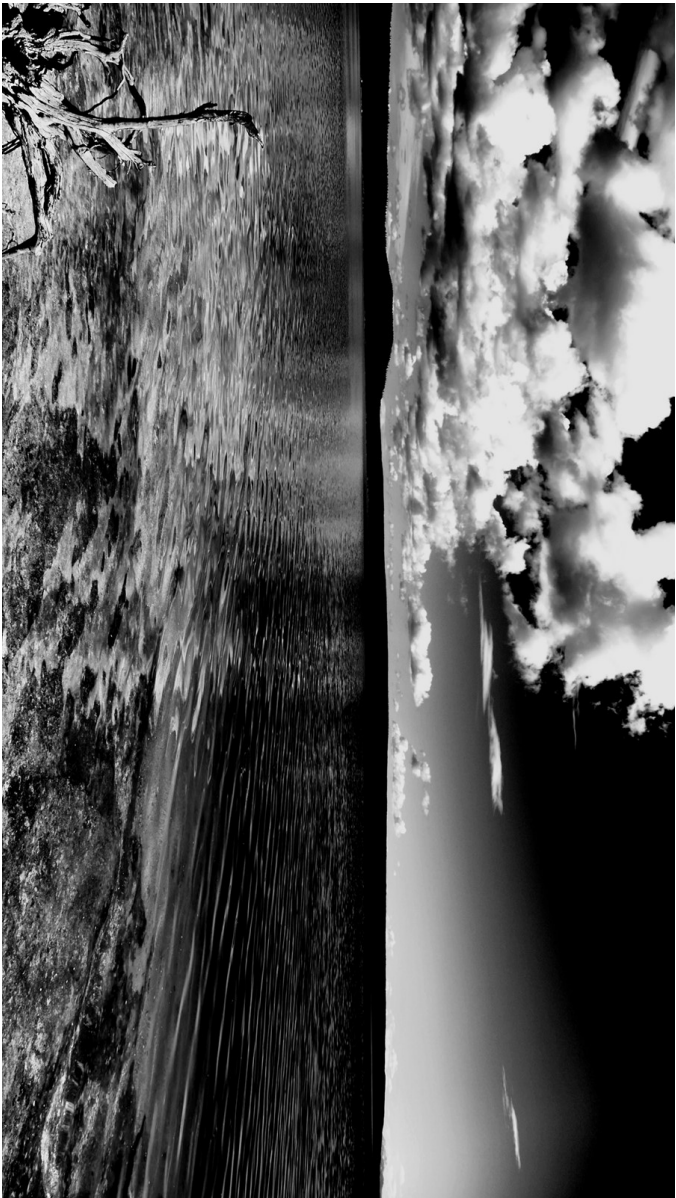
that she still lingers on someone's lips,
so that she serves not as a warning but a person who, once,
smiled as she lifted her body into the passenger seat.

Loosening the Unquiet

Morgan Feltz

My brain is a steel trap set by
the traditional figure of
a woman with neatly-painted nails
the color of demure;
rocked by the pendulum of law,
the church bells my mother hums along to;
sopping from the free, wet northern sky
where my eyes first went
out of joint,
as an educated man taught me
to display exquisite excrement on paper.

There are no dreams in a lit room—
only uneasy sleep.
A toss and a turn disrupting the calm,
loosening the unquiet
that settles like treacle in the throat.



Secrets

Fabrice Pousin

Photography

Rising

Rachael Bates

Yeast

Yeast are single-celled microorganisms that are classified as fungi, along with mushrooms and mold. Without yeast, beer and wine would not exist. It is likely that the use of yeast predates written language.

Before leavening agents came in sealed foil packets, people made their own yeast, keeping the fermenting fungus alive in a medium of water collected from rain barrels, wells, or nearby streams, and hand-ground flour from wheat fields behind their homes. In those days, you could taste the land and the sky in your bread.

Sourdough

1. Take a handful of flour, add some water, and let the mixture sit for ten days on your countertop. You are making sourdough starter from scratch. The wild yeast floating in the air will find your simple mixture and begin to feast. Vital signs include growth and bubbling. Feed your starter every day by adding a little more flour and water. Understand that it is like a baby that must be nourished.

2. You have created a living, breathing fungi in a small bowl. It will continue to grow and multiply as long as you feed it. Often, bakers refer to this live starter as the 'mother.' If kept alive, it will feed you forever.

3. In a large bowl, mix half a cup of starter with flour, water, a pinch of salt, and a spoonful of honey. Add more flour till you form a dough. Knead for ten minutes.

4. Now for the difficult part which is out of your control and mysterious. Cover the dough with a cloth and leave it alone. Hope for dough that will hoist itself over the edges of the bowl, up into the air. Be prepared for stubborn dough that has refused to budge, and seems denser than you remember. Have faith. You can always try again. You *must* try again.

Sweet

'Bethlehem' means 'House of Bread' in Hebrew. Jesus was born in a House of Bread.

On Christmas Eve, my sisters gather. We find the cinnamon, the butter, the nuts. We stretch dough across the countertop, three sets of hands patting and pressing. We argue about how much brown sugar to sprinkle over the melted butter and if we should use cranberries instead of raisins because someone forgot to buy raisins. On Christmas morning, the sticky buns emerge, smothered in caramel and pecans. Sometimes the cinnamon rolls are well-risen, melt-in-your-mouth soft and fluffy, but other times they come out of the oven small and hard. No matter, this bread is made to celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus, the birth of the Savior.

Risen

The people of Wales believe that if your bread rises, it is a sign that you are well loved. Love can raise even the coldest body of bread.

Leavened bread symbolizes the New Covenant Jesus made with his people when he died and rose again. The curtain was torn. The separation between God and man was no more. The Holy Spirit hovered over brows like tongues of fire.

When I was knee-high and waist-high I recall my grandmother asking me, "Is Jesus in your heart?" especially after I misbehaved. I knew all about Jesus from Biblical storybooks illustrated with gardens and arks and little children. When she asked me this, I tried to imagine a man in sandals with long hair and a beard standing inside the small, red organ in my chest. His head always seemed to scrape the roof of my heart because he was too big. I preferred to imagine my heart as something outside my body, a place with castles and mountains and forests. Plenty of space for Jesus and me to chat and look out the window. I dreamt of heaven, of Jesus as a little child. I thought of him more and more as an invisible friend.

Burnt

Burnt bread, like other burnt foods, can lead to the formation of carcinogens. The neighbors feed my dog rat poison on Christmas

Day. I find him crumpled on the stone steps behind the garden, vacant-eyed and foaming at the mouth. I am thirteen years old and beginning to exchange a black-and-white understanding of the world for one with infinite shades of grey. I can find no better way, cliché or otherwise, to describe my slipping from childhood into whatever comes after. I stand outside and look over the mountains, and I howl at God: “I believe in you, I love you, but I cannot trust you.”

The Body of Christ

Bowed heads, hunched shoulders. A hunk of dry white bread is passed, torn, brought slowly to mouths, crumbs flying with whispered prayers. I wait with a piece in my hand; I feel it melting into a dough ball with the sweat from my fingers. At last, the blood of Christ is being passed along the rows, grape juice in tiny cups sloshing with the jolting of elbows. God, your body sticks in my throat before the wine washes it down. Jesus, tell me this: when you lay in the coldness of your tomb, did you fear you would not rise?

Raw

My boyfriend kisses a girl, and then another. I find out a few weeks later and I am heartbroken. At fifteen, he is my first love. I feel that I have been cut from my moorings, cast out into a cruel and uncaring sea. I need to take control over some part of my unraveling self, so I choose to control what I eat. I lose weight, too much weight—maybe this will make me feel whole? I refuse bread altogether. My hair thins, my reason thins.

I lean on God more and more as I grapple with loss and the confusion of adolescence. I address journal entries to Him, pouring my angst onto the page and into His omnipotent hands. At night I light candles and pray for sleep, hoping the flickering flames will distract me from insomnia. Hour after dark hour creeps by until I feel that God does not hear me.

Light

I read Mark Helprin’s novel *A Soldier of the Great War* when

I am sixteen and cry for the first time in a year. I write this quote in my journal: “As long as you have life and breath, believe. Believe for those who cannot. Believe even if you have stopped believing. Believe for the sake of the dead, for love, to keep your heart beating, believe. Never give up, never despair, let no mystery confound you into the conclusion that mystery cannot be yours.”

I leave my home in India where I spent sixteen years growing up and move to America for college. I have no fear of what lies ahead; God is with me.

Stale

At nineteen, I stop believing.

Unwholesome

I lose my faith because I am far from home, far from the people who taught me to believe what I used to believe. I am told by college professors, the media, the world around me, that God is a fairy tale. All the places I imagined God to be, in the land of my heart, with castles and mountains, in the dreams, the journaled conversations, were nothing more than *imagination*. Why did it take me so long to see? I am taught that the Bible is nothing more than a volume of literature, like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Jesus was a good man, but he was not divine and he did not rise from the dead. And God so loved the world that he never existed at all.

Crumbling

I drop out of college after my freshman year to travel to Europe. Since I do not believe in God anymore, I need to find a way to believe in the world. I need to escape the loneliness that has settled on my shoulders like a mud-rimmed cloak. God has abandoned me and I tell myself that I should not be so angry or so hurt. I should feel free, no longer weighed down by the burden of religion. Instead, I feel like I have lost an ally and a friend, and I know I must force myself to forget the nonsense of the past.

I hope that travel will help. Looking to improve my grasp of the French language, I find a volunteer position at a horse farm in rural

Burgundy. In exchange for food and board, I will be put to work alongside other French-speaking volunteers.

Marie, the owner of the farm, meets me at the bus stop. Nervous about trying out my classroom French, I fumble my way through some conversation. She is loud and quick to talk over me. Her hair is sun-bleached and thinning, revealing the pale red of her scalp. There is an ever-simmering anger beneath that scalp and the skin of her face.

I have chosen to work at the farm because I am experienced with horses. I know to expect the unexpected when I am around them. I know that I will need something to ground me in this new world of mine that is not held together by bonds of faith. I choose horses because they will keep me from unraveling and because they remind me of my childhood, of times when the world made more sense. I find comfort in the softness of their muzzles and the smell of their fur.

The first time I go out riding with the other volunteers, Marie gives me one of the ornery, older horses to handle. He is clumsy over roots and lumps in the road and begins bucking whenever we break into a trot. Accustomed to horses more unruly than he, I stay calm, quietly aware of Marie's pale blue eyes on me. Back at the barn, amidst a chattering of French voices, a swishing of tails and stomping of hoofs, Marie singles out my horse to inspect. She runs her hand down a front leg and turns to me, quivering with anger.

"Quel est le problème?" I ask, bewildered.

She throws her hands up in mock despair, furious that I had not noticed a small, scabbed-over cut on my horse's heel. She is très, très disappointed in me. Later, the other girls confide that this is a typical baptism by fire and that Marie probably chose that horse for me because she knew it had a preexisting scrape.

Pastry

We watch, warily, as Marie drives a beat-up car through the gates, rolls down her window, and calls us over. We scurry towards her, bracing ourselves, just in case we had unwittingly done something wrong. I notice that there is an assortment of bread pressed up

against the windows, piled high enough to brush the roof. She scowls and cracks a joke that I only half understand with my limited French. Everyone laughs on cue, relieved that she is in one of her better moods. She snaps at us to unload the car *tout de suite*. Though we never know for sure, we guess that Marie made a deal with local bakeries to take unsold produce off their hands to feed her horses and chickens.

We unload armfuls of round loaves, still soft and fragrant with crisscrossed tops, and long brown loaves with seeds crusted into shiny glazes. There are yards and yards of toasted baguettes, some of them green with mold. There are loaves of every shape, size, and color. Mixed in with the bread is an assortment of squashed, but still fresh pastries—flaky croissants, doughnuts oozing with berry jam and dusted with icing sugar, rolled pastries with bits of chocolate, and buttery folded pastries bursting with raisins and apricots. When Marie is gone, we rip off hunks of bread and nibble pieces of pastry, passing them between us like pieces of treasure. My favorite is the almond crusted ones with chocolate inside, *la tresse au chocolat*.

Under the cover of night, we sneak back to the barn where the baked goods are stored. We tuck pastries and loaves under our shirts and steal back to our rooms, rejoicing in our temporary salvation.

Manna

There was no food in the desert, yet God heard the cries of the Israelites. He sent them manna from heaven, and it came to them like frost in the night. They said it tasted like honey. This was God's covenant with his people—that they would eat and be nourished.

I am cantering through the forest, flanked by a few other horses and riders. Marie is back at the farm and we savor her absence on our afternoon ride. I listen to the chatter of French voices and relax, holding the reins loosely in my hands and breathing in the earthy smell of horsehair and dust. We slow to an amble as we come across a clearing in the woods. Tombstones overgrown with moss and lichen gather around a tiny chapel. I slip off my horse and peer through the stained glass windows. This place is old, very old, and holy. I feel a warm, comforting presence burrowing against my chest like a small,

soft animal. God is here. His company is unmistakable. I remember that I don't believe in God anymore but make no attempt to shake off my wonder. The exquisite stillness of the place lingers in my mind as I ride away, folding itself into my memory like pressed flowers.

Whole

After a few months in France, I travel to England and fall in love with footpaths that meander over gentle slopes and sheep-speckled fields until they wander back to where they began. They lead you home, no matter how muddy the way or twisted the route. I also fall in love with a man who I met many years before. Not unlike a fairy tale, we know very soon that we want to be together for the rest of our lives.

In the months leading up to my wedding, I work in the kitchen of a gourmet restaurant. I wash hundreds of pans still dripping with roasted garlic sauce and peppercorn brandy cream. I shape bread rolls into even, round balls and fold filo pastry into muffin-sized baskets. Every so often, I am asked to arrange appetizers and desserts on long white plates, a curl of lemon peel there, a dash of raspberry coulis here, but mostly, I clean and clean. This is not so much a time for artistry, but a time for scrubbing.

The kitchen clanks with metallic sounds, trays from the oven slamming down on stainless steel counters, the jangling of spatulas and spoons as the chef searches for a ladle. Sometimes I linger in the passageway between kitchen and dining room to savor the murmur of voices and tinkling of wine glasses in the restaurant.

Sweat glazes my forehead as I plunge my arms into soapy dishwater. Perhaps conceived by the rhythm of mundane tasks, the clanging sounds of the kitchen are suddenly subsumed into lucid silence. I am aware of an internal tunnel vision focusing my mind. In that silence, I know, beyond all the greyness of doubt, that God is real and that He sees me. My soul, for a moment, is scrubbed clean. Then, from that oasis of peaceful suds, a great sadness swells and washes over me. I know that however unshakable my revelation feels now, my doubts will return. About this, I am certain.

Hard

My husband jokes that I have baked enough bricks of bread to build a house. I am Sisyphus in Tartarus, but my boulder is bread, and I cannot make it rise. I cannot summit this mountain. I wonder sometimes, when a loaf emerges sunken and dry, if I should give up trying to bake homemade bread. Yet something always stirs me on, prompts me to reach for flour and water and begin kneading anew. Sisyphus, though I am a wretch like you, I am not doomed to roll a boulder up a hill for eternity. Surely, that punishment is not mine to bear. The rising of bread is not beyond my grasp, though it may be beyond my understanding. Zeus covers his great mouth with a mighty hand and laughs at your strivings until he is blue in the face. Sisyphus, do you think God laughs at mine?

Unleavened

Unleavened bread is associated with the Old Testament. When Moses and the Israelites were preparing for the Exodus, they baked without leaven because the bread would not have time to rise. Unleavened bread is a reminder of rapid departure, of escape from a tormented existence to one of freedom. But the Israelites did not escape hardship when they fled across the Red Sea. Freedom in the desert was as difficult as enslavement in Egypt. Some expected the Exodus to lead them to paradise. Instead, their ankles were bitten by snakes and their throats were parched, but God was with them always.

I read, in Deuteronomy 8:3, “He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Rye

A twenty-five-pound bag of rye flour sits in my pantry, almost untouched. I used it once or twice, and the loaves were inedible. I cannot face trying again. I know other people craft loaves of rye that are lauded for their nutty flavor and open texture. Mine collapse under their own weight, too dense to rise. The yeast, for

some reason, did not activate the way it should have, remaining dormant and ineffective instead. I let the stunted loaves sit in my freezer for months until I finally find the courage to throw them away. I place them in the trash can with utmost care, glad to be rid of their bulk. Could I have salvaged them? Turned them into stuffing for a chicken or bread crumbs for a casserole? No, I decide. Those loaves were too far gone. I must start from scratch, following a recipe and method that has withstood the test of time.

Brown

The Body of Christ should not be plain white bread. His was a wholesome body, brown, and weatherworn by sun and waves. According to Isaiah, he was unbeautiful and undesirable. If ever I bake for Communion, I will make an uneven loaf of whole wheat, studded with olives and walnuts for flavor. Maybe one day, I will make it with rye, and I will not bring it unless it is well-risen.

Proving

I wake up one morning before dawn and feel my way into the kitchen. My dough has curved skyward under a tea towel. I feed my starter and sit down with a cup of coffee at the table. The Book of Luke lies open in front of me and I question my way through a few verses. You see, even though the mouth of God is far more elusive now than when I was a child, truth is found in rising and in promises of daily bread.

Untitled

Jodie Filan

Acrylic & ink



her mother's hands

Addy Mahaffey

sometimes, she sinks her splayed hand into the soft, damp dirt

and thinks of her mother's paraffin wax bath

her mother's pale hands baptized in the melted, crayoned honey

sometimes, she slides her hand out of the dirt and examines

the moons of soil under her nails and she thinks of

her mother peeling off the wax like a pair of snakeskin gloves

darling, come feel how soft

her mother's skin, milksoft under the warm kitchen light

smelling of lavender and calendula and then the funeral

stench of lilies, their fingerwhite flowers grasping toward

the embalming heat of the sun

sometimes, she grinds the heel of her hand into the dirt and thinks
of her mother's flesh pestled in the mortar of the earth
her hands, madonna-lily white, clasped over her chest, an X
to mark the soft, tender spot

darling, come feel how soft

FOR ALL I DID RIGHT

Joseph Hardy

She was the girl who hid
behind her bangs, dreaming
in the back of the room.

The one who would have done almost anything
I asked, I think, maybe everything,
if I had said I loved her back.

A girl in the dark at a school movie,
I pressed against, as she pressed against me,
for all of one pulsing hour.

For all I did right by her, still
I feel unanswered need
pulling me

toward a dimly-imagined backseat
where some concluding satisfaction
might be granted.

The Flares Burn Extra Bright This Year

Eliza Brewer

Secession is the word of the week
and everyone stands for the pledge of allegiance
while bay gulls fight for breakfast-food scraps
outside Mr. Johnson's window as he tells
the seventh grade girls about the tumors
growing on top of his wife's lung cancer.

He blames the oil city,
says there's a cloud of Benzine
so thick around this place it'll poison
all the livestock in a few years.
He considers the girls quietly,
wondering if they're the next to go.

And like longhorns, they shake the tags
tacked onto their ears. Jangling James Averys
to catch the light of daytime plant-flares.
Their mammas say, in so many words, that
the only way to escape the dirty bay
is to wrap yourself in a rich oil man.

The girls with straight hair and green eyes
are already gearing up rhinestone-camo
and too-tall cowgirl boots to go hunting
for Trevors and for Roberts who are called Bobbys
who are called *sugar, darlin'*.
Their Hot-Cheeto dusted lips, a crop to be harvested.
So who cares if it's in his daddy's pickup?
Or if he ate at the Taqueria before
planting frijole-laced kisses down your neck?
And who cares if he doesn't have a condom?

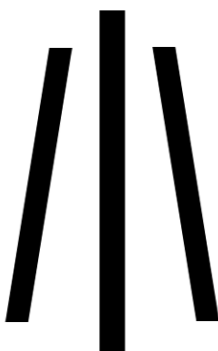
Mamma and daddy didn't have
a condom and they're happy.
The only time you ever saw mamma cry was
the day the bayou crept up to your doorstep.
The only time you saw daddy cry was
the day McCain lost the election.

He was wailin' like a stuck pig
over his glocks and his '22s.
He was hiding them in a fit
of fury. *There's one in my closet,*
you tell Trevor. *You can have it.*

You can have it if you really want it.

Walks Around Campus
Caleb Gray
Photography





Reviews, Interviews, & Essays

A Bright Sessions Novel: Lauren Shippen's *The Infinite Noise* (2019)

Alys Garcia Carrera

What if the X-Men, instead of becoming superheroes, decided to spend some time in therapy?

—Tanya Pai, *Vox*

The Bright Sessions is a podcast that began as one woman's passion project come to life with the aid of a handful of friends. Based around the simple concept of "therapy for the strange and unusual," this indie audio drama featuring a diverse cast of characters slowly evolved into a multimedia project that is growing in scale and popularity.

Now, only a year after the podcast wrapped up, comes the first novel adaptation based on the audio drama, penned by series creator and writer Lauren Shippen. Intended to be a three part novel series, *The Infinite Noise* starts off this story of supernatural abilities and covert government organizations by introducing the audience, new and returning, to a pair of queer high schoolers unaware of the strange and unusual world where they live.

The novel follows Caleb Michaels and Adam Hayes. Caleb is a 16-year-old all-American high school student. He has a nice nuclear family, he's the school's star quarterback, and he's a little embarrassed about the fact that he has to attend therapy. Also, he has superpowers. Adam is the high school outcast. He's openly gay, every teacher's pet, and struggling with major depressive disorder. Also, his scientist parents might not be all that they seem. Their romance seems simultaneously inevitable and doomed from the start.

At first glance the novel may seem to fall into some of the top tropes in the Young Adult Romance genre, but the story manages to avoid feeling stale, skipping over cliché coming out scenes and giving each character a fleshed out three-dimensional personality. Reminiscent of the short chapter style from *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, the love story between Caleb

and Adam develops in short vignettes of their everyday life, chock-full of emotional imagery and classic teen angst. Caleb's ability is extreme empathy beautifully explored through Shippen's use of imagery, mainly color and texture, which makes Caleb's chapters an almost multisensory experience. Adam's chapters, on the other hand, provide a foil to the fantastical comic-book-esque trials and tribulations Caleb faces. His depression is handled with care and realism as well; Shippen never implies that finding love can cure mental illness.

Apart from the tenderly-written high school romance, fans of the podcast might note that *The Infinite Noise* only hints at what else lurks in the sidelines of this atypical universe. The audio drama mainly dealt with the clandestine agencies who conduct extralegal procedures and individuals whose abilities are being used to cause harm. The novel graces the surface at its climax, but ends before any concrete information can be given. Dr. Bright, who the podcast is named after, only makes brief appearances in the novel as Caleb's therapist. It is clear this was purposely done to not come off as redundant for fans of *The Bright Sessions*, but it is at the cost of the greater conflict and intricate drama for which the podcast is known. Of course, *The Infinite Noise* is the first of the literary trilogy planned by Shippen, but readers who wish to have a full resolution to Caleb and Adam's story in this novel will be sorely disappointed once they reach the final page.

The 2010s have been an undeniable high point for LGBTQ protagonists, particularly in Young Adult Romance novels. Gems such as *Simon vs The Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli, *Gracefully Grayson* by Ami Polonsky, and *Juliet Takes a Breath* by Gabby Rivera are only a few of the books to have come out in this decade and receive universal critical acclaim. Despite its abrupt ending, Shippen manages to tell a down-to-earth queer teen romance story with a twist that sets it apart from the rest. *The Infinite Noise* might be late to the decade's boom of queer romance books, but it is a mighty contender for a place among the greats. Blending science fiction with real-life coming-of-age issues, Lauren Shippen's novel is definitely one to be bought and not just borrowed. With the second

installment in the series to be released in the spring of 2020, fans of the podcast and/or novel won't have to wait long to revisit this wonderfully complex universe and cast of characters.

The Holocaust and Logotherapy: Viktor Emil Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959)

Haley Rebecca Harrison

Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor Emil Frankl, the father of logotherapy, is not sufficiently recognized. When man finds no answers to his existential and theological queries—when man is not even *allowed* to pose such questions—he will either cease to be or he will find a reason to be. And that fork in the road of a tormented life forced Frankl to find logotherapy—*his* reason to be.

To define logotherapy, one will need to recall from freshman year of high school the Greek word *logos*. Logos, on the surface, stands for “word,” “reason,” and even “plan.” Digging deeper, one will find that logos also means “the word of God” and is affiliated with many different religious teachings throughout time. Philo of Alexandria, a first-century-CE Jewish philosopher, posited that logos was the intercessor between God and the cosmos, being both the proxy of creation and the means through which the human mind can access and understand God. The arts and a spiritual identity are both very important aspects of life for logotherorists. They both enhance one's capacity to facilitate personal meaning.

The late Viktor Emil Frankl survived the Holocaust. He was one of the many souls taken to Auschwitz (then to Kaufering, associated with Dachau, and then to Türkheim, also affiliated with Dachau). He was—before, during, and after the war—a psychoanalyst. His idea that one's pursuit for meaning is the sole motivating force in one's lifetime (logotherapy) explained behavior he observed and personally exhibited while in the camps. Frankl believed that if one could concentrate on the meanings inherent in one's inescapable suffering, one could survive the experience. He recognized that it was their search for meaning that kept them alive. The will to live can be steel, though it can also be heartbreakingly fleeting, simply because of circumstances which delegate luck. And there were many circumstances in the camps that dealt strictly with the “luck” of either the dead or the living.

This basic human tendency toward placing the “why” was observed and explained by Frankl, and specifically centered around the Holocaust’s effect on its victims. Malnourishment, as well as forced labor, in the camps were substantial factors in the transformation of the prisoners into primitive creatures living on instincts and nothing else. However, such a transformation did not occur overnight, but was learned over the days and then months spent in the camps.

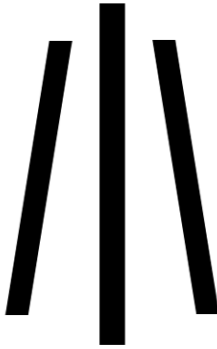
Three phases, according to Frankl, encompassed the prisoners’ psychological responses to the horrific effects of life as Jewish prisoners. The first phase, directly “following [their] admission” was characterized by a general sensation of shock. The second phase, which lasted the longest of all three, pertained to the time spent in the camps. “The prisoner passed from the first to the second phase; the phase of relative apathy, in which he achieved a kind of emotional death.” This apathy, a method of survival, separated each prisoner from the other emotionally. They suffered together, only not together, because, when witnessing a scene of another prisoner’s beating, “the prisoner who had passed into the second stage of his psychological reactions did not avert his eyes anymore.” The third and last phase of the prisoner’s psychological reaction to this life had to do with life post-internment.

Man’s Search for Meaning was separated into two parts, as Frankl wanted to explain his experiences in the camps (Part I) as the origin of logotherapy (Part II). Even though most of the pages in such a small book are filled with the details of his years in concentration camps, the shining fragment of this literary work lies in his “nutshell” telling of his Will to Meaning. He was in search of man’s meaning for a long time, until he realized that the search is the answer. And this realization, followed by the publication of said realization, brought much attention to the psychoanalyst. The attention was both overwhelmingly positive and surprisingly negative.

“Existential vacuum” eloquently describes life in the concentration camps. There was no reason to keep living with no hope of a better tomorrow, but the prisoners found meaning all the

same. No matter what *kind* of meaning was found in those muddy, cold camps—it was *meaning*, and Frankl made note of this. How strange it must have been to conduct one of the most groundbreaking psychological studies while being one of the subjects. While this may seem to “hurt” the objectivity of the results of such a study, it facilitated Frankl’s process enormously to see signs of his “three phases” in others because he had seen such signs in himself.

Logotherapy has made it into our social psychology in this century. Humans can readily recognize that *meaning* is what they crave. Once this recognition takes place, it is up to the patient and their therapist to pinpoint and activate meaningful avenues to explore. It took losing all perceivable identity of the individuals in the concentration camps for Frankl—being one of the nameless masses—to realize that man’s search for meaning in and of itself gives man meaning.



Contributors

Marabella Alberto is a first-generation student at the University of Houston. She goes to college full-time and works part-time as a barista at 85CBakery. She is also part of the powerlifting club at UH. In her free time, she likes to make master reproductions with a focus on technique and composition. Her goal is to stretch her artistic potential and convey the human condition in the form of visual media.

Isabel Armiento is a third-year English Major at the University of Toronto. She has been published in *The Mighty Line* and *Lemon Theory*, and is obsessed with sitcoms and Shakespeare.

Aroh Arzate is a first-generation Mexican American from Houston, Texas. Aroh is a 24-year-old painter and printmaker currently enrolled in the BFA program at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi. Aroh was born and raised in the international district of Houston, TX. Aroh explores the facet of the human condition that deals with identity with a focus on the people we turn into when we are hiding from others.

Rachael Bates was born in America but grew up in India. She lives with her husband in Kentucky and is pursuing an undergraduate degree in English Literature at Berea College. She works part-time as a reader for *Appalachian Heritage*, a literary journal based in Kentucky. Her work has been published by *Stove Leg Media* and The Preservation Foundation.

Joshua Borders is a math and economics student at Texas Christian University. His writing has appeared in the TCU Creative Writing Awards publication and *eleven40seven*.

Eliza Brewer is from Baytown, TX, and is currently pursuing dual English and philosophy degrees at Amherst College. She has previously been the winner of the Amherst College Poetry Contest and The 2019 Annual Amherst Slam. She's been published in *Circus*, performed at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, and read at The

FiveCollege Poetry Festival.

Alys Garcia Carrera, an international student from Mexico, is currently attending the University of Houston, majoring in Political Science and minoring in GLBT Studies. They also work for the University's Special Collections LGBTQ archives at M.D. Anderson Library. Apart from politics and LGBT history, they have a deep-rooted passion for comic books and all things horror.

Megan Conley recently graduated from the University of Maryland, College Park with a degree in English Language and Literature. Originally from New Jersey, she currently works as an assistant editor outside of Washington, D.C. She typically rants about whatever she is reading or watching on Twitter at @fatorangecat_.

Kirsten Fedorowicz is a lifelong Midwesterner with a passion for poetry and trees. A recent college graduate from Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, MI, she is a recipient of the American Academy of Poets College & University Prize.

Morgan Feltz is a library assistant and newly-graduated poet from UNC-Pembroke's English department with publications recently published in *Redheaded Stepchild Magazine* and forthcoming in *The Aurochs*. She lives in North Carolina with her husband, Zachary, and their little black cat, Eddie.

Jodie Filan was born in Saskatoon, Canada in May 1992, making her a Taurus. She is completely self taught. Unfortunately she, like many others in her community, is suffering from addiction to methamphetamine. You can find her and her art on Facebook at JodieFilanArt.

Caleb Gray is a new transfer student to UH in Spring '19, working on a pre-med path through school with Human Nutrition and Food Science. He has been taking pictures off and on for about a year, and since transferring has been focusing on doing it more as a

creative outlet.

Cassandra Green is a twenty-year-old photographer, videographer, and graphic designer based in Houston, Texas. With five years of experience under her belt, she first began creating content for commercial businesses such as the DeLorean Motor Company before moving her media in a more creative direction. Green is now known for concert photography, shooting for indie bands in the city of Houston such as No Rehearsal and Camera Cult as well as Southern California indie bands Vista Kicks, Hate Drugs, and the Jacks. Green specializes in black-and-white photography, but the occasional strikingly colorful image will make an appearance in her work.

Maryann Gremillion serves as the Program Director for Writers in the Schools, a literary non-profit in Houston, Texas where she works with writers to engage students in the power of story through creative writing. She currently spends her free time reading memoirs by Sonali Deraniyagala, Jesmyn Ward, and Hilary Mantel along with five poems upon awakening each day. Her essays, poems, and short memoir pieces have appeared in *The Sun* and *Teachers & Writers Magazine*, or in anthologies through Telling Our Stories Press, MD Anderson's Cancerwise, and Mutabilis Press. She is working on a chapbook exploring form, character, and place.

Joseph Hardy is one of a handful of writers that lives in Nashville, Tennessee but does not play a musical instrument; although a friend once asked that he bring his harmonica on a camping trip so they could throw it in the fire. His wife says he cannot leave a room without finding out something about everyone in it, and telling her their stories later. He has a BS degree in psychology from Stanford University. His work has been published in *Waving Hands Review* and is forthcoming in *Gyroscope* and *Crack the Spine Literary Magazine*.

Haley Rebecca Harrison is a Texas native who adores animals and

writing stories. They are graduating this May with a BA in English-Creative Writing and a BA in Communications-Media Production. They hope to work in (up to) screenwriting or publications after graduation.

Maggie Hart is a student at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She is working on getting a Bachelor of Arts in history and in writing. When she isn't in class or at work, she enjoys traveling, teaching piano lessons, and spending time outside.

Farah Hashmi is an undergraduate student at the University of Houston working her way towards medicine. With a passion for art and writing, she likes creating work in her spare time that others would enjoy. She likes dabbling in other outlets, such as dance and volunteer work, and is always interested in trying something new. She is the second of three daughters, and has two cats, Cookie and Sushi. For any interest in commissioning artwork from her, please message her on Instagram at [chewykookieart](#).

Greg Headley is an artist, photographer, and writer in Austin, Texas. His recent work is published in the *Burningword Journal*, *The Raw Art Review*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, and *The Indianapolis Review*. For many years, his creative focus was in writing and playing music. He had seven CDs and two tapes released on the 28 Angles and Bake labels, and he played concerts in Japan, London, Paris, and cities across the US. Some of his music and short films are available on YouTube.

Rachel Kaufman will graduate from Yale University in May with a BA in English and History. She is interested in memory studies and the ways in which literary and historical texts transmit the past and is currently writing an archival poetry collection about New Mexico crypto-Jewish memory. Her poetry has appeared in *Carve Magazine*, *The Yale Daily News*, *The New Journal*, *Kalliope*, *Shibboleth*, and elsewhere. This spring, she read her poetry across the state as a winner of the 2019 Connecticut Poetry Circuit.

Phoenix Kendall is a previously unpublished poet, currently studying Creative Writing and Communication at Eastern Michigan University, where they aim to graduate in 2021. Their work focuses on conversations regarding personal identity in both micro and macro world perspectives, including identities linked to ability, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender identification.

Dr. Elizabeth Landrum, a native of Kentucky, retired from 35 years of private practice in clinical psychology to enjoy living a quiet life with her wife and dog on an island in the Pacific Northwest. Publications in which her poems have appeared include *Cirque*, *Shark Reef*, *Southern Women's Review*, *Grey Sparrow*, *Soundings Review*, *3 Elements Review*, and *Jabberwock Review*. Her collection, *Shelf Life*, was published in 2019.

Layla Lenhardt is a Philadelphian poet currently residing in Indianapolis. She has been most recently published in *Poetry Quarterly*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *The Opiate*, *The Charleston Anvil*, and *Scars*. She once got drunk at Jane Austen's house.

Clara Leo is a musician, songwriter, poet, and student majoring in Music and Economics.

Addy Mahaffey studies creative writing and philosophy at the University of Arkansas. She is the 2017 recipient of the Felix Christopher McKean Memorial Award for Poetry and was most recently published in *Watershed Review*. After completing her undergraduate degree, she hopes to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing.

Fabrice Poussin teaches French and English at Shorter University. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *The Chimes*, and many other magazines. His photography has been published in *The Front Porch Review*, *The San Pedro River Review*, as well as other publications.

Lucy Simpson is a Colorado writer and artist. Her chapbook *Matchstick & Bramble* is available from The Broadkill River Press and she has poems in *UCity Review*.

Stephan Sveshnikov is a freelance writer currently based in Wisconsin. His most recent project sent him to Russia on a Fulbright fellowship to write about small farmers and artisanal food.

Benjamin Watson is an undergraduate student pursuing an English degree at BYU-Idaho. He works as a copy editor part-time and writes full-time. His work of short fiction, “Snip,” will be published in the 2019 edition of BYU-Idaho’s *Outlet*. His goal as a writer is to communicate the complexity of the human heart.

Editor’s Note: Robertson winner Christopher Allen retained eligibility for the prize because he was not enrolled in an MFA program at the time of poem submission.

shards

Shards is *Glass Mountain's* online literary magazine. We publish fiction, nonfiction, poetry, reviews, interviews and art on a bi-monthly basis during the academic year.

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