A NATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE LITERARY JOURNAL

VOLUME 10

Catfish Creek

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Issue 10 (2020)

Catfish Creek: An Undergraduate Literary Journal is produced annually by the English Creative Writing program at Loras College. We welcome submissions of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry from any author currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program. Submissions are read from Sept. 1-Dec. 10 each year and may be sent electronically to Catfish.Creek@loras.edu. Full guidelines and order information can be found on our website: http://www.loras.edu/majors-programs/english-creative-writing/catfish-creek/

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With assistance from Robert Waterbury
Cover Image: Amber Krieg (Media Studies, '20)
Special Thanks:
Jim Collins, President, Loras College
Dr. Donna Heald, VPAA and Academic Dean
Dr. Kate McCarthy-Gilmore, Chair of Language & Literature
And all the undergraduate faculty who encouraged their students to submit their work, and the student writers who contributed, without whom Catfish Creek would not be possible.
Table of Contents

I. Origins

Haley Grindle
Wikipedia
(poetry)
5

The Truth About Suburbia
(poetry)
7

Maithus Koppulu
Not Your Mother’s
(fiction)
9

Melanie Lau
Waipo
(nonfiction)
13

II. Society

Charles Venable
Things found n a Shark’s Stomach
(poetry)
16

Dwight James III
the only thing black people are told to say to cops
(poetry)
18

Kait Burton
Welfare Mom
(nonfiction)
19

Meagan Rock
Modern Love
(nonfiction)
21
Bria Holt
Luna
(fiction)
24

fried eggs
(fiction)
25

III. Brokenness/Healing

Kelsey Day Marlett
Man-Eater
(fiction)
27

Ashley Bailey
Collision
(fiction)
33

Perry Balmer
Cherub’s Disease
(poetry)
36

Melanie Lau
The Simple Life of Stardust
(poetry)
38

Shannon Baker
Habits
(fiction)
40

Notes of Contributors
46
Part I
Origins
Wikipedia

I learned our village was once named Walker’s Grove
As in James Walker and son-in-law Jesse Walker
I couldn't find the name of the daughter
As in my subdivision,
As in the elementary school two minutes from my house
Ten minutes by bike, which we only did in the spring,
When the weather was finally nice enough.

The Walker men, along with a few others,
Put in a sawmill and a town began to grow around
As it grew, a few wealthy white men began selling the land in plots
Each holding reign over their share
As farmers took up the land, turned it over
Planted and harvested, made it hold life.

Then the abolitionists in the town shared their food and homes
With the runaway slaves, but this
Only gets one line in Wikipedia.
Colleges and libraries went in,
Then the Tornado came through.
That’s where the article draws the line of history,
As if nothing else has happened in that town since 1990
As if I was never born eight years later
As if the first web server never went up
As if the housing market never crashed
As if the Plainfield of 1990 is still there,
Perfectly undisturbed by the world of today.

But there is a missing in the history
The article begins with the Walkers,
Only spares a few words to say Before the Walkers,
The land was inhabited by the Potawatomi people.
We have no records of famous battles,
Terrible massacres, only the passing of land
To the hands of the white men in a peace treaty.
But a treaty implies a war
A war implies battles
Their history is not written in Wikipedia articles
Their history exists in “implies”
Their history exists despite the efforts of erosion
And of the white “settlers” rewriting
Their history is the arrowheads we used to find in the backyard
And the oldest stone barn in town with slits in its west side
Just wide enough for a musket to fit through.
I cannot say if there were ever shots fired through those walls
But the slits themselves show the history of fear
And fear implies an enemy
The Potawatomi people called themselves the Neshnabe
Meaning “original people”
We put this other name on them
When- as the article says- we removed them from the land
With treaties, peacefully,
Or so it says
The arrowhead in my hand is telling a different story
It stands in defiance to its own erasure.
If they left peacefully,
What were the musket slits for?
The Truth About Suburbia

after “The Truth About Small Towns” by David Baker

I. THE TRUTH ABOUT SUBURBIA

It is always summer. The lazy sunlight slows the atoms in the air, drifting through hot days into warm nights. No one thinks of winter when they picture towns like ours.

If you know suburbia, then you know what it is to feel both free and suffocated. Here there is no telling visitors from locals, because no one comes here who is not from here. The kids walk to the Walgreens, ride their bikes as far as the Starbucks, the playground behind the elementary school. Only once were we brave enough to ride over the train tracks. The downtown. The library. The post office.

One week of the summer is given to Plainfield Fest—carnival rides. Dart games. Popcorn, cotton candy, and Dippin’ Dots.

For fun there’s the bowling alley, the five-dollar theatre. A gym teacher got fired for bringing vodka to class in a McDonalds cup. (Gas gone up again? Goddamn)

If you don’t know suburbia, you never will. It is always winter.

II. GRAVEYARD

One tall spiral stabbing straight up into the empty sky with PLATT written in crumbling letters. The stones far away are safer, the names mean nothing to anyone. One of these stones must be the oldest.
1889. 1903. 1945. They are getting too close,
Danae. Ketteson. They had trouble Americanizing that one,
spelled it differently on documents that mattered.
Great-gramma was a Johnson. They are far too close now.
One of these stones is the oldest, which one
could it be? Someone should go and find it,
get far away, wander back into time, into safety. Too close.
The nearest smooth stone has birds freshly engraved on the front
just above the word GRINDLE.
I know what is written
on the back.

III. CHARM

There are no eyes watching Plainfield,
and they'd like to keep it that way,
thank you very much. The last time cameras came
was for the missing woman.

It was once all farms, pulling up corn, soybeans,
sending them down the river in big bundles.
No sudden growth, no sudden collapse,
just the slow influx of families wanting schools,
parks, libraries. Rows of identical houses,
dystopian charm. But the kids still race each other
to the creek at the corner, wedge a plank of wood
into the fork of a tree to make a lookout.

I didn't know the weight of my words
until I saw the hurt in my father's eyes,
*Did you hate growing up here that much?*
He's misunderstood completely. I loved it like oxygen.
When I met Molly on the first day of fifth grade, she told me I should use Not Your Mother’s Clean Freak Dry Shampoo to make my hair less oily. Her twin brother Jake, a scrawny fourth grader at the time, had told her that girls with oily hair were dirty. When I asked why her twin brother lined up at the classroom next door rather than alongside our own, she said he had been held back for being stupid.

Later that evening, when I told my mother the coconut oil she soothed into my scalp every night was making me dirty, she laughed and told me the blacker my hair was, the sweeter my mind would be.

“Everyone knows that, baby. Simply everyone.”

As a hesitant 10-year-old, I wasn’t in the business of arguing with something everyone already knew. I settled between her legs and sucked on my mango pit as her hands massaged warm oil into my hairline, onto my eyebrows, and right onto the tips of my eyelashes.

The next morning, I stood in line next to Molly and shrugged when she asked if I had tried the dry shampoo.

“Boys don’t like girls with dirty hair, Tara.”
“Why does it shine?”
“Why doesn’t yours?”
“Because it’s clean.”
“Maybe mine shines because it’s cleaner?”
“Jake said shiny hair is oily, and oily hair is dirty.”
“You said Jake was stupid.”

This startled her; I noticed realization in the way her eyebrows drew back.
“I guess I did. I guess he is.”

I stood next to Molly every day for the rest of fifth grade.

Two weeks into sixth grade, she told me she and Jake were moving to Texas because her mother hated her father now, and they were the ‘collateral damage.’ After, I looked up what ‘collateral damage’ meant in the bathroom stall during lunch. I went back to our table and asked if there was anything I could do. She said no, that she had already tried everything, and that her mother didn’t get her period anymore which was making her rigid. I suggested she stay in California with their dad while Jake move to Texas with their mom, but her mother, whom she had started calling by her first name, Janet, in an act of dissent, wouldn’t allow it.

That evening, after I hugged Molly goodbye in the pickup line, I asked my mother why I hadn’t cried.

“Oh baby, sadness doesn’t always mean tears. Sometimes it means silence and sometimes it just means absence.”

“She said she’d visit,” I fiddled with my seatbelt. “Will you take me to the airport when she does?”

“Of course. You let me know when and we’ll go pick her up.”

“Mama, can I call you Sheila?”

“No, sweetheart. You can’t call me Sheila.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”
Six months later, my mother took me to the airport to pick Molly up for her first visit home. The night before, in preparation, I came downstairs for dinner with six inches off my hair. I stood proudly as my now shoulder length hair shifted around my face, and ignored Tatum when he pointed out the uneven areas at the back of my head. My mother smiled tightly, shook her head imperceptibly at my father's hiked brow, and scooped a dollop of coconut oil onto her palm.

Molly and I shared my bedroom that weekend. Each morning, we'd wake up before everyone else and climb out onto the arch just below my window, where we'd sit cross legged while I caught her up on everything she'd missed at school. On Saturday, one day before she'd have to get back on a plane, she explained how to make dip dye out of Kool-Aid.

“I don't know how well it'll show up on black, but we can try.” She flipped her own blue tips off her shoulders. “We can match.”

“What if it looks bad?” I played with my ends, now split and course from the desk scissors I had used. “I've never had hair that wasn't black.”

“It'll be cute.” She scooped my hair back into a low hanging knot and tore open a packet of blue powder; it smelled like plastic and raspberries. “Trust me.”

I wondered idly how different it would look – if people would be able to tell there was still black underneath. Somewhere, further away, my mind smiled at the idea of me and Molly’s tips dancing together, both blue enough that we couldn’t tell whose was whose.

Monday morning, after we had dropped Molly off at the airport, my mother passed the school and drove to the hairdresser instead. My tips smelled like plastic and raspberries but had stayed as black as my roots. When we parked, she stayed seated for a minute before turning to me.

“Would you like your hair to be a different color?”

I shifted in my seat. “Not really.”

“Colors don’t show on our hair unless we bleach it first, love.” She paused and looked at her hands. “Do you want me to ask them to bleach it so we can put another color in?”

“Bleach?”

“It takes the black off first,” I could tell she was trying too hard to smile. “So there’s space for other colors.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.”

“It’s okay if you want to, Tara.”

“No.” I winced at the thought of someone scraping the black off my head. “I don’t want to.”

“Okay, if you’re sure. Let’s get the cut evened out, though,” she squeezed my hand and laughed lightly. “It’s a little wonky.”

As we drove home, my hair an even length, something unearthed itself.

“Mama, what does it mean to have a sweet mind?”

She smiled as we waited at a light. Her eyes danced, but stayed looking straight ahead.

“In the faraway place we once used to live,” she had said, looking at me in the rearview mirror as she drove me home from school. “They’d mark all their babies with a special symbol.”

“A symbol?” I leaned forward as far as I could, the buckles of my car seat digging just slightly into my ribs.

“A small compass to guide us home.” Her smile was soft, and I searched for eyes behind the massive sunglasses she wore. “Forever on our arms so we never get lost.”

I thought about my own scar-free bicep and shifted in my seat. “But what if I get lost?”

“Oh, Tara,” her voice was like paint thinner poured into an already full gallon of paint, overflowing and diluted at the same time. “I would never lose you.”
Later that evening, she found me locked in the bathroom with a sharpie against my bicep, a quarter-sized compass drawn onto it in uneven lines. Her eyes widened in realization before they closed in frustration. “I want one too,” my voice was wet. “So we can match.” She sighed and sat down next to me, our heads resting against the wall of the bathtub. “But we already match in so many other ways, baby.” I looked at her sullenly. On the faucet was an open tub of coconut oil and the sparkly blue hand soap Tatum and I had picked out at Bath and Body Works the week before. “If we don’t match,” I turned the sharpie over and over in my hands, the cap deformed from where Tatum had chewed on it, “how will everyone know I’m yours?” “Because we will tell them, and you will call me Mama, and they will look in our eyes that are like Grandma’s and say oh!” She bit my cheek and laughed when I feigned hurt. “Look at those three, they are all each other’s!” My chest expanded, my ribs creaking in relief as a weight I hadn’t noticed finally skipped away. Coconut and raspberry mixed in the bathroom, the scents together creating a new one that wasn’t unnatural, but surprising.

Years later, after I had grown from adolescence to the sticky uncertainty of young adulthood, I visit home on a fall morning that feels more like July than October. My shoulders, bare in an attempt to combat the humidity, buzz with the lick of warm air. My father’s strawberry guava tree is on its ripest leg, our lawn littered with small red spheres that didn’t make it into the fruit baskets he keeps on every flat surface.

In the yard, my mother is plucking mint leaves from the sprouts she grows using seeds brought back from her own mother’s yard. I dig my hands deep in the sack of uncooked rice she has by her side; a couple of mint leaves thrown in a sack of dry Basmati makes the fingernail grains stay fresh for longer. I lean my head on her shoulder and watch her fingers as they pick leaves off stems, thin and long and wholly different from mine. She pulls gently on my bare earlobe. “Don’t you know,” she grins, “they’ll get lonely without earrings?” I laugh; I’ve heard it before. “Where do you come up with these things?” “They’re not things, Tara.” She swats at my hands as I play with the pile of plucked leaves. “They’re true.” “Right.” I scatter the rice instead, letting the grains run through my fingers before hitting the thin afghan we’re sitting on. “Where do you come up with these truths?” “We don’t come up with the truth.” She starts sorting the leaves, the smallest ones to her left and the largest to her right. “We just know it.” “How?” I shift so my head is in her lap, tucked neatly in the center of her crisscrossed legs. “How do we know?” “Because it sits with us.” I hum as her fingers run through my hair, knowing that tomorrow my braid will smell like mint. “Whispers in our ear in our mother’s voice.” She winks, and I think of her voice in my ear, strong and convicted in lilt. She smiles in a way that tells me she’s far away, and I realize belatedly that this voice doubles as my own. “You know, you barely cried when we got them pierced,” she laughs. “You were calmer than I was!” “You were scared?” “Terrified. I had them do both sides at once so you wouldn’t have to hurt twice.” We’re silent for a moment. The garden smells of mint and strawberry guavas that are ripe enough for me to wonder if they’re rotten. “Because it sits with us.” I hum as her fingers run through my hair, knowing that tomorrow my braid will smell like mint. “Whispers in our ear in our mother’s voice.” She winks, and I think of her voice in my ear, strong and convicted in lilt. She smiles in a way that tells me she’s far away, and I realize belatedly that this voice doubles as my own. “You know, you barely cried when we got them pierced,” she laughs. “You were calmer than I was!” “You were scared?” “Terrified. I had them do both sides at once so you wouldn’t have to hurt twice.” We’re silent for a moment. The garden smells of mint and strawberry guavas that are ripe enough for me to wonder if they’re rotten. “Why did you do it then? If you were so scared?” Her hands pause, and I know before she opens her mouth what her answer will be. I think about how, perhaps, these words she speaks are spoken simply because they’ve been spoken before. Grains of rice are scattered around us in the backyard, small constellations of what is yet to be edible. Sunshine, attracted as light is to the dark of my hair, warms my scalp and dips into the space behind my eyes. “Because it’s what we do.” Her voice is soft, but there’s certainty in her enunciation; I feel it hit my
forehead. “This is how it’s done.”
Melanie Lau  
*Emerson College*

**Waipo**

Her feet were bulbous and rash red. Green veins popped up from beneath thin skin. She could not put on her shoes; her calves were too swollen. I prodded at the top of her foot, and the skin went white beneath my fingertips. She did not even blink, and I was impressed. Generally, when any new physical ailment arrived, she paid no mind.

Waipo, I called her in Chinese, *grandmother.* My cousin Rolanda and I were crouched before her on the tile floor.

Her whole body was as delicate and discolored as her feet. Bruises dotted her arms; wrinkles textured her skin. With wispy white hair, she looked like Albert Einstein if he were an elderly Chinese woman. She sat sloppily in her wheelchair, shoulders hunched and lids half-closed. She probably did not realize her feet were swollen at all.

“Mel,” Rolanda said. She prompted me to sit beside her on the gray living room couch.

“Yeah, jie jie.” *Older sister,* I called her, even though we were only cousins.

With a darker skin tone than me, Rolanda could not pass as my sister, but we shared the same rounded face and black hair. The last time I saw her was about three years ago. My mom’s side of the family lived all over the world: Montreal, Paris, Thailand, and Las Vegas, where Rolanda was studying. As the quintessential older sister figure, she played her role as a successful student. She was in medical school, finishing her degree to become a dentist. Rolanda moved from Hawaii to get far away from home. I adopted the same mentality, choosing to attend school on the other side of the country.

“Is her heart okay?” Rolanda asked.

“What?” I replied.

According to Rolanda, swollen ankles could be a sign of heart failure. I knew Waipo swallowed four pills each night—three white and one pink: cholesterol, high blood pressure, calcium, and vitamin C. If something did happen to her heart, no one told me a thing.

I had been away for college in Boston just a week and a half prior to this, completing my very first round of final exams. School had been hectic and demanding. I FaceTimed my mom only once, some night in November. I had no idea the status of Waipo’s health over the last four months.

“Ahhh, it’s the heat. It’s just the heat!” my dad assured us before flitting away to fill up his dinner plate.

It was Christmas day in Sydney, but we were suffering an aggressive summer. I longed for the sixty-degrees-Fahrenheit temperature back home in Honolulu. In the span of two weeks, I had put my body through a funhouse of extreme weather conditions: Boston’s harsh snow, Honolulu’s mild winter, and Sydney’s foul heat. My body should have been swelling up like a balloon, but I simply felt sweaty.

Although Rolanda and I spoke in quiet conversation, aunties, uncles and cousins bustled about us. Exciting events were happening in Sydney. My Australian cousin Tony would marry in two days, so the whole family was at his mom’s house, eating pho for Christmas dinner.

On my phone, I typed up the words ‘heat swollen feet’ into my internet browser. Hot weather caused veins in the feet to expand in order to cool the body. I rose from the floor to gather my grandmother in a hug. Waipo sniffed at me curiously, like a puppy. I felt her heartbeat against my chest.

Rolanda started to ask our grandmother a series of questions.
“Hao ma, Waipo? Chi bao le ma? Hao chi ba?” How are you? Did you finish eating? Was the food good?

Her last question surprised me.

“Wo shi shei?” Who am I?

Wrinkles and weak bones came with old age. Long-term memory loss did as well. Waipo could only shake her head.

“Wo jiao Ya Ling,” Rolanda said desperately. My name is Ya Ling.

Waipo’s eyes conveyed no emotion, like she could not see anything at all. It felt awkward to hear this sober conversation in the middle of a crowd. Relatives filled the four-bedroom house from wall to wall. Their laughter hurt my ears.

“Wo bu zhidao,” Waipo replied quietly. I do not know.

“I could cry,” Rolanda said.

I shared a bedroom with Waipo in Honolulu. Rolanda only managed to see her whenever she visited home. For me, Waipo’s deterioration—what a horrible word—was slow and expected. A decade ago, she could walk and talk normally. Apparently, Waipo would pick me up from preschool every day, holding my hand as we crossed the street. Over the years, all of the symptoms of old age layered atop each other, weighing her down.

Rolanda turned to me. “Are you sad about Waipo?”

I took a while to answer. To Rolanda, Waipo must have seemed nothing like the grandma she knew. Waipo did not even know who she was.

Rolanda sighed heavily. “My mom will call me out of nowhere, and I’m telling her to just text me because when she calls me all of a sudden, I think she’s going to tell me bad news.”

Waipo’s loss of memory, her short attention span, her quiet demeanor—all of these built up gradually. Yet, the likelihood of her passing away kept me consistently panicked. Death is especially taboo in Chinese culture. Apparently, even the mention of mortality begets bad luck. My parents have shut down any conversations surrounding Waipo’s death or their own. I wondered if it was dangerous not to discuss the inevitable.

“I’m scared of her passing away when I’m away for college,” I admitted.

In high school, I despised caring for my grandmother. Caught up in schoolwork, I had no desire to cook dinner for Waipo or organize her pills. Her declining health was a nuisance to me. It would have been easier for her to pass away. So when I left for college, I enjoyed a blissful disconnect from my family. I did not have to constantly acknowledge the state of my grandmother’s health.

But when I came home, my mom told me that Waipo had missed me the most. She would say my name at night because she felt lonely. Reunited with my family once again, I worked to contain my resentment, so I could remember all of the things I loved about my grandmother. The scent of laundry softener on her clothes, the tight grip she held on my wrist, the way she smiled when I made a funny face.

Rolanda and I were caught up in the same sentiment: we were old, and grandma was old, too. Admittedly, Waipo had accomplished many things in her eighty-six years of life. She was the matriarch of the family. My mom’s three sisters and four brothers stemmed from her, as well as the subsequent chorus of cousins. Waipo still had her charitable heart, always asking the younger kids whether they had enough food or not. Chi bao le ma, she asked, a customary Chinese expression.

Rolanda and I decided to get some Christmas dinner. We moved to stand.

“Ya Ling,” my grandma called out.

Rolanda smiled gratefully.
Part II
Society
Things found in a Shark’s Stomach

Two plastic bags, Dollar General logo, sun-bleached,
   Floating in the gulf,
   Effervescent like jellyfish
   Bobbing, writhing,
   As if the writing was a warning
Shark was too hungry to heed.
   Did he see the sun shining in plastic?
   Like a prism,
   Like fish scales rotting on the pier,
   It became sunlight tangled in his intestines.

One I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter lid, new—
   It doesn’t taste like butter anymore.
   Wedged between shark’s ribs
   Where a fisherman kept worms
   Dug up from his backyard;
He was like my father,
   Buying bait by the pound,
   Only to take it home and
   Hide it in the back of the fridge
   Until our food tasted like frozen rot.

Three bottle caps, one Budweiser, one Corona, one Guinness
   Who brings Guinness on a fishing trip?
   Barley and hops are too dark for the Gulf—
   Dark like the water,
   Dark like shark blood.
Shark cuts his tongue on a bottle cap.
   Do sharks have tongues?
   He circles when he smells blood,
   But has he ever tasted the tang
   Hanging in the water like cigarette smoke

One bent filet knife, two slits in his stomach, fresh blood, his own,
   My father holds him up by his tail:
   Catch him, cut him open,
   Bleed him dry and find
   Two plastic bags, a butter tub lid, three bottle caps.
I pick up the cap emblazoned with a golden harp and
   Pretend the shark swallowed an instrument instead.
   In his death throes,
   He plays the strings one last time
   While my father throws the trash back into the sea.
Dwight James III  
*Florida State University*

**the only thing black people are told to say to cops**

*I need a lawyer* is the only thing black people are supposed to say
when approached by police. Which is to say we are rag dolls
until the officer regains their humanity,
the moment we show any sign of control, we get shook up,
thrown around as the cotton from our head spills red instead of white
or until an officer is so afraid that he
mistakes a human for a paper target
to see if it can take a bullet.
oops, is stained on the face of every officer that said the Gun did it.
and maybe it did, the trigger pulled his fingers.
As if the barrel wants to extend itself into its subject, the subject being the black body.
Maybe the gun did do it, the power of a gun could mesmerize a man by fate
like I could kill him, no I could,
too many black body bags happen to look like the victims,
black as the streets, black as night’s hollow tip. Black sounds like bones cracking
every time you say it.

Black, Black, Black, Black, Black,
Black baton breaks bone
Black back bleeds from creased leather
it sounds like a beating every time you say it.

*I have a lawyer* I tell the cop, and every time I tell him,
he shoots. I didn’t know his greatest ally could scare like that.
Black people get caught in the fight of officers who can’t achieve flight.

Is that why we’re always shoved into the ground when we follow orders?
The only thing black people are supposed to say:
Please, don’t
He was only
I’m supposed to be alive—
some cops don’t want me to be.
My brother and I waited behind the cart at the checkout counter at Walmart while our mom loaded groceries onto the conveyor belt. We stayed out of her way while she pulled things from the basket. Mom had a certain way of organizing the groceries, and we always messed it up, so we didn’t offer to help.

This shopping trip we’d managed not to stress her out. Neither of us asked for anything, so she didn’t have to tell us no. We didn’t chase each other around the cart or hide in the clothes rack. There’d been no yelling, no threats of spanking, and no strangers staring at us for making spectacles of ourselves.

As a box of Hamburger Helper went onto the conveyor, a man and woman pushed their cart to a stop behind us. We were taking up most of the aisle, and our cart was half-full. It’d been full to the top before my mom started unpacking it.

Perhaps it was the Great Value label, branded on every item in the cart, that gave us away. Maybe because it was the first of the month, when food stamps are distributed. Maybe it was the cart, full to the top with non-perishable canned and frozen food: cans of cream of mushroom soup and 5lbs of hamburger meat. I knew, even then, that the fullness of the cart caused a commotion, though I didn’t know why.

“Welfare mom,” the man behind us muttered under his breath. Something about his tone, something angry and dangerous, made me turn around to look at him. In my mind, I see him clearly, a man in his early 40’s, tall and trim. His face was heavy with frown lines, his hands rough from age or work, his eyes blue and mean.

Scared of the resentment in the man’s eyes, I turned back to my mom to ask her what a welfare mom was. Mom’s back was stiff, her movements mechanical. When she turned from the conveyor to the cart, I caught a glimpse of her face. It was flat, the skin stretched thin. Her mouth twisted down at the corners. I shut my mouth before I could become the target of her anger.

Mom rushed us through the rest of the checkout line and out of the store. When we got out to the car, she threw the groceries into the trunk and hustled us into the backseat. When she finally sat down in the privacy of the car, she bent her head down and cried. My brother and I sat mute and confused in the backseat. We recognized angry crying and, scared of her anger being directed at us, knew it was better to be silent than comforting. We waited for an explanation.

At 22 years old, I lie in bed in my dorm room and scroll through Facebook. I’m taking a break from working on a 6-page essay on modern poetry. I forgot to eat dinner, and my stomach growls at me angrily. I see a post with a picture of cigarettes and beer. “If you can afford beer and cigarettes, you don’t need food stamps,” it says. I wonder if the people who post things like that have ever been poor, if their moms ever stressed or cried over having to tell them ‘no’ to something as small as a one-dollar candy bar. I take in the meme that tells me because I was raised on food stamps, I never should have gotten anything extra.

I remember the man at the grocery store and think about how he never knew the struggle my mom went through putting herself through college as a single mom with two kids. He never knew the food stamps she used helped get her through college by letting her focus on school, instead of on providing food for her children. He never knew she denied herself things like new clothes, even when hers were holey or threadbare. He never knew that I would go to college because my mom had set a good example. He never knew what I
now understand: that she cried from shame and frustration when we reached the car. But dammit if she didn’t deserve the cigarettes she chain-smoked on the drive home.
“Dude, you just raped my eardrums.”

The words cut across the mingling conversations and laughter to reach my ears. Subconsciously, I guess, I was always waiting with bated breath to hear that word. Just as a dog can hear its owner’s footsteps trudging towards the door. Just as a bird can sense it is time to migrate. No matter how faintly spoken, or as loudly, it can pull me back from the deepest of daydreams to slap me in the face.

“Bro, what?”

“That song sucks. It’s raping my ears.”

“Well then change it!”

Rape. I stood up, phone in hand, heart pounding. Heart angry. Rape. Why are they talking about it? Rape. You keep that fucking word out of your stupid mouth. You, a man, don’t get to use that word. Rape. For fucking music. About your stupid ears.

The blood in me roars. I want to slap him. I want him to feel my rage. Let him taste even a drop of the hurt I feel. Then before I can get on my soapbox, my friend puts a hand on my shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” he asks. “You look mad.”

Well, I am, in fact, quite mad. But what am I supposed to answer? “Oh, sorry Brian. I am just upset because I am actually a rape victim, and I don’t like you guys throwing around the word rape because it reminds me of my assault and of my rapist! Haha! Pass me a White Claw.” No. I can’t say that. I’ll “ruin the mood.” Things will get awkward and uncomfortable. No one will be able to look at me the same. And I liked my friends, and I didn’t want them to feel they had to walk on eggshells around me. I wanted to keep them. So I would keep them, at the expense of letting them laugh and shout and scream about rape as if the word was as easy and as natural as their laughter.

So many possibilities had once laid out before me like pathways, yet by now, I had walked them all before just to reach the same cliff. At the bottom, far below, were the crashing waves of the sea called confession. One that, if I started something, I would eventually have to dive headfirst into, and I didn’t know how to swim.

I excuse myself silently to the balcony of their apartment. Chivalrously, they left two of their kitchen chairs outside. I sit down in one of them and try to breathe. I try to suck in the cold night air and push it down into the furnace that is my heart. I sit for a while with my pathetic red cup and try to drown out their conversation with the sound of chirping crickets.

A dip in the party volume occurs, and a moment later, the sliding door opens and I look to see who it is, already knowing who it will be. Aster’s eyes find mine, concerned and he tilts his head, a silent question. I don’t reply and he understands. My best friend closes the door behind him and leans against the railing, silently gazing into the night beside me.

Many people have asked me before if Aster and I had ever been lovers. Surprisingly not. I think maybe one day if everything works out I could see it happening, but we’ve never had the urge to be more than this. What I have with Aster seems to go beyond lust or sexual desire. We seem to just be partners in life, going our ways side by side, just fish in the stream trying to make it upriver to the sea. Besides, Aster’s love for nature outshines anything I could ever hope to promise him, just as the moon outshines the stars and planets at night.
As for me, I have had my fair share of lovers throughout high school and college and haven't had the desire to have another of a similar kind. Perhaps the reason I don't want to be in a true relationship is because my experience with them has always been negative, traumatic. I guess you could even go as far as to say I'm afraid of relationships. I thought my eventual lover would support me, be my best friend, just as Aster does. That was not the case at all.

He didn't love me. It was never about love. It was always about him, what he wanted.

We were at a swim meet. It was my third one during my first year of college. A late grad student nine years my senior. He wanted my body, and I didn't pick up on that. I just wanted to sleep. I stood to go to a different room that our team was occupying in the hotel. “I’ll sleep somewhere else if you need my bed that badly.”

But he had locked the door.

Don't be afraid of a little love, babe, he said to me, herding me back.

“Love” is what he called it. “Rape” is what it was. So when my professor tells me, “Write about a romantic, modern love,” what am I supposed to write about other than what I know? That modern love is violence? That modern love almost never involves love itself? When my friends laugh about music “raping” their ears, what am I supposed to feel? Does that mean they love the song? Or do they loathe it; does it consume them, every time they try to enjoy something?

After my experience with “love,” I had sworn to myself never to open up to anyone. It was like propping the door open with my foot, leaving a crack where my attacker could get in. When I think of “love,” I think of that night. When I think about the word “love” in romantic terms, it makes my chest hurt. I feel sweaty and anxious. Nausea overwhelms me to the point where I dry heave. My heart pounds. I feel instinctive terror. I feel an anger I can never use. Even the phrase “falling in love” gives me pangs of fear. And since I don't know what love is, growing up in the modern age of love, where it’s accessible everywhere, is quite confusing.

Men who I have allowed to have been a part of my life have said it to me, sometimes as a joke or because they meant it as a confession, but they never understood why I grew distant and wary immediately after. Who wants to handle all of my issues? The work that is required in order to make me feel safe? That requires commitment, patience, unconditional compassion, and no one wants that in their 20s. Except for boys who see me as their next DIY project, who think one night with them is going to repair the years of trauma.

I have so much love to give, a boy texted me in response to turning him down. I thought that I could've given you everything eventually with time … I could see it in my mind … but if you're already set on getting rid of something beautiful before it even becomes anything real, I can't stop you. I can't say I'm not disappointed in your decision, but I understand … so with that, bye. I had known him for about two weeks and had spoken with him even less. Another boy asks me out, and I decline. I have too many issues, I text. I've stopped explaining myself. He replies a beat later, I'm fine with extra baggage, but I'll let you decide I don't want to force into something you don't want. It's sweet, but I remind myself that he doesn’t understand. He doesn’t know. And if he did, he would see me differently.

When I finally decide to sit down with a therapist, I swore to tell her everything wrong with my life. But I found I lacked the courage to come forward about my rapist. Coming forward with this would ruin everything: the stability of my life and the relationships I had cultivated. People would see me as broken. I would be admitting that I was broken, that I wasn’t whole. So I convinced myself that I had found my peace. That there was nothing to be said, no justice to be chased, because I was still here, alive. But the truth is, even if we came to court, nothing would get fixed. I would stand before a male judge, he would ask what I was wearing, how many times I said no. If I was drunk or drugged. What did I do, the suave temptress of the night in a wet bun, sweatpants, and a sweatshirt, to cause this innocent boy with such a bright future to commit this atrocity? And of course, the fan-favorite, What do you remember?

I remember the times I told him No and Leave me alone. I said No exactly 12 times. I told him Leave me alone exactly 8 times. I remember that my attacker was studying to be a lawyer, and his entire family was lawyers. I remember I was a scared, broken girl afraid of admitting I was helpless in defending myself. I remember I was scared of admitting that I couldn’t figure out how to unlock the door of the hotel room in
time. Scared of admitting that with my injured shoulder I didn’t have the strength to push him off me. Scared of having to look my attacker in the eyes and remember it all over again. I remember how he told me in text message that this incident would never come to light or he would ruin me.

I used to believe in the idea of love. That it was life-changing, soul-saving. That it would change me and show me how to live for others. That it could fix my deteriorating relationship with my mother. That it would help my weakening connection with my religion. I wanted to know what it was like to have someone want to get to know you, to love you for your personality, to support you and your goals and dreams unconditionally. But I learned quickly that lasting love is for fairy tales. Those are for Hallmark Christmas movies. I only get to experience them in the books that I read and in the words that I write.

“Are you cold?” Aster asks me, stepping close enough to rest a hand on my back. Close enough for me to breathe in his smell of grass, pine, fresh-cut wood, all sorts of things.

“I’m fine, thanks.” I’m just trying to forget him. I hate that I can’t. I’m sick of my cowardice. I hate that he’s hurt me so much. I hate that I allowed him to get away with it. I hate that I couldn’t qualify for a restraining order because the odds are against me. I hate that he could find me at any time he wants. I hate that my friends are laughing about rape inside when they’re supposed to be my friends and supposed to telepathically understand all my secrets and notice how stiff and anxious and uncomfortable I become when they say the word rape.

Aster’s arms are strong and toned from his days of traveling. They remind me of roots curling around an object buried deep in the ground, finding little handholds to cushion and slide around the obstacle, in which case, is my shoulder. I think about how starkly contrasting sitting here in peaceful quiet with Aster is compared to that night. I distinctly remember shivering on my side of the bed because he didn’t want to cuddle after he was through with me. The door was still locked, and I didn’t dare to try and unlock it. I was petrified he would wake up and want more. I sat up and tiptoed over to the window, naked and pale, and stared out into the parking lot. I wondered, if I ran, how would I get out, where I would go. Would I call my parents or disappear into the night? My dissociation was at its peak. This wasn’t me, I told myself, this was some other girl, staring out the window of the Holiday Inn like the lady Llorona. If this was the real me, I would feel ashamed, but this girl hadn’t felt anything as he held her down with his arms, when she breathlessly choked to try and scream. She had felt nothing but terror.

I felt robbed of my own body, the only thing my soul could ever inhabit. If Maya Angelou is right, and my soul is a bird, then in that attack he had ripped my soul from its cage and plucked out all its feathers. The next morning he wears them like a trophy and tells everyone he knows, “He’s scored big.” As if I were a game. As if I were no more than a checkbox on his list. As if I were something worth keeping a tally of.

But he’s gone now. Nowhere in sight. I remind myself that he wouldn’t dare show his face to me. It’s been four years since that night, and I’ve slept with no one since my attacker. I’m still trying to figure out how to live on my own and for myself. Maybe when I’m healed I’ll get someone put in my path. But for now, I want to learn. I want to open myself to the world I closed myself off of. I want to leave open the door to my heart. In small steps, I am learning to trust, to give the benefit of the doubt. Like tonight. Aster turns back towards the glass door.

“Where are you going?” I ask Aster suddenly. Are you going to leave me?

“I’ll be right back,” he says with a gentle smile. “I’m gonna get us some water. I’m not going anywhere.” I’m staying. “Are you ready to come back inside?”

I stand and straighten my dress. “Yeah.”
She’s a wicked girl, the neighbors would say. A wicked girl who didn’t know what was normal. Don’t dress like her. Don’t talk like her. Those kinds of wacked out teachings that uptight parents beat you over the head with. But Jimmy didn’t think she was wicked or abnormal. Luna Winette Rollins rode a beat-to-shit tricycle with a Flux Capacitor on the handlebars. Her legs were so long, they banged against the body of the bike as she waddled her way up the narrow streets of her hometown. She wove rotting daisies in her hair because it was ‘murder’ to use the fresh ones, and why not give aging daisies a purpose again. Her mouth was painted purple and glitter oozed out of her pores in larger quantities than sweat on a hot, hot day.

Jimmy noticed these things, every little one, while he spent obscene amounts of time watering the already water-logged hydrangeas in the front yard. He would hear her laughter, shrill and free, at some good joke or a particularly witty episode of *That 70s Show*. He wished he could drop the hose and join her.

It was on a Sunday morning, or rather early afternoon, that fate threw him a chance. Jimmy sat in the rocking chair that belonged to his grandmother, heart beating in anticipation at filling out the crossword entirely in pen, when he heard that familiar laugh.

“Jimbo! You coming?”

He looked up to see a nest of messy, blonde hair and barrage of darned clothing. She leaned against his 1984 Chevy with a charmed indifference, arms crossed and mouth quirked in a slight smile.

“You got a hearing problem?”

He sat up straight, crossword forgotten. “I, no. Where are you going?”

“The beach, silly. The whole gang’s piling into Winnie Harbor’s mini-van. You should come.” Luna said the last phrase with such confidence that Jimmy nearly said yes with a mindless enthusiasm, until--

“Babe, ready?” A man, several years older than Jimmy, wearing a Nirvana t-shirt and jeans with Sharpie scribbles, came up behind Luna and squeezed her shoulders. Jimmy’s stomach dropped.

Luna tilted her head back to smile. “Be right there.” She turned back to Jimmy. “So whaddya think Neutron? You in?”

Jimmy forced a smile and sat back in his rocking chair, ignoring the shaking in his hands. “I’ve got to look after the house. Another time, thanks.”

Luna shrugged. “Suit yourself. Bake some cookies or something.” With a final grin, she seized the hand of the wannabe greaser and the two set off down the street. Jimmy stayed still for a moment, before shaking his head slightly and returning to his crossword. He’d water the flowers later.
Fried Eggs

Every breath I took was a struggle. In and out. *In and out*. I looked down, pulling up my thick pullover to see the bruises littering my ribcage. There were a few bite marks on my shoulders, one so deep that it had broken the skin and started to scab over. With a sharp inhale, I managed to fling my legs over the side of my bed and get up gradually, wincing at the thrums of pain that occurred every time I moved. *Fuck.*

He had assured me that he would listen. From the very first kiss, that dizzy, vodka-scented kiss on my second-hand sofa. He looked me in the eyes and promised me he would ask. That asking was important to him, that he *wanted* me to want it. I didn’t realize that this was on the condition that he was sober.

I felt like a fraud. I allowed his weight on top of me, endured his teeth sinking into my flesh. He liked it, so I had to like it. He wanted it rough, I could do rough. It didn’t matter what I wanted. I wanted him to be happy, and if wrestling with my body like a ragdoll gave him that, it was enough.

*Right?*

But this morning, it didn’t feel like enough. Shuffling through the empty rooms of my house, I threw some eggs on the stove and watched them sizzle. The edges blackened and cracked. I needed to take them out, they were beyond fried. But instead, I continued to watch, each breath becoming easier as I adjusted to the soreness. Something else would burn today, not me. I would gather myself up, hold my pale, bruised limbs in a soft bundle and close to my chest. I wouldn’t gift them to anyone. They were mine to hold and soothe and massage the ache from. I would ignore the dark circles under my eyes, cover the hickies with concealer. No one else needed to know. *No one but him.*
Part III
Brokenness/Healing
Man-Eater

It's Man-Eater today – slick, metallic, with a scent like wet paint – and it's twenty-five dollars and my brain is still trying to kill me.

The clerk looks at me like I'm a stray dog. A mixture of pity and disgust. She isn't wearing a nametag, but she looks like she could be an Ashley or Rebecca.

My brain says, You're useless.

The clerk says, “Do you need any help?”

I turn the lipstick over in my hands. The door bangs, making us both jump, and cold air blasts into the store. Ashley or Rebecca turns around and the new customer meets her at the register. Sweat prickles on the back of my neck, because now I've got a few more seconds with Man-Eater. A few more seconds to pretend I can buy it. I unscrew the lid again. Draw in that fruity, wet-paint scent. I dab a bit on my finger.

“Thanks for shopping with us,” Ashley or Rebecca says to the customer. The cash register clatters, there's another rush of cold air, then the door closes. I set down the lipstick.

Ashley or Rebecca has materialized beside me again. “Do you need any help?” she says.

“Are there any coupons?” I ask. My mom always asks that, no matter the store. Ashley or Rebecca says no. I say, “Not on the website either?”

“No,” she says.

“Okay,” I say.

We look at each other.

“Well, thanks for your help,” I say. I take a quick picture of the lipstick, because Anna will definitely want to see this, and then I leave the store.

The parking lot glowers at me, everything frozen and gray and cracking. I fumble in my bag, feeling around for my car keys. My brain is loud, loud, loud.

I text Anna the picture. It's called Man-Eater, I tell her.

Anna texts back before I start the car. Iconic. We should start a makeup company that only uses lipstick names that are GAY

I crack up a little at that, flopping into the driver’s seat.

My brain says, You're pathetic.

The engine catches, the vents cough cold air.

My brain says, You're disgusting.

I slide out of park, ease down on the pedal.

My brain says, You should kill yourself.

My favorite song floats off the radio.

It's Black Honey tonight – searing, violet, smeared on her teeth. Anna picks me up at eight o'clock in her chipped red Subaru like she always does, and the night is fog-soaked like it always is, and she plays sleepy music and tells me to pick the place.

“I always pick the place,” I say.

“False,” says Anna. “I picked the place three times ago.”
“Was that the K-Mart night?”
“That was very much the K-Mart night.”
“An incredible choice,” I say.

Anna and I have a simple routine. She picks me up at eight o’clock, we pick a parking lot, and we kiss each other senseless.

_Kill yourself_, my brain says.

“That was three times ago, though,” I say. “It’s definitely your turn.”

“I hate you,” says Anna.

“Lies,” I say.

_She hates you_, my brain says.


“Hey, I didn’t complain about K-Mart!” I say. “And it was K-Mart.”

“K-Mart was romantic as shit,” says Anna.

And I laugh, but she’s not wrong. There was something about that parking lot – the warm red light leaking through the windows, the sound of shopping carts ripping around in the wind, the breathless risk of being seen.

Anna reaches over. She keeps one hand on the wheel, tapping, and keeps the other wound around my hand, cold, soft, tangled, our wrists digging into the consol. She says, “I know a pretty awesome place.”

As it turns out, that pretty awesome place is none other than the Baptist church.

I start laughing when she pulls up to it, when I see the dark towering cross and the wide ugly parking lot.

“Are you serious?” I say.

“Hell yeah,” says Anna.

She parks towards the back, even though the whole parking lot is open. The church crouches behind us like a drooling monster. I just keep looking at the church, then looking at her, then looking back to the church, and laughing.

_My brain says, You’re worthless._

“This is – amazing,” I say.

Anna grins like an idiot. “You know this bitch loves some irony.”

“If we weren’t going to hell before, we definitely are now.”

“Worth it.”

And we both look at each other, and we both know what we’re about to do, and we both just giggle.

My eyes follow her Black Honey lips.

“I used to go here as a kid,” she says.

“Really?”

“Yeah, every Sunday.”

“Did they know you were –”

“I didn’t even know at that point. It was a hell of a process.”

“Yeah,” I say.

_My brain says, You’re worthless._

“Yeah,” I say again. “I get that.”

Her eyes, the color of aching copper. Her lips, drenched in Black Honey. The church, and the fog, and us.

_My hand finds the back of her neck. She shivers, just a little._

My brain says, _You are unlovable._

We kiss, and we kiss, and we kiss.

It’s no lipstick this morning, just dusty skin and glasses, forty something and sitting with her arms folded. She asks me how my brain is doing.

“Okay, I guess,” I say.
Her lips pinch into a skeptical line.
My brain says, *You're pathetic.*
“And the intrusives?” says Dr. Crothers.
“About the same,” I say.
“On a scale of 1-10?”
“Oh, you know;” I say, as a way of not answering.
“On a scale of 1-10?” she says again.
“Like a seven.”
“What thoughts have been bothering you?”
“The intrusive ones.”
“It’s safe to open up here, Olive.”
“No, it’s just – you know, they’re like, they’re embarrassing. And gross. And – private.”
“Many people experience intrusive thoughts.”
My brain says, *She’s lying.*
My brain says, *You’re disgusting.*
My brain says, *You should just kill yourself.*
Dr. Crothers switches tactics.
“Regardless of whether you want to talk to me about your ‘intrusives,’ I would suggest talking to someone you trust. Last session we talked about your relationship with your parents, and where they stand in – all this,” she says. “Have you had the chance to talk with them?”
I nod, because it seems like less of a lie than saying yes.
“What about your girlfriend? Anna? Does she know about your OCD?”
I nod again. I can tell she doesn’t believe me, but at least she pretends to.
“All right,” she says, but it sounds like, “Suit yourself.”

At dinner, it’s Burt’s Bees Superfruit Lip Balm, pomegranate pink and just subtle enough, my mother’s favorite brand. It's just the two of us for dinner tonight. Dad's at a work conference and my little sister is still at cheer practice. We eat in relative quiet, picking through spaghetti the color of *Man-Eater.*

“How was the doctor today?” Mom finally asks.
“Oh, you know;” I say, as a way of not answering.
“That’s good,” says Mom.
We pick at our spaghetti.
My brain says, *You’re such a disappointment.*
“Did you have a good day at work?” I ask her.
Her face lights up.
“It was okay!” she says, in a way that makes it sound way better than okay. “Bob was a pill like usual, but Gwen said he’s really coming around to the back patio idea.”

My mom is a real estate agent, but she is also a superhero, because she cares too much, too often, about too many things, and it makes her really good at whatever she does. The only thing she’s average at is making conversation.

I say, “That’s awesome.”
She says, “It sure is.”
We pick at our spaghetti.
“Are you going out with Anna tonight?” she says.
“Yes, I think so,” I say.
“How’s that going?” she says.

Anna and I have been together about eight months now, and every once in a while Mom does these weird check-ins. She never asks where we go in the evenings. She never insists to have Anna over for dinner. She just asks how it’s going.

“It’s good,” I say.
“That’s good,” she says.
We pick at our spaghetti.
“I found a cool lipstick at Sephora yesterday,” I say.
“You have a lot of lipstick these days, huh?”
“Yeah. I – yeah. But this one, it was called Man-Eater. It was bright red. I really wanted to get it.”
“So did you?”
“No. It was too expensive.”
I wait, tense with hope, and watch her expression.
“Well,” she says, “You’d better get a job then, huh?”
I deflate. “Yeah.”
“What color was it again?”
“Red. Super, super red.”
“You’re a bit young for such dark makeup, don’t you think?”
I think sixteen is the perfect age for dark makeup, but I just pick at my spaghetti.
My brain says, You’re pathetic.
My mom says, “Hey, I love you. Don’t forget to wash the dishes.”

I decide on Bruised Plum – dry, heavy, smells like Kool-Aid. Anna and I go back to the church, and it’s foggy again, and we start to kiss but my brain won’t shut up and my stomach hurts and the church burns into the back of my neck and I pull back.
“You okay?” Anna asks me.
My brain says, You are worthless.
My brain says, Just give up.
My brain says, I fucking hate you.
I breathe, and I breathe, and I breathe.
Anna watches me. I imagine her eyes as two twin clocks, ticking down the seconds before she leaves me.

She reaches over, winds our fingers together. Her thumb draws half-moons across the inside of my wrist. Her three metal rings dig into my skin. She says, “Take all the time you need.” And her voice is so quiet, so honest, that I want to close my eyes, but I don’t.
I pull away from her and wipe my lips. The back of my hand comes back smeared, the color of a bruise. I stare down at that starry damaged color, how it smudges over the back of my finger bones, and all at once I feel like I am going to cry.
I say, “Can you take me home?”
Anna says, “Of course I can.”
My brain says, No one will ever want you.
Anna says, “Did I do something wrong?”
“No,” I say. “No. I promise.”
She starts the car, pulls out of the parking spot. The wheels bump over a sewer grate. The church watches us leave. My brightness feels like it’s up way too high, everything oversaturated, black and red and Bruised Plum, and I’m terrified of Anna’s silence, how she hasn’t turned the radio on, how she doesn’t quite know how to look at me.
I say, “I’m okay. Seriously.”
My brain says, You are disgusting.
Anna says, “You know, you can talk to me about this stuff.”
“It’s the same old shit.”
“I don’t care how old it is.”
I don’t know what I’m supposed to say to her. How to make her leave me alone, or how to explain what’s going on. How to say my thoughts aren’t my thoughts, and my thoughts want me dead but I want me
alive, and I am running out and overflowing and so, so scared.

I say, “I’m trying.”
She says, “I know.”

She drops me off and I stand on my front porch with the lights off. The back of my hand burns. I watch her headlights shiver and curl and disappear down the road. I wonder if she ever turned on the radio.

It’s *Crocodile Tears* tonight, a sleek green that resists a sense of sickness. I bought it weeks ago on an impulse, telling myself again and again that I would be brave enough to wear it. The faucet is running. I watch myself in the mirror, gaze caught on the crook of my eyelids, wondering if my face changes when I get a bad thought.

My brain says, *You are entirely alone.*
My eyelid doesn’t twitch.

I brush my teeth once, then twice, then one more time before switching to mouthwash.

My brain says, *You are infected.*

I take my birth control, then my Zoloft, 100 milligrams of it. The bottle is the color of tangerines. I fiddle with it, drizzle the pills in my palms and roll them between my fingers, soft and dark, a handful of seeds. I count each one and drop them back in the bottle.

My brain says, *Even medication isn’t going to save you.*

I screw the lid tight.

I don’t kiss Anna the next night, or the night after that. We just go to the parking lot and sit. The whole time, all I can think about is the shape of her mouth, but every time we touch I want to cry.

I go back to Sephora. I stand in the aisle looking at *Man-Eater,* wondering how it would taste against Anna’s lips, how it would look in my dented bathroom mirror. Twenty-five dollars. The clerk looks at me like I’m a stray dog again. I want to shove her, scream at her, force her not to look at me.

Anna wants to meet up today, at five in the afternoon, before it gets dark out. I know before I even see her that it’s over.

We drive to a coffee shop, but we stay in her car. She says, “You’ve got to tell me what’s going on.”

My brain says, *She is going to leave you.*

I say, “Nothing is going on.”

She says, “Why are you lying to me?”

I say, “Why do you care so much? All we do is make out.”

She says that she loves me.

“Don’t fucking say that,” I say.

“I’m serious,” she says.

“Just say that you’re done,” I say. “Just say that you’re leaving.”

She looks at me like I’ve slapped her. My stomach is tight and crawling and the color of *Crocodile Tears.*

“Do you want me to?” she says.

I can’t speak.

“Do you want me to leave? Since all we do is make out?” she says, and my words don’t fit right in her mouth, they sound crooked, they sound out of tuning, they sound like goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.

“Do what you want,” I say.

Her eyes, anything but adrift. Her hands, clenched so tight that her fingers are white around the ring bands. Anna. My Anna. Eight o’clocks and fog-soaked parking lots and *Black Honey.*

She asks if I’m going to be okay.

“Oh, you know,” I say, but this time it’s an honest answer.

My brain says, *It’s over. It’s over. It’s over.*

“Okay,” she says. “Do you need a ride home?”

And I do, and she knows this, but I say no anyway and go sit in the coffee shop. I don’t order anything. The barista looks annoyed, but still I sit there, wrapped in numbness, and I think about *Man-Eater.*
My brain says, *It’s over. It’s over. It’s over.*
I dig my fingernail into the table. Outside the window, I hear cars and shopping carts.

I cram all my lipsticks in a box and drive out to the church. There’s no fog tonight. I wrench to a stop in the same place Anna parked, and I clamber out of the car clutching the lipstick box, and I think, and I think, and I think, *I am going to throw all of these to the fucking ground.* I am going to uncap them and grind them into the pavement, I am going to write out a message, I am going to crush the plum into the pavement, I am going to scrawl out “NO! NO! NO!” and I am going to write Anna’s name until the letters fall apart and I fall back together, and I am going to hurl these into the stained glass windows of the church and my brain is going to stay quiet for once.

And I stand there, shivering but burning hot, in the stillness of the church parking lot. My hands sweat on the box of lipstick. *Coral Fixation* and *Thirst Trap* and *Scorpio*. Pinks and nudes and grays. I think, I am going to crush this shit into the fucking ground. I think, I am done with this. I think, I am done with this. And I think, and I think, and I just keep standing there.

I get back in the car. Balance the box on my kneecaps. Lean my head against the steering wheel.

My brain says, *You shouldn’t even try.*
My brain says, *You can’t do anything.*
My brain says, *Just kill yourself.*

I breathe, and I breathe, and I breathe. I think of tea bags and early mornings and Anna.

The engine catches on the first try. The radio plays my favorite song, mid-chorus.

I stop at Sephora on the way home. I spend twenty-five dollars on a lipstick I’ll probably never wear. The clerk looks somewhat impressed, and somewhat like she pities me. I give her a look back; like *what can you do?*

I take *Man-Eater* out of its package on the way to the car. I run my fingers down the torn cardboard edges and slit my fingernail under the plastic, peel the lipstick free. *Man-Eater*. Slick and cool between my fingers.

I get in the car and toss the box in the back. I hold onto the lipstick. The store lights blink out one by one, and I sit in the parking lot, and I turn it over in my hands. Again and again and again.
The first mistake Henry made was being thirsty. He swallowed to soothe his parched throat, realized it was pointless, and pushed his pre-algebra homework out of his lap. Stepping into the kitchen, he paused, seeing his mom still as a sentry at the sink. Her hair draped around her neck in inky swirls, soaked from the thunderstorms that came sporadically in the summer. The faucet was turned on, releasing a steady stream of water. The pipes thrummed from the workout, and she stared with glazed eyes into the drain.

Henry grabbed a chipped Snoopy mug from the cupboard, reaching past his frozen mother to fill it. When he leaned in further to turn the faucet off, his mom’s hand shot out quick as a whip to grab his wrist. Her hand stunned him, but it was gentle, reminding him of the time she had picked up an abandoned hummingbird hatchling. Her face had been scrunched up in concern and concentration, but her face at this moment was stretched thin. He didn’t meet her eyes, slipping his arm out of her grasp. Her hand released his to retreat back to its spot on the counter, limp. She tried for a weak smile and brought her other hand to brush the fringe out of his eyes.

“I just remembered we need to go out for groceries.” Her breath smelled of mint layered over cigarette smoke, a poor attempt at a cover-up. She only started smoking again three months ago, when his dad had left. She added, “We can go for ice cream after. A treat for my sweet.”

Henry nodded; he was already having trouble concentrating on his homework. She grabbed her purse off the counter, a gaudy puke-green thing the size of a skunk with an excessive amount of zippers. He retrieved his dad’s Michigan State hoodie that was fraying at the edges. It was a few sizes too big for him, but he knew he’d grow into it. His mom was waiting for him in the garage, car engine purring. He slid into his seat, the AC already pumping away, while his mom checked her clumpy mascara in the mirror. She frowned at something in her reflection; Henry followed her gaze and saw a box with his mom’s work folders and a pencil holder containing pencils with the ends bitten to nubs peeking through the top. A picture frame sat haphazardly on the top like a cherry on a sad sundae. His mom shoved her purse in front of it as a shield. Her far off gaze from before made sense now, all the signs pointed to being fired from her job. Henry held his tongue.

“Don’t worry, I’m already looking for a new job,” she said, noticing Henry’s stare.

The number of cars on the road was less than average because of the rain; Henry counted the headlights as they passed. He got to six when his mom made stilted attempts at small talk. He gave her monosyllabic answers to questions about how middle school was and how his day went. Eventually, she gave up and turned the radio on, some slow song about dancing in the rain-filled the space between them.

The air was stuffy inside, despite the semi-faulty AC’s best efforts. He cracked the window open and let his nose get clogged up by the smell of wet grass and asphalt. The air was only slightly better outdoors, humid but refreshing. The outside was sweet with signs of thunder and lightning. His dad used to open the windows during the storm and howl, Henry and his mom following along in chorus.

“You’re going to get wet,” she said, rolling up the window and the memory along with it.

He turned away from her and rolled his eyes. He wondered if she was remembering the same memory he was, or if she only thought about his father at his worst. Maybe she was thinking about the fine she had to pay off when his dad had trespassed in his old neighborhood to show Henry his childhood hideout. Or about
the countless chores his dad forgot about.

“A little rain never killed anyone,” he argued. His hands picked at the threads on his sleeve.

“I wish you would get rid of that old thing. Look at how it’s falling apart.” His mom glared at the hoodie. Henry knew it was just an excuse to get rid of another thing that was his dad’s.

“You can’t force me to throw away everything dad owned, even if you hate him now,” he said, and his mom looked horrified.

Through a forced smile, she said, “Let’s not talk about things we don’t understand.”

“What don’t I understand? He left and you act like he never existed.” How could she just forget about the things his dad did for her? The hundreds of daisies and turtle stuffed animals sent to her workplace to remind her that he was there for her. All of it must’ve looked like trash to her now.

“I’m not going to continue this conversation with you,” she told him. A warning, clear as a clap of thunder. Henry crossed his arms and shut his mouth.

She always treated him like a child, as though ignoring the fragmented state of their family would make them both somehow forget. The irritation prickled under his skin; he wanted to throw a tantrum to show her how childish he could be. But his father’s last words to him kept ringing in his head: “You’re only thirteen, but you’re the man of the house now.”

She tapped an unsteady rhythm on the steering wheel, a strand of her wet ribbon hair held between her lips like a prayer. Her gaze kept flitting back to the rearview mirror, a moth to a flame. Henry bounced his foot on the crusted carpeting of the footwell, playing with the green threads of his hoodie. The smell of his dad on it used to comfort him, but the scent had long since faded.

A car honked behind them, startling them both. The driver made a risky switch into oncoming traffic to cut ahead of them, causing his mom to step on the brake suddenly to avoid being hit. Something touched the back of his shoe as his mother cursed and flashed her brights. Henry leaned over and felt cool glass under his hand, he pulled a picture frame out from under his seat into his lap. The picture inside was taken a few years ago at his fifth-grade graduation. His parents were smiling, and his dad was wearing his Michigan State hoodie, which had been new at the time. There was a crack along the smooth surface slashing across his own face; he touched it.

“Put that away,” she said, sounding like someone’s hand was around her throat.

Henry ignored her, lost in a whirlwind of memories. He felt as split apart as the glass. The smell of his dad’s aftershave. The stiff newness of the tie his mom had picked for the occasion. Dropping ice cream on his tie and baby blue shirt. The tears that came afterward.

“Henry! I said put it away.” Her voice got higher.

He didn’t acknowledge her. He would’ve covered his ears, but he didn’t want to release the portrait from his grasp.

“Honey, you’re going to cut your hand. Just put it in the back.” She reached over to steal it from her son’s hands. All her attention was on removing the picture from this moment, so she didn’t notice the buck leap out of the bush and waltz in front of the car. His mother slammed down on the brakes too late, the collision inevitable, easy as Superman ice cream on a blue button-up. The ringing in his ears drowned out the sound of the crash, though he felt the whole car jerk. The high pitch stopped and so did the car, and for a brief moment, the world was bathed in silence. The seconds ticked by. His mom slapped her open palm on the edge of the steering wheel, and it made the same sound it had when she had slapped Henry’s father across the face.

Henry remembered the hit; he saw it clearly from his spot by the kitchen door. He only saw half of his mom, but he’d only ever heard her voice get that deadly on rare occasions. Like when his dad had forgotten, even after being reminded a dozen times, to take in the porch furniture during a storm and the metal umbrella stand had broken part of the railing and ruined part of her garden. Even then his mother hadn’t been this livid. In the kitchen, his dad took the screaming with a straight-face. Henry had never seen him shed a tear.

He remembered her telling his dad, “Henry and I don’t need stories about your next adventure. We need you to be an adult. To not vanish without telling us. I think we deserve that at least.”

“You’ve changed. What happened to fun and spontaneous Liv? I don’t remember marrying a Mary
“Poppins villain,” he said.

She laughed, a rotten thing. “I’ve just grown up, while you stayed your same immature self.” She took a quivering breath. “Do you even still love me? Or have I just become your nagging parent, because that’s what it feels like at times.”

He huffed, irritation boiling the words out of his mouth. “Maybe you’re right I don’t love you anymore.”

Henry remembered the slap and the resounding crack that echoed on forever. His father’s face, defeated, eyes glossy. Henry didn’t stay long after that. Neither did his dad.

“You know I didn’t mean to hurt it, right?” She said, her hand strangled in her hair. “It was an accident. I never meant to hit it.” She rocked back and forth. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hit it.” She continued to ramble, looking everywhere but at Henry. Tears spilled down her cheek and dripped off her chin.

His mother cried into her dangerous hands, choked noises leaving her throat like a demon being exorcised from within. He tried to swallow the pit in his throat, his eyes stinging sympathetically. He didn’t like seeing her like this and was angry at her for being the thing that forced his dad to leave. His mom had become as fragile as the hummingbird she had once saved. It almost hurt to look at her. His gaze crept to the wounded buck on the road. The chest was still heaving breath, but there was blood soaking the fur. The rain made the blood spread more quickly into a halo of red around the antlers. He could see the animal’s big black eyes with no whites to be seen. He didn’t cry.
Cherub's Disease

His voice has traveled too far south.

No longer heard, it sits against scurrying mice on cobblestone streets
Coating itself in tequila and smoke
Long since abandoned its language
And rendered itself a mute among mountains

It fled past borders
To escape its own persecution of 25 bars
25 years and the revoking of a license
To begin again in that dirt and stench of treatment plants

His head shorn down
Leaving a scalp bare and freckled
With eyes that grew thick coatings of slime
White tinting his world darkened gray

He slept in semi-trucks, marooned on the sides of roads
And went sleepwalking through highways
Where bugs kissed and raised his skin
Until he could mortar a new home
Of ramshackle corrugated metal

Under which he copied his body twice more
Held his cherub pustules and pledged himself to them
Knowing they’d burst and spread
As his brain tuned to escape again

Soon, he’d whisper silence against his cherubs’ heads
Let them imprint their fingers in wet cement
Then go on to leave piles of unformed clay
While he said he’d bathe their brows in bleach
Only to shave them all away

Now, those children have grown into men
Men who try to close their ears to the sweet words of his sugar teeth
Men who shatter mirrors when they see how their faces resemble his
Men who hold their own strange children
Those copies of themselves

Men who whisper love into unformed ears
But find their words echo empty from their throats
Men who watch their bodies trickle away
From under water and soap
To clog drains and drown their feet in soot

They know now that a father walked out into that forest with a rifle in hand
Where the trees must twist in the wind and cry down leaves
They know he raised it up. Fired. Dropped his jaw and let it fall away

So he could finally ask:
Is the broken part mine?

All while two men drive north
Down that winter road where pavement crinkles into ice
Swerving in lanes and passing all the cars
With open mouths speaking wordless minds

Convincing themselves:
The broken part is his, not ours.
Melanie Lau
Emerson College

The Simple Life of Stardust

I will never
find true quiet until
I reach the numb
unknown
.
.
.

Imagine
a stick figure girl
scribbled
on blackened canvas
flecked with gold
No helmet, no holds
She is simple
She is dormant
Her galactic
body—
energy afloat
She is part of space now

Imagine
incongruous dots
on blackened canvas
(the universe)
she, the stick figure girl,
is small
She is a fleck of gold

Imagine
the universe as it
crumples in on itself
that long-awaited
implosion
The girl feels nothing
She is silly
stardust
stupid, human stardust
She follows the course of the universe
Imagine
True Quiet:
The past all for naught
The future uncertain
The black, black now is
the only time in existence
Habits

The elephant pressed up against Sadie where she sat on the couch, its rough white skin scratching her thighs. It was too big to fit on the loveseat, so its knobby knees and gnarled feet were twisted underneath its massive barrel body. Its great head lolled atop broad shoulders, nodding to the quiet notes of Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony on the kitchen radio. As the elephant’s leather ear brushed against her face, the tiny hairs tickled. The couch creaked and sank, tipping her closer so Sadie was practically on the elephant’s lap, her own knees bent, her own head gravitating towards its gigantic belly, which pulsed with great breaths.

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Sadie was used to the elephant by now, though it didn’t used to be that way. Two years ago, after an emergency trip to Sal’s Marketplace downtown, she’d muscled open the stiff front door and stumbled her way into the flat. Stepping over the threshold, she took care to watch the heaping bag of groceries balanced in each arm, only to trip over something long and grey-white stretched out across the entryway. Her heart had jumped into her throat and six Granny Smiths had tumbled out of the bags. Slinking along the floor, receding around the corner and into the miniature laundry closet, had appeared to be a... she’d blinked a few times, certain she was mistaken. With heat flushing her cheeks, she’d crept to the closet and peeked in.

The closet was crammed with jackets and winter boots no one had bothered to store away (even in mid-July), a rickety old washer and dryer that rubbed together and made a humming sound whenever they were finishing a load, and piles of collapsed cardboard boxes from when she and Dex had moved in the previous year, all shoved wherever there was an inch of space. She’d never gotten around to cleaning the laundry closet. There had been a time when it was on her weekend agenda, but something else had always come up and by now, the cluttered space was habitual, almost endearing. Still, every Thursday evening when she put in Dex’s and her own weekly load, Sadie felt an equally habitual twinge of annoyance.

Peering into the closet that summer afternoon in search of an elephant’s trunk, she’d felt that twinge. She’d also felt dismayed when no trunk appeared. It was absurd, Sadie had thought, shaking her head and ducking back out. No elephant could ever fit in that closet.

That had been two years ago, but since then, she’d caught other glimpses. That following Christmas Eve, after Dex had gone to the bedroom to watch Pay-per-view, she’d been picking up scraps of wrapping paper on her hands and knees. Near the little living room fireplace, behind her favorite orange armchair, was a pan-shaped foot with five cornified boulders for toes embedded in leathery flesh. Her head jerked up, but it was gone. Then, on Valentine’s Day, after what Dex jokingly called (to her feigned amusement) the Lovers’ Ritual, Sadie had gone to the kitchen for a glass of water and, when filling her cup with ice, was sure she saw an alabaster tusk glowing blue in the refrigerator light. Two months later, on her birthday, after serving her signature marble-mint brownies and ice cream to Dex where he was settled in the loveseat, she’d retreated back to the kitchen counter to fix herself a bowl when she felt something rough, pancake-flat, and floppy rest upon her head. Sticking out of the cupboard where she kept the dusty old wine glasses was an elephant’s profile. As its ear slipped off of her head, it gave a great sneeze, blinked a few times, and regarded her plaintively. She fed it a brownie.

Over the course of the year that followed, the elephant had slowly become whole. Its head would poke
out from behind doors she’d just closed, and sometimes a thick, cored leg would follow, maybe two, while the rest of it hid in the shadows. Eventually, it revealed half of its pot-bellied midsection, then its hindquarters, then its tail. It grew more comfortable too, lumbering into the kitchen while Sadie prepared mushroom risotto for Dex before he came home from the real estate office, or sauntering into the bedroom early in the morning while she got ready for her own job as a day worker at the local kids’ center. It would be there as Sadie did laundry, looking over her shoulder and draping its ears over the washer so they vibrated with the machine. It was there when they ate, listening politely as Dex commented about the unorthodox weather (it was a bit too rainy for Boston in October), his work (the secretary, Dina, never really understood that “memos” could only serve as reminders when they were timely), or friends from college that he’d run into on the street (it had been a long time since they’d seen Danny, probably not since Danny and Cara’s wedding a couple years ago—did she know that Cara was pregnant now?). At this last type of remark, Sadie’s eyes would flicker to the elephant, but it always sat there serenely, its trunk poking at the air, as if testing the mood. She wondered what it tasted like.

Sadie never asked why the elephant was there. She simply accepted it, letting it become a part of her routine, endearing and habitual, like the mess in the laundry closet. It didn’t make any noise, and it didn’t get in the way of her household chores. Before the elephant first showed up, Sadie would come home to an empty apartment, since Dex often worked until 7:00 or later. Now, however, she’d ride the little elevator to the fifth floor, rush down the hallway, stop at the door of her flat, fumble for the key, insert it into the lock, jiggle, and push—sometimes two, maybe three times before the door gave way with an indignant huff—and she would burst into the apartment and see the elephant waiting in the middle of the living room, the afternoon sun shining through the sliding door and illuminating the inverted canopy of its weathered tusks. On those days, it always contemplated her peacefully, despite her disheveled hair and heavy lids after a morning with the kids.

On the weekends, when Dex was supervising an open house or running with his cardio group in the Esplanade, Sadie would try out a new recipe from her favorite cookbook, Sweet: Desserts from London’s Ottolenghi. Back when she and Dex had started dating, they’d baked together at least twice a week. Little by little, Sadie would teach Dex the simpler techniques: how to cream butter and sugar for cream cheese sugar cookies or when to treat cake pans with butter and flour before pouring in the batter. She’d let him measure the flour or make the frosting while she folded egg whites into bowls to make a light foamy meringue. Sometimes, Dex would come up behind her where she worked and dance his flour-coated fingertips over her cheekbones, and she would yelp in surprise before he spun her around and pressed his forehead to hers in laughter. He was a quick learner and always eager to help. Sadie often dreamed of mornings spent beating cream into soft peaks to make rolled pavlova with peaches and blackberries or combining halva and tahini to make Middle Eastern millionaire’s shortbread—Dex and her, baking all day, just because they felt like it.

But that had been then. After those first couple of years, Sadie’s pans and spatulas grew to recognize just one set of hands. For the past year or so, while Dex clocked miles in the park, Sadie had kept her baking adventures alive with the help of the elephant. The elephant would hand her the whisk or the spatula when she needed it, sometimes holding onto it a second longer than necessary, forcing her to play tug-of-war with its trunk. When the peanut butter molten Bundt cake or the honey-and-orange amaretti was done, she’d let the elephant lick the spoon, watching it maneuver the too-small silverware to its mouth and fit it in, its pink tongue pushing the batter to the back of its throat with large, circular movements. The elephant even helped her with the dishes, plunging its trunk eagerly into the soap suds, splashing Sadie where she stood by the sink, towel in hand and ready to dry. She laughed and threw the towel over its eyes, watching it bob its head, its trunk curled up in the air in a sideways S.

Later, in the evening, when Dex was reading on the couch, she would sit outside the sliding glass door on the balcony with Sweet propped in her lap. The elephant never came outside, but it would stand at the door, its massive frame filling up the glass. It became commonplace, when Sadie went out to the balcony, for her to sit in the plastic Adirondack chair, her feet tucked under her with a mug of oolong tea steaming on the armrest. Not a minute after she was settled in, she would hear a faint tapping of ivory-on-glass as the elephant tried to press its nose to the door. It couldn’t have been easy, given the curvature of its tusks. To accommodate it, Sadie would hold her book a little higher so the elephant could read over her right shoulder, if it wanted.
For hours, she and the elephant would fantasize about the next time they might be alone in the kitchen, baking a chocolate tart with hazelnut, rosemary, and orange, or maybe an almond ricotta cheesecake coated in a decadent chocolate ganache. Eventually, Dex would knock sharply on the glass two times, give her a little wave, and motion that he was turning in for the night. Disrupted, Sadie would take one last look at the creamy raspberry swirls of the knickerbocker glory, dog-ear the page, whisper goodnight to the elephant—wherever it was—and follow her boyfriend to bed.

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She’d never really thought about how an elephant could fit in their one-bedroom flat, but now, on that Saturday, sitting on the loveseat with the elephant squished between Dex and herself, Sadie couldn’t help but notice its size. Its rough skin folded over where its shoulders met its body, creating pouches in the white-grey flesh. After each of the elephant’s breaths, the sag in the cushions grew more pronounced.

It wouldn’t be so uncomfortable if there were only two of them on the loveseat, but she couldn’t very well ask Dex to move to the armchair: four years before, after hours of surveying the HOM Furniture options, Dex had allowed Sadie to commit to a particularly loud orange armchair under the condition that she wouldn’t make him use it. She’d laughed and hugged him, his responding boyish smile pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. That had been a few years ago, but out of what was at first playful sport and then, eventually, convention, Dex had never sat in that armchair.

Heaving a sigh, Sadie pushed her fists into the polyester of the couch. Propping herself up so she was on the armrest, she stretched her legs out, her heels brushing leathery knees. She glanced at the elephant, but it was still nodding to the music. She looked at Dex; he was watching the TV. She didn’t even know what movie he had selected from Pay-per-view over an hour before. Sadie looked at the screen, watching Bruce Willis dart around the corner of a company building—of course, it was *Die Hard*, Dex’s favorite.

“You remember watching this when we first started dating?” he asked, giving her a sideways smile, his gaze still on the screen. She closed her eyes, trying to remember. “You were so sure Bruce Willis was going to die,” he continued, reaching over the elephant to pinch her toes. Sadie drew her feet back involuntarily.

She gave a small smile, but Dex still wasn’t looking. “But he didn’t,” she said, because she knew that much. The elephant nodded in agreement—or still to the music, she wasn’t sure.

“But he didn’t,” echoed Dex.

Still perched on the armrest of the loveseat, Sadie tried to get into the movie. Over the last four years, they’d probably watched *Die Hard* ten times, or maybe more, but she never really found herself enjoying it enough to pay attention to the plot. She knew that Bruce Willis was a terrorist-fighting hero, but that was about it.

“Do you want any popcorn?” she asked, finding an acceptable excuse to leave the couch.

“Sure, that’d be great,” came Dex’s reply. On the TV, a sweaty Bruce Willis leapt from the roof of a building as a bomb detonated behind him.

Sadie slid off the armrest and went to the kitchen. Grabbing the big metal popcorn bowl, she set it on the counter with a stick of butter and went to the cupboard to get the popcorn maker. Dumping kernels in the top, Sadie jammed her finger into the start button. The elephant lumbered into the kitchen and poked around the counter with its trunk, its sensitive nostrils finding the butter. She knocked its trunk away.

“You’ll never guess who I ran into today,” said Dex from the living room, raising his voice over the gunshots on the TV. Bruce Willis must have found the terrorists.

“Who?” Sadie moved the bowl closer to the machine, carefully watching the elephant’s roaming trunk. “I thought you didn’t work today.”

“I didn’t, but while I was running I saw Adam Crevens walking his dog.” Dex paused to react to the movie.

She put the butter in the microwave and had the elephant press start. “Mmmmmmm?”

Dex rustled around to face her. “So I guess Adam and Jess are engaged—just happened this Thursday, he said. They’ll get married in the spring, probably May.”

Sadie whisked the butter from the microwave and dumped it over the popcorn. The elephant added salt, its trunk almost concealing the little Snoopy shaker as it moved it up and down methodically. “That’s enough,” she whispered, her fingers stilling its trunk and carefully undoing its grip.
“You going to buy your wedding season shoes, then?” Dex asked.

Every year for the past four, Sadie had bought new shoes for the wedding season. Sometimes it was a pair of pumps, sometimes flats. Last year she bought lace-up sandals that made her feel like a Greek maiden. Dex never went shopping with her, but at the start of every year, he would ask her “what kind of wedding shoe season it was.” Three years ago, when Sadie had showed Dex a pair of turquoise peep-toe heels, he’d insisted on escorting her to the couch, kneeling in front of her, and fitting them onto her bare feet. As his right hand cradled her ankle and his left hand cupped the shoe, Sadie had flutter-kicked her feet within his fingers in mock protest. Dex had laughed, and she’d squealed as he pinned her foot between his legs and bent down to line her exposed shin with kisses. His lips had left a trail of warm impressions, butterfly wings that had pressed to her skin and danced up her leg to alight in her abdomen.

But when he reminded her about buying wedding shoes this time, she couldn’t help but feel a different twinge in her stomach, like the one she got looking into the laundry closet every Thursday. She bit her lip and shook the popcorn bowl to spread the salt.

“I guess I’ll have to,” she said, hoping Dex hadn’t noticed her clipped tone. Sadie handed him the popcorn and sat back down on the couch. The elephant stood in front of the TV and looked at her mournfully. “Sorry,” she whispered. She wished Dex would sit in the armchair.

The rest of the movie passed without comment. Every so often, Sadie would hear Dex’s sharp intake of breath and a chuckle in response to a terrorist’s idiotic error with ammunition followed by Bruce Willis’s wry retort. In front of her, the elephant loomed in front of the TV. She stared at its chest, watching it move in and out as the elephant breathed, each deep inhale and heavy exhale rippling its wrinkled skin like waves on a grey-white sea. Sadie forgot about the movie, and she forgot about Dex, until the movie ended and Dex turned off the TV, kissed her forehead, and went to bed.

Instead of following him, Sadie stayed back. The elephant plodded over to her. Slowly, it stretched out its trunk and touched her forehead where Dex had kissed her. It tingled. She stretched out and took the elephant’s trunk between her hands, pulling the elephant gently to her side. For a moment, she felt a spark of adrenaline—what if the elephant accidentally sat on her and crushed her? —but her fear subsided. The elephant wouldn’t hurt her. It had proven its loyalty. Sadie turned her face into the cushions and curled the elephant’s trunk to her chest, feeling the trunk tighten around her forearm. She clung to it.

Sunday morning, Sadie awoke with a jolt, for a moment wondering where she was. As she rubbed sleep from her eyes, she remembered the previous night. Her head swiveled sideways, looking for the elephant. Instead, she saw Dex in the doorway, shaking the rain off his coat.

Dex turned and saw she was awake. “Oh good, you’re up.” He often stated obvious things as his own revelations. “No one picked up the mail yesterday, so I got it,” he said. He unlaced his shoes and crossed the foyer to the kitchen.

Sadie yawned, picked herself up off the couch, and shuffled to the kitchen, opening cupboards to get a bowl for cereal. Where was the elephant? It was probably hungry.

Dex had picked up the card. He chuckled. “Wedding cake. For who?”

Sadie turned towards him and gave a start: The elephant was there, filling the space of the doorway behind Dex, a big grey backdrop to a portrait painting. She could barely see its head—its shoulders reached to the top of the archway, its front legs like tree trunks sprouting from the black-and-white pinwheel tiles. Its trunk hung just behind Dex’s right shoulder, swaying back and forth like a pendulum, its nostrils widening as it sniffed the air. Sadie watched, motionless, as the elephant’s trunk paused in its swinging and curved towards
Dex’s face, pausing an inch away. Slowly, its nostrils quivering, the elephant’s trunk moved closer, closer, closer, and poked Dex’s right cheek: one, two, three times. Sadie’s breath caught in her throat. The elephant had never touched Dex before.

Dex glanced over his shoulder. “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” she said hastily and put the milk away.

Dex moved into the kitchen and put the rest of the mail in a pile. He went into the living room, though she wasn’t sure how he managed to do so without tripping over the elephant’s feet.

“Did Jess ask you to make a cake for the wedding?” Dex picked up a magazine, his monthly subscription to Runner’s World, and started flipping through it, pen in hand.

Sadie’s arms prickled, and she crossed them, casting her eyes towards the laundry closet. The elephant still blocked her view.

“No,” she said, putting her bowl in the sink. She moved to the doorway and squeezed past the elephant, using her hands to push against its shoulders as she finagled her hips through the small space. The elephant’s head brushed the ceiling as it pivoted to look at her, its eyes blinking mournfully in the sun streaming through the sliding glass door across the room.

“Then whose?” asked Dex, finally stopping on a page.

Sadie kept looking at the elephant. It blinked. “Mine,” she heard herself say.

Dex looked up from the pair of electric blue running shoes he had just circled. “Oh?”

Her eyes held the elephant’s gaze, her fingers twisting together behind her back. She shifted her weight to the balls of her feet, bouncing slightly on her toes. The elephant tried to copy her, but its back was already pressed against the ceiling. It settled for flicking its tail, knocking a picture off the wall behind it in the process. She watched as the photo clattered to the floor in its frame. The elephant looked at her apologetically.

Sadie felt suspended, trapped, hanging between the guilty gaze of the elephant and the now-attentive gaze of her boyfriend. She thought about the last five years of her life: the day she met Dex, when he literally ran into her as she walked downtown with armfuls of new baking supplies for her first apartment after university. His sweaty face had turned red as he apologized over and over and offered to buy her a new, undented cake pan. She thought of the day he asked her out—a warm, sunny June morning walking through the Public Garden, bird crumbs in hand. She thought of the day they moved in together, into this very flat—Dex, buoyant and confident, she, breathless and expectant. She thought of the holidays that followed, like Christmas three years ago, when they spent December nights in the kitchen, singing “Jingle Bell Rock” at the top of their lungs as the snow blanketed the railing outside and an electric fire crackled in the little living room hearth. They’d spent hours making Dex’s favorite simple spritz cookies and Sadie’s more-complicated spice praline meringues, sugar and nutmeg swirling together, and dancing, intertwining, throughout the whole apartment.

Thinking back on it now, the past few years seemed disjointed, cluttered, stacked on top of each other. Sadie thought she might try to sort it all out, to throw things in the hamper or otherwise keep them. But as much as she yearned to remember, what filled her vision now was the giant creature that towered in front of her, the grey-white mass of head, ears, legs, and trunk encompassing half of the room and all of her memories for the past few years: she thought of the elephant and their weekend baking ventures and Sweet balcony escapades. She thought of their meals together in the evenings when Dex was out wooing clients and how even if the elephant couldn’t sit at the table, it always helped her clear the dishes. She remembered Laundry Thursdays, the hum of the washer and dryer growing steadily louder in the background as she covered the elephant’s tusks with dirty sheets to make a fort in the living room. She remembered the times she fell asleep waiting for Dex to come home from the office on late nights and how the elephant always stood guard at the door. Though it never made a sound, Sadie always knew it was there. And through it all, the elephant had kept some unspoken vow, helping her and staying with her, never saying a word, but always regarding her with that patient, doleful gaze.

Sadie looked at the elephant now. She wondered when it had gotten so big—was it in the past year, or in more recent months? Maybe she had just never really noticed its girth, or the fact that it now took up the entire entryway and half of the living room when it stood at full height. Of course there must have been some
part of her that had always known that it would grow—elephants weren’t usually small enough to fit in a city
flat—but she hadn’t really given it much thought. Soon, however, they’d have to open the sliding glass door so
it could put its hindquarters on the balcony, and even then, it would still take up much of the living room.
And eventually, she realized, as the elephant continued to grow, it would block the door to the apartment
completely.

Sadie turned away from Dex and the elephant, facing the little closet in the hallway. The small, bi-fold
door was halfway open. She peeked inside. The closet was as she had always remembered it to be, from their
first week in the flat until now, and despite her promises to clean it, that closet would remain a mess. It was
habitual, a routine, and Sadie knew that as long as she lived in this flat, it would be a constant—the same
movie playing over and over, no matter how much she wanted to change it.

When this last thought came to her, Sadie heard a click, like an old VCR player completing its
rewinding of a tape. All of the images she’d been imagining from the past six years whizzed by, blurring and
stretching into a thousand tracking lines across her mind, tumbling over each other until everything—the last
six years of her life—ground to a halt. At that moment, one picture stayed frozen in place: the old, cluttered
laundry closet, with its piles of clothes and boots and winter coats, the faint smell of caked mud, dust, and
dryer sheets like a thick veil over it all.

She reached in and slid her coat off of the hanger. Turning back into the living room, two pairs of
eyes still watched her: Dex’s, slightly wider than usual but un Concerned, and the elephant’s, sober and
sympathetic.

Sadie turned to the elephant. “Come with?” she whispered. It regarded her sadly, looking down. She
knew then that that was impossible, that the elephant had been here for quite some time, had lived here, had
belonged here. And if she stayed, it would too. Sadie traced her index finger along its trunk, feeling the
muscles ripple and then still. The elephant looked on, saying nothing, but she knew. She always had.
“Goodbye,” she said softly, and let her hand fall.
Contributors

Ashley Bailey is a freshman at Chapman University with a major in creative writing. She lives in the Bay Area, although she is going to school in southern California at the moment. She’s been writing for many years, though mostly self-taught, so she’s ecstatic to now be taking classes for her passion.

Shannon Baker is a senior at Luther College studying English (Writing) and Spanish. When she is not tutoring Writing and Spanish, attending class, or writing about culture shock and her experiences studying abroad in Chile last semester, one can find her running on Decorah trails or playing guitar. She serves as the Vice President for Luther’s Sigma Tau Delta chapter, the Co-Facilitator of Focus worship on Sunday nights, and Managing Editor of The Chessboard—an Op-ed-centered publication sponsored by the Center for Ethics and Public Engagement at Luther. Next year, with her TEFL certification, she hopes to teach English to Spanish-speaking students in South America.

Originally from Michigan, Perry Balmer is currently an undergraduate student at Chapman University in Orange, California working towards a Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing. He has held a love for reading and writing since elementary school and has just recently felt confident enough in his work to submit it to literary journals.

Kait Burton is a senior studying English Creative Writing and Strategic Communication at Oklahoma State University. Her work has been published in Frontier Mosaic. She is currently completing her senior honors thesis in creative nonfiction.

Haley Grindle is a senior majoring in Creative Writing at Northwestern University with a concentration in poetry. She grew up in Plainfield, Illinois, and had little experience with creative writing throughout her primary education. Her poetry has been published in North by Northwestern—a student publication on NU’s campus—and currently writes biweekly articles for STITCH, a student-run magazine which analyzes the connections between fashion and various other topics such as politics, pop culture, and sexuality.

Bria Holt is a Creative Writing major at Chapman University, with a minor in Film Studies. This is Bria’s second appearance in this publication, as her short story “Hard Plastic” appeared in Issue 9 of Catfish Creek. Over the last year she has worked hard to challenge herself with short fiction and genres outside her comfort zone. Her goal for the future is to continue to experiment with as many areas of writing as she can, while working to polish the pieces she is most passionate about.

Dwight James III is currently a senior at Florida State University, double majoring in creative writing and theatre. He enjoys writing, photography, and travelling to new places. His writing has appeared in journals such as Kudzu Review and Florida’s Best Emerging Poets: An Anthology. He teaches poetry at local high schools and to students on campus.

Maithu Koppolu is a senior majoring in Public Relations and Creative Writing at Chapman University. She is originally from San Diego and, as such, loves anything and everything to do with the beach and/or water. She
is often intrigued by race and sociocultural studies, and centers most of her work around these two topics.

**Amber Krieg** (cover artist) is a member of the Loras College class of 2020. As a Media Studies major, she enjoys experimenting in digital and mixed media art forms. As a person, she enjoys taking walks in the woods and watching late night comedy shows.

**Melanie Lau** is a student in the BFA Creative Writing program at Emerson College. Her work has been published in *Black Swan Literary Magazine* and *Flawless Mag*. She studies in Boston, Massachusetts, but lives in Honolulu, Hawaii.

**Kelsey Day Marlett** is a young writer studying in Boston, MA. Her work has appeared in literary journals such as *Astral Waters*, *The Emerson Review*, and *Atlas Magazine*. She was also awarded first place in the Serendipity Literary Agency's 2018 Discovery Contest.

**Meagan Rock** is an undergraduate student at Miami University of Oxford. She is a senior looking to become a debuting author by the end of the year.

**Charles Venable** is a storyteller from the Southeastern United States with a love of nature and a passion for writing. He believes stories and poems are about getting there, not being there, and he enjoys those tales that take their time getting to the point.
IN THIS ISSUE
ASHLEY BAILEY
SHANNON BAKER
PERRY BALMER
KAIT BURTON
BRIA HOLT
HALEY GRINDLE
DWIGHT JAMES III
MAITHU KOPPULU
MELANIE LAU
KELSEY DAY MARLETT
MEAGAN ROCK
CHARLES VENABLE