



Catfish Creek

A NATIONAL
UNDERGRADUATE
LITERARY JOURNAL

VOLUME 11



Issue 11 (2021)

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:

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Editorial staff:

Editor-in-Chief: Jacob Heelein

Fiction Editor: Emily Lemire

Poetry Editor: Avery Wickersham

Nonfiction Editor: Marianne Gleason

Faculty Advisor: William Jablonsky

Layout: Jacob Heelein, Emily Lemire, Avery Wickersham,
William Jablonsky, James Pollock

With assistance from Robert Waterbury

Cover Image: Chase Guerdet (Media Studies, '21)

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.*

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Pretty Face

Jimmy Franklin awoke to a sharp tapping on the window. He jolted, eyes flying open, and instinctually lifted his feet down from off the dashboard of his dad's '78 Cadillac. He glanced around in a groggy panic, reminding himself of his surroundings. He was slumped in the passenger's seat of the car, his face hot where it had been pressed against the glass window. His beat-up Nike sneakers had left a smudge of dirt on the dark plastic of the dashboard.

Jimmy had just enough time to register that his dad was not going to be happy about the stain on his car before another, heavier, pounding on the window reminded Jimmy what had woken him in the first place. His older brother Derek stood hunched over outside the window so that his face practically pressed against the glass. He made eye contact with Jimmy and made a circular motion with one hand.

Jimmy sighed. He shot his brother an annoyed glare as he slowly cranked the window open one inch at a time. "Can I help you?"

"What are you doing out here, dickwad?"

Jimmy gritted his teeth. "Dad drove me home from work, I guess I fell asleep. What are you doing here? Don't you have your own place now?"

"Chiefs game is on, baby!" Derek backed up and stood up straight with his arms held out to his sides. At his full height, he towered over Jimmy and the car. "New place is great, but my cable—not so much. Plus here, I get Ma's seven-layer dip and free access to Dad's beer. Now, get inside, you weirdo. Lombardi kid's on the phone for you."

Jimmy's interest perked. He hastily cranked the window closed and then shoved the car door open. He stepped out onto the gravel driveway and winced: his legs had fallen asleep. Derek laughed and pointed at the dirt stain on the

dashboard. “Dad’s gonna kill you for that, dickwad.” He reached over and flicked Jimmy’s ear—Jimmy flinched back—then headed back towards the house without another word.

Jimmy gripped the top curve of the car door, his hands curling into fists. He took a moment to breathe, calm himself down, and appreciate the feeling of the open air around him, the crisp wind of midsummer, the smoky scent of an oncoming storm. Then he steeled himself and bent back down into the car. He dusted the dirt off the dashboard, to little effect (other than getting dirt all over his hands). Once he’d done all he could do, Jimmy resolved himself to whatever consequences there would be and shut the car door.

Jimmy entered the house quietly, only letting the screen door stretch open about halfway so that it wouldn’t squeak. He immediately heard the cheers and shouts of his dad and Derek watching football in the living room beyond the front parlor. He heard the clanking and clattering of his mom in the kitchen, probably making the seven-layer dip Derek so highly praised. On the table by the front door, the phone sat off the hook.

Jimmy picked up the receiver and stretched the cord as far as it would go until he stood tucked in the corner of the front hall. Then he brought the receiver up to one ear and pressed a hand to the other to block out the filtering sounds of his family. “Hello? This is Jimmy.”

“Dude, if you’re not gonna answer the phone when I call, the least you could do is tell your hot sister to pick up.”

Jimmy decided not to ask which of his two sisters Luke considered hot. “What do you want, Luke?”

Luke Lombardi, by all technicalities, was Jimmy’s best friend. They lived next door to each other. They went to school together, eight years at St. Thomas More and now almost four at Rockhurst Catholic High School for Boys. Luke went to all of Jimmy’s basketball games and

cheered for him louder than Jimmy’s own parents did, and Jimmy lent Luke his Walkman every time either of them got a new cassette. They spent more time with each other than they ever spent with anyone else. Luke was the only person who knew Jimmy’s deepest and darkest secret, and the only person Jimmy felt he

could trust to really keep it.

But Luke was also kind of an asshole.

“Remember just before school ended, when I finally got up the courage to ask out Lucy Weber?”

Jimmy paused as an ear-splitting cheer rose up from his living room, followed by his brother’s resounding shout of, “Yeah, baby! Go *Chiefs!*” that made Jimmy wince.

He pressed the phone closer to his ear and mouth. “You mean when you chickened out so bad that you threw up and I had to ask her out for you?”

He could almost hear Luke glaring at him through the receiver. “Semantics. But anyway, you know how she said yes?”

“I believe her words were, ‘I’ll think about it.’”

“Well, *anyway*, she called me this morning,” Luke spoke pointedly over him. Jimmy bit back a laugh. “And she said I could take her out tonight *if* I could find someone to go out with Caitie Callaghan.”

Luke paused significantly, and it took Jimmy a second or two to process the words, but when his brain finally caught up with his ears, his smirk faded. “Dude. No.”

“Come on, it’ll be fun!” Luke insisted.

“I am not—” Jimmy began, then realized he was raising his voice and, with a cautious glance toward the living room, dropped it to a whisper. “I am *not* going on a date with Caitie Callaghan just so you can neck Lucy Weber in the back of my dad’s car.”

“I can’t believe you would think my intentions were so vulgar! Lucy and I have a real connection and—”

“Luke,” Jimmy growled, shutting his friend up. He kept his eyes and ears trained on the living room and kitchen doorways, ready to close his mouth or even

hang up the phone if the TV volume so much as dipped. “Look,” he continued in a low whisper, cupping his free hand over the mouth of the receiver to further ensure that only Luke could hear him. “I don’t even *like* girls—you know that.”

“Yeah, but your family doesn’t,” Luke pointed out, suddenly completely serious. “Don’t you think a pretty good way to keep them in the dark would be showing them evidence to the contrary?”

Jimmy ground his teeth and gripped the receiver more tightly. “I guess you have a point,” he admitted, each word clipped like it pained him.

“Just one night,” Luke pleaded. “We pick up the girls, we take them to dinner, we go ride a couple of rides down at Worlds of Fun, I kiss Lucy at the top of the Ferris Wheel, we take them home. Three hours tops, what do you say?”

Jimmy considered it. Down the hall came the unmistakable sound of his father throwing a beer bottle at the wall and shouting expletives at the opposing team. It made Jimmy wince as if he were being struck instead of plaster. “I’m pretty sure it’s supposed to rain.”

“Can I take that as a yes?”

“Definitely don’t take it as a no,” Jimmy muttered. “You sure you want to take them to an amusement park?” He stepped down the hall a bit to pull the curtains back on the window. He eyed the steadily darkening sky with suspicion. “I’m serious, man, I think it’s gonna storm.”

“It’s just a little rain!” Luke insisted. “You’re the best, man.”

“Closed Until Further Notice Due to Inclement Weather,” Jimmy read off the sign posted on the iron front gates of Worlds of Fun. He shoved the Cadillac into park and spun around in his seat to shoot Luke a withering glare. “And you’re an idiot.”

Rain was pouring down outside the car, just as Jimmy had predicted. It kicked up dust and mud in the abandoned gravel parking lot of the amusement park and sent a rushing sound through the air, making it hard to hear without

shouting, even with the windshield wipers going at full speed. Next to Jimmy, in the passenger's seat, Caitie Callaghan sat filing her nails, one mud-splattered heel crossed over her knee. Luke was sprawled across two-thirds of the bench seat in the back, seat belt abandoned, while Lucy Weber pressed herself as close to the car door as physically possible.

“Sorry, ladies,” Luke said unapologetically, pointedly ignoring Jimmy’s glare with a lazy smirk. “Looks like we’re gonna have to save our Ferris Wheel ride for another day.” Jimmy rolled his eyes and started to turn back to the wheel, but then Luke continued, “But hey, the night’s still young! Why don’t we take this party back to my place?”

“No,” Jimmy, Lucy, and Caitie all said in unison. Luke’s face fell, but the look he gave Jimmy was more annoyed than betrayed.

“Can you just take us home, please, Jim?” Lucy asked politely, leaning forward slightly in her seat.

“Of course.” Jimmy shifted the car into drive and pulled a semi-legal U-Turn back onto the highway, ignoring Luke’s attempts to convince the girls their night didn’t have to end.

He did, however, allow himself a shameless smirk when Caitie spun around in her seat, tossed her nail file in Luke’s face, and snapped, “Oh my god, Lombardi, shut *up!*”

Lucy’s house was farthest from Worlds of Fun, so Jimmy headed that way first, tuning out his passengers as Lucy asked Caitie if she wanted to sleep over and the girls started excitedly making plans. He kept his focus trained on the rain-soaked windshield and the road ahead of him, trying not to let his thoughts stray far from the task at hand.

The girls had met him and Luke at the diner where they had dinner, so Jimmy had only been to the Weber house once. Two years ago, Lucy had thrown a party to celebrate the end of the school year, and she had invited not only her entire class at St. Theresa’s Girls’ Academy but also half the Rockhurst boys. Her house was on the other side of the Plaza, in a fancy gated community with its own pool, ball court, and golf course. Jimmy’s family was far from poor, but his parents had put three kids through college and four through Catholic school, so

they lived simply enough that rich people's houses like the Webers' made Jimmy feel inadequate and uncomfortable.

Furthermore, the party had been little more than an excuse for Lucy and her friends to get mildly tipsy while listening to Top 40 hits that everyone would be sick of by morning, or make out in various corners where they could pretend no one was watching, or just stand around and admire all the handcrafted furniture and designer clothes Lucy's family could afford because her dad sold Kansas City real estate and her mom dealt in questionable but lucrative stock. Jimmy probably wouldn't have gone to the party at all if Luke hadn't dragged him there under the pretense of needing a wingman and a designated driver, and he hadn't planned to stay long.

It was at that party that Jimmy kissed Aiden Weber.

Lucy's older brother had been a junior at Rockhurst at the time. He was tall and built like the football player he was, dressed in beach shorts and a suit jacket nicer than the party required, with a dress shirt the color of salmon and a crucifix necklace glinting ironically at his throat. He had a shock of dirty blond hair that seemed to style itself and startlingly bright green eyes that he hid behind thick tinted glasses, even at night and indoors. He was the student council president his senior year, quarterback of the football team, prom king, valedictorian.

He was the only openly gay kid Jimmy had ever heard of, much less known, and his folks were rich and important enough to make sure that no one ever gave Aiden any shit for it.

Aiden had first caught Jimmy's eye across the crowded basement floor of the Weber mansion, as Jimmy hid on a barstool in the corner with a paper cup of flat soda clutched in his hands. Aiden had been playing pool with a couple of the other football guys, and he'd noticed Jimmy sitting alone and started eyeing him over the crest of his shades.

If asked, even to this day, Jimmy wouldn't be able to explain what exactly happened that led to him, completely sober, making out with Aiden Weber in his bedroom on the third floor. The room was half as big as Jimmy's entire house. Aiden's hands had been soft, swift, and experienced where Jimmy's were calloused and clumsy.

It had been the best hour of Jimmy's life, but then Aiden had said he needed to get back to his sister's guests and had slipped out of bed, leaving Jimmy kiss-flushed and aroused. Aiden had never called, not that Jimmy had really expected him to, and when school had started back up in the fall, Aiden had made no acknowledgment or even shown a sign that he remembered that anything had happened between them.

Aiden graduated over a year ago and went off to some fancy university Jimmy couldn't even dream of affording, even if by some miracle of fate he could get in. And yet, Jimmy wondered absently, as he passed Royals Stadium on the way to the Weber house, if Aiden would be home.

As soon as the car slowed to a stop in front of Lucy's four-story house, Luke practically jumped out of his seat and tapped Jimmy on the shoulder. "Dude, gimme the keys, I'll get the umbrellas out of the trunk."

Had he been fully of sound mind, Jimmy would have thought to point out that he had to get out of the car no matter what, if only to move the seat up so that Luke could get out the door. Jimmy was going to get wet anyway, so he might as well get the umbrellas himself so that Luke could at least stay dry. But he was distracted, still lost in the memories of that one night with Aiden, so he found himself moving on autopilot. He shut the car off and handed Luke the keys, then pushed open the door and stepped out into the rain.

He was soaked immediately.

Jimmy stood a few feet away from the car, giving Luke enough room to push the seat up and clamber out, and gazed up at the mansion before him. The Weber house was somehow even more grand than he remembered it, decorated with towering balconies on each window and some kind of fancy turrets. The whole building seemed to loom, making Jimmy feel smaller than he ever had.

He startled when the steady stream of rain stopped hitting his face. He turned and realized that Luke had come up behind him and held a wide umbrella over his head.

"All set?" Luke shouted over the rain. He had the other three umbrellas

hooked over his free arm and his hand shoved loosely in his pocket. He had a smile on his face that Jimmy wasn't sure he liked and a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Jimmy didn't answer, just took the umbrella handle Luke offered him and watched as his friend circled the car to shelter Caitie and Lucy as they climbed out the passenger's side. "You can come in for a minute if you want, Jimmy," Lucy called to him, glancing pitifully at his sopping clothes. "Dry off before you drive home?"

"Sure, okay," Jimmy said, out of politeness more than anything.

Lucy turned her gaze on Luke, her expression dripping with disgust, and said, "You can come in, too, just don't... touch anything."

Luke grinned shamelessly. "Yes, ma'am." Lucy rolled her eyes.

"My parents are out of town," she explained as she dug her keys out of her purse, once the four of them had crowded under the overhang of her porch and closed their dripping umbrellas. Luke elbowed Jimmy, his eyes lit up in inappropriate excitement, but before Luke could even inhale, much less say something crass, Lucy pushed open her front door and added, "But my brother should be home."

Jimmy froze, feeling ice creep through his veins that had nothing to do with his drenched clothes. His heart beat arrhythmically. He swallowed, his mouth dry.

"Are you coming or what?" Caitie's voice brought him back to reality, and Jimmy blinked. Luke and Lucy were already inside the house and halfway through the front parlor, while Caitie hovered in the door, gesturing impatiently at Jimmy, who was of course still standing frozen on the front stoop like an idiot.

He cleared his throat. Swallowed again. Nodded, mumbled something hopefully coherent, and forced his feet to move.

Jimmy felt self-conscious the second he stepped into the Webers' front parlor. It was even more intimidating without a mass of partiers flooding it. The hallway was high-ceilinged and huge, with a marble fireplace on one end and a plush burgundy carpet that Jimmy felt like a criminal for dripping rainwater on.

He closed the door behind him and carefully slipped his umbrella next to his friends' in the ornate iron stand. Caitie had already abandoned him to follow Luke and Lucy wherever they'd gone, so Jimmy hovered by the door, trying to decide whether it was less rude to yell for his friends or just go exploring.

A voice came from the spiral staircase to his right: "You just gonna stand there, or...?"

Jimmy jumped. Leaning on the stair rail watching him was Aiden Weber—just as beautiful as Jimmy remembered him, dressed in plaid pajama pants and an Elton John t-shirt and those same dumb sunglasses. His hair was rumpled like he'd just rolled out of bed, even though it was barely 8 pm. His toenails were painted black.

"James Franklin, right?" Aiden asked, cleanly filling the awkward silence that had started to fall between them before Jimmy could jumpstart his brain enough to say something. "You were at my sister's party a couple years back."

"Uh—yeah—Jimmy," he stammered out, legs moving without his brain's permission to bring him closer to the bottom of the stairs. "You and I—I mean, we... well, I didn't think you remembered..."

Aiden smirked and smoothly floated down a step or two, his eyes never leaving Jimmy's. "I never forget a pretty face."

Jimmy opened his mouth to say something else—he wasn't quite sure what—but footsteps coming down the hall drew his attention away from Aiden's mesmerizingly dark shades. Lucy and Caitie appeared in the doorway at the far end of the hall, followed by Luke carrying an unnecessarily tall pile of cloth towels.

"Aiden, if you're gonna be the kind of douchebag who wears sunglasses inside *and* at night, could you at least do it in the privacy of your own room?" Lucy said off-handedly to her brother as she took a towel from Luke's stack and passed it to Jimmy.

Aiden didn't respond, nor did he make any move to take off his shades or look away from Jimmy. It was hard to tell with the sunglasses, but Aiden might've winked. Jimmy blushed as if he had. He forced himself to drag his attention away

from Aiden and at least try to act like a normal human as he used the towel to wring his hair out.

“Thanks,” he said to Lucy once he was at least not actively dripping water onto her ornate carpet anymore. “We should probably get going before the storm gets any worse. Luke? Keys?” He held his hand out for them.

Luke made a big show of patting his pockets, and Jimmy’s heart sank with dread even before Luke said, “I... *may* have accidentally locked them in the trunk.” He was smirking, not the least bit apologetic.

Aiden snorted a laugh.

“*God*, you’re an idiot!” Caitie proclaimed. Jimmy couldn’t help but agree.

Luke shrugged. “Sorry, guys. Guess Jimmy and I are stuck here until morning—”

“Lucy, can I use your phone?” Jimmy cut him off. “I bet my dad will come pick us up.”

“It’s down the hall,” Lucy said, pointing, her voice thick with relief. “Caitie and I will be upstairs if you need anything else.” She cut a glare to Luke. “Try not to need anything.”

“No promises!” Luke called after her with a cheeky grin as she led Caitie up the stairs. Aiden followed without sparing them a second glance, still chuckling to himself. Jimmy deflated, feeling unfairly disappointed. As soon as the three were out of sight, Luke turned on him. “Dude, come on! I thought you’d love another chance to get hot and heavy with Aiden Weber.”

“Will you keep your voice down?” Jimmy hissed, glancing up the stairs in a panic in case anyone heard. “And also please never say any of those words again.”

The phone rang for a long minute as Jimmy anxiously tapped his foot. He didn’t actually know where Luke had stormed off to, or how long Jimmy had until Luke

started causing more trouble. He didn't know if he'd see Aiden again, or what he'd say if he did, or if he'd be able to keep himself from throwing himself on Aiden the second they were alone together.

Mostly, he didn't know how mad his dad was going to be if he actually picked up.

“Franklin.”

Jimmy's mouth went dry. He swallowed, tried to ignore the anxious racing of his heart, and managed, “Hey, Pop. It's Jimmy. I'm at Lucy Weber's house, in Cass County? Luke and I were dropping off our dates, and I... kinda locked the keys in the trunk. By mistake.”

He played with the phone cord and prematurely winced, waiting for the yelling to start. He knew there was no point in blaming Luke for the accident. Jimmy's dad would just find a way to make it Jimmy's fault anyway, so he might as well just claim responsibility from the get-go. But the ensuing diatribe would be harsh, nonetheless.

All his dad said was a low, growled, “Dammit, Jim.” Which was somehow worse. “Twenty minutes,” he added after a pause, then hung up. Jimmy allowed himself to breathe as he replaced the receiver—

“Your pop coming to get you?”

—and jumped straight out of his skin. He spun around and stared, wide-eyed. Aiden was standing only a few feet away, a neat pile of clothes in his arms. He'd pushed his sunglasses up onto his head. The green of his eyes was darker than Jimmy remembered it, closer to a hazel.

“Yeah, he's—he's on his way,” Jimmy stammered, after only a slightly awkward pause this time.

Aiden held out the clothes he was holding. “Thought you might want some dry clothes.”

Jimmy blinked. His mind went blank. The only thought he could process was the idea of wearing Aiden Weber's underwear.

“It’s fine, really,” Aiden insisted. “This stuff doesn’t fit me anymore, my mom was gonna give it away anyway.” As if that was the issue Jimmy was having.

Jimmy then had one of those moments where his brain told him to do one thing (in this case, kiss Aiden Weber until he forgot how to breathe) and his mouth did something entirely different, which was to say, “I think I’m good, actually. I’m gonna sit outside until my dad gets here.”

He didn’t wait to see Aiden’s reactions to his words or even to let them land all the way before Jimmy was walking past Aiden back into the front hallway and out the door. There, he froze and let his brain catch up to the rest of him. It was still pouring outside, dark sheets of water slamming against the hood of the Cadillac. There was a streetlight sparkling at the far end of the driveway, illuminating the middle distance and not much else.

Jimmy’s face felt hot. He couldn’t believe the turn this night had taken. Sour regret roiled in his stomach, but he wasn’t sure what exactly he so badly regretted. Not kissing Aiden even though he’d wanted to? Lucy or Caitie could’ve walked in at any minute and he couldn’t risk getting caught. Kissing Aiden the first time two years ago? Maybe, if it hadn’t felt so *goddamn* good. Letting Luke talk him into going on this stupid double date? *Probably*.

Jimmy sank down onto the porch step and ran a hand over his face. He could feel that the concrete beneath him was damp and mud-stained from footprints and splatters of rain, but his clothes were so wet already that it didn’t matter. He heard the door open and shut behind him, but he didn’t turn his head until Aiden sat down next to him. Jimmy’s heart beat a little faster. He was overly aware of Aiden’s presence, of Aiden’s warmth practically pressing into Jimmy’s shoulder, of the sharp scent of Aiden’s aftershave.

“I came to the realization,” Aiden began, dipping his head toward Jimmy’s so that his voice carried under the wind and rain, “or rather—I unblocked the memory that we made out at Lucy’s party, like two years ago, and then I never talked to you again.”

Jimmy reminded himself how to breathe. Attempted it with moderate success. Bit out a hoarse, “Yeah.”

“Would you believe me if I said it was for your own good?”

Jimmy looked down at his hands, clasped together in his lap. “It probably was,” he admitted, feeling himself blush as he avoided eye contact with Aiden. “I mean, I’m not—you know, no one... knows. If the kids at school had found out—if my *dad* had found out—”

“Yeah, no, I get it,” Aiden cut in. “You know, I was real scared about telling my folks too, a while back. I thought they were gonna throw me out, or cut me off, or something, but—you know, it really wasn’t that bad.”

Jimmy raised his eyes to Aiden’s face. Aiden was staring out into the rain, a calm smile on his face. Jimmy sat up straighter, starting to self-consciously fiddle with the thin hem of his t-shirt. “It wasn’t that bad cause your parents are rich,” he said before he could convince himself not to. “Rich young liberals who can afford not to give a shit what other people think about them. My parents are old and poor and my dad worked at a meat-packing factory for the last forty-five years, and he—he voted for *Reagan*, for god’s sake! He would rather I be dead than a faggot, so I guess it probably is a good thing you never called.”

He realized he’d been shouting and shut his mouth with a painful, audible click, turning his attention back toward the rain-soaked driveway. His heart was racing for a different reason now. He felt energized and invigorated in a way he didn’t think he’d ever felt in his life. He’d said to Aiden all the things he constantly wanted to shout at his dad and the universe.

“Jimmy,” Aiden said softly.

“What?” Jimmy snapped, turning his head, and suddenly Aiden was kissing him.

It was even better than Jimmy remembered it, soft and sensual and hot beyond all belief. Aiden’s hands worked their way up and down Jimmy’s body, warding off any remaining chill from Jimmy’s damp clothes. Jimmy shut his eyes and let his thoughts wash away, submitting himself to nothing but Aiden’s hands, Aiden’s lips, *Aiden*.

He barely recognized the sound of a car rolling up the drive or the headlights penetrating the darkness, but the slam of a car door made him jump away from Aiden like he’d been shocked. His heart stopped.

Jimmy's dad was standing in the driveway, one hand still clutching the driver's side handle of Derek's second-hand Ford. His expression was livid, angrier than Jimmy had ever seen him, angrier than Jimmy could have possibly imagined him ever being.

In that moment, Jimmy knew with absolute certainty that he would not be making it home unscathed.

"Jim," his dad growled, low and dangerous. "Get in the car."

"Dad—I—" Jimmy glanced at Aiden for help, but Aiden was staring listlessly at the ground, the tips of his ears red with shame. Jimmy felt tears prick his eyes and tighten his chest. All he could think to say was, "Luke's still inside."

His dad pounded a fist on the roof of the car, making Jimmy flinch. "GET in the GODDAMN car, Jim!" he roared.

"Yes, sir." Jimmy rushed through the rain to the passenger's side and practically threw himself into the seat. His whole body felt numb, though not from the cold rain.

And yet it still hurt like fire when the blow came, a sharp cuff to his ear that slammed his head into the door. The pain was blinding. He could barely register as his dad grabbed Jimmy's shirt by the neck and pulled him halfway across the car's middle console, but even through the throbbing in his ear and the blood rushing through his head, Jimmy heard his father's words loud and clear.

"I don't know if you need a priest, boy, or just to get the hell beaten out of you, but shit like this will never happen again, do you hear me?"

Jimmy's voice was hollow and distant to his own ears. "Yes, sir. I hear you."

Hannah Paige

University of Maine Farmington

My Little Town

It's not that my hometown is cruel, it's just that it's small. And when someone becomes aware of just how small their possession is, sometimes they can grow territorial, overly protective of it. When I was in Kindergarten, everyone in my class had their name typed up and dispensed out of a label-maker and taped to a cubby in our classroom. I remember feeling so proud, seeing my name on something. And it was small, but I wasn't aware of how small it was, how vulnerable that size made it, until someone tried to take it from me. Rather, what my classmate Robbie did was less like taking it and more like taking me out of it.

One day I came back from recess to find his lunchbox and sweatshirt in my cubby, my belongings having been piled on the floor. Evicted.

And I remember that anger, that betrayal. That was *my* cubby, *my* property.

I'm not saying that the woman who came to our town the year I turned thirteen evicted anyone. I'm not saying that any of my neighbors there thought their name was printed on plastic and taped somewhere in town, claiming their ownership of it. I'm just thinking about cubbies and towns.

What I remember about being thirteen is scant and ill-representative of the entirety of the year. For instance, I remember the budding pain of developing breasts, patting them gently in the shower as if they were two fresh wounds. I remember bullies: the permanent coffee rings inside a white mug of the world; no matter how we scrub at them with assemblies: and TED talks and the occasional awareness run with tie dye shirts, they remain.

I remember the denim skirts and the cheap neon earrings I bought with

saved babysitting money. I remember never having the right haircut. I remember prying Cheeto nuggets out of my braces with the tip of my tongue and giggling about how “oh my god soooo cute” Taylor Jemming from Algebra class was. I remember how hard it was to be that age.

I remember the woman who appeared on the street corner fifteen days after I turned thirteen. She was across from the coffee shop my mother and I frequented almost every morning on the way to school and work. The corner was in front of the post office on Main Street, at the beginning of what was considered “downtown.” At the end of the street was the bus stop, where downtown ended and Main Street wove into Highway 21 without the announcement of a sign, leaving tourists lost and confused in the Maine mountains. That’s how my hometown liked outsiders to feel upon leaving our town of 4,000: so turned around that they never wanted to come back for fear of failing to find their way to civilization again.

The woman simply arrived one day. She didn’t seem to use a map like other tourists or visitors had, shoving them in my neighbors’ faces and asking them where they could find “that homey little bakery they read about online.” As far as I could tell, she didn’t have a car. She didn’t have one of those hiker packs that always look big enough to contain an entire roasting pig but fails to hold more than a tent and some trail mix when it actually comes to packing it. No bags were piled around her ankles, no sweatshirt tied around her waist from preparing for all weather types. She’d come with nothing but herself.

I waited outside the café that morning. My mother was getting her coffee to-go because she was running late. While the early summer air raised goosebumps on my bare legs and the smell of coffee grounds churned into the air, I gawked at the woman across the street, trying to memorize everything about her in that first glance. She’d appeared there on the corner, a weed in between two sidewalk squares that springs up after the first warm rain. She had silvery-blond hair, something like I imagined my mother’s hair to be if she didn’t dye it every month. Her yellow sweater was patched on the elbows with cloth that didn’t match, and she wore a pink patterned dress. She was old, I remember thinking. In that soft way that some old women get—in a way that makes you think that when they eat out at a restaurant, they order hot water and bring their own tea bags; they really do smell like the “cotton wind” advertised on laundry detergent bottles; they get their grandchildren to eat organic vegetables. She stood with her arms folded in front of her chest, each hand cupping the opposite elbow, as if she’d

woven herself together to be a basket. Her eyes skated from car to car, person to person, alert but not taking any part in what she was seeing. If someone walked up to her and said hello, I wondered if she would, instead of saying hello back, would take a step back and wave her hands in front of her, “No, no I’m simply an observer.”

I wish that I had been the first one to see her. Maybe if I had been the first one from our captious town to meet her, things would have been different. Then again, I’m being too self-righteous, giving myself too much credit, because I never once said a word to the woman.

That summer I was allowed to sneak away to the park or the general store after breakfast at the coffee shop with my mother. There, I would look at books that my classmates, whom I pretended were my friends, would have teased me about. They were ready for high school and I was not, and what I mean by this is that I hadn’t fully arrived at the same decision they all had: that doing what everyone else did was what was best for you. I was still stuck at the turnpike before the exit for complete adolescent assimilation.

In the general store, Julie was twirling a rack of postcards. Sally and Marco pretended to flip through the magazines while actually devoting all of their attention to Julie’s words. “It doesn’t matter what she says, I’m thirteen now. I’m practically a woman. You’ll understand too, Sally, when you have your first boy/girl party. Once a boy’s lips touch yours, it changes you.”

It’s not her fault that Sally Smith’s parents cursed her with an archaic name that just *begged* to be ripped out of the twenty-first century and returned to its home era with sock-hops and 5-cent milkshakes. It’s bad enough being born with a last name like “Smith,” but with a first name like “Sally” you were permanently cast in the role of “generic woman” for the rest of your life. You were in every math problem. It’s the feminine name people use when telling a story about someone without revealing the true identity of that person— “My friend, oh let’s call her Sally.” An insert, an alternative, a fake name. Like Jane Doe, but Sally Smith had to walk, breathe, sleep and live the rest of her life with that name. Unless of course she did eventually get married, but knowing her luck she’d marry a man named John Jones and then there would be some kind of cosmic manipulation of their biology to ensure that they had one boy and one girl and they were named Mary or Nancy and James or Richard, and the whole cycle would continue: a lineage of vanilla. It’s not that I disliked her for her name. It’s

that I disliked how well she lived up to it, as if she had decided long ago when her mother was still buying monogrammed baby blankets and socks that looked too tiny to really have a purpose, that she would be the most mediocre, most passive person she could be. She would be Sally Smith without really committing to who Sally Smith was.

Marco just wanted to be the next boy invited to Julie's girl/boy party. But if he'd somehow ended up alone in a room with Julie he probably would have developed a stutter or asthma on the spot, asking his nearest wingman for an inhaler or an empty bag of Doritos for him to breathe into.

I had known Sally and Marco since Kindergarten and knew them in the way that only people who grow up in a small town (an "is that a booger or lint on the map?" sized town) and never leave that small town can know a person.

I didn't have this privilege with Julie. She'd moved here from Las Vegas when we were all in fifth grade and had managed to walk that fine line of mesmerizing the local children because of her *away-ness* and accruing judgement from their parents for the same reason. She'd done it flawlessly from where my thirteen-year-old self stood. She made me want to move across the country too so I could say things like, "Oh, we don't have that where I'm from" and "I got these back at home, but you can't get them here." I wanted to be able to refer to a home that wasn't here. Nobody in my hometown had the same hometown as Julie and nothing seemed quite as exotic and intoxicatingly enviable as that.

"I can't even go to the supermarket without asking my mom's permission," Sally admitted and picked up a copy of *Teen Vogue*.

"You should come to the party with me." Julie raised her eyebrows at them, knowing that such a dare would risk both of them being grounded for at least a month, probably more like three for Marco, whose mother was best friends with mine and had threatened to ground him for asking for a skateboard for his birthday. I let him ride my ten-speed, but only on the opposite side of town from where his mother worked. "Both of you."

They still hadn't noticed me standing by the door and I cleared my throat, instantly blushing because my mother always told me that I shouldn't call attention to myself— "Wait to be noticed, honey, don't push it. No one likes to feel obligated to be nice to someone."

“Amanda, you should come too.” Julie pursed her lips at me and her eyes were almost feline, teasing, like she knew I’d been standing there listening to them, wanting to be included, wanting to be the kind of person that could never be ignored when entering a room. But she and I both knew I was not that person. Julie was always doing things like that, making me feel like she’d been studying me under a magnifying glass for years and I hadn’t even known it. It was almost as if because she was from away, she had this exterior, other knowledge of all of us. She saw through everything in a way that people who had been looking at each other their entire lives couldn’t.

I shrugged my shoulders and hoped that she wouldn’t notice how many times I’d worn the blue undershirt this week; of course she’d know though. It was Julie. “My mom wouldn’t let me go to a party at a boy’s house.”

Julie nodded knowingly; was there anything she didn’t know (or pretend to know) at thirteen? Wasn’t there *anything* that I knew that she didn’t?

“Did you guys see that woman outside today?” I asked.

“My mom offered to give her money,” Marco said.

“My dad asked her if she was lost when he was on his way to work,” Sally added.

“Did you just notice her?” Julie asked. Sally knew; Marco knew; Julie knew (which wasn’t a surprise) but I felt myself shrink in front of them. Why was it that I was always the last one to know anything? What was I missing that they had somehow already found?

“No.” I noticed how high pitched my voice emerged, and I reigned it in, shaking it of the nerves I felt. “I saw her hours ago. But did you guys hear that thing about her?”

“What thing?”

Julie, for the first time, looked interested in me. I was under the magnifying glass performing something she hadn’t seen before. If I didn’t perform a pleasing grand finale, I’d be booed out, banished from the ring for the rest of my adolescent life as I knew it. This was my chance to one-up Julie, to

know something that she didn't.

"She's here because she killed her husband, you know," I said, just like that, surprising myself with my own glibness. I lifted a hand and inspected my fingernails as if I had anything better than chewed cuticles to gaze at. I'd seen Julie do this on several occasions to her own manicured nails (where she paid for these, I never knew; there wasn't a nail salon for at least forty-five minutes from my hometown) and it seemed like the right behavior.

Sally and Marco dropped the magazines they'd been holding and each took a step closer to me, latching on to my words as loyally as I'd done with Julie's every day for the past three years. Julie plucked a postcard from the rack.

"Yeah, right, Amanda. Who told you that?"

Straight to interrogation; Julie knew how to handle lies. She knew how to pick them apart. My thirteen-year-old brain didn't quite understand yet that that probably only confirmed her own unfaithfulness. Instead, I chalked this up to her no-nonsense demeanor. She'd had an upper hand in this area too. Her father was a police officer downtown. My father was a dentist, which gave me zero assistance in confrontational skills.

My brain scrambled for another lie, performing acrobatics around the fidelity it usually observed. What would Julie do? What would Julie do?

"It doesn't matter," I shrugged, letting my hand fall back to my side, "but I know she killed her husband."

Julie narrowed her eyes at me, returning the postcard to its place on the rack. "Then what is she doing here?"

"If I told you now, then what would I tell you tonight at the party?" I astounded myself with how much my own voice resembled Julie's. I crossed my arms over my chest, wishing I had better boobs like Julie, the kind that huddle together like plump penguins when you fold your arms over them.

She was too cool to look proud of me and instead unwrapped a piece of gum and popped it in her mouth. She chewed it quietly, so slowly, waiting for one of us impatient, awkward teenagers to break the silence, squirm out of

it. She brought silence on herself. She liked it. Marco fidgeted with the plastic sheet on the comic book in his hand. Sally looked at something out the window, then read the sign over the counter over and over and over again. I watched Julie know that I was watching her. Her eyebrows remained perfectly still in a permanently challenging arcs (Did she pluck those herself? Go to a mall to have them done?). Her lips were glossed, but not overly so, like she'd arrived at the makeup party long before any other girl in our grade. She wasn't messing around with cheap, flavored lip liners and blue eye shadow stolen from her sister or her cousin or from some other girl's locker. She might have even skipped that stage of development altogether.

“Sure, Amanda. You can tell us if you come to the party at Mike's tonight.” Her voice was steady and venomous, a rattlesnake who'd already learned to control its poison.

“I will. *When* I go to the party.”

If I went home that evening, I would have to come up with another lie to tell my mother that would explain my needing to leave the house again. But my brain was sapped and felt lethargic from all the lying I'd done earlier, and I knew nothing I would say would be believable enough for her to let me leave. I was leaving the general store, having waited for Sally, Marco and Julie to leave first, when I saw the woman again. She was still sitting on the corner, her legs crossed, her full, skirt, its color dulled from so many washings or sun or both, over her knees. Her eyes followed as my next-door neighbor, Mrs. Elm, pulled her son to the other side of her as they walked past the woman sitting on the corner. As if she were diseased. Mrs. Elm had always struck me as a trusting woman. She delivered boxes of homemade cookies and cakes to everyone on our street come Christmas time. Most people around town did the same and I never heard about her rejecting someone's baked goods for fear of poison or razor blades. You would have thought the woman on the corner was selling drugs or openly displaying pornography, the way people gave her a wide berth. Just for sitting there. Just for having arrived there without an explanation, without a connection to our little town.

I crossed the street to cut behind the post office and tried to walk as quickly as I could past the woman. I wasn't afraid of her, but I could feel the

town's eyes on me. I could feel my cheeks heat up and my legs speed accordingly because I knew that that was what I was supposed to do when encountering someone from away. I was thirteen. I was vulnerable. I was protected by the safety of having a hometown until someone invaded it, and when that happened, I knew to flee in the ways I'd watched the rest of my town flee.

"Excuse me," I heard her say as I was about to cut between the post office and the sandwich shop, a shortcut to my street. Her voice was deeper than I thought it would be. I'd expected the kind of raspy, willowy voice of a witch or someone on the brink of death, all thin and beige, but hers was punctuated and full with deep violets and reds. "Have you got a second?"

I knew not to look up. I knew not to stop. I knew not to talk to her. She wasn't from here. She was a stranger. She was a squatter or a loiterer or a vagrant. People posted signs about people like her. People kept brooms on their front porches to shoo away people like her. But I was curious, and I heard, maybe in the emergence of my diverging, my adolescent brain, *but really why can't you look?*

I kept my head facing towards the ground but darted my eyes over to her and knew why everyone was running away from her. Why I was told to flee. Why I shouldn't look. Her eyes were like mine. She resembled, when I really looked at her, someone I could live next to, someone that knew the right way to speak in my town, knew which people liked peanut brittle in their Christmas boxes and which people didn't. She looked like someone I could have known if I'd wanted to. She looked like she could have been part of my town, could have folded herself in so easily, organically, as one folds in the eggs while making pastries; once they are in, you'd never know that there had been a dough without them. If we had not been here before her, staked out our claim for this town in tax files, PTA meetings, town fundraisers for the middle school; if we had not gotten here first, we would never know that she was from away. We would never have known that she wasn't, clearly, in the way that Julie clearly broadcasted it, paraded the identity around for us all to envy, one of us. There wasn't a way to look at her and know that she was not from here. And that scared my town and me more than anything.

I turned my eyes forward again and hurried home, leaving the woman on the corner.

When changing at home, I tried to pick something that Julie would have worn to the party. Of course that was impossible because I didn't have the kind of inherent knowledge of what was right and wrong like Julie, the kind of clairvoyance that she seemed to have about all things. I hid in the woods behind my house and watched my mother's car pull into the driveway at around seven. I watched her go in the house and I heard her call for me and realize that I was not home. I would have about an hour until she started to worry, but by then I needed to be heading to the party. I waited until 8:10 to walk down to Mike's house. He lived on the other side of town from me, and it wasn't until around 8:30 that I knocked on his door. I'd heard that it was starting at eight, and when my mother and I went to parties we were never late, but it seemed like something Julie would have done. I knocked several times before a boy with a full mouth of braces finally opened it for me.

"Were you knocking? Jeez, Miss Manners, just come in. It's a party."

Teenagers lounged on the stairs with red cups beside them. Some were draped over the couches in the living room, where I found Julie. She was sitting on the floor, but it was clear that when she'd come into this room the sofas had been free. She'd *chosen* the floor. It was hers now. Such freedom, such command of a room. Everyone wanted to sit on the floor once she did. I could tell by Marco and Sally, shameless in their obsession with her, sitting cross-legged on either side of her. Others were sitting on the edges of couch cushions, wanting to casually slide down and join Julie there on the floor without making it look like they too had succumbed to her magnetic pull.

"Well isn't it the guest of honor, our very own representative from Channel 6 news," Julie cheered upon seeing me, raising her blue cup. Who else had a blue cup here? No one. I wasn't aware they made blue plastic cups. Julie knew how to be individual with something as cultish as a red plastic cup. The first time you held a red plastic cup was like an initiation; everyone wanted to be in the club. Julie knew better; she didn't need an initiation. She would just start her own club.

I stopped before the cluster of teenagers in the middle of the room, colored, and wanted to bolt. I had been there for ten seconds and already I was falling short on conversation.

She smiled, knowing, *seeing* me falter already. I didn't have the kind of

stamina to keep up with her. I didn't have whatever stuff made her so faultless.

“Come sit down and give us the latest.” She waved me over, blue cup in hand, and I felt blessed. She didn't have to show me mercy. She could have let me mumble and stew in my own uncertainty and silence until I evaporated. *Do you remember that girl who used to live here? Amy? Alana? Can't remember her name but wow, the water vapor she turned into really cured my chronic nosebleeds that summer. Humidity cleared it right up.*

I made myself small as I squeezed in beside Marco. The others still trying to figure out a way off the couches glowered at me, waiting for their invitation.

“So, Amanda here,” Julie said, looking around at the crowd gathering at the sound of her voice, “has the inside scoop about the woman on the post office corner.”

“My dad said that she just wants our money,” someone said.

“She tried to get me to stop and talk to her, but I knew better,” another said.

“I bet she's deranged.”

“The cops will pick her up eventually. You can't just loiter in the middle of town and expect people not to notice.”

“Amanda says that the woman killed her husband,” Julie said, ending all speculation.

Eyes turned to me. Was this what it felt like to be Julie? No, no not quite, but I was getting there. “That's right, she told me herself.”

“You're full of shit, Amanda. You're too scared to talk to teachers let alone some crazy old lady on the street,” Marco said, and he tried to scoot closer to Julie, feeding off of her confidence. Everyone wanted a piece.

Julie ignored him and sipped from her blue cup. “Tell us the whole story, Amanda. Leave nothing out.” Her voice was syrupy and coated with assurance and whatever bitterness someone had poured in her cup. No, whatever *she'd*

poured in her cup. Julie would know how to mix her own drink.

“Well, you know how my mom and I always go . . . I mean how my mom makes me go to the coffee shop with her every morning?” I got an amalgamation of nods and grunts and scoffs in response. I rolled my eyes to communicate how much of a drudgery it was to go anywhere with my mom. Parents. The worst.

“Well, at the intersection before we cross to go to the café, there she was. We had to wait for a car to go past, and the woman pulls at me, pulls on my sleeve,” and suddenly I was pulling on Julie’s arm. I was conscious of her allowing me to touch her and even more conscious of her lack of disgust in me and that’s when I knew I had to keep going. I wasn’t going to get a piece of Julie’s confidence. I was going to *be* Julie. People were going to look at me like they looked at Julie. “And my mom doesn’t notice because, you know, she’s just watching the light. And the woman pulls me over and tells me . . .” I looked at the eager eyes all on me and I wanted to make this silence stretch as far as I could. Taffy that moment. Stretch and pull until it’s so sweet I couldn’t stand it.

“She asks me, ‘You want to know a secret?’ And I don’t say anything because I’m just kind of shocked there, you know?”

I had never said “you know” and had the people listening care enough to pretend to know. They nodded. “And she says, ‘My husband doesn’t know I’m here. Want to know why? Because he’s bleeding out under the porch!’ And she cackles and I can smell her breath. It’s sick and gross and so old. And she says, ‘They’ll never find the body, sweetheart.’”

I looked to my left and saw Julie looking like she had just made a decision about me. Her plucked eyebrows were relaxed, and her head was cocked and her eyes slightly pleased. I had passed something. I had achieved something. I had known what it felt like to be looked at.

Before I could bask in the captured attention of the group too long, Julie patted me on the shoulder and stood up, tugging at me to follow. “Come on,” she said, “I’ll make you something to drink.” And when she showed me into the kitchen, she ignored the stack of red cups on the counter and instead reached into one of the cupboards like this was her house and not Mike’s, and she handed a blue plastic cup to me.

The next day I sat in the window booth, waiting for my mom to come back with her coffee and my scone. I wouldn't be allowed to go to the park or the general store afterwards but would instead go to work with her as punishment for sneaking out the night before. I didn't care, though, because as I sat there, I watched Julie's dad, in his tan sheriff uniform, stop on the curb beside the woman still on the corner. He asked her a few questions, motioned towards his car, and rested his hand on his leather belt. I watched her look around and stand up, and I watched Julie's dad clasp handcuffs around her wrists. I bet they hurt, I remember thinking. I looked away then, because I knew that our entire town was watching her, and sometimes it does more bad than good to have everyone's eyes on you.

Today, I pick up my son from preschool and when I buckle him into his car seat, he tells me that he had a bad day. I ask him why, assuming it means he didn't get to go first down the slide or that his teacher scolded him for not saying "please" when he asked someone to hand him the sparkles during craft time. Instead, he tells me that today their teacher told his class that the school had built new shelves and hooks outside each of the classrooms for students to hang their jackets on, leave their lunchboxes and books inside. His teacher told them that they had to remember which hook and which shelf was theirs and only use those. They were not allowed to use each other's. When I ask him why he doesn't like this new rule, he says,

"I like to share. Everybody's things are everybody's."

And I remember the woman that came to this same town so many years ago. And I think that if we had thought of our town in these simple terms, maybe we would have realized that our town and what makes it up, the BBQ we share with our neighbors, the fundraisers we throw for prom, the sign at the town line that reads "Welcome home, Mayor Roberts! You were in our hearts during your bi-pass surgery!", belongs to everybody. Everybody's things are everybody's.

But I grew up with the same rules that my son is given. Do not put your backpack in other people's cubbies. Do not speak to people who did not bring your mother a lasagna when she gave birth to you, who did not live down the street from you all your life. Do not let these people come into our town. Live in possessive pronouns and make them iron.

Zachary Shiffman

Susquehanna University

From Winter

*“Orpheus hesitated beside the black river.
With so much to look forward to he looked back.”*

-Donald Justice, “There Is Gold Light in Certain Old Paintings”

The envelope was white and crisp, and I slipped my heart into it. There wouldn't be a response, I thought, just as there hadn't been for the others. The flowers of her scent had withered to winter already, but it didn't matter. I still wrote.

With the letter sent and orientation complete, I walked back, but it was a frightful thing, for the streets swam with fish and I knew that I was destined to drown. Across the pavement, I paddled, barely clawing the surface as the more adept creatures rushed by. Their black-and-white suits clashed with the orange of my vest, my hard-hat blunted by their beanies and earmuffs. Soon, I reached my house: a huddled and disenchanting thing of uninspired architecture.

I collapsed on my bed, burying my face in my pillow, craving everything that words could not express, but finding none of it there; only musty. I fell asleep and awoke to morning's gray light slithering viper-like through the window and onto the spot on the bed where she used to lie. I blinked my dreams away and sat up straight and rigid. The echoes of plangent shots rang in my ears as reality took hold, and above them all slammed the door.

There went orientation, there went the dreams and nightmares that sang clumsily together in the night. There went my home too, disappearing as I rounded a salt-sprinkled corner; that sad house with its haunting door. Eventually, the street went as well, and with it the fish that were faster than I was. As I approached the work site, which stood solemn in a dirty square lot beside the

highway, a line from a poem she once read to me materialized. “The world is very dusty, uncle,” it went. “Let us work.”

The world is very dusty, I thought. I had seen much of that dust myself, far before winter came, and far away from the worksite and the door and her. The shots and screams of my dreams were coated in dust.

The other men came into view, and their eyes set upon me. *Let us work*, I thought.

“Hey, new guy!” called one as I arrived. His words were deformed by bread and turkey; it wasn’t even close to lunchtime.

“Shut it,” growled another. “And put away the food. Hardwick will be here soon.”

The eater shoved the rest of his breakfast into a brown bag, which he then promptly stuffed into his vest. Mr. Hardwick came moments after it disappeared behind the orange. A man of business and efficiency, he gave us our assignments with little fat in his words and even less appreciation. We started, sweat beginning its assault as the day marched forward, the sun its convoy and cutting through the midday cold. The work was hard and hot and cold and I liked it and I hated it; work was a bed of roses and thorns and I tossed and turned in aimless sleep.

With noon’s arrival came lunch. We ate together, the workers, the men who all wore orange vests, aside from one: the assistant to Mr. Hardwick, who did not wear a vest but rather just a plaid shirt. His name was Bill, and I remembered him as the man who ran orientation alongside Mr. Hardwick himself the previous day.

The eater from earlier finished his sandwich and, due to having eaten half of it already, pestered me for some of mine. I tore off some and gave it to him, not out of mercy or benevolence, but because I was simply too tired to say no, and I was used to smaller portions than that anyway.

As we ate, one worker, an older and tired-looking man whose bald head shone in the sun, tossed me something. I caught it, flinching, and held it in my palm. It was a tape measure; a white-and-red tool, as if designed on Christmas, dense and indistinguishable from the other tape measures the workers all had

clipped to their belts or jammed in their pockets and vests, except for an X drawn in black marker on its side.

“Thanks,” I mumbled.

“Oh, Lord!” exclaimed the vest-less assistant Bill. Bill turned to the older worker who had thrown the tape measure. “Still, Randy?”

The worker, Randy, gave Bill a glare. A glare with vitriol behind it I had never seen before in a man. “It’s tradition,” he said.

“It’s unholy, that’s what it is,” muttered another worker. Around his neck, a cross gleamed.

“Oh, you Bible men and your superstitions,” said Randy. “It’s tradition. We’ve all done it! Let the new guy go through it.”

“What are you on about?” I asked, frowning.

Bill’s eyes rolled like he was trying to catch a glimpse of his inner skull. “There’s a tradition here. A foolish one if you ask me, but Randy’s been here longer than me—longer than *any* of us—so I suppose he has the right to continue it.”

“Damn right I do,” said Randy. He breathed laboriously, like the worksite’s air was toxic to him.

“What tradition?” I said.

“We give new hires that tape measure,” explained Bill, “and they lose it.”

“They *lose* it?” I repeated.

He nodded. “Every time. Usually doesn’t take long either, does it, Randy?”

Randy guffawed. “Don’t take no time at all. I lost it two days after getting it. Typically it takes about a week.”

“It just up and vanishes,” jumped in another worker. It was the man I had shared my sandwich with, a man my age named Doyle. “Every time. None of us understand it. It’s like a real-life magic artifact or something.”

“Then how...” I held up the tape measure. Its presence, it seemed to me, disproved their mythology, but my implied argument only elicited knowing chuckles from the men.

“It shows up eventually,” said Randy. “Either back here, or whoever had it last finds it in some crazy place... Doyle here found it in his bed, in plain sight, two weeks after losing it. A crazy thing, it is.”

“It’s all a bunch of bullshit,” said a worker, chewing loudly on some chips.

“How can something that’s happened so many times be bullshit?” retorted another.

“The thing’s a tool of the Devil. We ought to have burned it years ago,” the cross-bearing worker said darkly.

“And explain to Mr. Hardwick that we set his shit on fire?” Bill said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Randy cut in. “Just let the rookie lose the damn thing so we can all move on and do some work.”

The rest quieted in agreement. I studied the tape measure. The silver clip on the back shone brighter than the rest of it, and its edges were ragged. Nevertheless, it was a nice-looking tool: experienced-looking. The word *wise* occurred to me.

Lunch ended and the men dispersed, but I stayed for a minute, examining the tape measure. Something changed just then, in my head; something clicked. I put the tape measure in my pocket, stuffed it deep, beneath my keys and my wallet and my sense, and I went to work.

The newly chaotic environment of the site dissolved into familiarity, and into my life, crept routine. I woke, I worked, I slept, just as before, but things were different. The fish in the street moved slower than before; I could almost keep pace, and it was not so frightening. I slept deeply, for the dreams and the

nightmares had relaxed. They were there, manifesting as flashes appearing in the black, but their vividness was destroyed.

The shots and the door's slam remained. I doubted they would ever stop.

Only one thing had changed in my life to warrant my newfound stability, and I knew what it was: the tape measure remained in my grasp, a whole three weeks after obtaining it. Occasionally workers would ask me if I still had it, and in response, I would present it to them and watch their eyes become wide. I heard whispers that the "curse" was broken, that the tape measure was, in fact, just a tape measure, and the rookie, the great Benjamin Madsen, had been the one to prove it.

Don't lose it, I would think, ensuring I still had it with a quick pat to my pocket or vest, wherever it happened to be, countless times a day. I played myself like a drum in my determination to keep the tape measure in my clutches, and I came to depend on the tool's presence; the cool clip, its dulled rubber vertices, its weight which quickly became weightless in its familiarity. *Don't you dare lose it.*

But why not, I wondered? It would come back if the workers' lore was true. Perhaps not to me, but to the worksite at least, and in that sense, I would encounter it again as long as I worked in Mr. Hardwick's lot. So why cling to it if it was likely to be seen again?

Because, I thought, perhaps it wouldn't. And that was enough.

So I kept it on or near me always. When I bathed or relieved myself it waited on the sink. When I slept I locked it in the drawer beside my bed. If I were to be accused that I feared the tool would grow legs and escape in the night, I would scoff, but I don't think I would deny it.

Two and a half months after I had received the tape measure, I made my first mistake and let it out of my sight after a long day of work left my body sore and my mind numb. That day, I cried for the first time since this eternal winter began and the coldness seized me, that cruel cold that swept in from the outside by the terrible motion of the slammed door, the wind that murdered the traces of her flower.

It was a muggy day when I lost sight of it. The sky was sullen, the city

depressed. I sat at the window, looking out, and absentmindedly reached for the tape in my pocket, only to find nothing.

My heart startled. Where was it? Had I finally lost it? Had I met the others' expectations? Oh, what would they think of me? The one who had come so close to potentially breaking the tool's streak of self-liberations, yet failed nonetheless? "No," I said aloud. "No, no, *no...*"

Then a thought arrived: *the table*. The rickety and bland wooden table I ate my dinners on. The one just behind me. I had left it there; faintly, I remembered leaving it there. I went to look but stopped. Ice gripped my heart.

What if it isn't there? How can I face that? You lost it, you lost it, you idiot, you lost it, you lost her, it's gone, it'll never come back!

I sat there, neck stiffened, staring out the window and into the gloom, too horrified at the possibility of a bare table to turn around.

Finally, I forced myself to take the leap, and my lungs emptied at the sight of the red-and-white device sitting there, unmoved, on the table.

I felt the tears roll down my cheek as I pocketed the tape measure, before inadvertently catching my reflection in the glass. My eyes were red, my skin pale. I looked like an unevolved, lost strand of mankind: a pasty species with flawed genetics and objective intellectual inferiority. My throat caught at the sight.

Had *this* been her last sight of me? This sickly creature, drunk and dependent on her flower?

I looked away.

"You still got that thing?" said Randy incredulously, sitting beside me during lunch. A moment later, Bill joined us.

I was holding the tape measure in one hand and a half-empty water bottle in the other. I nodded.

"Impressive," said Bill. "You've definitely beat the record by now. It's been months!"

Randy huffed.

“Something to say, Randy?” prompted Bill.

“Ain’t nothing,” he said, but upon seeing our inquisitive expressions, he continued, picking at his orange vest as he talked. “You ought to have lost it by now, is all. It’s always lost by now.”

“C’mon, Randy,” laughed Bill, his smile showing white teeth and youth. “That ‘cursed object’ and ‘magical artifact’ stuff is all just campfire stories we tell to get our minds off of work every now and then. You don’t believe any of it like Doyle does, do you?”

“I don’t care whether any of that is real or not,” said Randy. “It ain’t about that. I dunno about curses, but I know about this job, and in this job, losing that damn tool is something like a rite of passage, you know?”

“I’m sure I’ll lose it eventually,” I said, trying to be helpful, but the words came out strangled and uncommitted.

Randy scowled. “You don’t get it, neither of you, I’ve been here thirty-one years. I lost that thing the second day I had it, been hard at work ever since... loyal to this place, loyal to old Hardwick...” and he looked at Bill in a way before returning his attention to me, “...accepted by those who lost it before me and those after, too. You wanna work here, to earn your place, Benjamin? Lose it already.” He leaned back and bit his sandwich. “Thirty-one years, son. You ought to listen to me if anyone. Thirty-one years here and I ain’t had no accidents, no injuries, no hungry nights, no missed paychecks, no change, no... advancement...” he trailed off. He chewed slower as a disturbed expression crossed his face. Then he took another bite, threw away the rest, and left in silence.

Two days later, Bill stopped me as I was walking to my assignments elsewhere in the worksite. Rubbing his coarse hair, Bill admitted that he had left his tape measure with his belongings at the lockers and asked to use mine. Reluctantly, I gave it to him and held the plank in place while he went to measure it. To both our surprise, however, the yellow tape wouldn’t extend past the six-inch mark. Aggravated, Bill reset it and tried again, but to no avail. He yanked and

jerked, but the tape measure remained jammed. Cursing, he tossed it back to me and hounded another worker for his tape.

I held the tool in my hand and grabbed the silver lip of the tape and pulled. It stopped, as it had before, at six inches. I held the tool and studied it and saw things I hadn't before; I saw that the edges were so frayed they could potentially be pulled off, I saw that the metal clip was stained and slightly crooked, I saw that the tape within sagged downward and bent without any support, even at just six inches. I saw that the black X on its side was smudged to become practically a dirt mark, and I wondered how long it had been like that, that grey and ruined little X.

Putting it into my vest, I walked to the lift, my footsteps heavy.

I sat on an orange beam high above the drab city, broken tape measure in hand, and pondered things. The thing felt heavier than usual in my palm.

What would happen if I lost it and it never returned to me? What if I lost it and then it *did*, long after I had come to adjust to the absence of its weight? *Could* I adjust to the disappearance of such an important and buoyant thing? How could I breathe without it? Was air without its scent, mingled with flower, even worth breathing?

And then I thought, no, perhaps I wouldn't, and perhaps it wasn't. Perhaps on those streets, I sat so high above I was destined to drown. Or perhaps I wasn't. But I had seen myself in the mirror that day I looked back; I had seen the gauntness of my salted cheeks, my darkened eyes. And now I saw the tape measure in its true form, and it was a flawed and broken thing, too.

Terror still wracked me, but I knew, now, that it was time to drown, if fate willed it.

Four months after I first laid eyes on the tape measure, I awoke to find it gone. I hadn't locked it away the night before, nor had I taken note of where I left it last before going to sleep. I forced it out of my mind and left it somewhere in my house, and the following day, it was gone. Lost. But, I thought as I dressed for work, I wasn't, and it was air that I breathed. Air that, I noticed, was losing the chill I had grown accustomed to all winter.

Golden light streaming from outside, I opened the letter slowly, carefully, like it was made of glass. I unfolded the paper; the faint scent of flowers greeted me. On the sheet were only three words: *Leave me alone.*

Before, I might have been able to measure the streams of my tears at such a letter, and they would have extended far beyond six inches. Upon our final judgment, however, I merely sat and contemplated for a bit, my cheeks dry, before refolding the letter and going to face the dreams, where only the dusty shots remained now.

I went to work the next day with energy and relief the likes of which I hadn't felt in what seemed like eons. I entered the worksite, arriving earlier than usual; my foray through the fish in the streets had been the fastest it had ever been. My voice prideless, I told Bill that I lost the tape measure and needed a replacement. He gave a knowing look and wrote my request down, then directed me to Mr. Hardwick for my assignments, which were read bluntly and without eye contact.

Later, during lunch, I noticed an absence among the workers and inquired about it to Doyle. "Randy quit," he said.

Surprised, I asked why. He shrugged and said, "I saw him storm into Hardwick's office and come out all angry before you arrived, I don't know. When Bill tried to talk to him, he spat at his feet and left."

Later that day I noticed an orange vest sitting in the dirt by the front gate. Randy's vest, the same color as mine and all the others' (except for Mr. Hardwick, who wore a suit, and young Bill, who wore plaid), but thirty-one years faded, and now abandoned to the dirt. I thought that it was a good thing, for that vest to be in dirt, for so long it had been in the air, but not the same air which I finally breathed. No, it was a different air, a city air; air infected with soot and poison and delusions of dedication's desserts. Air that could be breathed for years, killing you all the while. The vest was out of it now and in the clean dirt, and I saw a glimmer of deep admiration in Doyle's eyes and suspected that my eyes looked the same, for old Randy breathed my air now.

Spring chirped outside, and I sat at my desk, listening. From nowhere an itch appeared on the back of my neck and an odd feeling overtook me, as if something significant had occurred right behind me, yet had made no motion or sound. The air seemed to hum on my skin, as if the strings of a lyre had been plucked and I was feeling the dying of their oscillations. It was a strangely soothing sensation, that lyre's pluck.

The tape measure was back, I thought, smiling at the notion. It was waiting for me, the worker who had finally lost it, the man who had managed to move on from winter. Or perhaps, I thought with the same smile, my table was bare. I didn't turn around to see which it was.

Maryam Gilanshah

The George Washington University

Something About Paul

*She looked me over and I guess she thought I was all right,
All right in a sort of a limited way for an off-night. – Paul Simon*

There was something wrong with Stella's boyfriend.

I had to tell her. Not just because this was her housewarming party, and the condo (read: not apartment) she bought was obscenely large, and I knew she invited all of us here to show off more than she did to talk to any of us.

I had to tell her because she was, well, getting on in years (read: 41), and I didn't want her time wasted on a guy I *knew* wouldn't suit her. It's not that all women, especially those with new money and tight waists, have to have kids by their mid-40s. Maybe *medically* they should get it over with so they don't have to spend the peak of their mid-lives worrying about if their company's insurance covers IVF or how a social worker will rate their weak attempt at baby-proofing.

But I don't think that. I need to protect her. From herself. And her misinformed desires, ones that seem promising but really just push her closer to (an even longer) spinsterhood.

"Jillian, Jillian, I have someone who wants to meet you! Paul, Jillian, Jillian – Paul!" Stella's voice rung through each room, pinging off the stainless-steel fridge and into the foyer; she had yet to enter the kitchen, leaving me to wait for her to notice me.

I could see her – white pants, white shirt, straightened hair – zipping through groups and clinking her glass on every surface possible. But Paul? Impossible to spot. Bits and pieces passed through my eyeline as he followed Stella around, but his size made it almost impossible to get a full image.

Stella had mentioned him four weeks ago at lunch, describing his

temperament in a coy, embarrassed way, like she couldn't believe she had picked him out, like she couldn't believe she was *telling* us about how she picked him out, like she was practically *overwhelmed* by the amount of attention we were giving her (though we had no other choice, as she initiated and organized the entire day).

The worst part about that was how well it worked. Hearing all of his qualities, listed out like we were some judge's panel, made it even harder to figure out his deal.

Kwame took a handful of pretzels from the bowl – well, at this point, my bowl – and kept talking. It might have been about him getting fired? Or hired? It didn't matter. Stella's livelihood was far more important than whatever temp job Kwame had now.

From our first meeting, now maybe two and a half years ago, Stella fancied herself a sort of work mom to me. And I enjoyed it, at first. She'd save me a seat at company-wide gatherings, decorate my desk with tchotchkes more expensive than they looked, make me feel welcome in the leadership position I continuously felt underqualified for.

Our actual ages aside, though, it quickly became evident that if *anyone* was the work mom, it was me. My consistent imposter syndrome had made me an exemplary employee at the non-profit – never late, always clean, appropriately intelligent – and as I spent more time with Stella outside of the office, my social success seemed to dwarf her individual (read: *single*) appeal.

Before Paul, there was only one guy she seemed absolutely in love with. Vivek Rao. She would talk about him constantly, and, unfortunately, I once saw her sketching *Stella Rao* in her planner, surrounded by fuchsia hearts and a stick figure family. I had never wanted to hug a middle-aged woman so badly. But soon after, he rejected her – swiftly, and semi-publicly, in the cafeteria, leaving Stella to choke sob in the bathroom while I passed her tissues under the door.

After that, she's been a swan – calm on top, but underneath, I know her legs (and head and heart) are going as fast as they can, trying to outrace whatever image of herself she had at this age. And as exciting as her newfound romantic libido was, I can't take another letdown – for her or my sake.

It wasn't Paul's coat. I saw it in flashes as Stella, with Paul just behind her, swept past the kitchen door. It was a bit rough, yes, but it also had an orange-brown ruddiness to it that made him seem down to earth. A man of the people, if that man looks like a tenured professor and those people are all geniuses.

It made me want to shop for Tim (read: my unfortunately English boyfriend) more than I already did, if only so he would look as smart as I assume he is. But that was a part of the problem! It didn't even seem like Paul had bought his coat. It was so snug and natural; I wanted to believe he had always worn it, that he was born a little kiddo and had the coat grow with him long enough that no one has seen nor no one *wants* to see him without it.

"Tim? No, no," Stella said, her eyelashes fluttering around. "He couldn't make it. I knowwwwww – bummer."

Great! Now Stella was talking about Tim (read: my *missing*, unfortunately English boyfriend), with Paul right next to her! And what was I doing? Standing next to a sink-sized bowl of pretzels, nodding to Kwame about working from home (or working alone?), unable to decide what it *is* about this guy!

I touched Kwame's arm and pointed vaguely in Stella's direction, walking away before he could try to regain the attention I never gave him.

"Ah hahaha! Excuse *him*! When Paul's joking around, his claws can come out! Hahaha!" Along with its ability to carry across a place as large as this, Stella's voice was always just a bit too loud. At first, I took it as confidence, but the longer I've known her, the more *unconfident* it seems.

Is it that Paul is *too* confident? It's not that I'm any expert since Tim's made it clear that despite his impressive height, he's quite non-confrontational, and I have yet to figure out if that's sexy or a major bummer. But Paul's been stalking around the place, practically purring with contentment, in an apartment that *isn't even his*.

I would rather have a man be a little more confident than apologize every time he and his giant feet knock over a coffee table or my father's old floor lamp. It seemed Paul had a liteness to him as well, his compact frame helping to glide around the crowded rooms.

Tim is, well... Tim is too long. He's got a long body, sandwiched by long arms, which all sprout up into an oval-shaped head I *initially* found endearing, like you would a uniquely shaped gourd. Even when he smiles, all I can see are those long, strikingly Anglican teeth, ones that taste like beige tea, ones that make me wonder whether or not it's ethical to date a British person in the first place.

And now, as I followed behind Stella, trying to catch her alone, I started to think: was it Paul? Or was it Tim, and his lankiness, and his love of wearing "football" jerseys, and the fact that he *had* to work a shift tonight, leaving me defenseless to Stella's parade of good fortune and bad decisions?

Was I just being jealous?

Stella's eyes widened, and it almost seemed like she was going to drop her wine.

"Come here come here come here!! I was just telling them how *interesting*" (read: middle-class) "Tim's job is! EMTs are those people that you never really know, you know? Like... there's always so many degrees of separation, right? But now, since you've been together for so long" (read: 1 year 8 months) "I feel like it's safe to say, we've got an EMT in the family!"

I nodded and stepped closer to her, trying to indicate that I *want to talk* without having to say *there's something wrong with Paul*.

Where was Paul?

"Where is Paul?"

"Oh, he just stepped out to do a little business. You know – duty calls!" She laughed so that I could see all of her teeth.

"Is he coming back?"

"Don't worry! He'll be right in. He would have a hissy fit if you left without talking to him." She looked out at the rest of our friends as if she was the emcee of a packed bar mitzvah. They nodded to varying degrees of assurance. "Are you sure Tim isn't free? The four of us together? I mean... caution: contents may ignite!" She joked, tossing a stray hair behind her shoulders.

I didn't know what to do. My hands were still streaked with pretzel salt, and the closer I got to Stella, the more I could whisper into her ear something heinous, the less sure I felt.

Everyone else appeared to look so comfortable, and the more I watched them, the more I felt convinced it *was* me. I was the one trying to find something wrong with Paul just to make myself feel better about the breadstick of a boyfriend I let myself have.

Then he came back.

"Paul! Over here!" Stella motioned towards herself like she was helping someone parallel park, before creasing her ivory capris into a squat.

He was a cat.

Paul was a cat.

Stella's boyfriend

was

a

cat.

I couldn't breathe.

"Paul, I'd like you to meet someone very special to me."

He was standing there, looking at me from 6 inches off of the ground. He hadn't seemed this small from the kitchen.

"She and I met during an apprenticeship mixer at the office."

Paul hissed.

"Paul! Please! Sorry," she turned to me. "He's just heard me complain about them *nonstop*. But look – working there has *got it perks!*" Stella spun around

the apartment, and Paul went on his hindlegs, excited by her sudden movement, and began pawing at her shins. His eyes were a striking orange, like decorative pumpkins, and almost glittered in the fluorescence.

What am I saying?

Tim's eyes were beautiful. Well, they were brown. But at least they were attached to a *person*.

“*Anywhoo*, we met way back when, and now, years later, we’re still besties! And honestly—” Stella turned to the group forming around us “—she keeps me young! Only 26 years old, and she is the most whip-smart girl – *woman* – I’ve ever met.”

Stella grabbed my hand. The only thing stopping me from throwing up was the jumble of words I had been holding in, curating, all night.

Should I speak?

No one else seems to notice. Or care.

Is it discriminatory if I say he’s a cat? I don’t even know what *kind* of cat he is. Would it be rude to say *mutt*? What do you call non-purebred cats? Non-purebred cats? Stella called him a “beeline to her heart,” so maybe that’s something?

Oh God...had she said feline, and I misheard it? Did everyone else *already know* he was a cat? Did *Tim* know he was a cat?

No...*someone* would have said *something*. And *Tim* would have made a huge deal out of it, had he known. There’s no way I could have missed this.

It must be that Stella hasn’t noticed, and everyone else is being polite. Or sucking up so they can be the ones to plant-sit (...cat sit?) in this lux condo when she has to fly out for work.

I can’t let her waste her life like this.

Stella’s so smitten that she’ll let the next three years pass by without taking

a second look at his ruddy fur, his overflowing whiskers, his sharpened (though intensely white) teeth, and all of the sudden – bam! – she’ll be 1) barren and 2) an actual Crazy Cat Lady.

Then she’ll be full of rage and regret, blame all of us, and I’ll lose the only friend that’s shown me real care and interest since middle school

I will *not* become that.

I will not let *Stella* become that.

I will not let Paul turn us *into* that.

“Could I talk to you in the bathroom?” I looked down, pretending to check my socks (read: shoe-free home) while trying to coyly look at Paul. He seemed absorbed in the conversation, craning his short, truncated neck into the rest of his trim body.

“Ope! Looks like *someone* had a little too much to drink!” Stella tossed her head back and took my arm, leading me into the bathroom, brushing my legs against Paul.

He was so soft.

“Stella? I think I really need to tell you something...”

“Oh my gosh...BABY what is it? Are you not having fun?” I faltered and she continued. “This is why Tim should have come! The four of us have so much to compare! You know – we’ve never even gone on a double-date!” Without Paul, and under this harsh bathroom lighting, I could see how tired Stella looked.

“Sure, yeah, we can double date. I know Tim would love that...but it’s nice to have a break from him, you know...*boyfriends* aren’t all fun and games.”

She laughed and poked me in the ribs. “Speak for yourself!”

I rolled my eyes. It felt good to be her work daughter, especially now,

outside of the office. Even if it was under false pretenses, in the eyes of a woman (hopefully not) having sex with a cat.

“It’s...Paul.”

Stella smiled like I was asking for help on my math homework and she already had the answer key. “He’s just a little skittish, I promise. He doesn’t respond well to pause— you’ve gotta assert yourself! I was actually a bit surprised, Lizzie, at how shy you’ve been around him. Normally, you’re charging straight ahead, barreling through things, showing all the guys who’s boss.” Her eyes widened. “Just because I’m in a relationship now, it doesn’t mean things will change between us. I will *always* be here for you, okay?”

“Isn’t there anything a little, hm...catty about him?”

“Catty?”

“You know, like...” I clawed, albeit crudely, at the air.

“Elizabeth, I don’t understand.” She crinkled her nose into a tight pyramid.

“Like, ugh – something *wrong* with him?”

“Wrong? What, what, what do you mean? Does he seem sick?” She swung open the bathroom door.

Outside, there was a clear shot, across the room, to Paul. And

Tim.

He was still in his uniform, his hair twisted and patted down into flat, dull stripes over a smiling, flat face. He held Paul in his arms, two bands of white clutching Paul’s chocolate-auburn fur. Paul looked...I don’t know how he looked. His nose was 2 millimeters thick. And so pink.

“Babe, babe! Come over ‘ere! Did ya meet Pawll?”

Stella looked over to me, in shock, and squeezed my now frigid hand.

“Lizzie! Is this what you were trying to do? Buy time, just to surprise me with America’s cutest Brit?!”

Her last three words were punctuated with coordinated leaps from the bathroom to where Tim stood. I walked.

“I had no idea Tim was coming.” I said, standing just out of Tim’s wingspan. His uniform did always make him look sexy. Even while petting my best friend’s boyfriend.

“I wanted to surprise ya!”

Stella beamed beside me and reached out to hold Paul.

“But I ended up bein’ the surprised one! Stella, ya didn’t tell me ya got a cat!”

I swallowed hard, pounding a wad of moisture down my throat. Everyone else had moved into the kitchen where Kwame was still holding court.

“I’m sorry?” Stella now held Paul under her arm, the two of them with bent necks, trying to make eye contact with Tim.

“Your little keety cat! What’s the fella’s name?”

Thankfully Stella began to laugh, making me feel a little bit less like I was tied to a pipe bomb. Though her laugh was more out of confusion than panic.

Tim looked at me and shook his head.

I wanted to shake my head too and burst out laughing, instead of the weird choke I was suppressing right then.

“Lizzie, I don’t,” Stella lowered her voice, “I can’t understand his accent.”
You can’t understand his accent?

“He said...hm, well,” I looked at Tim. He was so so confused. I would be too. I *am* confused. “He said that Paul’s a cat.”

Stella blinked rapidly and looked at Paul. He was stretching his paws out, towards the ground, so she set him down. They seemed engaged in some sort of conversation, primarily from Stella, so I whispered to Tim the...situation. Or, rather, my side of it.

“Bethy, you’re not going to prank me again. You’ve always got something up your sleeve, but not this time, okay? I’m razor sharp. I just got off a 10-hour shift. Nofing can get past me.”

“Tim, please, please, listen to me. She thinks—”

Stella and Paul were both up again, now, and so close I could smell Paul’s shampoo, the same one I had smelled wafting off bookstore cats for years.

“Paul’s my boyfriend.”

Tim shook his head and laughed, more confidently than he did before – than he had ever, really.

Narrowing my eyes at Tim, he quieted down, familiar to my moments of social discomfort and the ensuing, silent rage I carried home with me. “Stella, I just don’t – I don’t understand how that’s possible,” I said.

“I love him.”

“Okay, well, I love my dog back home, but you don’t see me kissin’ ‘em!”

I could feel Stella gritting her teeth, her cheeks glowing a hot pink.

“I think what Tim is saying is that, well, we’ve never seen anyone, um, dating, or, er, *in love with*, a cat.”

“He loves me,” Stella looked down at Paul, whose little paws were crossed at the ankles, and paused for a bit. Tim shook his head again and laughed louder, ignoring my silent pleas to subdue himself. “And I love him.”

I let Tim’s hand go as Stella turned to me. “You, of all people, should understand that.”

Lori Adams

Central Michigan University

A Prayer For The Biter

My Daughter

Small and lovely and twelve years old. Much prettier than I was at that age. Sweet but spunky with a devilish dimple perfectly placed upon her right cheek. That dimple wasn't always there. It is the remnant of a collision with the edge of a coffee table when she was four years old. I can still see that perfectly plump cheek with a blue square bruise. It happened when my parents were visiting, and my mom and I left to run some errands. I don't usually leave my children with my father. Even though he is well into his 70's, he has not yet learned what it means to be in charge. To him, in charge means that there is an adult in the house. Nothing more, nothing less. As I suspected, he settled himself onto the sofa to watch television while my children raced through their new house like wild beasts free from their cage. Circling two small wooden coffee tables and cutting it too close on the final lap, my daughter tripped and met the edge of the table with her face. I can only imagine the shrill scream that would have come from her tiny frame and the look of panic that must have washed over my six-year-old son as he watched his little sister's face bloom into a swell of deep crimson and violet. I can also imagine the effort it took my dad to pull himself up to standing and shuffle over to the scene. I see him clumsily giving her some ice or maybe a bag of frozen peas, but mostly I see him praying that proof of this accident would fade away before I returned.

I came in through the front door about an hour later. I was loaded with bags and thoughts of dinner plans when suddenly, I stopped dead in my tracks. Before me was a whimpering little child with tear-moistened wisps of blonde hair stuck to a swollen and discolored cheek. That beautiful perfect face. Creamy, ivory complexion with caramel-colored eyes and just a sprinkle of freckles over the bridge of her nose. I felt as though I was looking at a masterpiece that someone had just spray painted with graffiti. I looked to my dad for explanation, but he just stood sheepishly in the corner. It took weeks for that bruise to heal but when it did, it left behind a perfect little dent that shows itself just as a grin begins to

take shape. In the end, that imperfection defined that sweet face and made it even more her own. We now refer to her early childhood as PD (pre-dimple).

My Daughter

The biter at daycare. No one wants to be the mother of the biter because no one wants to believe that their child can switch from a calm and peaceful stream to rocky rapids that toss unwanted visitors violently to the shore. Yes, my biter personified that stream. She was, and still is, beautiful, exhilarating and frightening all at once.

Multiple times a week I would walk into the center, only to be greeted with a slip of paper that described an “incident” that had taken place where my child was the perpetrator. The judgmental look in Ms. Taffy’s squinty blue eyes made me feel like I was failing at motherhood. Honestly, did she really believe that my husband and I were teaching our child to bite her friends? Maybe she was hungry. Maybe they pissed her off or maybe this little toddler just can’t express herself any other way. None of that mattered really. I left the daycare feeling embarrassed and annoyed. Annoyed with Ms. Taffy, my child, the victim who now wore my daughter’s dental records on their forearm and with my husband who worked horrendous hours with very little pay which meant that I too had to work and raise small children mostly on my own. Oh, the mother of the biter carries the weight of the world on her shoulders.

One evening, after a particularly awful day at work followed by bumper to bumper traffic along the concrete tube that is I-696, I was exhausted and heavy with weariness. I sluggishly walked up to the door of the daycare. It took all my strength to reach up and ring the bell. I love my children, but I was dreading the second part of my day where if every task didn’t happen at warp speed, Armageddon was sure to ensue. First dinner, then bath time, a quick game, a quick story, and then bedtime.

I was giving myself a well-meaning but ineffective pep talk when I saw the matriarch waddling quickly down the hallway toward me with her short orange bob swinging atop a short thick neck. I was thinking about how compact her features were but also how she was almost as wide as she was tall. She had that look in her eye, like she needed to urgently tell me something. I felt myself tense and I mumbled quietly through a clenched smile, “good God woman, leave me alone.” She opened the door and said, “Mrs. Adams” but I abruptly cut her off

with the snippy response of “who did she bite today?” To my surprise, Ms. Taffy told me that my daughter had been the victim. I have never been so happy to hear that my child was injured. I smiled to myself, feeling that the balance of good and evil was made right again. Her little friend had had quite enough and finally took matters into his own pudgy little hands and bit her back.

At last, the Golden Rule presented itself and the era of biting ended. I would remind her of this chain of events every time she squabbled with her brother or her friends. Telling her that the universe has a way of leveling itself, so always treat others as you want to be treated. I’m sure I don’t say it quite as prophetic as I do in my mind. It’s probably more like a screechy, “if you can dish it, you have to take it!” The point remains.

Once my husband finished his residency and accepted a job in Traverse City, I was able to resign from my less than satisfying office job and be home with the kids. On the last day of daycare, Ms. Taffy said to me, “I know she gives you a lot of grief, but she has so many qualities that will make her a successful woman.” Unfortunately, none of those qualities served my daughter very well as a toddler so I wasn’t exactly sure what she meant, but I held on to those words anyway. I held tight to them with pride and hope. Yes, she would be just fine in this world.

As my daughter became more vocal, she developed a very dry and adult-like sense of humor. Her sarcasm sent many of her school friends running to the teacher. They didn’t understand her and frankly, I think they were a little afraid of her. Picture a tiny little blonde, sans front teeth, who loved to sleep with sponge rollers so that she had big bouncy curls in the morning. See that sweet dimple and those bright caramel eyes. Picture her navy knee socks and pink converse with a school plaid skirt and white peter pan collar shirt. Now, see her telling everyone she had a Beyoncé. Imagine the confusion on her fellow kindergarteners. It did not phase her that the word she was searching for was fiancé because the looks of confusion would not have faded.

Exasperated, my daughter would breathlessly explain how she planned to marry the love of her life, her cat Dino. A ceremony was planned, and a dress was chosen. A rather formal white gown, a replica of Glenda’s from the movie *Oz the Great and Powerful*. Another furry friend, Belle, would be the maid of honor and officiate the ceremony. Pictures would be taken and cake (specifically Swiss Cake Rolls) would be eaten in celebration. Kids thought she was speaking in tongues and her red cheeks would signal that she had no tolerance for such ignorance.

Her greatest downfall has always been that she wears her emotions like a late-night neon sign. If she's happy, tired, angry, or annoyed, you know it. If she runs into a child that she doesn't particularly like, that child knows it. I've tried to teach her to fake it a little, but she reminds me that lying is wrong. Hard to argue.

As grumpy as she sometimes appears, she also gives love in vast quantities. Up until a few years ago, she would wrap her tiny body around me and press her warm rosy cheek to mine and tell me all the ways she loved me. She drew pictures of her and I holding hands, she would make me cards and bookmarks with sweet words that professed her love. She would change the words to Taylor Swift songs so that they were just, "Mommy, Mommy, I love Mommy." She would hold my hand tightly as we walked from the living room to the kitchen. If I sat down, she was climbing on my lap or snuggling up close as if any amount of space between us was too great. If I could fit her in my pocket, she would have climbed right in. In all my life, I have never been so loved.

I told her once that a day would come when she wouldn't think that she loved me so much. Her face contorted in utter confusion as if I was speaking in tongues. She scrunched up her nose as she tried to decipher my words and then quickly threw her arms around me and promised me that day would never come.

My Daughter

Twelve years old now and still terrorizing the boys and speaking her opinions freely and without apology. She still has a wicked sense of humor with a laugh that's somewhere between Woody Woodpecker and Julia Roberts. She does not describe herself as a "girly girl" but has recently confessed that she does in fact like pink. She still loves me, I know, but she doesn't reach for my hand that often and is too big to sit on my lap. Snuggling is more about being near but not with our arms wrapped around each other and not with her warm sweet head tucked under my chin. Now, she finds me annoying when I think I'm being quite charming. My hilarious jokes aren't as funny as they once were and I'm terribly embarrassing in stores when I try to talk to small children. She squirms away when I try to kiss her cheeks and instead of being right by my side, she prefers to be in her room. There are more times now when she wants to expand the space instead of fill it.

I knew this time would come. I've been ready. I've read all the right books and done my research on the perils of pre-teen-hood. But still, things are shifting

in an odd direction and I feel as though I'm entering uncharted territory.

2020 has been a defining year for many. Normal life came to a screeching halt, sealing us inside and taking away everything that felt normal. Can I blame my daughter's personality shift on the pandemic? Can I say that her life has been altered so much that she can't find her place within it? That would be easy, but we are the lucky ones. My husband's job had not been affected. I'm able to be home with them. We have all that we need and honestly, I thought we all enjoyed the break from our crazy schedule. Maybe the busy routine kept her grounded and connected to her friends. Maybe she felt more alone and isolated than I realized. Maybe this was a normal part of raising an almost teenage girl. How is a mother to know?

Parenting is really a game of chance. Most days you are just rolling the dice and hoping for the best. I foolishly believed that the hardest part of motherhood was over. I mean, I kept a fragile tiny person alive. I fed her, bathed her, clothed her, kept her safe from scary things like honey, blankets, and processed foods. I taught her not to stick her fingers in outlets or place her hands on the stove. She learned the hard way about running too fast or jumping from swings. Mostly, though, I just loved her.

Now that she's older, we talk and laugh, and I love her even more. I still feed her, but she can bathe herself and keep herself from suffocating at night while she sleeps in piles of blankets. It wasn't that long ago that I thought about how special these years were where she liked to spend time with me and still said I love you.

But, here we are now at this place where everything is slightly tilted and off balance. I knew she worried about things like burglars, kidnapping and alligators and I recognized how she liked everything neat and orderly in her room, but those little quirks were just a few of the many reasons I love her. She just needed a little extra assurance that she was safe, and I praised her for keeping her room so clean and tidy.

Those quirks however, started to bloom sometime in the spring. She began worrying that her brother would fall asleep before her. In her mind, if he was awake, he provided a layer of protection. If he went to bed, she was alone and vulnerable. Next came the need to put things in three's and then the avoidance of even numbers and then the sadness, anger, and tears. Not the toddler tears that

spill over because the cookies are gone. Quiet tears, alone in the bathroom or in her bed. Quiet tears that cannot be consoled because they aren't understood. Tears with no origin and no destination. It was time to call in the professionals.

The therapist's little quaint office with its soft light and comfortable sofa had ironically, just one year prior, been the loud, messy studio of my daughter's eccentric piano teacher. The foam panels that covered the walls in an attempt to muffle the sound of amateur pianists were now replaced with calming pale blue paint and trendy reclaimed wood shelves decorated with inspirational quotes in white matted frames. The endless maze of cords from keyboards and amps that were secured by grey duct tape were swapped out for a cream shag rug and open bookcases with neat fabric containers. Such a strange twist of fate to be in this room again but for a different kind of therapy.

The soft-spoken woman in the casual leggings and lavender tunic was in stark contrast from the piano teacher who fancied button down shirts in bold Hawaiian prints and Birkenstocks with black crew socks. She had such a warm presence that I had to fight the urge to hug her. How inappropriate. I'm not the one there to pour out my heart. Besides, I'm terrible at therapy. I can type my deepest, darkest thoughts, but I am far too clumsy to speak them.

I started to fill the therapist in on what was happening, but emotion immediately took over the tone of my voice making it quiver and echo in my ears while my brain pleaded for me to stop talking. Fight or flight? Always flight. Luckily, my brave daughter politely asked me to leave. Ever so grateful, I awkwardly stumbled out and left her alone to tell her story to this stranger.

Therapy provided great relief for both my daughter and me. She could finally expel the feelings that had been rolling around in her mind and I could finally breathe because the cavalry had arrived and I no longer had to navigate this terrain on my own.

We were a few weeks in when the therapist asked me to join the session. I climbed the stairs to her office, nervous that I would be asked to participate in the session and wondering if I put on enough deodorant to endure any kind of talking. Much to my relief, she only wanted to talk about my daughter's progress and suggest that she be assessed for Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Okay. This wasn't surprising and I was open to the process. I did not feel sad or fearful. I really felt more curious than anything. I hold a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology

because I've always had an interest in the intricacies of the human brain (really, I just pursued the degree to figure out my own issues but let's not split hairs).

Our next step was a televisit with a psychologist. This was weird and the psychologist seemed as uncomfortable as we did, but we chatted and answered what felt like hundreds of questions while the middle-aged woman in her living room fidgeted and did her best to sound professional. I liked her. Fidgeting and discomfort is my jam. As the meeting concluded, she told us that some questionnaires would come via email that we were to complete separately. I would fill one out based on what I was seeing, and my daughter would fill one out for herself. I completed mine right away as did my daughter.

Now, if I thought our world was just a little tilted, soon I would be tipped over, spun in a circle, shaken and left lying in a dizzy haze of stars.

On a very normal Thursday afternoon, I was doing my usual rounds of picking up everyone's trail of junk and sweeping up cat hair and talking to the incredibly cute but stinky guinea pig. I walked into my daughter's dark room to pull up her shades and neaten her bed when I noticed her OCD questionnaire lying on her blue dresser. Remembering that I needed to get this to the psychologist, I picked it up. I examined the way she printed her name and date at the top of the page. Her handwriting seemed so childlike and it made me smile. Perfectly straight letters in purple ink. It didn't look like the rushed scribbles of an adult and it didn't have any adornments of a teen. It was just small purple letters spelling out her name. I glanced through the pages and noticed that she checked a lot more boxes than I had. These boxes preceded statements such as: Checking locks, toys, schoolbooks/items, and so on; Excessive touching, tapping, rubbing (e.g., repeatedly touching particular surfaces, objects, or other people, perhaps to prevent a bad occurrence). None of this seemed particularly scary because I had noticed these rituals.

It was the next page that slapped me in the face. It was there that everything changed.

Next to the statement: Fear might harm self (e.g., using knives or other sharp objects), was a purple check mark.

That little checkmark sent my stomach into my throat. I felt weak and sick, so I sat down on her bed, letting the paper rest in my lap. Just a piece of

paper with some purple check marks but it felt like it was alive with electricity. It sent prickly sensations through my legs and forced me to hold my breath until the pulses passed.

I looked up to see my reflection in her gold framed mirror and the face was not mine. It was a much older woman. A much sadder woman. I closed my eyes and let my head drop to my lap. Terrible thoughts began filling my mind and I found myself in dark places where I imagined finding my daughter dead. The tears began to flow as I watched the whole scene, including the funeral where I could hear people say, “how did her mother not know she was in so much pain?” How didn’t I know? Tears continued to gather in the corners of my eyes and then ran for their life as I blinked them away. I blinked it all away and did the only thing I knew to do, I walked over to her statue of a guardian angel standing with a child.

This statue has been in her bedroom since she was born. I placed my hands on the faded, painted figures with chipped corners and began to pray. I offered my prayer, pleading that she finds her way, that she finds the strength she needs, that she has the armor she requires to battle each day, and most of all that she knows how very loved she is. I prayed for my biting two-year old that is now on the brink of womanhood, and who is struggling, clawing her way through her own pain.

Biting is no longer an option.

Now, she has to search within herself to get what she needs out of this life.

My Daughter

She has so many qualities that will make her a successful woman. Those words come floating to the surface just as I feel as though we are sinking into something very cold and dark. Images of my daughter swim up with those words. I can see her at all stages of her life, and one thing is constant: her strength. She knew that her struggles were becoming too heavy and trying to sink her, so she asked for help. My daughter has so many qualities that will make her a successful woman. Yes, she is brutally honest and insightful, and she will not let this current pull her down. She will rise above and go after what she wants. She will climb out of this and walk with steady steps and if anything tries to block her path, she will sink her teeth into it.

This is my prayer.

Kayla Cooper

Mount Saint Mary's University

Quarantine: Surviving The Day

Kayla, go vacuum the house before you leave for your mother's - and be back here by 5:00 PM.

I received this text from my father on April 8th, at 6:53 in the morning. I was dumbfounded. We are living in the midst of a global pandemic, and all he cares about are household chores and a custody agreement that I legally no longer have to abide by? I stared at the grey text bubble for a minute longer than I needed to. I couldn't shake the feeling of *deja vu*, like I had already lived through reading this text message on a drowsy Wednesday morning. And then I realized that I had.

The dynamic between my mother and father's houses has always been drastically different. My father is a burnt out police officer who spends his evenings making cynical comments at the news, sipping on a glass of aged whiskey before bed. My mother was a middle school math teacher, and shortly after I was born, became a private math tutor. Those things haven't changed, but when they split, their professions and personalities were amplified. After the divorce, my mother tried to be the "cool" mom. The kind of mom who took you out of school to get your nails done, just to talk about the new boyfriend she was seeing. My father stayed the same. Work, come home, grumble, drink, sleep. Repeat. His rules were rigid, and there was no arguing with him. You were either wrong, or he was right.

Once I was in high school, my parents treated the custody agreement as if it were socially void. I could go to my mom's house on my dad's day, so long as I explained in excruciating detail why. Or rather, ask permission first. My mother was always much more lenient, as it was her way of coming off as carefree and laidback. However, when she wanted the custody agreement to matter, she made sure it did. Although they got less intense about the custody agreement as I got older, that didn't change the natural dynamic between my parents and I. My dad still expected me home for dinner on his days by 5:00 PM, unless I told him

otherwise. Most days I stuck by his rules, and didn't think much of it. My mother, though she had settled down and remarried, still couldn't care less what time I got home because she was "the cool mom". Everything was just like that, all the way until I moved out to start my freshmen year of college. I had finally gained independence. No more keeping track of whose day was whose. Every day was mine, and mine alone.

Then, just like that, quarantine pulled my family dynamic 10 years into the past. I am 20 years old, and my father is still insisting that I be home exactly when he wants me to be. What caught me off guard was his wording and tone. He didn't ever ask, he demanded. In fact, I would argue that his militant rules have become exacerbated since moving back in due to the pandemic. My parents started to care more about which day was theirs, what time my brother and I got home to their houses, and so on. So when I got that text, I was stuck not in my head, but rather living through my later childhood all over again:

Kayla, go vacuum the house before you leave for your mother's - and be back here by 5:00 PM.

It didn't hit me until after reading that text just how different life is during this pandemic. Typically, even in high school, I found ways around the dynamic of my divorced parents. I had school, clubs, work, and friends to establish a sense of freedom. Once I was in college, even on breaks, my parents didn't care where I was - if it was mom's or dad's day. They cared that they could give me a home cooked meal before I went back to school. Now, all of that is gone. It's just me, my brother, and my parents - sharing the walls of two suffocating houses.

I realized that my parents, much like everyone during this unpredictable and scary time, are trying to control what they can. My father still goes into work, doing a job he has lost his passion for. He is an essential worker. The word "essential" is a new title he must wear. He can't control whether or not he brings home the virus. But he can control when "lights out" is and when I must report to Officer Cooper's house. Control is a product of fear. This pandemic, and the fear of it all, is the root of the problem. Nobody has control, and we are scared, so we control the little things we can. My mother started letting me eat dinner in my room while I do school work. She wants to prove to me, and might I guess, my father, that she is still playing good cop. Perception is something we can change, shift, adapt, and control. My father has always had a hard time with change. So he holds on tight until things break. That's exactly what is happening.

I realized that this new dynamic isn't about divorce. It's about the world changing during a fearful time. It's about not wanting to face the scary reality before us.

During a time like this, there is no rulebook on parenting or good family dynamic. Everyone is just doing their best to stay afloat. Sometimes, that means going back to old habits and patterns. It worked before, so it should work again, right? Maybe there is no right or wrong answer to that question. There are only outcomes that are okay and less than okay. I think it is okay to fall back into my dad's rigid rules. It keeps the peace. I also think that it is okay to escape to my mother's for a little while. It keeps me sane. One thing that hasn't changed is that life is about balance. It's a balancing act that is tricky and one mishap can have you falling off the tightrope. But there is always a safety net beneath it to catch you.

I waited for a long time before answering my dad's text. The phone screen lit my face up, forcing my tired eyes shut. I was still lying in bed. My childhood loft bed creaked every time I moved my body. And every time I moved, I swore the bed would collapse beneath me. The early morning light from outside was still finding its way into my windows. I peered out of my cozy bed, and saw that I was surrounded by collectables from each phase of my childhood. Marvel posters, comic books, playbills from high school theatre, old knickknacks and pottery from middle school art class. Across the room was my purple vanity, with its matching butterfly chair. Nothing has changed, but everything couldn't be more different. I unlocked my phone and stared at the text message my dad sent me again. Sometimes, life is about finding balance, or peace. Sometimes it's about breaking free and being rebellious, living life to the fullest. And sometimes, life is about surviving each day the best we can, for both ourselves and others.

Okay Dad, see you then.

Sent at 8:14 AM

Meghann Huya

Allegheny College

The Search for the Missing River

The creek wasn't always a creek. When I was little, the creek was a raging river that split the woods behind my house in half. There were beavers instead of drug dealers, and frogs instead of garbage. When I was seven, the river went missing, and my cousins and I set out to find it. It didn't make sense to us, how something so huge could suddenly vanish. So, armed with sticks and bug spray, we marched into the woods like conquistadors searching for cities of gold. My oldest cousin took the lead. He claimed it made sense because he was the tallest and the oldest, and that meant he was the smartest when it came to these types of things. We were all under ten years old at the time, and none of us thought to argue. It never occurred to us that maybe a city boy with a stick who had been in the woods maybe twice before in his life was not the best choice of leadership. Looking back on that choice, and how easily we went along with it, it makes more sense why things ended up happening the way they did.

As with any exploration mission you learn about in history classes, ours had a rocky start. There was an argument between our leader and his sister when it came to where the search should start. Should we go where the river started, or was that too far in the woods? Should we just go to the nearest spot and start looking, or was that too obvious? Eventually, we decided to head to the last place any of us had seen the river. I remember discussing what our moms told us to do when we lost things. Almost every time, we were asked, "Well, where did you see it last?" It was good advice, we thought. Not to mention, it seemed as good a place as any to start a search. We remembered seeing a broken bridge the last time we had been at the river, so we headed there. Everything was exactly as we had left it, or, almost exactly how we had left it. The bridge was there, the trees were there, but the river was not. Following the river, or more realistically, the mud, seemed like the smartest course of action, so we went deeper into the forest. That was where the trouble began. We were all so young, so easily distracted, and the woods are such a fascinating place, even for adults. One by one, we all started to drop off. We were all so focused on our mission, that no one noticed as our group became smaller and smaller. One stopped to tie her shoe, and wasn't waited for. Another paused to climb a tree, and was never seen again. As for me, I was chasing a dragonfly. It was so bright and blue, and its wings shone like a fairy in

the sunlight. I was drawn to it. I called out to alert my group to the dragonfly's existence, but my mistake came in not waiting for a response. When the dragonfly left, in all its sparkly, fantastical glory, I left with it. I assumed people had followed me, and hadn't thought anything of it. The dragonfly flew far away from the riverbed before coming to rest on a log. It was if it had been trying to get away, but had realized it would be far simpler to subject itself to a few minutes with an awe-struck child than it would be to keep being chased. I marveled at it, not thinking anything of the fact that no one else had anything to say. When, finally, my curiosity was satisfied, I looked up to find that no one else had come with me. I called my cousins' names, but heard no response. Once the dragonfly flew away, I found that I was very much alone, in a very dark wood.

The woods have never been hard to navigate. But at seven years old, separated from my cousins, the woods felt gigantic. I remember the whole afternoon, but I remember most vividly the parts where I was alone. We had gone to find the missing river, but instead of finding it, I had become the thing that was missing. I wasn't afraid, not in the way a child alone in the woods should have been. My dad was a marine, he had trained me for times like this. Since I could walk, he had been taking me for hikes, leading us deep into the woods and telling me to find the way back home. We had gotten lost, many times. That's to be expected though, I think, when you let a five-year-old navigate the woods on her own. By the time the river went missing, several years later, I knew the woods like the back of my hand. I wasn't afraid of never getting home, I was just excited about the potential sighting of a deer or a fox. I stepped lightly, practically running. I wasn't going any particular direction. The woods offered me an escape, an adventure. Before we moved to my current home, we lived with my cousins. There were eight of us, crammed into a house meant for three. When we moved to the forest, I had space to run and let my imagination run to its full extent. I spent days out there, dreaming up various scenarios. I remember my excitement that day, at the idea of being alone to live out my fantasies without anyone interfering. At that point, on that day, I was imagining myself as a wood sprite, protecting the trees and animals with whatever magic I chose to specialize in that day. No part of me was thinking of going home. I remember realizing after a while that I should try to find my cousins, but I wasn't in any hurry. I took my time, meandering through the woods like the missing river once had.

I have no idea how long I was out there, but I heard branches snapping, somewhere close. I knew my four other cousins would be trying to find their way out, too. They knew less about the woods than I did, and they didn't know to be

quiet. Thinking I was rescued, I ran towards the sound. Sticks clawed at my ankles and cut my feet. I learned the hard way that flip flops are not a smart choice for hiking. I stumbled into the clearing, shouting the name of my eldest cousin, but it wasn't him that I found. A herd of deer stood silently, blinking at me. None of us moved, all of us too in shock to have any idea what to do. In that moment, I understood, as much as a child could, why people loved nature. I understood why people would spend days out there, by themselves. It was peaceful, and magical, but unsettling at the same time. It was like being in a storybook. The big brown eyes of the deer looked at me like they were more annoyed with me than they were scared of me. As for me, now that I had finished my mission and found the deer I had been hoping for, I had no idea how to react. Not wanting them to run, I stayed frozen in one spot. I stayed silent, knowing that any sort of noise would startle them and send them running. After a minute, after I was no longer the most exciting thing in the world, they returned to eating. One deer though, never took her eyes off me. I held her gaze for a while, but I was seven, and easily bored. I waved, and she huffed something that made the herd take off. I didn't chase them. I was a kid, not stupid. I wish I had followed them though, because when I told my family about it later, none of them believed me. Why would they? I was one of the youngest, after all, one of the easiest to tease. They all thought they knew better than me, and liked to remind me of it when we were little. Maybe I would have told them if I wasn't so afraid of the jokes they would respond with.

Two of my cousins found me shortly after I found the deer. They all had stories about crawdad fights and flying turkeys (none of them had known turkeys could fly until then). The other three had been found by my uncle who had come searching for us, and their only story was about a salamander they found sunning itself on a broken log. None of their adventures seemed nearly as exciting as mine, but I didn't dare tell them about it. It felt sacred to me, like I had experienced some kind of fairytale magic that I could never hope to explain properly. I suppose I thought that, since the deer had only appeared when I was alone, it only made sense to keep the tale to myself. I also was afraid of being teased, or getting in trouble for wandering off. It wouldn't matter that all of us wandered off at one time or another. I was convinced they would make fun of me and tell my mom. I was afraid of being forbidden from going out alone again. I did eventually tell them, but not for a long time. I only brought it up very recently when, at my eldest cousin's wedding, the missing river was mentioned. No one believed me. They blamed it on daydreaming, or an overactive imagination, or the inability to accurately remember childhood. I didn't argue; it didn't seem worth it.

They could very well have been right; I could very well have imagined the whole thing. But when I try and tell myself it wasn't real, it doesn't feel right. I know what I saw that day, just as they know they saw flying turkeys and a salamander on a log. Even if my brain did dramatize the event over the years, as brains tend to do with childhood memories, it did still happen. It could still happen again, and it has, to certain extents. No one believes there is a sort of magic in the world until they see it for themselves, and I was okay with that. I still am. Being the only one to know about it makes it all the more special.

Looking back, that day taught me the benefits that come with being alone in nature. Adventuring with others is definitely more fun, but you miss so much when you're also trying to have a conversation or interact with others. Had I stayed with my cousins that day instead of wandering off, I never would have found the deer. I never would have found the dragonfly or the clearing. I learned that there was a kind of magic that can be found when you are quiet and careful. When you are at your most aware and most vulnerable, things come creeping out of the shadows. The things that are hidden find you when you think you're lost. They're searching for you when no one else is. I find that, even now, when I am alone outside doing homework or reading, I see the most butterflies or squirrels. It's like they're waiting for you to be alone, when you'll most appreciate their company.

We never did find the river, and it never did come back. When I was older, I learned its disappearance was the result of a beaver dam, a long way into the woods. The water was stopped up, and eventually, it all receded under the ground. A remnant is still there, in the form of the creek that trickles through the mud like a broken faucet. It is full of trash now, and we frequently have to call the cops on all the drug deals that occur. My happy place, my place of escape, was discovered and taken over by people that don't appreciate the places they are walking. I rarely see the deer anymore. When the water dried up, they moved further into the woods to find it, further than I could ever feasibly hike. I leave food for them, in the clearing I first found them. I go by myself, an effort to find peace in nature I suppose, or maybe just out of a hope that some long-forgotten creature will appear and ask me to tea. I hardly ever see more than a robin, or a squirrel I have to chase away so the deer will find something to eat when they arrive. But sometimes, a singular deer will wander into the clearing and meet my eyes. It will snatch up the corn or the grain and disappear into the trees as quickly as it arrived. I like to think they remember me. I like to think they check the clearing too, to look for me the way I look for them. They are there, I know, trying

to coax me back, trying to remind me exactly what waits if I dare to explore alone.

Cowboys & Indians

I used to love the thrill of the chase.

Right after lunch and right before nap, Mrs. Michaels would have us line up in front of the big blue door in the back of the Montessori classroom. I'd anxiously twiddle my fingers and bounce on the tips of my toes, glancing around to see how far my pursuers were in line behind me. The second the bell rang and the door swung open, I was off, a four-year-old flying at light speed towards the playground. I knew I'd only have a couple of minutes to get my bearings. I climbed into the swing set castle after grabbing a long piece of mulch and tucking it behind my ear, where it very quickly became tangled in my wind-blown hair. It's supposed to be a feather, I explained to my peers. An Indian girl had to have a feather in her hair.

Every day I spent recess running away from "cowboys." These Western vigilantes consisted of three boys who were also in the Room 3 class. Their names are lost to me, but I still remember the blur of their grinning faces, huffing and puffing on their way to blow me down. I had a dilemma with this game of ours: the thrill would wear off halfway through. My legs would grow tired, and my chest would ache with the deep sighs and gasps of a marathon runner just finishing their 25th mile, yet the cowboys never ceased to be hot on my trail. I had to keep running.

There was a part of me that loved being chased. I felt wanted, desired, something these boys craved so severely they just couldn't let up. I knew that if they caught me (which they seldom did), we would start the game over the next day and begin the chase again. A blank slate, a fresh start, my soul rejuvenated and thrilled to once again be on the run.

On those occasions where they did catch me, I'd fall helpless in their clutches, tiny fingers pinching my forearms and pulling at the hem of my skirt. I was often pushed, tripped, tackled. New holes were torn in the knees of my white

knitted tights. As they hovered above my defenseless figure, my reactions would bounce around in limbo. I struggled to know whether to laugh or cry. Only when I admitted defeat would they release me, exclaiming it was they who'd won and I who'd lost. It was only their victories they ever remembered.

Throughout preschool and elementary school, I almost always had boys to chase me. Most of the time, I would initiate it, teasing them, poking and prodding to get them to make a move. Once we'd both taken off, the seemingly endless pursuit would once again be exhilarating and once again grow tiresome. I would decide that I'd had enough, that I didn't want to run away anymore. The boys would never listen. It was hard to get close enough to them to be heard. I was afraid to approach them while their hands hungrily reached outwards, and their eyes lit up with an expression I didn't recognize.

On one occasion, I was driven to go to the recess supervisor and let her know that the boy chasing me would not stop. For the last twenty minutes, I'd been running from a boy a couple of years older than me, who pursued swinging a jump rope in hand. It was a hot day, and my heart was pounding unbearably against my ribcage, begging for a chance to catch my breath. Despite my pleas to take a break, the boy pursued, the rope whipping at my heels. After finding the supervisor and pleading my case, she began to reprimand the boy. However, he chimed in and exclaimed: "She started the game! She said she wanted to be chased! That's not fair for her to stop playing!" The supervisor carelessly brushed the small spat off. The boy locked eyes with me, and from his gaze alone, I knew the chase would not end and I would need to run faster than I ever had before.

Being chased stopped being fun when I turned fifteen. I was picking up some Christmas gifts for my family members at the Dollar Tree with my little sisters, a fun tradition we'd started the year before. While waiting outside for our dad's car, a beat-up white sedan pulled in front of the store. The two middle-aged men inside started shouting things at me, things I struggle to remember. At first, I ignored them, avoiding eye contact while desperately searching for my dad. Refusing to respect my obvious discomfort, their shouts only grew louder and more aggressive. They wouldn't let up without my acknowledgment of their "compliments." I debated whether to retreat back into the store, preferring the larger company of shopping strangers to these men in the idling car. "What were they saying to you, Anna?" my six-year-old sister would ask as we finally climbed into our black minivan. I told her it was nothing and then didn't eat dinner that night. When I told my boyfriend of the time about the catcalling incident, he

asked what I had been wearing. I didn't bring it up again.

All these years later, I still get the same apprehensive feeling that I did when I played Cowboys and Indians in preschool. Except now, the fenced-in playground is replaced by an empty parking lot late at night when I am walking to my car after an eight-hour shift. Or the car with tinted windows that honks at me as I'm jogging through the park. Or the man in the grocery store who has been distantly following me for the last fifteen minutes. Unlike when I was little, the thrill doesn't come at all anymore. My mind immediately sinks into the tiredness, the fear, the desperation to get away. When you're a nineteen-year-old girl, you don't want to find out what will happen if you get caught.

When I moved into my apartment in Saint Louis, my mom was floored to learn that I hadn't bought any pepper spray. "Are you serious, Anna? You thought to bring all of these decorations and your bedding and pillows, and you didn't think to get any pepper spray?"

At that moment, I wished I could go back in time to be the little girl who stuck mulch in her hair and thought that the big bad wolf would always let her go.

Emily Dexter

Indiana Wesleyan University

Strawberry Patch

I didn't notice the strawberry plants
Until winter, until they blanketed my
Stomach's soil, until daughter plants
Traced a line up my spine, until
A leaf tapped the back of my neck.

Then I locked the bathroom door,
Stripped my shirt off, and twisted in
Front of the mirror—first one way,
Then the other, waiting for the light
To unveil its trick, for the plants
To evaporate into illusion

But the snow sank to slush, and my
Body stayed a strawberry patch.
The runners ran; the roots burrowed
Into my shoulders, arms, wrists.
I ripped them from the skin, left it
Scabbed and scarred, and buttoned
My shirts all the way up. But by
Each evening, the plants had grown
Back beneath, bright green

The birds began singing, as leaves
Brushed my legs. The first time
A flower opened between my ribs,
I took sewing scissors and snipped
Its stem. When more bloomed, I wore
Scarves so tight, almost choking.

But I learned to pull my knee socks up
Slowly, how not to crush petals. The sun
Shone later, and I layered on layers. I

Only shed them after nightfall, but not
Every nightfall. The first time I bared
My arms to a window's sunlight,
Every plant vein sparked and surged,

Remembering their biology lessons,
The photosynthesis they'd forgotten.

This morning, I woke with a closed fist.
I opened it, and inside: a pale knot of
A berry, an infant already seed-speckled.
Its stem entered my wrist like an IV,
And I put on an extra-long-sleeved sweater,
To hide the fruit beneath. Someday soon,
I whispered, you'll taste light without
Glass, and they'll taste your sweetness—
But not today, not now, not yet.

So I stepped into summer, sweating.

Joscelyn Sager

University of Wisconsin-Superior

My Derriere

There in the window
on display, some new
Louzanchoo, I want them.
Their steel core thrusts expressly,
systematically through my
breast, gushing plutocratic nonsense

but still I want them.
Advertisements of acculturated beauty
like my ass when I wear them.
The epitome of femininity
endorsed by Genesis,
a cancer contracted in the Garden of Eden.

Established to aid the gaze
turning bounding gazelles
into newly hatched fillies
conditioned to swoon over
the new fall lines, on their knees
praying for a bag to match.

Do they come in red?

Lexi Kilcoin

Saint Mary's College

The Influencer

You call yourself a crusader for posting, tweeting, sharing-- just about everything you can find on saving her because she means something to you. Because she is dying. It's comical to see you then, sitting on your marble floor posting life updates and first world problems. They broke her open for that granite countertop your maid polishes every day.

It's comical to see you inside, on Earth Day, ass back, lips pursed, toes pointed just so, to make yourself look taller, leaner with your "tips and tricks on saving the environment." She cries out to you. The ice caps are melting while you tan in your pool. Soon, your entire home will be a pool. Her skin is burning. You want your followers to think you're natural so you "hike" among the trees while the fire threatens them in the distance.

You post about your headache because you forgot your sunglasses #dying. But her people are dying because of dehydration.

Your tears match the color of the rising sea as you sit on your stained leather couch. All you want is to be loved. The clock ticks as you work to edit your photo that only gets half as many likes as you hoped for. You get the urge to post something new so your followers will think you're genuine. Maybe if you post about the earth, maybe they'll like you then.

-sorrynotsorry

Jeremy Mauser

Franklin and Mauser College

Child of the Privileged

with respect to Ferre Family Tree, Leah Lightner Dale, 1870

The guitar, heavy in my hands, summons my Southern ancestors and Northern descendants. Humming folk songs that call for our collective voice, we encircle the tree that unites the living, the dead, and the not yet born.

The branches allow us to sway to the music as it shields us from a relentless storm. Offering nutrient after nutrient and caressing its grainy bark, we nurture it in return. Arm in arm, family and strangers alike sing the ballad; artists from different centuries find one another; stoic men sulk under the same lonely branch. Future grandchildren find dead grass and rotting roots that past generations failed to water. With the chorus comes outside strangers, lonesome spirits searching for their own song. Some ancestors and some descendants stick around, eager for fresh blood; others leave to find a new family tree. Then, with no warning, the sky opens and unleashes a lightning strike that signals fire, chaos,

calamity. Screams fill the inclement air and branches flail
around till all that remains is singed grass. And a lonely player.
I, child of the privileged, strum to the tune of dying bark.
I, singer for the tree, welcome the lightning and the fire

Jeremy Mauser

More Lovely, but Not More Temperate

Why should I compare you to a summer's day?
Eleven hours of sunlight merely tease my lust
for your hazel eyes, your earthy glow. I crave
tickling joy onto your lips and staring into eyes
that mirror my own admiration. Other mortals
crave that mellow season, only to bemoan brutal
heat and merciless showers, forgetting the cold
and dark that lurk just beyond the horizon. But,
as you know, passion can trickle over the edges,
soon swelling into a powder keg that summons
annihilation. I reckon we encapsulate a summer's
day—as the seasons cycle through impermanence,
we cycle through the consequences of loving
endlessly and shamelessly. You ask me what's wrong,
and I respond with silence. Looking skyward,
I wonder what could withstand our rough winds:
not a summer's day, nor any sonnet. I imagine
the earth dividing into two between us, separating
our bodies and forcing us to make a decision: stay
apart in safety, or jump the gap to stay together.

Emma McCoy

Point Loma Nazarene University

call me beloved

I am gardening, again.

Watch if you want to,

mind my rows in silence

while I dig,

I can only hear the sharp

snap of rock on metal,

feel the ground shift

and give way in inches.

The dirt coats my hands

and arms, worms its way

under my fingernails

and settles in the creases

of my face, but I don't mind.

It tastes real.

I see the tangled roots-

dark, purple, festering

in woven complacency,

hissing against the air.

It's rank, set, solid,

but I have grit up to my elbows

and an open-palmed approach,

sun-streaked hair
in a red bandana soaked
with sweat—
I smell of earth and undercurrents.
I have my rows ready
for when I am done,
new things to grow
in a gaping crater
that my two-armed asteroid
has left behind.
I think I will be slightly
hollow in the best possible way,
perched on the edge,
watching young green
creep upward, tentatively,
brushing soft things
against the air.
I am filthy, sore in my
heart bones, clinging to
a future and a shovel
as I keep digging
with splinters in my palms
and the hiss
of root on metal.

1. they walked out to the ocean. lost their bodies, their lungs, and their color.
like blueberries when we buried them.

2. a person regarded as exerting a powerful influence over another for good
or evil.

a. the ocean speaks of colors that hurt. of decay.

b. but he makes them feel good on our tongues.

i. we dream of seaweed hands, crab legs, green scales.

ii. we dream of knowing the shape of the water. the earth. and the shore.

1. where they meet and depart in vivid continuity and violent disruption.

2. we want to feel weightless. like we will never feel our own skin again.

c. we want to know everything the ocean can show us. what it coughs up on
the shore.

i. of the dead.

ii. of the ruined.

iii. of crushing secrets.

iv. of strange silence of midnight.

d. the ocean enlightens our understanding of the very laws of the universe.
with its depth. its voice whispering through broken conch shells.

i. what we defer to in conversation but never speak of. what we reach for,
despite never finding the bottom.

1. getting drunk off of fermented fruit until we are dizzy from the drought
and forget what it's like to want something so bad it hurts.

e. we are stubbornly earthbound. we smell strangely of fruit. we wonder if

the garden of Eden even exists.

f. yet we stare into storms above the sea like they are camera lenses and there is a greater sense to all of this.

i. and there's a director watching, reading his leather script.

3. exceptional intellectual or creative power or other natural ability.

a. we were gifted with bodies. with bones. with tongues that can know other tongues. with brains that hurt. that feel too small in skulls.

i. we are sick of limitations. of beginnings and endings.

b. but human has to be enough.

c. we try to get comfortable when the ocean watches.

i. we let the sand run together with our skin.

ii. we take another bite of our oranges.

iii. we feel it slide down our throats.

iv. we let it stick to our skin like wet silk.

v. we don't wipe our mouths.

vi. we don't ask for water.

vii. we let the sweet burn.

Luna Phalen

West Liberty University

ode to a black cat found by the road in 2003

she staggers on stiffened legs in the kitchen doorway,
and stares at nothing with fixed gloss eyes
when i push the name i gave to a kitten into the air.

this is a life i will oversee in full, i understand,
as she brings her thin bones draped in greasy fur
to rest in my 20 year old lap.

i wonder if she feels some injustice in it all,
that it should be death
while the body of her oldest friend
is still fresh as it coddles her.

that she should feel her soul evaporating
off of the inanimate pieces it has moved,
while a hand as full of soul as it is body pets her head,
though a child once saw a child.

i plead her name to her,
and though the sea of grand questions
(is all life only an accident of cells?
how is the final moment cheapened by oblivion?
et cetera? et cetera? et cetera?)

wants to vomit from my throat
as an all-feeling-nothing-telling sob,
the answer falls out of my mouth as did you have fun?

she purrs for a shivering hour before stilling,
and i hope that this dream of existence was sweet.

Contributors

Lori Adams lives in Northwest Michigan with her husband and two children. One night her husband asked her how she planned to fill her days once the children went to college. That question lit a spark inside her and forced her to remember the dreams she had before real life stepped in and stole her attention. She knew she walked around with a lot of stories in her head so she enrolled in a writing program at Central Michigan University. This fall she fell in love with nonfiction writing. She now knows how to answer her husband's question. She will write. This is her first publication but hopefully not her last.

Anna Bankston is a sophomore at Washington University in St. Louis double majoring in Psychology and Women, Gender, & Sexuality Studies and minoring in Writing. She plans to go into the clinical field of child psychology before eventually transitioning to the role of a college professor. Anna is the publicity director for Spires, an art and literary magazine at her university. Working on the executive board inspired her to submit her own writing for publication, and she now has four pieces either published or awaiting publication! Her two favorite writing styles are creative nonfiction and gothic fiction, and she hopes to one day publish a book under one of these styles!

Kayla Cooper is a Sophomore at Mount Saint Mary's University, in Emmitsburg, MD. She is studying English Literature and Communications, and is on the editorial staff for her university's literary magazine, Lighted Corners. When Kayla is not writing, she often has her nose in a good book or is out hiking.

Emily Dexter is a full-time college student pursuing English and writing degrees at Indiana Wesleyan University. She is passionate about capturing slices of the human experience in poetry and prose.

Maryam Gilanshah is a fourth-year Creative Writing/English student, concentrating in fiction, at The George Washington University. A native of Northern Virginia, her work has been published in The Paper Shell and presented at the International Writing Center Association's annual conference. Maryam is currently producing a series of short stories, focused on femininity and loneliness, for her honors thesis in fiction.

Chase Guerdet (cover artist) is a senior Media Studies major at Loras College. Chase is from Dubuque, IA and spends his time creatively producing short films and doing freelance work for his small business, Zen Lens Creative. He plans to continue career in the creative realm of production, hoping to eventually go to major film and show production.

Dalia Hamilton (she/her) is a senior Creative Writing and Theatre Performance major at Susquehanna University, though she hails from Falls Church, Virginia, outside of Washington, D.C. She is a writer of fiction in all its forms-- novel, short story, and even drama-- as well as an actor, singer, and performer. She proudly identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ and Latinx communities.

Meghann Huya is a creative writing major at Allegheny College, with a focus in fiction. She is a junior, and editor for the college's literary magazine. She currently lives in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Lexi Kilcoin is a Creative Writing major with minors in Journalism and Religious Studies at Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame. She is an aspiring author and journalist and her favorite style of writing is in prose and poetry. She plans to graduate in 2023 and is excited to begin her career.

Jeremy Mauser is a junior at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, PA. He is pursuing an undergraduate degree in English-Creative Writing & Spanish, and his writing has appeared in boy-band magazine and Ghost Bible. You can find Jeremy on Instagram (@jamauser13) or Twitter (@JeremyMauser).

Emma McCoy is a sophomore at Point Loma Nazarene University. She's a Literature major with a passion for poetry, and writes whenever she can. In her free time, she enjoys mountain biking, reading, and finding the best burrito places.

Hannah Paige is the author of the novels *Why We Don't Wave* and *30 Feet Strong*, as well as the upcoming novel *Late Magnolias*. She has served as the editor for the literary journal *The River*, is a current book reviewer for *Brilliant Light Publishing* and a staff writer for *The Daily Bulldog*. She has been published in the *URECA International Journal*, *The Blue Route*, and *Adelaide* magazine. She was also featured in the *Flash Nonfiction Food Anthology* from Woodhall Press. She is currently attending the University of Maine Farmington for her BFA in Creative Writing and her BA in History.

Luna Phalen is a junior at West Liberty University where they are an editor for the university's literary magazine *Ampersand*. When they aren't stressing over classes and writing poems as a way to procrastinate, they can be found working in their college's library. They hope to eventually pursue a master's degree in library science and become a university librarian.

Renee Roberts is from Connecticut and in her senior year at Hollins University, studying English with a concentration in creative writing and multicultural literature.

Joscelyn Sager lives in Northern Wisconsin. She is currently a senior at the University of Wisconsin Superior pursuing a major in writing with a minor in communication. Her main focus in writing at the moment is poetry and creative non-fiction.

Zachary Shiffman is a first-year Creative Writing and Publishing & Editing double-major at Susquehanna University, PA. He writes fiction and lives in New Jersey.

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