

OBSCURA

18th Edition



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Red Rocks Community College
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18th Edition

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OBSCURA STAFF BIOS

Gray Adams (Penname Grayson Hunt)

Gray, or Grayson, is a peculiar human who has spent the majority of their life writing, reading, and feeling oddly passionate about the use of the Oxford comma. After the life-changing event that was the *Lord of the Rings*, they couldn't stay away from the fantasy genre and wrote a book, which at this time is in editing. Lover of dogs, sweets, and manga, you can find them playing video games in their basement until 3 am.

Nico Gambone

Nico Gambone is a concurrent enrollment student, creative writing enthusiast, and a disaster icon. He is writing this bio in the third person despite the fact that he can't take himself seriously. Nico listens to sad music when he's happy and angry music when he's sad. He knows that cats are the most superior animal in the world—that's not an opinion, that's a fact—and he loves any elements of body horror in prose, poetry, art and music. He is currently working towards two AAs in English and Communications and is hoping to pursue a degree and career in social work.

Terra Iverson

Terra Iverson is thrilled to be on the Obscura editing team. She originally graduated from Red Rocks Community College in December of two thousand and fourteen, earning an Associate in Art with Business Designation. As a book author she re-enrolled in two thousand and twenty to continue her education and hone her creative writing, editing, and publishing skills. A Colorado native, Terra currently resides in beautiful Bailey with her husband and their two sons. She is looking forward to sharing the amazing talent of Red Rocks Community College's students with you.

Jacob Ulrich

Jacob Ulrich is a sophomore at Red Rocks Community College. They like to read science, gothic, and historical fiction as well as audio horror podcasts. Jacob spends almost all their off time playing video games or watching any one of their dozen "in progress" shows. They also love Dungeons and Dragons and have been running a game for several months. They are studying technical theater. Jacob has worked in the RRCC Theatre department for 2 years. They are interested in Set Design and Show Running. They are planning on joining the local IATSE chapter after graduation.

Leah Rogin-Roper

Leah is faculty at RRCC and is delighted to serve as this year's advisor for Obscura. She brings experience from being a founding editor with the now-defunct FF>>> Press and working with editors around the country on her own creative writing. She is rounding out a decade at RRCC and hopes the best is yet to come.

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COUNTING TOES

Terra Iverson

Bright blue eyes tightly closed,
all hear your chorused cries.

Silent shushes I disclose,
disrobed before their eyes.

Nipple nourishment, tiny suckles,
safely in my arms.

Tummy tamed you cuddle close,
filled with daddy's charms.

Chubby cheeks and thunderous thighs
my doing I suppose.

Life lingers sweet since that day
counting ten fingers and ten toes.

BLUE JEAN

Kali Hall

My knees creak and my back aches as I slowly walk up the stairs. There is a certain serenity in the discomfort my old body feels when roused into movement. My breath is heavy and labored. The dust of rooms not touched in a long while fills my nose as I make my way to the attic. I have pointedly avoided my attic for years. Remembering the multitude of old, moldering boxes that live up there certainly deterred me, but that wasn't the real reason I didn't go into the attic. In reality, it's because Jean is up there. All those pictures and trinkets up in that dusty old room bring back mountains of memories I'd rather not remember. But, now is the time. I have to face the emotions that Jean uncovers.

Those around me, I'm sure, would describe me as a bitter old woman, and they'd be right to do so. Seventy five years on this godforsaken earth will do that to you. I've lived through more shit than the usual person and I don't deal with bullshit. I've dealt with enough of that for more lifetimes than I've had opportunity to live.

My baby sister, Jean, was born blue. I remember meeting her the day she was born. She was blue and I remarked to my mother that she looked like a Smurf. This upset my mother and I was reprimanded for saying such a thing. My sister stayed in an incubator for two weeks before we could take her home. My parents told me she was sick, but I didn't understand. "She's just blue!" I would say. My father would give me a glare and my mother would leave the room. They wouldn't tell me what was wrong. After those two weeks in the incubator, my mother and father finally brought her home. Her blue tinge faded and I finally got to feel the fuzzy fur on her head and look into her bright green eyes. I was disgusted. I already saw all of the attention she was getting from Gran, my favorite person in the world. Watching Gran's eyes light up when she held Jean and smelled her hair made my blood boil. I was supposed to be the center of attention and seeing this newcomer swoop in and take all the praise was world ending for me. Don't get me wrong, I absolutely loved her, but I couldn't help but see her as a thief.

As Jean grew, my resentment for her also did. I knew she couldn't do all the things I could, but I would still challenge her to races. Looking over my shoulder as I sprinted, I would see her struggling to keep up, breath heavy, face red. Eventually, she would call out for me to stop, crying because she hurt, but I always told her it was because she lost. I reveled in teasing as many older sisters do. I would be scolded by my mother and father. I would be told "You know she's fragile! You have to stop egging her on!" I would roll my eyes and nod.

Throughout our childhood, Jean was babied, coddled, waited upon. I watched as my mother and father, my Gran, walked on eggshells around her. She got away with everything. Not that she often got into trouble, that was more my bag. I now know that all the mischief I got into was a cry for attention. The attention I saw as being stolen by Jean. One time, I got busted stealing from a department store. I was driven home in the back of a police cruiser and it was the most embarrassing moment in my young life. I ran out of the back of the car, face red hot, and immediately went into my room. My mother and father came to the door a few times that evening, angry, but they never even opened the door. A brush with the law couldn't even muster the attention I wanted from them.

Jean was in and out of the hospital for most of her early life. Surgeries, checkups, monitoring stays. It was at times like those where she got all of the attention from my parents. I would be swept away to stay with Gran, which I loved, but it was bittersweet. We would play games, bake, read, do puzzles, but through it all Gran would have this anxious edge to her. I could tell she was worrying about Jean and I couldn't blame her. I was worried too, but I wanted my time with her to be spent without Jean taking her attention. It so infuriated me that even when it was my time to be lavished with all my Gran's love and attention, baby Blue Jean was still on her mind.

She hated being called Blue Jean, so, of course, I called her that all the time. No matter the occasion be it at home, in front of her friends, at school, I would call her Blue Jean. The look she would get on her face was classic! She would narrow her eyes and her mouth would pucker into a tight frown as she yelled at me to stop. I would laugh and say, "Of course, Blue Jean!" and traipse off on my merry way, hearing her upset

mutterings as I went. She came to accept her nickname around when she finished junior high, so obviously, I stopped calling her that. By that time I was almost done with high school and saw myself as mature, so I had to be the bigger person.

When I went off to college a few towns away, something unexpected happened. I missed Jean. After all those years of loathing her presence and wanting nothing to do with her, I missed her. I missed her smile and our talks; I missed her knocking on my door to ask for advice one can only ask of their older sister; I missed how she still dealt with me even after all the crap I put her through. It was in those years that we grew very close. I would drive out almost every weekend to have dinner with my family, but I would take Jean out to see a movie, or to the mall; anything to spend more time with her before I had to go back to campus. When I didn't get the chance to come out, we would talk on the phone for hours, much to the chagrin of my roommate. We would talk about what she was studying in class, or who she was seeing, stuff like that. It was from one such conversation that everything fell apart.

By that time I had moved across the country, hours and hours away from my family home. Jean had been seeing this guy who I thought was bad for her. He was a dropout, he ran with the kind of people who would hang around behind the school if they were still in school, if you catch my drift. I didn't want to see her fall into that kind of crowd. I knew those types of people and what associating with them can do to a person. I expressed this all to her and she blew up. She screamed at me through the phone that I was just like mom and dad, that I was worrying about her too much; that she was a grown woman and could do what she wanted. I told her that if she kept seeing him that she could expect to be on the street soon and to not come to me crying when it was all over. It was like a nuclear bomb. Jean stopped. In all our lives I had never once said something so callous, so cold. I heard her breathing on the other end of the receiver, but she wouldn't say anything. It was heavy breathing. Breathing like when we raced when we were little. She ultimately hung up on me. I understood. What I said was hurtful and, although I thought I was right, I regretted it.

We didn't speak again.

I set my hand on the dusty attic doorknob. My fingers leave a dent in the thick layer of grime as I pull my hand back. It's been years. I don't know if I'm ready for this. I take a deep breath as I bolster my courage and tug the door open. It sticks a bit from the disuse, but not as much as I expected. I stumble slightly from the excess force but steady myself on the banister. A ray of light shines through the floating dust mites in the air. As I step into the attic room, my eyes scan across the forgotten objects. I see my wedding dress, moth-eaten and falling apart. I see the rocking chair where I nursed my daughter, the filing cabinet filled with my husband's old business papers. I ignore it all. I go straight to the boxes, falling apart with age. The cardboard crumbles slightly in my hands as I pull them open. Inside are piles and piles of photos. Tucked away under years and years of memories, are the photos of my sister. Ones from the day she was born, her first birthday, her kindergarten graduation, her senior prom, her high school graduation. All the happy memories came flooding back and with it, the regret. For years I had treated her so poorly and it took me going away to bring us close again. Near the bottom, there is a picture of Jean in a hospital bed. My initial reaction is to shove it back into the box, slam the attic door, and never think about it again. I instead stop and allow myself to look at it. She has tubes in her nose, an IV stuck in her arm, she looks like hell, but she's smiling. Her shining smile juxtaposed against the grim and dour mood of the ICU room she was in. It was taken the night she died.

I spend what feels like forever staring at the photo. The light in the room slowly fades with the sun and after a while, the dust finally settles. As I am looking at the picture, a drop of moisture falls upon it, and I am surprised to find that I am crying. I have been all this time, but I just now noticed. I look up from the photo and see that the sun has set. I slowly put all the other photos away, keeping out only one. I slide it into the pocket of my dress, leave the attic, and close the door.

WHEN MOM BRUSHES MY HAIR

Katelyn O'Guin-Slinger

I behave

Sitting in a chair

No wiggles

My mom switches between her hand and brush

Brushing the long raven strands

From hairline to hair tip to air

These raven strands will turn grey with age, like hers

I am aware at age eleven

She switches between her brush and hand

A tangle a single tangle

“No tangles, no split ends”

She tells me

I feel the need to argue

But decide to stay silent instead

She finds tangles She gets mad She finds tangles I tell her

“My hair is fine. I don't need to brush it.”

But she keeps brushing

She finds tangles

She tells me

“Take care of it.”

But she keeps brushing

And always finds more tangles

And then I start to wiggle

And she assures me

The tangles will unthread with time

IN THE ARMS OF THE INEVITABLE

Derek Lucero

There are nights, like tonight, where the moon comes out—the stars fade, and the snow on the ground reflects the moonlight—where everything on the mountain side is illuminated, almost as though God turned on a fluorescent lantern. I sit in my chair, right leg over the left, and watch the deer in the distance. They quietly and cautiously place each step silently to avoid attracting the attention of one of the many Silent Killers that reside in the densely wooded Wet Mountains.

Ultimately, it's nights like these, when my mind goes back to the start of another story. It is a story, for me, that brings clarity to who I am; where I came from; what family means; and what we know about life.

For eldest children, one of the first memories you have is the memory of when the responsibility of taking care of your family is forever placed on your shoulders. For me, this moment happened many years ago, shortly after my brother Kevin was born. It was under the moonlit mountains, northwest of the small town of Del Norte, and just south of the mighty Cathedral Mountains.

Perhaps, not fully understanding the moment, but realizing the significance of it, I sat in my lawn chair trying to mimic each move my Dad made—my Dad sat under the moonlit sky, his right leg crossed over his left, holding a beer in his hand. I, of course, tried to do the same thing (replacing beer with soda). My Dad looked over at me and said: “You know what, Dee?”—my Dad rarely called me Derek, I was always “Dee” to him—he continued, “You are the oldest brother now, and you’ll need to take care of this family when I’m gone.” Taking a sip of beer and moving his right foot to the beat of the New Mexico Spanish music that was playing in the background, he paused, and said “You are the oldest like me, like your Grandpa Willie, and your Grandpa Henry.” (Grandpa Henry was actually my Great Grandpa Henry.)

My Dad continued, “Grandpa Henry is the oldest of all of us, Grandpa Willie is the oldest of his generation, I am the oldest of my generation, and you are the oldest of your generation, and one day, each

of us will need to be the leader and protector for our family”.

In a Latino family, great pride and responsibility comes with being the eldest – it is a birthright, a sacred passage in life, a lifetime responsibility – it is a conversation that every Latino father will have with his son, and every Latino son will have with their son. It is an honor to be the eldest. Similar to the honor of a bridegroom, being welcomed by their families after being married, while dancing to the distinct rhythm and guitar melody of “La Marcha de los Novios”.

My Dad’s words never ceased, echoing in my mind with every step. With each new addition to the family, one sister, Veronica, and one brother, Keith, I held them in my arms for the first time, and in my mind, promised them that I would lead and protect them when Dad was gone. It was a promise that I never intended to forget.

Our family spent a significant amount of time in the mountains. We did not have vacations in far off places, much less, have the desire to go anywhere else. The times in the mountains were filled with memories of dancing, New Mexico Spanish music, hunting, and fishing, conversation and laughter.

As a young boy, or even as a young adult, I always heard stories from my friends about the Silent Killers that live in the mountains, but I never feared any of the Silent Killers who lurked in the forests where we enjoyed our time. Why would I fear? After all, we were protected by the generations of Lucero men.

The Lucero family was a large family, near 100 people. If we were not in the mountains, we were likely to be found in Pueblo, at Grandpa Henry’s house. You could imagine the craziness at family gatherings: New Mexico music in the background, side conversations, group conversations, kids running and screaming through the small two-bedroom house, teenagers occasionally disappearing and returning with a guilty look on their face, babies crying, the Aunts warming up a feast of potatoes, beans, tortillas, and chile.

Grandpa Henry never struggled to lead in the chaos though, he gently navigated change, our family was always together. He sat like a

holiday center piece on the dinner table, surrounded by chaos, Grandpa Henry sat at the center of his family – sitting in his chair, right leg over the left, occasionally moving his leg to the New Mexico music in the background, patiently and quietly enjoying the chaos that came with his expansive family.

Of course, at eighteen years old, I knew there were Silent Killers everywhere. With such a large family, it didn't take long to meet them face to face. A silent killer by the name of Sepsis returned Grandpa Henry to the heavens where his journey first began. As the patriarch of a family of four different generations, nine kids, over thirty grandkids, over fifty great-grandkids, and over ten great-great-grandkids, it was obvious the role was not for just anyone.

With my Dad's words still echoing in my mind, it was clear my Grandpa Henry was a special person. Still the thought lingered... How the hell can I even attempt to be "that guy"? He always made it look so easy. I often interpreted Dad's words as the need to physically protect, and forcefully lead. What was most perplexing? I never saw Grandpa Henry do anything like that.

Exactly a week after Grandpa Henry passed, another Silent Killer struck, except this time it didn't kill a person, it destroyed a family. The silent killer's name: Adultery. It was discovered that my Dad was having an affair for several years. The person who once bestowed on me the great responsibility of "taking care of this family", was the same person abandoning it.

What choice does a person have when the Silent Killer is your own father? In my mind, there was not a choice, it was not possible to stand and let anyone willfully destroy the siblings I once promised to protect.

My Dad and I did not speak for many years.

For me, it was not so much that he left my Mom, or that he wasn't happy in the relationship and needed to leave. More so, it was that he intentionally caused pain, to degrade and hurt my Mom and all of my siblings. The same siblings that I once held in my arms as infants, and promised to lead and protect from the bad in this world. Still, never had I

felt so incapable or helpless.

Many years later, when things started to improve, they started to improve in all the right ways, unfortunately, for all the wrong reasons. A new Silent Killer emerged in the form of Lou Gehrig's Disease (A.L.S).

My dad had been diagnosed with the silent killer, a killer which kills your body's ability to build muscle or maintain muscle, a disease that will render your body useless, unable to move, unable to talk, unable to eat, unable to drink, and inevitably, unable to breathe.

While it was hard to move past the damage of the past, all of us knew that any further progress in life was running against the Silent Killer's watch, so we had no choice but to forget the past and move forward with whatever the future held.

Along that journey to the Silent Killers inevitable arms, there were surely some good times, but with each passing moment those words from the moonlit mountainside continued to echo in my mind.

A dark reality dawned, I couldn't help but think that on this journey to the Silent Killers' arms, it isn't possible to lead or protect. The Silent Killer had already defined the parameters of the journey, all of us had no choice but to follow it.

Each year, it became a tradition to go to Cancun with Dad. It was a place he loved, and a place that had no memories of the dark times of years past. It was a place filled with new memories.

Each year, we always took note of the increasing devastation of the Silent Killer. With every year, we watched my dad's shoulders and arms dwindle. When hugging Dad, we felt more of the hidden bones and crevasses that were always hidden underneath the large muscles he used to have. The effect of the killer was apparent each trip.

Despite the Silent Killers' desire, we did try to make our own path. There were years where only some of us could go to Mexico, but there was one year where we all made it.

On the balcony overlooking the Royal Sands Resort, facing the bluish green ocean highlighted by the moon. Kevin, Keith, and I were

talking and enjoying a beverage. It was the first night of the trip. We made note of Dad's increasingly worse condition. His arms were purely appendages, only moved by his knee to somehow catapult his arm up on to the table. Dad's historically stocky build and muscular disposition was replaced with a look similar to the people who spent years in Hitler's Concentration Camps - who were deprived of the most basic nutrients, of course, this wasn't the case for Dad, he ate as much as he could, three thousand to four thousand calories a meal.

It was clear that the Silent Killers' watch was closer to the end than the start. We knew that just once, especially after all of the rotted memories from the many years before, we all needed to be together. So, we booked a ticket for Veronica - we called her to let her know that whatever she had planned needed to move down in priority. She would be leaving in 8 hours.

The next morning, I faked a hangover as an excuse to stay in the room, but I really was going to get the last remaining piece of our family puzzle. Veronica was landing in Cancun and we could all feel the new energy in our hearts - it was the feeling of knowing that the Silent Killer will win in the end, but we will win that moment.

We all coordinated with each other to surprise Dad. This was a surprisingly difficult task. While Dad could not do some things, like yell or raise his arms, he was always alert and always watching his surroundings—it was always hard to bamboozle Dad. Fortunately, there were enough of us to distract him.

Dad, sitting with his right foot over his left, his foot tapping to the sound of Caribbean music, and the sound of water splashing from the nearby pool, provided me with a useful lecture about drinking too much. Unintentionally, my excuse to escape to the airport worked out as a perfect diversion to keep Dad's attention on me, while Veronica stealthily crept around the pool and interrupted Dad's passionate lecture saying, "Geesh Dad, am I not invited to the party?"

Dad had a look of confusion, what seemed like 10 minutes was only a few seconds, but Dad struggled to understand and comprehend what had just happened. You could almost hear every thought going through

his head: Why is there a random girl hugging me? Why did that face look familiar? I know that voice, but Veronica isn't here. What is going on? Slowly, as all the pieces came together, he could only manage to say, "What the hell?"

Due to complications from the Silent Killer's lethal grasp, Dad could not lift his arms to hug Veronica, but Veronica made up for the difference. She held him firmly around his shrunken arms and shoulders - you could see the elation on Dad's face. It was almost like the energy that couldn't go through his arms, exuded through his face and smile. It was the look of a Father, knowing the Silent Killers fast approach, but realizing that all his kids were there with him.

It was a trip that each of us will remember for the rest of our lives. Each trip ended with a picture in front of the Royal Sands Resort, where cars pull in along the long narrow driveway, paralleled by a long pool that separates the "In" traffic and "Out" traffic. That year, in front of that long marble pool - the only year all 4 of us could make it - we all stood together, standing proud with our Father, lauding our victory over the Silent Killer. That moment captured by a picture - cherished by each of us - that was out of reach of the Silent Killer's grasp.

It wasn't long after that trip, sitting like he did so often before—like in the mountain's northwest of Del Norte or at the table near the pool in Cancun; his right leg over his left; his arm over the side of the chair—Dad sat motionless. Head hung to one side and instead of holding a beer - his hand was held by the hand of his daughter. Instead of three boys sitting next to him trying to mimic his every move—three men knelt before him, placing our hands on his legs, wishing those same legs would once again move to the rhythm of the New Mexico music that Dad loved so much. But in that hospital chair Dad sat motionless, head hung to one side, and only kept alive by a mask.

My Dad's mom, who never cried in front of my dad in all the years that the Silent Killer enforced its rage on her son, watched her son and stroked his hair in a way only a Mother can, like a mother trying to savor the last sensations of touching her baby boy. Next to her, the current leader of our Lucero family, Grandpa Willie looked in disbelief, struggling to imagine the next heir would soon be gone. The same large family

whom my Dad planned to lead, crammed into the room and out into the hallway by the nurse's station in the intensive care unit. But this time the chaos was gone, and with it our next leader.

It is on nights like tonight, where God's lantern illuminates the Wet Mountains, while I sit with a beer in my hand, my right leg over the left, and a compilation of life highlights plays in vivid detail, like I am watching it on the white snow-capped mountain tops that surround me, as though it was somehow being projected onto them—like the movies at a drive-in movie theater. With every replay, I question what all of it means.

I am daunted by the existence of the Silent Killers I have yet to meet—knowing that one day they will take the people I love most, and take me from the people who love me most. At times, I silently acknowledge to God that there is a deep part of me that wishes to return to my childhood—to the comfort and protection of the real Lucero men of my youth.

The young kids in our family, now look at me as one of the Lucero men. The only resemblance I have to a Lucero man is my mostly black hair with a few gray emerging—otherwise, I most resemble a Lucero child. In the form of a question: How the hell can I even attempt to be “that guy”? It makes me wonder how my Dad's words should come to fruition, and makes me try to find any meaning from Dad's story.

Perhaps it means, like Dad showed, that when it is impossible to lift your arms to hug someone the appropriate response of a leader is to let your smile exude the energy your arms don't have.

Perhaps, when Dad was sitting in that hospital chair motionless, it was not appropriate to let him leave us the same way we would always remember him—sitting with his right leg over his left—preserving what always was and creating what always will be. It was the need to lead and protect that inspired us.

Lifting his defeated body out of the chair, we placed him on the bed. Peacefully laid down with his arms crossing his lower chest. Placed in a way we had never seen before, but placed in a way we will never forget. Protecting our memories, and leading him to the arms of his Silent

Killer.

It may never be possible to fully know all the answers to life, if that were the case, there would not be a need for me to write these words. But tonight, underneath the light of God's fluorescent lantern—lost in the vastness of the Wet Mountains—sitting in my chair—with my right leg over the left, a drink in my hand, listening to the same New Mexico Spanish music—my Dad still speaks in this brightest of dark nights.

There is a Silent Killer for each of us. Watching us. Waiting for us. Inevitable to us... Leadership and protection lives when your heart lives close to the hearts of the people you love; in the chaos and in the calm; when you claim your victories; when you suffer together, when you forgive together, when you say goodbye together—when you place yourself into the arms of the inevitable.



MOTHER

Isabel Witter

The corridor was empty; dust clung to the corners of an out of use ATM. The strands of her hair looked like they were trying to run away from her scalp, a halo around the head they wished to escape. The connection of her hair to her head could be easily severed. I thought about running too, but my connection to her was not so easily snuffed out. She looked across to me, but her eyes glazed past mine. She seemed disconnected from herself, but this was nothing new.

“Are you hungry yet?” she asked.

I toyed with the hem of my shirt; it was my favorite. The yellow threads melted together and frayed, reminding me of sunshine and the smell of chlorine on my fingers. All my clothes were old and ill-fitting, I associated them with the before. I hadn't been to a pool in years, but I had fond memories of the day my mother took me. I daydreamed of the way the water hugged me, clinging to my skin and hair and causing me to feel weightless. My mother had been watching me from the side, her feet left soft prints on the concrete. Mostly I remember the way she had looked at me, her eyes connected to her body. When she had looked to me, she didn't look through me, her corneas weren't melted into her skull the way they are now.

“Are you deaf? I asked you a yes or no question Alma.” She said, more exasperated this time.

Knowing we only had four dollars until next Tuesday, I chose my answer carefully. “No, thanks. I ate a big lunch at school.” I said.

I felt like my stomach was eating itself, like a ravenous animal was locked within the lining. I ignored it. I knew Mrs. Richman would give me an extra donut tomorrow morning, so I shut my eyes and tried to wish the ravenous animal away.

I imagined the animal, licking it's chops as it stared at the near-empty contents of my stomach. It drooled and snarled, it wanted to survive, but so did I. I opened my eyes and I turned my attention to my

mother again. Sometimes I just liked to watch her.

My mom used to glow; she was so full of life that it seemed to fill her up. Her hair used to shine, like her eyes. She had the most beautiful hair. It was long and golden brown; sometimes she even let me brush it, if I wasn't too rough. Her eyes were my favorite. She always looked at me as if I was the only thing that truly mattered, a conglomeration of worry and warmth of love. I liked it when she worried about me. When I observed her now, her limbs seemed weighted, like something was always pushing her into the ground. Her eyelids were pasted halfway open, and when she looked at me it was like I didn't fully exist in her perception. Her once flushed skin was now reminiscent of paper. She looked like anyone could push her over and she would break into a thousand pieces. We were an odd pair, neither of our clothes fit right. Mine were two sizes too small and hers too big for her dwindling frame.

The bus driver glanced over at us as he pulled into the lot. I liked this bus driver; he had kind eyes and always gave me a piece of candy as we walked up the steps. It was the same every night. He smiled at me warmly, and I always smiled back.

“Alma! How was school today honey?” he asked. His voice was like a blanket, a two-packs-a-day blanket that filled the room. He handed me three cherry flavored jolly ranchers as he inquired.

“School was good today, I had art and my teacher told me that my drawing should be put into a museum. I learned about the potato famine, and we started the geometry unit. I don't like geometry bu-”

“Come on Alma! I am tired as hell and want to lay down.” My mom said as she pulled on my arm.

Reluctantly, I went with her to the back of the bus. I thanked Gary for the candy. The blanket his voice and interest had covered me with was torn away as the space widened between us.

Mother snored quietly as I stared out the window. It was raining, and that was the best. Some people think the rain is sad, but for me the rain is a blessing. I love the way it saturates everything, drips from the gutters and soaks the concrete. I love the way it fills me with hope.

I remember learning about early civilizations and how they would pray for rain, some even had gods they worshipped that controlled the rain. For them, rain was the difference between life and death. I imagined what it would be like to look outside my hut and see the droplets as the gods poured them from the sky. It must have caused the most exuberant happiness, maybe celebrations and feasts! I think I had a piece of my early ancestors within my heart, because when it rained, I too felt like celebrating.

I carefully opened one cherry flavored jolly rancher and hid the other two in my pocket. It was a bone to the ravenous beast in my stomach, the sugars melted on my tongue and seeped down my throat.

I liked the bus because it felt safer than home or school. Nobody on the bus stared at me or my freckles. They never stared at my unruly, unbrushed hair, or my knobby limbs. I liked it because it was dark, and mother always slept. When mother was quiet, I could pretend it was like before. I felt a sadness creep over my heart as we pulled into the bus stop by our apartment complex.

“Goodbye Gary, I’ll see you tomorrow.” I said to Gary as we walked down the steps. My mother’s grasp on my wrist was too tight. My feet skipped a step as she rushed up the stairs to the apartment. I never knew why she was in such a hurry.

As she opened the main doors, I was welcomed by the familiar scent of laundry detergent, beef chili, and moldy carpet. We ventured up more steps to the third floor. Apartment 307. Mother jimmied the lock with an anger nobody could find the source of if they tried. Mother threw her bag on the floor and slunk into the bathroom. Mother always did this, and always spent at least an hour in the bathroom before retiring into her room. I knew she wasn’t using the toilet, I never heard it flush or the sink run. Her actions always eluded me, but by now I was used to my own ignorance, and more than anything I knew never to ask.

Living with mother was like a big game of play pretend. I acted like I didn’t care, and my mother acted the same, although I don’t think she is acting.

The ravenous beast had returned to the depths of my stomach, so I threw it another bone. The cherry-flavor coated my tongue once again, disintegrating. I thought of Gary and his two-packs-a-day blanket voice.

The sixth grade was easy for me, I liked all the subjects. The only subject which seemed more foreign to me was math. I could read books about science, history, and English but I had no desire to read about math. The hordes of books I had already collected helped me to feel safe. Reading allowed me to transport myself elsewhere, and it was an added perk that my vocabulary was in a constant state of expansion. What I liked most about school was the distraction, and my teacher Mrs. Richman. Mrs. Richman was an older lady, she smelled like fabric softener and coffee creamer. She always wore colorful shawls across her lumpy shoulders, and her pants never fit her right. Like Gary, she had the kindest eyes and warmest smile. I went to sleep looking forward to her flrid spirit and the extra donut I knew she would hand me at nine am.

When I woke up everything felt different, it was as if a shadow had fallen over our dingy apartment. I heard nothing from mother's room, but this wasn't abnormal. I brushed my hair and put on my favorite yellow shirt and blue jeans. With my backpack thrown over my shoulder, I walked into the kitchen. Usually by now mother was awake, fixing herself a cup of coffee and smoking an American Spirit. I thought she might be taking another sick day, I wondered how many they allowed. Mother seemed to take one every other day. Although she didn't worry about me as much anymore, I still worried about her.

I walked to the bus stop and let my thoughts run. I thought about the before. Everything is so different now. I say before not knowing what caused the present, but it's been at least a year of wondering. She used to pick me up every day after school, gathering me in her arms and kissing the top of my head. Her eyes used to be kind, now they were empty. Sometimes the seduction of this nostalgia would cause me to lose my balance. I felt dizzy and isolated as I approached the bus stop. The big yellow rectangle veered around the corner, and I brought myself back to the sidewalk I stood on.

Mrs. Richman's smile led me into the classroom, and like every other day she handed me two chocolate glazed donuts and a paper towel.

Colonialism, geometry, Native Americans, tertiary colors, pizza, writing stories, Egypt, tectonic plates.

The bus stop brought more memories, the amalgamation of happiness and sadness. It was raining again, cleansing.

Mother wasn't at the bus stop when I returned, and this was abnormal. Although she never gathered me in her arms and kissed the top of my forehead anymore, she usually came to grab me too tight by my wrist, sometimes she even had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for me in her bag. I walked myself through the main doors of the apartment complex: laundry detergent, beef chili, and moldy carpet. I ventured up the stairs to apartment 307, jimmied the lock as a ball formed in the back of my throat.

"Mom?" I called out. There was no answer. With more desperation this time,

"Mom?" No answer.

I slowly walked to the closed door of her room, everything seemed very small. I opened it a crack.

"Mom?" I said. My voice was teetering on the edge of tears. When again there was no answer, I walked fully into the room.

Before I noticed her, I saw the mess. Dishes and clothes piled on every surface; sheets were sprawled across the floor. I saw her form crumpled against the closet door. Something was very wrong, and I was scared. I could feel my heart pulsing in my ears, in my teeth, the ravenous beast in my stomach was replaced with an ebbing feeling of despair. Something was very wrong.

Salt leaked from my eyes as I came across her folded body. She looked like a napkin someone had crumpled up and thrown away. I screamed her name in her face, begging her to wake up. I watched her chest, the one I hadn't felt safe in for a year and a half. I looked for her breathing and couldn't find it. A shaky finger was put under her nose, and the despair fell unto me. I laid my head on her chest, her heart was beating irregularly. My unruly hair mixed with the sweat on her paper

skin, fear was controlling my movements. Everything was distorted, a dream. The nightstand was too big and her body was so tiny. My head felt swollen. A foreign feeling snaked through my veins, its long fingers clasped my ribs and heart, squeezing out the dread which was overcoming my senses. Her face was being attacked by gridlines of blue and purple, etched upon her neck and jaw. Her lips were cold, her eyes were rolled far back into her head and the vessels inflamed with stress. The spit was dripping, guiding itself along the etched pathways of blue and purple; a thought that was never finished.

I tried to lift her, to turn her on her side. Although she was thin, my shaking hands could not turn her more than halfway. Her body fell the rest of the way. When she was on her back, the most horrible sound ran out from her lips. The groan of a beast, lungs seized up and calling for any relief. The intensity of her one desperate breath broke the air of silence, permeated the dread which leaked within me. There were no more gasps after that.

I made my way to the landline; my feet were made of lead. The hall from her room to the phone stretched forever, the air in between was thick.

“911 what is the location of your emergency?” the dispatcher asked. My voice broke as I responded with the name of our dingy apartment complex, apartment 307. She asked me to repeat it and I did.

“Is she breathing?”

“No.”

I don't remember all the questions she asked. I just wondered how the lady on the phone was staying so very calm, as any lingering sense of peace had been stolen from me.

I remember learning that CPR breaks the person's ribs, I didn't want to break mother's ribs. Her face was enveloped with the sunset of unnatural colors, the spittle on her lip was drying. I placed my knobby fingers over her chest, sobbing as I began chest compressions. I heard the dispatchers voice as if she was on a spaceship, she wanted me to count with her. She told me I could be saving her life.

The horsemen of the paramedics broke through the door, I was carried away from her. There were so many of them, little ants asking too many questions. My head was still swollen, my mouth full of cotton. The ball in my throat made me struggle to breathe. Nobody hugged me, nobody kissed me on the forehead.

The policemen had empty eyes like my mother, but the pity in their words stung. I couldn't swallow as we drove to the hospital. It was raining still.

Little ants asking too many questions, questions too old for me.

All my answers were the wrong answers. This was the beginning of the after. After I had found out what my mother was doing in the bathroom, on her sick days, in her closed bedroom. After I found out why she was so angry, why her corneas were melted into her skull, why her skin looked like paper.



TO LOVE AGAIN

Riann Rose

The nights were loud and dark
But you, my dear, carried through softly

We meet where the stars find the water near the park
Breathtakingly so handsome you followed promptly

Our cries heard through the deaf ear
Hold me tighter, listen to me fondly

Flowers, so sweet once blossomed here
Alone under the stars of past dreams

No prayers for who we once were to rehear
Laughter flows through, silencing the river's screams

Only our love shines brighter than the moon gleams



ODNEK the Warrior
Protector of WATER

INCURABLE

Grayson Hunt

Hooves beat upon the damp earth at a slow, cautious pace. A dense fog covered the rolling, grassy moor, so thick and all-consuming he thought he might lose his way. He didn't remember this type of fog in the area, but that wasn't a surprise. When he was still only a child, his family moved away from this place. The only memories he kept of Noctham Moor were a hazy few about playing by the side of the pond with his beloved mother before she contracted the "illness".

Elliott Taylor spent most of his time taking care of his mother, who always seemed to be on the brink of insanity, ever since his father decided to move away from Noctham. They hoped she would return to normal after moving from the moor, where many others had also contracted the "illness", but her condition only worsened. What started as acute fatigue, dizziness, and pallid skin developed into all those things plus madness. Most of the time she was no longer herself and tried to sink her teeth into the flesh of others. Only a precious few hours each day she would return to her normal self – kind, soft, affectionate.

The doctors in the new city advised moving her to a place for the mentally ill, but Elliott and his father refused, knowing it would be hell for her. They would try to take care of her themselves.

Despite her deteriorating condition, Elliott did the best he could to care for her for 25 years. He continued even after his father passed away from consumption. To avoid her violent outbreaks, he purchased a straightjacket for her, which worked well for several years. He cared for her in this way until two years ago. In a terrifying display of strength, his mother broke out of her straightjacket and attacked him. For the first time, she succeeded in biting him on the forearm hard enough to draw blood. Hearing the commotion, a neighbor broke in to help tear the madwoman off of him, and together, they restrained her by tying her to a chair. The two of them noted that even her appearance had changed during the episode.

A few hours later, when he told the doctors what happened, they de-

manded she be placed in an insane asylum for the safety of the city. But Elliott had heard of the horrors taking place in those institutions behind closed doors. Wanting to protect her from harm at the hands of others, he decided to end her life himself.

In the fading sunlight, he urged his horse to walk faster, knowing if night fell, there would be no navigating his way out of the foggy blackness. Little by little, the horse made its way down the path, and in a stroke of luck, found a signpost pointing toward the small town of Noctham. It wasn't long until the looming shapes of houses appeared out of the fog. As he rode past, he realized all the homes had been abandoned for some time. The signs he could find pointed the way to the town center where he was sure he would find some townsfolk.

Upon entering the town square, he found all the businesses and homes remained deserted. Did no one other than Madame De Sang still live here? Only one woman living in a ghost town? If he made this journey when he was younger, Elliott would have seen this as a red flag and turned away, but he wasn't that person anymore. After his mother bit him, he had contracted the mysterious "illness". He no longer feared for his life.

After a few more minutes traveling on the main road, he could make out a light shining through the fog. With confidence, he followed it, knowing it had to be Madame De Sang's house. He hadn't even known the elderly woman until recently, but she invited all him the same.

Two months ago, he received an unexpected letter from her out of nowhere asking how his mother fared. He replied, telling her she passed away years ago. Then, he received another letter, this time requesting he come to her house in Noctham Moor. Madame De Sang claimed to have an item she always wanted to give his mother but never did. To Elliott, it was an unlikely story, and that's what he relied on.

Within a short while, he arrived at Madame De Sang's massive front door. The dated mansion she lived in was huge – so large that he couldn't even see its entirety in the fog. He didn't have to see it all to know it was the biggest in the entire abandoned town. Elliott tied his horse to a post outside, then used the heavy iron knocker to knock on

the door. The sound faded quickly into the fog outside, but he could hear it echo through the mansion. Only a couple of moments passed before Madame De Sang opened the heavy walnut door, standing before him with a crooked smile.

“Ah, welcome Elliott. Such a handsome young man like you is a sight for these sore old eyes!” She chirped, beating the white marble floor with her cane for emphasis.

“The pleasure is all mine, Madame De Sang.” Elliott bowed as he took off his trifold hat. With sharp emerald eyes, he scanned her, finding nothing out of the ordinary – only a hunched old woman with wrinkly plaster skin and sunken brown eyes.

“Oh, polite and handsome! Please come in. It’s such a delight to meet the son of my dear friend Florence.” she exclaimed, motioning Elliott inside with her cane. He cringed when she called his mother by that name. Anyone who knew his mother, even in the slightest capacity, called her Flora.

Regardless, he stepped inside, moving to place his hat on the bronze hatstand, finding it filled with dozens of dusty men’s hats. Warning bells rang through his mind, telling him to ask what happened to the men they belonged to, but he ignored them and continued as if he hadn’t noticed. Madame De Sang grabbed his hat and placed it on a banister of the grand staircase before them. “Goodness, my apologies! I haven’t had company for quite some time. You can place your coat here as well, and – Oh! The tea! When you have finished, please meet me in the sitting room straight through that doorway.” she requested before hobbling away to the kitchen.

“As you say, Madame.” Elliott nodded in reply, taking his time as he looked around. The place was dusty but grand, with gold oil lamps, carved marble tables, and delicate paintings on the walls. Dark red velvet curtains hung from the windows, tied open with golden silk tassels. By far, this opulent home was the nicest he had ever been in. He took off his topcoat and slung it over the banister by his hat, then tread briskly into the elegant sitting room.

An ornate bone china tea set sat atop a carved dark walnut table in a room filled with gold accessories. Madame De Sang sat in a matching walnut chair awaiting him with her crooked grin.

“Please sit, my dear. I’m sure the tea will warm your bones after the long journey.” she cooed, and Elliott bowed again.

“Thank you for your consideration, Madame. Your kindness overwhelms a commoner like myself,” he said before taking a seat.

The elderly woman chuckled and shook her head. “You don’t have to thank me, dear. That you came to see an old woman like me is more than enough.” As she spoke, she poured the tea, offering milk and sugar.

Elliott drank deeply, letting the tea warm him before asking, “Where are all the townsfolk? I knew there wouldn’t be many, but I never thought you would be the only one left in Noctham.”

Sipping her tea, Madame De Sang sighed. “They all moved away when the illness came about. First the middle class followed by the working class, who moved because they could no longer find customers here. It’s quite a shame – this was once such a delightful little town.”

“And you never caught the ‘illness’, I presume? Why didn’t you move away like everyone else?” he pressed, listening to her story with uncommon intensity.

The old woman sighed again, a wistful look in her eyes. “I have no other home. These people were my family. There’s nowhere else for me to go, so I stayed here even through the illness. I was one of the lucky ones who never caught it. I’m sorry your mother struggled so much before she passed away. She was such a lovely woman.” she frowned. For a moment, her sadness appeared genuine.

Elliott almost felt sorry for her, but he stopped himself. He knew better. “I see...” his voice trailed off, not sure what to say in reply.

The two engaged in idle conversation for a short while. She asked about his life and he gave her quick, shallow answers, not wanting to beat around the bush any longer.

“So... What was it you wanted to give me?” Elliott asked, becoming impatient. He had only come here for one reason.

Madame De Sang’s tired form perked up, and she sat up completely straight, her brown eyes piercing and excited. This is what he had come for.

“You young people can’t wait for anything. I would’ve liked to have talked to you a bit longer – you’re such a charming young man. Oh, well...” she sighed at first, but then laughter broke through her facade.

For one moment, she looked down at her tea, and when she looked up again, her eyes had changed from brown to a deep red. Now she cackled openly. “You fool. How cute you are, trying to act all brave in the presence of the one who caused the ‘illness’. Oh, but those idiots in town! They didn’t even realize I was feeding on them!” As Madame De Sang’s laughter resounded through the mansion, Elliott snuck a knife under the table. Suddenly, her focus shifted to him. “But you – you’re no better. Coming out here thinking you’d be meeting an old woman in the middle of an abandoned town? You may be handsome, but you sure are stupid. That’s fine – I like the stupid ones better. I’m going to end your lonely, miserable life and send you straight to hell with your mother!”

In the blink of an eye, she climbed onto the table to lunge for Elliott, causing the fine china to fall and break on the floor. Just in time, he dodged, and Madame De Sang missed him by fractions of an inch. With momentum carrying her forward, she tumbled off the table and crashed into the wall. While she flew past, Elliott stabbed her with the knife he stole from the cutlery. Taking advantage of the fraction of a second she sat stunned, he bolted from his chair to the door. He glanced back only to see an enraged, deformed version of the elderly woman.

Her eyes flashed red like blood above her gaping mouth, where her razor-sharp canines had grown to extraordinary lengths. Dreadful, elongated claws appeared on the ends of her knotty fingers, blackened and twisted. He saw the knife fall from her side harmlessly, the wound already healing. He’d have to kill her another way.

Not wasting a moment longer, he ran into the entryway and up the grand flight of stairs. Fighting this monster outside in the fog was not an option.

“You cannot run from me, boy! Come out and face your fate like a man!” she shrieked from the sitting room. Elliott swept his curly brown hair from his eyes and gazed helplessly at all the closed doors in the upper hallway. As he hesitated, not knowing which one to open, he heard Madame De Sang’s wretched claws screeching across the marble entryway like nails on a chalkboard.

With a quick prayer to his mother, he sprinted to a random door and opened it, finding an enormous old library inside. As fast as he could, he wove through the dozens of bookcases hoping to lose the monster that De Sang had become. He didn’t want to think about how his mother looked exactly like that the night she bit him.

A loud clatter told him that the Madame was now in the library. Quietly, he crept through the bookcases until he felt far enough from the entrance. Maybe if he caught her by surprise, he could kill her, but to do that, he would have to stay in his current position. Any noise at all would alert her to his presence.

Trying to quiet his hard breathing, he inhaled and exhaled through his nose. The room around him fell completely silent aside from the occasional bookcase being knocked over. Elliott’s eyes darted around in the dim light, knowing the victor would likely be determined by who saw the other first.

Another few awful moments crept by, and everything was dreadfully quiet. As he turned to peer around the bookcase, he caught rapid motion in his peripheral vision. With a hideous scream, Madame De Sang descended from the top of a nearby bookcase, tackling him onto the hardwood floor with the force of a speeding carriage. Under such a force, he heard the sickening crack of his bones as they snapped like twigs. Elliott gasped as searing pain flared from several points in his body, then hissed out curses.

“It’s over you unbelievably stupid, foolish boy. You cannot win this

battle as a mere human. You humans always think you know it all – hah! How wrong you are!” she scoffed, her terrible deep red eyes burning into his, “I wonder if your blood will taste as sweet as your mother’s? Oh, I do hope so.” As she considered it, she smiled her crooked smile, fangs gleaming in the low light of the oil lamps.

To her surprise, Elliott began to laugh underneath her deformed body. Using his remaining good arm, he displayed supernatural strength of his own by relocating his shoulder, wincing as he did so. With caution, Madame De Sang watched his movements until he spoke. “It’s a good thing I came here to kill you, then, isn’t it?” he managed to say under his cracked ribs, his comment causing her eyes to go wide. “You’re not the only one who knows things, De Sang.”

From underneath her, Elliott flashed a smile to distract her as his hand crept to the hidden stake in his boot.

“What do you mean, fool?!” the monster demanded, claws digging deep into his chest yet somehow drawing no blood.

“What I mean is – you’re the one going to hell tonight.” he spat, grasping the stake and plunging it through her heart.

“How... How did you...?” she gasped before falling to the ground beside him, her skin wrinkling like a prune and her hair falling out as she aged rapidly.

Elliott breathed a sigh in relief and stayed on the floor until he felt his bones snapping back into place. He was no mere human. Not anymore.

When he felt he could stand, he slung De Sang’s body over his shoulder and broke several gas lamps in the room to ensure the place would burn. With that done, he gathered his things and left the mansion, tying her body to his horse and riding the short distance to his childhood home. Naturally, thieves had plundered it after remaining vacant for such a long time, but the pond in the back remained the same as he remembered it. The old rowboat remained tied to the small dock his father crafted.

Before stepping into the boat himself, he tied a few stones to the monster's body and tossed it into the boat. Then, leisurely, he rowed out to the center of the pond and threw it overboard, watching it sink to the bottom. For the first time, he noticed the fog had cleared away because of the moon's beautiful reflection in the water.

Elliott closed his green eyes for a moment, hoping, praying to see his reflection, but when he opened them, he saw none. He knew it was only a matter of time until he became like De Sang. With a realization that felt like the twist of a blade in his heart, he understood no amount of monster corpses could cure the "illness" his mother passed on to him – no amount of hatred could change what he had become.

A vampire.

NIGHT

Jacob Ulrich

Night falls as the lights shine

The shaded lamps aren't enough

The light creeps along the walls

Shadows shriek as the candles burn

Wax doesn't melt as midnight strikes

The only LED I feel is in my bed

The fairy dance provides no warmth

Mirror's reflections show only dark

Night bleeds in from a corner of shade

The cold seeps out from beneath the blanket

The ghosts sing as my eyes dare to rest

Pictures of the past hang above my bed

Night fails as sun shines

The lamps are never enough

The stars shine only on the ceiling

Shadows lurk no matter the light

THE WAY DOWN

Hannah Orekhov

From the ridges of space

You grasp onto life

One swift blow

Nothing left but to let go

Gliding through time

Your crisp outlines

Make the light stutter

With old aged colors

Falling to end

You're the aroma of

Fresh early morning

Untouched by being

Tinting the sky for the last time

You gracefully land

Admiring the realm

You unwillingly left behind

A small disturbance

With a destiny of your own

An autumn leaf

At the end of its road

WALLFLOWER

Isabel Cheeseman

She sits at the side,
As he hides from the tide,
Both afraid to let them inside.

The lights blind and the music blares,
But nothing will draw them away from the
Further dimmed lights at the back of the theater.

They fade into the background,
Not wanting to be crowned,
If they did they'd be drowned
In the applause that they repudiate

Don't put me on the spot,
Don't put me in the game,
Don't make me go on stage,

What would I say?
What would they think?
If I spoke, opened up,
Decided to speak.

I go unnoticed

But I am no loner
I prefer to sit back
And let the world pass me by

Invisibility,
Is the superpower,
Of the wallflower

STRESS

Anjela Jones

The kitchen is sweltering hot.

What did table 37 ask for?

Can't forget the napkins and umm

Cocktail sauce!

Table 40 is cashing out

I need to check on 47

I need to finish my english homework

It's already a day late.

My apron is falling off,

maybe I'm losing weight

did I eat anything today?

I'm mad at myself,

3 points off for forgetting to simplify!

"Everything tasting good over here?"

Discussion responses are due at midnight. I'm getting another table.

LIFE

Scott Bauman

Birth death and life in between up to me,
deciding how I live.

I could become a romantic courting love
and probing the mysteries of the heart.

Probing the depths of the soul,
Living for beauty and emotion.

Or perhaps I could live the life of science.

Looking for answers,
Asking questions.

Searching for the how, where, when of the universe

Consumed by work, ever focused on the next discovery;
The more perfect theory

The life of a philosopher presents itself;

Learning, growing, thinking, knowing Befriending Plato, learning
Sartre.

Becoming wise, reading ancient text

So that I might better understand thought If I so desired, I could become
the activist

Champion of truth and justice,

Fighting for all who dwell on this floating rock

Applying philosophies of Life, Liberty, and Property Joining – no –
Leading the Revolution.

There is no right life,

Nor is there a wrong one.

And why should I confine myself to a singular life when all is an option?

I must live many paths to understand Life



AND THEN

Jackson Page-Roth

6:24am. You are waiting for the metro, as you always are. The station is dark and cold, as is the sky outside. You stand on the platform, thermos in one hand, briefcase in the other, three back and two left of the orange, discolored brick. The city above is slowly coming alive, as echoes of car horns and construction drift down the escalator and through the turnstiles. But down below seems to be another world entirely, like a dream that feels almost real. The mist from the city above has begun to leak down into the station, giving everything a hazy, quiet feel. Your nose picks up the smell of grease on the tracks and you hear the man next to you shift his newspaper from one hand to the other. You shift your weight back and forth, eyeing your watch.

6:25am. Light flashes through the tunnel as the subway rolls to a halt, filling the air with the screeching of brakes and a gust of air, breaking the misty silence. Your shoes clack along the brick towards the doors, echoing the sounds of hundreds of others.

6:27am. The intercom crackles. The doors are closing, please move away from all exits. The station slides away behind you.

You will ride to the same stop, your stop: the one with the statue of the two dancing girls, and the sign that is cracked through the second “t” in Everett Place, and the man in the ticket stand who always has his hat pulled too low, and the clock above him that always reflects the light into your eyes as you get off.

And you always get off.

But, it occurs to you, that you don't have to get off. You could say fuck it. Stay on until the end of the line. And then get on another one, and keep going. And another one, and another. You don't know where this train will take you, but it doesn't matter. Eventually, you would be so far away that you could be anyone.

You could end up in the countryside. Buy some land and raise livestock surrounded by rolling hills and the smell of sweet grass. Or you

could stop at the edge of a forest. Build yourself a cabin and enjoy the solitude of nature, researching birds and painting incredible images to sell at the local market. Or you might find yourself on the coast. Become a crewman on a ship, that is, until you can buy one for yourself. Sail away, and spend the rest of your life wandering; your mind would be so full of exotic cultures and your stomach so full of their food. Yes, that is what you will do.

You are getting excited now. This is what you were always meant to do, not wallow away in... wherever it was. You would find someone, someone who would want to come with you. And then you would have children, and they would learn to love to wander, as you have wandered.

Because, at that point, of course, you would have climbed atop Kili-manjaro and ventured deep into the Amazon. Read in the Bibliothèque Nationale and watched films in Cine Thisio. Dove down into the deep of the Mariana Trench and floated in the Dead Sea. Bungee jumped in New Zealand and flown over volcanoes in Hawai'i. Perused through the markets of Pakistan and feasted on the views of Patagonia. Protested with the Iranian citizens and sat in on a Swiss democratic convention. Skied the French Alps and surfed the coast of Bali. Worshiped with the monks of Thailand and wept with the widows of Afghanistan. Fly fished on the rivers of the Saskatchewan and sang *Nessun Dorma* in the fields of Italy.

You would have done all that.

And then your children would look up to you as their hero. And you would be their hero, and retrace all your steps with them. And then, once you are too old and tired to continue, they would continue for you, adventuring and living life as it should be. And then you would die with a smile, for there was nothing more for you to do in this world.

And then—

And then the light blinds you from the clock tower, and you see the man with his hat pulled too low, and the cracked “t” in Everett Place, and the dancing girls. “And then what?” you ask yourself, as you stand on the platform, gazing up at the clock above the ticket stand.

6:42am. And, as your shoes clack through the stop, your stop, you

realize you don't remember what you were thinking about on the ride over.

NO.5 WRITERS BLOCK

Ben Clark

Pressing pen to paper again,

The words used to dance from these finger tips.

Now all that comes out is stammers and stutters in your brain.

The words used to dance from my hands like they did from my lips.

You love to write, right?

In this now dark room you start to remember:

The boy who introduced himself wild and bright

With “I love to write”.

They watch, eyes bound to the page

Waiting to see you sing your beautiful flat words

You can feel their rage

“YOU SAID YOU LOVED TO WRITE” flutters in your mind like a million birds

You love to write

You love to write

Where is the boy who loves to write?

Where are the ideas that made your heart take flight?

Why does every word feel like fight?

Why do you not feel right?

You love to write

Just write

Just Write I know you can

Am I a failure to the teachers in middle school who said I would be the next Conan Doyle?

Have I lost the spark that ignited me so long ago?

Inside the agony starts to boil.

You love to write, is that not so?

Just Write Kid

So you press pen to paper again

Coffee in your veins and exhaustion in your heart

You dance your kingdom across the page and renew your reign

You can write all you have to do is start.

All you have to do

Is start.



GUATEMALA IN SENTIMENTS

Katherine Forier

So. This is what came of my letter attempt. I shall continue to try.

Describe Guatemala...

I know a place where the warmth and the water and the world are.

There are five fruits:

zapotes jocotes papaya mango piña

I crave nothing else. Nothing else but tortillas, and frijoles, and
guacamole...

When I meditate up here on the bamboo
hummingbirds get stuck inside the circled windows,
the construction team shouts over Spanish pop,
and the coffee flies nibble my legs.

And arms.

And ear lobes.

Little red bliss bites cover me for months.

If I look out at it every day

Will my eyes turn blue and infinite

my hair become pine needles and banana leaves

my lips kissed sunset orange and the midday sun glowing on my breath?

I will become the lake at dawn and my skin will be the clouded sky
reflected.

Water careens down a rock face, and another and another
high over head and I am down on this rock
where like falling stones it meets my body.

As though it were my breath, come from the outside in
liquid ice is inhaled through my flesh.

With my eyes closed in a cold shower I am in the falls again.

Where a fire takes my flowers, I have a frog in my throat.

I count ... six ... seven ... eight

It takes until after I reach twenty one for me to get my voice back.

It came when I was in a room with tea, reading a book, looking out a
window at the trees.

I have no soul as rich as this one waiting for me where I land.

I will break it into pieces and tuck them into cacao beans
and make avocado pudding for days until I am whole again.



SKIN RELIEF

Nico Gambone

I had a dream

I opened up the stretch marks on my thighs

but my flesh was only bread

I tore the loaf

I kept it to myself.

I had a vision in the shower

my breasts splitting from my chest like pinched clay

falling to the earth.

I picked them up

they were small and heavy in my hand

cupped my palm

like a handshake

solid.



RYLEE

Benjamin Bird

I met her a few months ago at this place; Atlantic Maine university. It was some tiny college of just under one thousand students, most of us marine biology majors. The campus was on the ocean, at the end of a small peninsula some fifty miles north of Portland. Atlantic Maine was in the town of Bailey, if you could even call it a town. During the semester, well over half the population were students and staff; when classes weren't being held the population nearly dipped into the double digits. I had come because I wanted to study the ocean and because they offered me a tidy scholarship, but mostly because it was as different from my hometown as I could imagine. It was my second semester. I had just become roommates with a friend of mine, Rylee. We had met in our first semester and hit it off. We decided to be roommates since we seemed to get along better with each other than our actual roommates.

Rylee was a pretty typical student at Atlantic Maine—she was smart, wealthy, and had a love of the ocean—but for some reason I liked her better than most of the people there. She was a short white girl with a messy blonde bob and she dressed like a boy. Rylee was studying environmental science. She had hopes of becoming an oceanographer, a person who studies the movements of the ocean, its patterns, changes, and effects on the shore. However, that semester she had decided to take an intro to philosophy class, despite my best attempts to get her to take the easy—A film studies course I was taking. To be clear, my intention in trying to get her to take film studies with me wasn't exclusively that I wanted to sit around and watch movies with her. It was because of the philosophy professor... Chris Nakagaki had a reputation on campus for being eccentric. People said he would fail students for arguing with him, give large papers with short deadlines on random subjects, and he made his female students uncomfortable. But Rylee didn't care; the class seemed interesting and she could not be swayed.

During the first week of that semester she burst into the library across from our dorm room where I had been working. She hurried over to the seat opposite my own and looked at me expectantly. Rylee had a

smug, excited look on her face; I knew nothing good could come of asking her about why she looked so eager, so I decided to ignore her. It only lasted a few seconds before she relented and decided to tell me herself.

“So my philosophy class was today!” Rylee said, waiting for me to respond.

“Oh, neat.” I knew the facade of indifference would get under her skin.

“My teacher, professor Nakagaki is a genius.” After a few moments of silence, she elaborated. “He told us that philosophy wasn’t just a way of thinking... It’s a science, and an art.” Another few moments of silence. “He also said that-”

I realized if I didn’t say something she would probably end up repeating the entirety of the lecture she’d heard. “I get it, your mind was blown by an intro to philosophy class.”

She gave me an angry look before storming off. She was just trying to make me feel guilty, and frankly I could’ve been far more mean than I was. If anything she should’ve been the one apologizing, I was trying to study and she just interrupted me. She should apologize too...

Her ability to make me feel bad was greater than my ability to rationalize my behavior. I closed my laptop and swept the small stack of books I had checked out into my bag and went to apologize.

That had all been about two months ago. We made up as soon as I apologized. Since then I had sat through a dozen lectures on basic (and often misunderstood) philosophy she had decided to repeat to me. In turn she’d listened to my armchair analysis of over a dozen films, ranging from Schindler’s List to Sharknado, although the latter wasn’t actually a part of my class. I just wanted to talk about it.

I finished checking the storm kit in our floor’s kitchen. The first aid kit, bottled water, flashlights, and emergency radio were all there; our floor was prepared. A massive summer storm was going to hit Bailey soon, and the college had decided to suspend classes for the duration.

Most of the students had gone to live with family until the storm passed. That wasn't an option for me, and Rylee had decided to stay, having grown up on the coast and being accustomed to this kind of storm.

The floor was mostly abandoned, just myself, Rylee, and a few other stragglers; most like me, with nowhere else to stay. The staff had almost all stayed on campus, so during the days leading up to the storm, those of us who had stayed on campus had the opportunity to receive private tutoring from our teachers. Which, of course, meant an uptick in pseudo-philosophical rants from Rylee.

The storm was supposed to hit tonight. We had been assured that as long as we followed emergency procedures we would be fine, that this type of thing happened every couple of years, and that if the storm was too dangerous the administration would have made arrangements to get us somewhere safe.

But I didn't feel safe, I had lived my whole life in Nevada; I saw rain twice a year, and it rarely lasted more than an hour. The storm hadn't even hit yet and there was a downpour outside, it had been going all day, and I'd never heard weather so loud. This was my third time checking our list of emergency supplies.

"Alex, the storm kit isn't going to walk away." Rylee was behind me with a concerned look on her face. "I told you, I've been through these storms countless times growing up, it's not a big deal."

I knew she was right, but that didn't change my anxieties, that didn't change the sound of rain hitting the roof so heavily it sounded like any second the ceiling would cave down on us. My throat felt tight. I realized I wasn't breathing. I took sudden, panicked breaths.

"Come on, deep breaths. It's fine, let's just go back to the room. The storm should be over by tomorrow morning."

After a moment I was able to calm down.

"Okay, let's go."

My breathing was still ragged, and I didn't feel much better, but standing in the hall wasn't helping. We walked down the hall back to our

room. As soon as we got back to the room I pulled the blankets off of my bed and wrapped myself in them, covering my ears. The sound of the rain faded, if only a little.

I came here because I thought the ocean was beautiful, I never understood why people talked about its ferocity. What if the building can't handle the weight of the water being blown up against it? Maybe the storm will just linger so long the peninsula floods, or maybe someone forgot to pick up a trashcan and the wind will blow it through the window, or—

“Alex!” Rylee was looking at me, and from her tone she had probably been trying to get my attention for a while. “Calm down, just keep taking deep breaths.”

I had never seen her look so concerned.

“How about we watch a movie or something, will that help?”

It wouldn't, but I suddenly felt pathetic. If nothing else, it might distract her from how I was acting. “Yeah sure, what do you want to watch?” My throat felt so tight it was hard to talk.

“How about that movie you've been telling me you wanted me to watch?”

“Oh, *The Room*, yeah sure it's great.”

“Great great or terrible great?” She might know me too well.

“Terrible great.”

She ran down the hall to make popcorn and grab sodas while I pulled up the movie on my laptop. To my surprise, it did help. Even with the screaming wind making it hard to hear the movie it was a distraction, but before the movie was over the storm hit in earnest. The wind blew against the storm shutters so heavily it sounded as if they would be torn off, and the rain pelted in a deafening blur. Every minute some new terrifying sound would occur, a crash or rumble from some unknown source.

The movie ended, and Rylee went to bed, advising me to do the same. She crawled into bed, and I did the same, though I couldn't bring myself to turn off the lights.

But I couldn't sleep. For hours I stayed awake, shuddering at the ferocity of the storm. Every sound that could be heard over the wailing of rain and wind shook me. I covered my ears with pillows, blankets, and my hands but the storm only seemed to get louder.

I noticed Rylee across the room. She had crawled into her bed hours ago, but her eyes were wide open, staring at the ceiling. Despite her courage, even she seemed scared by the tempest. We lay in our beds across from each other, both awake for what seemed like an eternity. Neither acknowledging the other.

Sometime after midnight I heard a crash so loud my ears began to ache. I let out a slight scream, but the cacophony swallowed it. I looked at Rylee, but at some point she must have fallen asleep. How could she sleep through this? But as the hours dredged on my exhaustion overtook me, and I eventually fell into a fitful, nightmare-laden sleep.

I woke up, not in my room but on a raft floating in the center of a vast ocean. From horizon to horizon all I could see was water. I stood up, shakily. The raft wobbled under my feet, and I fell as the raft tilted on the waves. The raft nearly capsized.

Taking a deep breath, I stood up. This time I managed to find my sea legs and stay upright. The heat was unimaginable; there was no shade to shelter in. I tried to cover myself with the rags I had, but it wasn't enough. The sun kept beating down, searing my flesh.

The heat began to overtake me and I slumped back down onto the raft. The water felt cool. I lowered myself gently next to the raft, holding onto it, drifting in the current with it. The cool of the water was pleasant, and, for a moment, I closed my eyes.

But in that instant I lost my grip on my raft and it rapidly drifted away from me. I tried to swim closer but the raft quickly drifted out of sight. Panicking, I swam in the direction I thought it had gone, but with every stroke the waves rose, and rose, and rose, until each wave pushed

me under. The distance between them was so short I barely had time to surface and gasp for air.

And then a wave pushed me under and I swam up to find . . . nothing. I was exhausted, my arms and legs and lungs aching. When I looked for light, for the surface, I saw only black, all around me.

I woke up. It was dark, soft, hot, and wet. Sweat clung to every inch of my body.

I wrestled my way out of the blankets. At some point during the night I must have fallen off the bed. I threw the pile of sweaty blankets on my bed and looked around.

Rylee was already gone, her bed made. That's odd . . . Rylee never woke up before me. I looked over at the clock, it was noon. Groaning, I grabbed a handful of clean clothes and headed to the showers.

I showered, changed, grabbed a breakfast of potato chips, and walked out of the dorms. The campus was in a state of disarray from the storm, water every crevice on campus, and anything that hadn't been bolted down was strewn about. No one seemed to care. Everyone was down a hundred yards or so from the dorms. A crowd had gathered directly in front of the library. I walked over and spotted Rylee among the crowd. Had something happened?

"What's going on here?" I said to her.

Rylee looked over at me, seeming surprised at the sound of my voice. "Look."

I pushed past her and saw what the fuss was about. A sinkhole.

Roughly circular, it had a diameter of about two meters, a sinkhole had been opened by the storm. I stepped forward, wary to get too close, trying to see the bottom. I couldn't see anything, so I inched forward.

Gazing into the pit.

There was no visible bottom to it; after a few meters it was just void. I looked down. My foot had moved by itself, it seemed, and now I was

right on the edge.

I stepped back hurriedly.

“Creepy.” I said, looking over at Rylee. Her hand now rested next to my arm, waiting to pull me back.

“Yeah, it is.” She swallowed.

“Why is everyone hovering by it?”

“Because... I don’t know, we just can’t seem to leave.”

“Well, let’s leave. This thing creeps me out and I don’t want to be near it anymore.” I had concerned myself with how easy it was to walk right up to the edge.

“Yeah, lets. You eaten yet?”

“No.” A lie, but I would take any excuse to go somewhere else. “You?”

We walked just outside of campus into Bailey, which was in a similar state to the campus, wet and messy. Most of the buildings were shuttered, but as we came up to our favorite cafe, we were somewhat surprised to see it open. We grabbed a table and ordered.

We were the only customers, and the owner, Tim seemed to be the only one working. After a few minutes of silence and a few awkward attempts to break it, our food arrived. At least when we had food we could pretend the silence was just because we were eating.

Our phones dinged in sync, an email from the school. Due to damage to the roads and campus, classes would not be starting back up for an estimated two weeks.

“Sweet, we get a break.” I tried to lighten the mood. Something about the sinkhole seemed grim and neither of us could get it out of our head.

“Yeah,” Rylee said, between bites. She had barely touched her food.

“So.” I had decided to say something, but hadn’t planned any further. A few moments of silence ensued as she gave me an expectant look.

“Thanks. For... For last night, I was uh, freaked out.” I tried to wrap my brain around finishing the sentence, and stumbled forwards. “And you really helped so thanks.” The act of putting together a sentence had never felt like such a herculean task.

A wry smile crossed her lips, “No problem, I know you’d do the same.”

Sincerity was not my strong suit, so she could tell me saying that meant a lot. After another minute of awkward back and forth, we finally rested into a comfortable conversational rhythm. Then Tim kicked us out so he could close up shop for the day. Business was too slow.

As we started walking back to campus my phone went off, a text from my friend Kevin.

“Hey, Kevin wants me to come hang out and help him with a project, you cool if I bolt?” I didn’t want to just abandon Rylee after she’d stuck with me all of yesterday.

“Yeah, I needed to go get some studying done anyway.”

“Lame, we’re on break, now is the time to dick around, not study.”

“You’re going to do a project!”

“And that project is stabilizing Kevin’s hemp garden.”

She gave me a look, clearly unsure whether or not I was screwing with her—I was—before laughing. “Fine, shoo.” She gave me a smile and I jogged off.

As I jogged over to the boy’s dorm, where Kevin and I had been shooting a mockumentary on the lives of college boys, I looked over at the library. The crowd had dispersed except for a solitary figure, Professor Nakagaki. I decided to ignore him and kept going.

Three hours of work and about two minutes of worthwhile footage

later I decided to leave. As I walked back to the dorm I saw him again, seeming to not have moved an inch and still staring into the sinkhole.

I hurried back to the dorm, something about the intensity of his stare put me on edge, similar to how I felt this morning. Rylee was lying in bed, surrounded by textbooks and disturbingly neat notes. We hung out for a few hours, ate dinner and went to bed.

The next morning I was back on schedule. Rylee wouldn't be awake for at least another hour, so I decided to go for a morning run. My stomach lurched as I walked out of the dorm and saw him. Nakagaki was sitting right next to the edge, staring deep into the pit. Had he not moved all night? No, he was wearing different clothes. Still, it was creepy. I intentionally planned my run so the library never came into view. That meant running along the beach.

The rock shores used to be a comforting place, but the ocean didn't seem peaceful or serene anymore. It seemed hostile. The ocean and its wrath had pelted the town, had screamed late into the night, had made a mess of the campus, and most of all it had opened the pit.

I cut my run short. By the time I got back to the dorm, Nakagaki was gone and caution tape had been put up surrounding the pit. I went to make breakfast. It was better not to think about that hole.

The next two days were calm, Rylee and I spent most of the time hanging out, and for the first time since the campus canceled classes for the storm it felt calm. The only disturbance was the pit; Nakagaki had come back and spent his time gazing into it. Sometimes waiting just on the edge of take the campus had put up, sometimes ducking under it to stand at the very precipice of the abyss. As long as I didn't look at him or it, I felt safe, and calm.

That Friday, he was nowhere to be found, an oddity to say the least, as he had not been absent from the sinkhole since it formed. I thought he had gotten bored.

That night however, the campus administration sent out an email to all philosophy students. Professor Nakagaki had decided to quit his job and leave the state. Rylee was heartbroken; despite my constant

annoyance, philosophy had been her favorite class. She held a deference for Nakagaki himself.

At first she was despondent, moping around all day, but by the next night her attitude seemed to have changed entirely.

“Alex, I need to talk to you.”

“Yeah, what’s up?” I was just glad she was finally done moping.

“What if Professor Nakagaki didn’t quit?”

“What if I was the president?” It seemed like a fair retort.

She scowled at me. “Take this seriously!”

“Look, he quit his job. He’s not gonna change his mind just cause it upsets you.”

“I’m not saying he is coming back, I’m saying…” She paused, struggling to finish the sentence. “What if he. What if he went down the sinkhole.”

Abruptly, I felt that it might have been better if she had kept moping.

“Rylee that’s silly. Look, he probably got freaked out by the thing same as everybody else and decided to get away from it.”

I didn’t believe myself. I thought the same thing Rylee thought the moment I heard he had left, but I didn’t want to consider the possibility, and even more than that I didn’t want Rylee to consider it.

She nodded. “Yeah, you’re probably right.” She obviously didn’t think so.

“Yeah, and if he did ki- if he did jump into the hole they would’ve put up a fence or something so no one could get to close.” I was trying to convince both of us.

Rylee just nodded, and barely spoke a word for the rest of the night. After we went to bed, I lay awake, thinking. The room was pitch

black, we hadn't opened the storm shutters yet, so no moonlight could penetrate the room. That's a fire hazard, now that I think about it, I should probably get those open.

"What do you think he saw in the pit?" Rylee startled the shit out of me. She had hardly spoken a word since earlier, and nothing above a mumble. Now she sounded lucid and clear.

"Go to bed, Rylee."

"But what do you think he saw?"

"He saw what everyone saw, a big ugly empty pit."

She didn't respond. I doubt she went to sleep, though.

I spent the rest of the night considering her theory. If he did fall in, was it an accident? It did rain the day he disappeared, even if only lightly so maybe it was slippery and he fell in. I shouldn't even be thinking about this; he probably got a better job, or the administration learned about his reputation and fired him. After all, plenty of students had complained about him. Or maybe he killed himself.

Why did I think that? He wasn't sad or depressed, at least not on the outside. Rylee said he gave a dead poets style rant about living life only a few weeks ago, so he couldn't be suicidal. Of course that's not true, plenty of people pretend to be happy, or get depressed abruptly.

Unless he didn't do it because he wanted to die. When I stood by the pit I kept getting closer, and closer. What if he heard it calling to him and finally answered the call?

No I shouldn't think about this. I forced my mind to clear, pushed out any thoughts as best I could and eventually drifted to sleep.

I stood on the edge of the pit, in front of the library. It was singing to me.

The blackness of the pit didn't seem harsh anymore, but a soft, comforting black, like sleep. Curiosity is what drove mankind to be great, to climb mountains, build cities, and even leave our planet.

Curiosity is what got Alex away from her hometown, from her father. Why deny curiosity, when it is what drove us to greatness when it had helped her so. Alex's blank face turned upward into a gentle grin. Gentle, that seemed like the best word to describe the pit. The singing was beautiful, not like the cacophony of the storm, no it was euphoni-ous, like a symphony written just for her. Alex turned around... she was standing in front of the gas station at the edge of Bailey. Turning back she saw the pit again, this time not a mere two meters across, but what looked like a mile. Bailey, the university, and the entirety of the pen-insula were in the pit now, even the ocean threw itself in, draining into the pit. But the pit did not fill with water, instead the ocean ran out. The abyss was warm and welcoming, and the singers wanted Alex to come with them. She heard amongst them Rylee, her sister, her last girlfriend, the boy who'd been her first, her late mother all singing to her, to join them.

I nearly puked when I woke up. That pit, whatever it was, was evil.

I looked over at Rylee, who was missing, her bed neatly made. Did I sleep in again because of the nightmare? No, it wasn't even six yet. Why was Rylee awake? I hurried into the kitchen, but she wasn't there either.

Then, in a panic, I ran out the front doors and saw her.

Rylee, hovering a few feet from the pit, gently holding on to the caution tape surrounding it and looking in. I ran to her.

I grabbed her shoulder and wrenched her back as far as I could.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” I was panicked.

“What the hell, Alex!” Rylee had fallen onto the ground when I pulled her away. “What was that for?”

“Why are you near the pit!” I said, suddenly furious.

“I told you, I want to know what he saw in there. Seriously what's going on with you? You're freaking me out.”

Maybe I was being crazy. Rylee was a far more rational person

than me, I probably don't need to be worried. "Sorry, I was—just after what you said about him jumping in—"

Her face softened. "Oh... I'm—I'm just going to look for a bit longer, will you feel better if you stay?"

"Yeah, I would."

I sat down on a bench across from her and watched for a while as she looked into the pit. I laid down on the bench and stared at the sky, watching the sun rise higher and higher into the sky until it was nearly directly above me. How long had we been sitting here?

Then I heard her scream.

At some point Rylee had inched up right next to the pit, and slipped. Her legs were in the pit as she clung to the pavement.

I jumped off the bench and ducked under the caution tape, grabbing her from behind and dragging her away from it. She was crying, and incoherently apologizing to me. A dozen people came running out of the library as I dragged her away from the hole she had nearly fallen into. Others rushed over to check for injury, or to help pick her up and put her onto the bench.

After a few panicked minutes the crowd dispersed, some back into the library or to their dorms. The librarian, Mr. Kim, went to administration, to get them to put up a more substantial barrier until the sinkhole can be closed off. I walked Rylee back to the dorm.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, I—" She was still crying.

"It's not your fault, just don't go near that thing again, okay?" She didn't respond. I looked at her expectantly but she just averted her gaze. "Rylee I'm serious you can't go anywhere near that thing after what just happened."

Finally after another pause she responded. "Okay, I'll stay away from it."

Her voice was coarse. She didn't sound like she was lying, but she

sounded like a smoker promising to quit. Sincere, but unsure if she could keep the promise.

I spent the rest of the night with Rylee. I opened up the storm blinds so I could watch as campus staff put up fencing around the pit, with a padlock on the gate so no one could get too close by accident. I shut the curtains; it would be best if Rylee couldn't see it.

For the next few hours things were fine. Rylee was quietly working in her bed. I tried to do the same but couldn't bring myself to look away from her. I got up to use the bathroom. By the time I came back, she was standing at the window, eyes glued to the pit.

I grabbed her by the shoulder and dragged her away from the window before shutting the blinds. I looked at her furious, but she was crying. "Don't let it take me." She gasped through sobs. "Please Alex, don't let it, please."

I embraced her, holding her shivering form, "It's okay, I'm here. It can't get to you, all you have to do is stay away from it, it's okay." Suddenly she was still. A moment earlier she had been shaking with her sobs, but now she didn't move at all; her sobbing had stopped instantaneously.

"I don't know if I can." Rylee said her voice was serene.

"Of course you can, and I'll be here for you the whole time, okay?"

A gentle rain had started to fall.

"You'll be fine yeah? Look we've got another week before classes start again, how about we go on a little trip, maybe drive down to Portland? Or even further, down to New York, it's only a half day drive."

"Yeah, that sounds nice." Her voice was wry, surrendered. I heard a gurgle, her stomach was rumbling.

"You haven't eaten yet today, have you?" I realized I had been watching her all day and never got her to eat.

“No.”

“I’ll go make some food, you should come.”

Rylee crawled into bed, “I don’t think I have the energy” She gave a tired smile.

“Okay, I’ll be back in a minute.”

When I got back she was gone.

My stomach dropped. I bounded down the stairs. How could I be so stupid to leave her alone, into the commons? Maybe she needed to go to the bathroom, out the front door... I couldn’t see her.

I dropped out before classes started, packed my bags, and got on the first bus heading out of state. The college’s official story was that Rylee ran away with a boyfriend, that school stress was too much for her. I felt like I should tell her family about what happened, about what I think happened. But I didn’t have the stomach for it.

I never went back to the ocean.

VULNERABILITY

Nico Gambone

You blew bubbles through my scars
that hole drilled into my knuckle
rainbow-lit soap at twilight
not knowing I had kept my heart there
not knowing who had cut it away.

You drew my baby teeth in a tinderbox
but made the shadows longer
so they stretched into something else
until the page curved when I touched it
not upset, so it scared you.

You asked to know my secrets
so I showed you the creases in my palms
the way they ran down the road into tractor ruts
your footprints on it like the lipstick kisses
in my grandfather's ashes.

I was naked in your silence, so you spoke
undressing words left by your loved ones
pinned to a smaller heart and left untended
until they grew to fill your ribcage with a poison
that you drained and drank like apple juice.

I took you through my old houses
with a torch to light or burn the things we found

but you fed the deer head on the mantle
with string, my Ariadne
and it let us pass untouched.



HISTORY OF OBSCURA

In 2004, the Obscura Club began meeting for the first time, drawn from quiet coffee shop corners, coming together to exhibit the creative work of Red Rocks Students. In the years since, with the help and guidance of mentors like Amy Braziller and Paul Gallagher, Obscura has blossomed into one of the best student-run literary magazines produced by a community college in the country.

Now offered as an official class for credit, Obscura encourages students to foster connections with their peers, creating a community of artistic and literary individuals, by working with fellow staff and contributors to produce the magazine. Obscura is highly competitive. We receive over a hundred submissions yearly that are meticulously evaluated for acceptance into the magazine. We take into consideration a range of criteria, from the technical to the emotional. The staff have agreed on the pieces for the inclusion in this year's issue and truly believe that it will inspire the student body as both writers and artists.

We are confident that you will enjoy the selections in our 2021 issue of Obscura, possibly even enough to submit some of your own work for the next issue or work on the Obscura's production. Students interested in becoming part of next year's staff can enroll in the "ENG 231 Literary Magazine" class in the spring 2022 semester.

Please visit <https://www.rrcc.edu/obscura> for more information about Obscura.

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“YOU BLEW BUBBLES THROUGH MY SCARS”