

An aerial photograph of a salt flat, showing a grid of rectangular basins filled with brownish-orange brine. A person wearing a green jacket, dark pants, and purple boots is standing in one of the basins, looking down. The background shows the ocean with white-capped waves. The title 'the grotonian' is overlaid in large white letters, and 'SPRING 2021' is written in smaller white letters below it.

# the grotonian

SPRING 2021





*This year has been nothing but unconventional: mask wearing, split afternoon activities, meal blocks. Despite it all, or perhaps because of it, we received hundreds of pages of submissions. Such a number signifies that in the midst of a world and a country undergoing a great reckoning, you all held fast to your voices. Each poem or story is only a small shout in the endless tide of current events, but it is the accumulation of these voices which inevitably ends up influencing history's course. To the poets, storytellers, and students who have not forgotten how to shout - this issue is for you.*

*Sixth Form*      Beatrice Agbi  
                         Sam Quigley  
                         Angela Wei

*Fifth Form*      Jared Gura  
                         Amelia Lee  
                         Allison Jiang

Designed by Angela Wei  
Cover Photo by Jack Wang

POETRY

- Alisa Gulyansky 3 Boston in the Park
- Alisa Gulyansky 4 Trompe L'Oeil in Reverse
- Fiona Reenan 7 Raised Catholic
- Alex Karr 9 Sonnet
- Alex Karr 10 April Flowers
- Allison Jiang 12 Grandpa's Pomegranate
- Christina Chen 15 Waiting
- Lily Kempczinski 17 In the Mind of Natasha

PROSE

- Mikayla Murrin 21 Nydia
- Rufus Knuppel 23 Blur
- Griffin Elliott 31 The Perplexing Comedy of Callum Pendergrast
- Sophia Bay 37 How to Flirt with the Universe
- Ben Reyes 41 Juvenile Joy
- Mikayla Murrin 49 A Short Story
- Angela Wei 53 The Bus Stop



bear talk *Luke Benedict*

# POETRY





# BOSTON IN THE PARK

*Alisa Gulyansky*

Is it the clinking of glasses or shatter of glass that accompanies us & Tchaikovsky & the still-life painting of Boston in the park? sounds like what's your favorite dinosaur? & the lady with the slender hands telling mommy to take off her ring and throw it across the table.

lady yells and evening cries but all I hear is  
*you'll be staying with mommy this week, ok?*

ok.

mommy's new place is never pretty. only handshakes, sweaty palms, empty pit

summer blues, cigar smoke. dead hamster. fine wine. electric twilight. the girls who sob on TV singing, *I'm not in love! I'm not in love!* mommy cries, tummy rumbles. it's time you grew up.

mommy's new place is always empty. the walls are bare and the painting is gone. that was us, Boston in the park. holding hands were me and mommy and daddy, Boston in the park. Can we go back? Please,

can we go back?

## TROMPE-L'OEIL IN REVERSE

*Alisa Gulyansky*

*Trompe-l'oeil is a technique in art that uses realistic imagery to generate the optical illusion that the objects portrayed exist in three dimensions.*

Raise pen to paper and watch as words don't fall. Classic  
writer's block, stick blockade. Lingering thoughts,  
no expression.  
Human themes always run dry.

Toss, turn, cry, suffer the beauty we soak. Beauty like  
mother's back surgery like  
pink in darkness like  
the grief that comes  
when you realize you are hardly human.

Your childhood crush who moved to Montana when you  
turned four is in town again and jokes that  
you can be like once before, this time with maturity and grace  
though she shouts like children and invites you home for a  
play date;

half in love  
(the other half confused)  
you stay,  
because she promised philosophy and hugs  
and depth and warmth  
but you're not so sure now.  
When she leaves love is dead  
so you write a poem.

It is beautiful.  
Uncle's limp body in the emergency room.  
He was not.  
Write about him -- the visceral.  
Tell the people a story so tragic they relate every human  
trauma to your own,  
give you their condolences and pennies.  
Truth: what is perfect is hardly ever art. Art is your dead uncle  
and your sister's eating disorder. Art is prying for meaning  
when none is there,  
art is churning disgust into beauty into disgust back again  
but this time you are human.

*But this time you are human?*

If you suffer, are you more human? Drowned in trompe-l'œil  
renversé,  
take what is three dimensional and equate pen and paper.  
Is this art? Is art  
skinning your knees on pavement is  
vomiting into the toilet bowl is  
dying is  
living is  
anything in conceivable sorrow is  
art? Suffer.  
Are you, too, not human?



*Lama Jack Wang*

# RAISED CATHOLIC

*Fiona Reenan*

raised catholic  
i came out of the womb  
choking on an “amen,”  
and since then i’ve been trying  
to find that word again.  
i went to mass on sundays,  
i’ve worn the obligatory white dress,  
and every night i spend ten minutes on my knees  
before i go to bed.  
when people ask me,  
“what are you?”  
i don’t think before i reply,  
“well i was raised catholic,”  
because i know that’s not a lie.  
you see sometimes when i’m alone,  
i look up towards the boundless above,  
waiting for some lightning show,  
or olive-branch carrying dove.  
oh merciful God,  
my one and only Lord,  
why is it so hard for me  
to accept the peace You offer forth?  
You brought my father salvation,  
carried him away from poverty  
and i am so ashamed to be this confused.  
i don’t know what he’d think of me.  
in my heart, i want to love You,  
but my mind repeats the unholy question—  
how do i convince myself that  
i don’t need to see a resurrection  
in order to feel your glory?  
to let your love shine upon me?

to bask your sacrosanct glow  
along with the rest of my family?  
yes, i was raised catholic,  
and yes i believe in god,  
so why, oh why, lord,  
isn't that enough?  
please tell me, god,  
what is missing from my faith?  
why was i most catholic,  
before i knew how to say  
*Credo in Deum Patrem Omnipotentem?*  
yes i believe in god—  
but i still can't help feeling  
like some kind of fraud.  
father almighty,  
my ever-perfect lord,  
maybe it would've been better if we had taken  
a little more  
time to get to know each other,  
before i was baptized in your eyes  
because the "amen" i had stuck in my throat,  
only sounded like a baby's cry.

## SONNET

*Alex Karr*

Who would have thought that the road ended here?  
Syllables split and stand alone—syllables trip  
Sounds rebound from sticky sonants in fear  
Washed-up words grip, become thoughts, then slip  
Choked rhymes run round rhymes run around  
My mind except I can't think. My page is blank.  
Thick fog sits heavy in the empty, doubt rounds  
The corner looking for someone, anyone to thank.  
Your thoughts are a girl, were a boy, is a man  
Was a woman, is yours, is mine, is a thought.  
Who would have dreamed that this was the plan  
To sound syllables about thoughts that were not.  
Time ticks towards time toward the end  
And suddenly this sonnet has landed in my head.

# APRIL FLOWERS

*Alex Karr*

some secrets taste sweet  
on a summer's day  
memories pressed between pages,  
smooth stones collected in pockets,  
dresses and dirt and grass  
the sugary smell  
of aliveness like  
blooming flowers and  
muddy footprints  
on endless afternoons.  
time turns to time until  
only an old picture remembers  
the sickly scent and melancholy  
of the courtyard—  
some secrets taste better  
once they die and  
only i  
remember.



Goats *Tai Campbell*



## GRANDPA'S POMEGRANATE

*Allison Jiang*

You gave me the smallest fruit off your pomegranate tree  
because you loved how I called each ruby pebble a little eye.  
Behind your woven garden door  
the biggest fruit left creases on the branch where it hung  
but the pomegranate with a thousand eyes  
demanded nothing.

You split it open with only your fingers  
a broken half onto my blooming palm  
and deep, joyful sweetness rung out with your laugh  
as I plucked at the flesh  
loose seeds speckling small, sugared fingers.  
The pomegranate made me forget to remember  
your warnings as I wiped my hands across my lap:  
a guilty imprint.

I forget again  
creasing under time and distance  
unable to recall which branch, how red,  
the composition of wrinkles, the cadence of laughter—

But I remember with the piercing ringing after your visit to the emergency room.

And there, the woven garden door  
at the corner of my screen  
begs me  
to wonder if your pomegranate still grows  
with a million ruby eyes.



Mountain View *Tai Campbell*

4380 *Luke Benedict*



## WAITING

*Christina Chen*

She told me to wait for her in the spring  
And obediently, I did -  
I waited as the trees  
Sloughed off their white silks  
And exchanged it for green,  
As the songbirds began  
Their morning serenades again  
And the ground  
Began to palpitate  
In time to the breeze.  
I waited  
As the leaves turned,  
The bushels full  
Bursting and swelling  
With foliage.  
She did not come.  
When I met her in the winter again,  
I accused her:  
"You forgot about me!"  
I waited  
And waited  
And yet you never came."  
Impatient, she simply tossed her head  
And told me to look harder -  
Between the babbling brook  
And cacophonous growth,  
Seeping out of twigs  
Gnarled by snow  
Lay a constellation of  
Darling buds,  
A portrait of  
Her.





Barbados *Tai Campbell*

# IN THE MIND OF NATASHA

*Lily Kempczinski*

*Inspired by Natasha Trethewey*

We bail the brown water in a line,  
and count each pass in beats of four.  
I'm standing next to my father on a splintered  
wooden chair, his left hand held around my waist.

His skin is darker than I've known it to be and  
he's looking — I think now — at his daughter  
in the reflection of the swinging tin pot,  
wondering how to keep her above the mire of a rising tide.



Sixty-Six Year Hustle *Tyler Weisberg*



PROSE



# NYDIA

*Mikayla Murrin*

The end makes everything beautiful— that’s what Nydia used to say. That’s what she said the year she went blind and moved us to a field of crabapple trees and died. She was right. But I’d scoff anyways. I’d scoff in that comfortable way you get around people you’ve loved too long.

Now she was gone and I was here, grasping at rusty clay with dripping fingers, trying to remember the topography of her face as I sculpted: the valley beneath the eyes, the crest of the cheekbone, the curve of the cupid’s bow. I grazed the ridge of the philtrum, forgot to rub out my fingerprint from its hollow. Had she always held tension in the quiver of her brow? Would her forehead have furrowed this way if I brought my moist fingers to it? I closed her eyes. I closed my eyes.

...

Maybe she wasn’t all right. There certainly were things about her end that weren’t beautiful. Most of it was rather ugly. She could hear the snap of a blossom stolen from its stem but never see the vase in the corner filled with flowers.

Since she died I can’t get the red, red clay off my fingertips. It dried into my nail beds and stayed there. And that night I walked into the bedroom after scrubbing at it for so long and her body was still. It was so still. There lay this woman who both was and wasn’t.

I left the room. Walked from seat to seat in the house. Opened and closed doors. Unloaded the dishwasher. Threw the laundry into the dryer. Her dirty plates. Her clothes. Her scuff she’d made on the wall with her cane.

And then I was back in her room and I sat in the chair by the bed and held her hand to my lips and began to cry. I stood. I almost left. I came back in. I lay on the bed and hugged her. It felt wrong, a violation. This was not the way

it was supposed to be.

I wanted to squeeze until she started patting my back, giggling that she loved hugs but she couldn't breathe. I traced hairline, face, neck. I tried talking but it felt too awkward. All I could repeat was: "It's gonna be okay. It's gonna be okay."

She was dead. This was a corpse. What was I doing? I extracted myself from the bed and knew I had to call someone. 9-1-1, my eyes closed, knowing it probably wasn't what I was supposed to be doing. This felt like an emergency.

I was certain then that I didn't exist. This wasn't reality.

In time men came for Nydia. To take her away. It was then I realized I'd gladly have let her rot right into the house. I couldn't say goodbye. I forced myself into the bathroom. Stuck one hand on the sink and the other on the toilet, heaved. A man came in to say they were leaving. I barely heard him even when he put a hand on my shoulder.

Then came the awful sound of the front door shutting, and I ran to the window. I writhed and withered onto the tile floor. I couldn't chase after them. I couldn't. That's not how it works.

When I got back up again I was in the bedroom. I saw the indent where her head had rested on the pillow. I lay where she used to be, hoping it'd still be warm. Almost hoping it would smell like her. I ran my hands up and down the sheets with my eyes closed, like I might reach out and touch her, like in just a moment she'd be there and wrap her arms around me and tell me to be still.

...

The clay face was not what I'd envisioned. They never are. But I smiled at it anyways, and took a walk beneath the crabapple trees as their petals fluttered down, golden and dry. Knowing full-well this is the end. And this end is beautiful, as are all the others. A flowering, sickening, sweet smell. The bloom. Senescence. Fall.

# BLUR

*Rufus Knuppel*

“It’ll be quick, just look away and relax.”

I didn’t like her breath near my ear. The nurse hissed a little when speaking. I tensed the thin muscle in my shoulder; not relaxing makes the pain much worse, someone had told me once. The needle collapsed my skin—like a baseball on a tablecloth, pinned taut by the book weight of the world atlas, which father had used to demonstrate how Einstein’s general relativity morphed our perception of space and time. Now, I watched reality break: the tender skin gave way and I thought that I would die.

“There we are!—that wasn’t so hard?”

Mother’s smile revealed her soft gums and stretched her thin lips. Her rough thumb smoothed the little hollow in my palm. *It’s alright, my poor, little 17-year-old boy, that you’re still shy with your girlfriends and still afraid of the doctor’s needles*, she told me through her finger.

We headed downstairs, picking up father in the lobby.

“Bo’s got try-pan-o-phobia,” murmured father. The automatic doors were weary to open for us. He waved toward the sensor.

“Are you even listening to me, David?” mother continued her story. I studied patterns in the cement cracks while we walked toward the car.

My father was like that: he was curious and he would over-explain. When I approached him about Picasso or cars, he would explain the trajectory of cubist art in the 20th century and the functions of combustion engines. He was sensitive, with a gentle nose and full, wide, green eyes. He had been disappointed to see, through his glorious emerald irises, that those beautiful recessive alleles had lost the great genetic battle. All three of his children emerged from birth—under the echo of their splitting and infinitely joyful first cries—with little mahogany marbles in the sockets. James, Diana, and a little boy, Bo. Thin hair and tough





Unintentional  
Tai Campbell

beard stubble tapered gray among the cracks and ridges of his face. David (as mother called him when she was mad) suffered from acute annoyances which caused great discomfort: a “misophoniatic,” as he called it. The crunch of chips was equivalent to an ambulance siren; cotton candy and movie theater butter induced migraines.

Trypanophobia meant I wasn’t good with needles. I’d hated them since the sixth grade when I watched the vet open the door, syringe in hand, and fumble for veins in my first dog. Then, I saw the life of Polly, the ruby-colored-cavalier with black beads as eyes and a cancerous tumour in her kidney, slip away under my innocent, hazel gaze and the cool lights with hot bulbs that buzzed.

“Look at our son, Mia! 6’2”, wonderfully handsome, swelling with teenage arrogance and false grandiosity, and can’t bear the needle. You know, when I was pre-med in college I was a phlebotomist and I dealt with so many goddamn needles—”

“You don’t need to make the child feel bad, okay?”

“I know, I know, it’s just silly. Alright? A little silly, we can have a laugh about it.”

“Yes, we can.”

Mother had beautiful fingernails: opaque and pinky—the color of milk and grapefruit juice. Her fingertips were calloused by the steel strings of her childhood dulcimer which she had kept around for blues and lullabies sung to her brown-eyed babies. When she spoke with you she held your hand and rubbed her fingertip in your palm and told you secrets. Big, round, chestnut eyes balanced her face; those seeds sprouted eyelashes that would twist and twirl and make other women cry out what beautiful lashes you have! She had good ears, the kind made for listening, the kind that seduce the stories out of you, that ask you to tell them everything.

The car was swollen with stale, summer heat. The steam from the leather seats sat heavy in my lungs. This Massachusetts medical center parking lot is very gray, I thought. That sore part of my arm, patched with a skin-toned band-aid, beat harder than it had before.

“Lunch! Please, I’m begging you all.”

...

They would get divorced soon; I was sure. The mirage of happy marriage is hard to bear. My parents, sharp mother and soft-spoken father, had done so going on five years now, at least. Ever since they had stopped loving one another—which was who knows when—and decided to wait it out until the kids were all in college. They were avoiding a custody battle, surely: both parents loved us very much. I had

a hard time deciding who it was that loved me more when the imaginary divorce lawyer had me pinned on the stand while I lay awake and the milky moonlight slept by me on the carpet.

Love had slipped between Mia and David Wiest's fingers like river water on fishing trips in the Catskills. It ran free like the trout we never caught. They'll run upstream and spawn, and when we come back next May we'll catch double, my father said. But every year we saw less of the marvelous, rainbow gleam of the trout's scaly underbelly and more of the dark, murky riverbed. That raw tension on the line began to fade. It didn't matter—the joy of fishing lies in the waiting, in patience, not the catch. Everyone knew that.

Father stopped sleeping with a leg around mother as he had done when I was younger—like a prostrate Rockette on a king mattress. They never kissed one another. Some nights, more nights now, my mother slept in the extra bedroom off the landing, east-facing, where the sun set fire to the walls in its daily blossom. Mia (as father called her when he was flustered) was a child of divorce; she had seen this quietly violent ritual performed three decades prior. I'll find the right man and I'll stick it out with him, mother had once sworn to herself while warm, salty tears wet her floral pillow.

(Nietzsche tells us about eternal recurrence—phenomena, things like this, repeat. Father had told me this one night under the butterscotch haze of a reading lamp).

Maybe I was destined for dissatisfaction.

When we sipped on metallic tap water while out with my parents' friends, I watched the husband run his fingers through the wife's hair or sometimes put his arm around her. She would lean in to kiss him back. My parents would stir their rice or spaghetti in circles and chide young Bo for eating his peas with his hands or spilling water on the paper kid's menu.

*Can you imagine them going out with anyone new? Oh my god!* Diana had called this to James once as I sat in the backseat breathing fog on the blue-gray car window. The oil from my waxy, juvenile fingertips left behind faces and patterns when the moisture faded away. My siblings had taken me to see a movie that was blissfully wonderful and wildly inappropriate. As I sat patiently on the side of the tub, Davids and Mias and Jameses and Dianas rang out over the running of my bath water. My parents sat me down while my skin was still rashed red by hot water and made silky by absent hormones and bodywash. *What you saw this afternoon is something that us adults call sex, Bo, and it is a very important thing to know about.* Then I asked when was the last time you had sex? and they looked at each other and said: *you don't ask people questions like that.*

Sometimes, while my father did the dishes, my mother sat staring at her blood-purple wine and he went over and hugged her. We all watched them as

the steaming water from the faucet splashed in the basin and mixed with the oily scraps that clogged in the drain.

They were getting older now. Lines showed around the edges of their brows, and sometimes I would find my mother picking at the gray strands in her hair. We made fun of their senility. Maybe they would chuckle along or, sometimes, they would stare into the grains of the maple in the kitchen table (which matched Diana's eyes) and wonder: a loveless marriage, the second half of my life, death is approaching, body is decaying, youth is gone...

...

"Bo, is your arm feeling any better?"

"It still hurts—I shouldn't have tensed up. I think that's what made it worse." The Massachusetts Turnpike. Pavement and the smell of gas and tar-filled potholes and the David's-eye-green trees (as mother called them) blurred together (like memories or tears). That blur and the Turnpike made me car-sick. I felt the same alien panic, (fear), as the time I was strapped into one of the rides at the carnival that terrified me and was told it would be okay. Or each time I sat on the crunchy white parchment paper under the heavy lights at the doctor's office and the nurse with the hissing breath appeared with her alcohol swabs and needles.

The paper, like chips or cotton candy or theater butter, aggravated my father and spurred on his migraines. He waited downstairs in the car or the lobby while my mother held my hand and rubbed that little hollow in my palm with her rough fingertip and answered questions about my diet and how much I exercised.

We had arrived. This parking lot was somehow grayer than the last. A bottomless gray that gave way to subtle shades of boundless black (as black as Polly's beady eyes or rotting love). We went inside and sat down.

The waitress spilled a little of the tap as she placed the glasses on the black tablecloth that covered the pine. The water tasted of innocence and river water and sucking on copper pennies.

"Thank you. That's it for now... thanks very much." Mia sipped her water and said, "Your father and I are going to get a divorce—wait hold on, okay—it's something we've been thinking about for a while now and, you know, we've come to an agreement and, you know, we will separate for a time, I'll move in with my mother for a bit—ugh! back in the basement with a parent, oh well—it will be slow and painless, or quick and painless, I don't know which is better, anyways, we will have lots of time together before it goes through as a family and we will try to make it hurt less for you all, we know this is really tough." Mia looked at David. David spoke:

"Our time just ran out. We don't know why; we can't explain it. (I keep

asking, why?) It was great while it lasted. And we got you and your siblings. What better gift? We gotta start fresh; you'll be off to college and paving your way in your own life, and we will all be here for you, okay?"

I saw that glossy, salty gleam fill his emerald eyes. Suddenly, I hoped the puddle of water that the waitress had left behind was like that baseball, and that this black, tar black, tablecloth held answers to the existential questions of space and time.

All that lay beneath was cheap pine.

...

Tears don't come easily to some boys: I hadn't cried since that time I went with my mother to watch our ruby-red Polly be euthanized. When they come, they run hard and swift, like orange juice from the reamer, like free trout, like hot bath water or steaming tap from the faucet. That night, I lay awake and watched the moonlight sleep on the carpet and the headlights rotate around the walls of my room. I rubbed that sore, skin-colored patch, that beacon throbbing in my shoulder, and I felt that welcome warmth flush around my glorious, hazel eyes. Poor little Bo's sight began to blur.



Veggie Burger Paopao Zhang

# THE PERPLEXING COMEDY OF CALLUM PENDERGRAST

*Griffin Elliott*

Callum Pendergrast was easily the hottest name in the Santa Margo art scene. Just passing through a room he was in gave you a sort of electric buzz, like you were walking by a live, high-voltage fence. He was not what your father would have called a “man’s man”; his frame was built like a wire coat hanger and he couldn’t have stood more than five and a half feet from the ground, but still he had this whirring gravity around him, a sort of attractive energy that kept him surrounded only by the most influential figures, the biggest stars in the scene, and he was the obvious center of the solar system. You could pick him out at a party by the elastic black curls that hung from his head like old telephone cords, or by his distinct sense of fashion, somewhere between a Sevillan matador and a trapeze artist, or just by his entourage, which was comprised of around six of the most visionary painters, the most brash photographers, the most renegade performance artists of the time.

But despite his immense success, despite his universal and enduring adoration, Callum was dissatisfied. Through all of the pretentious glamour of his reality he felt a lacking, maybe an inadequacy, almost an embarrassment, as if he hadn’t yet gone far enough.

Callum is one of those artists who very easily could have been lost in the great sea of creative wanna-bes, just another B- in a college level Art and Expression class, passionate but mediocre, daring but ultimately unconvincing. What ended up setting him apart from this miserable crowd wasn’t superior technique or an indomitable work ethic. It wasn’t a lucky break or a friend in a high place, not a eureka moment and certainly not an agreeable disposition that rocketed him to the highest pedestal of creative reverence, but his unwavering commitment to

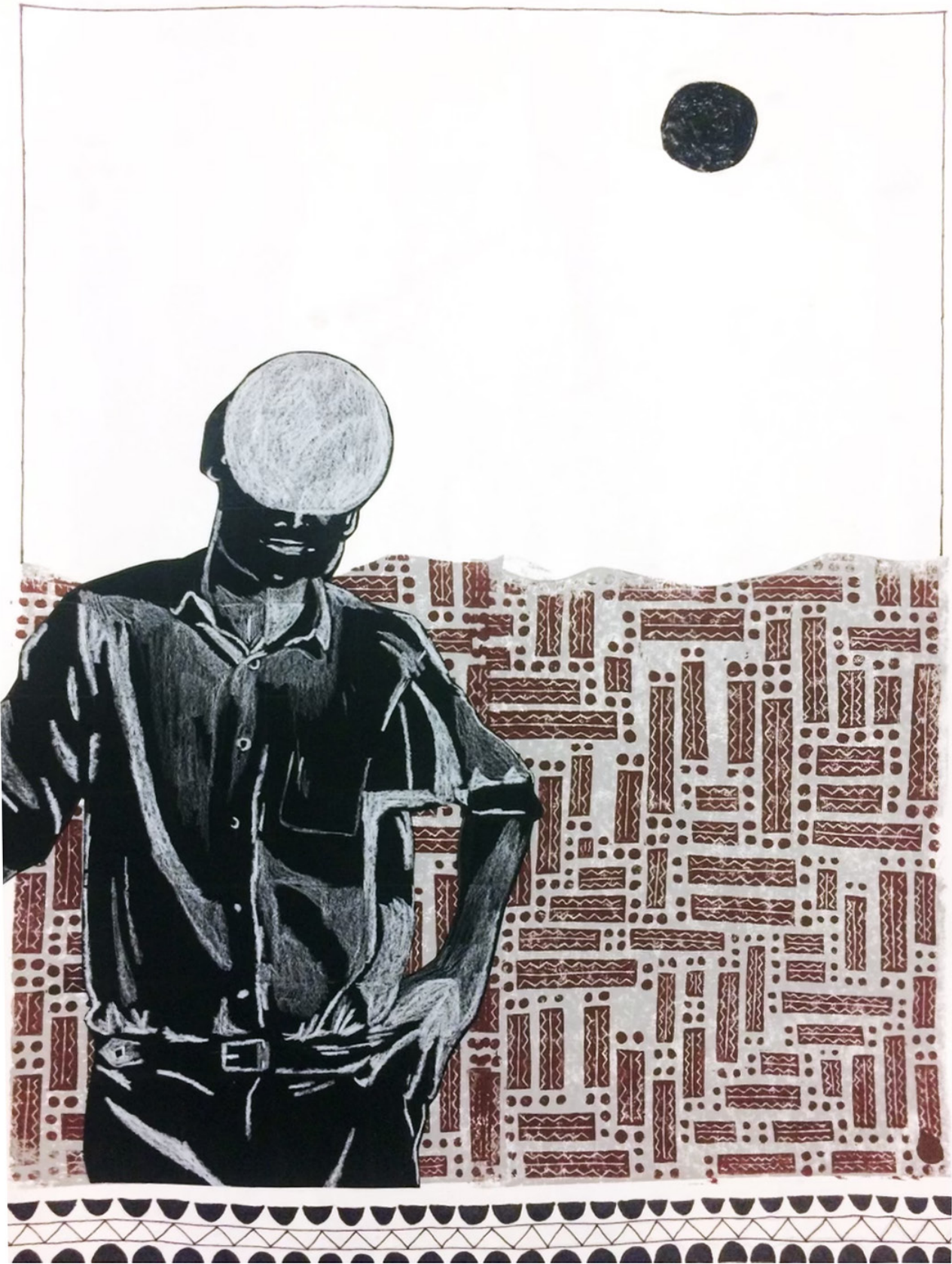
his principles. Often the principle that he was pursuing wasn't obvious, but what was obvious, at least to his core of avid followers, was that what he was doing was more than art, that his creations were like essays on some ineffable compartment of the human condition, of the conscious experience even.

Being so transcendental, he drifted between media freely to whatever style or technique would best suit his lofty moral agenda. As a treatise on human suffering, or perhaps as a statement on rampant deforestation, or maybe even as a protest of animal cruelty, Callum stole into Elby Plaza in the very early morning and left behind a thirteen-foot paper-maché globe with a triumphantly posed, minimally designed human figure planted at the top. The whole construction was made with discarded newspapers and was held together by horse glue, its wire frame salvaged totally from a recycling plant. Once the statue had drawn a crowd, which it was sure to do in a place as bustling as Elby Plaza, Callum drenched the whole affair in diesel and set a match to it, watching smugly on as it all tore away and floated into the air. It was performances like these, his symbolic, puzzling displays, that made Callum at the same time a cultural pariah and countercultural messiah, an untouchable idol to the new generation of creatives and a repugnant smear on the reputation of art as a whole to the harsher critics.

So here Callum sat, on the throne of probably undeserved reverence, basking in the sounds of a self-assuring echo chamber made of social leeches and frenzied sycophants, in a perpetual state of being carried triumphantly through the town after winning the big game. Many people didn't think it would be possible for him to ascend to loftier heights, but it was in his nature to always strive for the next biggest idea, the newest, most potent, most undeniable creation.

As time went on and he continued to orchestrate enigmatic installations, his contemporaries began to notice a change in him. Instead of his usual gaudy wardrobe, he started appearing at events in drab hemp shawls, coarse tunics, and sandals. At first this change seemed insignificant, and some even joined in for a time before abandoning the style, but with his change in clothes, he himself seemed to morph into some new thing entirely. He had gone from overzealous art snob to unkempt hermit in a matter of a few weeks, and this first shift marked only the beginning in his ascent to the mythical status which he has achieved.

As he became more reclusive, his art followed. He had cast aside his tendency towards brash, bombastic works (lighting a strip of firecrackers attached with tape to a dead canary, pouring two hundred-or-so gallons of unpasteurized milk into the lobby of the MoMA, things like that) in favor of more understated and even more confounding pieces, like his gallery showing of a handful of edamame beans impaled on a skewer, or the performance in which he repeated the Hippocratic Oath at a deafening volume for 35 minutes, pausing only to sip his water, which he now carried in a waterskin made from a goat.



Man on the Moon Wren Fortunoff

Needless to say, Callum's new habits lost him many of his more sensible supporters. His fame had been dwindling for nearly a year, and there was still no obvious intention or endpoint to the new phase that he had entered. His showings became less and less frequent, and of course rumors of all kinds had circulated about the cause of his aloof mania. People heard that he had sold his old clothes and buried the money under his studio, that he had taken mescaline in Albuquerque and lost his mind completely, even that the real Callum had died in some secret accident and that the man posing as him was only a body double. In any case, after months without releasing anything, word spread that he would be having another showing. Although his popularity had certainly dropped off, this news still excited enough people to draw a crowd to his studio on the day of the event. People milled in the studio, mingling over wine and cheese as was typical at these kinds of things, all of them eager to catch sight of the artist and waiting for whatever the big reveal might be.

"It'll probably just be a turnip with googly eyes or a flyswatter without a handle. I just don't get him now" one skeptical attendee said to another.

"Right, or maybe a clod of moss in a coffee mug. He's just lost that power he had, that spark. It's sad, really."

After sufficient time for mingling, Callum appeared in the doorway, rolling in a cart with what looked like a curtain draped over some roughly rectangular shape beneath. The room froze and directed its attention to him, some people leering derisively at the ascetic and others simply in looking on curiously. Callum didn't say a word, and with a single dramatic pull of a sheet he revealed the thing that they had all been waiting for: what stood before them was a bird cage, perfectly rectangular and uninhabited, save for a few inchworms crawling up the narrow bars. The onlookers peered around the room in silence to gauge their peers' reactions to inform their own; should they be amazed? Insulted? Inspired? Nobody seemed to know. During this moment of tension, Callum nodded humbly to the crowd and exited the way that he came. Left alone with only themselves, a bewildered clamor erupted from the spectators as they tried to make sense of what they had seen. Some walked up for a closer look at the cage, to make sure they hadn't missed some important detail, but they found nothing. The crowd soon drew the collective conclusion that if there was any higher meaning to this display, it was lost on them and that they had wasted their time.

The real confusion, however, didn't come until the next day, when a couple of Callum's few remaining fans came by the studio to find it deserted completely, bereft of any trace that he had ever been there. The hanging art was gone, the furniture removed, his name scraped from the entrance, not even the bird cage remained. There was nothing. Like before, rumors spread.

"Haven't you heard? Apparently he booked a flight to Buenos Aires in the

middle of the night. I doubt he's coming back after something like that."

"Where did you hear that? I thought he went to Alaska to soul search or something. Wouldn't surprise me."

"Elle said that he's probably just preparing for some other project. Maybe this is a project? Right? Like, minimalism to the extreme?"

Unfortunately, that other project never appeared, and neither did Callum. Weeks passed, months and months without a sign of him. After a while blurry photos of homeless people and recluses would surface on a tabloid cover claiming to be him, but of course these never amounted to anything. As Callum's career became a memory, his story was told and retold, enriched and inflated as all legends are. Essays and articles were written about his life, his work, and his disappearance, each one positing some new theory about his motivations; that he had a brain tumor that drove him insane, that he was a con artist that amassed a fortune from his eccentricity and is living on a distant island in triumph, that he was assassinated by the CIA for being too powerful a figurehead of the counter-culture. Of course these hypotheses didn't solve anything, and the world was left asking if he had crossed that thin line between vanguard and lunatic, or if that line ever existed at all.



will & i *Luke Benedict*

# HOW TO FLIRT WITH THE UNIVERSE

*Sophia Bay*

First, die. At least attempt to. It's best to be immortalized as the vibrant "gone too soon" young adult before everything goes downhill in your late twenties and you become the archetype of failed potential. Dying is as timeless as a Chanel bag. In a maniacal frenzy, pop twenty-three pills from your mother's medicine cabinet on it while listening to ambient whale noises. Your shaky breath fogs up the mirror. Draw a smiley. Sprawl like a ragdoll in the bathtub and let the tepid water coat your body as it washes away the grime in the crevices of your mind. It takes a while for it to heat up. Wait—for the water and the pills.

As you anticipate the requiem for reality, drift off into a dream where Australian babies, freckled with spots like those of ladybugs, sit perched on tree branches and spit on humans below while calling them "bludgers." Begin to question whether you're in the afterlife.

An abortive suicide attempt is the key to entering the world of spiritualism and religious zeal. There is no room for a nihilist in Niš, Serbia. Awaken in the bathtub to the low droning hum of a ladybug which lands on the thin layer of skin covering your protruding ribcage. It's a sign. Your salvation. A quantum flirt. Convince yourself the universe has chosen to keep you alive so that you can fulfill your purpose. Fail to realize that, in reality, your overdose attempt was unsuccessful because the pills you took were actually homeopathic tablets.

The jumbled neural circuits in your brain have now been rewired and you are free from the shackles of pessimism. A believer. Embark on your linear self-discovery journey to make sense of your existence. First destination, Živorada Kostića Moravca street. Find solace in a garish apartment that looks like a low-budget version of the Rothschild Surrealist Ball of 1972. It consists of a queasy

yellow kitchen, stained floral chintz couches, and a shelf with seven taxidermied cats wearing mini knit scarves. Follow Ms. Marković with the flaming red bob into her den. Inhale the crisp scent of nicotine and wet dog. She grins and reveals a set of polished and orderly white teeth. Veneers.

Ms. Marković's acute clairvoyant nature compels her to tell you, "I can sense your aura. It's gray. As gray as the hair of the other woman your husband is cheating on you with." The only thing she can "sense" is your eyes drifting to the book on the coffee table titled *How to Read People like a Book*. There is no bookmark in it. Kindly explain to her that you're not married, but rather single by choice, and not because you are a twenty-one-year-old hermit with severe depression who does crossword puzzles for fun. Recall how you spent your entire morning trying to conjure the name of some impressionist who was also regularly a Manet subject. Let it depress you.

She corrects herself by clarifying that you could possibly find the man you're going to marry in the next two months. Trust her empty words.

Gauge husky men with fragile egos at the bar in primordial sniffs. Grow addicted to the validation of physical touch. Let the subtlety of human nature seduce you. You like hands. Claw-like. Big-knuckled. Spider-veined. Age-mottled. Blood-stained hands that caress your face. A blank mind is a good mind. It's probably best that you don't remember much from that night, but you do remember his intense eye contact and the half-joking remark he makes.

"Polygamy is one wife too many. So is monogamy." Of course the man is funny, he's a lunatic. Your type. Mental illness adds flavor.

Slightly distraught, decide to scout men in a coffee shop rather than a bar, it's more likely for your future husband to be here. Order yourself a shot of espresso and sit in a corner to read *Love is a Dog from Hell*. Charles Bukowski will always attract an interesting crowd. Wait for a plaid-wearing Italian man with a chevron mustache to approach you.

"My eyes are up here," you broadcast. He isn't checking out your nonexistent bust, but rather the pickle pin on your jacket that reads "dill with it." Secretly wish he was looking at your bust. He looks like the type of guy who would sing to his houseplants to help them grow. Later that night, he tells you in his sexy accent that he likes your "beautiful marks of stretch." Tell him you love him. Scratch that, tell him he needs to iron his shirt. And leave. Love is a disease.

Decide that you need to spend some time away from the draining city life of Niš. Let your journey take you to the dull town of Donji Komren, where you rent out a room in the house of an old alcoholic American poet. Your first night over, while in a drunken haze, he tosses out the fact that he has been exiled from three countries. More importantly, he teaches you, "If you want to be a good poet, you have to be a witness to life."

Take his advice. Listen to the deaf woman who wails in pain as she circles the town because her husband beats her. Observe the hunchback with a limp who strolls around with a pack of thirteen dogs trailing behind him. Befriend the friendly wolf at the bus stop which whimpers because it doesn't know how to howl.

On your second night, make sour cherry jam with the poet, an activity which eventually allows him to open up to you.

"I've always centered my life around adventure," he reveals, "My wife in the UK wanted to retire and look forward to visiting my grandchildren. I said bye-bye, I'm going to live with gypsies in Czechoslovakia."

"How did she take that?"

"She divorced me."

He is the epitome of the freedom of loneliness. Or perhaps the loneliness of freedom. Maybe they're the same.

On your final day, find the savagely contorted carcass of your friend, the wolf. Hit and run. A single ladybug perches on its shredded muzzle, clawing its little legs back and forth.



Seeds Wren Fortunoff

# JUVENILE JOY

*Ben Reyes*

My friend, I am dead and you have killed me. Or perhaps that is rather presumptuous of me to say, as to die implies I had a life to begin with. But let us ignore the terminology for now. I am your judge, your jury, and your prosecution; it matters little what words I use.

Do you remember the other world in which you'd travel? Rolling hills and flat seas of green were as far as the eye could see, cute creatures with no death in sight inhabiting them. The ocean was the deepest, most brilliant blue to be found on any planet, with a top of stained glass shimmering at sunset and a bottom of uncut sapphires. Every food imaginable could be picked right off the trees. No one was hungry; no one was weary; no one was in pain. Children would laugh and play during the day and dance around the fire pit at night, admiring either the great sponge cake or the ball of cheese lighting up the sky. You would join them. To this world where logic was not, where suffering was unknown and where happiness begot, you would retreat. I was waiting there for you every time.

At the beginning Time was not there, at least not the same Time you know now. Suns would rise, sure, but that was more out of desire than necessity. It rose and fell to display streaks of fiery hues, or to light land and sky for the creatures you created, or to make way for specks of an angel's dust glimmering in the dark, but never for marking "days" or "weeks." Time was something you feared; therefore, we didn't have it. That beast eternally lurking, who snatches away the young and the old, the strong and the bold, who shatters countries and devours nature herself, was kept away. We had a declawed kitten in its place, one you could command.

In this world a dear city had lain, floating in clouds above the sky. Here it never rained, for we were above it. In this forest of marblesque buildings and bejeweled streets was a palace so grand that no Earthly wonder, from the Amazon to the Sahara, or from the towers of man to the buried secrets of long ago, or from

the heights of Everest to the depths of the Mariana, could look upon it and feel ashamed. You were very sure to turn off the lights at night, lest the opulent glow drown out the black sheet speckled by white flames for those below. Here you sat, upon a high throne of gilded stone, ordering everyone and everything to do as you pleased; they had to obey. You loved this place equally to the one below.

This world was so perfect, why did you feel a need to change? Did you not feel guilty? Do you feel guilty now? Perhaps you still don't know to what I am referring, so let me tell you more.

One day another day came. It was unlike the one before in that it had a clear beginning and was building towards a clear end. You were away when it first happened, attending to matters in that world of yours, and that made us quite afraid. Had something occurred which you did not will? Yet when we all gathered in the city of clouds and shouted to the heavens on whose orders Time, the true Time, was released, the suns and the moons had replied: you. Confused, I asked you immediately upon your return for the sake of what the celestials had to undertake this madness. You laughed and told me:

“Oh you silly child, there isn't a world without Time!”

My friend, you seemed to have forgotten that there was for me.

In fact it seems you have forgotten much, seeing how you still know little of what I speak. Alas, how sad that is! In this world we created, you used to know everything. The face and name of every person, the exact location of every animal and plant, what the weather would be in two months' time, if I asked for any of these you could tell me. Though I suppose that this was no surprise, as you were the creator of all of it, and I merely a tool for you to use.

We inhabitants were quite naive at the time, so we thought that the introduction of Time would be as far as you would go. That is the general consensus among us; I, however, believe that it wasn't naivete, but rather an active choice to not believe in what we could not bear to think about: your descent into insanity. Once you've lost your mind, what would become of us, the creatures who live in it? Yet still not all of us were scared. The vast majority of the citizens were panicked, as was most of your cabinet, save for Reason. He and I were like fire and ice – ah, excuse me, you would probably prefer a more mature analogy now – he and I were like Hamilton and Jefferson. He rather liked the changes you had made, and he promised that more were on the way. When asked, you lowered your head and feigned deep thought; yet you knew as well as I what the answer was; you just couldn't bring yourself to tell me face to face.

Just as Reason had said, more change came to our little world. First came the trees; fruit, and only fruit, could be taken from a few of them. The rest grew nothing but leaves for admiring and branches for housing the songbirds. By order of the monarch (you) leaves could only be green save for the fall season, unless it

were a flower-producing tree. Those were allowed to bloom in many colors, but only in May. It was the most peculiar thing to watch the trees protest these laws in vain. Many fell into a state of aporia as they asked themselves whether it was right to cast away their beings because of a government decree, or to resist their once-beloved master in order to keep their identity. No one knew what the punishment for disobedience was – or what punishment itself was, for that matter – yet still they all obeyed, all save for one. A small would-be mulberry tree refused to shed her cotton candy foliage for some boring fruit.

This tree was once your favorite; not only was her harvest sugary sweet, but she might have had the sweetest personality as well. Always a delight to talk with, the winds themselves refused to blow hard in her presence lest they ruffle her glimmering crown, the cotton balls of all shapes and sizes sparkling in the sun with more colors than the rainbow. Yet it seemed you had forgotten, for the very next morning she began to wilt. Her leaves fell one by one as the her branches became a mangled mess; her body dried, and cracked, and fell over, and became food for the beetles and the ants; she was dead.

It was around this time I noticed I was sick. Of course by the second day I was already feeling more tired and more thirsty, yet not enough to alarm me. After this first death, I began to cough. My head was in chronic pain and I was overwhelmed with lethargy. I still forced myself into the audience chamber of your castle on the clouds to inquire why Death had been allowed into our world, to which you retorted:

“Oh you silly child, there isn’t a world without Death!” My friend, you seemed to have forgotten that there was for me.

Death made the rounds, devouring people, animals, and plants at random; his appetite was never satiated. A once perfect world was now ravaged by every form of plague and hunger. Your castle descended from the clouds to sit on the surface. You locked me up in a rather lavishly decorated bedroom on the 23 floor to help me recover; I was bedridden by then. My condition kept deteriorating, however. I began to cough blood when all the people were put to work. Food would no longer be doled out freely, you see; every world had to have farmers and blacksmiths and governments and artisans. Wealth was no longer shared but earned, inequality bloomed, hate and anguish took hold of nearly everyone.

O the cruelty, O the injustice! When first you saw me collapse onto my knees, unable to stand, you feigned care and sympathy, yet it was all a ruse, no? You told me that you longed for the times when we had fun together, yet those were the times you had forgotten about or dismissed as juvenile. Those were the days you killed. You promised to do whatever it took to make me better, and yet cruelly you slayed me with inaction. Have you forgotten even this? Will you kill even these memories too? I shall remind you of the last conversation we had then.





Buy! Amy Ma

While the city was bustling with both the wealthy and the destitute, the housed and the houseless, the quenched and the parched, you sat by my bed and asked me what you could do.

“Go back to the time before time,” I replied, “This world is no longer. We must reset everything and start anew.”

“That is impossible!” you said, as if I spoke heresy, “This world is beautiful! This world is real! Can you think of a world without hunger, without inequality, without the passage of time, without death? I, for one, cannot.”

“My friend, that is the problem. There was a time when you could. There was a time when that was our world. I am that world, my life and its are one and the same.”

“Oh you silly child, this is how things must be!” you replied while standing. Before you could leave, however, I grabbed your hand and told you one last thing.

“My friend, I pray you do not forget, lest my friend become my killer.”

You shook off my hand violently and slammed the door shut. I think that was the moment when you realized that you did not remember what I had done for you. All this time you were forgetting, and still now you continue to forget, but right then, in that liminal bound, when you had not forgotten what I had done for you yet still could not remember clearly what it had been, anger drove you away. Although you had forgotten the specifics, you still clung to the feelings I once gave you; when you threw even these away, you hammered the last nail into my coffin.

The last thing from life I remember was how the people began to divide themselves. I was quite delirious from bleeding both internal and out, from aching of my heart and lungs, from chronic headaches, and from other maladies that I could not discern much from the world. Yet still, I could tell the people had divided themselves further. There was a rather petty argument that turned into a greater one and people on each side of the argument would refuse to do business with the other. Then the boycott turned into an active hate. Then one faction moved away to found their own city, and raids and war and violence and blood became commonplace. In that moment, when my world and yours no longer had a difference, I breathed my last breath.

Once there was a man who was tossed into the wilderness cold and naked on a winter's night. In a desperate dash for survival, he searched far and wide for a fire. As his limbs tightened and his breath became visible, hope, a once great cord holding together his heart, was strangled and frayed. Soon it was nothing more than a string. Eventually he wandered in search of fire not because he believed he would find it, but because doing something was better than just waiting for death. His steps became meaningless as he wandered; he lost sight of what once was his purpose because of circumstance. Eventually, he was found dead, collapsed in a

plain covered with snow. His death was as slow and painful as mine.

As you can see, my friend, you did not kill me in one fell swoop, rather you did it slowly, step by step. As my world changed, you pretended to be my friend while plotting my demise. You killed many, including myself, and commenced the suffering of millions more. Why did you do this? For maturity, for progress, for education, you tossed me aside and clung to Reason alone. You decided to forget about matters of importance and only focused upon reality. These crimes are too egregious. I sentence you to the rest of your sad existence. And as for me, you may wonder, what will I do after this trial? The answer is simple: nothing. There is nothing for me, since you killed me by forgetting me, and the remnants of me in your head you dismiss as some juvenile joy.



Pancho *Tai Campbell*

## A SHORT STORY

*Mikayla Murrin*

I thought I was going to die last night. But I'll keep this quick.

The exposition: I'm a woman. I don't own a washing machine or have any children. My name is Moira. I live by the ocean. I feel death before it happens.

Only when it's a person I love, that is. And each time's a bit different. But they all start with me crying cheesy, no-reason tears. Tears sent to me while I'm driving under denim sky or sitting on a park bench. And I think they're probably just hormones until my ears get real itchy, and my chest caves in on itself, and I know. I know before I get a phone call or one of those still-faced people with a hand on my shoulder.

The setting: me and my two cousins cleaning out an old house. A house of an already dead woman. Their mother. My aunt. A house of grime and boxes, and three dumpsters out front to take away every stained thing.

Rising action: we had greasy pizza and sticky beer, a generally okay time. Awkward, catch-up conversations before the older of the two left for the graveyard shift and thanked me for all the help on the way out. I had a date the next morning and hoped I'd be gone soon too.

I thought about how I didn't know him well. I didn't like it when people put half-eaten pizza slices back into not empty pizza-boxes. But it was fine.

And then, when that front-door shut, there was the feeling. It was all at once, with none of that peacefulness that flows in with it some days.

You're gonna think I'm crazy. Psychics and ghosts and religion are for people who don't believe in science. For people who are sad or confused or weak-minded or not as smart as you are. But it is what it is.

I can think of no right way to segue into climax—don't want to call it that—no way that doesn't make the story longer than I promised it'd be, anyways. Don't want to give it a colon at the end. But in media res: he (the younger of the cousins, that is) told me that I was his to have. An unnerving thought. No

matter what I learned or read or thought—always trash. And I got blood under my fingernails and I think I bit him so hard a tooth came loose. You get the gist.

No. I didn't tell on him, if you're worried. I got into my car and I drove away with part of me frozen. Get out. Get away. Get as far away as possible. Away from the too much noise of that moment. Away from wanting to crack his head on the floor so it opened like a sick, red flower. As far away as possible from his damp, fat palms.

That night was all the denouement: crumpled laundry in a ball in the corner and my eyes crazed and my left pinky finger crushed from when he staggered me into a cabinet. Just me on the carpet for a minute because that might make me feel better—and where was I? Calling to cancel everything and crawling over to pick crumbs off the floor. The cutting knowledge that this is reality and it is all so unclean. It feels so overdone. So done before.

I thought I was going to die that night; I've thought I was dying for the past two years since. And I tried to tell the someone I loved why I canceled our date that day and couldn't quite.

The backstory: I wrote it down and sent it in the mail. Then I got a phone call and whispering over the phone—there was a storm and the waves were so huge I could barely hear.

It was explained to me that I'll be okay. I shouldn't let the past define me and I said yes. Thank you.

It was then that I hung up and sat on the floor of the shower like it'd make me reborn. But it didn't. And I knew better than to shower in a lightning storm but I was in no mood for games; I wished the power would go out so I wouldn't have to see myself in mirrors.

When I felt like I was wasting water it was enough to get me up. I couldn't lift my hands and put on lotion or comb out my hair; I lay on the bed with my towel and the back of my mind reminded me that damp sheets get moldy. But it's not like I want to lie down or stand up or do anything at all. I want quiet. No music. No people. Just for a minute not to think about anything. Just for a minute to not be anything at all.

In time, I stood and clothed myself and sat on the lip of the tub because I was so tired. Staring at myself in the mirror. My pants all wet from the shower.

I called back up the person I thought I loved and there was conflict: I can hear you looking at me like that. Don't do that. Just stop. I can hear the thoughtful nod. The, how do you feel? The, what about you try doing \_\_\_\_\_, instead?. Stop it. No. No. You don't understand.

That letter I'd sent. I'd bled all over it. It was like I'd bled all over it. An ugly imprint of me. And my blood clotted and brown and when you look at the page you probably felt weird about it. Maybe sorry, maybe wish I wouldn't cut

myself open, swirl the blood around with my eraser because nothing even matters. I don't want to feel looked at the way I know I was. With pity. With disdain. With a look of empathy and the *I've been through something similar* and the *no need to worry*. It was over.

So we come to the tacky lesson, the tasteless moral: it all moves towards entropy anyways. Best to accept that things fade out.

This story is dragging on longer than promised, but you should know there are days when everything disgusts me—the milk and the margarine, linen, breeze, moss, hanging things on clotheslines. The glimmer of hope: I swim into the ocean and I don't stop. Away, away, away. Out in the beyond where half the time I'm floating on reflections of cumulus clouds, over seaweed and under singing birds, denim skies. I just don't stop. Not until I'm far away. Not until my ears don't itch and there are no dying tears. And that's the end:



use my best colors for your portrait *Janice Zhai*

## THE BUS STOP

*Angela Wei*

He liked bus stops like these with plexiglass and advertisements behind it, because people stopped to look sometimes, and by looking at those people he could tell what they wanted. Only in front of advertisements did they desire freely.

The bus stop has only one yellow light, next to the sign, which swarmed with moths. The night was chirping, and clouds hung from the sky like dollar store paintings, thin and low. There was a woman standing beside him. He was eyeing her, just looking at her, in a way he would describe as submissive and passive, not that he cared; she was eyeing an advertisement behind him. She looked like she smoked cigarettes. She had no shoes on.

“I don’t like rom-coms,” she said when she sat down.

He looked around but it was only the two of them. He smiled and nodded and she shook her head.

“I’m just saying there’s no point anymore. To them I mean. We aren’t dumb. We’re spoon-fed all our lives, man, there’s no point to being, I don’t know. Mediocre. But we’ll go to the theatre anyway because there we feel safe and nice.”

“Okay,” he said finally. He looked at his watch without reading it.

“What time is it?”

He looked at his watch again. “Quarter past seven.”

“You should give me that watch.” She crossed her legs, one bare foot up in the air, her hands tucked underneath her thighs. The soles were dirty and the heels had cracking, bleeding calluses. Her nails were glittery red and chipping. He looked away. “You aren’t even reading it,” she said.

“Sorry.” He counted twelve separate stains on the inside of the metal roof.

“For what?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t need to be sorry. I came here and sat over here. What’re you

apologizing for?” Her fingers were also red and chipped.

“Okay,” he said, and then looked at his watch again. He wanted to check his phone but wondered if that would be rude.

So they sat in silence. He thought about how he was a bus-stop man. He was the kind of bus-stop men people looked at and forgot. He had tweed jackets and he could not stop compulsively buying tweed jackets, like one would eventually make him handsome enough, like maybe with enough jackets and ironed shirts Lauren would stop lowering her eyes from across the bed at him and stop turning away when he nudged her shoulder. How much turning-away and eye-lowering he would endure after this one, he thought.

Then he remembered the stains, and watched a spider crawl from the corner of a pole downwards. It had legs that spun and fidgeted. It spun its web from the corner of that one pole downward to the woman’s feet.

The swift snip snap of a lighter. She was cupping a flame with her hand.

“Do you want one?” she asked.

Lauren used to tell him to think of trees when he saw cigarettes. The potato-chip bark of red pines. Short, stubby hemlock needles. The redwoods that reach into the sky with branch-fingers. He scratched his neck. “Okay.”

“You can say no.” She let out a long exhale from the corner of her mouth. “You’ll save me a cigarette.”

“No, I want one.” It was smooth and white. He thought of how the smell of smoke would cling to his jacket, how he would hang the jacket on the back hook and wash it when Lauren wasn’t looking. He did it anyway.

“You smoke?”

“Used to.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Shit, did I just—?” She laughed, and it was hoarse.

“No, it’s okay.” He paused to smoke. “Why not, you know?”

She looked at him. He was looking upwards at something in the corner. She eyed his diamond-patterned navy socks. She could not stop thinking about his socks. Her toes were cold and she hadn’t had shoes in a while, since they had gotten stolen at the shelter, and Meg at the convenience store had stopped lending her money, and Janet had stopped looking for her. Maybe in the meantime she would talk to lonely-looking ginger men at the bus stop.

The cigarette was nice until she burned her fingers. She threw the rest underneath the stop and wiped her face with her palm, downwards, and leaned forward onto her knee. They sat in silence for a while, only hearing the gasoline tear of tires, the night chipping away at them, the bus-stop silence.

“I stopped a while ago. You know. For my wife. But— I don’t know. I

don't know," he said.

"You don't know?" she said.

"I mean I don't know."

"That's fuckin' helpful."

"I mean what's the point of— it's like you said. We please everyone all the time. And I'm so tired. Of pleasing people. I'm groveling, all the time. I'm so nice." He talked with his hands, she noticed.

She laughed. "That's a good problem to have."

"I guess."

"People hate me, man."

"Really?"

"No, no, I mean people hate the concept of me. They look at me. And they see the feet and they see my hair and they see everything, and then they don't see me at all, and then they're lookin' the other way, you know?"

"That's horrible."

She was thinking about the convenience store. Maybe Janet would see her then. Janet, with boa-feather hair, Janet who touched the doorknob three times every day before she left for work, and checked the stove obsessively, who would usually turn up by now (every Friday) to check up on her. He was thinking about Lauren, and how he had left his slippers by the bed this morning, and the Ambien she took right before bed, before she turned onto her side and began snoring.

"I'm Reese, by the way," she said. She began picking at something on her toe.

"Albert."

"Albert, do you want to know something fun?"

"Okay."

"I think Meg hates me."

He thought about Lauren again. And then the trees. And then he looked at her, and her toes, and he said, "Do you want to know something fun?"

"Okay."

"I cheated on my wife. No— I am cheating. On my wife."

"Wow. That's much worse than my thing."

"Thanks." He snuffed the stub on the poster.

She sniffed. "Do you have any money?"

"Yeah."

"Can I have it?"

"Sure."

And they sat smoking until the bus came.









# featuring

Alisa Gulyansky

Fiona Reenan

Alex Karr

Christina Chen

Allison Jiang

Lily Kempczinski

Mikayla Murrin

Rufus Knuppel

Griffin Elliott

Sophia Bay

Ben Reyes

Angela Wei

