



mangrove





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Masthead

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Mangrove is the University of Miami's undergraduate literary journal. It seeks to elevate voices of all kinds by publishing student art and writing that pulses with human language, sits under our skin, and settles into our soul. *Mangrove* is designed and edited by an undergraduate staff and advised by university faculty.

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Refueling off I-95

Andrea Rose Frei

My blackened fingerprint and the gun of the fuel filler,
that over-easy, sulking scent of the hurling everglades
and fat under-bellied greying sky with its sweat
snail-trailing the Broward County air
that whines with the Florida crickets
as all of nature's haze seeps into my trunk.

At the stop sign. I ran through on my first driver's test,
the beggar blinks with the yellow epilepsy of the broken street light.
Through the one-way window, my head shunned to my lap, a broken rearview mirror,
to the sorry "L" of my thumb and pointer finger
and a wish that I could tell my left from my right.

Pompano roads resurfaced at night,
left dotted with traffic cones and trucks like toys
my brothers used to drag through the dirt,
years have repaved that crumbling curb,
but the black hiss of wheels against old asphalt,
still mills through the half window of a child-locked backseat
of the sweet, hot-aired minivan with a trail-mixed carpeted floor.

blind spotted. I moved
from the back row
to the driver's seat.

Apagón

Jay Moyer

When all the lights in the house went off, I walked to the weathered city wall and back, and the streets were peopled : arms to arms and holding breath up to the sky : murmured prayers : *¿qué pasó,* *qué pasó?* I craned my neck into dark café windows and empty tables. The streets were peopled, not like the slow march to see the Alcazár but peopled like medicine traipsing to the heart. A congregation at the grocery counter making music out of coins for bread : fanning one another : sharing food if they had no fan : laughs if they had no food : only the hot gold of the Spanish sun. The buskers stopped and started : as far as a voice can fly over wind : cobbled streets : knocked by flamenco dancers. Spilling from cool houses, we were our own kind of warm before we remembered to be electric : peopled more than ever : springing like grass between concrete cracks.

Wasting, in torrential rain.

Bella LoBooskia

I had not thought death had undone so many
of me—every crony in a damp black hat
tilted down for respect of everything,
nose up to the sky and black plaid coat
dragging under the toe of the following,
ever tripping themselves like running
mice from a receding shoreline,
tails under claws.

But the wave will come in rain
from above, and fill the rooftop bathtub
atop St. David's chapel where we won't be wed
but I will bathe, clothed fully in wool
and long skirt that is sucked wet between my legs as they splay,
heals on the edge of the tub, along with my head
hung back toward the stars, arms out
like they might catch my fall when the
heavy roof collapses, plaster in my hair
and soap under my nails.

I will be refined then, nails gnawed
to softness.

Or I will be helpless,
amniotic on the dinner table,
dripping onto ceramics, oozing down the legs
and I will be less than wooden, and they will be,
they will be,
they will be, and fork-handed and spoon-mouthed
and pin-cushion-eyed, as they pull from their
sockets the most delicate, most feminine pins
with which to prick my retching body,
with which to sew me up, sew me
Together. Elbow to hip.

Chin to neck.
Foot to ass.
I will shrivel, crying,
the milk of me fresh on their thimbles.
I will coat a knife when it sticks down
in and is pulled out, ready to eat,
not yet, not yet ready
to be made into the thing I will be,
which will, of course, be nothing *at all*.

Am I Home?

Madison Ming



Periapsis

Kevin Pillsbury

It's not the binary star system—
two orbs holding the other in,
grasping for the other,
conversing with gravity—
that best conveys it.

It's more the comet,
orbiting a star in ellipses,
sweeping along its track
until its tie pulls taut,
reining it in at length,
completing its crescent,
and bringing it back near.

Not as though I'd never left,
but as intimate as if I hadn't.

Before the Eclipse.

Fernando Castro

When I wake up in the morning
The world appears new
And just for second
I see you
I'm in love

I see you
And yearn
There's only one of you
And so many of me.
Do you?

Impatience consumes me
you.
Waiting to stand before you

Maybe at the eclipse?

Alright then
For now

I'll be ready

And thats when ill say

Good morning

Old Sol.

when I go to bed
its dark I fear
my light falters
just for a second
once again
Do you see me?
I miss you

Im sorry
I know.
So what?
I love you.

I am consumed by
behind you.

Thats when Ill see you

Good.
just a glimpse
I'll be ready

too

Goodnight Selene...

The Women Here

Jose Restrepo

stand upright around the dinner table, observing
in delight as my abuela Adi dips her worn thumbs into the midnight blue bowl,
pinching la masa de maiz like cheeks in between her fingers.

The women here, all mothers, daughters, sisters, mimic the movement
like light-shadows, each a curious mirror of Adi del Carmen,
whose braid holds memories like tree sap.

The women here sweat caldo de pollo, lift the Canaima mountains,
swim alongside the Orinoco crocodile, before tucking us into bed
without a hair lifted from their head.

I sit with the men. Their outstretched legs corner my curiosity
as I observe the women from my honeycomb couch. Un juego de futbol
blasts from the TV, the sound matched only by the men's drilling laughter and

raised fists. Their enclosed hands obstruct my vision of the women here
so I stand, peering over the men's slicked back scalps andw clinking beer.
Running my fingers through imagined hair, I admire

the women here, their closeness, their secrets, their lined lips
And coiled curls, the way they hold the others hand without fear of
parasitic eyes. I feel the men's piercing gaze own the back of my neck, poking, prodding,

sticking to my skin like leaking egg whites from a broken shell,
gripping onto my skin like shame. I ignore this prickly beast, almost comforting in its
familiarity, and look onward towards Adi, wishing how much I could be like all

the women here.

Lotte's Wife

Caitlin Heidgerken

She said the fresh air would help. She said it like it hadn't been said before, like this time, really, it would be a miracle cure. She'd been frowning, harried, packed for work and practically halfway out the door. Her eyes, behind round, gold rimmed glasses, clearly said *I don't have time for this.*

You went.

The rocks are slippery beneath your sneakers. The wind tugs at your hair, sharp and tangy with sea-smell, threatening to blow you over into the ocean. You could let it.

It's thrilling, that tiny beat of hesitation, the knowledge that you could, but you won't today. You breathe in deep, inhale the morning sun. There are gulls out on the water, smudges of white and brown, bobbing with the waves. The squalling of their fellows is the only sound loud enough to overtake the steady crash of waves.

You still have a good hour before you have to leave for work. Maybe you'll watch a reality show. Maybe you'll read *Rose in Bloom* again and cry over poor Charlie. Maybe you'll die before you get home.

You do none of this. You descend to the beach and sit on the sand until the ocean drowns out every thought in your head, and only then do you head back across the street, dazed with the weight of everything.

She is on the other side of the bed, across an ocean of sheets. Her back is to you, long brown hair in sleeping braids.

"You worry me," she says, all quiet like she's hoping you won't hear.

You're on your back, tracing the crack in the ceiling that was there when you got this apartment—you have photos of it in case the landlord tries something. A dull streak of light comes from the bathroom, the door opens a crack. She can't sleep in the pitch dark.

You roll over. You press your teeth to her bare shoulder. Not enough to bite, not sensual, just grounding you both. You taste salt. Her

breath is shaky.

“Charlotte,” you say against her skin. You drape an arm over her, take her left hand, the one with the wedding ring. She grips back too tightly. “I’m here.”

“I had a dream you were drowning.” She chokes on the words. “And I couldn’t save you, I couldn’t—I couldn’t help.”

Dreams aren’t prophecies, you want to say. You once dreamt you had two daughters and she threw them into the sea to become whales while the boy king of America watched and bled out on the sand.

“I’ll be better.” It’s still a lie, but it’s closer to what she wants to hear.

She sighs. She rolls over to face you. An inch away from you she says:

“You don’t know that.”

“I’m *trying*.”

Her eyes are twin new moons from here. You think of your dream children.

“Fuck,” she says. It comes out as a sigh, peppermint breath gusting past your nose. “I know. I just—”

“I’m sorry.”

Her face falls.

“No, no, you have nothing to be sorry for.” Your shoulders are shaking, but she says your name real soft and brushes the wet from your cheeks and curls her arms around you. “It’s okay. It’s okay. I’m here. I love you.”

There are good days. Ish comes over; it is lonely, she says, since your brother was deployed. She brings the baby, a fat little thing called Ben who giggles at the slightest provocation. You play with him after dinner while Charlotte and Ish go out on the balcony to smoke. Someone can see the ocean from that balcony—a thin strip of blue above the buildings.

“You don’t mind, do you?” Ish presses, sliding the glass door open enough to hear you. The sweet, herby scent of cannabis drifts into the apartment. Charlotte is a shadow leaning against the railing, eyes on the

horizon, on that perfect line of sea. “I don’t have to—”

“I don’t mind,” you say, honestly enough. Ben is sweet and easy to please and you don’t smoke, anyway. Ish sags against the doorframe.

“You’re an angel,” she says. “I’ve been needing this all week.”

The door slides shut. Ben babbles, waving the plastic measuring spoons you gave him in the air. They clack against each other, a simple sound. You are crosslegged on the living room floor, one hand running over the carpet as though it is grass, as though it will uproot with a tug.

Charlotte is at the table, grading her third graders’ spelling sheets. You’re ladling out pesto sauce over penne. She wants to say something, you can feel it in the air. You wait. You put a fork in each bowl and bring them to the table, taking the seat across from her. She takes a slow bite, savoring.

“Thank you,” she says.

“You’re welcome.” You tap your foot in an anxious rhythm.

“What did the psychiatrist say?” she asks, finally.

“They’re changing my meds.”

“Again?”

“Again.” You smile, trying to lighten the mood. “What is it now, the fifth time?”

“Why can’t they just figure it out?” she demands, stabbing her pasta with more force than the poor stuff deserves. “They’re supposed to know what to do. To fix it.”

“You know it doesn’t work like that.”

“It just makes me so angry.”

“We’ll figure it out.” When did it always become this: you reassuring her, instead of the other way around.

“We can’t go through that again.” Her gaze flickers to the scars on your arms. You have the urge to cover up. You used to tell her everything. “I won’t let it happen.”

“You can’t promise me that.”

She stares right through you. You are both trying so hard to make this work.

“What can I do?” she asks, coming across all desperate.

“Love me.” Your voice is barely louder than the noise of the dishwasher. Something in Charlotte, pulled tight with tension, snaps back to place.

“Like it’s hard,” she scoffs, eyes watery.

“Let’s take a walk,” Charlotte says next time you’re all caught up in your head. “The fresh air’ll help.” She brings you your shoes, does the laces when your hands shake too much.

It is dark and silent on the way to the beach. You count five things you can see, four things you can hear, and on. You grow steadier. The world opens up slowly, pieces of the veil falling away, fluttering in the wind.

“Dance with me,” she says when you step off the sidewalk onto the sand. The beach isn’t open after sunset, but the locals have never cared. When you were a teenager you would sneak out to the lifeguard’s chair and meet up with pretty-eyed, asshole boys or girls who would be softball stars if they’d just quit drinking so much. You suppose it was the doom that drew you to them.

Charlotte takes your hand and leads you across the soft grit. It’s high tide, the beach reduced to a slim belt, the air thick with salt. She twirls you and it must be quite a picture; you in your sweatpants and a ratty, community college sweatshirt of Charlotte’s, her put-together striped vintage dress and earrings that look like calculators but secretly say BOOBS.

“I love you,” you say. “I don’t know if I can tell you enough.”

“I know it enough,” she says, and you both run across sand the color of old bones.

Scratch HeArt

Ashleigh Morris



A Boy's Mantle

Tamara Yeshurun

This is a story about a little boy who saw himself as a man. Or perhaps a man who would see himself as a little boy. You shall decide.

He was brought up seeing that there were big people and little people in the world. The big people about whom everyone spoke in hushed tones. And then the little people who got flush-faced, finger-pointing, throat-scratching snarls when a dish slipped from their fingers onto the red-tiled kitchen floor.

A dish was a little thing; but big people dealt with big things.

“A world of such big things to be dealt with, and you can’t handle a simple dish?” Indeed, the smaller the crime, the bigger the offense. “Your petty fumbles are a mockery to the weightiness of the world.” Their eyes flared.

The boy learned to puff himself up. He stood tall and broad, gave a powerful handshake, and echoed grandiloquence. The larger he seemed, the less the scrutiny upon him. He was dealing with much bigger things, you see. What things? The all-consuming labor of planting and harvesting hushed tones. He had never learned to care about the big things themselves, only about his place among them, and he presumed that the giants around him were likewise preoccupied.

In fact, he rather doubted big things even existed.

It is true that on very rare occasions he had a nauseating feeling that his peers were not little boys standing on tip-toe, but men. Real men, orbiting a Big Ought. Whenever this possibility creped up on him—always in darkness of the night—he quickly reassured himself that experts, heroes, and saints were not real; he had nothing to be afraid of. “Greatness” was nothing but a lame squeak against a silent and commanding universe—and oh, what a comfort that was!

But, something he had not foreseen: that his guilt thus absolved, his stature would dissolve. So, the man turned a pulsing red face to the fresh shards on the red-tiled floor, and roared until the child trembling there was even littler than he.

psychotherapy

after sam sax after adélia prado

D. H. Lane

i have four bloodrotting dreams in a week
shoving me into wakefulness
the closing act of a baptism.
they all start at a table, plastic spoon lifted
to my sticky lips. open the curtains there is
a girl devouring and devouring and devouring
gorged until sick, dirt under the fingernails
hunted until extinct by the newest
translation of the bible.
left covered in the rain's mud

stray in a box. the first dream
i wash myself clean of old latin old greek
the second dream i wash my mother
the third dream i wash my mother
the fourth dream i'm at
the last supper watching myself
choke on a wishbone
delicate throat convulsing
an animal's lost dance with a bullet in its mouth
forgive me, mother
for i am not even sure i am awake.

i have five bloodrotting dreams
of devouring the girls i try to love
and washing your back with their
decay caked on my hands
if the definition of insanity is repetition
my body ought to learn that it works
the same way a taxidermist does
putting dusty furs and hollow bones on
and playing ugly melodies
trying to fix its ceaseless hunger,
the insolent fear of its mother
a heart and head that gape and gape
devour and devour and devour and
pray.

Exquisite Corpse

Arlenis Hibirmas



GERANIUM

Nadia Jacobs

The sky was shining a silvery grey, gleaming bits of shrapnel dust swirling softly above the brick apartments in warm, thick air. It was a so-so day, like all other days, but no day was bad and there was no reason to say today wasn't a good day for a good day.

Rosie's skipping shoes made light footprints along the road. She galloped right, then left, then right again, twirling so her dress would make a circle around her. She sang as she went, with occasional pauses to pounce on scraps of paper and rubbish that scuttled across her way.

*Girls and boys, come out to play,
The moon doth shine as bright as day;
Leave your supper, and leave your sleep,
And come with your playfellows into the street.*

She kicked a rock. It crumbled against her shoe. Bothered, she kicked an old Fanta can, chasing it down the street as it rolled. When she finally caught it, she was out of the living district, and she kicked it along in front of her as she danced past shuttered-down businesses—a realtor, a costume shop, record store, town hall, cafe, pharmacy—here, she stopped, jumping onto the can, stomping it flat.

The metal grid was pulled down in front of the pharmacy. She rattled it, stooped, pulled at the lock, and snapped it off. Struggling to raise the gate, she got on her hands and knees and pushed it up, crawling beneath it as it fell. She scrambled to her feet on the other side, brushing off her dress. The thick paste of dust was persistent; it spread to her hands, along her arms. She smacked them on her skirt. It didn't work.

Before her was the main counter. The glass was blown out of the window, and she stood on her tiptoes to see beyond it.

“Excuse me,” she called.

Dust-strewn boxes and carts and shelves answered her with silence.

She jumped up, trying to balance her arms on the edge of the counter. “Excuse me!” She fell back to her feet.

There was no response.

“My mama is sick,” she added, sticking her chin on the counter, and when there was still nothing, she moved away, disappointed. “Okay, I’ll come back later.”

She wrenched up the gate and squirmed back into the street, where she sat for a moment, considering her predicament. She stood resolutely, trying once again to wipe off her dress and at last relenting.

The restaurant was the next store down. Next to the door was a giant open rectangle where there had once been a shop window, and Rosie stepped through it onto the display platform. Glass crunched under her shoes. She scuffed the shards around, around and around, sweeping them down the steps. What dim light that was outside dropped away a few yards in; she followed the stairs into the darkness.

“Hello?” She turned, sticking her arms out, reaching for the room’s perimeter. Rather than finding it, she stumbled over a heavy, sizable box, and suddenly water splashed over her arms, up the front of her dress. It was sticky, thick; even as she briskly drew herself out of it, her skin was beginning to sting. The sudden, indescribable urge to stick her head in the tank and swallow a few gulps struck her, and at the same time she felt, equally indescribably, that it was something vile. She rushed backwards, clawing water from her clothes.

“Is there anybody there?” she called, momentarily shaken.

The wind muttered a light draft through the gaping wall. She felt chilly. Mama was right: she should’ve brought a jacket—only Mama hadn’t said that, but she surely would’ve if she weren’t so sick.

“Hello?” Rosie called out one more time, and when still she heard nothing but her own faint echo, she hastened back through the shop window and down the road.

Rosie shivered on the porch of the post office, knocking incessantly. It didn’t seem to be doing much. She began pounding with both fists. Her hands were a colorless shade of red.

“Hello!” She yelled. No, that wasn’t loud enough. “Helloooooo!”

She inhaled deeply—the breath burned her lungs—“HELLO! I’M A ROBBER!”

Pitter-pattering echoed behind her, and she turned quickly. Half

a pair of glasses skidded across the blacktop. She sighed, trotting off the front landing, bounding across the street and back again. She made a game out of jumping over a few pieces of trash, and bits of dust smoked the air as she jumped.

Fetching a rusting metal pipe from the busted-in doorway of a menswear shop, she traced out a grid in the powdery earth, tossed the rod aside, spun around six times, and hopped the course. By the time she got to the end, the lines were smeared, and she drew a new two-by-six at the end of the first. She leapt around for a while, tried balancing on the rolling side of the pipe, wandered into the empty cafe and back out, sampled a beige blade of grass, changed her mind, and remembered her mother was sick.

“HelloooOOOo,” she sang. She banged the pipe around on a door handle. The door handle fell off. She threw it into the sign for the costume shop, snapping a hole through the fabric, then she frowned and felt like crying. She shouldn’t have thrown it. It wasn’t right to destroy nice things. At least there was no one around to see it, Rosie thought, although there should’ve been.

Where was everyone?

She wandered down the street, trying to whistle with her fingers in her mouth like they did in storybooks, but she couldn’t. It must’ve been a made-up way to whistle. She stomped a little as she walked, pretending she was walking along a long row of drums that went BONG when she tapped on them. Surely, if anybody was nearby, they would come to see what the ruckus was when they heard a lot of drums banging.

It was so quiet. Surely someone would hear.

After a few minutes, the white sun grinned through the mist; Rosie blinked, covering her eyes, and hid beneath the awning of a hair salon. She remembered the pharmacy, and she went back the way she came, staying close to the buildings. When she got to the grate, she hooked her fingers in it, peering past the criss-crossing metal to the large open window.

“Hello?”

Still, there was no one.

She swung on the grate for a moment as the sun vanished, then

she tumbled off into the road. She tried again to balance on the old pipe and fell, scrambling to her feet and traipsing onward. Picking up speed, she pranced in a circle, humming, singing to fill the silence:

*You were all that to me, love,
For which my soul did pine.
A green isle in the sea, love,
A fountain and a shrine...*

This was her favorite. It reminded her of flowers and rivers and little round birds that liked to sing with people. She had always wanted to sing with a little bird, and someday she would. Maybe when she grew up she would organize a choir of half people and half little birds. This was a good plan—it hadn't been done before. She would probably be famous and make lots of money. But she wouldn't spend the money, because that was greedy—she would give it to forests so there would be more birds everywhere. She didn't want money, really. It was the kind of thing everyone was supposed to want, but it wasn't good for that many things.

Like now—she had some stuffed in her skirt pockets and nothing to do with it. The coins could be lined up for her to hop along like stones across a creek, she thought, but Mama would get mad if they were all dirty or if she lost some. Mama would surely be sad that there was nobody at the pharmacy. Rosie was sad, too. Mama had been waiting for a long time, and she deserved to have something when Rosie got back.

With renewed excitement, Rosie sprinted across the street, turning between two crumbling office buildings. There was a narrow path here, one that she followed out of the city centre; the bricks tumbled away into overgrown brown weeds, and the trash that gathered in the city plants became harder to find.

The path opened into a field of grass, a large, dirty slope climbing upwards. Over the hill, she could take the long way home through the woods on the other side.

She trekked skyward slowly, combing through the grass with her shoes. Sometimes there were little flowers hidden in patches between the weeds. She couldn't find any. The wind was louder here, colder here, and she shuddered. Halfway up, she sat down, tired, and twirled the cool grass in her fingers. Ripping up a few pieces, she wound them together,

pretending it was an odd bundle of thin flowers.

*A green isle in the sea, love,
A fountain and a shrine,
All wreathed with fairy fruits and flow'rs, and all the flow'rs were
mine.*

Her voice sounded different in the high air. She liked it. She laid down against the hill, closing her eyes as the white sky filled them, and held the plants in front of her face, pretending she could smell the sweetness of daisies and violets.

As she lay there, giggling as the grass tickled her face, a soft, piercing sound floated into her ears.

Come with a whoop, come with a call...

Rosie stopped laughing. She opened her eyes, listened, and closed them again.

Come with a good will or not at all...

She sat up. She had said nothing else, hadn't she?

Turning, looking around, ripping the blades into narrow shreds, she called, "*Up the ladder and down the wall...*"

From over the hill, from the white sky...

...a half-penny roll will serve us all.

She stood. "Hello?"

There was no response.

"Hello!" she repeated. "I heard you!"

The wind twirled across her face. She thought, then started afresh:

Juguemos en el bosque...

The voice, all at once cold and dark and crystalline:

Mientras el lobo no está...

Quickly, she began hiking up the hill.

"Hello? Where are you?"

El lobo aparece...

"Hello?" Rosie began running, higher, higher, as fast as she could. She stumbled to the top of the hill, where the grass leveled out before it dipped back down again, and sitting among the tall weeds, looking beyond to the far side, was a woman.

...él todos nos comerá.

The song trailed to a stop. The woman glanced over her shoulder, and she smiled. "Hello."

"Hi," Rosie said. "What's your name?"

"I don't have a name," she answered. "What's yours?"

Rosie shuffled her handful of weeds around, watching the woman, and thought she shouldn't say to a stranger, but she seemed nice enough. "Rosie."

"That's a pretty name."

"Thank you. I think so too."

"What are you doing here, Rosie?" Her figure was faint and blurred, as though she were farther away than where she sat. Rosie took a curious step closer, but nothing changed. The woman's image seemed ever in the periphery. She was perfectly kind, though, and Rosie couldn't help but speak honestly to her.

"I'm walking to my house," Rosie answered. She pointed for a second, then changed her mind. "It's over there."

"It's not safe to walk alone," the woman said gently, facing Rosie now.

"Yes, it is," Rosie protested. "I won't get lost."

The woman shook her head. "You might meet a bad stranger."

Rosie looked out over the city. The only flickers of movement were metal cans and white papers catching in the overcast light. "But there's nobody here."

She followed Rosie's eyes, and as she did she said simply, "Why not?"

It was a good question. Rosie picked apart some more grass, peeling strands out of her grasp and sprinkling them on the ground. "I don't know," she said finally.

"Where is your family?"

Rosie could feel the woman's eyes on her, but she kept on staring out over the forest. She could almost find her house; it must've been near the edge of downtown.

"They're at home."

"Who?"

"My mama. She's sick." Dispiritedly, she thrust the rest of the

grass onto the ground. At least it would grow more grass there. It was no good in her hands.

“I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?” asked Rosie. It was a silly thing grown ups did, to say sorry when they hadn’t done anything wrong.

Standing at last, the woman approached.

“Did you mean to drop those?” She pointed at Rosie’s shoes.

Rosie looked down. At her feet was a small pile of yellow-pink daisies. She gasped and snatched them up at once. “Where did those come from?”

She smiled. “You were holding them.”

“No, I wasn’t!” beaming, Rosie giggled. “I was holding grass!”

“I remember you holding flowers,” the woman insisted, raising her eyebrows mischievously.

“I wasn’t!” Rosie insisted. She shoved the bouquet into her face, sniffing deeply. They weren’t sweet, but that was fine.

“Here,” the woman said, stooping. From the weeds, she withdrew a single star-shaped flower, a pale, vivid shade of purple that spiraled out across rounded, pointed petals. She held it out to Rosie, who took it from her hands. “That one is for your mother,” said the woman.

“For my mother?”

“She’s sick?”

Rosie nodded.

“That flower,” the woman said, fixating on her with a concrete stare that Rosie found herself stuck in, “will make her better.”

“Make her better?” Rosie whispered in awe.

“Yes. If she eats it”—the woman stepped away—“she won’t be sick anymore.”

Rosie’s mouth dropped open. “Really?”

“Really,” the woman responded. “But you should go back quickly.”

The sky was getting darker. Rosie cradled the bouquet in her arms as she started off down the hill, calling out a quick goodbye over her shoulder. Her pace became faster as she descended until she was running, letting the gravity drag her to the slope’s end.

She threw herself down the last few yards, hitting the ground and rolling with whoops of glee. After combing a few pieces of glass out of her

hair, she righted herself and plowed on, humming still. Her throat was tired from singing, and she couldn't anymore.

Galloping through the forest, the bundle of flowers at the end of her swinging arm, she thought this must be what Little Red Cap felt like every time she went to visit her grandmother. Rosie didn't go through the woods often, but it wasn't quite how she remembered it. The trees were tall and thin and plumb-straight and there must've been something missing, because the forest felt strangely empty with nothing but smooth, barkless trunks and docked branches. Parts of the wood were splintered and slashed. Maybe there was a wolf about.

Rosie wasn't scared of wolves. She was a very fast runner and knew she could handle one.

Worn from galloping, she slowed to a walk, glancing down at her flowers. One of the yellow ones was shriveled and wilted. She thought about throwing it aside, but a wilted flower was better than no flower, so she continued on. Flowers didn't usually wilt so fast, but cities usually had people in them and her mother never used to be sick. This reminded her of the whistling, and she put her fingers in her mouth and made another failed attempt.

It didn't make any sense. How could a storybook make up a whistle that wasn't real? Why were fictitious landscapes green and blue and not white and brown? Where did these imaginary pieces of the world come from, and where did they go? It wasn't possible to tune without hearing. Everything came from somewhere.

Rosie felt suddenly lost.

She turned in a slow circle. How had she all at once found herself in the epicenter of nowhere?

No, it wasn't her. The forest was out of order.

When had the birds stopped singing?

Glancing around, she twisted the flower stems absently in her grip, and as she did something snapped suddenly and crumpled in her fingers. She looked down. In her palms was a collection of dry thin old sticks, which crumbled into bark as she unfolded her hands in front of herself. She flung them to the ground, and just as quickly as she did so she saw the ever-perfect purple flower gleaming against the dirt. She snatched it up.

There she stood in the middle of the woods, clutching the flower beneath her chin, not feeling much like singing anymore, and not feeling very much like Little Red Cap. As she lingered there, she twirled the flower in her fingertips, thinking how lucky she was that the most beautiful flower was the one that remained.

She looked back down at the mound of twigs before her, and as something possessed her she stooped to scrape her fingers through the dirt, which felt oddly smooth and velvet. She dug through a thin layer of grey dust until a fistful of soft red petals cascaded mildly upwards into her hand.

In marvel, she ripped the flower up from its stem, holding it out alongside the other.

Beyond her hands, a new flower frothed up from the ground. She bounded after it, tearing it up with her fingernails. As she moved it with the rest, there was another, a bound away. And another, and another, another...

She emerged at the far end of the empty neighborhood, and suddenly it was dark, although she didn't know when it had become so, and she started running.

Reaching the apartment breathlessly, she kicked off her shoes at the door and slipped inside.

“Mama!” she called, bounding through the hallway. Sliding into the kitchen counter, she scrambled to right herself, and she ran to the bedroom, where she knew Mama would be waiting for her.

Mama was in the bedroom, but she was not waiting.

She was lying on the bed utterly stiff and still, and above her bent the woman, sharp and lean, as she closed Mama's eyes with her spindly fingers.

The flowers were gone from Rosie's hands. She suddenly realized this, and she looked to the ground, hoping they would be lying at her feet, simply slipped from her hold. They were not.

“What are you doing?” she said smallly.

The woman turned to her with shining colorless eyes and her hunched spine curled over her svelte, little arms. She was like a spider whose extra legs had shrunk into itself.

“I’m sorry,” the woman recited.

Rosie was by the bed, she was shaking Mama, Mama, who should’ve woken up had the woman not put her into such a deep sleep, who should’ve been all better had the one perfect flower not disappeared from Rosie’s possession. The woman’s shadow was consuming them.

“Rosie,” said the woman, with her clear, soft, singing voice. “Rosie.”

“Mama, Mama,” Rosie sobbed, unlistening, as she pulled on Mama’s arm, which had become strange and faded. In front of Rosie, her own arms were the same drab color as Mama’s. That wasn’t right.

“You are the last one left.” The woman was speaking, but Rosie could hear nothing; she had become aware of an all-consuming wickedness that polluted everything her vision could take in, it was plaguing her, the ice was in her eyes, the very shards of offense.

“Everybody has gone.” Her words, her vile words, were the only thing in a vacuum of utter silence. Not a bird, not a drop of wind or rain, not a creak of cricket or a far-off call from neighbors interrupted her. Even Rosie could yell no longer. Her voice had been coughed up out of her throat, and she felt it would not ever be returned to her.

“Look around, Rosie.” She spoke softly now. It might’ve been comforting. “There is nothing here. Life has ended.”

No, thought Rosie vaguely, this didn’t mean anything. Life did not end. Endings belonged to roads and songs and stories. Life, though... life kept going.

“When did everybody go away?” the woman asked. “What do you know of since then?”

The answer was nothing, Rosie discovered, as she tried to recall. She had no memories.

“Life has ended,” the woman repeated. “It ended a long time ago.” And with utmost grace and sympathy she offered her hand to Rosie. “Let me take you away.”

Rosie would not take it. The woman was lying. Her flowers were lies. Her words were lies. She did not know what she was talking about. She knew nothing about Rosie’s home or Rosie’s mother. She knew

nothing about life. She knew nothing about endings. These things, Rosie knew.

“I’m sorry, darling,” the woman whispered. “Sometimes you don’t get to choose.”

At last, in the old crumbled apartment that lingered in the middle of a grey neighborhood nestled within a hollowed-out city that sat half-flattened in a large black crater flecked with twisted white trees and white ash and white corpses that stared up at the white sky with eyeless faces, Rosie’s final semblances of knowledge drained away, as everything else had three months ago when the bomb was dropped.

Fractals of My English Syllabus

Maia Kane

In pursuit
of escape from one's work,
final and a deal.
sold destroyed binding. originalities
into asexual androgenesis.
experiences. indiscernible. nonsignificant.
a plagiarized database.
half truths: condensed
from humanities cartooned
hearts: fragmentalized.
beaconless drifting
in a pool of scrapped intelligence

Register Six

Reese Wilen

My register was numbered six, halfway down the stretch of couches guiding the queue. I watched video essays on the couches during lulls. One cashier stashed packs of Camels between the cushions. Another wiped her snot on the armrests. I guess we all had our things. The smoker was never surprised by anything, even when I told her about my having stolen an armchair on my day off.

“Sweetie, I stole Obetrol from Andy Warhol on New Year’s Eve in ‘64,” she said.

The snotter didn’t have much to say, ever, though she seemed to like me enough. She was like a pile of bricks with extensions.

The store was an all-around home goods store with long forgotten trinkets, ‘50s gizmos no longer in production, cheap designer knockoffs at a twelfth of the price, and pillows stuffed with months of vacuum dust. That, but the size of a Ford dealership.

I spent my first few months at the store decorating my register with various printed duct tapes cut into patterns. A fire lotus adorned the ceiling of the underside, my personal breakroom. The communal breakroom was in the back corner of the showroom and smelled like mildew and piss. I only ever went in there once, to stash a slice of leftover ice cream cake from my birthday in a box labeled “pickled sardines” to eat on the front curb on my break.

Darlene, the smoker, often joined me on my breaks. I trusted her not to eat my stuff, but not anyone else, so I liked her most. I’d sit, she’d stand. Neither of us talked. Not until Bagel Boy came around, the teenage son of the bagel shop owner from across the strip mall, which happened every now and again. He usually came while I was working, walking up to my register with a wicker miniature Burning Man or once, a kitten he found under a shelf toward the back of the store.

“Look at this little guy,” he’d say in a wobbly baby voice, puppeteering its paw in my direction. “Will you be my mommy?”

This time he drove by the store entrance and crawled past us in his

beat-up old Mitsubishi Lancer with a hanging front bumper and a missing rim closest to the driver door. I looked down at my cake, now devoid of ice cream and frosting. Darlene started her second cigarette.

“Looking good, Moira,” he said to me when his window lined up with me.

We stayed silent.

“I see how it is, okay. I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said with a smirk I could hear.

Darlene held her pack of smokes out to me. “Want one?” she asked.

“No, thank you.”

Bagel Boy started pulling away from the curb. Darlene put the pack back in her pocket and flicked the last of her lit cigarette at his back window as he drove away. We went back inside.

I worked nights which were usually slow, so it would just be me and two or three others in the store, usually Darlene and Judith. Judith was a mean old brownnoser with colored contacts and halitosis. She sometimes followed me around the store as I restocked, seemingly trying to curse me with her unnatural husky eyes. I didn’t see her look that way at anyone else but her husband who sometimes came to drop off her medications. I looked in her bag once to see what they were: blood thinner, antibiotic, nicotine patch. No wonder she was so cranky. She’d only leave me alone when *The Young and the Restless* reruns came on on the little tv by the registers, and then I’d go off and stress out some customer with excessive questions. “Have you noticed our year-end sale? Would this cooler-sized ceramic duck fit in your bathroom? Excuse me, but, what color should I dye my dog’s hair next? I was thinking yellow but after seeing your (yellow) bag, I’m wondering if blue is a better move.”

I had one customer who came in every Monday and the last of every month to make sure he was stocked up on craft supplies for gifts for his nieces and nephews and whoever else he felt like. He often let me in on his plans after a few failed guesses on my part. Once, he bought three pairs of needle-nose pliers, a cracked and drained snowglobe, and a bag of confetti to make a giant model diamond ring for his wedding anniversary. So far, my favorite one had been a dog bed and giant felt classroom wall

hangings he transformed into a dinosaur costume for his niece.

“This one is going to my grandson Liam,” he said, handing me a grotesque plush rabbit sewn into a cowboy hat. “Though I’m going to give it new eyes, make it look a little kinder, you know?” He smiled warmly, tilting his head.

“I know,” I said.

He was almost my friend.

Our other regular was of course Bagel Boy. In the radiating light of the store, he looked even more pathetic. His long, straight hair covered his eyes, and his backpack hung down to the backs of his knees.

“You know what I’ve been thinking, Moira,” he’d say, leaning back. “I think you should let me take you out sometime. I know we could find something to do.”

He’d look me up and down. I’d gag. Sometimes I went a little far with my responses.

“Die.”

Judith would listen and scowl from afar. While she was on the phone once, I heard her say it’s sad that I draw that kind of attention to myself, that I’m downright shameless.

But my boss I cared for. He was thirty years my senior and had an oily, scruffy face with permanent smile lines. He talked about his wife often, building her up to be a supermodel-chemist-veterinarian extraordinaire. Of course, Darlene and I had unspoken bets on when he’d admit she wasn’t real.

Whenever I’d tell him about the Bagel Boy, he’d gasp quietly in genuine shock. “Oh my dear Moira, you don’t deserve to be spoken to like that,” he’d say. He’d cradle my head in his arms, tsk him above my head. I could feel his eyes staring out at the store, wondering how someone could be so inconsiderate of my feelings. A sniffle. I could’ve cried.

One day he came up to the registers for an impromptu team meeting.

“Buckle up,” he said, “because we’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Sighs.

“The holidays are almost here and we haven’t even decorated the store yet. We’re falling behind.”

It was mid-December at this point.

“We need to pull in major clientele and get this store booming in sales to close out the year strong. Alright?”

Affirmative murmurs floated around.

“That’s what I like to hear.”

The rest of us knew we wouldn’t be pulling in any newcomers.

After his pep talk he came around behind the registers to fish out a snack from Judith’s drawer while she wasn’t looking. He stopped by my register on his way back out, seeing the layers upon layers of duct tape stuck to the sides. Without hesitation he said, “This is so creative, Moira,” eyes widened, mouth agape. “You’re so talented. You’re really going places.”

I liked the way he said my name, always with care.

I spent my breaks under my register practicing close-up magic. I’d even managed to put up a little curtain for privacy. In the dark, closing my eyes to blink meant crossing them impossibly hard. They often felt strained after those breaks. Maybe I did need contacts. The space wasn’t as cramped as you’d think, though. With the moisture of my breath lingering in the air, it was almost like being in a womb.

Once, I even took a nap and woke up to Darlene rapping her nails on the linoleum behind the closed curtain. When I opened it, she held a lit cigarette in her hand and her eyes were puffy. “Time to work,” she said.

“Got it.”

I patted some peeling tape on my way out.

My girlfriend was very routine. Every Thursday evening at 8:15 she would put on *Top Secret!* starring Val Kilmer because she loved the underwater saloon fight scene. She couldn’t just watch the one scene though, it had to be experienced all the way through, she said. The movie ended at 9:45 exactly, which gave her fifteen minutes to finish up her night routine before bed. She left her daily contact cases in the bathroom sink, her clothes on the floor, and crept into bed. I grabbed a pair of contacts from their box to see what they felt like. Immediately I thought of Judith. *Bitch.*

Only then did I realize how much smaller my eyes were than my

girlfriend's. I stretched my lids as far as I could, just to keep instinctually squinting the second the contact edge touched my lashes. I remembered the look of how she did it, and it seemed like she pressed it so hard onto her eye, pushing her eyeball a little further into its socket. Looking away on my eighth try, I managed to get it in and find it with my pupil, not without a wince and a gag.

I couldn't tell if they made my vision better or worse. They weren't a strong prescription, so they threw me off just enough to feel like I was in a lucid dream. It was interesting though, so I kept them in for a couple hours while I stayed up watching reruns of *Roseanne*.

Taking them out was so much worse. It hadn't occurred to me that I'd have to watch myself pinch my pupil (not actually, but sensually) to get it out. It took about ten minutes and some mild panic to realize that I could slide them out toward the outer edges of my eyes. They were so itchy and watery afterward. I wonder how long it took her to get used to that.

My girlfriend worked as a CPA during the week, then as a community theater actor on weekends, usually in supporting roles in avant-garde productions with few words. We didn't see each other very much, but what time we did spend together was some of the best of my life. She was the cheeriest person I knew. Every month she hosted themed parties for all her closest friends. She threw one party where all the guests were to dress up as problematic characters. Guests with dates were to either come as individual problematic characters or as a problematic fictional couple. She liked to rehearse mini performances for these parties too, either monologues or action scenes involving me but with my parts having few to no lines. For that party, we reenacted the scene in *Interview with the Vampire* where Lestat nearly kills Louis with much physical acting, trying (unsuccessfully) to throw himself up to the ceiling and into walls to sell it.

I appreciated how popular she was, and she jumped at introducing me to her new friends, even though I had a hard time holding a conversation. She made new friends before every party, at the theater and through mutual friends, growing the guest list exponentially every time. I tried to tell her that we only had so much room in our apartment, that any

more people would leave us cramped beyond belief.

She whined. "No," she drew out. She flailed her arms and stomped her foot. "They're my friends. I can't—*won't*—leave anyone out," she said with resolve. Then a stern look.

I nodded. I didn't bring it up again.

She and I disagreed on other things. We both did close-up magic, but she was more advanced, having been practicing since the fourth grade. Hers were mostly card tricks. She didn't like my ideas of tricks.

"It's one where you fool the audience into thinking there's a horse in the room," I said once. "I've been trying it at work. I scared my boss with it."

"No, it doesn't work like that," she said. "You can't just make stuff up. That isn't magic. Why do you even still work there?"

"I just like it." I shrugged.

She looked away, unconvinced.

I smiled, nodded, and kissed her cheek. Then I left the room. On Tuesdays and Thursdays when I'd wake up before noon, I'd walk around the corner to the community rec center to meet with my own close-up magic group that met between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. I was the only person older than twelve in the group, but I didn't mind. Their parents were a little wary at first, keeping watch of us from the other side of the room, until they deemed the meeting safe.

The group understood me. They had bullies at school too and were into crafts like me. Claudia, the second oldest in the group, asked me what it was like to be an adult. I accidentally told her there was a lot of loneliness and that it's hard to make and keep up connections, and she stopped coming to meetings after that.

After the magic group meeting ended, I'd watch video essays in bed for hours. One day off, I watched 16 hours' worth. I learned about the context behind the three SpongeBob movies, the making of The Wizard of Oz movie, and the costume design for all the Oscar nominees for that year. I didn't watch any of the films. I thought, *I'm young; I have time. It's fine.*

Every year around the holidays, an inconceivable number of

people came into the store visibly distraught. It usually had to do with family or time. For some reason, people in the area seemed to get existential at the end of the year. Somehow, Judith thought she made the best shoulder to cry on, so she jumped at every chance to console a weeper. She swore she didn't keep a clean handkerchief just for them, but I know she did. She watched the CCTV too, since a lot of the episodes were triggered by some nostalgia brought on by the stuff we sold. Once, a person came in and lay on a display sofa before removing the cushions and beginning to fold themself into the pullout.

I was hanging up garlands after the meeting with our boss when a woman came in clutching her chest and fell to her knees just ahead of the automatic doors. She didn't even seem like she came to buy anything. Judith rushed over and kneeled next to her, lowering her head in a way I'd find condescending.

"Oh dear," she said. "Oh my sweet, what's wrong?" Her phony concern voice was, I thought, an imitation of our boss. Like she was an alien trying to understand empathy.

The woman proceeded to sob over her words, telling Judith that coming into the store reminded her of her recently deceased parents. They were regulars.

I approached her. "Who were your parents?" I asked.

"My dad's name was—"

"No, no. I don't know names. What did they buy?"

She stopped crying and thought for a moment. "He bought crafts. He was going to give my son a stuffed rabbit this year for Christmas."

My stomach dropped to my shoes, and my eyes glazed over. "I'm sorry for your loss," I said. I walked back to my register as normally as I could.

I crouched under my register and tried not to cry, then began clipping together the shape of the rabbit in the cowboy hat out of green camouflage tape. I pasted it beside the lotus.

I worked the rest of my shift trying to avoid Judith, the only other person working that shift. Thankfully, she left early, leaving me to lock up.

#

I worked on refining my magic act for my girlfriend's next party.

I'd bought a few green parakeets from the PetSmart across town and fashioned a collapsing cage from an old birdcage from the store. I used an old scarf of mine to complete the set. Oh, how I hoped no one had seen *The Prestige*.

Her January party was bald character themed in celebration of Terry Crews, who came to her in a dream, telling her she would soon be recruited to act on Broadway, and I was pumped. I'd had my costume planned out for weeks and I was ready to be in character for the night. I was Roger Smith from *American Dad!*, which was no easy task, painting myself grey and finding an extra-large bald cap to recreate his lightbulb-shaped head with a one-dollar beach ball. Thinking about it now, I could've chosen any of his personas to dress up as, yet I wore only a uniform, grey skinsuit. What was important was that I channeled his confidence. He would perform this trick if he were getting into close-up magic—I just knew it. Inspired by Roger, I invited some liquid courage.

The apartment walls were plastered with large sheets of paper and little tables with instant cameras to take photos and tape them to the papers for a collective photo album. Once guests started showing up, everyone showed up, though no one that I recognized. *Okay, I thought, maybe that's better than knowing someone. If I mess up the trick, the risk is low.*

I was social all night. I initiated conversation without my girlfriend facilitating, albeit exclusively about shows and movies from at least a decade ago. I came up with things to say even after they responded. I was ready to end the night with a bang.

Around midnight I collected my props in front of the fireplace in the living room and called everyone (really about a third of the party) to gather 'round on the rug. More exactly, I shouted, in due inebriated fashion, "Hear ye, hear ye! Come one and all; step right up and see..." I gagged, continued, "the incredulous magic of the great Moiritanius." I realized that it sounded like I mashed up my name and Mauritania and Mauritius. I ignored it. Not my finest moment of the night.

I swung my arm out from behind me to reveal a birdcage containing the one little parakeet. All eyes were locked on me. I lowered my head and widened my eyes, mysteriously, I thought, making eye

contact with everyone, one by one. They seemed giddy, though it may have been drugs. "I...am going to make this ordinary bird...disappear!" The group clapped and whooped.

I readied the cage between my hands, reminding myself that I knew how to do the trick. I asked the crowd to count to three. On three, I snapped the cage down flat. The bird was not seen or heard.

The room gasped and fell silent. Most hands were over mouths beneath wide eyes. I paused. I couldn't have them believing I killed the bird for even a moment, so I showed them the mechanism of the trick. I reinstated the cage's form and showed the crowd a door at the back of it through which I pulled the bird on a string into my sleeve when I slammed the cage down. I pulled the bird out from my sleeve. The crowd bellowed in approval. They patted me on the back. I was glowing.

My girlfriend didn't like it, and we ended up breaking up later that night.

At work, I asked Darlene about her weekend, telling her about my trick and she seemed surprised, almost confused. Judith, of course, stood back in judgment.

Our boss walked into the store with an air of determination, like he had to prepare himself to say what he was going to say. He told us we didn't do nearly as well as he'd hoped this holiday season, and that now that our customer base has taken a big hit with the craft-man's death, the store would be closing in a month. Darlene was pissed. She grabbed her bag and stormed out of the store. Judith left the room to call her husband. I stood at my register and let on a bittersweet smile.

The Mystery of the Ocean: SOLVED!!!

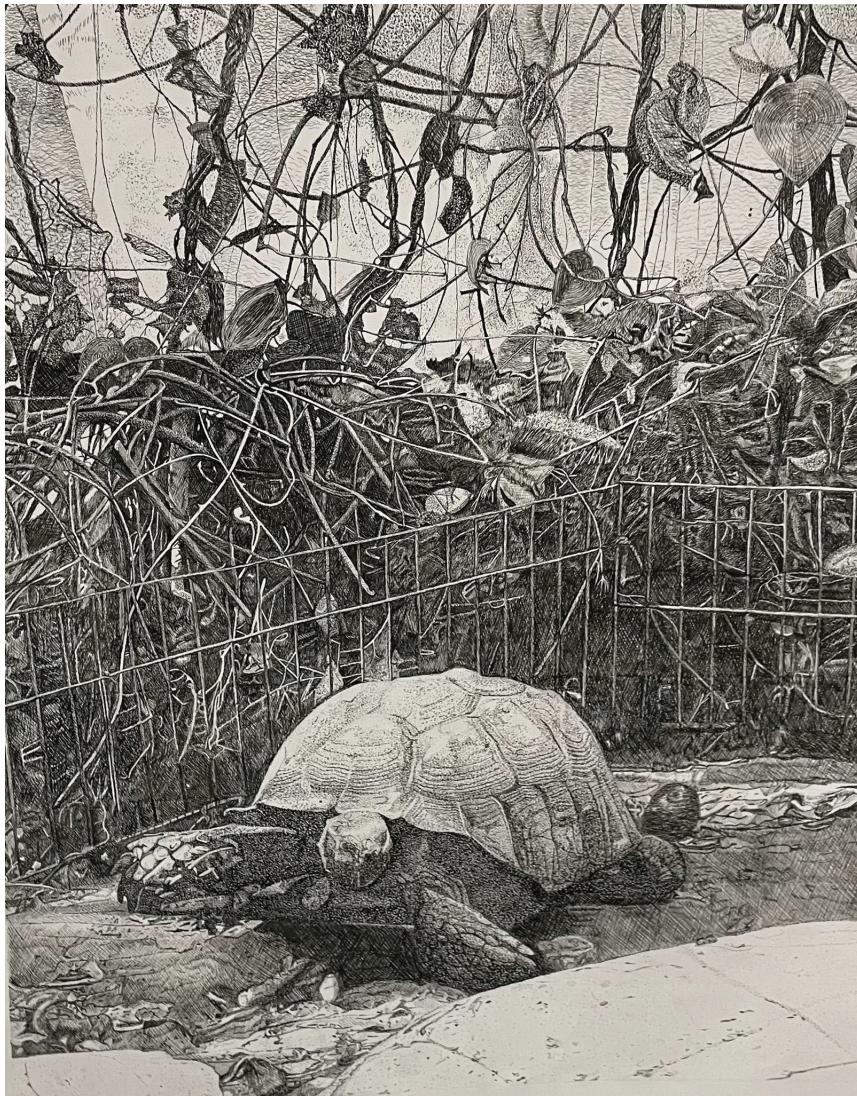
Conner Snider

I cried when I learned about it. 507 years, the oldest known animal in the world. Just to be killed by being put in a freezer. The scientists didn't even know how old it was until they could count the rings on its shell, like a redwood tree felled to just become someone's deck. The mightiest of flora demoted to hosting bbqs. *How could they do this*, I thought! All humans do is destroy. I got really emo about it. I thought about happy little Háfrun filtering away for 507 years. Did it realize it was dying? How ironic that it lived in Iceland and then was frozen to death. A little funny, too.

And then I remembered that it was a clam. Which is not to diminish it. Clams are perfectly respectable things to be. But clams don't have brains. This clam had no sense of self. It had a central nervous system, a foot, gills, hell, even teeth. But this clam did not have clam friends. It didn't have a clam wife—or husband, it died before the scientists could politely inquire about its sexual and gender identities. This clam never despaired over the suddenly dropping temperature after it was put into the freezer to die so the scientists could carbon date its shell to learn about the climate patterns about the world. It never thought, *Alas, if only they knew my venerable age! Then they would surely regret snuffing out the long candle of my years!* It was like, and then not.

Turtle in the South

Leah Reichlin



To E.D., Keeper of Light and Darkness

Gabriella Vance

There's a certain slant of light,
Autumn dusk—
that liberates, like the heave
of windchimes—
Collateral beauty, it gives us—
found after the chimes stop singing.

In the silence there is noise—
Only perceived through feeling.
A feeling understood by the wind.

A certain slant of light—
Trickles deeper than lust,
Like water seeping through sand
Permeating each grain—
Advancing towards the horizon,
Filling the empty moat within.

It is a stamp of hope—
Like breath that fills empty
Spaces where dusk and dawn
Converse in violet rays.

As it nears, earth listens—
The sun stands still.
When it leaves it is like
The absence of the owl—
Perching underneath.

I wonder if you felt this hour—
The weight and chill of it.
Each word a kind of light left behind,
The promise of more—
beyond the veil of now.

In Charlottesville

Will Hancock

“You must not believe me when I say there’s nothing else to love in this world.”

— Cate Marvin

Spend an August sweating from the chapel
to the cemetery, from Jeff Hall to West Lawn,
and brick by brick you’ll understand the futility
of scouring the browning grass for a dewdrop
in the afternoon sun, the one from the morning

with holly-green eyes & beaten brown bangs,
the one with a labyrinth of conviction raveled
in a subtle southern drawl. She finds me mid-coin toss,
Sweet/Monticello/Bitter/Jefferson turning in the air.
I flip again & again until I lose her in the grass.

On a bar patio that evening, she asks,
Was it obvious? Did you even know?
We laugh at the delay. We laugh at the decay.
Verdigris on a nickel, verdigris on a knuckle,
heartbreak crushed fickle, clenched in a chuckle.

Notes on Love (Sunday Evening)

Jackson Miller

i could write you
a poem before we sit cross-legged
on frilled picnic blankets
or taste Wednesday's salmon,
but i'd still be imagining a name, a face, a middle—
and could one begin with beginnings?

before i turned twelve
my sister & i spit cherry seeds
far into earth's tangle
and from that bramble
rose a thick tree—oak?—
the one we left behind when we moved.

on the first night in our new house,
my family ate dinner on the floor
brown boxes became full shelves
the new house smelled like fresh wood
(there is a tree i used to climb,
in the front yard. a woman passing by
saw me reading on its branches.)

lover, i have not held you
yet. Some Sunday evenings ago,
in a California apartment, my roommates' Vans were strewn about
some of us shirtless, brushing teeth, drying dishes,
moving in sleepy, pre-week anticipation. Six of us in all, not yet grown,
growing. i do not know your soul's quiet, hiding spaces
yet. let me ready myself, let me note which flowers
strangers in the elevator carry, let me learn to learn,
to lean on the One who already loves you
and even if you don't exist
in any (near) future,
now is still a beginning, isn't it?

Thank you for reading.

*We appreciate your support for the literary arts
at a time when storytelling and empathy
hold incredible, world-shaping power.*

