



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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Cover Art

27 Mangos, *Saidy Burch*

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Hymn to El Santo Taqueria

Catherine Butler

We don't pray to the masked saint
even though he tastes like God,
even though his face is muraled
and his body is nailed
on the sides of our place of worship.

*Santo nuestro,
luchador enmascarado,
ruega por nosotros, pecadores,*

We don't pray to the masked saint
when we baptize our quesadillas in cotija,
when we consecrate our margaritas into the blood
and our swaying bodies into the body.

*ahora, y en la hora
de la llegada de nuestros platos.*

We don't pray to the masked saint
but through him, to give thanks
for proof of an Almighty,
to repent for not believing our tongues
when they recognized God before our eyes.

Luchador enmascarado,

santo de las quesadillas,

so with cardboard warmth on our hands,
by the powers vested in our stomachs
and the wrinkles of our grease-stained receipts,
we bow our heads:

*ruega por nosotros que vemos el cielo en ti
y reconciamos nuestros pecados
con pollo y queso derretido.*

Waterfront when it sizzles

Kay-Ann Henry

make your way south
emerge from the slipper
beaten dust and sodden air
with your tomatoes
plantains, green banana,
papaw, cake soap, rags
and other fandangles
smell the
possibility of seawater
be uprooted and settled
by the winds' romp
know that it's going to be alright
a couple in a glittering embrace
tucked away under a concrete enclosure
as if they are seeking refuge
their features opaque
but their perfumed energy calls out to me
I peer and peak until their faces
reveal something familiar, something queer
we are here too
a man in his humble white van
sprinkled in market dust
blares I Knew I Loved You by Savage Garden
a song from my first year of life
cars, taxis, and daffodil-colored buses
ripple by yelling at each other

in their own creolized language
one two three four fishermen
start to pool
armed with their stringed instruments
ready to play with the local school
they stare at the casual coronation
of a woman walking by in a
metallic blue dress
I stare too
her skin like electricity
her shoulders softening as
the breeze passes through them
everyone comes here to leave
something behind
trash becomes embroidery
despair transforms into hope
lovers and the loved
assorted families
workers leaving their 9-5
are scattered along Kingston's coast
the soon-spring sun wedges
comfortably among the clouds
that hang low like fruit
we witness the seagulls' ritual
dive then grab then soar then repeat
small boats and industrial ships
duel each other on the sea courtyard
the airport monumenting in the distance
coming and going
seeing and watching.



Greyhound
Black



14



(Tim the greyhound)



Jim the Crow-dog, Cherry Hybrid





1951 Stardust, Cherry Hybrid

Miles Runs the Sky, Cherry Hybrid



Red Azalea

Christopher Madrid

I whispered my sweet nothings
My needs and wants and desires
My sweet nothings
Read in books repeated in words
And she whispered nothing

We weren't made for one another
One's body is two alike
We are the same each other
And our words patter like rain
I want us to be each other

Toil the fields withering away
The dirt loose and feet grained
Pray for the Reds running their way
The soil slips you collect snakes
And I worship you building away

Under mosquito nets our blood
What I understand is love
Mingles in the breast of blood
So hungry we watch closely none
Rose blooms remind us of blood

I can't stand her the traitor
And my friend I wish I was a man for

Says: "I'll tell the traitor"
And she goes behind the bricks
And tells the traitor

Now the Reds caught them together
Mingled into one another
I swipe mosquitoes away from her
Our blood bond withered
And she gets jailed with the traitor

I sold my soul for a position
A long undefined tradition
The chairman marks his position
I wish in vain love is omniscient

As I curse in vain my position.

Tiramisu

Juliette Shenassa

You sit next to her at the bar inside the dimly lit restaurant. The cocoa crushed velvet of her cowl-neck dress coats your throat like powder, stealing your speech. Her lady fingers are already encircling an espresso martini, and you notice that her coffee painted nails match yours.

Her caffeinated aura gives you the jitters, but you introduce yourself, and she smiles with sugar teeth. Her greeting carries a tone sweet and mild like mascarpone, and you're hooked on the flavor faster than you can reply.

You savor tales of her travels to Europe and beyond, the inflections in her voice as she demonstrates her knowledge of Italian, how she listens with sweet earnestness as you describe yourself, the flow of your conversation as smooth as the jazz notes wafting through the bar's radio.

Silver spoons clink like your shared laughter over a split tiramisu for dessert, and as you finish, she brushes a dusting of cocoa off your ivory blouse, lady fingers over cream.

You take her hand. Fingers with coffee nails

intertwine. You look into her chocolate eyes.
The distance between you and her closes, and
as your layers come together, you whisper,
I think you're my new favorite dessert.

Grammy got hit by a car so we could have microwaveable chicken pot pie for dinner

Remi Turner

and with our once-frozen pools of gravy goodness—
carrot & pea synchronized swimmers, came
a side of Diet Pepsi and divorced wife. Waiting with fork and
knife for another Grammy saves the day story. She sends
instant dinner into orbit, pressing the button:
6 minutes on high with
chipped coral nail polish. Distracting grandchildren from broken
bones
while applying Mary Kay with a slinged arm, she smiles back
at her radioactive reflection.

Mommy tells tales of mommy's
mommy raising mommy. Our chicken pot pie Grammy. How
she brought up those babies in the
trailer parks of West Virginia, where girls couldn't kiss
boys until they turned eighteen. Remembers weekends spent
beachside,
sewing cheerleader costumes with pruned hands. Stopping at
the store on the way home, plucking spare change from
bottom of bag dust bunnies so them kids didn't realize daddy

was drunk. All summer Grammy lied—the summer before Grammy said to daddy, divorce.

Grammy taught how to be a fool. Preaching a fool's sermon to protect from the hurt that leaves a nasty taste, like the curdling milk sunbathing on the kitchen counter. Teaching the things grandpas and daddies forgot to, making up for the losses of men.

Sneaking out of the house armed with sheer tights, cigarettes, and southern tongue sass, she chased new fellas to make use of and Marlboro Gold sunsets while her babies slept sweetly at home in springy cot havens.

Babies became their own mommys— sisters with daddy issues since there own daddy ain't act like no daddy ever should. Passing on wives tales of keeping an extra bar of soap under the sink for the slippery mouths that needed lathering. Open palm spanks temporarily burn but lye on tongues cause curse words to wash away forever.

Building armies of female stonewalls that allow getting away with telling lies that don't sting but never crossing the street without looking.

Nicky Rolls a Double

Sarah Riveron

Nicky wakes up rebreathing the rot of five years into his body, choking on air that's more dust than oxygen. His first thought is leftovers from before he was dead. Kill that bitch. He is going to kill that bitch.

The thought comes alive inside of Nicky like something animal, the sheer seething heat of it frothing up into his mouth, filling the space behind his teeth with the sour taste of copper. He coughs, once. Feels it dislodge a tooth that rattles off into the darkness somewhere, gone forever.

It's so tight in here. And so hot, too, now that his heart is pumping again, and the cold stone of the mausoleum is refracting the warmth of his own body back towards him. Nicky groans, and presses himself backwards, then forwards when he feels no give. Backwards again, quicker this time, and then tries to thrash, possessed by panic, but finds himself too restricted. He gulps in a great, heaving breath of air that he probably cannot afford, and tries to keep himself still in the face of the knowledge that there's nowhere to go. He's been buried alive. His wife has buried him alive.

The sound of his panicked breathing, knifing in and out of his body. The womb-like dark, which betrays nothing.

The anger again, in the absence of all other sensation. The anger which gives itself body, in its intensity.

The anger has a hack-job haircut the color of blonde box-dye, which he'd helped inflict. The anger has a lower-back tattoo, and a name like a song he can't remember the words to, but whose melody

is intuitive. He hums it now, low.

The pain in his skull, which he'd hardly noticed upon waking, is beginning to build to a dull roar. Nick hasn't had water in — he's not sure how long. His body is screaming out for its basic needs. It's getting harder to breathe. He's running out of air in his little marble box.

Nicky is a man of slow, impenetrable notions. So said his wife — hammered it into his head whenever he gave her the chance. He comes to a decision first, and figures out how to wade there, second. But he wades there. He remembers thinking that, through the thin cellophane surface of her fake congratulations, his wife had resented his ability to follow through without a plan.

Nicky's always had luck like the devil.

He shuffles his feet, and the slab of stone beneath them shifts.

Nicky is going to get out of here. That's the first thing. Graves aren't built to keep things in.

And then he's going to get his hands around his wife's long neck, and wing it from there.

Ten miles from the cemetery and five years deep in a bad dream, Eleanor wakes up from a nightmare with a jolt. She foregoes the performative drama of sitting up and screaming. She holds herself still in the bed, betraying no weakness to the shadows that amass, mute and watchful, in the corners of the room. Focuses on the electric hum of the fan, cooling the sweat on her upper lip.

A dead hand reaches up from the foot of the bed to circle around her ankle, a gold band winking at her from the ring finger. Eleanor kicks out — screams so loud she wakes herself up for real, and scares the crap out of the dog.

The terrier gives an indignant, stressed bark. It hurls its little body off the bed, and goes careening into the dark.

“I will sell you for a doberman!” Eleanor shouts after it, meaning, come back, please. Come back right now. It is insufferably dark and hot in here and I don’t want to be alone. She can’t hear the dog’s nails as it moves down the hallway. It may as well have disappeared into a black hole the moment hit the floor.

Eleanor waits for her eyes to focus in the dark, paying heed to her breathing, and entirely failing to reign it back in to a normal rhythm. After a full minute of agony, she can make out the popcorn ceiling, and all its familiar irregularities. It helps.

She doesn’t even have to get up to go for the tarot cards. They’re a watered down form of fortune telling, compared to the straight-to-the-vein, IV hit of a nightmare. Eleanor smacks her left arm, just below where she imagines a tourniquet might make the skin taut.

She starts to laugh, but the AC dies halfway. It gets too quiet, and the sound of her own voice starts to make her uncomfortable. She cuts herself off.

She hopes a twenty is enough, adjusting for inflation.

Nicky’s bones groan with the strain of standing upright for the first time in five years. He feels a bit like an old, unloved house, crumbling from within, starting with the foundation. Nick’s earthly positions amount to a sum total of five items. His shoes and his suit, which is dusty and not at all tight, like new clothing ought to be. It’s worn out slightly at the seams, actually, like he’s been thrashing all through his long, long sleep. The other three he found in the breast pocket of his dress shirt upon patting himself down, hoping for a wallet but expecting, at worst, a maggot: A folded piece of notebook paper with the perforated edge still attached, his wife’s wedding ring, and twenty dollars cash.

Keeping the light on for you, his wife has scratched onto the paper in a lunatic scrawl, half-cursive, all mess. Unintelligible to anyone but him, probably. Possibly mistaken for a love note by anyone but him, as well.

The anger like a knife in his body, lodged in his sternum, just missing the heart. He reaches for the phantom pain, and is surprised to feel his shirt dip into a cavity that hadn't been there, the last time he remembers being conscious. He makes to push his fingers into it as far as they'll go, but chickens out when he feels something not of his own body shift against his nail and go wriggling away, deeper into the safe dark of his flesh.

A shudder of sheer revulsion. Horror at himself — he'd always thought he was handsome, privately, no matter what insecurities he'd convinced himself it looked humble to carry.

What she has reduced him to.

He hates that fucking witch girl, good god. In a way that is erotic and profound, and goes shivering up from the hole in his chest all the way to his fevered brain. He hated her little candles, in his previous life, which stunk up the house with the scent of minty wood and lavender. Her stupid superstitions — Mostly he hated the smug look on her fucking face, her pug nose wrinkling up into itself, whenever something she dreamed broke its way out of her rancid egg-head, and came bursting into their lives, half-formed and hideous. His father, knee deep in an affair. Their friends, one of those couples that was annoying about their love, but Nicky had never wanted to see them like that, separating and snapping at each other over the bones of the life they'd built together. The golden retriever his broken sister relied on for emotional support, smeared into red paste on the road.

Can't you ever dream anything good? he remembers asking.

She'd looked at him and said, *Well, I dreamed about you.* He had wanted to take her eyes out just to stop her seeing anything, ever again. Then he realized he'd probably have to go at the brain itself, just to make sure he got at the source.

Nicholas realizes he remembers what her eyes looked like, which brings him to the rest of her face. Which brings him to the rest of everything.

The black spot on the surface of his mind lifts, revealing beneath it memory after memory, like a thousand grubs beneath a rock on the forest floor.

His hatred finds purpose, name, and home.

I am going to kill that fucking bitch Eleanor, he thinks, no commas, all rushed, all true, and probably all deserved.

Eleanor sets the gun down on the kitchen counter. She keeps hold of the knife, though. For its sentimental value.

It's been hours, and she's beginning to get impatient. How long does it take a man to walk ten miles? Or to hail a cab? She hadn't left him the money for nothing, the bastard just lacked forethought. Really, now. As directionless in death as he'd been in life.

Eleanor massages her left hand, working the ring finger. She'd buried her wedding band along with Nick, but the cold press of its weight never relented. The tan line never faded, even after years of charring her skin in the alien brutality of a sub-tropical sun.

Eleanor is going to make him eat the fucking ring, this time around. See where that gets her.

She's staring out into the backyard through the little window above the kitchen sink. It's the impenetrable darkness of a new moon outside, but she knows what's out there without needing to see. Just sweeping acres of nothingness — waist-high grasses, broken only by

the occasional pine tree. She doesn't go out there much, anymore. Nick had been the one to cut the paths through the tall weeds, and make the land walkable. Initially, she'd been keen to let nature reclaim the place out of spite. Now, she's just afraid of the coral snakes.

She takes a long, deliberate drink from her cup, espresso and vodka, accidentally too hot, because she forgot to chill the brew. Eleanor gags bile and coffee back up into her mouth, and swallows it neatly back down.

The truth is, she starts to admit to herself, but ultimately does not. It would not, at this point, serve Eleanor to know what the truth is.

She settles for her side of the story, since no one's around to tell Nick's, and he'd been a ponderously boring storyteller, anyway.

The truth is, Nick's death had been an accident. Originally, in any case. He'd gotten home late, and she hadn't bothered looking for lipstick on his collar — did it matter whether he'd been cheating, or did it only matter that Eleanor thought he'd been cheating? She'd launched right into the same fight they'd been having for the better part of a decade, dinner cold in the fridge. She'd had hours to stew, and was prepped and ready for the good ol' routine of fight, fall into bed, forget by the morning. The misery inside her ate at her body unless she pushed it out her mouth and in Nick's direction, shiny verbal daggers slicing the air.

Maybe an hour into the dance and Eleanor was finally putting away the dishes, slamming them down onto counters, away into drawers, every harsh movement a punctuation mark. She loved this — seeing how far she could push him into his bubble of silence. He'd been quiet for twenty minutes, by this point. But Eleanor couldn't stop going, alternately yelling and keeping deadly calm, letting the words possess her.

Eleanor wondered where Nicholas went, when he receded. How charming — that there existed a part of Nick that belonged entirely to himself. That he kept a secret, even from her. The thought was quaint, until it lingered long enough to make her angry.

Eleanor's sharp words petered out as she lost stamina. Nicholas gave her no reason to continue speaking.

The silence hung over their little yellow kitchen, broken only by Eleanor's violence against the cookware as she washed, dried, stored. The scent of well-water, all mineral, getting everywhere. She was being careless, that night. Not turning off the tap in between toweling dry one plate, and starting on another.

She felt it before she heard it. Later she'd think that she probably did hear something — or see or feel something that didn't consciously register. Maybe he'd already begun to move, and had cast some faint shadow that her animal hindbrain fixed upon, or disturbed the barest column of air in her direction.

Her stomach pushed aside every other organ in her body on its way into her throat. Her muscles seized. Eleanor's body was telling her that there was a predator standing behind her, with intent to kill.

Eleanor's body was telling her that her husband wanted to hurt her.

Eleanor was ready as she turned around, great big carving knife still slick with soap clutched in one hand, to scream at Nick, and dare him to do it, fucking do it! Do it, I dare you, you don't have the balls! Except he'd been closer than she anticipated, and she was already high off the fury and the fear, so it was actually more instinct than anything else that made her flip the knife outward, and let Nick walk himself straight onto it, the silver body disappearing into his sternum.

The look on Nick's face. It's the only part she'd never been able to erase, and override with her own version of things.

The warm, slow beat of the blood — Eleanor looked down. Leave the knife inside, she remembers thinking. You should always leave the foreign object inside a puncture wound. Increases the odds of survival. Then — it's in his heart, you stupid girl. It's in his heart. She looked up again. His *face*.

Eleanor opened her mouth. She wanted to say sorry. She wanted to say I love you and I'm sorry and holy shit somebody call 9-1-1. Somebody.

Something else came out of her, unbidden.

"Did you think I was going to let you hit me?"

He slumped over her, before long — all 6 foot even of him. It hurt her to hold him up, so she gave one good jerk of her torso into his. He crumpled to the floor, still wheezing, bleeding even faster.

There was something in Nick's eyes, at the moment of his death, that was unidentifiable to her, even after the ten years she'd spent learning him — every line in every expression. Eleanor's knife remained in her hands, pointed outwards, while she forced herself back into her body by degrees.

She looked down at her hands. Made herself look down, so the full weight of what was happening would sink into her. Made herself hold the knife's silver gaze. The color of the blood. She was briefly overcome by the urge to lick it clean. Eleanor tossed her jewelry into the pond outside, and prayed it'd be eaten by a catfish. Eleanor turned over sofas, and pulled out drawers wholesale. Eleanor threw piles of clothing all over the bedroom floor. All of this — after she'd called the police, already, banking on the 30- minute response time out to the middle of nowhere, so Nick's body wouldn't be cold when they arrived. That would be a bad look.

Eleanor took years clear off her life with the agonizing scream she let out to the operator, and the following hysterics, which weren't entirely unreal.

When she'd gone to soak her hands in her husband's blood, to affect the wife who'd tried to save her love by pressing her hands to the hopeless wound, she found them red enough already.

The knife she put under the pillow. She slept with it there for five straight years of uninterrupted nightmares about unfinished business, figuring the best way to kill a corpse was with the weapon that succeeded the first time around.

She'd bought a gun, too, though. Eleanor is nothing if not practical.

In the present, Eleanor knows it must smell like well-water, again. She's been running the tap over her left hand, ice-cold, trying to numb her finger, which insists on throbbing with the weight of a ring she hasn't worn in half a decade. It must smell like the old blood, too, actually. The grout had soaked it up like a desert drinking in rain. Eleanor had never been able to get it out, fully. She'd killed her sense of smell with the sheer volume of ammonia dedicated to trying. She shuts off the water, drying her hand on the front of her shirt.

The night is so dark her eyes are registering the shade of blue that hides just beneath the deepest blackness, like faint luster. Even the faintest flash of a firefly's bulb would stand out like a neon sign saying *here, here!*

You would think Nick would know this, after a lifetime of living in this house with her. But perhaps Eleanor has colored her memory of him with nostalgia, and is remembering him as more intelligent than he was. For the past ten minutes, the low, interior house lights — the bulb on the back porch had burned out three months ago, and she'd never bothered to change it — have been

reflecting off of something. Snatches of color in the dark as whatever it is gets closer to the house.

Eleanor takes another deep drink from her mug. It burns at the back of her throat, as much from the heat as the liquor. She relaxes her eyes against the urge to squint, and waits.

There. Again. Not ten feet from the unlocked back door. It's only in her field of vision for a fraction of a second before it disappears again.

Eleanor kills her drink, and gets ready to dance.

Nicky drops his ring in the dirt. He'd left Eleanor's back in the cemetery — chucked it and her note into an open, empty grave, the dirt piled high in wait. He'd kept the twenty and walked here. Needed to think. Needed to make sure his rage had the staying power to carry him through the violence it demanded.

It's held up so far.

The circulation hasn't fully come back into his fingers, yet. He looks down at his hand, and flinches to see the spiderweb of veins, a dried-out horror show so close to the translucent surface. He looks away again. Back up to the window.

Eleanor's head is facing his direction.

It is an exercise in willpower, standing perfectly still, but he lived in that house, too. He knows the light doesn't reach far enough to reveal him.

Her face — dark like the moon, hovering in the window, unmoving. She's backlit, so he can't see her eyes. But he can feel them.

He thinks she must shake it off, cause she pushes away from the window and makes for the living room, flicking the kitchen light off on her way. But then the living room light goes, followed by the

one in the bedroom.

Nicky's anger tempers into steel. He looks down at the wedding ring in the dirt, which must've been catching the light, the last twenty or so feet up to the house. Throwing it back towards his wife, whose lupine gaze misses nothing, ever. And especially not now.

He carefully positions one shiny loafer over the ring and sinks it down into the ground with his heel, where it disappears from his life forever.

Nicky looks up again, and studies the dark house. Inside, his wife is moving. He tries, not for the first time, to see like she does — peer into the future to anticipate her movements. What door she's going to try to run through. If she's going to try to run, at all. But she's slippery, even this version of her that lives in his head, so violently unpredictable as to scare him, sometimes.

Nicholas studies the house for one heartbeat longer. Two. Then decides his intuition and his wife can go fuck themselves. She was never half as mysterious as she'd have liked to be. They've been married for a decade, and no part of her is secret from him.

Eleanor's got the gun in the waistband of her jeans and the knife in her dominant hand before she even leaves the kitchen and sets herself to the business of making the house go dark. Next order of business is the house alarm, which she sets every night like clockwork. She opens the front door to trigger it, wincing instinctively at the resulting shriek, before she slams it closed again. She doesn't lock it. There's no point.

See no evil, hear no evil, Eleanor thinks, but evil won't be able to see or hear her, either. Eleanor knows Nick, so she knows he's going to try and get in through the back sliding glass doors, which

she has left unlocked for him. It'll take him ten minutes, minimum, to build

up the courage to test and see if he can open them. By which point she will have positioned herself in the living room arm chair, and leveled her gun at his head. If that doesn't work, well —

Something goes flying past her in the dark, brushing against her leg. Eleanor's whirling and slashing but hitting nothing, and then she remembers the idiot terrier, who must be absolutely freaking out at the wailing of the burglar alarm. She sighs through her nose. If it's got any sense, it'll go hide somewhere safe, and wait until it's all over.

She sags back against the front door, the alarm so loud in the dark that it takes longer than usual to settle her heart rate. Ten minutes are almost up. She should think about getting into position.

Because the alarm is going, Eleanor doesn't hear the rattling of the doorknob at her back, but she does feel the vibration. Something curdles inside of her.

When Nicholas opens the front door, she can't turn around fast enough — can't even see him in the complete darkness that she's created. She steps wrong — no — trips over the animal that's sprinting like crazy back and forth across the house — and falls down hard, her ankle twisting beneath her until it pops. No pain, at least initially. Then it hits her in the teeth.

She spins around, facing the front door now, but still can't make out Nicholas. Against her better judgement, Eleanor drops the knife she's kept hold of in the fall and scrambles, at first unsuccessfully, for the gun. She heaves it up — can't see him to aim, but as soon as she feels his hands, she'll shoot.

The light on the front porch, which she hadn't bothered to turn off, works only intermittently — some nights on, some nights off. It had remained resolutely dead for the past week, and she

thought it had finally kicked the bucket.

Of course, it comes on now, in a blaze of cinematic glory. It's just her luck — no. It's Nick's.

Her husband looks brutally handsome in the suit she'd picked out for him. She'd done his tie, too. But he's loosed it, somewhere on the way here. It's hanging limp around his neck in a slash of red, moving faintly in the breeze. The cuffs of his pants are muddied. He is a thinking being, Eleanor realizes, at once and with painful acuity. My husband who I thought of as a particularly large dog is actually a human being.

"Did you walk here?" she asks, but Nick can't hear it. The alarm is screaming, screaming — the dog shoots out the door like a rocket, but doesn't go far. Nicholas reaches one arm in the doorway and thrills to see Eleanor flinch, but he's only punching in the code to make it shut up. She hasn't changed it. The alarm cuts out.

The dog lingers by his feet. Emits a long, low whine.

He can't stop looking at Eleanor. She can't stop looking at Nick.

He's lit from the top down. She can only really make out the tip of his nose, his mouth. His eyes are all darkness.

She pulls the hammer back, slowly. The pain in her ankle's so bad it's making her eyes water, but she doesn't blink.

"Did you walk here?" she tries again. It's got her particular brand of disdain woven into the tone. Nicky's not sure if he can smile. He can't feel his mouth.

Nicholas is smiling but it looks wrong. Eleanor wants to vomit. Her finger twitches on the trigger.

"Honey — " Nicholas starts.

Eleanor fires. She squeezes her finger against the trigger until she can't stand the kickback — which turns out to be after three

shots. One misses his head by a mile, but by the second she's aiming for his torso, bigger target, and lands both.

It's not like last time. Nick doesn't fall. And there's no blood.

Eleanor's fingers spasm on the grip. She briefly considers pointing it at the dog, but she's got to come away from this thinking that even she isn't that bad. And Nicholas would have to love the dog, for it to work. She's not really sure if he's capable of loving anything. The porch light gives a half-assed flicker. Dims, but doesn't die.

Eleanor lowers the gun, then drops it entirely.

"Say something," she says, hands hanging in the empty space between her splayed legs. She feels, for all the world, like an unloved marionette, strings cut. She's not even sure she's angry anymore. What a horrible thing to realize, when you've still got a husband to kill for the second time.

Eleanor brings one hand up to cover the bottom half of her face. She looks at Nick, whose eyes she still can't see.

She's so afraid that realizing it makes her break into the nervous laughter that Nick had always taken as mockery.

Her husband takes one deliberate step forward. Eleanor stops laughing.

"Say something," she says again. Nicholas does not.

Eleanor wants to cry. From Nick, not from the pain. She made a promise to herself, though, a while back — not to cry in front of him, anymore. It'd been a cheap way to buy sympathy.

She swallows, thickly.

Nick is stunned by her, as always. First time he's seen her in five years and she looks no different — a little more haggard around the eyes, maybe. But still beautiful. Like what she'd done to him hadn't rotted her from the inside at all.

She looks kind of frail, from up here. Nick's never thought of her as frail, before — not with all that anger making her look so big. But now it strikes him that he really could kill her. Nick takes another step. He's inside, now.

The dog whines again from behind him like warning. Eleanor reaches out to her left, agonizingly slowly, all the while staring fixedly at Nick, like he's a wild animal she doesn't want to startle into motion. It's a last ditch, blind attempt to save her own life — but her fingertips scrape the handle of the knife, first try. She draws it into her lap, the point whispering across the floor.

"Say something," Eleanor says again. The dog barks, then warbles into a low, mournful howl.

Illuminated by the porch light, which filters into the house from around his body, Eleanor looks the smallest that Nick has ever seen her. And — he squints. Yeah. Her face betrays absolutely nothing, because Eleanor was born and will die as a steel trap. But Nick can see it anyway, because he knows his wife.

Eleanor is about to start crying for real. And because she's sad, not because she's hurt. Because he's scaring her.

I don't want to do this anymore, Nicholas thinks, and it all goes out of him, all at once. The love and the anger together, chasing each other out into the night.

Eleanor sees this. It makes her want to scream. Not even at him — just out loud. She wants to start to cry, so he'll come fix it.

There's a slumping to her husband's shoulders that suggests an ending.

Her mind makes no coherent thoughts. She cannot find any more words with which to hurt him, piss him off enough to make him stay. She's out of practice. She's used up all her best lines. Her mind is making animal panic, instead of words. This is a deviation

from the regular routine. This is not fight, fall into bed, forget by morning.

The look on his face. Same as it was in the moment of his death, as he waned out of the world.

Nicky looks relieved.

Eleanor puts her face in her hands and starts to cry in earnest, catching terrible glimpses of her husband through her parted fingers.

Nicholas reaches down inside himself with both hands, and strangles to death the rising urge to hold her. He takes a step back — lands on the porch.

It seems to go swiftly, from Eleanor's point of view, though Nick backs away as slowly and deliberately as when he'd first approached. He's trying not to startle his wife, who looks as wild and hungry as she did when he first met her, which is both horrific and beautiful. He has no time to dwell on that, at present. Eleanor looks like she might burst into a flurry of action, at any moment. Go to crawl away, strike out at him, or worst of all — cling to his pant leg, press her face to his thigh, and beg him not to go.

Her large wet eyes, leveled at him. She drags her hands down her face, only covering her nose and mouth in the same way she does when she laughs.

"Fucking say something," she says, and it comes out muffled because she's choking on snot. She barely makes an attempt to plaster a thin veil of anger over her desperation. She seems suddenly pathetic, to Nicks. All that maddening power over him that she'd had — where did it go? Like pus, draining away from a wound.

She really does seem so goddamn small, from this angle. He's got to do it now. In one fluid movement, or else he's not going to do it at all. Nick pivots on a heel and walks down the gravel driveway

towards the road without saying goodbye to his wife, out loud or in his head. His dog gives one final bark, then comes tearing after him, running in a circle around him as he walks, before shooting off ahead. Nick slips his hands into the pockets of his suit jacket as he goes, groping for the twenty. If he turns around here, even for a look back, he's going to go help his wife off the floor, and into a chair. He's going to make her tea, and he's going to say sorry. And she's going to say sorry, whether or not she means it. And they're going to have five minutes where they love each other more than they resent each other, for which he will pay with several days of pain. Nick would like nothing more than to turn around. If Eleanor asks him to, he's going to turn around.

He runs his thumb over the edge of the twenty, giving himself a paper cut that does not bleed. He could hold off on the cab, actually. Save the money for a bottle of water and a pack of beef jerky to share with the dog.

Nick does not look back at his wife. Nick decides he's going to thumb a ride. He watches as the dog banks left at the end of the driveway, breaking into a full-fledged sprint as it hits the dirt road.

Nick reaches the border of the property and turns to follow.

Back in the main house, still on the floor, Eleanor feels an invisible pressure slacken around her ring finger.

She'd thought about a few things, in the eternity spent watching Nick's back recede. Thought about firing the gun, which might've been loud enough to shock him into spinning. Or hucking the kitchen knife at him — sending it flying from her inexperienced hand to spiral through the night, end over end, until it lodged squarely in his back and put him down again. But that would mean Eleanor was okay with things being over.

She's glad Nick didn't say goodbye.

The porch light gutters twice, and dies with a mechanical click.

earth signs

Giorgia Cattaneo

You are the world after it has rained, and my humidity hangs a heavy
hug
where sweet grass lives with its dewdrop tongue.
Warmth burning from my cheeks,
an everlasting autumn birthed from my chest,
there, lives a hearth you once fueled.
I was created in the sun, the child of Apollo, out from the sea.
You arrived within the gloom of a winter spring.
I thrive in Fahrenheit; I curl up like a lizard on a hot rock,
I bask; you break
a sweat at the first thaw.
I photosynthesize.
You run your fumes for fuel
by burning my plants.
Permagrin,
little black stick stuck between lips.

Inhale your pollution-
Nicotine-stained smile.

I stick to organic hemp, with a side of the flesh of gods.
You linger in every room, hours after you leave,
your cedar scent clinging to furniture,
leaving a forest trail in your wake.
I stay grounded, you turn your back.
We are made from the earth, grounded,

two headstrong creatures who charge with horns first.
But for as hard as I try
the length of my arm cannot extend enough to grasp you,
my fingers grazing just barely.
I can feel the cotton of your charity shop shirt
and you live unaware of my very efforts.
one day I'll grasp
or know the feeling of your hand reaching out to mine.

The Faucet

Matthew Torres

An onslaught of strobe lights, christened in crimson. Incriminating the sinless in increments, within us. His tremors are chilling. His eyes blank canvases, riling in his remains like what Salvador Dali would paint. He lies in the bathtub fainted, drained of his color. I am flooded with adrenaline, kissing my stutter. You have the flesh and the stench and the breath of my brother. But you're possessed, or you're hexed somehow or another. Reanimated but non-responsive. Zombiesce. You reach for the faucet like it's your unfinished business. A husk of skin that's being worn by a begrimed apparition. Could the tusk of a mammoth pry the shell purloined by the wicked?

Blue Jean Baby

Remi Turner

To the 18-year-old girl of Muro Lucano, who we wear denim for every last Wednesday of April: ti porto la pace, mia sopravvissuta.

Denim tried to tell her mother three times. Three times. Three times Mother didn't listen. Mother rubbed her hands with the checkered dish towel draped over her shoulder, milking away excess soap fairies with gingham fibers. She pinched her overgrown nails with the end of the cloth, letting out huffs of *I don't care to listen to you, child*. Mother was preparing for the supper of the year she was to host tomorrow. Denim sat perched on the counter adjacent to the kitchen door: her wooden escape route painted in cracked yellow. She stared out the glass panel at the top of the door. Head tilted, shins swinging, pondering how that pastel rectangle she idolized led nowhere good since home wasn't even safe for a teenage girl in this town. "Now don't you dare start again with this talking your uncle's a pervert. That's blood, you know! Crazy child," Mama shook her head in disbelief.

Denim felt a pinching cramp in her stomach, but resisted the urge to soothe. Instead, she increased the pace of her stubbly legs kicking against the cupboard underneath. Hollow claps drowned out her mother's cranky voice. Denim had mastered the art of ignoring parental figures—lost in the cerulean sky through the window at the top of the sunny door. Sheep clouds packed the sky, laying together tightly. Denim imagined what it would be like to float. Float up off of this planet and join Little Bo Peep's herd in the stratosphere. Brain

singing *what does a bed that doesn't bite feel like* while threading her mother's comments in one ear out the other.

"Denim, are you even listening to me?" Mother interjected.

"What, Mama?" Denim looked up.

"I swear, child, you're about on my last straw!" Mother scrubbed the dishes ferociously.

"I'm sorry, Mama— I—"

"Save it girl. This conversation over anyways," she dropped the sponge and turned towards Denim, "and if I ever hear you bring up this silly nonsense about your uncle again I'll have Poppy come and teach you a lesson, you hear?"

"Mhmm." Denim rolled her eyes.

"Don't get sassy with me now, child. I brought you into this world and I can take you right out," her stiff pointer finger darted at her daughter.

Denim jumped down from the counter, "Grandpop torture time is all fibs anyways—always stories, never truth. How could Poppy ever do anything really bad?"

"Oh, darlin," Mother sighed, "ain't you lucky to believe Poppy never caused any harm."

#

The Mercy family took their designated spots, assuming designated roles, with their designated complaints. All playing their intricate part in this turkey slaughter play. Mother used extreme elbow grease to whip potatoes in the kitchen. Father rocked in the wicker chair hugging his big ass in the living room. Their adjacent laboratories separated by an open threshold. With tobacco eyes glued to the TV, Father dropped peanut shells in the tin bucket on the floor beside him, one by one. Touchdown. Celebration. Father rose quickly in exuberance, knocking over the pail of salty carcasses

with his clown feet. The circus snacks skid across the hardwoods, revealing a soft oak stain from where the bucket had been hibernating for the past twenty years.

“Dammit! Virginia, come over here and clean up this spill,” Father screamed over the football game on the television, “Lord, the shells are everywhere.”

“Quit screaming fool, I’m cooking,” Mother shouted back.

“I said, get over here and clean up this mess, woman,” Father grunted while reassuming his throne, “before Poppy comes back from the barn and takes a spill.”

“Hush, hush, I’m coming,” mother yelled while tossing her kitchen tools in the sink.

Mother scooted into the living room in her inside-the-house slippers. Fuzzy, faded blue polka dots covered her feet, hiding her bunions and the broken pinky toe Old Boone snapped when he was a steed. Outside-the-house shoes weren’t allowed inside unless they were Poppy’s cowboy boots. You could always hear him coming because Poppy never takes Poppy’s boots off. The finest alligator leather glued to the feet of a man that kicked more than hugged. Poppy was out feeding the horses, although he could barely tell the difference between the hay and the pucky these days due to his double cataracts.

Mother sunk down to the floor, flipped up her apron to her chest and dropped her trusty clean-up-any-mess rag. She shoveled the peanuts into the kangaroo pocket she created with her apron.

“What time is your brother getting here?” Mother asked, not removing her eyesight from her laser focus on nut removal. Father remained mute. “Donald!”

“What?” Father questioned from his squeaky chair.

“Do you ever listen?” she looked up with a three-fold eyeroll.

“I said, what time is your brother arrivin?”

“Uhh, probably 6:00,” Father scratched his head, “run the damn ball, you dumbass.” He paused. “Maybe 7:00.”

“Supper is at 5:00,” she slapped her husband’s shoulder with the rag.

“Oh, you should have caught that, you jackass!” father cursed at the TV.

“For chrissake, Donald, your brother is gonna miss the Thanksgiving meal I’ve been slavin over all day,” Mother stood to her feet.

“Goddammit, Virginia, he’ll get here when he gets here! That porker don’t need any extra fat anyways,” father huffed, “Where’s Denim?”

“I don’t know, probably being a drag in her room. I’m sick of all her teenage angst anyways,” Mother whispered as she returned to her cranberry cave in the kitchen.

“Well tell her to get her butt down here, she’s missing the big game.”

“You tell the child,” mother snapped, waving her dishcloth in dismissal.

#

Denim’s strawberry head hung off the edge of the chaise lounge pressed up against the far side of her bedroom. A bent “L” of emerald velvet that had been passed down through the family for decades. Her little fingers toyed with the frayed carpet threads below, as Loretta Lynn sang about not being woman enough to take my man on the old phonograph her late grandmother gifted her. Denim didn’t lay much in her bed these days. She avoided the place of can’t fight back decorated with a paisley patterned quilt. She continued to scrape against the shaggy floor, separating girl-never-listened-to from

senseless relatives celebrating Turkey Day below. Her mind floated to memories of her Poppy and a classic afternoon on the ranch; she could smell waves of hickory from the farm and toasted pecans from Namaw's kitchen. Poppy pushed her on the wooden playground swing after a day's work of milkin and slaughtering.

Something about Poppy stinging others like a bee wasn't believable, no matter how many times Mama hinted. The telephone down the hall rang. Denim jolted in a quick upward movement, sending a sharp cramp through her abdomen. She rubbed her bloated belly in steady half moon circles. Turtling into an upright position, Denim tried to ignore the repeated pingy vibrations sirening her out of her daydream. Mama commanded Denim to grab the call from her oven and dishwasher prison below. Denim followed orders and skipped to the corded conversation machine down the hall from her room.

"Hello?" Denim questioned softly.

"Hiya D, Happy Thanksgiving!"

"Oh, howdy Charlie," Denim responded with hesitance sledding down her throat, "What are you doin' calling me on a holiday?"

"I just wanted to check in on you, D. You weren't at school the past couple of days."

"Oh, yeah."

"Everything oka—"

"Yes, yes, I'm alright, Charlie," Denim interrupted quickly trying to hide her fib.

Mother called above to Denim for her to come down to the dinner table. Her voice a pitchfork pelting through the ceiling. The whiffs of gravy and sludgy green bean casserole caused a whirlpool of digestive juices to spin in Denim's stomach. She swallowed back the

nausea spells. Mama yelled, again. Denim ignored the second request to crawl down the stairs and shove fork into bird.

"Well I'm glad you're alright, sweetheart. You had me worried for a second," Charlie spoke with a blanket of tenderness wrapped around each word.

"That's sweet."

"Well, I should go set the table before my mama throws a fit. I'll see you at school on Monday?"

"Wait!" Denim responded quickly, tossing out a lifeline, "can we keep talking for just a little while longer?" She anxiously twirled the telephone cord.

"Aw, I'm sorry D, I wish, but my mama already asked for help with dinner thirty minutes ago, and I'm not really in the mood for one of her scoldings."

"Oh, yeah, you're right."

"I'll call you tomorrow!" Charlie added with hope springing from his lips.

"Bye now, Charlie," Denim ended the conversation with her boyfriend in defeat.

#

The family sat huddled around a pasture of stuffing, cranberry sauce, lumpy mashed potatoes, and all the other classics Mother wouldn't let a soul assemble but herself. Daddy carved the turkey that won't see tomorrow, slicing knife back and forth through the gutted centerpiece. Steam rose from the table, cloaking the ceiling with sweet potato sweat. Denim covered her nose with the fancy napkins Mama only brought out on holidays. Attempting to block the scents from traveling through her nostrils and deep into her chest. She held back the urge to vomit.

"Why ain't you grabbing any fixins hun?" Poppy questioned

Denim's empty plate.

"I'm waiting for everybody else to get theirs first, Grandpa."

"Good girl," Poppy nodded in approval. He attempted to swing his silver spoon into the Jell-O salad, but missed, landing in the cornbread instead.

"Here, Poppy, let me help," Denim guided Poppy's shaky hand.

"If you're feelin so polite child, then why don't you lead us in grace?" Mother interjected.

"But Daddy always leads it," Denim pleaded, hoping to avoid the faithful duty.

"Come on now Denim," Father spat out his words with a forest of green beans already shoved in his mouth, "Listen to your Mother and say grace."

The family folded hands in hands. Claspings pockets of flesh with fellow biologically connected folks that hurt them, but they still care for. Denim didn't mind holding Poppy's since Poppy never hurt Denim, despite the rumors: whispers Father passed along to Mother that Denim overheard while sneaking out of the kitchen door. Assumed fabrications of Poppy being a bad man back when Father and Uncle Richard were growing up. Denim cleared her throat, shooting phlegm back down her esophageal tunnel. She began to start with the Father. And then the Son. And finally the Holy Spirit, until Uncle Richard came clamoring into the room. The yellow kitchen door clapped shut. Denim's grip tightened around her relatives' palms, locking them in with a python coil.

"Jesus, Denim!" Mother pulled her hand out from Denim's sudden suffocation, "Are you trying to break my fingers, child?"

"Bout time you showed up, old bastard," Father chuckled while adjusting his belt line and rising from his seat.

“My sincerest apologies for my tardiness, Ginny, but I brought your favorite homemade moonshine to make up for it.” Uncle Richard threw Mother a wink as he stationed himself in front of the empty table setting.

“That’s all right, Dick,” Mother blushed as she grabbed the Mason jar.

Denim felt her Uncle surveying her up and down, his eyes burning into her olive skin. She hurriedly slopped heapings of the Thanksgiving offerings onto her plate to keep Mother from bitchin, but she knew not a single taste would hug her tongue. She planned to pick around Namaw’s old china and run the meal out to the barn dog when it was time to clear the table.

“Would ya pass me the salt, darlin?” Uncle Dick asked with a grin. Mother elbowed Denim to pick up the salt shaker soldier at attention in front of her plate. Denim pulled up her left arm from under her napkin. Little vibrations danced from her hand as she reached for the salt. Her heart smacked repeatedly inside her thoracic cavity. Beads of sweat formed along her hair line. She extended the sodium chloride rattle to her Uncle across from her. As their hands touched, electric shocks rollercoastered down Denim’s spine. Ringing. Then black. Ginger head smashed into the mashed potato pool below.

#

It was three months ago when Uncle Dick did the very bad to Denim on Poppy’s 88th birthday. It was three months ago when Uncle Dick did the very bad to Denim on Poppy’s 88th birthday. It was three months ago when Uncle Dick did the very bad to Denim on Poppy’s 88th birthday. Poppy wore his boots. He scraped alligator leather against stable floors after dinner while his granddaughter was being ravished by his son.

Uncle Dick was invited over to celebrate the man who raised his own sons to be beasts of terror. After cake, he followed her up to her room, tripping on the carpet with a bourbon-inspired skip. He entered her space without a sliver of shame. Shut the door. Pinned her down. Uncle Rick pressed his body into the cavities of Denim no one had ever felt before. Drunkenly sloshing his pig body against an innocent sixteen-year-old girl. Denim stared at the ceiling. Made friends with the stain from last year's roof leak. Uncle Dick's right hand covered Denim's mouth. Pressing the ruby family ring up against her teeth. Denim looked for escape, but Mother and Father were drunk downstairs playing rummy on the fold out table. This wasn't the first time they were oblivious to her absence. She cried and cried but the tears didn't make him stop. Uncle thought *must molest more*. The dams built by her eyelids burst, sending salty rivers past Uncle Dick's hand and down her cheeks. Hemoglobin armies marched down her legs, staining her sheets and shedding her innocence. After he was done, Uncle Dick left Denim in the coffin he built into her childhood bed. Zipping his pants up in one fast motion, he tucked away his weapon of destruction.

"Speak a word of this, pretty girl, and I'll snap your neck," Uncle Dick shot a clicky wink at her and left the room with his niece's virginity in his hands. He beelined for the bathroom before he could notice Denim's carcass seizing on her bed. Body trembling. Breaths increasing with alarming speed, exhales releasing like an AR. No pauses, just shakes. A strip of her soul sliced away with a meat and bone saw, leaving fleshy scraps on top of her sheets.

#

Denim woke back up on the living room couch. Her eyes slowly twinkled, meeting the face of her concerned, but never concerned enough, mother. Mother stroked a wet rag against her

head, smearing away cranberry guts.

“Finally! Jeepers, child, I thought we bout damn lost ya!” mother frantically questioned with relief.

“What? What happened? Where am I?” Denim puzzled while trying to regain consciousness.

“You passed out in your meat and gravy Denim! Had me worried sick,” Mother curled her face in concern.

“I think I blacked out,” she rubbed her head slowly.

“You think!” Mama sarcastically huffed, “I’m glad you’re okay hun, I don’t know what I would have done if—” Mother adjusted the pillow behind Denim’s head, distracting herself from the swelling in her eyes, “Richard, can you please watch sweet Denim for a second while I go rinse off my towel?” Mother gestured towards Uncle Dick who was sitting in the loveseat at Denim’s feet. She hadn’t realized her genetic perpetrator was in the room.

“Sure thing, Ginny. She’s safe with me,” Uncle Dick assured with cynical confidence.

“No,” Denim screamed, “I mean, I’m really okay, I just need to lay down some more, maybe have a glass of water,” she awkwardly added with haste.

“Well, hold on one second and I’ll fetch you a glass,” Mother yelled from the kitchen. Uncle Dick got up from his seat to readjust Denim’s position.

“Actually, I’m all set for now” Denim rocketed out of her seat before her uncle could inch closer. She ran for the stairs, her ears ringing like a tuning fork sending waves of perfect A.

#

Denim paced around her bedroom in circles, lining her own race track in the shaggy carpet. Her desk chair shoved underneath the knob was only a thin barrier between her and her family. She

clenched her chest with both hands, hoping to slow down her accelerating heart rate. Lub dub lub dub lub dub. It kept getting faster. Panicking. Nowhere to go. The acids in her stomach started to march up her throat, hut, hut, hut. She stumbled to her knees and crawled towards her desk, snagging the tiny waste basket and hurling away her anxieties. She wiped her sour mouth with the end of the blanket dead on the floor. That helped. What now? Denim rushed over to her closet and threw open the door. She grabbed the plaid suitcase set Namaw had gifted her five Christmases ago. Packed it with the necessities, her family not on the list of must-takes.

Her clammy hands rattled as she clicked the suitcase latches together, one brass snap at a time. Denim turned and removed the chair from the door. Opening the door slightly, she peered at the phone on the wall and imagined woodpeckering the number for Charlie's landline with her shaky pointer finger. No. She couldn't bother him right now. He was probably enjoying supper with his family. A family that actually cared. Besides, this wasn't his baggage. Wasn't his baby.

She closed the door as mumbles from her mother downstairs evaporated upwards.

"Denim, honey where are you?" Mama asked through the floorboards in a honeysuckle tone. Panicking. Denim didn't dare move. A sharp sting pinched in her belly. Baby was scared too. She pulled up the ivory sweater from her pantline and rubbed the shallow moon of her stomach. Forming gentle craters on the surface with her sweaty palm. A snapping sound from outside. She stopped rubbing. A naked tree branch tapped against the window above her desk. Denim skipped over to the panel of glass and threw it open. Only two feet wide of overhang for her to land on before hitting the hard grass below. She had to be careful. Precise steps. She slid her

luggage down the side of the house, sending her belongings sledding down shingles. Now it was her turn. She stuck her head out the window. A stream of crisp fall air whistled through her strawberry locks. Sucking in the smell of freedom she breathed slowly, in and out. In and out.

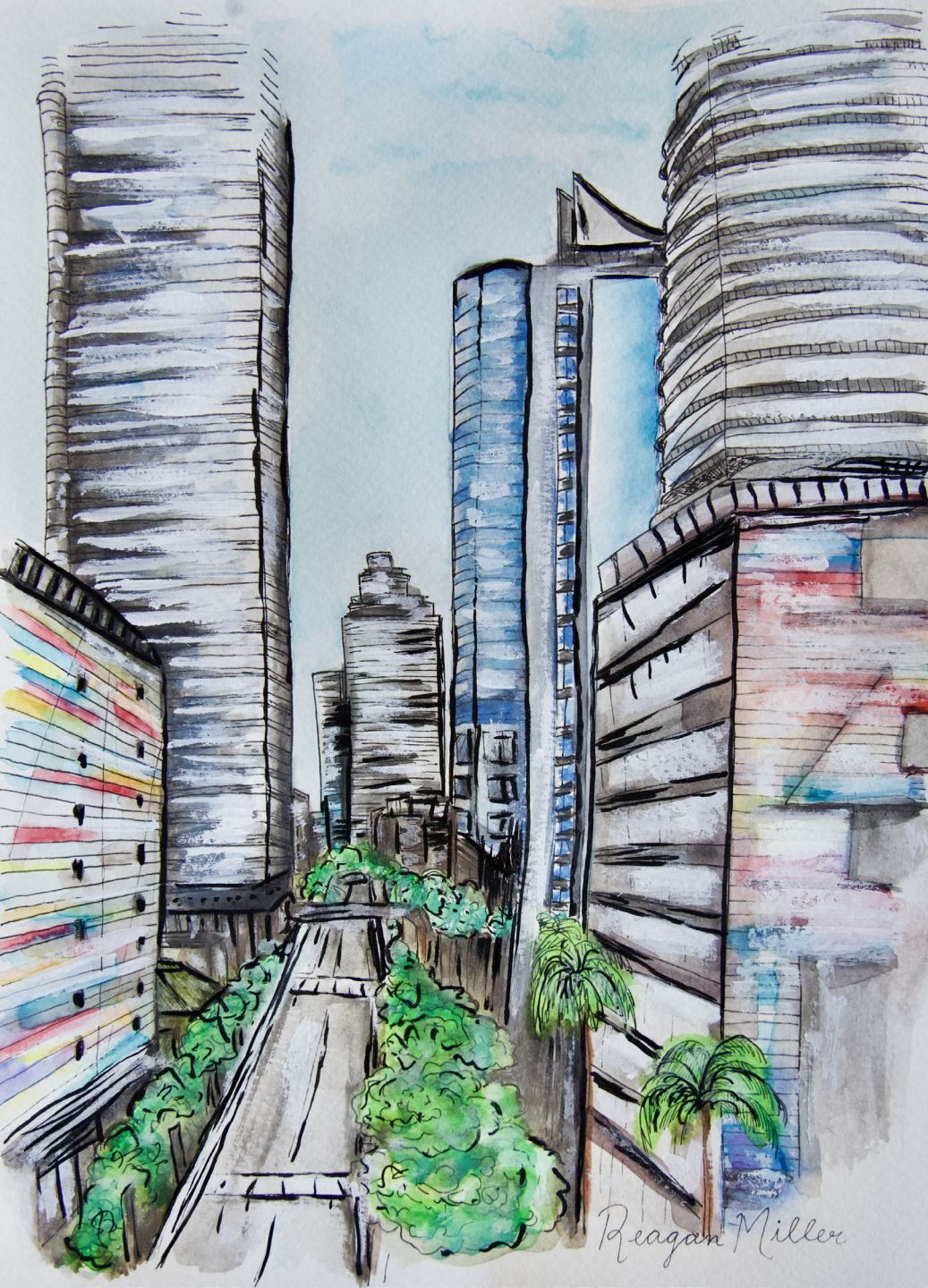
Suddenly, peace interrupted. She choked with each heavy stomp that clanked up the stairs. Step by step, shaking Denim's ribcage. Her breathing thinned into little strips of murmured oxygen. She grabbed onto her throat, wrapping her hand around her neck as if she could grasp the few pockets of air that were left. Bending the upper half of her body outside of the window, she closed her eyes, creating a soft prayer with her hazel eyes. The rumbling settled, then one hard, final pound followed. A singular beat of a snare drum swallowing the pain.

if the door is malfunctioning, call my ex

Veronica Richmond

if the door is malfunctioning, call my ex
and tell her i loved her
loved her like the vowels in heart
and hurt sound the same
to a girl who doesn't know what love is for
o'clock and now she holds her hand
as she tells her that she feels too much deja
vu and voodoo religions scattering dead goats
on the rocks like the drunk snapping dancing
with words, twisting the story of her life, of
your life, of us, a double helix of never
touching paths
asymptotic
we waltz with language and i wish you didn't
smell so good and that she could hide secrets
about why i'm supposed to hate you and your
fans sit with me and i get it wrong
way on a one way sidewalk but it's the
only path away from the twists of
hopping in a car i've never seen
you laugh this hard and as the crocodiles
nip at your feet it's all i can do to not
spend my life

looking in your eyes and wondering why
everyone forgets so
much of my mind is dedicated
to memorizing your voice and i
can't forgive what i can't
forget how you get this
feeling that you've told me
your whole life story because
in some amalgamation of other
lives' talk
i've known this song and i've
known your face and i've seen
your heart
folded around me
everywhere i look there's free time and space
filled with your ribcage and i'm
beating
beating against this chest
of treasure and maybe just
maybe the gold in your heart
is
Me.



Brickell, Miami, Reagan Miller

Black Venus

Kay-Ann Henry

A young woman wrestles through the kinetic crowd,
her kaleidoscope eyes gleaming for depth,
aching to be powered by something other than despair.
She has been a parishioner in her mind
and below the wretched deck seemed like God's headquarters,
if he had one.
If he even existed.
Still, she hoped he would have her
and just in case he was thinking otherwise,
she offered up her blood and body
for this is all she had.
The blue sound of no sound
gnawed at her and she gave in,
wrapping herself in the rough waters like a gauze.

Death of a Lily

Isabel Odahowski

The meadow swayed with dusty white lilies, each one stretching high with an unspoken plea. The air was thick with the earthy aroma of sweet blooms and freshly turned soil. I watched the balmy sun wash our skin in orange light, its warmth already fraying at the edges. As day bled into night, long, sprawling shadows crept over the field. We nestled into the blanket of ivory, feeling their delicate satin petals unfurl against our skin.

I wrapped my fingers around a helpless stem, feeling the cool earth shift and give way beneath my grip. With a soft tug, the lily broke free, its roots left exposed—raw, fragile. Their edges curved gently, like the contour of a lover's embrace.

I let it dance between my fingers, a melodramatic display. She lay beside me, still and silent, her eyes wide with rapt attention, fixed on the darkening sky. I reached out, tucking the lily behind her ear, my fingertips grazing skin that still held a whisper of warmth. Her lips parted, just barely, as though holding onto a secret. The air thickened with the weight of what I could not say.

My heart thundered. I leaned in, the space between us taut with anticipation, and pressed a soft, fleeting kiss against her mouth. When I pulled back, she almost appeared to exhale a delicate breath that sent a dusting of pollen into the air.

It spiraled upward, weightless and wild, like her spirit slipping beyond my reach.

Thank you for reading.

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

