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From the Editor,

I am delighted to present this year’s edition of the *Echo*. Begun by the Adelphian and Philosophian literary societies of Furman University, it is a display of the institution’s aim to promote intellectual creativity in its students. As we Furman students grow and prepare for our futures, the *Echo* strives to publish promising authors and artists and give opportunity to expose those interested in the editing and publishing process. From the earliest available *Echo*, published March 1893, this print issue is the product of many talented students and faculty that build upon the rich history of the magazine as an esteemed publication of student literary and art works. I would like thank the editorial board members for their work in reviewing the submissions, my faculty advisors for their generous advice and support, and to all the submitters—without you there would be no magazine. Most of all, thank you, our readers. In addition to the print issue, you can view this edition and previous editions of the *Echo* online at Furman University’s Scholar Exchange (scholarexchange.furman.edu). I hope you will enjoy this collection.

Sincerely,
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A Breaking
by Margaret Shelton

After the shell breaks in the little boy’s hands, he will stare at them until the clear liquid dries in the sun. He will carry them to the creek at the edge of his backyard, put his hands into the water, let go, and watch them float away. After that day, he will not love birds anymore. He will not remember how heavy the egg sat in his hands, but he will remember the feeling of it breaking. Gentle cracks, fissures in a seamless sphere, the big hole where he pushed his finger through by accident, fleshy beak breaking through too early from the wrong side. When the creek carries the broken shells away, he will watch until they float around the bend and out of sight. He will blink a few times, turn, and walk back through the yard to the house. He will not look back. When he passes through the living room, he will not look at the bird book that he used to read. He will not open the book to the page with the robin’s eggs to check their color. He will not need to ask if the egg was one of theirs. He knows the color of the robin’s egg. It is the same color as his eyes.
“Gracie, Gracie!”

Consciousness crept upon me slowly. Yet even with closed eyes I could sense the brightness of the summer sun, filtering through my blinds. I tried to roll over but couldn’t. A warm mass restrained me.

“Get off, Doodle,” I mumbled.

“Gracie, come play outside with me.” My seven-year-old sister tugged my silky duvet cover away from my sleep-weakened grasp. I blindly reached for the cool, smooth layer in vain.

“I’m trying to sleep.” I then grabbed one of my pillows to pull over my head, but Doodle tugged it out of my hands and sprawled on top of me, whispering in my ear, “Come play with me or I’m going to spit on your face.”

At that, I opened my eyes for fear there was already a conglomeration of frothy saliva dripping from her mouth.

“Please, please, please.” She shimmied her tiny body against me. I saw that she wore her favorite outfit: a long pink shirt, cut like a dress, and striped pink and purple leggings to match.

Even then, when I was only ten years old, Doodle had a way of being able to get me to do anything. For instance: while I was growing up, one of my favorite pastimes was to sit on my carpeted floor listening to *Harry Potter* on cassette tapes and putting together puzzles. Sometimes when I would listen to Harry’s adventures, I would just lie flat on the floor and daydream that I too was part of the wizarding world and that when my letter from Hogwarts finally came, I would join Harry, Ron, and Hermione on their next great quest. But far more often than not, midway through some momentous scene, Doodle would come barging in, long hair flying, crowing that she wanted to swing, or play make believe, or race, or swim—and all it would take was a minute of her begging (sometimes on her knees for dramatic effect, tiny pale hands clutched in front of her as if I held her life in my hands) and I would give in, leaving behind my friends at Hogwarts.

When I assented on this particular summer morning, Doodle shrieked and pirouetted out of my room. Groggily, I followed her down the hall to where she was putting on a pair of light-up Little Mermaid sneakers. “Let’s pretend run away.” She jumped up to open the door, but I grabbed her hand.
“Wait, we have to tell mom. And we need provisions. And Bud.” Our mother never let us go outside on our own without our German shepherd because she worried we would cross paths with the black bear, coyotes, and bobcats that roamed the surrounding woods. We lived on the top of a mountain in the middle of nowhere Connecticut, and we often spotted wild animals.

“I want Smartfood.” She dashed to the cupboard to grab the bag of popcorn and began to fill two plastic Ziplocs with the cheesy snack.

I told my mom that we were going outside, grabbed a lunch box, and collected a bunch of cherries and strawberries, and when Doodle wasn’t looking, four Oreos for a surprise dessert. I watched Doodle dance around the room as she waited for me to make us some sandwiches—ham and cheddar for me, and plain mayo with the crust cut off for her.

Just watching her twirling made me feel dizzy. She had started taking ballet lessons in downtown New Milford with my old dance instructor Miss Bonnie. I’d only taken classes for about six months before I begged my mother to let me quit; I lacked any sort of balance and was by far the worst ballet dancer in my class. Doodle, on the other hand, adored Miss Bonnie and her class, and had been continually practicing for their upcoming recital ever since they started learning their dance routine in May.

“When do you get your costume?” I asked, zipping up the last little bag.

“I don’t know,” she swirled, “but Miss Bonnie showed us pictures and mine is going to be purple—only two other girls get to wear purple with me, all the others are in red and blue.” This was clearly a point of great pride for her.

Once I finished putting our lunch box together, I opened the door and called to Bud and Doodle and I chased after him, past the tall metal gate surrounding our pool, past the open field of grass with the camping spot where our dad built fires to toast s’mores in the summertime, and down a little hill into the forest, littered with fallen oak and white birch leaves that crunched under our feet. We owned twenty-three acres of land and as far as we were concerned, the surrounding woods were the great wilderness undiscovered to anyone but us, except maybe to the Indians who lived there many years ago.

“How far?” Doodle slipped her little fingers into mine and grabbed Bud’s collar with her other hand.

“You have to follow the stone walls.” I took my leadership role very seriously and gestured in a superior manner to the long wall of hand-stacked, loose stones that ran through much of our woods. “Did you know these walls are hundreds and hundreds of years old?” The rock walls that ran throughout
the forest were varying shades of gray, but many were freckled with moss that made patches of green like the surface of an algae-filled lake.

“Wow.” Doodle tilted her head back to see the tops of the trees, utterly in her own little world.

Her given name was Bernadette, but I’d called her “Doodle” ever since my parents brought her home from the hospital and I couldn’t pronounce her real name. She’d been my Doodle since day one.

I led my sister towards a wide rock, silvery in the sunlight from the mica that littered it, and we climbed to the top, following Bud, to an area covered with bright emerald moss. As we ate, licking the powdered-cheese residue off our fingers, we talked about the cultural fair coming up at our elementary school. Doodle was jealous I got to do Egypt while her class had to do Mexico. And then somehow we started arguing about which Lizzie McGuire episode was best.

“Frankie Moonis!” Doodle insisted.

“Frankie Muniz, twerp.” I rolled my eyes at her. “And no way! The Aaron Carter Christmas episode is soooo much better. Talk about the best present ever—I would die if I got to be in one of his music videos.”

“Oh I almost forgot.” Doodle covered her mouth with her small hands before digging into one of the pockets in her long shirt. “I have a birthday present for you, Gracie.”

“It’s not my birthday for another two weeks.”

“But I can’t wait to give it to you! Mama showed it to me and said it was grandma’s, and that I could have it when I was older, but then it was so pretty I said I wanted to give it to you for your birthday.”

She unwound a long silver chain, at the bottom of which swung an antique cameo pendant with azure ivory surrounding the woman’s face. The image’s face was in profile, allowing a clear view of the woman’s slightly upturned nose. She wore a heap of curls atop her head, with several loose tendrils falling down her back. I wondered who she was; she had the same impish nose that Doodle and our maternal grandmother shared.

Doodle clumsily pried open the edges, to where the pendant—a locket I realized in awe—opened and an engraving read: per sempre.

“What does it mean?” I breathed.

“You like?”

“It’s the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen.” She held it out to me and I rubbed my hands on my corduroys, getting rid of the last remnants of cheddar flavoring, before cradling the necklace in my palms.
“Let me clip you.”

Doodle tossed my hair out of her way, gently but impatiently, and linked the clasp of the necklace behind my neck while I held the locket against my chest to keep it from falling.

When I think of Doodle, I think of that day when she gave me my favorite necklace and the way how after she hooked it around my throat, she came around to my side and plopped herself into my lap, grinning up at me, gap-toothed, light brown hair flying everywhere as it always did, telling me I looked like a princess.

“Where is it?” I heard my door bang against the wall from the force that had opened it.

“God, Bernadette, I’m getting dressed here!” I wrapped my towel back around my naked body as Doodle stormed into my bedroom and opened my closet door.

“You took my fucking blue zebra Aztec chiffon dress!”

“I don’t have your zebra whatever dress.”

“I don’t believe you. I’m supposed to meet Nathan in half an hour and I still need to do my makeup.”

I sighed and walked out of my bedroom to check the laundry room. Sure enough there the dress hung, looking harmless. “It’s right here, moron!”

Doodle flew into the small room and pinned me against the washer as she reached for her dress, hanging above the dryer. Our mom must have washed it by hand for her.

“I didn’t know you were going out tonight. I thought we were going to get dinner as a family. I have to go back to Tufts on Monday, you know,” I said as she grabbed the dress.

She rolled her eyes at me, “Oh my God get over yourself, Grace. You’re just here for Easter. The world doesn’t need to stop.”

Before I could reply, I realized what was dangling from her neck.

“Bernadette, that’s my necklace! Where did you even get that, I had it in my purse.”

“Calm down. I’m just borrowing it.” She rolled her eyes at me like I was the unreasonable one.

“But—” I was about to insist that it was my favorite necklace, but stopped. I felt awkward admitting it was my favorite.

“It’s mine anyways,” she said, peeling off her jeans and tank top, re-
vealing a matching red bra and underwear set over her curvy figure. I watched as she pulled the dress over her wild hair. I don’t know why she always felt the need to undress in front of me; it made me uncomfortable and wonder how many other people had seen her without her clothes on. With her thin waist and large breasts, she didn’t exactly have the body of an innocent seven-year-old anymore.

“Whatever.” I crossed my arms over my own towel-covered body, and went back to my room, locking the door behind me, and sat on my shiny duvet cover. Once alone, I felt overcome with regret for coming home in the first place. I could be in Boston hanging out with Devon. I was going to stay at school originally; things had been tense with my parents ever since they found out that I’d applied to a trip to Greece for the following semester without asking. I didn’t tell them until after I received my acceptance. I would be spending the fall of my senior year in Athens. I hadn’t meant to be dishonest, but I knew that if I’d told them, there would have been many long conversations about finances before I even heard back from the program. To be fair, I knew they would be annoyed with me, especially because I had already studied abroad in Italy during my junior year of high school. The Athens program was so competitive, though; I didn’t want to go through all the drama if I wouldn’t get accepted anyways.

I think Doodle was especially rude to me this trip home in part because she was bitter I got to go on another abroad trip. She was also just a bitter seventeen-year-old. When I went to study in Italy, she had been mad at me, and I think she still was, but back then it had been bitterness because she had missed me and had wanted me around. This time, it was because she was jealous I would be abroad again and she would be in Connecticut for another full year before she could escape to college.

I reflected on how Doodle looked older than a senior in high school, and how somehow our roles felt reversed, with me the little sister getting left behind while my prettier, more experienced sister went out on a date with a cute boy—the kind of boy who never would have even looked my way in high school—an Alpha Delta at UConn with dark curly hair who had a hockey scholarship.

I laid down on my silky Caribbean-colored blanket, knowing that I was even more jealous of the guy than I was of my sister because she would rather hang out with him than me. Even though I came home this weekend to see her, even though she could see him any other weekend. Now I was the bitter one.

I ended up going out to dinner with just my parents. When the topic of
paying for Athens came up, as I knew it inevitably would, I forced myself to take deep breaths before I answered my mother’s repetitive questions and my dad’s various safety concerns. I wished that Doodle had come and softened the tension with her long winded complaints about her teachers who gave her worse grades than she deserved or the latest drama with her friends. Even though, if she’d been there, she would have whined how unfair it was I got to travel so much, and how our parents spent all their money on me, at least it would have deflected my parents’ attention away from me. If Doodle had come they would eventually have had to take on the draining task of placating an unhappy Doodle.

When Doodle knocked on my window to let her in later that night, because she’d forgotten her key, I didn’t even comment on the stench of cigarette smoke.

“Thanks,” she said, jumping from my window seat to the carpeted floor. I quickly closed the window behind her as the cool, April air began to fill my room. There were patches of snow still, now brown with mud, splattered across the lawn that was lit up by the lamp my mother had kept on for Doodle.

“Mom ordered you tiramisu to go.”

“Sweet.” She tore her heels from her feet and sprawled across my bed with a groan. “I’m so freaking tired.”

“Why, did you get a workout in?” I asked with a wink, setting aside the copy of *Jane Eyre* I’d been reading.

“You’re such a bitch.” She chucked a pillow at me, smiling. Her brown hair, the color of a lightly creamed cup of coffee, was strewn across my bed. Ever since Doodle had hit puberty, and started looking more like the older sister, I became constantly torn between feeling jealous of how beautiful she was and feeling protective because I was sure I wasn’t the only one impressed by her looks. My own shoulder length hair, short and dark like espresso, had nothing on my little sister.

“I’m going to grab my tiramisu,” she said, rolling off the side of my bed.

“How about two forks, Doodle.” She glared at me for using her nickname, but when she came back she was holding two forks.

Doodle stayed for brunch on Easter Sunday, but then went over to one of her friend’s homes and I didn’t see her again before I had to head back to school. She had forgotten to give me my necklace back, and when I went into her room to look for it before I left, I couldn’t find it anywhere.

It was the spring of my senior year of college, two weeks short of graduation day. Doodle had just left for Spain with some of the friends she’d
made during her first year at Vanderbilt.

I received a text from my mother asking when she should make reservations for dinner after the commencement ceremony for the three of us.

“The three of us? What about Doodle?” I had called her immediately after receiving her text.

“She won’t be back from Barcelona until a few days later,” my mother sighed into the receiver. “Didn’t she tell you?”

She hadn’t and I was mad. I got the number for the pay-as-you-go phone my mother had gotten Doodle for her trip, and tapped my foot against the brick-lined pathway where I sat outside the library as I waited for her to answer.

“Hola, bitch.”

“So mom just told me you’re not coming to my graduation. What, you couldn’t cut your world tour three days short?” I covered my hurt with anger.

“What’s your deal? I go away one time after all the trips you’ve gone on, and you’re going to give me crap?”

“I’m not jealous that you’re abroad, I just think it sucks that you’re not coming to my graduation.”

“Well guess what, Grace, the world doesn’t just stop because you want it to.” I didn’t answer. I heard a siren pass on her side of the line. She sighed at my silence. “Would it make any difference if I told you I got you a really good graduation gift?”

I couldn’t help it, my anger started to fade.

“It couldn’t make it worse,” I said slowly.

She laughed; she knew she had me.

“You’re going to love it. I haven’t bought it yet, but I have it all picked out.”

“Is it edible?” I asked.

“Sorry, you’re just going to have to wait and see,” she teased. “I have to go. But good luck with the whole graduating thing. Assuming you don’t fail any classes before then.”

I rolled my eyes. “Goodbye, moron.”

“Adios, bitch.”

The day of graduation was perfect: high seventies, clear sky, smiling faces. The only thing missing was Doodle. I didn’t even mind spending time with just my parents. They took me out to my favorite Thai restaurant downtown.

“Hello?” My mom stood up from the dinner table to answer her phone. As she headed outside to talk to the person I’d assumed was Doodle,
my dad and I debated whether or not we would have room for dessert after we finished our Pad Thai. But then my mom came back in and everything changed. Her face was contorted, stiff, and the second I saw her mouth try to form words and fail I felt an iron mass plummet into my stomach. Heavy, cold, it made me feel sick. Dread filled my entire being and all I could think in my head was Doodle even before my mom could get the words out.

Everything seemed to unfold in slow motion and from a distance, like I was watching through the wrong end of a telescope in a dream. Words no longer made sense. My father led my mother out of the restaurant and I stayed at the table, the weight twisting itself violently inside my body, and as I tried to stand a thunderous sob choked its way out of my throat. I shivered. I clutched at my throat where my necklace usually rested, but I realized that Doodle had taken it.

They found her body outside a ceramic shop in Barcelona. Alcohol poisoning. The girls she had been with—her friends—said she had been with a boy the last time they saw her, but they couldn’t remember his name and the police haven’t had any luck tracking him down to get more information.

She was wearing my necklace—our necklace—when they found her. The day before the funeral my mother tried to hand it to me. Her hands shook. But when I saw it, I shoved it away. “I don’t want it.”

“It’s yours.” My mother spoke gently but firmly. I didn’t answer, but instead stared at the wooden table where her lemonade glass was leaving a ring of condensed water. My mother set the necklace on the table in the space between us. I looked up at her tired face. She was only forty-six, but already wrinkles had begun to crease her soft features. I met her gaze for a moment before dropping my eyes back to the glass. I didn’t think my mother could out-silence me, but as I waited for her to say something and got nothing, I eventually gave in.

“I don’t want it, mom. It was hers anyways.”

She tilted her head and didn’t answer until I looked back up to meet her gaze. “She was only eighteen, Gracie. She was selfish but she always wanted that necklace to belong to you.” At first I took blue cameo locket just to escape my mother. I intended to stick it in a drawer and not look at it until a day when I stumbled upon it, forgetting it was there—but I loved it too much to lock it away.

Doodle has been gone for six months. Gone. Like she’s just something that was lost. Something that could be found again. As if she is a pretty, but
replaceable piece of jewelry that gets borrowed or misplaced, but is eventually is found. I wear our cameo necklace everyday; I never lose the necklace. Sometimes having its cool back pressed close to my skin makes me feel brave, and I imagine it carries some of that selfish, naïve, wild spirit that belonged to Doodle. Other times it becomes so heavy that I reach up to pull it from my throat before it suffocates me. Every day is different. Every day I feel its weight between my throat and my heart. Every day the necklace is the one thing I carry with me that is not lost.
Bubble Bath
by Ben Gamble

The most important rule of a bubble bath: if you can see the blood, you need more bubbles.

If you’re mute, standing in the shower while you wash off might make you feel a little empty, so you take baths, because no one sings in the bathtub. That’s just weird. And if you can see blood in the water… then more bubbles.

…She needed more bubbles. It wasn’t her blood. Was it her blood? Had she checked to see? She remembered somewhere between the running and the stopping, she found a quiet place and padded herself down. Entry wounds, exit wounds, were her shoelaces still tied: the crucial things. She had checked and she was okay. Wasn’t she? She might have imagined that.

She had forgotten something, that much she knew. She had to have forgotten something. That was how these things go. You forget something that the sniffer dogs and the uniforms with maglites don’t. She stared at the opaque water. The bottle said White Vanilla and the other said Lilac Bliss and the third one said Honeysuckle Kiss. When you bought bleach and lime alone, you got funny looks, but if you buy them with bubble bath mixes, then you’re just doing spring cleaning.

There might have been sirens outside. Both kinds, the blue-light shrieking kinds and the kinds that waited at the edge of the water and pulled you right on under. If there were any in the bathtub with her, the rushing water was shutting them up. Or maybe they just really liked ad-hoc bath mixes. If this line of work does not wind up being profitable, I should look into bubble baths.

There was steam rolling off the water and the faucet was going to break if she twisted it any further but it wasn’t really her fault she was still cold, and hot underneath the chilly goosebumps skin, and then cold again beneath that. She moved her leg, a bruised-on-the-shin, unshaved-because-there-were-really-bigger-issues-at-the-moment pale lithe thing that, years ago, could pull a mean pirouette, and more recently, was not half bad at scrambling on top of rooftops and scampering down back alleys. She moved her leg and parted the bubbles for a minute like Moses parted the Red Sea, except the Egyptians stopped following Moses, and the Red Sea didn’t smell half as good. The water was free of bubbles for a minute and she saw blood swirling around the water. Water and blood mixed turns sorta pink. Brains were kinda pink, too. If you mixed water and brains and blood, did they smell as good as all these bubble bath mixes? They did not. That’s why they sell bubble bath mixes, you
know.

She looked away from the bloodwater. The rest of her bathroom was arguably more unnerving. There was the cracked mirror – which, on its own, didn’t really bode well, but it reminded her she hadn’t cleaned it in a while. It was minor, but it was another thing, you know. She was okay with the crack in the mirror itself. If you positioned yourself just right in front of it, it could hide scars, and a mirror that hides the parts of you that you don’t like is really a rather fine mirror.

What do Moses and that mirror have in common? Denial.

What do the bubble bath mixes and the girl have in common? They’re both mixed up in some bad stuff.

To say the counter was messy was to say that Carthage had a pinch of salt, though she supposed the two were equally peaceful. The toilet seat was up. She had put it up before she left. She lived alone and was not expecting guests (well, she was expecting guests who knock on doors with warrants but not guests of the male variety), but she was expecting to throw up quite a bit, and that was just a nice way to streamline the process. Like the past her was reaching into the future and holding her hair back as she dry heaved because she’d been too nervous to eat anything all day.

Hair. Hair. That was something she’d forgotten. Could hair slip through a hair cap under a ski mask? Could it, did it? Or, maybe, would it?

If you ignored that catastrophe, there was the duffel bag lying next to the bathtub. For a moment, she was a gypsy woman cradling a crystal ball, shuffling Tarot beneath the bubbles, and she saw lots of duffel bags, lots of lying, and lots of bathtubs in her future. The mist in the crystal balls was sorta pink. It did not smell good, and she mixed three of them together to get the truth.

The duffel bag was black, which did not provoke suspicion at the checkout line, because every duffel bag is black, and if your duffel bag is not black it is not a duffel bag. If a bath does not have bubbles, it is still a bath, but it is a waste of water. She stared at the bag. It was zipped up really tight, because things—things full of probable cause and jacketed bullets—fall out of duffel bags, and those, like hair, are better kept zipped up nice and tight. She reached an arm out of the bathtub, looking like the Leviathan trying to ruin some fisherman’s day, and pulled the bag over close to her. The water dropped and fell on the bag, flowering up and darkening it in a few places.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Now she couldn’t use the bag again because it would smell like White Vanilla and Lilac Bliss and Honeysuckle Kiss and guilt. Also, probably some blood. Not hers.

Inside the duffel bag there was
a rifle which was missing exactly two bullets from its five-round magazine. It was a magazine and not a clip and it was something she knew from many late nights researching and then memorizing because when you can’t sleep you might as well try and memorize something. Inside the duffel bag there was also a suppressor for the rifle. It was a suppressor and not a silencer and it was disappointing because she would’ve liked a gun as quiet as she was. Like a sister that was really violent, and moody, and sometimes, if you flipped her switch, killed people. Like most sisters. Also inside the duffel bag there was a ski mask and a hair net. There was also a jumpsuit—and honey, if you thought that bathtub had blood, you should see the inside of that bag. Also, there was some water, but that was mostly from when her hand grabbed it just now.

She pulled her hand back in and sunk down below the water, feeling rather childish folding her legs up against the side of the tub to get her face way down under. She tried not to think about the blood in the water and tried to think about rubbing her face mask off. Why do you put on a face mask in the tub? Because if the rest of you is going to be underwater, and you’re not going to move your face in the tub singing like you would in the shower (because it’s weird), you might as well smear some guacamole-looking, supposedly-helpful product all over it to keep your face from feeling colder than the rest of you.

She came up out of the water a product of the world’s sweetest-smelling self-baptism. That was an okay thing in her book. She wiped away the rest of the gunk on her face with fingers that had shriveled up under the water and vaguely contemplated things like burning fingerprints off with acid or getting more bubble bath mix. There’s actually a surprising amount of overlap between the two.

She sat half-above the water just thinking about things. Primarily, contradictions. She was sitting in a tub full, yet she needed a drink. She had enough scents mixing above the foamy water to kill an asthmatic, but she needed a smoke. She had been marinating in soap for two hours and she was not clean. She could not see through the face of the water but she was pretty confident there was nothing below the surface anyways. Nothing at all.
Looking back over the last week, help us understand how you have been feeling by rating how well you have been doing in the following areas of your life. How do you feel about your general sense of well-being? 0 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied)

Mira stared at the paper clamped down to the clipboard in her lap. The girl's paperwork only required her to complete fifteen general questions about how she was doing, but somehow there was still some uncertainty as to what an appropriate answer was. Rate yourself too high and you look like a complete liar. Rate yourself too low and you'll be committed to the psych ward of Rush University Medical Center.

Mira skipped the question and moved back the previous five she had neglected to answer. She hesitated once again, tapping the pen against the plastic clipboard. Tap! Tap! Tap! The teenager pulled her attention from questionnaire in her lap. Glancing up she found the rest of the people in the waiting room giving her “that look.” The pen froze in mid-tap. “Sorry,” she mouthed to those around her. The seventeen-year-old girl gave a quick side glance to her mother and found her to be completely oblivious about the pen tapping incident.

Like any mother who came into Dr. Alex Tobias’ office, Ms. O’Connor was diligently filling out cannons of paperwork regarding medical history and confidentiality agreements. While mother and daughter had arrived to the office right on the dot for a 4 o’clock appointment, no one had warned them that paperwork would take at least fifteen minutes to fill out before the patient could walk through the threshold of the shrink’s office.

Mira let out a deep sigh of relief. With her mom taking so long to fill out paperwork, she had ample time to figure out how to answer five more questions on this self-rating inventory. In the back of the girl’s mind, she knew that the longer this tedious work took, the shorter the counseling session would be today. The shorter she could make these sessions the better. The last thing she wanted was a crazy shrink digging into her mind.

She didn’t really want to be here on a Wednesday afternoon. Giving up robotics team for a psych appointment was a sacrifice that was almost unforgivable in her mind, but she wouldn’t disobey her parents’ marching orders. Mira would adamantly deny that she had problems, but her parents knew she needed some kind of help. When Brian O’Connor—aka psychologist, licensed thera-
pist, and father—noticed that his daughter needed guidance beyond his scope, he called up a fellow colleague from the area and asked to set up an appointment.

This seemed like complete betrayal to Mira. Her father wasn’t even the one to take her to the counseling appointment. Ms. O’Connor was the one who took off from work to bring Mira to her appointment. At the moment, Mira felt nothing but resentment toward her father for selling her out to be a mental problem that he couldn’t handle.

Do you ever think about harming yourself? Not at all, somewhat, moderately, a lot, or extremely.

The girl thought to herself quietly. Somewhat. As she began to circle her answer, a twinging pain radiated from the tip of her index finger. The pain was an annoying reminder of what she did to cope. For now, she had an inconspicuous flesh-colored Band-Aid wrapped around the mutilated skin on her finger. For as long as she could, she would keep her finger-picking a secret. But then how long could it stay a secret when your fingers were consistently wrapped each week you showed up to an appointment? And then there were the blade cuts along the insides of her arms. At least now that winter was coming, she would blend in with everyone wearing long sleeved shirts. This would be a guise that she’d have to hold onto for as long as she could.

Do you have suicidal thoughts?

Somewhat. Who doesn’t ever think about it? Mira thought to herself. Any thinking person alive imagined the consequences of suicide. That didn’t mean that everyone was suicidal though.

Would you like to end your life?

Not at all.

This was the first question the girl hadn’t hesitated answering. She knew that this question was a sure trap—one that would guarantee hospitalization. Any answer besides “never” would have yielded a certain diagnosis of depression and a prolonged plan of treatment. For Mira, that was the path she wanted to avoid at all costs.

Three more questions to go, Mira thought to herself. Two more about my mood this week and one about my overall well-being. Back to the stupid rating scale.

How do you feel about your close relationships and friendships?

9. Mira was content with her friends at school and she didn’t mind her mother. Right now her beef was with the traitor who was related to her by blood. For the purposes of this inventory, she would say she was content even if she wasn’t fully content.
What do you feel about the main concern that brought you here?

4. This was a pretty honest answer. The week so far had sucked. College applications had been open for two months now and were begging to be completed. The unit quiz in AP biology was miserable. Sleep had been a non-existent luxury because of said AP biology quiz. Plus Mira had to give up the robotics team until she no longer needed counseling services with Dr. Tobias. The sooner the sessions ended and she could be cleared, the sooner she could return to her cyborg team before the competition at the end of January.

How do you feel about your general sense of well-being?

What kind of question is this? Mira asked herself. The previous questions should have been a good enough indication of her well-being, so why ask about one’s “overall well-being?” Also why put this question on a self-inventory? How truthful and unbiased could a person be answering this kind of question? For Mira, there was no good way to answer the question.

Mira paused in deep thought. 4 and 9 were the answers to the previous questions. How about just take the average and round up? So… 7.

Looking up from her paper with contentment, she surveyed the waiting room and she now began the wait until she was called. “Finished?” Ms. O’Connor said brightly to her daughter. Mira nodded. Her mother had already finished her paperwork and had been waiting for Mira to finish. With a sort of grace, Ms. O’Connor rose from her seat and crossed the waiting room to deliver the forms back to the receptionist. She lingered at the desk for a few moments. She passed a few words to the woman at the desk before returning to chair beside Mira.

“We good now?” Mira asked.

“Yep,” Ms. O’Connor answered. She reached into her bag for her Kindle device. “She said that Dr. Tobias will be with you shortly. Just reviewing a few things before you two get started.”

“Wait, aren’t you coming in for the first part of the session?” Mira was caught off-guard. Since her father was a licensed counselor, she knew well that parents usually expressed their concerns to the therapist before the initial session began.

“No. Your father already chatted with Dr. Tobias over the phone.

“Great,” Mira said with deep sarcasm. “I’m glad to hear that they are both buddy-buddy.” Her mother smiled gently and began to read. She knew it was next to impossible change her daughter’s frame of mind when she got like this.

Dr. Alex Tobias. This man is probably just as crazy as my own father, Mira
thought to herself. In her mind, she imagined an old balding man with large framed glasses. She could definitely see him as a connoisseur of fine cigars. Mira’s eyes wandered about the waiting room finally resting on a magazine stand with subscriptions ranging from the standard *Seventeen* magazine to *Sport Illustrated* and then to the unstandardized *Opera Now*. *This man must have a wide range of interests to occupy his time.*

“Mira O’Connor?” a woman called from a doorway in the back of the waiting room. The auburn-haired teenager stood and crossed room to the open doorway. The woman led her down a small hallway to an open office with a brass plate on the door which read “Dr. Alexandra C. Tobias, Ph. D.” As the girl walked in, a pale-haired woman seated at a desk turned to face her. “Good afternoon, Mira! I’m Dr. Alex Tobias. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” In a swift motion, she stood and extended her hand.

*Ah,* Dr. Alexandra Tobias. The woman had to have been in her early thirties. Mira was caught off guard. The girl hesitantly moved forward to receive the doctor’s handshake. “It’s nice to meet you, too,” Mira answered just as she had been taught to answer for college interviews. The two shook and then stood there for a moment awkwardly.

“Come on in and I’ll close the door. Go ahead and make yourself comfortable.”

There was a choice of three chairs placed within the room. One straight-backed chair by the doorway and two puffy lounge-like chairs opposite the woman’s desk. Together, the three chairs made an awkward obtuse triangle. Somehow, the choice of chair seemed like the first test that her new therapist was administering to her. Finally, the girl settled into the one of marshmallow chairs further away from her desk. Following suit, the psychologist took her place in chair mirroring Mira’s.

“Your father has told me all about you,” the woman began.

“Oh great,” Mira said unenthusiastically. She tucked her arms comfortably across her chest. There was no telling what insanity her father had already revealed this woman.

“Don’t worry. We only talked briefly over the phone.” She paused and reached over to her desk for her clipboard and pen. It had three papers attached to it. From what Mira saw, she knew that the form she had filled out in the waiting room was on top. “So tell me, what brings you here today?”

“Well… my mom obviously.” The girl smiled sheepishly. Though she would never admit it to Dr. Tobias, Mira’s stomach rolled with nerves. “Stress?”
Mira offered in the form of a question rather than an answer.

“I see.” Dr. Tobias flipped the front page over the clipboard and began jotting down some notes on the second page. The sound of her pen scratching across the paper only made Mira’s heart jump even more. She hated this appointment already. The more the woman talked, the more it reminded Mira of her father’s approach to solving problems, talking them out. “Tell me more.”

“School is intense at times. It’s a real challenge.”

“Your dad says you’re a straight A student.”

“I mean—yeah, I do well in my classes, but that doesn’t come without hard work.”

“Of course. Tell me what classes you’re taking. Are you doing any clubs this year?”

“Plenty.” And I’m missing robotics club because of this, Mira thought to herself. “I’m taking a pretty heavy load of classes. As a senior, I picked challenging classes that will look good on transcripts that’ll be sent to colleges.”

“Smart choice. What colleges are you thinking about applying to?”

“Vanderbilt, Tufts, Duke, Columbia…”

“That’s an impressive list! Have an idea of a major?”

“Biology with a pre-med track. I’m going to med school after undergrad. I’m working to be a surgical orthopedist,” Mira answered with confidence. Since sophomore year, she had her answer rehearsed and scripted. For her, direction, focus, and meticulous planning were prized; without them, there was no future. To attain that future, all she needed to do was go through the mechanical motions of completing task after task.

“Sounds like you know exactly what you want to do, but does the future ever frighten you?” Dr. Tobias asked.

“I guess—but if you think about it, the future scares everyone.”

For a moment, Dr. Tobias saw a glimpse of something within the girl. Ever so slightly as Mira modestly admitted, the girl’s aura turned inward. Her eyes shifted downward. For only a second, the girl’s fire withered at the revelation of vulnerability. But as soon as her guard went down, it snapped back up. The therapist jotted down something in her notebook: Successful kid. In denial that she has a problem. Heavily guarded. Trouble opening up.

“So things are stressful at school… are things stressful at home? How is your relationship with your parents?”

“Mom’s great. She’s a chemistry professor at a university. We’re close. Sorta.”
“And how about your dad?” Dr. Tobias noticed Mira’s deliberate avoidance about talking about her father.

“He’s okay, I guess. You already know he’s a licensed psychologist. I mean, you guys kinda work with one another.” The girl grimaced.

“We sometimes refer our patients to one another for second opinions, but we don’t necessarily work together,” Dr. Tobias answered. She paused in thought. “Tell me a little more about your relationship with your father.”

The red-haired girl shifted in her chair and allowed her weight to fall against the back of the chair. “Well, he’s clinical. Believe it or not, he has his own problems.”

“From my experience working with him, he seems very nice. Very gentle and calm.”

“It’s a defense mechanism,” Mira answered. The therapist cocked an eyebrow. “He may seem calm on the outside, but it’s all a façade.”

The unspoken keyword was “crazy shrink.” Dr. Tobias knew this phrase too well, so she could see where her patient was coming from. Therapists spent their lives listening to other people’s problems that sometimes they neglected to take care of their own problems. Sometimes it was just a matter of putting on a calm face for your patients. Nothing screamed unprofessional more than a therapist venting her problems to a patient.

“What bothers you about your father?” the doctor asked.

“He’s been acting as though there’s something wrong with me. He thinks I need help and I don’t. There’s nothing wrong with me.” Dr. Tobias made a mental note to herself. Denial.

“Perhaps he’s showing that he cares about you.”

“Or that he wants to diagnose me. That’s why he sent me here. I shouldn’t be here. I have other things I need to do.”

“Like?”

“Homework, reading, applications, and more homework,” Mira rattled off. “There’s a lot to worry about as a senior.”

“I have no doubt, but have you ever considered that worrying does you no good?” Dr. Tobias posed.

“It reminds me of everything I need to do in a timely manner,” Mira shot back.


“What do you mean?”

“Not much.”

“Well for the next week, I want you to take a little time for yourself and do something enjoyable. It’s alright to be selfish sometimes.”

“I don’t have time for that.”

“Maybe ten minutes a day.”

“That’s ten minutes I could be doing—“

“Mira,” Dr. Tobias said firmly. She didn’t mean to cut her off but she was beginning to show her frustration with this girl. “You’re a successful young woman. Your academics are wonderful according to your dad. He brags your hardworking mentality. I appreciate how hard you work, but you need to first and foremost take care of yourself.”

“Okay,” the girl huffed as she re-crossed her arms over her chest. She adverted her gaze away from the woman who was speaking to her.

_This is going to be a rough session today_, Dr. Tobias thought to herself.
The Portrait of Grandmother Lorelei
by Meg Gillogly

Connie paced around her studio, setting up her easel and hiding abstract paintings, boxes of odds and ends, and containers of paint more vibrant than anything found in the wild. Grandmother Lorelei was coming to visit, and Connie was less than thrilled. She wasn’t family—Connie had heard about Grandmother Lorelei from her best friend, Rosie. Rosie was Grandmother Lorelei’s granddaughter, and although the grandmother and granddaughter were family they certainly weren’t friends. This was the first time Connie was meeting Grandmother Lorelei and after hearing the stories Rosie had to tell about her, Connie was not excited.

Grandmother Lorelei didn’t know that Connie painted only abstract portraits. A quick Google search would have pulled up images of Connie next to paintings even she didn’t understand the meaning of, and she was their creator. Thankfully, Grandmother Lorelei didn’t own a computer, a detail that would make Rosie’s plan much easier to execute.

When Rosie had first approached Connie with Mission Lorelei, Connie flat out refused.

“I’m not going to participate in some twisted plan of yours, Rosie!”
“Come on Connie, help a friend out. Grandmother is loaded, and I know you need the money. Waitressing at night isn’t going to help you keep your studio, you need something—or someone—to help you out.” Rosie was right; there was no way Connie was going to be able to keep her studio and her apartment on her waitressing salary. As much as painting was a priority, sleeping in a bed was even more so, and it was only a matter of weeks before she was kicked out of her precious workspace. The facts were indisputable, and with one sad glance around the studio Connie had agreed to the plan.

It was actually Connie’s studio that made the plan perfect. Grandmother Lorelei would only get her portrait done by a real artist, and the studio made Connie look credible. A few white sheets draped over pending work, a few more award winning pieces in the back storage closet, and Connie finished the transformation. Precisely three sharp knocks sliced through the air. It was time.

When Connie opened the door, she expected a soft, cool handshake from the shrunken woman standing before her. Instead Grand-
mother Lorelei barreled right past Connie and into the studio, more like a dog hot on the trail than an old woman looking to get her portrait painted. Her sharp eyes processed the paint splatters on the table, the skylights in the ceiling, and the dark brown sofa in the middle of the room. Connie was shocked, but she was able to push the feeling down and replace it with a cool politeness that she hoped mirrored the old woman’s.

“Right, let’s get started. My name is Mrs. Woodsen, which you knew. I am here to have my portrait painted by a professional. Are you a professional?”

“Of course—I mean, yes, yes I am.” The plan, thought Connie. Think of Rosie’s plan.

“Well if you are a professional then you must have a place for me to pose. Tell me dear, where is my spot?”

“I-I thought you could sit on the couch.”

“Is this how you treat all your guests, dear? By placing them on dirty couches?”

Connie was horrified at the blatant insults being thrown at her beloved couch. She had found it on the side of the road, forlorn and abandoned by a previous owner who had not dared to see its true value. She and Rosie had taken it to the studio and steamed it themselves. Connie used it for everything: for long nights spent painting her latest inspiration, for hurried dinners before her evening shift at the local restaurant, and for daydreams about her future as an artist in some far off city, perhaps Paris? The couch was special, the couch was good, and the couch did not deserve to be insulted.

Connie remembered an old armchair hidden away in the back of the closet, and figured that using it was better than listening to Grandmother Lorelei complain for the next few hours. It was the ugliest thing she had ever laid eyes on, from its gaudy feet and arms to its slightly faded 90’s attempt at ornamental pattern upholstery. Thankfully Connie hadn’t converted it into her next project, and it lay ugly and intact in the back of the storage closet.

“Wait right here… Mrs. Woodsen. I can get you another chair.” Connie went to the back room.

Grandmother Lorelei stood still, a look of slight disgust perched upon her face. Grandmother Lorelei was many things: the widow of a successful lawyer, the mother of one doctor and one wedding planner, and the owner of enough stock to finance an overpriced apartment in the nicest part of the city. She was unofficial queen of the city’s social circle, and she made decisions on matters as important as who was decidedly “in” and who was most definitely
“out.” She did not associate with dirt, had a tense relationship with anyone below the upper middle class, and struggled to see the value in anything used. She would have never graced Connie with her presence if it weren’t for her granddaughter. Rosie was Grandmother Lorelei’s weakness, and it was a weakness the young girl had finally decided to exploit.

Connie burst out of the back room, pulling the chair behind her. “Here. Is. The. Chair.” She panted.

“I guess that will do, won’t it dear?”
“I don’t know, will it?” Connie muttered.
“What was that dear?”
“I said would you like to get started?” The two took their positions, Connie at her easel and Grandmother Lorelei on the chair. And the day passed.

The thing about Grandmother Lorelei was she was especially good at picking favorites. This time, it was Connie who was privilege to her favor.

“Tell me dear, how is my Rosie doing?” she would ask. And Connie would tell her about the ice cream they ate that afternoon, the boys they liked. Sometimes Connie would let a small secret slip, like that Rosie was in trouble of failing one of her classes, but Grandmother Lorelei never reacted harshly. Connie found herself not hating Grandmother Lorelei. In fact, they may have even become friendly. Not best friends, not life long confidants or laughers at the same joke, but they could hold a conversation. A pleasant conversation. It was this friendliness that made the plan so much more difficult.

By the end of her fifth visit, Grandmother Lorelei had coaxed enough secrets out of Connie to fill a small basket. Grandmother Lorelei was also more than a little impatient to see Connie’s work.

“Connie dear, when are you going to let me see this beautiful painting of yours?”

“Remember Grandmother Lorelei, Rosie wants it to be a surprise. You can see it at the gallery show.”

“Yes dear, we have to talk about this don’t we. I have decided to invite several of my society friends, not too many but there is this young woman Mindy whom you have to meet. She knows everything about art and I think she could be an asset to your budding career.

“Your… your society friends?” Connie stuttered. This was not part of the plan. Fluster Grandmother Lorelei? Yes. Humiliate her? Absolutely not.

“I don’t think so Mrs. Woodsen. Thanks for the offer though.”
“Dear I’m not asking, I’m telling. You will show my friends your work. They will absolutely love it.”

“Mrs. Woodsen I really don’t want to—”

“If I know the details of this little arrangement correctly, Rosie is paying you for giving me the gift of my portrait. But Rosie gets her money from me. Since I am the true customer, you will do as I ask and that is final.” Connie was beginning to see why Rosie didn’t like her grandmother.

“Absolutely NOT.”

“Connie this is even more perfect, we couldn’t have planned it if we tried.”

“Rosie I don’t want a part of this.”

“Connie you have to. You promised. You need the money to keep your studio; you know you can’t keep up your work without it. You really have no other option.”

Connie was trapped between a moral dilemma and a financial hard place.

The air was crisp on the day of the art show. Connie was wearing a dress that was too tight with tights that were too sheer and a coat that was too light. She was sitting on her favorite brown couch, rolling the dilemma around in her head like a glass marble between her fingers. It was late afternoon, mere hours before the gallery showing. Connie hated the late afternoon.

There was something about the way the sun sat in the sky that perturbed her, something about the waiting—waiting for dinner, waiting for evening plans, waiting for the 3 o’clock exhaustion to fade—that made those hours completely unappealing. She did her worst thinking during that time, and her worst paining. The portrait of Grandmother Lorelei sat before her, and it was truly a stunning piece. Horrific and cruel, but stunning none the less. Say what you want about Connie, but she was a terrific artist. Her use of color, shading and detail highlighted Grandmother Lorelei’s worst qualities. Her eyes were bird-like, her posture unnaturally erect, her nails as long as talons. And the colors—oh the colors used to describe her! Grays and blacks, deep purples and blues depicted soulless eyes and a stone cold heart. She was a statue, not Michelangelo’s David adored by all but more closely a figure from Dante’s inferno that all loved to despise. The portrait was everything Rosie had asked for, it was all of Connie’s talent summed up in one square.
Connie hated it.

Connie sat looking at all these things, the details that worked together to compose her painting. She sat as the late afternoon passed her by, as the sun left for the night and the moon and stars came to play. Connie considered many things in these few hours—the state of her fridge (empty), the state of her cupboards (bare), the state of her bank account (dismal). With a final sigh she stood and made her way down to the gallery showing.

Grandmother Lorelei was the first person Connie saw when she arrived at the gallery that night.

“Oh darling, I’m so glad you’ve made it. The gallery is simply stunning isn’t it? Come with me. I have someone you must meet.” And so the night progressed. Connie felt like she had met everyone that was anyone from the upper crust of the city. Stuffy lawyers shook her hand with meaty fingers, critical doctors advised her on the best time to start Botox treatments (the answer varied, but each doctor assured Connie that he was best for the job). There were business owners, fashion designers, and artists—so many artists! Artists from Paris, New York, Rome. Connie had never been happier than she was in that moment, stuffing her face with little sandwiches and discussing the techniques of Picasso with an expensive glass of champagne in her hand.

Except she wasn’t happy. The painting still loomed in her mind, the dilemma of what to do, what to do, do I have time to change my mind? And where is Rosie? Grandmother Lorelei’s presence unnerved her; Rosie’s tardiness irked her until she thought she couldn’t take the waiting one second longer.

“Excuse me; can I have everyone’s attention?” Grandmother Lorelei stood at the front of the gallery beside a large white sheet.

“Hey, did I miss anything?” Rosie sidled up beside Connie with one sandwich in each hand and a third in her mouth. Connie couldn’t answer. Connie didn’t answer.

Grandmother Lorelei’s speech was long and monotonous, yet Connie wished that it would never end. However, like all good things it finally did, and Grandmother Lorelei swept the sheet off the painting with a flourish of her hand. A hush fell over the room and for a moment all was still, like how the world feels after landing underwater after a large cannon ball. Suspended, that’s how Connie felt. And then her head broke to the surface.

The room filled with the buzzing of hundreds of people as the painting was viewed, for the first time, by eyes that weren’t Connie’s. Grandmother
Lorelei’s face grew to match the horrific painting as she turned to look at it herself.

Connie didn’t want to see the look of shock on Grandmother Lorelei’s face; she didn’t want to see color rise to her cheeks as she suppressed both embarrassment and rage. Behind her Rosie snickered, and Connie was positive she heard a congratulation or two. But Connie couldn’t make herself stay, so she didn’t.
Listening for the Conga
by Kolade Olaiya

Pray to the lord, is what the mouthpiece of the lord does
Preach the word, is what the mouthpiece of the lord does
Two hours gone in the house of the lord,
Yet a grave yard was livelier.

One man is seated, singing with his lips closed,
And his head moving like a car with no brakes.
The priest’s wife is so engrossed in the parable of
The prodigal son, and reads her bible with her eyes closed.

Four hours gone in the house of the lord,
Yet a graveyard is still livelier.
Suddenly, everyone stands on their feet
When sticks strike the conga.

Men and women wind their waists as freely as a tree moves
When it answers the call of the breeze.
The poor man smiles as his hands are in the air
Constantly jamming each other as sticks strike the conga.

The strike of the conga erases the sorrowful’s sorrow in a second
The strike of the conga equates the rich and the poor in a second.
Five hours gone in the house of the lord,
And finally, the strike of the conga resurrects the dead.
They Saw
by Emma Zyriek

They saw it on a Sunday,
saw it when his smile ran away
and wrinkled up to the sun;

The saw it never belonged on their living room couch.
On no, it danced,
danced in the pews and at the dinner table,
danced when the muffled phone calls grew louder and louder.

And when they cursed
they saw it enter his mouth and sound like a brass band,
and they heard him for the very first time.

He had only loved as he loved them; he spoke,
his voice calloused from the whispers of the blind.
And with this they covered him with their knitted blankets
so only God could shape what was beneath his skin.
Victory and Whistling
by Madison Browne

a bicycle
a breeze
muffled words through a tinted window
antique clocks
vance joy
silhouettes in the rain
the day we both knew

a beginning
November storms
rain-weighted spiderwebs
ice skates
the melody i thought was ours
fleur-de lis
a poll of cyclical times

you’re whistling
but i can’t tell
who’s won
I can only tell embellished stories.
They begin as beige throw pillows,
comfortable and unobtrusive,
gradually garnering metallic threads and lustrous tassels.
The creation strengthens the narrative.
In form,
the two stories—the situation and the imposed arc,
are identical.
In utility,
strained.
In the ability to mesmerize,
justified.
We want our stories to reflect the person we believe ourselves to be.
Coherent Human Ability
by Madison Browne

I wonder why breath can’t be articulated, only felt.
I wonder why indigo isn’t the color of stones in the sun,
And why living is a fact, concept, but we don’t really know
Why things are alive, other than they happen
To be made of the right atoms that
Swirl and stack together into something
That processes glucose and emits carbon dioxide or oxygen,
For that is our greatest function.
This is life.
But is that really a life?

Maybe I’ve been dead for a long time,
But my heart keeps on beating (for this is expected).
Is life a state of mind?
Three of my family members killed themselves.
Everyone denies it.
That’s not what good Christians do.
I like books about fantasy because I’d love to touch fire unscorched.
I wonder why I was made so small in comparison to the stars,
When they say that life is such a miracle.

Once I watched a thirty minute show about volcanoes.
There was Hawaiian music and no voice-over,
because someone finally realized that people talk too much.
I’d like to die in a bed of molten lava.
Isn’t that poetic?
To die in the earth’s blood,
To die of an excess of warmth.

How often do we think about the fact that
Money is only dirty paper, arbitrary numbers?
Politics is showmanship and figures,
Fueled off roadkill.
Look pretty (you’ll win) look at the camera. 
Smile big. Now run them over with your eyes.

I’ve never met a person who cares, actually cares, 
About one thing other than himself.

I wonder if slugs realize that they are just snails without a home. 
But would any of us really know if we were of the lonely species? 
I knew a girl once who thought she had a family, but no one even saw her. 
They didn’t realize she was a volcano.

I wonder why I’m cold in the summertime, 
And why no one even offers to warm my hands.

We all aspire to live long, medicated lives 
Contently keeping fires in chimneys, 
Without ever experiencing the rain, 
Without ever standing in the presence of a tornado, 
Holding on desperately to our precious, limited lives, 
Wearing football helmets in bathtubs, 
Denying the wind burning our own lungs.
Extra(ordinary) Skin
by Elizabeth Campbell

The world taught me how to look at my reflection and feel distressed by the dimpling of the skin lining my thighs, apologetic for the curves of my baby-bearing hips, ashamed of the flesh bulging above my blue jeans, and weary of the stretch marks adorning my moody breasts.

God forbid if the right one matures before the left, if it sags from the weight of gravity, and swells from the bites of my baby’s teeth.

God forbid if instead of cringing when the scale refuses to light up skin and bones, I choose to exalt the (thick) skin I’m in.
Mirror
by Taylor Darks

I boil beneath her gaze, festering like a sore
Engulfed in flames, a pain I ignore.

Her eyes undress me, revealing what I hide.
The secrets I have guarded, the tears I have cried.

She is cruel, in the way she sees,
Picking apart my serenity,
Hoisting me up, like strange fruit on a tree.

My skin scarred, like dirt in fresh snow.
I smell the burning of flesh, that I recognize as my own.

I swing back and forth, controlled by the wind,
as she whispers the weaknesses I hold within.

She cuts me down, when I’ve accepted defeat.
My head hangs low, like the branches of a tree.

I wouldn’t dare look up, to behold my enemy.
With one look in the mirror
I recognize her as me.
Mama
by Margaret Shelton

She drinks from the yellow cup with black flecks in the plastic,
sets crystal glasses
and paper napkins on the table.

Her touch is a satin pressure,
    an old clean cotton top sheet
    thrown into the air
    and sighing back down.
Fingers smooth and brushing along my skin.
Quiet calligraphed I love you across my wrist.

She teaches me to sew a white wedding dress,
    doll-sized.
The buttons are plastic pearls.
(I keep her winks in a clear bookcase in my brain. Open it.
Smell the lavender.)

I drink from her mother’s tea set.
I keep her old string of beads in my jewelry box.
On the fourth finger of my left hand,
I wear her husband’s wedding ring,
    a circle of beaten gold.
Apparition by Corrine Helman, digital photography
Golgotha by Sam Person, *digital photography*
Unstructured by Nathan Mathai, digital photography
Ode to O’Keeffe by Heather Brame

35 mm film, silver gelatin print
Desert Portrait by Heather Brame
35 mm film, silver gelatin print
Portrait of My Mother by Elizabeth Campbell
black and white film photography
Portrait of A Sad Clown by Elizabeth Campbell
black and white film photography
Up & Down by Eva Bilo, digital photography
Scaling Vivaciousness by Emma Nguyen, *hand-colored film*

Everybody’s Got A Price by Emma Nguyen, *film photography*
Panes by Demi Marshall, *color film photography*

Vet by Demi Marshall, *black and white film photography*
Hindsight: A Scene from Auschwitz by Oryza Astari

digital photography
Pilot by Julia Roberts, digital photography
Phantom of Kalaripayattu by Yiming Hu, digital photography

Untitled by Yiming Hu, digital photography
Silk Hydrangea by Aaron Navarro, digital photography
Silk Rose by Aaron Navarro, digital photography
Walking to School by Kristina Benson, *digital photography*

Drawing Water by Kristina Benson, *digital photography*
Tree of Life by Finley Buchanan

*brass metal, glass, silver wire*
Descent of Man by Lauren Zimmerman, marker
Bad Dream by Lauren Zimmerman, marker
Gilded Genie by Sawyer Martin
white and black conte on toned paper
The Feminine Mystique by Sawyer Martin
white and black conte on toned paper
Fading by Corrine Helman, watercolor and ink on paper
Audrey by Aaron Navarro, graphite on paper
Twiggy by Emily Matthews, *spray paint on canvas*
Religious turmoil, burning the pure oil,
Turn the heat up just to watch their blood boil.
Bodily remains seep deep into the soil
Of the same fields our forefathers did once toil.
Who’s loyal, who’s royal, when it’s ash to dust?
Piss on gold and watch how fast it rusts.
What’s corrupt when even pastors lust?
Pressures build until we spaz and bust.
That’s enough! But a man’s gotta eat.
Mice get trapped when they try to get some cheese.
Food’s not cheap, we have families to feed.
See how the American dream is just a tease.
It doesn’t come with ease. It’s a struggle to the top.
You best not rest lest you’ll drop if you stop.
They watch from a box, cast lots, and throw rocks.
But when it’s the carrot or the stick, the rabbit’s gonna hop.
Traveling Leaves
by Sarah Luke

Plastic teeth of the rake under leaves,
tip toe steps in pink tennis shoes
because this is where the yellow jackets
make their nests—under the earth—
your hand, Hannah,
between my dirt-caked fingers:
this is the other world, the thing
you can’t forget.

Inside the house, the stovetop
decorated with oil-stained pans
piled up to the underside of the microwave—
I mean, we had nowhere to store them,
but that wasn’t the point;
the point was the staticky radio
and our father’s hands
drumming an old Billy Joel rhythm onto a glass,
a near-empty bottle of ketchup
that gasped when you squeezed it,
our mother, one hip against the sink,
propping her elbow against a
corner to wring out
a wet towel for our fingers and all
we wanted was something to dip our French fries into
and to know who would claim the last fry.

The pockets of all your jeans are now filled
with makeup-dusted quarters, mine
with thrice-folded receipts from the drug store
two months back. Where did the time go?
I don’t know; does anyone?
Leaned against the rooftop of my car
in late September, thinking
about the autumns that have come before
and all those that may or may not come after.
I forget that yesterday
is just another version of tomorrow,
all its redundancy and bitterness,
that the leaves I raked into a pile
in the backyard yesterday
are now traveling through the woods—
the same leaves.
I Feel Time As Hues Branded Behind My Eyes
by Emily Matthews

Some days ease warm yellowgold
When orbs of light sneak through leaves
And hot breathes of air hug across bodies

Some days drag deep blue
Like sinking currents
With soothing depths pulling back and forth

Some days scrape sharp white
Where heads crisscross above clouds
And bodies are left behind

Some days pulse red
When everything burns
Words thoughts touch

Some days burn icy black
Like a cave with crumbling walls
And a tunnel without an end
Picnic Day
by Maddie Allums

While holding take-out tikka masala from a place down the street, she passed by a man wearing jeans and a brown coat.

She was walking when the man stopped her and asked if she had any extra food for his friends.

She looked at him, embarrassed “No,” she said, “sorry.” She was sure to put on her most sympathetic, kindest look.

“Oh it’s okay,” he said, almost sweetly, matching her face, before his tone turned indignant,

“It’s OK when you’re hungry, but when we are it’s a crime. But don’t worry—when you die, God will forgive you for this.”
Home
by Addison Tapp

Home is a funny thing
It brings with it a sense of permanence.
Of old creaky rocking chairs with coaster stains on the arms
And indents in the carpet from where the couch has always sat.

But Time likes to play this game
Where it sneaks along right under your nose,
In the form of hot summer days and snowy winter nights
And then, all of the sudden,
You blink, and the ink-stained carpet got replaced
And the couch got a new cover.

That word Home doesn’t seem so stable anymore.
Quietly the rocking chair became a lumpy spring mattress
Scattered with polka dot pillows from an unfamiliar store.

You don’t really remember the first time you called this new place home
And maybe you didn’t even really mean it at first.
But you heard yourself say it once,
And you were sure you’d said it before.

Maybe Home isn’t just one place.
Maybe home can have a scratch on the wall
From when you tried to play baseball in the house when you were nine,
And also maybe home is the place where you proudly made
Your first cup of watery, instant coffee before class.

But it might be okay if home isn’t quite home anymore.
Maybe Time wasn’t being mean after all.
Maybe it slipped along so quietly all these years
So when you finally caught on to the game,
And turned around to see all that you had missed,
You would pause,
And smile,
And maybe even shed a tear or two
Before turning back around and letting time slip on by.
Because maybe now you’re ready for it.
Near the purple cow mural
was where the teacher told us to meet
if one of us got lost.
And I knew that one of us would.
We both have a habit of watching our
shoelaces drag on the tile, letting our eyes
follow the inconsistent path. The laces leave
no trace. Just a memory of where we were.

My laces lead me to the still life art.
I get as close as I can
to the painting of a lone boy standing
in an empty field. The hairs on my nose
long to touch the thick, chunky streaks
left by a brush stroke of acrylic paint. My eyes
narrow on the boy’s face. Who knew people
were composed of so many colors?

You tend to navigate the floor below
filled with colors and geometric shapes
that mean different things to you than they do to me.
I realize that I don’t understand your brain.
How could that purple cow symbolize your life?
It’s just a cow to me. What am I missing?
Let’s just meet by the trashcans next time.
Those mean the same thing to everyone.
Bruises
by Taylor Kinsley

She stands captive
On one pointed toe
Forming a dainty, miniature pirouette.
She stands voiceless,
Destined to a statuesque ballet for all eternity.
Her box once held
A collection of beautiful things
Like fairy wings and flowers
And promises.
Now all that’s left is dust,
And it stains her porcelain arms like
Bruises.
She plays her part, spinning and spinning
To that ceaseless melody
At the whim of the key,
And hides behind a plastic smile
Like the one she wears to garden parties,
Along with winter sleeves.
Mountains
by Britt Viergever

Her shoulders and spine curve
into shapes of mountains
protruding from tired skin

And her ghosts follow her
down streets
and around corners

And nostalgia,
an old friend,
breathes down her mountainous
neck and vertebrae

Remember your past?
Have you forgiven?
If you’re still haunted?

And each day
She must remember:
Nostalgia is the past’s trick,
Making you think
dead gardens can still grow
But remember girl,
to water the wildflowers
in your chest and fingertips
And those ghosts,
they are not the people you knew
so letting go is not a failure
but rather a victory

Remember
that it’s good to have mountains for bones,
To be built from rock
Because God met Moses in the hills
for a reason
countless burnt orange leaves
crushed by a speeding scarlet bicycle
the setting Sun surveys the scene

longing to remember what it’s like to feel
the amber of the city’s lights
warming her face

longing to remember what it’s like to feel
the cool sensation of the South Carolina wind
whispering softly in her ears

longing to remember what it’s like to look
down on the broken asphalt
and watch the centerline flick by

Tic. Tic. Tic.

she can’t remember how it felt
to look up into the robust green of the surviving oak leaves,
    relishing in their vigor
despite the knowledge of their fate

soon they will lose hold of their tree-mother
to be lit by amber as they slide softly through the wind
down to that broken asphalt to lie patiently and expectantly

waiting for a cool evening in fall when a scarlet bicycle comes speeding by
Swamp Rabbit II: Junkyard

Selfless
Rust
Forlorn
Tire
Empty
Window
Forgotten
Junkyrd

Time eats the automobiles
Unaware of the millions of miles of memories
tucked into the decaying leather seats

John’s first view of the Grand Canyon
Caroline’s first road trip
Rachel’s first drive
Michael’s first kiss

Their owners are dead, forgotten by all
Except the Fords, Chevys, and Chryslers
They once couldn’t live without

Swamp Rabbit III: The Water Tower

A timeless sentinel rises
from the Earth on four posts of concrete or steel
at this distance, I’m not sure which

What I do know is the old codger has ruled
over this domain since before my birth
perhaps before my father’s as well
collecting it’s cool corrosions
I wonder what it has seen
in its years of watching over these upcountry hills
I wonder what wisdom it may have
to offer the next generation

If only I could speak its language

_Swamp Rabbit IV: Barbed Wire_

A bulb of red trickles down his thumb, testing the wire. I remind Cole of the “No Trespassing” sign posted on the fence. He replies stubbornly by taking off his shirt and wrapping it taut around his hands. He grabs the wire and hoists himself over in one motion.

He turns back with the same sheepish grin that has gotten us into trouble more times than I can count. “You coming?”

I glare through the chain links beyond his skinny torso towards the hopefully abandoned, half-collapsed shed caked in illegible graffiti.

Goddammit Cole.
Ten Things I Know as of Thursday, January 21st, 2016 at 8:02 pm
by Jake Crouse

1) Birds are more enjoyable to watch than they are to make into numbers. Numbers are static — no field markings, migratory patterns, summer trills, or winter chirps.

2) The first human was endowed with the ability to fear. Our species survived on the proper balance of trust and intimidation.

3) Most Americans can’t say the country Mogadishu is situated in; many of those same people can only hypothesize which continent it lies on.

4) Epidemiologists study large groups of people at a time. Some in the field refer to themselves as “number watchers.”

5) Birds are generally aware of when to leave an area. Triggers include temperature changes, resource availability, and concentration of predators.

6) Fear elicits a number of unfavorable responses in the human body, including sweat gland stimulation, increased heart rate and adrenaline uptake, and shunting of blood to the large leg muscle for explosive speed production. “People also searched the terms: stress, anxiety, panic.”

7) The bodies are being counted in Mogadishu as I write. “This is a developing story.”

8) I have yet to meet an epidemiologist who prefers to substitute numbers for people.

9) A variety of birds (e.g. sparrows, vireos, thrushes) will respond to alert calls, regardless of if they see a predator or not.

10) The only humans we will hear of tonight in Mogadishu will be numbers. No names, no stories, no word on if they knew they were supposed to run.
Creativity drips. Pooled pigments congeal into a dizzying topographical map of contemporary hues. Physicists claim that the drips in Pollock’s painting mimic naturally occurring fractals in nature, such as Fibonacci spirals in seashells, emerald blooms in Queen Anne’s Lace, glacial fjords in icy-inlet places, and limbs of lightning that blink across night skies. Unrestricted geometries.

I think of my favorite landscapes, the places that hold fractal-like memories, irregular and infinite. I remember counting the horseshoe crabs dotting the low-tide shores of Kiawah as tiny sandstorms of wind-whipped dust tickled my ankles. I remember hanging perpendicular to the lapis waters of Kawarau River in Queenstown, acutely aware of all my senses for what felt like the first time—staring at the lichen-covered cliff walls, my throat dry and tasting of wind, the smell of wet rocks, asphalt-like, wafting upwards, faint music drifting from the gift shop and my hands touching nothing yet grasping coldness as if it were a tangible medium. Thin bungee cords proved the tether of my existence and the catalyst of my flight. I remember the faded dock where I first contemplated worth and beauty, beauty and relevance, relevance and circumstance.

Staring across a dark lake always makes me feel as if I’m about to drift into brilliance, but without a proper vessel. Hazy lights from neighboring boathouses striate the blue-black canvas of water. Search around in the small pocket of life you carry. Do you, too, think grand thoughts that cannot be labeled? Once dawn yawns a breath of pink and purple across the sky, once the tides lose their inkiness and mutability and catch the light, reflect the sun and dancing dust, once the saltwater grotto you are trapped in releases you; do you still try to capture the brilliance? Does mediocrity stare back at you from the page, as I have so often felt it staring up at me?

The color lavender does not speckle the canvas of Lavender Mist. Pollock painted it in an old barn by Accabonac Creek on the East End of Long Island. I like to imagine this balding man, cigarette in mouth, paint canister slightly tipped in left hand, creating inky puddles under weathered wooden beams, fashioning a mist of colors that could not be labeled.

Look at his mess of oil and enamel and aluminum. Spirals and swirls and domed cathedral-tops caught in an unremitting feedback loop. Dribble out the banal, it seems to say. Banality is the harbinger of brilliance.
I slammed my foot on the gas and the truck surged forward. I could see out of the corner of my eye that my grandpa looked less than comfortable in the passenger seat. It’s as if he was trying to telepathically communicate with me. I could hear him grumbling in his head, *Slow Down Caroline, this isn’t your getaway car.* Maybe not, but it was the closest form of escapism that I could conjure up at the time. Those open fields were my own adventure, an adventure free of harsh opinions and unfair assumptions. They were fields of endless thoughts and suppositions.

The sunlight hit the window as the truck jumped across another muddy ditch and maneuvered around another bale of hay. I tried to ease my foot off the gas pedal to smooth the worry lines of concern off of his pale face. The years of farm labor had hardened his appearance. Lines of worry were permanently etched onto his skin. Whether they were a result of years of working outside or being married to my grandmother remained unclear.

The sun slowly sank beneath the pine trees and he seemed to automatically relax, as if he was suddenly remembering that I was the only other sensible member of our family, even if I was only eight. Besides the time I drove his John Deere straight into a tree, my driving record was impeccable. But then again, how could I be blamed for that? Who lets a six-year-old drive a utility vehicle unsupervised anyway? I was much more equipped to handle an automatic transmission.

And he was crazy enough to let me try again.

When I begged him to let me have the keys, he didn’t question me, but rather accepted the inevitable. If my grandma wanted to drive an hour and a half to Augusta to shop, he didn’t argue. If my mom needed him to cut down yet another tree, he was there rain or shine.

As I gripped the steering wheel, my foot lightly on the pedals, my eyes alight with righteous indignation from the previous family incursion, Papa and I easily sat in one another’s company blissfully unaware of the continuous verbal assaults going on at home. We were equally glad to be among the open field of hay, the hay that lacked the capacity to fight and argue with the other. Although my feet could barely touch the floor, we both seemed to relax in each other’s presence with the radio softly crooning in the background. Papa sat in
the passenger seat with his hands clasped on his lap looking out at the tall grass in front of him. He was a quiet man and I always knew he loved being out here because of the overwhelming tranquility, that transcendental quality of nature. It gave him a place to think and embrace his thoughts rather than the hostility of emotions ever present in the house.

I slowly turned up the volume of the radio. Surprisingly, he didn’t object.

Family events were a common occurrence in the latter years of my childhood. From the age of eight to fourteen, I was as eager to go to them as I was for them to end. Whenever we were at the dinner table, my mom, as well as my uncles or grandmother, had a knack for bringing up a subject that flamed the nerve of another or every individual at the table.

Trust me, it’s not hard to do.

As time progressed, I was usually that individual: the instigator or the inflicted. But if I’m being honest, I was a sensitive child and could argue my case with the best of them. The conversation followed in one of two manners:

Option One: One particular individual at my grandmother’s dining room table tentatively asks about a shared acquaintance as food is at the midway point in between plate and mouth.

My grandmother asks: “So did you hear about Cassondra? Apparently, she’s leaving her husband and taking all of his money to build stables for her horses in Wagener.”

Here we go. I roll my eyes.

“Not surprised,” someone responds.

My grandfather ignores all comments and proceeds to eat with caution. Thus began the discussion on the statistics of failed marriages, the outcome of children with single parents, and how in reality it’s somehow the government’s fault. It’s always the government’s fault.

No matter the theme of localized scandal, my response was always the same.

“For God’s sake, who cares?” I would ask.

I never got an answer.

Option Two: Immediate family drama. I.E. my great grandmother’s hoarding addiction.

“Have you been to her house this week? I couldn’t even walk through the front door without six cats and twenty pill bottles falling on top of me.”

This was nothing new.
My great grandmother’s house was something of a spectacle. She was 95 years old living in a white house by the side of a railroad track in Trenton, South Carolina. Her house was surrounded by overgrown grass, dozens of flowerbeds, a storm cellar, and depending on the season, five to ten cats. A lot of people liked to use the excuse that she grew up during the Great Depression and therefore hoarding was a manifestation of her fear for lacking basic necessities.

I can tell you, that was not the case for Granny Lott.

Her parents, aunts, and uncles controlled the railroads along the Savannah River. They weren’t losing money. They were making it, along with a few other political scandals.

“Well she’s your mother, it’s your responsibility to take care of her,” my uncles would argue whenever her “estate” came up.

Granny Lott’s hoarding tendencies were always a hot topic of tension in the Trotter household. Her “legacy,” or rather monetary value, was a constant source of debate up to and after her passing. Sometimes she would even propagate the argument: “Well when I die, it’s up to you to make sure John Howard doesn’t get that safe.”

Everyone rolls their eyes. Like we would’ve been able to find it anyway. But the best way to solve my great grandmother’s hoarding problem? “Easy. Bulldoze it all, problem solved,” I’d explain with my eyes resolutely on the plate in front of me. It was a simple solution.

Their response, “Shh Caroline, calm down.”

Apparently my sense of humor was less than appreciated.

Family meals were simultaneously a time for fellowship as well as an episode of nuclear fallout even on trivial matters. The inevitable mediator of World War III invariably fell on Papa, the voice of undeniable reason. He was able to settle disputes and dissolve the flames of verbal outrage and indignation that were constantly threatening to overwhelm the house. I’m not quite sure how he was able to do it, but whatever the discussion, it didn’t faze him. Nothing did.

Today, it’s a miracle the house is still standing. Only in the past couple years since his passing, have I been able to notice the signs of disrepair: The roof leaks, the grass grows through the cracks of the sidewalk, and my grandma’s green house is filled with unacknowledged life. Despite my grandmother’s attempts to reinvent and remodel, even physical structures wear thin from exhaustion. The house has been through too much. There are no more hay bales
in the field and the sky always shines gray.

Somehow, Papa was always able to cool the mood without using the techniques my mom and grandma were, and still are, so fond of: yelling, passive aggressive comments, and tongue biting that turns their cheeks into swollen red balloons. My uncles’ marks of disagreement were similar. Instead of tongue biting, they would gesture with their hands like they were handles of an axe. The disagreements were always the same:

- Mental Illness? “It’s a personal problem.”
- Economic difficulties? “You caused it yourself.”

Somehow he was able to divert everyone’s attention to the weather or the birds that sat on the feeder outside the window looking in on the chaos. Nature was my grandfather’s escape. Once the storm calmed, we would leave to explore the healing powers of four muddy tires, the open field, and a blue sky.

A small world that rested on the outskirts of predisposed verbal outrage and excessive energy.

Many people believe that in order to create a connection with another person, language is necessary. But in those moments, we didn’t need to speak to understand what the other was thinking. I undoubtedly knew that he enjoyed being there as much as I did even if there was the slight possibility of a head on collision with a hay bale.

Larry James Trotter was the foundation of our family. He was the guiding force that prevented an avalanche from trampling over us all. When words were threatening, his silence spoke volumes. He kept us in balance whether we wanted it or not. He was the one who gave my uncles the power to be independent, my mom the strength to uphold her beliefs, and my grandma the courage to carry on. And when I was in that truck with him, he gave me a sense of fearlessness.

I didn’t question myself.

But when the time came for us to stop with the petty quarrels and give him the strength to guide him through the ditches of medical fallout, we found ourselves lost, still looking to him for guidance.

2008 was the year of transition. I began my first year of high school, my mom started a new job, and my uncle got engaged to a girl he’d been dating since high school. We were all so wrapped up in our own worlds that we didn’t recognize the signs. My grandma refused to believe that he was actually sick and when my mom finally convinced him to go to the doctor, the only explanation they could come up with was an allergic reaction to a tick bite.
A creature that sucks the life out of you until you have nothing left to give. After a couple of rides in ambulances and several other trips to the hospital, my grandfather had had enough. Medical bills were piling up, and my grandmother refused to accept the reality—their lives were changing. She began to realize that her comfort came at a price. He knew that and he didn’t want to be a burden any longer.

I didn’t know much about that day, but as time went on I started to realize that some details were better left unknown. I was only fourteen when he committed suicide and I was too concerned with a new school and what others thought of me to be worried about the troubles at home.

I was selfish.
I thought he would pull through.
He was Larry James Trotter.
If the effects of life had overtaken him, how were the rest of us supposed to survive?

August 21, 2008 was the day I realized I was no longer exempt from the world’s cruelty.

I was no longer fearless; I was constantly afraid. Afraid for my grandmother and afraid for everything he was going to miss.

He wouldn’t be there to watch my uncle get married.
He wouldn’t be there when I learned how to legally drive a car.
He wouldn’t be there when my uncle had his first son.
He wouldn’t be there when I graduated from high school.
He wouldn’t be the one to help me move in and out of college.

He left us, but I couldn’t blame him for what he did. Instead I chose to blame everyone else.

I blamed myself for being the one to answer the phone that afternoon and hearing my grandmother’s panicked voice on the other end.

I blamed my dad for telling me what I had already expected in the car on the way home from school.

I blamed myself for not seeing it coming.
I blamed us all for being selfish.

For years, I didn’t care to listen to anyone about anything, but I could never quite block out his obvious presence in my thoughts and surroundings. Whenever I would garner the courage and ask my mom about what happened, she would talk and I would mentally shut down. I laid in constant fear of
finding out yet another detail that would make me feel shame and regret. Too much time had been spent blaming others rather than looking for how to mend the future.

We had failed him. Instead of admitting that our foundation was as human and fragile as we were, we denied the horrific possibilities of human frailty. We refused to leave the house of blissful ignorance and wander outside into the field of consequences.
Walking into the upper level of Sainte-Chapelle is like a burst of music resounding before you, where the notes are tangible and silent. The rounded supports of the walls are gold eloquence, shooting up into ribbed groin vaults painted with blue night and golden stars. The air you breathe is no longer of the physical world, but one entirely ensconced in stained glass. Instead of barring the outside world from the inside, the walls reduce it, purify it until all that remains is sunlight and colors that glow copper and burgundy and royal blue. The only opaque surface in sight is the tile floor beneath your feet, the vaulted ceiling, and the pillars that join the two, trapping you between.

The very nature of describing the chapel falls short. It is inimitable in anything but its purest state: divinity. Sainte-Chapelle is a distinct example of the French Rayonnant style of Gothic architecture. It is as if the builders set a rose window atop the skeleton of a chapel and left it to melt in the heat of the sun until its glass stretched and oozed down the spindle-thin stone ribs and set overnight.

In a period of less than a hundred years, Rayonnant style flourished and faded, a time between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, where quality of space above quantity of space became the new ideal. You step into a room where the very walls are art. Gilt chandeliers hang, weightless, in space, lighting the windows from inside as the sun streams in from the outside. Light transcends functionality into necessity. Darkness is as incomprehensible as ever returning to the real world.

My family and I do, though, and stepping back out onto the cobblestone streets of Paris where the exterior is nothing but an unassuming mass of gray stone is jarring in the least. Colors are duller, colder, even though it’s the middle of June and the city boils in heat.

It’s as if some greater being has doused the fire over the world and I can only look back on the ember of what I know is still throbbing inside the chapel’s walls with molten gold.

In the evening, however, we return, and knowing what to expect somehow makes stepping back inside even more stunning. We approach from the balcony, ferried in with a line of guests showing bent tickets at the door. We’re sitting this time, rooted to the floor, necks stretched upwards. On my left my sister shuffles her purse under her chair while my parents on my right murmur between themselves. The chairs are packed so tightly into rows that I have to tuck my elbows in close to my body, back rigid, but it’s barely a
sacrifice at all.

The program opens with Vivaldi’s The Four Seasons and the moment that the first violinist’s bow lifts to play the first note, my body and mind split.

Spring is a joyous celebration of life, a harmony of yellow and gold glass and trills that spring through the air in delicate arcs of lead.

I float somewhere through the chandeliers, carried on waves of vibrato. The air that fills my lungs is the same that existed when Vivaldi penned the poems accompanying his music. And though seasons do not occur in a birdhouse of stone and glass with webs of Baroque harmonies strung between the arches of the vaulted ceiling, damp spring flowers grow in cracks of tile and the gentle murmur of rain slips over marble.

Spring eases into summer and the breath between broadens the room like a sigh filling a chest. I imagine those who have listened to the sounds of nature in nothing but the vibrations of air, how many have heard two hundred and ninety years’ worth of this one combination of notes. How many of their hearts have raced to the storms that rise with the point of an arch and burst from the ceiling like liquid sound?

Autumn processes in, triumphant, and the sun pouring in through the rose window behind my head glows burnt orange and blue. The space above our heads does not fill with empty air, but rather the light of 3,221 square feet of glass that bleeds color and bows on strings that bleed chords. Dust drifts on cerulean threads of F major.

Staccato bursts of snow and sleet pluck away warmth until the space of our bodies packed into chairs is covered in a blanket of minor chords. I drift somewhere down through the blizzard and seep back into myself, breathing, flushed, between two walls of stained glass, the empty space rich with eddies of harmony and melody, intertwining, rolling through and over each other.

The moment between the last echo of the final chord suspends on a single breath, the lift of a bow, and in those two seconds, there is nothing but green-gold beams of light and silence hanging like spider webs.
Cold Coffee
by Reilly Mahan

I take another deep inhalation through my nose. I smell dark roast coffee, Newport cigarettes, and peanut butter.

Familiar gray morning light filters through my sheer bedroom curtains, shielding my eyes from the obtrusive streams of dawn. Same old morning routine, same welcome scent of Sumatra dark roast brewing in my old garage sale coffee machine. As much as I love my morning cup, I couldn’t tell the difference between coffee brands by a distinct smell. Every time I pick up more at the grocery store, I come back with a different brand. Dark roast is the only quality that remains constant.

This morning, I breathe in the wafting scent much more deeply, trying to awaken my senses along with my groggy mind and also making a point of remembering this brews individual notes of dried herbs and fresh earth—at least that’s what the bag says I should be smelling.

I grab the pot and as I pour its contents into my gray lump of a mug, I become entranced by the silky dark liquid. I muse to myself about its origins… ‘handcrafted’… ‘one of a kind’… twenty damn dollars for a mug. The regret is fleeting, however. Its charcoal curves bring a smile to my face, though I cannot place my finger on just why.

“Shit!” I seethe, shaking excess coffee off my freshly scalded fingers, now lightly pink and tender. I slurp up the top coat of coffee threatening to spill over the lip again. I have to find my way back into my mind and start the morning off right, but I have a feeling it’s just going to be one of those days.

I rip the two pink packets of Sweet & Low and gingerly empty them into my coffee. You’d be hard pressed to find anyone under seventy still using this brand of artificial sweetener, but I can’t stop.

It’s not like an addiction.

But maybe it is. I carry a bag of them in my purse to work.

No one even stocks them anymore. Understandable, I guess. One day I might switch over to one of those all natural cane sugar brands, but not yet. Too much memory is kept locked away in each artificial vessel.

“Grandpa, please. I’m feeling much better. You’re scaring the nurses away.”
“Riles, you can’t just let people get away with not doing their damn job! You’re in here all sick and shit, while they are just yapping over at the desk all night long!”

“They’ve done all they can do, Grandpa, I promise I’m okay. But you know what? I bet we could both use another warm cup of coffee about now.”

Grumble… grumble… “…should make the nurses do it…” grumble… grumble…

I’m in the fifth grade, parents are overseas, and my grandpa has been staying with my siblings and me as a babysitter. We’ve gotten used to a consistent breakfast of coffee cake and a consistent dinner of peanut butter sandwiches. I am also the sickest I have ever been, some sort of intense stomach bug, leaving me completely dehydrated. My grandfather is never in a particularly good mood, some may even use the word “crotchety,” but that day he was thrown back into fatherhood and tried his best to be comforting. I could tell he had no idea how to handle all the worry he was feeling for me. It was a very sweet crotchety then.

The nurses suggested he go home to get me a change of clothes (mine were covered in vomit). He came back with was light blue star pajamas, a stack of playing cards, and his bag of pink Sweet & Low packets. Even then barely anyone used them. Rumors of carcinogens and all that.

As we waited through the night in the emergency room, we played a hundred games of blackjack—my favorite of all the card games he had taught me in the past two weeks. Every couple of hours, he would go get us more black coffee, pull out two packets each, sweeten our drinks, and pass me my cup.

We finally left in the early hours of the next morning. I was fast asleep for the next day. I don’t even remember the car ride home, or how I got up to my bed. When I woke later that day, there was a bowl of hot Campbell’s Chicken and Wild Rice soup and Canada Dry Ginger Ale waiting by my bedside. After devouring the perfect stomach-settling meal, I pulled on grandmother’s old silk robe around my star pajamas and headed downstairs.

Three whole cases of Canada Dry Ginger Ale and five rows of Campbell’s Chicken and Wild Rice soup sat on the kitchen counter. Outside, my grandfather was sitting on the porch, smoking a Newport cigarette.

I was away at college when my mom called to tell me.

We knew he had been sick for a while, but he hated the doctor.

*No need to come home early, we won’t be having a funeral.*

I hold my mug up to my lips, nestled between my palms, and take my first sip. Coffee’s gone cold.
You know you’re at Big Oaks Rescue Farm when you see the donkeys sauntering along the fence by the highway and horses atop acres of hills flicking tails like feather dusters to swat away the flies. The first of three red gates is wide open and broken, sitting in a heap like a discarded soda can, probably rammed into with the blind force of a tractor trailer. When you get inside you close the gate and get out of the way fast; no goat is too shy to insist how baaaadly he wants to explore the highway streets beyond the fences, and whoever is conducting the pickup truck plows it straight through clusters of turkeys, forgetting that visitors of the farm haven’t yet learned the self preservation routine that the animals already know. The routine usually means if you stick your snout through the slats in the fence you will get a carrot, but when Mary is driving the truck it means get out of the way.

People who know the alpaca named Coco walk around with a whip. If you are lost, new to the farm, or are simply standing in the wrong place at the wrong time, Coco will welcome you immediately. He slips his lips across his teeth in a grin and takes a running charge at your backside, stands on his hind legs and clips his arms to your sides like magnets. With his nose pressed into the space between your arm and your ribcage, you can almost hear him saying, “Ha, I gotcha there. I gotcha now.” You might, over dinner later, draw a parallel to wrestling with your brother on the red and green patterned carpet of your living room at home, but this will not be the first thing that you think. If Joe, the owner of the farm, is on the phone he will watch the situation from afar, the corners of his mouth curving upward in the modest way that tells you he doesn’t want you to know he’s smiling. If he’s not on the phone he lowers his voice and says, “Coco,” and the alpaca pins his ears back and slinks away. “I bottle fed that animal for the first part of his life,” Joe says. “Potty trained him with puppy pads.”

When he says this to me I am still eying Coco, imagining the mop-head as a baby. “You didn’t,” I say.

He nods his head at a pile of brown pellets by the side of his house. “It was easy. Alpacas only go in one place.”

Big Oaks is not the kind of place you go unless you’re searching for something. Wearing yoga pants and my grandmother’s ring, I have no other reason to have
come. When I stand at the center of a dirt arena the wild boar named Wiggy waddles over and glues his oozing nose to my pants. His laugh is like a pepper grinder and he snorts it everywhere. “Stop,” I cajole him in the language he doesn’t understand. He flops onto his side and scratches his back on the surface of the earth, a child at a playground, a three year old enamored with the feel of wet dirt on the backs of his fingers.

Many of the animals at Joe’s farm are made of skin pulled tightly over rib cages like too-small velvet jackets. Joe is careful not to feed them too much immediately after taking them in; he would burst their bellies. The horses roam in the pasture by the dozens, breeding with donkeys at times and bearing mules, their numbers climbing above one hundred. He has asked people to take in foster horses to make room for more. The cows fold their legs on the ground, their knobby knees knocking. The deer wears a neon orange collar so you know it’s her and not one of the ones that lope in the trees next to highways. Even so, her size alone would be enough to differentiate her from the deer that have to travel for their food; her body is a covered pillow cushion on pine needle legs, and she leans against your side like a house cat. She is one that doesn’t need a cage, and if you hold out an apple she will eat it, taking slow bites like someone who knows she can trust the consistency of a man in a leather vest and cowboy boots.

The first time I see Blondie she is rocking in the open space beneath the barn roof, digging a small pattern into the dirt with her hoof. I notice first her color, then her size, then her jagged hipbones angled towards the ceiling. Shapeless black shadows blanket her form. She is dusty, her fur bone white, her head long enough to stretch past a man’s forearm twice over.

“Laura,” I say to my friend. We are the only people on the farm today. She looks at the horse and pockets her hands. “Don’t go in.”

I take one step closer to the barn gates.

“Sarah,” Laura says, “the horses kick.”

I plant my feet and lean forward, slick black pants folding over bent knees. Blondie steadies her stance, raises a long-nosed head. She stares at me, and the red veins in her eyes are bright maps.

Coco paces the fence railings of the “trouble-maker pen” at noon, spitting at anyone who walks by. Leaned against the jagged edge of a fencepost, Joe is a proud parent at his child’s first stage performance. He tucks his chin, a smirk climbing through the lines on his face.

“Joe, you really need to keep Coco penned up from eleven to three when
This is the volunteer named Penny, a woman with hair chopped to her shoulders and the stiff kind of blue jeans that look rough-feeling, like she’s scraped mud off of them too many times. She’s the one with the camera; almost all of the photos on their web page are hers.

In the driveway a wide-bellied donkey blocks a van from getting through. The donkey has heavy ears and a stance by the gate that looks almost permanent. I tap the gate gently against her side to encourage her. One look in her eyes tells me she is a female who has a matted coat stained by somebody else’s dinner and a resolute prerogative to profess, *I can’t move. Don’t touch me.*

“She’s pregnant,” Joe says. “Ready to have her baby any day now.”

He rams the gate into the donkey’s side—not enough to hurt her, just enough to make her get going—and urges her out of traffic’s way, one hand on her belly and a foot against her heel.

“I was out here yesterday,” I say. “I came to see my friends Spirit and Blondie.”

His head whips around. “You saw who?” He puts a special emphasis on the word who. “Who are your friends?”

I say it again, smiling because I know he misheard me. At this farm there are teams, and when it comes to the animals, you’re either on their side or you’re not. If you’re not then you can’t be trusted.

“Oh,” he says. He nods. “Don’t let their old owners be your friends. Especially Blondie’s.”

I am a patient outsider watching Joe take stiff-legged steps toward the gate. For him the anxiety is over. It came in a short wave, and whether or not I feel like it, I passed a test. He pulls the latch around to fasten the gate.

“What do you do when a donkey has a baby around here?” I ask. The question is how to go about assisting one who allows part of herself to break in sacrifice for another. In my mind I see blankets and the bent knee of a veterinarian in a stable doorway. But Joe tells me it’s simple.

“Celebrate,” he answers, and he urges the despairing donkey onward. When I talk with Penny about Blondie and Spirit I speak in the hushed, earnest voice that people use around children under the age of three. “They’re my favorites,” I say, “but don’t tell the others.”

Spirit takes heavy steps around Blondie. He has thick spots the color of clay patterned into his fur and long bangs that cover his eyes. He and Blondie stick together. It had been Blondie’s work to remind Spirit after visitors come.”
his mate died on the journey here from Georgia that the world, or at least most of it, could be stitched back together. Spirit and his mare had both been starving, their consciousnesses dipping into the places it was hard to come back from, and the female collapsed before they made it to the farm. I approach the two as they watch the farm scene from within the bounds of a round pen, two half-lovers presented with a cinematic picture they’d seen too many times. I take a round brush to Spirit’s matted fur and Blondie puts her nose in front of me. “Be nice,” I say. I crawl through the fence and am immediately swallowed by the dance of hooves finding their places around me, making room for a two-legged guest.

“She bosses him around and he takes it, just the way boys and girls do,” Joe has said of the two. We were in the barn. The rain pelted the roof, hooves ground against the walls, and a rooster clucked his lips in the doorway. I held out a carrot for Spirit, though in the presence of Blondie he made no motion to take it. She stepped in and snatched the carrot, slipping it through thick lips that were stained with all the natural hues of farm dirt—her turf.

Penny lets herself into the pen.

“There’s a donkey over there has cancer,” she says.

The donkey she’s talking about I have seen before: a tall, skinny thing that walks sideways through the slats in walls, wiping the pus from itchy scabs onto the wood.

“They say that sometimes if you catch it early enough you can cut it off of them,” she says, “operate in places that will make it clean. But this donkey, he’s been in for surgery three times and the cancer keeps coming back. I tell Joe he’s going to drain his bank account over one donkey but he keeps putting holes in him. I think it’s about time to let him go.”

She taps Blondie’s chin with her fingers. “This one looks like she has cancer, too.”

“How can you tell?” I say. I feel suddenly as if I am in the operation room of someone I don’t know. My hands are clambering across her coat as if the answer might jump out at me from underneath her skin.

“You can usually see it in the eyes,” she tells me. “Look how red they are.”

“But that doesn’t mean she has cancer,” I protest. “It could be an allergy.”

“It could,” says Penny, “but she’s got some lumps forming on her eyes too.”

I give her a look and she throws up her hands. “Maybe I’m wrong.” She pulls the zipper on her jacket to chest height. “I hope I’m wrong.”
I spend the rest of the day thinking about lives that bubble and die in callused hands, tiny lives that crawl out of mamas and onto bleeding dirt behind horse stables. Do they ever stop to ask, *Do we belong?* Do they ever stop to harness the wind inside their feeding rings before they stuff their mouths with wads of hay? Joe pumps thousands of dollars into horse feed that fattens Blondie’s ribs and feeds cancer cells collecting on the surface of her eyeballs. The donkey goes under anesthesia, bears gashes in his sides, and wakes three times for a few more breaths of life. Where is the love going? I wash dirt off of my hands when I get home. Is it slipping down the drain with vanilla-scented soap? On Joe’s web page there is a picture of Blondie from the day he rescued her, her broken body lying on the ground—bones on bones. Stretched across the clovers, she looks like she is waiting for the vultures. When I see the photo my breath catches in my throat. Before and after, I think, and after and after. Prolonging the inevitable. Helping a life across a threshold before its formidable return to clovers.

My mother loves horses. I don’t think I can ever love them like she does. When she was sixteen she had a horse with spots like someone had dipped their fingers in black paint and flicked them across her white fur. Her name was Silly Filly, and dozens of crayon colored sketches of her rest in a labeled box in my mother’s bedroom closet at home. When my mother goes to farms she reaches her hand through fences and horses put their noses in it. If she can get close enough she kisses their heads. “I love the way they smell,” she says. It is all grass and breath and fur.

At the farm Joe ushers Laura and me into the barn where we find ourselves clustered against the steady chests of Spirit and Blondie. Up close you can feel the life pulsing through their veins in rolling echoes: a whisper over a shoulder bone, a hurried utterance across a rib. When Blondie comes to me I hold out my hand. She carries her bony hips like a pile of sticks. “I love you,” I say. You can be forward like this with horses. She tucks her nose into my palm and I press my lips to the side of her face. There I smell only grass and breath and fur.

“An animal knows when there’s somebody cares about him,” Joe says. He says it in his sleep. I can hear him still, speaking against the gate, one hand pressing the side of the pregnant donkey: *That ole owner of Blondie ain’t no friend of mine.*

In the ring, Penny tells me a story about twenty-five horses they found on someone’s property lying dead in a ravine. The one donkey was staring death in the face, preparing to hand over membership to this world. As she talks she keeps a hand on Blondie’s rear to keep her from kicking.
“Everyone told Joe that donkey wasn’t going to make it, but he said he couldn’t leave him out there to just rot. He wanted to bring him back, give him a good meal and all the treats he wanted while he could. The donkey was in such bad shape when he got here that Joe had to harness him up and tie his rope to a post above his head, just to support him long enough to eat his last meal standing up.”

I tuck Spirit’s bangs behind his ears, not knowing what to say. A soft breeze whistles across the roofs of the barn and the house and the portable buildings Joe uses for storage. The birds are still flapping around, one slender-necked bird wearing a speckled coat that looks like my grandmother’s polka dot turtleneck. She takes a barreling start through the tire of an old tractor trailer.

“I love that bird,” I finally say.

“That’s a guinea,” Joe says. I didn’t realize he was sitting on the fence behind us, cigarette in hand. “And that donkey just took all your carrots.”

“Oh no,” I say. I grab what’s left in the plastic bag from the ground where the donkey is retreating.

Joe leans his arms across his knees, says with the mock defensive tone of a five-year-old kid next to an empty roll of Oreos, “But they were there.” Then he relaxes again, blowing smoke out of his mouth. “That donkey won’t go up to nobody. I’m surprised he came up to you.”

I hold out another carrot in my hand—an offer. This is how you make a friend, I urge. This is where you begin to trust. The donkey steps backwards, crooked legs jerking as if someone had dropped a match and the whole ground were aflame. Joe and Penny begin talking again and the donkey points his ears forward; they are the hands of a shy child not tall enough to reach. I toss the carrot onto the ground and wad up the plastic bag in my pocket.

Days later I find myself idled behind a pickup truck at the corner of East Stone Avenue and Column. Behind the peeling green paint of the open trunk a brown dog stares through the slats of some metal crate. The eyes don’t blink—two orbs with urgent messages and an inaudible language that most people cannot understand. Who would listen, they say. Resignations. Who would listen to something he did not understand.

The truck jerks forward through the intersection, climbing far above the speed limit, and the dog tucks himself against the wall of the crate where nobody can see. I think of my own brown dog that we rescued from the highway when she was loping down it with the flow of traffic. When I hold her she tucks her head into the hollow between my neck and my collarbone and sighs.

I think of Joe Mann, leaned against the wooden slats of a stallion’s sta-
ble, lowering a cigarette from his lips. “I have to do this,” he had said. “I don’t have a choice.”

If you have never been in a horse stable before, then you would not know what the sun looks like when it climbs across wooden beams and onto horse fur. You would not know that when you clap two hard bristled brushes together around a horse’s coat the dust that explodes into the light is really just particles from another life trying to choreograph its existence in a few moments before it settles back into the earth. The place tends to smell sour. It is the place where the animals lean against the walls at nighttime; it is where they go to the bathroom; it is the place where the animals are moaning to get out from when Mary lifts the latches in the morning; and it is the place they can’t wait to get back to at dusk when they have emptied all other buckets of feed. When you give one a carrot all the others prop their chins over the doors to their stalls. What about me? they say. Their hearts are pounding. After you make your rounds, what will be left in your dusty hands for me?

And as you exit the farm gates, you know that the same stuff that covers the knuckles of your hands also makes up the sinew in a horse’s jaw and the filaments that stitch together an alpaca’s leg. There is a scrawled thank you on the back of the cardboard sign on the second gate. You cross a dusty threshold and know that a part of you is a horse. There is a part of you that mourns the ending of the day, the way that the blinds shudder against lit street lamps and remind you no one else will visit until the dark shawl lifts in the morning. There is a part of you that resigns yourself to urging your car aimlessly into your driveway without any supposition of somebody else’s hand on the other side of the doorknob. There will be no returned utterance of hello in any language at all. What about me? you ask. But that is not the question. The question is, in fact, who would dare? And who would dare? At Big Oaks Rescue Farm the birds fly in from places in the sky you’ve never heard of, and the donkeys step aside so they can share their feed. I know a man who bottle-fed an alpaca inside his house for the first part of his life. Sometimes we choose love; we are still choosing love.
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