

Front cover art
by Kira Adams

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Growing Pains

By Bella Selph

I drink the same brand of lemonade that I drank all those summers ago, but it doesn't taste as sweet. I tell myself that the recipe has changed, and I still crave the taste of that summer: knees grass-stained and grazed, hair knotted, and halfway up a tree with so much further to climb. In my hand was an apple with a bite mark missing a tooth, and time stretched on forever. That summer tasted like warm strawberries, love, and sweat.

These days I think I may be a time-traveler: April, May, June, July, and August. I roll Summer around my mouth, and I have no idea what it tastes like. September wakes slow and difficult; outside, the smell of rain and the sound of windchimes. Most late summer days resemble this now: the air is fine and still, and there's something in it that's maudlin and familiar. Over half the year has passed. I had said I would make something of myself this year, and over half the year has passed already. The language of time is inexact grief, and, for the first time in my life, I fear I have no true direction.

I've never been an adult before, and I think I'm scared to become one. My childhood had felt bottomless, and then in an instant I was seventeen. I think I turned thirteen years old last week. I've been seventeen for years; I am still twelve. I am closer to thirty-five than I am to being a toddler. Today is dragging on forever; a year has passed. I want to sit in my moms lap forever; I can't tell her anything. I want to be independent; I don't know how to do anything at all. I grew up into a tall child with a ticking time bomb for a heart.

becomes an hourglass with sand spilling into the wrong end: we are all tall children pretending to be grown. We can all taste it, too: that thin and eager flavor in the air that we recognize as the taste of evaporating dreams. Truthfully, that is the taste of growth. Who we are becoming is lovelier than who we've ever been; and suddenly I realize I am no longer afraid of growing up because I'll never stop growing up: I will always be the same child reaching out my bedroom window into the night sky wanting to touch the stars even if they burn.

Lemon Tree

By Ava Wisely

The record player spins lazily, crackling idly in my ears as I sit, and think. Old tunes by the Mellomen play, humming through the air like a hazy dream. My recliner is worn out, made with a sun bleached shade of brown leather. I stretch out my feet, propping them up on the leg rest. I'm watching TV on the same tiny box my grandma used to own--complete with the crack in the glass screen. Or, I was about to watch TV. Or, no--I was previously watching TV? Time does not exist here. The cuckoo clock on the wall is just for decoration.

Outside the house, there stretches a vast field. The golden straw reflects the sunlight warmly, and I know that if I were to open the windows, the temperature would be perfect. The sun is hot enough to make sweat bead on my forehead, but not so hot that I feel choked by the air. The house is perfectly insulated and functional in every respect, but carries the exterior illusion of being old, and run-down. It was intended to seem imperfect, but there's only so much imperfection God can try to replicate.

Next to the garden is a windmill, and a little ways from that is a silo, as well as a barn. When I'm ready for the sun to rise, it glides up above the horizon obediently. I go out to the barn and harvest eggs, milk, butter, wool, raw meat...there are no animals. The silo and windmill have virtually no purpose--everything I could ever want is accounted for. There is an empty field for cows to roam, with a pretty picket fence stretching around it as far as the eye can see. There's an empty pond for ducks, and an empty chicken coop. There is even an empty doghouse, complete

with a food and water bowl that are always full.

Sometimes, I go out walking, wading in that perfect sunlight. The dirt path is always there, leading me exactly where I want to go. I always walk away from the house. I walk, and walk, and the sun remains in the center of the sky indefinitely so that I can see better. I walk on. And by the time I feel even the slightest inkling of wanting to return back to the house, I find myself climbing up those wooden stairs, the permanently full moon rising as it always does--illuminating my land even in the dark.

I don't remember how long ago I decided to live here. I'm not even sure how old I am. But I know that a very long time ago, I decided to leave everyone I loved behind...for this. I don't really remember them anymore, so it doesn't hurt. Although, I understand perfectly well that no matter how far I sink into the depths of solitude on this perfect farm, I am never--not for a single second--alone. Omnipresence is no joke.

In the beginning, this was a reprieve. I was exhausted after a life spent. My family and friends, long lost, greeted me as if they'd never left at all. We drank wine, ate good food, and shared stories of our lives--the things we'd learned, the things we'd loved. We never spoke of regrets, because it didn't feel like they mattered anymore. Many years--or at least, what I perceived as years--passed like this. There was nothing but joy.

Nothing but joy.

Nothing...nothing but joy.

But nothing lasts forever--at least, that's what I believed before I was brought here. The Bible doesn't tell you about the humming, incessant glow of paradise--the one that floats on every surface, and illuminates every object. The raw beauty and ethereal perfection that no mortal could--should be forced to endure. The streets, meticulously laid with

unblemished golden bricks, began to hurt my eyes. Smiles became stale. The most exquisite of spices didn't quite reach my tongue.

I remembered life--remembered suffering. I felt empty, like I needed the agony back. I no longer needed air, or food, or water, or sleep--but I did need sorrow. And nobody around me understood.

When I decided to leave, it was without any real purpose or direction--partly due to the fact that the afterlife lacks purpose. But, as always, it bent to my desires, and a dirt path appeared to me--one that winded around past the iridescent gates lined with pearls, and into the vast, rolling hills of nature that were only there for scenery.

As I said, I don't remember them now, but the people I loved begged me to stay. Said it wasn't fair; that I couldn't go. My whole life had led up to this. How could I throw it all away?

I remember telling them that, if this is what I had lived for--bottles of wine that never ran out, sparse clouds that never held a single drop of rain, the same jokes and stories told over and over as people slowly ran out of things to talk about--then my life was all but worthless. Forever is a long time, you see. That was something they didn't understand. And for that, I had to leave them.

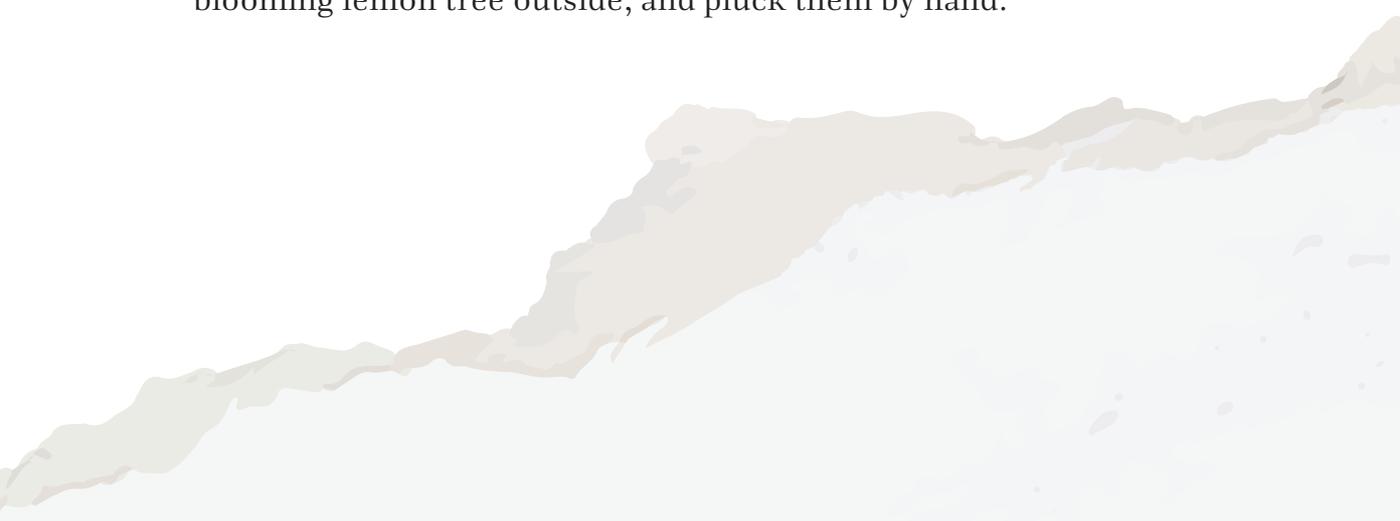
In retrospect, I wonder if they were distraught because I was leaving, or because, deep down, they knew that once I stepped past those gates, their memories of me would disappear. Grief is not welcome in paradise.

When I first started to walk, I never planned to stop. I fooled myself into thinking that maybe, if I walked long enough, I'd feel that familiar, painful ache in my legs. That sinking feeling of exhaustion that crashes over you when you've run yourself to the bone, or spread

yourself too thin. Maybe I can walk myself to death, I thought, a slight hysteria at the edge of my mind. Because, no matter how I attempted to rationalize it, I knew that nobody can die twice.

But then, after an unmeasurably, indistinctly long period of half-existent time, I reached the shabby little house, and the garden, and the silo and the windmill and the barn. I lived on a farm when I was a little boy--or maybe a little girl. Therefore, the house, and the garden, and the silo and the windmill and the barn were familiar sights--nostalgic, and welcoming. I was distinctly being told to give up--to come home. And because I was given no other choice, I obeyed.

Now, I exist. I no longer have the capacity for sadness, or anger. I know that this is my eternity. A reward I didn't ask for, a gift I can't return. So I make corn on the cob, and gather up the eggs, and the milk. I listen to the Mellomen, and I watch the same cartoons I grew up with. The dialogue is fuzzy, and only half-coherent--sort of like when you try to read in a dream. I crave lemonade, and a glass conveniently appears beside me. But still, I rise to my feet, dutifully march to the perpetually blooming lemon tree outside, and pluck them by hand.





In The Flesh [Affectionate]

By Morgan Doerr

The Man Who Lives in My Bathroom Mirror

By Daniel Thomas Moran

There's a
weight in my feet,
and years
in my mirror.

That fleck
in my distance
draws me
ever nearer.

A re-
flection defied
begins
to now bother,

In this
garish light I
become
my father.

A Brief Treason

By Gunner Kipp

Here is the rich boy: His arm is tremulous and his pale fingers are wrapped around the gun. He is planted ineptly on a bridge and aiming at his brother, who aims in kind.

Beyond is a mass of leering spectators, no less than the living genealogy of the Brinold estate, their servants, their alchemists, and half the neighboring hamlet who had caught wind of the duel, all strewn across the reedy banks. They pulsate and bet over the boys with pistols.

“Who you staking on?” A bullish woman elbows a middle-aged seer. She never did subscribe to prophecy, but the seer’s cloaks are House Brinold, and her money hinges on this imminent bloodsport.

“Ohh, I’m not allowed to tell you that,” the seer says dryly. Besides his dress he looks ordinary: Mussed hair, supine eyes, a suggestion of wrinkles. The woman tries to untangle the clairvoyance of his words and resigns:

“Then, who do you want to win?”

The seer shrugs. “They don’t pay me to figure that out,” he says, through pipe smoke. He sidles straight into morass and swears, trampling a few errant reeds.

The farmer takes the seer for a pagan and a fraud, and joins the shapeless crowd. The duel is nearly underway, and the chattering falters. There is a clap and two spouts of gunsmoke that slither away. When all’s done, the unharmed duelists pace their dominions of the bridge. There is a greater tension, now: An air of cheated death. The seer shakes his head with ambiguous disapproval before a new assailant clasps his shoulders.

“Hobbes!” Egan yells past the throngs. The seer’s expression creases, but Egan continues with his terrible grin: “I didn’t expect to see you. Loose stomach for this business.” He winds around to the seer called Hobbes, towering over him, a man of great stature but impious posture, with sable button eyes like mischief.

Hobbes snuffles once. “Shouldn’t you be working?”

Egan waves dismissively. “Call it fieldwork. Our Duke saw reason enough to pay for the presence of his Alchemists. Of course, not all wounds can be treated...” His smile is knowing.

“I’m sure Duke Brinold believes that, anyways.”

Egan’s lips feign a maudlin pout. “My duke is as sharp as the day he leapt from the womb. And he’s about to be rid of the real leech, that, that... usurper on the bridge.” He jabs accusingly at the distant younger lad now fumbling to load his pistol.

“His sixteen year old son?”

“Easier to kill a puppy than a hound, yes?” Egan laughs as if he’s just heard a good joke and not told a bad one.

Hobbes pinches Egan’s hand and removes it from his shoulder like a spider. “One way or the other, Lord Isaac’s defeat is no sure thing,” he says, “For most.” He can’t tell how successfully he resists the chemical urge to smile.

Egan’s pretense ices over: Not successfully. “You’ve been this way since you were a boy, even among the alchemists. Willfully obdurate, willfully isolating. A leper even to lepers. A second, worse strain of

leprosy. Is it purposeful?”

“Worse leprosy...” Hobbes whispers, as if revelatory.

Egan fumes. “Perhaps Isaac’s grave will be as grand and excessive as he is. There would be room for two, then.” He stalks away, hastily enough to find another perch. Hobbes is satisfied and settles to observe the next round.

It happens the same way: The clap of gunshots, the churning barrel-smoke. For a long instant the duelists are motionless. The stream froths, the air is pregnant and fallow.

Isaac’s pistol falls to the bridge and clatters down the arch to the dust. He falls straight on his head, there is a dull kind of thud, his body goes canted. A shallow lake of red encircles his chest and seeps into the lattice of the stonework. A rapturous cheer breaks out.

“Do I win?”

Hobbes was encased in his pool, an intestinal and prescient cocoon, its contents churning like honeyed quartz. The child’s voice pierced the surface.

“Mr. Hobbes!”

Hobbes rose from the pool. He groaned as if waking from a hundred year slumber, rosy liquid sloughing from his face. He sat up and began expunging scum from his eyes. He went to speak, but it was still too early.

“Oougghh,” he gargled. Isaac took the seer’s shoulder and rattled him.

“The duel, Mr. Hobbes, was I the victor?” He repeated.

Hobbes recalled his vision; recalled Isaac thumping bloodily to the ground.

“ Well,” he said, repressing humor, “It’s all very complex
“A draw?”
“You fight admirably,” Hobbes ventured, hesitant.
Isaac took his meaning and flew at once into hysterics, “You’re
lying, Mr.

Hobbes, I know it. I’ve had a pistol in my hands every spare minute for a year and you’re telling me it’s for this?”

Hobbes crept out of the pool, dripping wet. “Very well, I’m lying to you. But hand me a towel.”

“You want me around so I can keep giving you my earnings, isn’t that right? So I can keep paying for your fake fortunes.” Isaac handed the seer a towel, as defiantly as one could.

“You’ve got me now. The earnings from your father’s fields or his stipends?”

Isaac scoffed. “Like you’re much different. Who paid for all this nonsense?” He gestured grandly to the divination chamber, the gilded cassoni, the palatial ribbed ceilings; Clocks populated the walls, some fixed and some ticking and some exposing naked entrails of mechanism, as if this eccentricity hid the surrounding wealth.

“We are different. You won’t hear any righteous preening about all this. I deserve it. I earned it. Does that surprise you? I wouldn’t say it in your family’s courts, but I don’t mind admitting it to their black sheep.”

“Black, for now. What do you think the duel’s for?
Station, standing-”

“Love,” spat Hobbes, like a vulgarity. Isaac didn’t deny it.

“Yes. If I take my brother’s birthright, they’ll have to love me then.

And if I don't get all that, then at least I'll be dead."

Hobbes extinguished any kindling sympathy inside him. He had to remember this was still a royalist, it just hadn't been born yet. It wore the skin of a sad, pithy boy, and festered conquest in him.

"Then let me teach you this: There is no act in the universe so seditious and grand that it can provide you love. Strip fifty birthrights from fifty brothers and the only thing you've got is lots of corpses."

"Lie! A lie!" said Isaac, with a glowing diffidence in his cheeks. "My father loves nothing more than the right sort of killer. He always tells us, we need cold blood and a warm heart for this life. I am different than you."

Hobbes snorted. "I have nothing to say about your father's platitudes, other than that I think he'd hang you for treason if he had an inkling of your plot; but really? Do you think I've always rejected the alchemists? I used to be cloying. Desperate, like you. One figures out that it's more dignified to be a deliberate pariah than a pathetic one."

"Why not leave?"

Hobbes shrugged.

"Cowardice." He lit his pipe. "Cowardice, money." He smiled through smoke.

This seemed to break something in Isaac, this tethering to the adult male now soaked in pink gauze, full of nothing but smug equine glances and terse declarations, sprawled and smoking on the wet tile steps.

"Could any existence be so awful as ours?" Isaac asked.

"What histrionics! I think you're sixteen," said Hobbes, "Which I suppose means no. I'd tell you the same thing at twenty-six." Hobbes

took another ponderous drag of his pipe, and stared into that pink pool, blankly entranced by the elliptical tide of the sludge, the way it spat and revolved in the tub. The pool was lined with metalline discs, interlocked bronze with grooves that expelled the liquid. In that pool laid all that was and would be.

“I agree you don’t belong here, but I would be long in telling you where on earth you do. Ha!” An exhalation. “Awkward, mutinous beast. Who would care for you beyond genes and compulsion? You’ll learn that the answer is complicated.”

“Are your eyes wet, Mr. Hobbes?”

Hobbes sniffled wetly and hoisted himself up. “I suddenly realized I wasn’t talking to you anymore.” He wiped his cheeks and smoothed his robes. “Forget this conversation.”

He fastened the towel around his waist and started towards his dresser before stopping abruptly.

“I think you’re a beautifully adequate boy,” he said. “So you know.” His face was anguished and threatened to betray his austerity, in a sort of way that acknowledged the deficiency of his words, and he hoped his eyes could fill in the rest.

“Thank you anyways,” croaked Isaac, who didn’t feel half the duelist he was this morning.

Tap Shoes

By John Wojtowicz

When my little son first opened the shoebox,
it was only a peek
as if opening the box farther
might let out a gleam
that would alert every
eyepatched and parrot-shouldered
pirate within fifty leagues
of his treasure. At three years old
he had yet to receive
even a bike of his own, and he knew
that these size eight, black-laced
patent leather vessels
would carry him to distant grottos
with a shuffle, stomp, heel-toe, single buffalo.



This is what it feels like

By Megan Tuthill



*intersecting memories: melodies of
aging*

By Juan Restrepo

My Surgeon Has Brown Eyes

By Artemis Asbury

In 2 hours

Over 10 pounds of flesh

Left my body forever

I woke up lighter and hungry

Shoulders curling forward

Posture pulled down 24/7 by compression

My chest is numb to the touch

Hot water feels like acid

Sleep lines and red bumps dot my skin

I spend the day in bed

Looking to the other side

I had to lose part of my body

To grow

In Favor of Selfies

By Katie Babb

My phone contains hundreds of Me.
Some of Me are smiling,
Some of Me are sultry (or trying),
An album of Me are crying.

Some of Me get shown to the public,
With edited lighting.
Some of Me sit in stasis,
Unvisited and unchanged, neither prized nor disdained.

I like to imagine the deleted Me go on vacation together,
To a place of half-blinking eyes and crooked smiles,
Where wrong angles are right.

But when I look back at the Me I cast aside,
I'm confused at times.
I don't remember Me looking so young, bright.
Maybe even looking
Beautiful.

Viewed strictly through my own insecure eyes,
I saw Me as jagged and fruitless,
Maybe even deserving to be punished,
Ostracized.

I scroll through a carousel of Me from the past,
Labeled in disgust
As “Good Not Great” or “Oh Well”,
Hidden away in the cavities of my camera roll.

But with this gift of distance I see Me again,
Not a troll or a blemish, even if I had a blemish.
Not a mistake in the middle of a project to be meddled.

I’m a damn work of Art.
I take up space and take up issue
With varnishing vulnerability so it’s palatable to viewers,
With picking apart the dents and dazzle of Me,
In fear of being seen as conceited,
Or simply in fear of being seen.

So if my gaze is always kinder in hindsight,
Then this I know for sure:
When I’m Me for the last time,

I’ll have only Love for every Me I’ve ever shared or shred.
I’ll be grateful for every document.

Me, growing by millimeters or miles,
A chronicle of beginnings and ends, lows and highs.
A memory card brimming with selfies of Me,
A work of Art,
Simply because I’m alive.

Crippling Factors

By N.H. Shāe

Just when my head begins to rest, my lovers rise from the darkness
where they lurk.

They, the feeling of emptiness inside my chest. They, a hollow ache
in a place where life should perk.

Instead, only her and her best friend are present.

They exhaust my mind,

I'm unable to find

rest.

And just as she and I are enemies, I would say her best friend is my

worst. He keeps me on a precipice

of uncertainty.

They make me question all my quirks.

Her name is a depression

on my soul, carved like young love's initials on birch.

His name is the anxiousness

fluttering within, stealing my every breath. I feel needles and pins.

They are my close companions, but only when not

present, will I call them friends.



Caught reminiscing
By Hunter Mclamb

Explaining to My Friends Why I Impulsively Purchased a Jacket that Makes Me Look Like Kurt Russell in John Carpenter's The Thing

By Fenn MacDonald

The thing is – well, not the thing, not the thing of The Thing fame, but the thing – the thing about this jacket that I bought after watching John Carpenter's The Thing is that it really doesn't look like the jacket in the film at all. Not a bit.

There are several notable differences. The Kurt Russel jacket is blue, I believe, although that may be a trick of the admittedly superb lighting, and it has a rounded stand-up collar of the sort that an unusually hip and casual vampire might wear on a beach vacation to the Bahamas. My jacket has a much more sedate zip-up collar that shows a bit of the fleece lining at the edges and has a decorative zipper on the back. My mother expressed profound disappointment with this zipper. "You can't even use it as a coin wallet," she declared, fingering the teeth of it with a look of extreme displeasure.

I hadn't seriously considered using my jacket collar as a coin wallet. Rather than contemplate adding the sound of rattling coins to the sound of the rattling zipper-pull optimally situated directly below my left ear, I was instead pondering the look of extreme displeasure with which Kurt Russell fingered the controls of his flamethrower in The Thing. His jacket didn't have nearly as many pockets as mine does, which is a significant point in favor of my clearly superior taste in jackets.

The thing about my jacket – and see, here we are again – the thing about my jacket is that it makes me feel like I look cool, like Kurt Russell in *The Thing*, staying frosty even with his beard frozen. My jacket came off the rack at the local grocery store already looking weather-worn, like something Harrison Ford meant to wear in *Cowboys and Aliens* but forgot to pack, like a cross between a 1940s fighter pilot and a misplaced movie star, like something MacGyver once accidentally set on fire while wearing and had to extinguish with a spare marshmallow.

Wearing this jacket unlocks new realities for me, rooted in fiction though they may be. When I walk into my local game shop wearing this jacket and one of the middle-aged men I play D&D with on Sundays calls out, “Hey there, leather,” like I’ve finally attained that perniciously elusive state of no longer being a particularly fascinating oddity but instead being just one of the guys, it’s impossible to regret a single penny spent. What a feeling! To feel as though I finally fit in, like I was always supposed to have fit in from the beginning but forgot it somehow, to feel as though my name was Danny or Martin or Flash, like my inclusion was obvious and easy and effortless. What a gift!

Of course, money can’t buy happiness, but it can damn sure smooth over some rough patches, I think to myself as the November winds batter fruitlessly at the outside of my toasty warm jacket.

One Brown Jacket (noun):

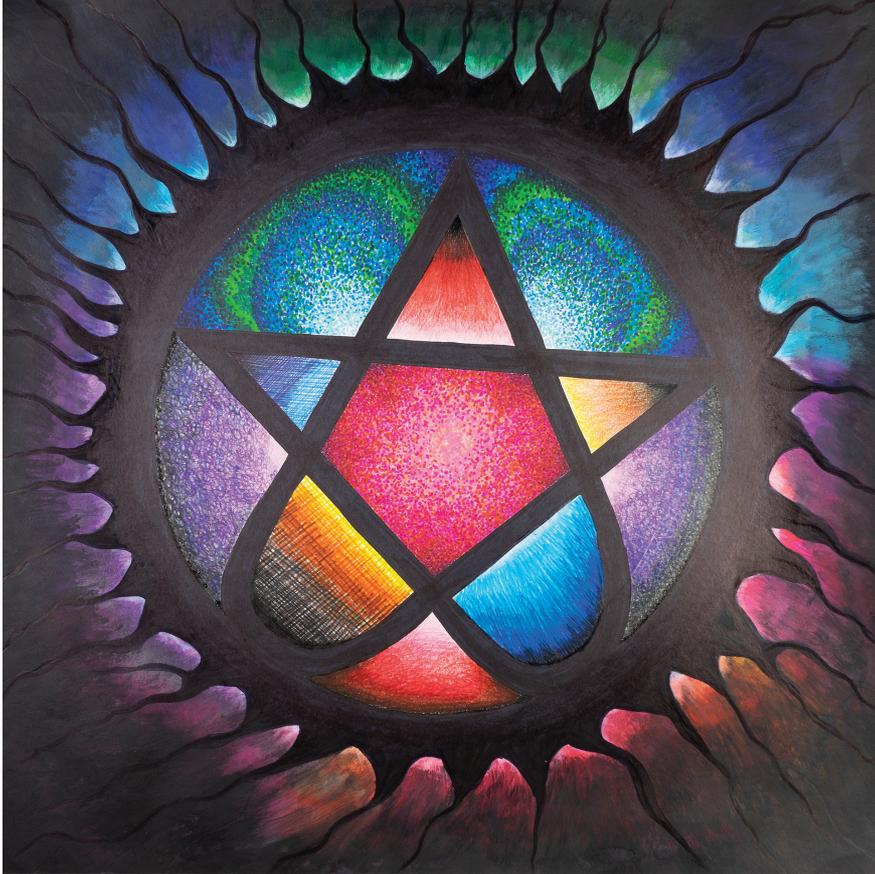
1. Zip-up, lined, shoulder snaps, plenty of pockets – pairs well with fingerless gloves, the author’s best friend, and hot coffee.
2. Safety, comfort, and contentment in a single fashionably cozy package. Bold, casual, dare we say rugged? In this jacket, we dare.

It won't change the world, get me a job, or save my life (probably, unless there's a sudden invasion of shapeshifting aliens with a mysterious vulnerability to people wearing cool jackets), but it makes me happier. My jacket is comfortable and functional and fits every part of me well, with the end result of causing other people to reevaluate their opinions of me into something a little better tailored, as though I were a shapeshifting alien that's finally found the right disguise to be accepted into the pack just like Kurt Russell before everything went so spectacularly wrong. Wearing my jacket makes me feel cool, and that's really the fantasy, the dream, the thing that money can't buy.

But buying the jacket certainly helped.



Blue Peach
By Ava Wisely



Heartagram

By Briceida Perez

untitled i.

By Morgan Doerr

if i entered a house that reeked of cigarettes,
i would think of my grandparents ashes and the
oldest tree in the yard that lost a branch to a lightning strike
and though i think little of it now,
there is a place that a part of me still lives in,
and calls home, the time before the fire.

but in the before-time when i lived in that place,
Anna and i stood side by side as the wind tore through the wood,
wore through us,
and we heard before we saw
the snap and fall of a tree.

A Vow

By Gianni Avilan

for worse,
for poorer,
in sickness,

I do.

Winter, The Fool
Jason Ross

Winter growls, scratches; permeating through our senses;
shivering—cold. We become bruised by the weather.
In fury it breaks down barriers; all those barbwire fences.
Bold—once untold; now the chills work together,
as they try to pave a way and leave no room for second guesses.
Nonetheless—never will it reach the core; our center, as we prevail.

Yet Another

By D.C Klein

I think I write the same poem over and over.

- William Erickson

I write the same poem over and over.

Using a Uni-ball pen. Listening

to Simon

and Garfunkel

— what kind of names are those?

Waiting

— for Christmas Day

— for bedtime

— a grown man with a bedtime?

— for the rapture?

— that Revelation shit? That “Left Behind” shit? That four-horse-men bullshit? That Hell-On-Earth shit?

— yes, I wait and nothing happens.

Maybe I won't die

— for death, I wait

— in a hurry?

no, just waiting



Impending Doom

By Alexandra White



i wish i could grow up
By Abigail Jackam



oh where did the time go?

By Abigail Jackam

Orca

By Scott Starbuck

Maybe one kind of death is when
I fished on Whidbey Island
and a giant orca leapt nearby
almost knocking me over,

more majestic, beautiful, wild
than anything I could have
imagined before it happened, or
recounted now.

There in the sky,
magically twisting,
he, or the One who sent him,
gave me a mission.

A Homage to Abusive Households

By Alexander Serrano

When they took the tree out of the yard,
the one planted before my birth,
they did it without care.

Ripped it out, and
sawed off the branches.

They tore apart birds' nests,
exhaust lay heavy and thick in the air.
The noise, the sounds, the smells.

I buried animals under that tree.
I buried animals under that tree.

The process was quick.
Three days later and it was over.
A circle of wood
a single branch
discarded in the yard.

Eccedentesiast

By N.H Shae

Woeful tears flow, moistening her cheeks. As
each
drop
falls,
seething anger stirs, withering.
How could she cry here and let them see?
anguish swells, within this girl that even kin
wouldn't
watch
slip.

Such sin. Here she lay, weeping.
For all to see, her weakness on display.

A voice sounds. Affectionate. A
hand
reaching
down,

It says: Stand
Up
Now it seems so helpless,
My dear child, hear my rebut;

Tears, once dried, salve the soul.

Your smile becomes a sword,
cutting common

be lief

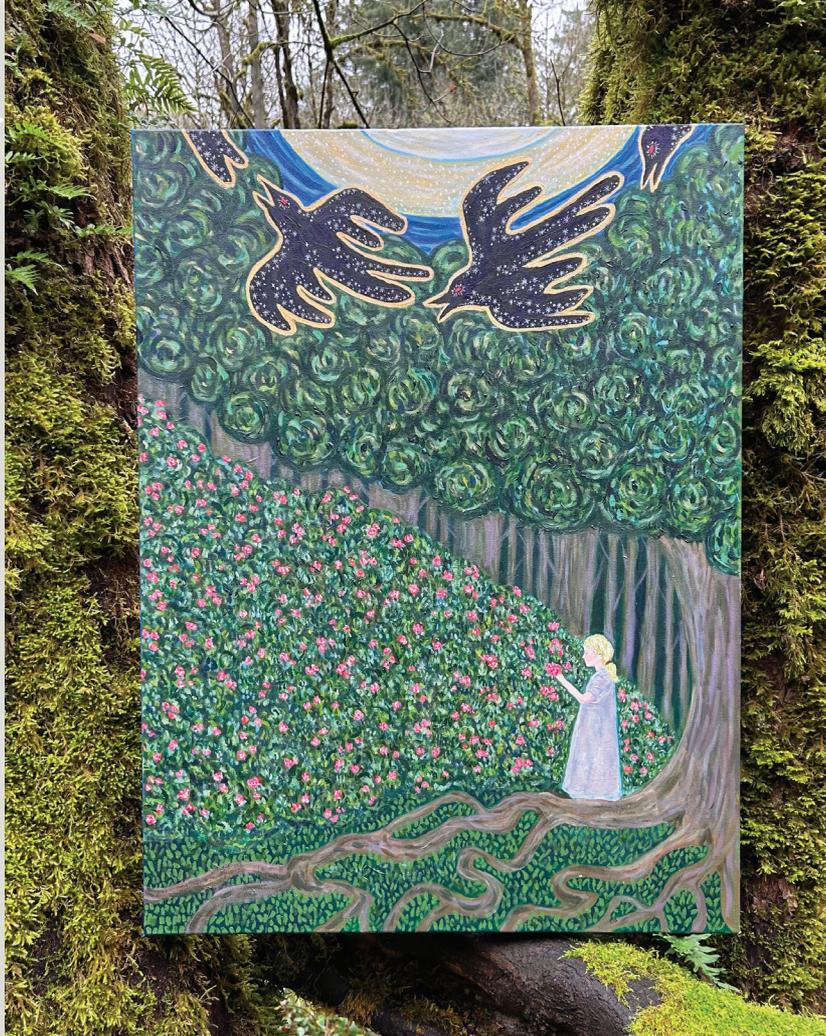
in two.

feelings cause uproar but strengthens one, too.

Pity those whose heart remains stone.

So trust, my dear, fine art.





*Budding adolescence and withering
innocence*

By Hunter Mclamb

Interstate Flowers

By Gianni Avilan

Ragweed, scotch broom,
camas lily and lavender shoot,
chicory, thistle, and fernroot.

The eye of the sparrowhawk,
the beak of the hummingbird,
scaly talons with salmon between.

Out past the rusted-out carcasses
of Camari, American-made,
lies the new Bethlehem, Dream waiting to be born

The Wrestle With Ready

By Torrey Francis Malek

I am, at this very moment, in a mighty wrestle with readiness.
I can feel it grasping and clawing at the meat over my wings.
I am unhinging, denaturing, unclasping like ancient door latches,
and if I am not cautious, my fingers will fall right out of their caskets.

I can feel the ready rising,
outgrowing the size of me,
and all I can do is sit here,
all I can do is be here and be
ready.

Well, I'm ready.
On the cusp of something.
On the brink of something.
On the edge of a ledge of, something.
On like a light switch looking up at the sky,
on like an eyelid prying open for dawn,
all aflame because I decided it was time
to look up.
To look on.

So now, I'm ready.

Though not at all
in agreement
that I am.

My guts are in a clamor.

My lungs are funneling gusts.

My feet are playing a rudderless drum set.

My head is heating up a baked brain
bound down by a wool bonnet.

Yet I know that I'm ready.

Even if we may not all agree, I am

Ready.

I'm pinning down ready,

razing down ready,

at any moment, shaky,

stern, and steady

and when my legs push,

I'll shoot past plaster of sky

toward the highs I set my sights on.

because I know that I'll reach them.

Because I know-

Because I know.



Toy Cars
By Josalyn Ortiz



Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor

By Alexander Serrano

Survival is inevitable.

There is no other option.
I will live.

A brief moment in history has taken my comfort.
 Shredded my ligaments
 and destroyed my life.

Taken from me in a heartbeat.

Pain is a capsule,
medicine.

It starts with a v
 ends with a d
 and is seven letters long.

Ate at my cartilage.
 Fed on my ligaments.
 Spat out my bones.

But I will live, and I have lived.
There were no other options.
Survival is inevitable.
I know this to be true.

How did you do it?

By Bethany Fischer

It comes as subtle and swift as a breath
One moment I'm sitting down at the kitchen table clipping fast food coupons,
And suddenly I am my stepmother,
Who was at my age of twenty-four,
Dealing with two teenagers, a preteen and a new baby,
A man who doesn't treat her right,
And the impending doom of bills to pay.
Suddenly I'm thinking of how much is left on the EBT card,
Calling in the parking lot before walking through the doors,
Cussing at the balance over the phone
Because my husband spent all of it,
And now I don't know what we'll eat for dinner.
Suddenly I'm making a fun game
Of teaching these hungry children how to make pizza from scratch,
When there is nothing left in the cupboards.
Suddenly I'm a young woman,
trying to guide other, younger women through life.
And then I'm back at my kitchen table,
Tears in my eyes,
I decide to call my stepmom,
"Hey, can I come over next week?
Need help cleaning the attic?"
She replies
"You can come up,
Even if we don't go anywhere near the attic."



Fish in a Cup

By Alexandra White

Ocean and All

By Ava Wisely

I am, at no given time, in control over my emotions.
They are, in a way, lost to the unpredictable, merciless will of nature
Like a whispered prayer on a winter night that will disappear with
the wind
Or a love letter, tucked away into a glass bottle and tossed out to sea-
-never to be read.

I have not yet learned to navigate the current
The rage, the despair, the mindless ecstasy
They crash against the rocky caverns of my skull
Slowly wearing the bone away, bit by bit

Perhaps I will not escape it.
Perhaps the water will drown me.

Perhaps it doesn't matter; for who would miss it?
Who would long for the inconsistency of my smiles, and the ever
present threat of my isolation?
Who would swoon at the sight of my tears--endless, endless rivers
with no clear origin?
Who would marvel at my rage, and my compulsions for revenge?
Who would find endearment in my own poor navigation of my
conscience--a constant fight
for control?

I am a frightened animal--huddled in the corner of a cage that is gradually filling with water.

I am chronically deprived of safety--how can one feel safe when they are constantly trapped
In a battle between themselves, and their own mind?

I need reassurance like I need air, but it will never be enough.
Because the ocean will keep flowing, and the waves will keep crashing
And I will try my best to slow the erosion process.
How successful I am
will entirely depend on me.

But maybe one day, I will meet someone
Who finds empathy in my irregular smiles, and understands it when I hide.
Who is relieved when I cry, because it means I am not numb.
Who talks me down from my irrational spirals, and makes their love undeniable--even
through my tainted eyes.
Who knows I am trying to be good, and cheers me on, even when it's their praise
that I deny.

I know I can survive on my own.

I know I can't be fixed.

I know nobody will save me from myself.

But in my worst moments, when I'm unable to perceive the world as
it truly is

I wish someone, anyone, would simply tell me

That I am, and always will be, enough--ocean and all.

The Word Looked Like Chartreuse

By Tamarah Rockwood

This morning, on the way to piano class,
I was making conversation with the kids
And asked them their take on mushrooms.

I love cooked mushrooms, but that is because
I am older, and they are earthy.
I also like Swiss cheese — now.

One of my daughters hates mushrooms.
I know this because she also despises
“Squishy” cooked vegetables (also, soup).

The other two kids were politely ambivalent
About their preference of mushrooms,
Cooked or not.

This was, actually, all in preparation for dinner.
I had a bag of mushrooms in the fridge,
And I was planning on making stroganoff.

My other daughter began a discourse
On the flavor profiles
Of different varieties of mushrooms.

Button mushrooms were out, because they're
Bland and squishy. Being a mushroom fan,
It was my responsibility to mention other options.

And, suddenly, I couldn't remember their names.
I could see a vision of small, buttery mushrooms,
And large, deep brown mushroom heads —

But the names completely escaped me.
One name looked like “porterhouse”.
The other looked like “chartreuse”.

As we drove, I wondered how many words and names
I've lost in the mundane arc of the sun,
Day after day, burnt out of my head.

It is worrisome, understandably, to lose
Small things, like words, that shape
The memories we can still see.

Stretch Marks I: I used to battle the devil

By Drew Ott

XIII.

In my backyard
In the war torn grass
A battle scar of ash
he embodied my yetzer hara
I was scarred in trauma

What Molly didn't know
From that thinly veiled window
Was the true struggle
Or maybe she understood
She saw me past those picket slats
It clicked for her
What fighting the invisible meant

God built a temple for one
And all
To come and enjoy
Yet here I was
Outside the gates
Fighting Satan for my fate

Temple bloodied

And I'm dead
At thirteen
The grass envelopes my carcass
And traps my soul in the earth
The loam leaves me alone
Afterlife here is as fine as the dirt
Bugs at least want me
Lick me, touch me,
Eat me

There is no telling of the truth
From the lies you tell yourself
When God puts his hand out
And the devil tries to pull you back down

XXI.

Though I never had to fight
Because the blood caked under my nails
Disintegrates at the sight
Of God's predestined

I'm now too tired to swing around a sword
I'm too weak to hold up this heavy shield
For I know I am protected
I no longer need anything, I yield

Stretch Marks II: A Flea to Disagree

By Drew Ott

A lie in disguise
My life on the line
Etched in chalk
Lost but not forgot

Please just leave me now
For I like to be alone
It's all I've ever known
Isn't that all we are, though?

I guess I'll never know
At least in this life
Uncertainties are certain
And bubbles burst

Just as everyone leaves
But there is no way
To know where we go
So I sit tight and hope

I'm not wrong
But even so
I'm not worried about it
I just like to think of it

How different it might be
Better even
At least I hope.
It could be worse

It could be better
Should I be so grateful now?
This won't leave me
I'll leave it be

Then my mind will change
As it always does
Because the view is different
From the other side

Don't you know
That's where I need to go?
Come with me
Or don't.

I know I can't stay.

See you there.

Stretch Marks III: Suicidal Ideation

By Drew Ott

Contemplating creation
Betrayed by knowledge
Apple seeds implanted
Doomed by what's within us
Time eludes or colludes us

A family torn by love
But what even is this
A misunderstanding or declaration of fate
Time is running rather late
Death is surely among us
For it never truly leaves

Spots of a memory
Vaguely disembodied
A face split in two
One side uneven
No closer to heaven

Talks of being fair
As if fairness was ever there
For what I think is missing
Like the devil at a christening
It has no place

Only a blank and nameless face

I think I'm almost done

Smoke signals from a gun

My heart is relatively full

For it's known nothing more

A yearning only He can fill

I'm sorry your expectations weren't real



Catechism

By Tamara J Madison

“You entertain me,”

you say,
letting a clown creep
from your mouth
like I

ain't got nothing

else better to do
than be your

*court jester, pom-pom/chorus girl, pole-ho'/lap dance,
broke ego stroke?*

Like I will just

*kiss teeth,
bare gums,
arch back, bend
over, touch toes*

for you, a better view:
pyramids between my thighs,

galaxies between these cheeks,
generations nestled in this cleavage.

Don't you remember the Divides
we survived?

The soles of these feet
raced through wilderness
fleeing capture,
stood their ground
on the auction block,
trudged through fields
sunup to sungone,
mopped the Trail of Tears,
paced circus cages,
stumbled on stages
all over the globe, for a tyrant's

Entertainment.

Shards of shame
are embedded in the balls
and heels of these feet.
Not your

Entertainment,

this dance, edification.

Keeper of your ancient memory,
I wipe sand from your eyes, I,
serenade the echo of your bones,
till the seeds of your dreams,
buff your brilliance
with my sweat.

Entertainment?

No, Beloved,
in a world insatiable
thirsting for your blood,
craving your soul as repast,
I am conjure
of your resurrection.



Iris Drops

By Alexandra White

Chaser

By Zane Jager

I'm not a chaser. Our love was always pure. Or as pure as adolescent love between a boy and a girl can be, at least. I loved you through the caffeine peaks and over the alcohol droughts.

My dad flipped when he found out about us, but he eventually came around. Your bond over boomer music was a real-life saver. Lucky enough I'm tall enough to cross the chasm of bigotry. Your mom didn't accept you either, but your friends did. It was reassuring to know I wasn't your only way out of this backwards town. I love this town; I've spent my whole life here. But there is this undeniable malicious undertow, patiently waiting on graceful toes to rise to the surface. Like Edmund Burke said, "evil triumphs when good men do nothing." I'm lying; nobody knows who actually said that. But does it matter? It was an oddly gratifying surprise when my uncle became the most pleased with you of all, and not in a creepy way. I wonder if he even knew? I'll pretend he did. Your secret's safe with me. For now, and forever.

I've never met a girl who wore as many skirts or flowers as you. Don't you know compensating is the deadliest form of addiction? It's quicksand for the mentally encumbered. Femininity is a fool's errand when taken too far. Any errand will drive you mad if you're denied direction and destination. I even grew my hair out long for you. I thought it would make you less self-conscious and bring you less attention. But maybe I just made things worse. You were more woman than my own

mother.

I didn't mind the stares we got from strangers when we held hands and you'd so eloquently speak whatever happened to be on your mind that day. Silence means nothing to the silenced. I was an incel flattened by envy until I met you. Every day I would wake up and curse God for blessing me with the gift of mediocrity. But now I understand the power of resting high on the bell curve, with the added benefit that comes with overlooking my voyeuristic surroundings. We were two broken souls desperately scraping the bottom of the bargain bin for the right brand of crazy super glue ta to stick us together in the rusty ol' tool shed.

We never had to prove our love to each other. That was something that was apparent when we first locked eyes. Sorry about the second time we met, when I started to unbuckle, to awkwardly lower and shift my pants, to re-tuck my shirt. Though it was a plus when you realized what I was really doing and exclaimed, "Oh thank God, I thought you were pulling out your dick."

I loved the concoction our sweat and chemistry made. I was beyond dismayed when I got a closer look and realized the album art, which I thought was the cover of the Japanese release for Izzy Stradlin's Unleash the Hounds in your car's CD holder was not that, but instead Bob Seger's greatest hits. You may have had great taste in music, but regrettably not as much as me. If only you had more time for me to show you the light. I remember the triangle shaped lamp on your dresser, its shade an arrow directing you to a greater light above. I remember the rabbit figurine by your bed, one of its ears broken off, making the other look like an antenna. But there was nothing alien about you.

I remember the day you decided to leave this planet for good.

“If only you just spoke up a little fucking louder,” I say. “How dare you leave before me,” I reassured myself. Sorry if that’s in poor taste. As you know, my buds are dull from all your cherries.

I cried the appropriate amount of tears a man of my size and stature is allotted. One day I'll build a spaceship out of all the rusty staples I have zig-zagging in my filing cabinet and come find you. You never did wander too far from home. How could you do something so selfish to yourself? Did all the times I called you beautiful and clever mean nothing to you? Or was I trying to put out a forest fire with toothpaste? You left a hole in my life. Maybe if I look hard enough, I'll find your paper soul stuck to the hole punch. Love wins the war but not always the battle. “It's not your fault, you did all you could.” What empty words from empty fucking people. Other people said it was your own fault, for believing you were something you were not. Don't they know that we're all defined by what we're not?

Your mom barred me from your service. She said I was an enabler. I looked up enabler in the dictionary. It was to the right of the word empty-handed. I guess fate will forever know who I am. Call me spiteful, but I never went to the service they held at your school either. If you ask me, the faculty and staff were the true enablers, every time they looked the other way when students would take your spot before class or tear down the Pride Club posters you put up on the classroom cedar cork board and even how they would write comments on your essays with a pink

pen instead of a blue pen. Maybe this whole paper is just a sad, angry, manic little schizo screaming into the loveless void. I'm writing this part using voice to text in a JCPenney. The staff are giving me funny looks. I don't know if it's because of what's coming out of my mouth or the fact that I'm sitting in one of the display chairs. It might not be a display chair though; it looks well-worn and the vinyl is cracking. But that might just be the style of the times.

I never got to return your lucky pencil. How fitting is it that the only thing you left me was a tool for creation in such destructive times? Every time I smell a eucalyptus scented candle I'm reminded of you, a coarse and invasive plant that heals even the deepest of wounds and burns easily.

I remember the last words you said to me. "Well, goodbye for now." I've spent countless nights pathetically trying to derive some greater meaning from these words. Or maybe those weren't your last words. It's honestly hard for me to pay attention when you're upset. My car was smashed recently. The passenger door no longer opens. But it doesn't matter. You were and will always be my only shotgun buddy.

I can't listen to music in my car anymore. How am I supposed to enjoy *Semi-Charmed Life* without your out-of-tune backing vocals? Don't take this the wrong way, but you left a masculine void in my life. Not from your energy, but from all the negative space I now have to fill on my own. I get angry when I see happy young couples under our favorite fir tree. They will never appreciate that spot as much as you or I ever did.

I'm sorry I didn't stand up for you more to all the ignorant assholes you attracted. I became a barn owl with his head on a swivel, his neck bloody and bruised from all the times he chose to look the other way and scamper in another direction so hard that the bottoms of my feet morphed into the callous, rough, and dry texture of an off-brand kitchen sponge. I still have all your voicemails, messages, and photos bloating my storage space. One day I'll gain the strength to eradicate this beautiful cancer from my phone. I refuse to change the month on the hand-crafted alt-music vinyl zine calendar you gave me. Whenever I wake up I'm greeted by Shirley Manson. Don't worry dear, I get the message. It's comforting to know you'll always have your eyes on me. Your mom ended up with custody of your cat. Good thing we never had kids, eh?

I'm sorry for all the times I deliberately called you by your dead-name out of frustration. That was absolutely inexcusable. That's what I get for holding your insecurities so close to my own fragile black heart. I'll never truly know what hell you went through but maybe that's for the best. Every other Tuesday was your shot night. We'd joke and call it your chill pill. I assure you the only sadism I took pleasure in was inflicting you with the prick of the needle, because only after would you finally relax in my arms. On second thought, maybe I should have mentioned I have a fear of needles. Good thing I don't have Parkinson's.

Now that you're gone my right eye occasionally tingles with muscle pain. Why just my right eye? You always did do a half-assed job, I guess. On the morbid bright side, now that you are no longer with us, I don't scramble and panic when violence breaks out at a march. You are the bravest

person I know. We were a lethal combination, I thought there was nothing wrong with two introverts colliding to manifest extroversion, but I guess I truly didn't know how alone you were. It's sad that you never got to meet my grandfather. You both shared a love and fascination with all manner of flags. Though I don't think the flags you were into were for Navy signalmen. Our favorite song was Stargazer by Mother Love Bone. I hope you didn't take it the wrong way when I said you looked like Andy Wood. I was referring to your hair, I swear. You said I reminded you of Mark Lanegan. I hope you were referring to being a strong silent type with a beautiful burgundy voice rather than a miserable junkie who spent the last half of his life Burning Bridges with everyone who tried to help him.

My favorite memories were when we would do nothing but nothing, lying on the floor like a pair of lethargic cats. Only then could I appreciate your style and attention to detail. If I didn't know any better, I'd say that you were exploiting my nostalgic memories of my boyhood fireplace. Everything from that grey checkered dress you wore, an homage to the necessary brick patterns, to the thin charcoal marks under your eyes. The gold trim on the nape and your beautiful, deep fiery red hair. You are too beautiful for this world, both inside and out. I had a dream about you recently. In the dream you were naked on an operating table and you started peeing on the guy adjusting the surgery light. The light resembled a bright tentacled jellyfish and I can only assume that you thought he had been stung. Always quick on your feet. Not that it pertains to you, or at least for a very long time, but I swear the urinals at Target are much wider and more circular now. It just verifies my

hypothesis that America is getting fatter by every bar graph and scatter plot.

I never got to take you to that Cold Cave concert. We probably wouldn't have got it anyway, because they asked for your driver's license on the way. You never brought your purse anywhere. Why did you always do that? Were you paranoid that it was a bronze spotlight upon your chin that would attract all manner of incestuous, illiterate insects to feast on your intelligence? I love using big words.

I don't think I've ever met someone in the 18 to 25 demographic that swore as much as you. Not very ladylike, eh? I hope you take that as a compliment. I'm sorry I could never remember your birthday. I prefer writing on my arm now. I carry a Sharpie everywhere I go for when I need to jot down a thought or reminder. These engraved sketches have much, much more rich personality and many more stories to tell than any lame-ass, copy pasted tattoo. I hope it counts for something that I remember your desk's layout like the back of my hand if I view it as a chessboard. Your maroon glasses on A1 corner, your scented water-color pencils residing in a well-worn Styrofoam cup on C4, your retro Sony tape recorder on A7, a piece of Halloween candy, expired by half a year at the least on H2, and the turquoise stress ball you'd leave lying about, all of these together forming an unintentional tribute to the five senses. The five senses all artists need to be free.

Maybe I was a chaser. Difference now being it's my own tail I'm after.

Like a dog in heat with no mate. I promise the only thing I ever wanted from your body was heat. Who's to say where the country of lust ends and the imposing wall of love begins? I only have one favor to ask. While you're up there, can you ask Jimi how he got that guitar tone on I Don't Live Today? Thanks!

P.S. There's a red and black tear from a packet of beef jerky in my cup holder. The colors of anarchy. The colors of us. I miss you.

The Second Crisis of the Year

By Fenn MacDonald

My god, my god – it's February
the doorstep of the year
wedged between the wilder beasts
of winter's petty rage.
March bangs on the door
and screams *get out, get out*
it's my turn now
while January sulks and fogs
the mirror with its breath.

February, the flimsy lever-lock between
– no long-lost love lost here –
between the first of its siblings,
the terrible toddlers of the year.

Thank god, at least, for February
sensible enough to be brief
apologetic, almost, for the tempers
of its fellow-months, still young
still with so much to learn.
An unfair lot hath February
whom with fickle hearts we spurn –
Poor month, well-deserved of our well-wishes!
– and we hurry on our way
eyes straining to the horizon for a glimpse
of perfumed April, or farther, fairer May.

The Light of Hope

By Katie Babb

I hope one day
We'll look back on this time.

When we struggled to be strong
While we wept heavy in our hands.

When it felt like we were sleeping on the edge of a cliff,
Both fearful of the fall,
Yet witlessly wondering if jumping might be the answer.

When we lost the light of hope,
And the softness of love grew sharp,
Because sharp things are easier to blame when we hurt.

When we were forced to digest our dissent,
As we nodded along to fables that prayer would save us.
As if a belly full of prayers would be a sweet enough potion,
To distract us from the sourness of shelved dreams.

I hope we look back on this time,
When we ate rice and stolen candy bars for dinner,
When we sold every precious thing,

When we begged to be seen with compassion by those
With keys to doors and gifts to spare.

I hope we remember the simple beauty of our humble home,
Of sharing a blanket on the couch to keep warm,
Of kittens curled on laps and dry-erase doodles on mirrors,
Of running out of tissues because we talked until we broke through,
Of forehead kisses so gentle they wouldn't dare disturb our slumber,
Of feeling almost alone but not quite, because we had each other.



Houseplant

By Kyle LaHara

I was a houseplant.
I grew and grew.
I grew a lot with you.
I grew around the shape of you.
Then you weren't there.
And I lost the rocks
My roots had clung to.
My vines curled
To brace upon
A ledge now gone.
I reached out
For the wall of a pot
That held me
For so long
But I could only find
Loose soil.

I grow different now
My roots have all
Spread out
And finally
I feel ready
To brave the winter
And maybe once again
In spring
I will flower.

Leading Life

By Zane Jager

I'm walking through a mental health facility
There are people screaming both loudly and coherently
One is doing the former and complaining of a stomach ache
She keeps calling me her doctor and asks me to take her home

I ask the doctor if I should tell her who I really am
He says I will know what's best
We're walking to her home and I spot a close friend
I wave and say hello
He tells me blood family is most important and then carries on barbecuing

We arrive at the halfway house she shares with many others
Once inside she falls to the floor intentionally for her sake
I fake inner turmoil with one foot still on the threshold
Before long she grabs at my legs
my heartbeat not my heart has made up its mind
I hang a do not disturb card on the front door
I'm in the master bedroom and she's already undressed
Every time I take off a piece of clothing a phantom layer appears
She teases me for taking as long as it typically takes a woman to get dressed
I notice there's no bed
She says no shit Sherlock

She's my babysitter

There are three couches all ugly and persuasive
We choose one and fold it into a bed

We're ready but I hear an animal moan
I look out the window and see a girl curled up in pain
Scratching the front door that's shielded by the do not disturb card

A Train Of Stories

By Teresa Patron Rivera

A woman in her mid-twenties watches the white landscape from the train window as it continues to its destination. The woman sits alone with only her iPad and travel bag to keep her company. The woman wears a long winter coat pushed to the side, covering her bag, with her phone lying on top. The woman's red hair is in a side braid as she sips her hot chocolate, putting on her headphones and typing away.

“Hello, everyone! Merry Christmas, and welcome to another travel vlog-” the woman paused the video, typing away and adding edits.

Nasyrn, the woman, stares at herself in the paused frame, eyeing the scenery around her. How different it is from the black roads and grey sidewalks she grew up with. She eyes her ears and the pair of vacant holes there. Briefly, she lightly touches her left ear, grazing the area where she once displayed an industrial piercing. Nasyrn smiles at the empty space, thinking back to her high school years; mornings spent applying make-up to hide her eye-bags. The feeling of wishing to have the same expensive clothes and cool piercings as her friends. One tried convincing her to get a belly piercing, but she said no. Her ears are the only place she would have pierced. Nasyrn looked down at her clothes, long, dark, and comfortable for the winter season; unlike before, when she once chose to sacrifice her health by wearing a cute jacket dress despite the biting cold of winter. She unpaused the video as she finished putting in the features, watching her face with minimal makeup. Nasyrn turned

er head slightly, beginning to wonder, what questions did others have looking at her ears? What do they think about her outfit? Does she look like someone who spent her money on cute piercings and makeup for most of her teenage years? Nasyrn sighed at the thought.

Then she heard loud laughter from the cart diagonal from hers. A group of four young teens laughed, speaking in German. Nasyrn guessed that they were on a winter trip of their own, or they were foreign exchange students. She noticed two of them looked like a couple, the boy with his arm around the girl's waist, making a small smile grow on Nasyrn's lips. She looked back outside while still listening to the German students laugh and talk over the occasional click and clanking of train attendants moving about. Nasyrn looked back at the group before her, briefly seeing herself and her old friend group. She had that friend group since the start of 7th grade. Her first boyfriend came from that friend group. All of them were inseparable. Even without being in many classes together they all kept in touch as much as they could; text, school events and little trips to the mall. How would our friendship be now? thought Nasyrn when the group finally broke. Nasyrn and her boyfriend realized how draining it was to be around one of their friends; Nasyrn's boyfriend got accepted to a university in New York, but Nasyrn realized that she was distant from the group; Nasyrn didn't like what they became or them constantly pushing her into things like a wrist tattoo she had removed after uni graduation. She didn't know much about their whereabouts now, but sometimes she thought back to those days when they were just like the German group, laughing and talking about whatever. Nasyrn hoped their friendship lasted longer than hers did. Especially the couple; she hopes that they grow together rather than apart.

“George!! Remember your blood pressure. Stop eating that!!” said an elderly woman in the cart beside Nasyrn. Nasyrn took a side glance as she finished drinking her coffee. The scene before her was an elderly couple. The man, George, was eating a cheesecake and cannolis rolls, his face nearly covered in pastry cream.

B-but Melody, these rolls are heavenly! Come now, try one, love.”

“George, I also have to take care of my bloody blood pressure. Tck, it's what I get for marrying a bakery owner.” George didn't seem to take offense as he simply giggled happily, piling up what cannolis rolls were left.

“Look, Mel, a mini tower.”

“Oh, George.” Old lady Melody laughed and grabbed the chocolate cheesecake. “Here, use this as the base.” George's face brightened.

“Great idea, Mel.”

Nasyrn's lips rose in a smile as the elderly couple continued their desserts. Occasionally the old lady would lightly brush cream off her husband's face, a tiny laugh escaping her lips as she eyed her husband.

How cute, thought Nasyrn, lifting her hands, and looking over their smooth and slender surface. Her mind pictured those same hands, old, wrinkled, with some bits of skin sagging. Nasyrn wondered what the couple's story was. Maybe they were high school sweethearts, or maybe they met after a divorce, which happened to her mother. Nasyrn used to hate her mother for remarrying after only two years of being officially divorced; however, as she grew up, her mother and stepfather looked like the elderly couple before her. They were like two teenagers in love. Her mother would smile with bright red cheeks at anything her new husband did that she considered cute. The new husband gave her little nicknames

and loved it whenever she created a new candle; her father, on the other hand, would try to get her mother to stop making candles despite it being her favorite hobby. Now with all the kids out of the house, the pair are home alone, turning the old bedrooms into makeshift studios and mini studios. Every time Nasyrn would visit her mother, she seemed happy despite the emptiness of the home, and despite being retired she had a smile that almost made her look younger, the smile Nasyrn knew from her earliest memory, whenever the two would play games together or baked pastries. That smile had brightened up her childhood.

The train horn snapped Nasyrn back to the present before her. The announcement came on to explain that the train would be arriving at its destination in 30 minutes. “Madame, would like me to take this?” asked an attendant, nodding to the empty coffee cup and dessert plates.

“Yes, thank you,” she replied, quickly stacking the plates and handing them to the attendant. Chatter returned to the train cart as Nasyrn put her headphones back on, silencing the chatter instantly as she pressed play on her video, resuming her own story as she waited for the train to stop and leave her in a new environment, a new chapter in her life.

When the Healer Needs Healing

By Laura E. Garrard

I.

*I should have known there was no space
For the healer to become ill.*

Give and give and then when
The body said it was her turn

There was no means for the healer
To receive what she gave away.

Her body knew this years before,
Whispered subtly from floating sheets

As she washed, folded, and unfolded,
Made ready the table, extended her hands,

Ears leaned in, witness to suffering,
Stories of pain no one else heard.

2.

*I should have known there are no friends
From this giving; healers aren't human.*

She also believed herself exempt from illness;

She was inspiration, a walking sermon.

She denied her tucked corners of exhaustion.
Compassion fatigue, they call it.

Giving gives back, does it not?
When health tests became terrifying,

Many who had called on the healer
Diffused into rose and lavender.

For she was the mystical exception,
In control of her cell destiny.

No surprise that when she needed to receive support
Only the closest remained in touch.

She herself hardly accepted that stellar health
Didn't guarantee normal outcomes on tests.

Waves plunge her shore, but the rainforest
Waters hope of a storybook unfolding for

The healer who, having spent years
Hands open, heals her body too.

3.

*I should have known that when the healer
Relied on herself for healing*

She'd finally let go and understand
There was no control but asking,

That when she did what she knew
To heal herself, it would siphon to faith.

No one else could give her this trust,
She had to find it through surrender,

Retract and fold her hands in her lap,
Let the dirty sheets fall to the floor,

Then the support she received
Became identifiable and immense,

It wasn't in the form she expected.
It didn't come through touch but distant actions,

Prayers and expressed thoughts from those who cared
About her as a person, who she was and was not.

She knew she was loved with or without
A deadly condition, a rare surety in this life.

4.

*I should have known that what the healer provided
Over fifteen years was her desire to help.*

More than her skill, the healer was willing
To provide care and concern for well-being,

Whether or not it was her job to do so,
Clientele received what was given.

Now it was her turn to comprehend
Through her healing what she did for them,

She validated their fear and celebration,
Witnessed their sickness and wellness,

Not only of the body but also emotion,
Embraced their pain in clean flannel,

Soothed their searing nerves, the slightest
Relief releasing tears of thankfulness.

She was their constant cheerleader
Which was no small gift of herself.

What she gave returned in a different yet
No less powerful way: humility, trust

And gratitude could not have been scheduled.
She may have packed and stored her office,

But her legacy of assistance still calls
Every week for an appointment.

The Myth Of Sisyphus

By John Beck

The tower rises
and the blocks fall.
Our Romulus and Remus
are unfazed, undaunted
in their drive
to construct a world.
For now, the twins pause
from any toddler jealousy
to cooperate, to build.
They show no frustration
as they gather the tumbled bits
of colorful wood.
Each downfall gives them
laughter enough to begin anew.
I can learn from their patience.
They watch their parents
and learn as well. They cannot
sense a future yet
of seemingly insurmountable slopes
and impossible boulders, each stone
rolled upward only to slide again.
The newest tower falls.
Bright blocks ring the boys
on the kitchen floor
and their fresh giggles
fill the air. This time,
they choose a red one
and start again.

hallmark

By N.T Chambers

Yesterday was
your birthday -
I wanted to give you
something - anything -
hope...laughter...love...
a newly fallen maple leaf -
all those seemingly
insignificant distractions
that weigh us down
with their absence -
delectably elusive
in their nature -
seductive beyond belief,
but there was no call -
there never is a call...

I couldn't tell you
that you were loved - often -
and would be again -
as regularly as you choose
if you finally give
yourself that freedom -
not that you'll ever believe it -
myopia sometimes

obscures the truth –
but best wishes
all the same...

It's a humble gift,
I know – only words...

think of it as
a random thought
wrapped in
consonants and vowels
sent your way in lieu
of a wistful smile
or an unexpected phone call
filled with awkward
pauses and resentful silences –
simply a way to mark
the quiet passage
of just another day.



Prayer

By Julia DaSilva

For the door that lets you out again
no matter how many times you lock
yourself in. For chains given to crows
who will make nests in spite of your clasps.
For sandcastles that collapse because
they dry out, too far from the sea. For beams
suspended between trees, and the sixth grade
teacher who watched until you let go
just long enough to stand. For high ropes.
For the time you forced a silver moon
into your ear, and collapsed under a struck
nerve. For what flows over your unmade
towers: for a night in Catalonia, sometime
during the civil war, when you tried to pray
for a fire exit, in a church too crowded
to keep the thread, and left. Every chapel
plundered silver. For earrings missing backs.
For bodies that know when the mirror
is too high; that heal while you sleep, that ooze
boundaries, that say, *never make a bit
of imitation silver into the moon*. That spit
out your jewels, your real studs, even,
not because you shouldn't have worn
them, but because you were trying
to puncture your way out, to re-insert
yourself back into a self that wouldn't
fit. For chapels that spit you out onto the grass
where, first, you must learn to dance.
For doors that let you back out of your
little life, where your room was crowded

with the mirrors of others. For a love
who warned you against cheap jewelry,
but still clung to your ear while you wasted
from the cheap poison of her love.
For that being past. For the people
who couldn't love you. For the steadfast
sandcastles you will fall to pieces with.
For a mug of saline water to your ear,
drying away infection. For scar tissue.
For the body that welcomes you home,
now, with bread,
and salt.





Hatsuyume

By Fenn MacDonald

One ordinary night in December I dreamed
that something wearing my father's body like cheap jeans
(fading at the knees, tearing at the seams)
was taunting me

His favorite old sweater
(horses and mountains, cotton jersey)
and a stranger's smile, twisted and sharp
He looked me in the eye and said
I know what you want to see
and twisted – sharp

With his head hanging all sideways
the thing wearing my father's face
began to laugh at me

With his head hanging all sideways
the thing wearing my father's face
began to laugh at me

The sound melted into my phone ringing
and my mother's voice –
emergency
surgery
fastest-growing cancer

in my ringing ears I still heard laughter

Puddles

By Jason Ross

Pouring rain cascaded down the side of my house while I stared outside my window, admiring the moody weather. What others may have perceived as dreary, I viewed as home. Taking another sip of my coffee, I continued to observe the passerby. Many had their hands tucked into their pockets, their hoods over their heads as they looked down at the ground...seemingly to avoid getting droplets in their eyes.

I wished I could be like one of these people--walking around, going to who knows where. It had been a couple of months since I was last able to enjoy the sweet sound of stepping into a puddle. Hearing the swish, swash noises while carelessly trudging through the water...Christ, did I miss it. That was...before the surgery.

Yes, it was something I had always hoped to avoid, at least until hitting my later years. Nonetheless, it happened. As it turns out, I had developed a degenerative symptom in my knees that could be fixed by surgery.

Ok, I'm fibbing just a bit. It could mostly be fixed by surgery.

Everything was successful--or so Dr. Hendrick M.D. had determined through his observations during my early appointments at physical therapy.

"Learning to walk again isn't easy," Mike had told me. He was one of the patients I befriended during my first couple of weeks in PT. It's maddening how similar circumstances can result in such lightning quick friendships. He happened to hold a similar condition; however, he was quite a bit further along into his recovery by the time we met. In no time

at all, he'd be just like those dozens of pedestrians; splashing their way through the typical weather of the Pacific Northwest. Rain. So much rain.

I was jealous of all these people outside, pretending not to enjoy the pouring rain. "Soon enough," I said to myself, "I'll be stepping through those damn puddles too."

More Than Water

By Zane Jager

A ride through the waters can set many men's minds at ease. I know the sail is meant to be ornate as well as practical, but I do not give it a second thought. Smiles gleam in the sun, awaiting further instructions from my friend of a friend. He stands tall and gestures where to stop over the liquid landscape. A mile or a meter; too soon or too late, can and should make all the difference. One tank, some goggles and a camera are all that's needed to begin, and that's how it starts. Years of contact with the great submerged scene no longer make my body shiver in disgust. A warm blanket of blue is a gift from the Florida climate. I accept it, and never leave it in vain.

The rope sways, breathing life into my grip. A tether keeps me bound from the undersea pocket. Others are beside me, determined and enchanted. I see the allure in green and black packages, just ripe for the taking. Crustaceans and fish steer the way for my return with ease. But now is not the time to stop. Glass and wood are a treasure for some, but photographs will prove the journey for success. Hills of paper will be willed from this journey for others to see. Learn what you can, for in due time, the acidic waters and hungry life will consume it all to nothing.

My vision is green with the blue tint of relief when viewed from below. A tug of my rope could set me free for the time being. Dust is a constant down here with us, waiting to move when prompted. A reef is here to keep me posted when others drift away. Its purple glow is beaten away from the cast of aqua that layers it. I hope I stay some more--a job for my body and mind, and a recreation for my soul.

Asleep in Another Room

By N.T Chambers

Asleep in another room
the woman I love
tosses fitfully dreaming
of some other life
in a quietly secluded place
where ancient stories
no longer exist
and those to follow
remain unwritten.

It is a location where I exist
only as a distant memory -
an unannotated footnote
in a quickly skimmed chapter -
seen by those who later
scan her as “filler” -
or maybe comic relief -
before the real drama
takes place and a climax occurs
that guarantees
a happy ending for everyone -
well -
almost everyone.

The computer's incessant hum

reminds me I'm awake
at the keyboard again
overcaffeinated and sleep-deprived -
as usual.

I can hear her faintly slumber -
creating a new arc
in her reverie -
rewriting her denouement
while I stare
at the gaping white void
before me whose purpose
is to nudge me
towards a new chapter
outlining the not-too-distant future -
absent her scent, smile and touch -
leaving a handful of memories
to morph into a few
quickly forgotten poems
from a lesser poet
whose unedited words
were never enough.

The Deadline

By Fenn MacDonald

Two weeks of nosebleeds;
the headline says we need to be patient.
More paper in the bin -
bloodstains under my nails again.

“Why you need to be patient,”
the headline smirks up at me, smugly superior.
Blood stains my fingernails
where they bite bitter smiles into my palms.

Smugly superior, the headline smirks
as I sweat, sleepless, shuffling papers
that blur bloody lines across my palms.
When did it get dark outside?

I shuffle papers, sleepless and sweating.
Should I check my grades again?
When did it get dark outside?
Should I check the news again?

I check my grades again.
Nothing has changed.
I check the news again.
How many lifetimes have I waited?

What if nothing changes?
Four years of nosebleeds.
How many lives have we wasted?
More bloody paper in the bin



Growing Pains

By Samantha Garcia-Ortiz

Camellia Sinensis

By Ava Wisely

hello, camellia!
you look beautiful, as you tend to.
i'm tending to your leaves
and i'm going to
pour some hot water on you
i'm surprised it doesn't hurt.

hello, camellia!
thank you for your gift
as for you, i don't have much to give
but i do have honey, and lavender
and about half a billion other things
to fill your cup.
China and India raised you
but i'm happy you came all this way
for a visit.

hello, camellia!
i see you in every flower
every fruit, every plant, every summer
you're warm on my tongue
but i ought to hesitate, so i don't get burned.
you're kind, though
and i know you wouldn't hurt me

if you could help it.

hello, camellia!
thank you for holding me
the rain is getting worse, and i'm shivering
but your embrace is warming me
in more ways than one.

camellia...
can you hold me for a little longer?
i know you're well traveled
and you don't need
someone like me.
but, if i asked nicely, camellia
if i promised to water your leaves
and give you the sunlight you need
if i promised to leave
if you asked it of me

would you stay?

The Lesson of a Möbius Strip

By N.H Shae

Some have said that life is like a roller coaster, with endless twists and turns; ups and downs. At the beginning of the ride, we are filled with child-like glee. Anticipation buzzes in the air as we find our seats in the train car. The safety bar is locked over our bodies, securing us in place. We ride plummet to certain doom that cause us to question our mortality, only to then climb to insurmountable heights—repeating the process over and over and over and over again. Until, in a moment, it all just Stops.

Then, we get back in line to go again.

Roller coasters, yes, are like life in oh so many ways. They come in endless shapes and sizes. Some are made of wood; some of metal. Some have a thousand twists and turns; some have none.

Dual-tracked roller coasters pose two train cars against each other. The intent is to make these riders feel like they are in a competition. A race. Often, these rides are designed with a Möbius strip structure. The ride is quite deceitful. It appears to be two separate rides happening simultaneously, but in reality, the two trains are racing on the same track, just on opposite sides. To truly understand how the ride works, you must understand the multiple perspectives of the Möbius strip.

Möbius strips are used for many things besides roller coaster tracks. They are convenient to use when we need reality to be warped just a little bit, and they make for a fun lesson to learn.

In The Beginning...

My earliest memories are filled with the zesty taste of an orange Tic-tac zapping along my tongue as I crunch down on it. My fingers trace the intricate maps at the back of Daddy's Bible. My tulle hair tie brushes against my cheek as he bounces me up and down on his knee, discreetly passing me another candy. Mommy gives me a side glance, but I know she won't scold the early morning sugar intake while the pastor drones on in the same warm baritone as every other Sunday. I always found myself sitting in this position, as I refused to stay with my sister when our parents dropped us off for Sunday School. I didn't really like it there; the teacher only ever covered a handful of lessons, and they all seemed to teach the same thing.

It was a cycle; the pattern continued, flowed, and evolved. My brother added to the controlled chaos a few short years later. Soon, my sister's seat was filled with his car seat as she would stay home with a headache every Sunday. My dresses and tights were traded for a simple top or sweater and a pair of jeans, accessorized, always, with a simple silver necklace adorning my collar.

The necklace was the one my grandma had given me last Christmas.

The Necklace

It was now, three years later, that I sat in trigonometry class, fingers twisted and twined together with the silver ring that hung as the focal point of that silver necklace. The class was rather small, being advanced high school math. The teacher was laid-back, at least with us. He trusted us to grasp every concept thrown our way easily and tried to find fun ways to teach each new thing. Currently, he is helping us memorize the

quadratic formula by playing an animated music video to the tune of $x = (-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}) / (2ac)$. Though I think he got distracted again. He did that sometimes, going on down rabbit trails to share new and curious facts with us.

“A Möbius strip is an infinite circular structure,” he said, clutching a piece of white paper and tearing it into a thin strip. In his trademark red-inked pen, he scrawled the quadratic formula on one side of the paper. Then, he started twisting and distorting the paper. “You can make it by half-twisting each side of the strip, then attaching the two ends together.”

His eyes were focused on the task, the tip of his tongue pressed to his teeth, as if the pressure alone would contort the paper to his whims. We all watched, enraptured.

“Ah-ha,” he exclaimed, punctuating his triumph with a piece of tape placed to connect the two ends of paper. “Now the words appear on both sides,” he explained with a grin, then set it to the side and moved on to explain today's homework.

But my fingers were frozen to the place where they were rubbing against the words engraved on my necklace. I peered down at the silver ring resting, seemingly heavier, on its chain. It's a Möbius strip, I realize. The writing wasn't really on either side; it just appeared to be.

With that new understanding, I scrutinized the words I had long since memorized, from Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

I stared at the engraving for the remainder of class as if the words themselves would suddenly alter, shift alongside my knowledge of how they were written.

Lost...

That millisecond of cross-examination passed, and the world just seemed to keep spinning round and round. Classes, homework after school, honors society at lunch, and robotics club meetings in the evenings. Except on Wednesday, that was for Youth Group and volunteering at the church's kids' scouting program. Sundays were for church. Though the days were all the same, only going by different names. All the lessons were fed to me on a repeating cycle. They all required my utmost attention, devotion, time, and dedication. Some days, their, or maybe my own self-imposed, expectations were just a little too heavy to heave through each event on the checklist.

Through it all, the Möbius strip dangled from my neck. I would play with it like some tapped their feet or squeezed a stress ball or spun a fidget spinner. The engraved ringlet object was about the size of a quarter, and its physical weight measured up to twice that of the coin. Though, with each rub of my finger over the object the necklace soaked up the anxiety and stress of the day. I couldn't see it for what it truly was: a stress ball, yes, but a ball and chain, nonetheless. The small ring, which was twisted to form the Möbius strip, was my only peephole into the world: one so limited I was no better than a horse with blinders on—a puppet for the jockey. The accessory was nothing more than a physical manifestation of my bindings. The burden of the chain added mere ounces to my natural weight, though it felt like tons. It rested there, at my clavicle, and even when removed, its existence was a phantom lying on my throat.

Thus, it took several days for me to notice. I was getting ready one

Sunday and was trying to find my necklace to put on. I checked the nightstand. It wasn't there. Nor was it on my dresser. Or desk. Or in my bag. Or my purse.

Staring at the mess around me, I collapsed suddenly. Clothes were thrown in a haphazard frenzy, highlighters scattered from my bag having been torn apart, and yet the silver necklace was nowhere to be found in all the clutter.

Mother said we were late and had to leave, and so I stood, grabbed my shoes, painted on my smile, and walked out the door. Whether the necklace was gone or not, the show must go on. Right?

The time passed when I looked for the necklace every day, then just every now and then. Eventually, I stopped searching at all. It was futile to hunt for the engraved words whose impressions had already been molded into my very form. I found solace in other things. Words all the same, but the kind printed on a page. Where characters felt the way I did: where I found likeness. They learned and, in-hand, taught me so many new lessons. They took the blinders off and unchained me from my bindings. The world came through in fractals, like a kaleidoscope of different opinions, situations, beliefs, and paths.

However, I will admit that I found myself reaching for my neck to find the ring, only to find nothing at all. It was easier sometimes, at a fork in the road, to be told what choice to make. But whether I wanted the direction or not, the weight was still there—always. I tried to ignore it.

Replaced...

Years later, I felt frozen; bound, really, inside the walls of my home.

The outside world was just too dangerous, with nefarious assailants littering the air. But eventually, the seasons circled back, as they always do, to warmer weather.

It was on a sunny June afternoon, the air hot and arid but filled with the smell of frosting and the sound of laughter, as my family and a few friends had gathered to celebrate my graduation from high school.

Like many rites of passage, and I suppose this party was a rite, the well-wishers gathered in a circle with me and an assortment of gifts in the center. I reached first for a small rectangular shaped box. It was wrapped in Grandma's trademark comic section from the Sunday paper. And, when unwrapped, inside was a familiar silver ring on a thin chain. The long-ago memorized phrase engraved on the Möbius strip didn't even warrant a glance to realize what was written.

I unclipped the necklace and placed it in my palm, letting the weight pull me away from the moment and get lost in my thoughts. What was lost is found. Or, at the very least, replaced.

Chattering between my grandma and Mother snapped me back to the present. I smiled wide at my grandparents in thanks and quickly latched the jewelry around my neck. The chain was secured by muscle memory, but it didn't quite sit with the same weight as in the past. Don't let the thin chain and its Möbius strip fool you. It might look dainty, but the weight was suffocating. That's the thing about insidious objects, no one truly notices them.

It was only now, with the Möbius strip around my neck once again, that the secret in the structure seemed to make sense. The mystery I had tried to crack in that math class all those seasons ago finally revealed itself, and with it demystified, the things preached to me for years seemed

to need more examination. After all, misinterpretation is just another way of saying miscommunication, lie.

Found...

I contemplated the engraving for months, hoping to reveal some answer to the universe. I felt that with every new truth, my world was destabilized a little more. But what really is the truth? Only when asking that did I learn the importance of context.

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” This doesn’t mean God will necessarily give me the power to walk on water. The idea always seemed ludicrous anyway. Some translations replace “things,” with “this,” because when Paul explains how Christ strengthens him it is an explanation for how the apostle was able to survive each hardship he faced—with God’s love and that love being his truth.

My problem wasn’t so much the lessons being taught; it was the peephole through which I was instructed to view them. At the end of the day, everyone’s story and experience—everyone’s truth, is just a tad different. The adrenaline junkie might get off the roller coaster and hop right back in line. The person beside him might decide to loathe having their stomach drop to their toes in ten seconds flat; and, consequently, swear never to go on a roller coaster again. One experience doesn’t cancel out the others. Both views are important. And every story has more than one interpretation.

My own truth will not be the same as yours, but I share mine so that you can see one of the many points of view available. After all, it is not the lesson you are taught that matters the most, but the lesson that you choose to learn.

When you have no hometown

By Bethany Fischer

Sister,

I remember you crying

“I want to go home!”

The voice of a scared and angry child,

Echoing through yet another empty house,

With the same impartial white walls

As all the other places they dragged us to

And tore us from.

And I remember our mother’s frustrated yelling:

“You are home!”

And when you defiantly shouted “No!” in response-

I watched and said nothing,

But I understood.

I still understand.

The Safest Place

By Lindsey Pierce

A little cozy home for a gnome
and his family rests atop a waterfall
encased in cobblestone

A serene Buddha takes his scene
amidst the honeyberries and melons,
nary a need to be seen

The girthy stump of a once looming
sycamore finds a new purpose
simply showing off its rings

A lush green grassy carpet
welcomes weary toes and hands
to pluck, comb, graze, and grip it

The meager fence is short and frayed,
it never sought to hide a thing,
merely protect what it made

A straight and narrow stone path
leads to the old alleyway
where horses and milkmen used to pass

A ladybug scales a blade,
and maybe your hand and wrist,
a brief reprieve from a life of shade

A silent wheel spins and spins,
waltzing forward and back again.

No need to chime when you have the wind!

My sister's little pups fill their noses
with earth and air and ash.
Maybe they can even smell the roses?

Someone smokes a spicy cigar,
a stark though nostalgic aroma
that reminds us of where we are

My son chases bubbles, laughing
So much fun to be had
when you're young and happy

Just like me back then when
smelling spring lilacs and running through
the sprinkler was my heaven

When chowing down Weber grilled
steaks and listening to Styx
was all it took to be thrilled

This is still the safest place on earth
A big and humble backyard
cultivated and nurtured by Dad



Teenage Angst

By Katie Babb

