

# The Oval

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# THE OVAL

VOL. XIII • 2020



# THE OVAL

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STUDENT  
INVOLVEMENT  
NETWORK



*The Oval* is a literary magazine published annually by the Creative Writing Program of the University of Montana English Department, the Associated Students of the University of Montana (ASUM), The Student Involvement Network, and the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library. Each volume is printed with vegetable ink on recycled paper by AlphaGraphics.

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

Welcome to the thirteenth volume of *The Oval*. It's an honor to have so many participants featured in this work representing the diverse creativity of the University of Montana and we're pleased to provide a place for many to see their name in print for the first time and for artists to freely express themselves.

I've seen a questioning of art recently, especially as we've all been learning to live during a global pandemic. Basically, what's the point? What purpose is art serving when we are leaning so heavily on medicine, science, caretakers, and service workers? Arguably, art doesn't do much practical work and it does little to solve the big problems we're facing. But I think art does serve a purpose, which is most clearly seen when it's taken away: it makes us feel good about ourselves and the world. I see people using movies and books to escape, cope, and connect to others, which can feel counterproductive as we're being told to use our time efficiently. But there's no point to the inevitable guilt when we don't live up to these unrealistic expectations. Don't we still deserve to feel good?

*The Oval* is only made possible by the generosity of ASUM senators and executives, Megan Stark and the Mansfield Library, Hailey Michelson and the Student Involvement Network, the creative writing program, the English department, Ken Price and the AlphaGraphics staff, and Kevin Head and the annual Writers' Fall Opus. Thank you for your valuable time and unending support.

Special thanks to Robert Stubblefield, our faculty adviser, for his kind mentorship in and out of the classroom. Your enthusiasm is contagious and has driven us to continue to work hard and produce something to be proud of. Thank you for your generosity and kindness, especially now. Thank you to Shannon Janssen, our technological adviser, who knows that you need a little more than enthusiasm to make a physical class go digital and has smoothed every speed bump we've faced. And thank you to Stacia Hill for your invaluable perspective and gentle leadership through the creation of this magazine. All of you have taught us the importance of passion and have made the classroom one of my favorite places to be.

*The Oval* is the result of a collaboration between UM students—those creating art and those working to see it published—and I am encouraged to see so many people willing to do both. I am grateful for

everyone who's worked to help this publication come to fruition. Our genre editors and design and layout board have taken on extra responsibilities to ensure the quality of the magazine, and I thank them for all of their behind-the-scenes work. I especially want to thank Luke Smith, our design and layout editor, for doing all the hard work and making it look easy. I'm so glad to have had you by my side.

I am humbled by the number of students who submitted to this year's *Oval*. Thank you for sharing your stories, poetry, and art. Your powerful voices are a reflection of the University and form the backbone of *The Oval*. And to everyone who opened this book, thank you for supporting your family, friends, and all of the artists on campus.

I hope you feel good,  
Mielle Hubbard  
Editor-in-Chief

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# ROCK YOUR BODY

Trisha Bartle

**B***ackstreet's back, alright!*" The cheerful tones rang from Ryan's nightstand. If he'd known that his guilty pleasure song would be waking him in the dead of night for weeks on end, he might have chosen a different song for his alarm. Something he hated instead, like "Sweet Caroline." Then again, none of this was really his choice. Of course, he'd tried to change the alarm. No matter what settings he'd hammered out on his phone the night before, it always woke him up at 4:27 a.m. to the dulcet tones of Nick Carter and the boys. Considering he had to be at work over four hours later, it wasn't exactly a welcome alarm. Even worse, it happened on the weekends when he'd normally be attempting to catch up on the sleep he'd missed or, more honestly, recovering from a night binge-watching *Twin Peaks*. Since this started, he'd wake at 4:27 a.m., smash at his phone until it stopped, then try his hardest to go back to sleep. It only worked about half the time. He cleared all alarms every night, but it still woke him up. He did a factory reset. He even bought an entirely new phone—something he'd usually avoid at all costs. Alas, at 4:27 a.m., as he was dreaming of riding a glittering rollercoaster to the moon, he was jolted awake with Backstreet Boys' seminal 1990s classic, "Everybody (Backstreet's Back)." Backstreet's back, indeed.

"Oh my god, we're back again ... brothers, sisters, everybody sing..." Ryan sang along grumpily, more zombie than man, as he rolled over and pawed at his phone, knocking it on the floor in the process. He had it on good authority he'd have that song in his head for the rest of the day. Rest of his life, perhaps. The thought crossed his mind to roll back over and hopefully succumb to the sweet nectar of uninterrupted sleep, but no. "What do you want from me?! Why, phone? Why?"

He'd had enough. Maybe it was time to do something drastic. He needed to do the two things he hated most in this world: go to Walmart and talk to a professional about his phone. Well, "professional" was a bit generous, but he couldn't wait for the AT&T store to open. He needed to figure this out now, at 4:27 a.m., and the only way to do that was to schlep his tired, moon-coaster-dreaming ass to Walmart, of all places.

“You’re coming with me, Buddy. Your Backstreet days are over.” Ryan pocketed the offending device and, with a little sprucing-up and a swig of day-old coffee to brighten up his life a little, he walked out into the crisp air of a much-too-early morning.

For a moment, he thought his local 24-hour Walmart might be empty. Who else would choose to be out at this hour? Instead of the empty aisles he’d hoped for, he had to dodge kids playing tag amidst inflatable pool unicorns and old men taking up the whole aisle on their Hoveround scooters. Though he had to hand it to the adult man walking around in Wolverine onesie pajamas carrying a stack of frozen pizzas. If only Ryan could be so brave.

To further burn his luck, the tech counter in the anemic Media and Gaming Department had a line. A man wearing tight pink leggings with *Dirty* written across the back in silver rhinestones was telling the tired-looking clerk about his DVD player and how it wouldn’t play movies when he put the discs in label-side down. Behind him was a woman about Ryan’s age with long, wavy brown hair. She was wrapped in a long beige coat and tapped her foot while holding her phone in her hand. She looked tired.

Ryan got in line behind her and tried his best to pretend that he was patient. He watched the wall of televisions as they cycled over and over through ads for the most recent Pixar release, the new Ariana Grande album, and an inexplicable video about Martha Stewart’s new line of baguette-themed scented candles, available only at Walmart.

Ryan tried. He really did. But he just couldn’t get the song out of his head. It pulled his attention away from the screens and the *Dirty* man that was currently getting red in the face from frustration.

“Gonna bring the flavor, show you how,” he muttered, low at first, barely more than a whisper. “Gotta question for ya, better answer now.”

Now he was in full-whisper territory, not so loud as to start an impromptu flash mob or anything, but loud enough that the brunette in front of him turned around with a glance. He cracked a tiny smile and continued. “Am I original? Yeah. Am I the only one?”

Before he could fill in the next response, Brunette, her eyes slightly wide, chimed in. “Yeah,” she sang along.

“Am I sexual?”

“Yeah.” They both sported large grins beneath their tired eyes.

“Am I everything you need,” they both sang in unison, louder now,

“you better rock your body now.”

They burst into laughter, making *Dirty* nearly jump out of his pink leggings. He turned around and scowled at the pair, a furrow where his non-existent eyebrows would have been. He swiveled back to the clerk to continue his tirade.

“That was awesome,” the woman said, her hazel eyes shining. She stuck out her hand. “I’m Hazel.”

*What are the odds?* “Hi, Hazel. I’m Ryan,” he extended his hand for a hearty, early-morning handshake.

“Hi, Ryan! Are you doing that thing where you repeat the person’s name to help you memorize it? Because that’s what I’m doing.”

“Ha, you guessed it.” He smiled. “If I don’t do something, I won’t even hear the name in the first place. Honestly, there have been a lot of awkward moments when I’ve gone through an entire date with a woman and had no idea what her name was. I don’t want to do that again.”

“Good thing this isn’t a date then.” She winked.

*Don’t blush, don’t blush*, Ryan urged himself, though his body was betraying him. He could feel heat rising from his chest toward his neck. Before he could come up with a witty response that would be the perfect mix of flirty and nonchalant, *Dirty* slammed the DVD player onto the desk.

“Screw this! What kind of place are you running here, anyway? Perverts are singing songs—”

“Perverts?” Hazel whispered quietly to Ryan, mid-laugh.

“—and you refuse to help me.”

“Sir, I told you. You just insert the DVD like this.” The clerk reached for a DVD he’d placed on the counter, but before he could grab it, *Dirty* took hold and launched it toward the wall of TVs like a Frisbee. It sailed a few feet before floating to the ground and skidding across scuffed linoleum for a soft, uneventful landing.

“Go to hell!” *Dirty* yelled before stomping away empty-handed.

Ryan and Hazel stared at the clerk for a moment, who just sighed and lowered his eyes. “I’m not supposed to say this ... but I hate my job. Anyway, who’s next?”

“Oh!” Hazel said, lifting her phone. “Yeah, it’s me.”

The line stepped forward so Ryan was a few feet closer to his hopeful destiny of a Backstreet Boys-free morning routine. Maybe he could get a solid seven hours of sleep from now on.

“Okay, this is going to sound really weird,” Hazel said. “And I prom-

ise I've done everything I could think of to fix it myself but ... Do you know the song 'Everybody' by the Backstreet Boys?"

Ryan had been trying to pretend he wasn't listening, but now he couldn't hide his interest. He stepped a little closer.

"No," the clerk said.

"Well, it probably came out before you were born. It's not important. I mean it kind of is, but ... Ugh, let me start from the beginning. Two weeks ago, my phone woke me up at exactly 4:27 a.m. to that song. But here's the thing: I didn't set the alarm. I don't even really care about that song." She blew out a breath that ruffled her bangs. "I restarted my phone. I removed all music and music-streaming apps from my phone. I even called Verizon customer service. Nothing. It won't stop. It wakes me up every day." Hazel, for a moment, sounded like she might cry.

"And?" the clerk seemed unimpressed. Ryan, on the other hand, was so beside-himself that he felt like he'd briefly detached from reality.

"And I want it to stop! Customer service told me to bring it into somewhere so they could fiddle with the settings in person. I was planning on going somewhere more professional, no offense—"

"None taken."

"—but it woke me up again. I seriously can't take it anymore."

The clerk sighed and turned toward his computer monitor. "Let me look it up online."

"I already did that. I can't find anyone else with the same problem."

Ryan cleared his throat. "Um, now you have."

Hazel turned. "What?"

"I've been having the exact same problem. Same song, same time. That's why I'm here." He stepped forward so they were both at the counter. Safety in numbers, right? "I did a factory reset. It didn't stop. I even bought a new phone from a completely different brand. It's still doing it. Can you help us?"

The clerk looked back and forth between them, then sighed again. "Did you try turning it off and on again?"

"Did you not hear what we've been saying? Of course we did." Hazel cocked a thumb at Ryan. "He even bought a new phone, which, to be honest, I was hoping to avoid. Do you have any other ways you can help us?"

"No," the clerk responded, eyes dulled.

"What do you mean, 'No'?" Hazel asked.

"Look, we're not exactly trained to handle big stuff. It sounds like

you've done all the troubleshooting steps I would have tried. And if there's nothing to Google, then I really don't think I can help. But if you want to buy a new phone, I can help you with that."

"Wow, no thank you." Hazel rolled her eyes.

Ryan and Hazel turned away from the tech counter, allowing a teen holding one of those electronic hoverboards to move forward.

"I can't believe you've been having the same problem as me," Ryan said as he turned to her.

"I know. I told some people at work and they all thought I was nuts. It's not like I could prove it or anything. As soon as I turn off the alarm, it disappears from the menu without a trace, like it never happened."

"Mine too!" He turned back to the clerk, now wiping the bright red hoverboard with a cloth, and scowled. "I finally got up for the alarm so I could take care of this thing, and look what happened?"

"There must be something we can do," Hazel said. She grasped her phone, white knuckles pronounced over a pink glittery phone case.

"I'm really at a loss for—"

*"Psst."*

"—what to do about this. I feel like I've done everything short of downgrading to a flip phone, but that's honestly a last—"

*"Psst."*

"—Okay, what's going on?" Ryan whipped around to the source of the noise to find a man leaning against a pillar next to a display of stuffed hippopotamuses wearing tutus. His leather-clad arms were folded in front of his thin chest. "Can we help you?"

"No, but I might be able to help you. Sir," he nodded toward Hazel, "ma'am. I couldn't help but hear about your ... predicament."

Ryan could see their confused faces reflecting back at them from the mysterious man's mirrored sunglasses. "You know how to fix phones?"

"Not me, no. My powers are of the more ... earthly ... persuasion."

Hazel shivered. "Eww, what does that mean?"

"Let's just say I'm a bit of a cat whisperer."

"Double eww," Hazel said. She turned to Ryan. "I don't know about you, but I'm getting as far away from here as I can."

"Wait, wait!" The man stood up from the pillar and took a step forward. "I'm just a veterinarian. I was just trying to be cool, okay?"

"Sure, man. Very cool. But you said you can help us. How?"

The man leaned back against the pillar, resuming his stance. "There's someone you should talk to. Downtown. Do you know that bagel place

that sells unicorn bagels? They taste like cotton candy.”

“Future Bagels. I love that place.” Hazel was back next to Ryan, her interest piqued. She smelled like Head and Shoulders dandruff shampoo and watermelon-flavored Bubblicious.

“Well, have you ever noticed that little gap between that building and the one next to it with the Super Cuts?” The mystery man raised an eyebrow.

“No,” Ryan and Hazel said in unison.

“Of course you didn’t.” He chuckled. “Go there. Now that I’ve told you about it, the way will be open to you. Inside that thin alley is a door with pi on it—the math symbol, not the food. Knock on the door and you’ll find someone who can help you.”

Hazel turned to Ryan, a mix of exasperation and intrigue lighting her face. “Well, should we go? I imagine there’s about a twenty-percent chance we’ll get murdered, but safety in numbers, right?”

“Normally I would get as far away from this guy and some weird back alley as I can, but I haven’t had a decent night’s sleep in ... hell if I know. I’m too tired to even remember.” Ryan hoped his face didn’t look as tired as he felt.

“True, but we don’t even know any details. Hey, guy—”

Hazel turned to the pillar, but it was now empty. Only sparkling turquoise eyes from the rows of stuffed hippos were there to greet them.

“He’s gone.”

A shiver ran up Ryan’s spine. It was too early for mystical Walmart shenanigans. “Oh crap, what are we getting ourselves into?”

“Oh, hey guys.” The mystery man poked his head out from behind a shelf. “I thought we were done talking, so I walked away. I still have to pick up a bulk order of Ensure for my grandma. Did you have any other questions? It’s really easy. Just knock on that door I told you about.”

Ryan wiped a palm down his face and sighed. “Nah, man. No other questions. Thanks.”

Set inside a lightly crumbling brick wall was a steel door. The metal was scraped and weathered, old stickers hastily peeled off of it, then re-stickered and peeled off again. Over everything was a pi symbol made of faded red paint, encircling an old peephole.

“Go ahead. Knock on it,” Hazel said, finishing off the last bite of her unicorn bagel. The pair stood beside each other, the narrow alleyway pressing in on either side.

"No, you go ahead," Ryan said. He chewed on a hangnail that he'd been worrying over for days.

"Ahh, what the hell." Hazel shrugged and stepped forward, kicking an old can that had once contained evaporated milk. Her fist hovered briefly over the pi symbol, then came down to rap twice on the steel.

Ryan waited a beat, listening for any signs of movement. "Maybe no one's home."

"Let me try one more time." She lifted her fist again, but just before her knuckles touched metal, a shrieking sound of grinding metal pierced their ears. Slowly, the door opened and a young Asian woman with an asymmetrical bob stepped out from the darkness.

"Can I help you?" She said, half-bored and half-tired.

"Uhh..." Hazel muttered. She slowly lowered her fist and stepped back next to Ryan.

"Yeah," Ryan said, raking a hand through his hair. The low light of dawn filtered past the woman, but he could only make out a few feet of orange shag carpet. The rest was darkness. "We met this guy at Walmart today. He said you could help us. With our cell phone problem."

The woman crossed her arms in front of her and leaned on the door jamb, nearly a perfect copy of the way the Walmart Mystery Man leaned on the pillar. "Julien sent you here? Figures. He thinks I'm some kind of tech wizard." She rolled her eyes. "He's right, though. Come on in."

Ryan and Hazel followed behind her as the orange shag carpet gave way to pale green laminate, then wood, then beige wall-to-wall.

The woman looked back and caught their downward gazes. "My dad owns a flooring company. Don't worry about it."

She led them through dark hallways until they reached a bright room with empty, white walls and a desk sitting right in the middle. She sat down in a swivel chair behind a computer.

"Have a seat," she said, as she typed on her keyboard.

Hazel looked around. "There aren't any chairs—"

"So, what can I do for you? You said you had cell phone problems," the woman said, her eyes still on her computer screen.

"Uh, yeah," Ryan said, stepping forward. "Our phones are doing this weird thing. Every night, at exactly 4:27 a.m., they wake us up with a song."

"Did you try turning off the alarm?"

"Of course we did," Hazel chimed in. "And before you ask. Yes, I turned it off and on again. And this guy apparently even bought a new

phone.”

“What song? Is it the same every time, or different?”

“It’s the same every time: Backstreet Boys’ ‘Everybody (Backstreet’s Back)’,” Ryan said.

“Never heard of it,” the woman muttered, sounding bored. “Did you choose that as your alarm?”

“No,” the pair said in unison.

The woman turned away from her computer screen and seemed to see them for the first time. “How long have you guys known each other?”

Ryan glanced at his phone. “About an hour.”

The woman’s eyes flitted back and forth between the two, then she sighed. “I can’t help you.”

“What? Why? You didn’t even look at our phones.” Hazel threw up her hands in exasperation.

“I don’t need to. The problem isn’t the phones.” She paused. “The problem is you. Both of you.”

“Excuse me?” Ryan stared at the girl, then the room around him, this improbably bright room filled with mismatched flooring. *How did he even get here?*

The girl sighed. “Listen. We all define ourselves by problems. Whatever’s wrong in our lives, they become our identities. I think I can safely assume that this song—and 4:27 a.m.—has become your identity, correct?”

“Well ...” Hazel whispered.

“Exactly. But it’s not our problems that should define us—it’s the way we overcome them. It’s time to slay the dragon, as it were. Pick yourselves up and fight. Of course, I’m being metaphorical right now. But my real-world advice is this: Go chill out. Grab a drink. Hit a museum. Forget about your phones, your alarms. Just have a good day. The two of you, together. I have a feeling that’ll do the trick.”

Ryan furrowed his brow. “How old are you?”

“Fifteen. Now go. I have things to do.” She waved a hand toward the door, back the way they came.

The pair stared at her for a moment, then turned without another word.

“*Backstreet’s Back, alright!*” The song bled through Ryan’s dream. In this one he had been a bear, stalking through a forest and following an injured fawn that had his childhood babysitter’s face. He’d have to unpack



that one later. For now, all he could hear was the Backstreet Boys serenading him like they always did. He let the music flow over him, his toes bobbing to the beat. He refused to open his eyes. Not yet. He wanted to savor the sleep for a moment longer. But no. As seemed to be his life now, he had to get up at 4:27 a.m. He might as well accept it.

His arm flopped to his nightstand and tapped vigorously at his phone, but the music didn't stop. "Ugh, fine." This time he scooted up to a sitting position and grabbed his phone. That's when he knew something was off. He could see his phone just fine. Sunlight filtered in through the half-open blinds of his bedroom window. He wasn't plunged into darkness like he normally was when the infernal forever-alarm went off. He looked at the screen and, instead of 4:27, it read 9:15 a.m.

"What the fuck?" In his haste to get out of bed, the slate grey top sheet tangled around his bare feet and clung to him, sending him careening toward the floor. He hit the hardwood with a thud, banging his hip in the process.

Rushed footsteps padded into his bedroom. "Whoa, are you alright?"

Ryan looked up to see Hazel. Her brunette hair, a little wilder now, shined in the morning sunlight. She wore a Leavenworth Urban Art Museum t-shirt she'd bought in a gift shop the day before, her tanned legs poking out from underneath. "It's nine o'clock," was all he could utter.

A large, toothy smile spread across her face. "Yeah it is. I woke up without an alarm for the first time in weeks. I mean, granted, I didn't get a lot of sleep," she winked, something that was clearly her trademark, "but at least I got up at a realistic hour. Can you believe it?"

*"Everybody, yeah, rock your body, yeah, everybody, rock your body right. Backstreet's back, alright!"* The song continued to fill the room.

"That's amazing, but what about the song?" Ryan looked down at the phone clutched in his hand. Rather than the alarm notification, it looked like his typical lock screen: a picture of his childhood cat, Mittens. No alarm.

Hazel's smile grew. "Oh, right." She walked around to the other side of the bed and picked up her phone, pink glitter case and all, from the other nightstand. "I was just messing with you." She tapped her phone, and the song stopped.

Ryan sighed and fell back onto the floor, his legs still tangled in the sheets. "Why did it stop? I mean, it's not that I'm not grateful, but why?"

She walked over and laid on the floor beside him. Her wild brunette waves splayed out across Ryan's chest as she snuggled up into the

crook of his arm. She smelled pleasantly of the day before. Hints of coffee grounds, unicorn bagels, and then movie theater popcorn, among other things. It had been a full day. "What I don't understand is why it happened in the first place."

"Right. It's bothered both of us for weeks. We only finally got fed-up enough to actually get up with the alarm yesterday." He stroked the arm that she'd let flop across his stomach.

Hazel looked up at him and held his gaze. He had the feeling she was thinking of their day—and night—as well. An improbable day that began improbably—with Backstreet Boys and a trip to Walmart. Her eyes glinted. "You're right, it probably doesn't mean anything."



# GLACIAL LAKE MISSOULA

Jasper Vanspoore

I'm daydreaming about a 12,000-year-old lake  
and about a 16,000-year-old fire-hearth  
found last summer  
just on the other side of the Bitterroot Mountains,  
a place not so far away. I wonder then  
if anybody was *here*,  
to watch the floods  
the moment the ice dam cracked and  
I wonder if it looked like a cleansing.

I'm on a hillside, looking south  
across the city in a grey November.  
The green haze of industry  
clinging to the edges of the valley,  
silt in the bathtub after draining.  
I'm wondering what it all looked like underwater,  
wondering if this hill was an island.  
This

is what I'm doing  
hours before my best friend  
tells me she needs  
to be away from me.  
Eyes rimmed red from tears  
she leans against the sink.  
Rice steams on the stove  
*do you even know what sadness is?*  
she asks and I wonder if to tell her  
that sometimes I dream  
of a glacial lake  
to flood us all.

I'm on a hillside, looking west  
and at my feet, a granite plaque  
marking an ancient shoreline.  
I place my palm against the Ponderosa,  
to twirl myself in and bury my face into thick  
rivulets of vanilla bark, cracking small twigs in my palm  
to remember the ancient comfort of fire.  
I bend my neck to the sky,  
  
lusting for water.







# BUT NOT QUITE

Kat Jackson

**M**y name is not Cassandra, but it might as well be. Might as well call us all Cassandra, us who swat at wasps, because truth is a commodity we do not possess. The tide is coming up and up and up, and in the distance the grey-green water laps at the grey-green sky. I always get distracted when I walk, but who can justify driving such a short way?

Should probably get milk. We're almost out, and the kitty will be slighted if she doesn't get her tablespoon tonight. Also mushrooms, onions, garlic. For me. God granted humans the ability to eat just a little poison, might as well utilize it.

-Pappy, do you believe in God?

-All seven and one that doesn't even exist, kid.

I think, so I exist, and thinking is my fighting, but how do I justify fighting for anything if I can't justify the belief that anything outside my own consciousness exists? If only I knew Jesus.

-I think he's in prison, my mother tells me. I hear a lot of people find him there.

A woman walks by. White hair, ash-blond at the roots, and chopped to the nape of her neck. Eyes grey-green and searching without finding; she doesn't see me. I ache. I fall in love a little. Scatter the grace, tenth muse. But words are not immortal, not anymore. She said someone in another time would remember us, but who can remember us if we are the last generation of our people? Who will remember all the women I've loved and immortalized within myself, my work? Virginia, Francesca, Sylvia. They die with me when I am shot or choke on smog.

*All around the world it seems that things are looking rough* (as a woman I have no country), *but the Jackboot only jumps down on people standing up*. A few months ago, anti-homeless architecture went up outside the library where the lady used to sleep. So sweet, little green ducks, if she freezes when winter comes, it's on you. And me maybe, too yellow to take action. How shameful to obey unjust laws.

I sidestep off the path to avoid colliding with the man walking towards me. Did he notice we were playing chicken? Didn't seem to. He

knew I would step aside, never doubted it. Shame is all we teach little girls, and little boys often escape without any it seems. Bratty, fratty little boys. Well, actually, they say. Well, actually.

Well, actually, I'm so bored of beauty. Ogress, unseeable. Queen of the Eyesores. We used to let kids be ugly. Ought to blame Instagram, I reckon, though I risk sounding like a crone. If you can be pretty, you can be famous; if you can be pretty, you can be rich. And that's the American dream, baby!

Coins clatter in my pockets. Original sin. Self-sufficiency is the only road to salvation. I really do believe that and I don't believe anything. *Il faut cultiver notre jardin*. Pale, cracked earth. Can't grow anything. That will be the biggest problem. If it matters, if we make it that far. Maybe the only right we're born with, the only right granted to us by Nature, is the right to die.

This is where I ought to pray, right? But—it's all mythology to me. If there is a god, I suppose her name is Entropy. *Why is God? To shape the Universe. Why is the Universe? To shape God*. Have you heard the good news? The Demiurge lives! Divine craftsmen with their holy triangles.

Almost out of yogurt too, and maybe grab some avocados if they look alright. Maybe chicken for dinner. *Behold, a man*, says he who lives like a dog. True virtue, if you ask me, not that anyone ought to, though if they did I'd tell them I hope to deface currency as well as he did.

-Who died and left Aristotle in charge of ethics anyway?

A beat. Blasphemous.

-Plato.

I squawk to myself. There's something to it though: the moral purity of pooches. All the hounds of my youth have been heroes. Mutts mostly, mixes of heelers and bird dogs and collies. There's no such thing as an American purebred.

But at home, it's a cat that waits for me. Felines are bad at object permanence, and I fear she thinks I stop existing when I step outside. Precious creature, perfect predator, but too small to be lethal (lucky for me). What would our games look like if we weren't hunters? They say my generation treats their pets like children because we can't afford babies.

So what? No use making new humans when the planet is dying and us along with it. What sacred hearts we give to easy love. Almost a sacrifice, but not quite.

The wind picks up and I turn my collar against it. Where I come from, it never quits, howling with the hound dogs, ancient music. Rocky



Mountain Gothic, can you see it? Barbed wire and willow trees. One state south, they strung up a man for singing about the lack of pie in the sky. The mine is going bankrupt again, and the beetles won't let the trees alone. Ghost towns get made the same way you go broke: *slowly and then all at once*.

(As a woman I have no country) girls are ghosts before we ever hit the grave. Written out of history, expected to relinquish our name, our body, our personhood. Call me bitter. Call me Cassandra. Call me slut. It's okay; it doesn't mean anything to me. Never thought I'd love a man, and maybe never will again. Momentarily thought it was a moral failing—imagine that! Caught between. Much too queer to be straight. Not quite queer enough to be gay (I have no country). To my right, the water weeps against the rock. To the left, a group of children plays, their voices carried to me on the wind:

*Merricat, said Constance, would you like a cup of tea?*

*Oh no, said Merricat, you'll poison me!*

*Merricat, said Constance, would you like to go to sleep?*

*Down in the boneyard nine feet deep!*

That's not really what they sing (they're not even singing; they're listening to Spotify, I think), but there's something attractive about that story, right? So suffocating, but also something attractive. Maybe not unless you've had your eye put out, and even that is a process. Inconclusive analysis. Cat stories always start the same. *My mother, who was the first cat, told me this*, they say. What Jonas said to Merricat, what mine says to me. Precious creatures, perfect predators. Easy loves. The tide is coming up and up and up. I saw the movie. It was okay, but doesn't do justice; never does, does it?

Eggs? No. I think I'm good on eggs. Though if you break one in half, you're left with two empty crowns or something like that. Pity about Cordelia. Is that how it always goes? Performance over substance? Is this how I loop back around to Instagram? Oh, hell. Goddamn influencers. Sounds like the kinda job you could have in a Lois Lowry story, no? Givers and keepers. Parasites. Selling diarrhea tea and skin bleach so you can be prettyfamousrich and happy! A terrible, wicked thing. Coins clatter in my pockets. Original sin. Useless, unproductive sin. Waters boil. All around the world, waters boil.

Tea! I'm out of peppermint. Told myself I'd remember. Mint will

grow just about anywhere, through anything. A hardy herb. Respectable. As a child with my mother, our knees in the dirt, we cleared the weeds to find a patch of it. Let it be. It earned its place. Never so natural as when in the dirt. Beneath fingernails. *Il faut cultiver notre jardin*. Lovely, holy worms. Lovely, holy bumblebees. What's the point if not to coexist? To take care of each other? Sometimes, I can't believe it. The way we chased precious metals to the ends of the earth. The ends of the earth. Ghost towns get made the same way you go broke.



# JE NE SAIS QUOI MEANS I DON'T KNOW WHAT

Kat Jackson

bird-bone fingers tracing treasure maps  
into the soft river sand. the streetlights  
flirt with the trees; trust them to  
translate the stars.

giving such gifts as feather-light kisses  
makes magic more attainable. those  
sheet-ghost eyes pierce straight  
through border lines.

little lapses in time cause euphoria; a  
bit of brilliance licked up as soon as it  
is wept; swept away by parallel  
tides hidden up high.

pleasure derived from shoulder blades,  
forgiveness, and freckles forming  
constellations, spelling out love  
stories translated by trees.

the streetlights swoon at the thought of  
river wet skin scattered with simple  
stars, glimmering with electric  
joy/eclectic savvy.

bird-bone fingers trace treasure maps  
into sand then into skin. shared  
brilliance, basically blessed. parallel  
tides wash over parallel shores. cast  
the lines out. share the softened  
signs of really human.

# FOUR FUCKS ANNE BONNY DID NOT GIVE AND ONE SHE DID

Libby Riddle

**A**nne Cormac did not give a fuck about decorum. Long before she became the West's most renowned female pirate, she could be found firing her father's pistols into the trunk of the weeping willow in their Charleston manor's backyard or picking fights with the sons of her wealthy neighbors. The cool grip of a pistol or a smirk knocked from a gentry boy's face was a wave crashing over the boiling pit inside her, filling in the lava's cracks and pores, cooling it to a heat that she could stand.

One night, the manor's English servant girl was being particularly irritating. Her Cockney accent grated on Anne's ears as she performed her kitchen duties. Anne was seated at the dining table attempting to balance a carving knife on her hand, and she simply could not focus with the girl blithering on about nothing. The third time her high-pitched whine caused Anne to drop the knife with a clatter, Anne snatched it up and stood from the table. She crossed the kitchen to where the servant girl was sitting on a stool scrubbing a cast-iron pot. It wasn't a conscious decision really. A gasp cut off the servant girl's chatter mid-sentence, followed by a thud as she slid from the stool to the floor. If Anne had known a carving knife to the back was all it would take to shut the girl up, she would have done it ages ago.

Anne Cormac did not give a fuck about her father's wishes. He was tireless in his attempt to relieve himself of Anne's company via her marriage to the closest suitable bachelor. Despite the allotment of eligible suitors in the greater Carolina colonies, he quickly discovered that it was difficult to marry off a girl known for her tenacity with a carving knife. All the better for Anne. Instead of attending society balls and tea parties that dulled her brain, she was free to wander the docks, where she could flirt with handsome sailors debarking from lengthy voyages during which they had longed for the company of a woman. One such sailor was John Bonny, young and gallant with hands roughed up from rope burn and saltwater. He had no reputation, no money, no future in her father's eyes, but he had something more valuable than any nobleman could give her. He got down on one knee, and instead of a ring, offered her a one-way



ticket on a ship leaving from the Port of Charleston at dawn. Without a thought for the colonies' expectations, she packed her bags, and eloped with John.

Anne Bonny did not give a fuck about her husband. John Bonny had served his purpose. He had been at the right place at the right time to whisk her away from her father and her life's tiresome socialite trajectory, but he had failed to deliver on his promise. John had turned from sailor to snitch, reporting on the activities of local pirates to Governor Rogers. Anne, not content to sit around waiting for her whistle-blower husband, took to spending her nights in the saloon where she drank and gambled with the very men John Bonny was chasing. Her fiery hair and fierier temper caught the attention of Calico Jack, the most dashing pirate south of St. Augustine. Jack liked that Anne could hold her liquor and give him a run for his money at stud poker. Anne liked Jack's ship. Jack offered John Bonny a handsome sum to divorce her, but his pride refused. John's inability to accept a good deal when it was offered was the final nail in his coffin. For the second time in her life, Anne boarded a ship in the dead of night headed due south to adventure.

Anne Bonny did not give a fuck about superstition. Pirate legend was that it was bad luck to have a woman aboard, but any man who objected to her presence would find himself thrown into the sea with a cutlass-sized hole in his back. The only other woman aboard, Mary Read, found a different solution. She masqueraded as a man, complete with a long frock coat and her very own tricorne hat. By day, Anne would fight by Mary's side, their backs pressed against each other as they gunned down enemy pirates and privateers too senseless to stay out of their way. After the battle, Anne and Mary would strip off their blood-soaked clothes and dress each other's wounds, recounting their best parries and most audacious stunts. When the two had drunk their share of looted rum, Anne would stumble back to Jack's quarters to spend her night in his bed, though more and more often she wished to be in Mary's.

Anne Bonny *did* give a fuck about Mary Read. Mary smoothed the edges of Anne's jagged soul with her crass jokes and the way she bumped Anne with her hip when she passed her in the berth. Before they went into battle, Mary would wish Anne luck and look her in the eyes, really look at her, like she saw beneath the bluster and arrogance to the girl who had been promised adventure over and over again and finally found it in a cross-dressing, cutlass-wielding Englishwoman upon the high seas.

As with most pirates, Anne and Mary's luck eventually ran out. Per-

haps Anne's former husband had finally mustered the courage to turn them in, or perhaps Governor Rogers had found them on his own, but pirate chasers were gaining on *The William* fast. Unfortunately for the pair, Calico Jack and his crew were so drunk from last night's raid they could not be roused into fighting.

With Governor Roger's fleet rapidly approaching, Mary shouted to them, "If there be a man among ye, come up and fight!" Anne punctuated her declaration by firing her pistol into the hold. Not a single man rose to their call to arms.

"Cowardly bastards," Anne said, retreating from her place at the entrance of the hold. "The whole lot of them."

Anne looked at Mary and saw an emotion written across her face she'd never seen before: fear. Steeling her nerves, she crossed the few feet separating her from Mary until their faces were inches from each other. "If not for this, every cowardly fellow would turn pirate." Anne could feel Mary's breath hot against her face. Mary broke their gaze to watch Anne's hand as she reached for her. Her fingers curled around Mary's waist as if she were about to pull her the rest of the way towards her. Instead, she released Mary's pistol from its holster and placed it in her hands. "Today we show them we, too, are fit for the sea."

The pair pivoted at the sound of a gangplank being lowered onto their starboard side. Governor Roger's crew poured onto the deck of *The William*, surrounding the women before they could even fire off their first round. Without another glance at each other, Anne and Mary set about cutting through the pirate chasers. The sailors were meant to take the women alive; Anne and Mary had no such orders. They shot straight until their pistols clicked empty, at which point they stabbed and slashed at any man that dared approach them. They fought like a cornered animal, desperate and wild, but as one creature. Mary hit a man in the temple with the hilt of her sword and Anne stole the knife from his sheath while he was dazed. Anne jammed her knee between another man's legs and sent him stumbling backward right into Mary's cutlass. Nonetheless, Roger's crew outnumbered Anne and Mary twenty to two.

As the women tired, the pirate chasers began to get the better of them. One man wrestled the cutlass from Mary's hands, and another sent Anne to her knees with a well-placed blow to her stomach. The pair kicked and bucked against their captors as they tried to escort them off the ship. The crew was forced to bind and gag them after Mary bit one of them and Anne clawed another across the face.

They were locked in the brig and brought to Jamaica for trial along with the rest of the now-sober crew of the immutable Calico Jack. While the court debated the morality of executing two women on charges of piracy, Anne watched Mary languish in the cell next door. A slash across Mary's stomach—a gift from Governor Rogers himself—had turned green and thick lines of infection climbed up her torso. Sparing no thought for her cowardly lover waiting to be hanged like a dog, Anne could do nothing as Mary grew weaker with every day. She lay upon a straw pallet, her eyelids fluttering and her fingers stretching for Anne or her lost cutlass. Anne whispered to Mary through the bars of their cells tales of their adventures, how she had forgotten Jack as soon as Mary sauntered aboard the deck of *The William*, how Mary had been to her what no man ever had: a friend. Countless men had failed her—her father, her husband, her captain and his crew—but one woman never did, even in death.





# PIRATES

Jordan Stow

your marriage  
was sailing  
upon tempest sea,  
dancing hate  
trampling me,

can I really be blamed  
for my disdain of the sea,  
with such pretend captains,  
like He and She







# CONVERGE

Emily Greenlund

Felix Adkins wasn't dead, though to passersby he probably looked it. He lay beneath the gnarled branches of a sugar maple, flat on his back, the toes of his leather work boots pointed toward the cloud-ribbed sky. Hands cupping the place just over his heart, breathing deep and painstakingly slow, Felix imagined himself expanding into the dark place behind his closed eyelids.

Today was his eighty-third birthday. Birthdays had long since lost their shine. Standing naked in front of the foggy bathroom mirror that morning, Felix stared at himself. He watched his mouth form the shape of *eighty-three*. He watched himself blink, eyes lined with creases he had watched grow deeper each year, and then he leaned in, bracing himself against the porcelain sink with his palms, arms shaky, and stared into his own eyes. Eighty-three was absurd, he thought. At least his eyes looked the same.

Felix was the groundskeeper at Sunset Memorial Park Cemetery. Each day he awoke facing the same cherry wood window, early morning light the color of butterscotch or Crest toothpaste or tomato soup leaking in through the blinds. He would reach out to find the old matted cat curled on the pillow next to him, one eye the color of coffee and the other white, and the cat, Melvin, would purr as he rested a hand between its ears. He had never liked cats all that much, but at least it was a body with atoms and cells and blood vessels and nerve endings. At least it could feel him reach out.

The walk from his house to the cemetery was only two miles. Thirty years earlier he would have made it in twenty minutes, but eighty-three demanded patience. Eighty-three was the cat, purring with one eye closed. Eighty-three was the moon, toenail-shaped and still wide awake as the sun claimed her place in the sky. Someone should tell that damn moon to go to sleep, Felix thought as he shuffled slowly down the sidewalk.

He wasn't melancholic, though he had been for much of his life. As he made his way down the long winding road skirting the fence of the

cemetery that morning, a journey he had made hundreds of times, Felix was merely the ache of old joints, toes curled inside his boots, kneecaps creaking. This morning, more than anything else, he was tired.

He began at the front gates with hedge clippers. He liked to think he was their caretaker, that the hedges needed him as much as he needed them. The day was still new as he circled the hedges, sunlight leaking through the thick spider web-like branches. Next, he tended the flower beds, bending over with a watering can. Mostly tulips, mostly yellow and pink. He knelt down, knees on the cobblestone path, and reached out to pull the weeds up and away from the flower stems, roots and all. *Thank you*, he imagined them saying, *we can breathe again*. The flowers needed him, too.

At eleven o'clock, Felix wandered through the rounded paths, over the hills, past the red-haired girl sitting atop the lawnmower, motor off and neck bent at a ninety-degree angle with her eyes on a cellphone that rested in both her hands. He didn't know the girl's name, but he had seen her every few days for months now. He liked that about the job; they felt each other's presence without needing to acknowledge it.

Rounding a corner—rows of headstones stretching out, seemingly endless, in every direction, and sunlight patchy on the grass—Felix approached the tree. He liked this spot the most, though he had tried to find others. A single stone rose out of the grass beneath the sugar maple tree. It was small, shorter than his knees, but it was black marble and reflected the color of the sky, and it belonged to a woman named Rose. Rose had been his wife's name. *His* Rose had died nearly a hundred years after the Rose who lay beneath him, but he liked knowing that they shared the name and he figured the dead were all lonely. *His* Rose had been cremated twenty years ago now, her ashes thrown into the Baltic Sea off the Southern coast of Sweden. He had stood barefoot in the shallow water, watching her ashes become one with the wind and waves. For a second, he could have sworn they took the shape of her figure, curly hair windblown and arms wide open, facing away from him, but then she was gone.

He lowered himself to the ground slowly, bones protesting, and then laid back in the grass with Rose's gravestone a few inches from the top of his head. Closing his eyes, he filled his lungs with air. As he breathed out, he imagined his body merging with the earth beneath him, imagined every piece of him touching everything else. He had once tried to explain this strange meditation to Rose, tried telling her that it wasn't morbid at

all, that he was *listening for the heartbeat at the center of everything*. She had only laughed, smacking him on the shoulder with a dish towel and rolling her eyes beneath silver bangs, eyes shining.

Missing her was different than it had been twenty years before. Then, it was like rain so heavy you couldn't see your own hands. Like swallowing broken glass and inhaling sawdust, completely and utterly consuming. He no longer felt so raw. He dreamt of her often, green eyes speckled with yellow and a laugh the color of Tuesday morning, but his body was slowing down and he was becoming much more aware of the simplicity, the serenity of lying beneath a sugar maple and melting into the grass for a while. Soon he'd pull himself back to his feet. The flowers and the hedges and that old cat Melvin needed him, after all, and at eighty-three that was more than enough.

Georgia O'Connell was over the moon. After nearly four months, she was finally just an hour away from completing the three hundred hours of community service she had been sentenced to. Sick of lawn mowing was an understatement. She hated the way the tractor mower made her body go numb. She hated the rows of gravestones, hated the randomness of their placement, hated the silence inside her head when she wore the earplugs. She thought she was the epitome of a modern-day Sisyphus, chained to a lawnmower and locked inside the gates of a cemetery five days a week. All. Summer. Long.

She was sitting on the hard plastic seat of the lawnmower, smack-dab in the center of the two square miles that made up Sunset Memorial Park Cemetery. She had mowed in a spiral today, starting at the edge of the fence by the funeral home and circling around for nearly two hours before deciding to take a ten-minute break next to an above-ground crypt with the words *Jim's Skybox* engraved in the stone. Her ears were tired of earplugs and her hands felt like the static screen on the old box TV she grew up with. She was almost done for the day, but her mom wasn't supposed to pick her up until noon, so she figured she'd waste some time before reaching the center and returning the mower to the equipment shed for the last time. She was *so* close.

Just after eleven o'clock, as she scrolled through photos of kids from school wearing swimsuits and drinking from red Solo cups on her Instagram feed, Georgia watched through her periphery as the old man passed her on the path and then disappeared over the hill. He made her glad she was only seventeen, that she wouldn't spend another minute inside

the gates of Sunset after today. Why he *chose* to work in a cemetery when he was already so close to joining the dead was beyond her. She hated the girls from school, laughing with their arms around each other even though there was probably nothing worth belly-laughing about when the photo was actually taken. She knew this, but it still made her stomach burn to see the pictures.

Summer seventeen was supposed to be the best one yet. A month before school let out, Georgia had been with the same girls who were now frozen in her Instagram feed at Michael Bensen's lake house, wearing a silky red crop-top and drinking raspberry Kool-Aid mixed with Everclear from a silver water bottle. She didn't like the taste much, but Shay was next to her, long blonde hair pulled up in a messy bun and eyes lined with black and silver, and even though she wasn't talking to Georgia, Shay's hand rested next to her thigh on the step, pinky just barely touching her bare skin. Shay had asked Georgia to help her steal the golden ball from the roof of the conservatory near the high school that night. The idea was absolutely insane, but her eyes had been so *intoxicating*, her lips cherry red, and she had held Georgia's hand when she'd asked her behind the boat shed just off the beach, her thumb tracing tiny circles in Georgia's palm. How could she say no?

"Michael bet me four hundred dollars I couldn't get away with it," Shay explained, her brown eyes shining, "and if you help me tonight I'll give you two hundred."

Georgia was hesitant. The conservatory roof was a glass dome with a tiny ladder winding up to the golden ball that rested at the very top, and she was deathly afraid of heights. She opened her mouth to respond, still unsure what she was going to say, but suddenly Shay's lips were pressed against hers and she could taste her strawberry lip balm and all she could think was *oh my God, Shay Morgan is actually kissing me*. In the three years they'd been friends, Georgia had imagined the moment a billion times, but none of her daydreams even came close to the full-body thrill of the real thing.

Shay pulled away, her lips curling into a trademark Shay smile—no teeth, eyelashes fluttering—and she grabbed Georgia's other hand. "You don't even have to do any climbing. Just be my getaway driver."

Georgia was so stunned by the kiss, Shay's lip balm still smeared on her lips, that she could only nod.

Georgia sat by Shay on the back porch steps and forced the Kool-Aid down, the bass beat of music from the basement below them shaking the

deck. She wasn't sure whether the knot in her stomach was from nerves about what they were about to do or from the kiss, but she figured drinking would solve both. The backyard was filled with people from school, most of them lingering near the keg that sat atop a fishing cooler just off the deck. Shay was laughing with Ryla—a girl with long black hair and blood-red nails she'd met from the rival high school—while Georgia went to the bathroom inside. As she watched Ryla rest a hand on Shay's shoulder, Georgia finished the contents of her water bottle. Georgia was used to watching Shay talk to other girls, but that night is stung more than it usually did.

Ryla leaned over to whisper something in Shay's ear and then turned and disappeared into the crowd, black hair billowing out behind her, and suddenly Shay was grabbing Georgia's hand and pulling her up off the steps. She didn't realize how drunk she was until they were next to her mom's blue van and Shay was kissing her again. Had they walked around the house? Through it? She wasn't sure, but the strawberry taste was back and the most gorgeous girl in the entire world had one hand on her cheek and another in her hair and she could have sworn the entire universe was inside her chest.

Georgia couldn't remember unlocking her mom's van or starting the ignition, but she remembered watching Shay climb out of the passenger side when she pulled up next to the towering conservatory and parked in the shadow of a large tree. Georgia watched Shay jog across the field and then disappear around the edge of the conservatory, but she had no idea how long she waited in the car, engine running. She remembered staring at herself in the rearview mirror, tilting it down to see her whole face. She remembered smiling at her reflection with unfocused eyes, remembered a breathy laugh escaping her lips, remembered *remembering* where Shay was and searching the dark outside the window for her silhouette. And then suddenly, Shay was back in the van, yelling "drive!", and as Georgia stepped on the gas pedal and peeled away from the curb she realized that Shay had her arms wrapped around a golden ball the size of a cantaloupe. Shay was laughing hysterically, yelling even though the windows were closed. Georgia couldn't understand what Shay was yelling as they sped away from the conservatory, but she yelled with her, pounding her hands against the ceiling of the car and laughing in triumph, steering with her knees.

They had made it down the road and past the high school before the sirens began directly behind them, flashing lights filling the van with



light. Georgia heard Shay swear, saw her shove the golden ball between the front seats and into the back of the van, but her memory stopped there. Georgia woke up alone four hours later on a metal cot in a room with no windows, head pounding.

Georgia and Shay were each charged with trespassing, though they were given different court dates. Georgia received a DUI along with being an accessory to a felony crime, and Shay was charged with a felony. Georgia spent the night in the temporary jail cell, staring at the chalk-white ceiling and attempting to piece her memory back together with little success, and in the four months since then she had relived the same memory fragments over and over and over while she steered the mower through the rows of graves at Sunset.

Her house arrest was coming to a close at the end of August, and she had her last meeting with her probation officer tomorrow afternoon. Georgia was more than relieved to be so close to freedom, but she still hadn't escaped the nagging ache she felt each time she thought about Shay. The last time she'd seen her was in the car that night, police lights flashing. Georgia had written her letters when her mom took away her phone for the rest of that month, but they lived in the drawer beneath her bed, collecting dust. She knew from kids at school that Shay was far away, that her family sent her to Massachusetts for the rest of high school, but she hadn't reached out to Georgia all summer and Georgia was settling into the realization that she probably never would.

At eleven thirty, Georgia started the lawn mower and headed back through the cemetery toward the parking lot for the last time. A woman wearing dark green pants was kneeling in front of a tombstone, her shoulders shaking, and as Georgia drove past she realized that the woman was actually laughing. As Georgia stared, the woman looked up. For a second their eyes connected. Georgia felt like she had suddenly invaded the woman's privacy, seeing the wild hysteria in her eyes even from twenty yards away atop the mower, and she looked away quickly. *Thank God* she would never have to come back again.

After parking the mower inside the shed near the cemetery gates and getting the woman at the front desk of the funeral home to sign off on her community service hours, Georgia sat on the curb and waited for her mom's car to pull in. She bit her nails and tried not to think about Shay. She felt lighter than she had since that night four months ago, and she tried to tell herself that she would only feel better with each day that passed.

She climbed into the passenger side door of her mom's blue van when she pulled into the parking lot around noon, and then she watched as the cemetery disappeared from sight through the window for the last time, thinking she'd be happy if she never mowed another lawn for the rest of her life.

Addy Drake hadn't been back to his grave in almost two years. It felt strange to be walking through Sunset Memorial Park Cemetery again after so much time. As she followed one of the many winding cement paths away from the parking lot, hands deep in the pockets of her wind jacket and shoulders tense, she thought the trees looked more full, more *alive* than they had when she had been a regular visitor. Then again, she hadn't paid much attention to things like trees back then.

She had been waiting for a sign from the universe that it was time to return for a while now. She didn't know what she was looking for but she trusted that it would come. That morning, at the cafe across from her house before driving to work, she had finally gotten the sign she'd been waiting for for so long.

She was more exhausted than normal that morning, her eyelids falling as she stood under the showerhead, the water not quite warm enough but not daring to mess with the finicky handle. Too many times she'd attempted to turn it up just to find herself wrapped in the shower curtain, attempting to escape the scalding water as she frantically tried to turn the handle back towards cold. She was ready to move out of the old bungalow she'd occupied for too many years now, and that morning she mouthed a silent *thank you* at the grimy ceiling tiles in the shower because in just three weeks she'd be leaving for good.

The walls felt weighed down as she passed through the hallway wrapped in a towel, no longer adorned with photographs but nails still sticking out where they had once been. He had died nearly seven years ago but she had kept most of the photos up, feeling like removing his face from the frames was some kind of metaphorical murder. *Fallacy of the heart*—that's what he would have called it. And so the pictures stayed, his eyes watching her from the walls as she had attempted to begin again, this time without him.

She got dressed with the lights off. She liked that leaving the lights off made the act of dressing more *body* than *mind*. She chose the green pants (corduroy) because they felt soft in her hands. Underwear (silk), bra (also silk), socks (polyester), then the pants, soft as she pulled them over

her legs in the dim blue light of the sunrise through the small window in her closet. She chose the white shirt because it felt like running water in her hands. Then the wind jacket, the black boots. The lights in the house were off as she stepped through the front door and locked it behind her, daylight beginning to spill through the streets like coffee creamer.

As she crossed the street, she realized she had once again forgotten the ring on the dresser in her closet. She wouldn't see him today because he was away for work until Saturday night, but she still felt guilt gnawing away at her stomach as she felt her naked ring finger with her thumb. Why couldn't she remember the ring? Didn't she love him? She did love him. Without a doubt, with the same certainty she knew her own name, she wanted to marry him. Stepping into the cafe, she reminded herself of this certainty, that the ring had nothing to do with her desire to spend the rest of her life with him. *It's just a ring.*

She ordered her usual—large iced Americano, no cream—and the barista's eyebrows flew upward.

Reaching into a minifridge behind the register, the barista, a small girl with wire-rimmed glasses and a tattoo of a moth covering her forearm, pulled out an already-made Americano.

"A guy came in less than five minutes ago," she told Addy, "and he ordered this and then left without grabbing it. It's free if you're okay with the melty ice."

Addy thanked the girl as she took the free drink and then left the cafe again. She whispered another tiny *thank you* to the brightening sky as she crossed the street once more and climbed into the driver seat of her 1998 Subaru outback. She buckled her seat belt and then reached down to grab the coffee from the cup holder beside her. As she lifted it to her lips, she caught sight of the name written on the side of the plastic to-go cup and felt her chest go cold. *His name.*

She stared at the cup for a moment before reaching down to unzip her purse and pull out her phone and call the speech center office number.

Molly answered after two rings. "Lily Lake Elementary school, how can I help you?"

"Molly," Addy said, "It's Addy. I'm so sorry I didn't call sooner, but I woke up with a nasty stomach bug and I won't be coming in today."

Molly assured her it was no problem and told her to drink some tea and spend the day in bed.

Taking a shaky sip of the coffee, Addy started the ignition and pulled

away from the sidewalk in front of her house. She had been waiting for a sign, and she knew in her bones that this was it. As she merged onto the highway, headed towards the cemetery, she opened up the glove box and pulled out a small red bag, tucking into the pocket of her jacket.

She held the red bag in the palm of her left hand as she made her way through the rows of gravestones, sunlight tie-dying the freshly-mown grass as it filtered through the trees.

The night after they buried him, she had returned to the stone and sat with her back resting against it and watched stars spill across the sky like salt above her. She stayed there like that, chin turned up, until the sun began to wake again, thinking, *I'll never meet someone else, I'm thirty-five and I'll spend the rest of my life mourning him.*

As she approached his headstone nearly seven years later, she felt a laugh bubbling up in her chest. She knelt down in front of it, eyes blurry with sudden tears, and she reached out to trace the name engraved in stone.

When they had met at twenty-six, she thought the name Gabriel Richmond was the most beautiful sounding name in the history of the world. The years were filled with barefoot dancing and microwave popcorn and vintage sweaters with holes in the sleeves, and though they had barely scraped by, there was always music playing through the kitchen stereos. She had loved him with a ferocity that terrified her, and when she received the call from the hospital just short of ten years later that he had died of a sudden heart attack, that they were still trying to determine the cause, she had watched the pieces of her world fall away through their bedroom window, the phone falling to the floor at her feet.

Kneeling in front of his gravestone now, Addy traced each letter of his name with her pointer finger just as she had a million times before.

"I met someone," she choked out, gasping in a breath, "I met someone and I'm getting married in three weeks and we're moving to the coast."

She felt strange saying the words out loud, but as they left her mouth she felt her whole body exhale. She began to laugh then, at first a strangled sounding cry and then a full-chest laugh, tears still spilling from her eyes as she pressed her hand against the stone.

She continued to laugh as she became aware of the buzz of a lawn mower driving down the path towards the parking lot. She caught the eyes of the driver for a moment, a young girl with hair the color of butternut squash, but then the girl looked away and continued to drive,

leaving Addy alone at the gravesite. Was she crying or laughing? She felt hysterical and unleashed as she reached up to wipe her nose with the sleeve of her wind jacket.

Addy reached in her pocket and pulled out the red bag. As she untied the opening, she realized it was the first time she'd opened it in seven years. She reached inside and pulled out the ring, a small thing made of guitar string that they had chosen together, and she slipped it on her ring finger for a second. It felt strange seeing the old ring. Her hand was much older now, forty years of wrinkles creasing her knuckles, and the ring looked so much rustier than she remembered it being.

"I miss you," she said to the stone as her laughter faded away. *Fallacy of the heart* once again came to mind. An image of Gabriel, dark curls brushing his eyelashes as he chopped onions, hips swaying to the jazz coming through the kitchen speakers.

As she placed the ring atop the gravestone, once more resting her hand over the letters, she felt as if the world outside the window had finally stopped falling away, the pieces no longer collecting on the sidewalks and streets like dead leaves. As she stood up, Addy whispered one last *thank you*, this time directed at the ground beneath her feet.

Returning to her car, Addy reached in her pocket for her cellphone and called him. The phone was ringing as she pulled out of the parking lot. As she passed through the cemetery gates, she caught sight of a man wearing a button-down shirt, one button off the whole way down, holding his phone up in front of him in search of cell service, face red with frustration. For a moment she wondered if she should stop, roll down her window and ask the stranger if he needed a ride somewhere, but then Henry answered.

"I love you," she said in place of her usual greeting. Thinking of the ring still sitting on the dresser, Addy turned out of the parking lot and passed the man without a second glance, the cemetery quickly falling away in the rearview mirror.







# HOME COMING

Jasper Vanspoore

She came from the east.  
Morning sun,  
hot summer sap,  
dripped over her shoulders,  
down a long dark braid  
trailing behind her feet.  
The warmth of auburn hair woven  
thin, winding lines into  
soft, wet earth.  
Her fingertips trailed across the sky,  
pricked swollen clouds,  
and rain fell.

The rivers followed her westward.

A place appeared,  
five waters coalescing into one.  
and she stopped,  
heavy bellied and sway backed.  
and she lay,  
knees bent and neck arched  
and the midwives came.

One from the south:

she came with red stones etched into her sides, resin burned in her palm.  
hot wind billowed, swirling flaxen hair  
tangled shards of lightning searing canyons of  
ochre   serpentine   and granite.  
She followed them up.

One from the north:

she came with snowmelt streaming over her hips,  
sparrow-red cedar woven with raven blue hair  
carried pillows of emerald bedding,  
her soft footsteps mirrored by stardust  
leading her way.

The midwives came  
and the eastern woman labored.  
Water broke  
flooding  
until a deep well formed  
and silty murk turned to grass,  
soft autumn hazy golden.  
The skies quieted.

Children came,  
tiny fists clutching camas bitterroot  
balsam    cous.  
Limbs of larch and pine.  
And through the valleys  
scattered

thousands of years  
later  
we came in the afterbirth,  
my grandmother, my mother  
myself.

It is fall and  
after many years  
I have just come home,  
nestled at the bend of her knee  
where pine trees tumble off into piles at her feet.  
I see the midwives still, broad and proud like she is:  
the mountain in the south, and the mountain in the north.  
the river still flows.  
Today it was colored with clay.



I came home  
but it looks different than in my dreams,  
I see rivers of asphalt  
and rusting metal snakes through the valley.  
charcoal coats the golden hillside,  
the soft spot of her inner thigh.

At night I lay in bed.  
The lonely howl of the city  
seeping through my window,  
I try desperately to recognize her voice,  
to remember her story,  
desperate to know  
if I am a worthy daughter.

And then,  
looking across the valley  
in golden evening.  
I bury my hands into the  
soft, wet earth,  
trailing my fingertips through the soil,  
I remember what it means to create rivers  
and I remember

what it means to come home.

# ROSES FOR AMELIA

Libby Riddle

**T**he first time I walked past your little garden, it was spring. Your street is a little out of my way, but the blooms caught my eye from the corner of Main Street and Magnolia. Amelia loves flowers so I knew she would want me to go and see them. I turned on Magnolia and ambled toward your house. The roses were practically bursting from the box beneath your window. Yellow, pink, and blue petals like tiny starbursts before my eyes. I had never seen blue roses before. I loved them immediately, and I knew she would, too. But the roses were not mine, so I hesitated. You had plenty of them, but they were so perfect that it seemed a great crime to deprive you of a single one. I also knew that the blue ones were the same color as Amelia's eyes. I realized then that I couldn't leave without one.

I've stolen one rose from you every week for the past six months. I'm sorry; I didn't mean for it to become a pattern. But you always seemed to replace the one I took and then some by the time I returned the next week. Even when spring turned to summer and summer to fall, there were blue roses in your box. You must be a truly excellent gardener.

You nearly caught me one day in June. It was Amelia's birthday. I had taken nearly five roses—too many, I know—but they were especially vibrant that week. As I plucked the fifth rose from the dirt, I saw you approaching the very same corner from where I had first glimpsed the flowers. I ran from your garden in shame before you turned onto Magnolia. I never took more than one rose after that week.

Until today. I was lost in thought when I turned onto Magnolia. A man on the corner with an acoustic guitar had been playing Amelia's favorite song, and I was caught up with whistling the melody. I didn't notice you watching from your front window until I was already stepping into your yard.

I froze with one foot on the sidewalk and one placed irrevocably on your grass.

Your figure disappeared from the window and my stomach filled with dread. I was afraid you would yell at me or call the police. You would

have had every right. I had stolen from you. But you did not do either of those things. Instead, your old wooden door unlatched, and you stepped onto your porch. You beckoned me closer as you descended the steps. I forced the foot lagging behind on the sidewalk to join its brother on the grass. You gestured toward me again, and my body obeyed, walking stiffly in your direction. Soon, I had joined you in front of your flower box.

“I know you’re stealing my roses.”

I said nothing because there was no denying it. I couldn’t meet your gaze; I was so ashamed. You gripped my chin and tipped it forward so I was looking at your face. It was stern but not cold. In fact, you have lovely laugh lines around your eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, looking away. I couldn’t muster anything more. I studied the roses intently. They were something to look at that weren’t your knowing eyes, but really my hungry gaze took them in because I knew this would be the last time I would ever marvel at their beauty.

Startling me, you dropped onto the dirt in front of me. You plucked a blue rose from the earth. Then a yellow one. A pink one. An orange one. After gathering around a dozen roses, you stood abruptly and thrust the completed bouquet into my arms. I’m sure I only gaped at you. It was perhaps the loveliest thing I had ever laid eyes on. Except for Amelia, of course. I wished I could have eloquently expressed my gratitude, but you must understand that I was overwhelmed by your kindness.

“Take this,” you said with no room for argument.

I managed a breathless “Thank you” and was ready to repay your gift by quitting your presence and never trespassing on your property again when you stated, “I want to see this girl.” I simply stared at you. “She must be quite the beauty for you to commit such high crimes as flower theft in her name.” Your eyes sparkled with humor, and I felt my cheeks flush. You’re really quite observant.

“Her name is Amelia,” I breathed, flushing deeper. I closed my eyes and inhaled the sweet scent of the roses to calm my racing heart.

“Amelia . . .” You said her name deliberately as if testing how it felt on your tongue. “A beautiful name for a beautiful girl,” you decided. “Yes, I must see her.” I tried to protest but there was no dissuading you. You’re incredibly stubborn; did you know? You took my arm, though I had not offered it, and we started down the street.

Now you’re walking with me down Magnolia and Chestnut, across Main Street to Dogwood. Step for step, stride for stride; we’re synchro-

nized except your footfalls have more bounce than mine. You know each one brings you closer to the joy of seeing Amelia.

I'm afraid you'll be disappointed when we arrive at the cemetery.



# WHEN SHE WAS 7, IT WAS THE FIRST TIME HER MOTHER SCREAMED AT HER DAD IN THE LIVING ROOM ON VALENTINE'S DAY BECAUSE HE FORGOT FLOWERS

Emily Solberg

and the janitor still drops his broom every time i walk by  
and i never cease to freeze like the glaciers that never stop

moving because our earth is its own radiator  
and we can't stop it from warming itself since we are unable to show our love

to the people who sit around the dinner table  
and stare at their canned green beans swimming in the juice

that fills up the pond on the opposite street from her bedroom window  
that killed her kid brother because he didn't know how to hold himself up

when the rocks got too heavy to hold in his weak arms, yet he always carried on  
the beat of the drums that still sit in the basement of my father's house

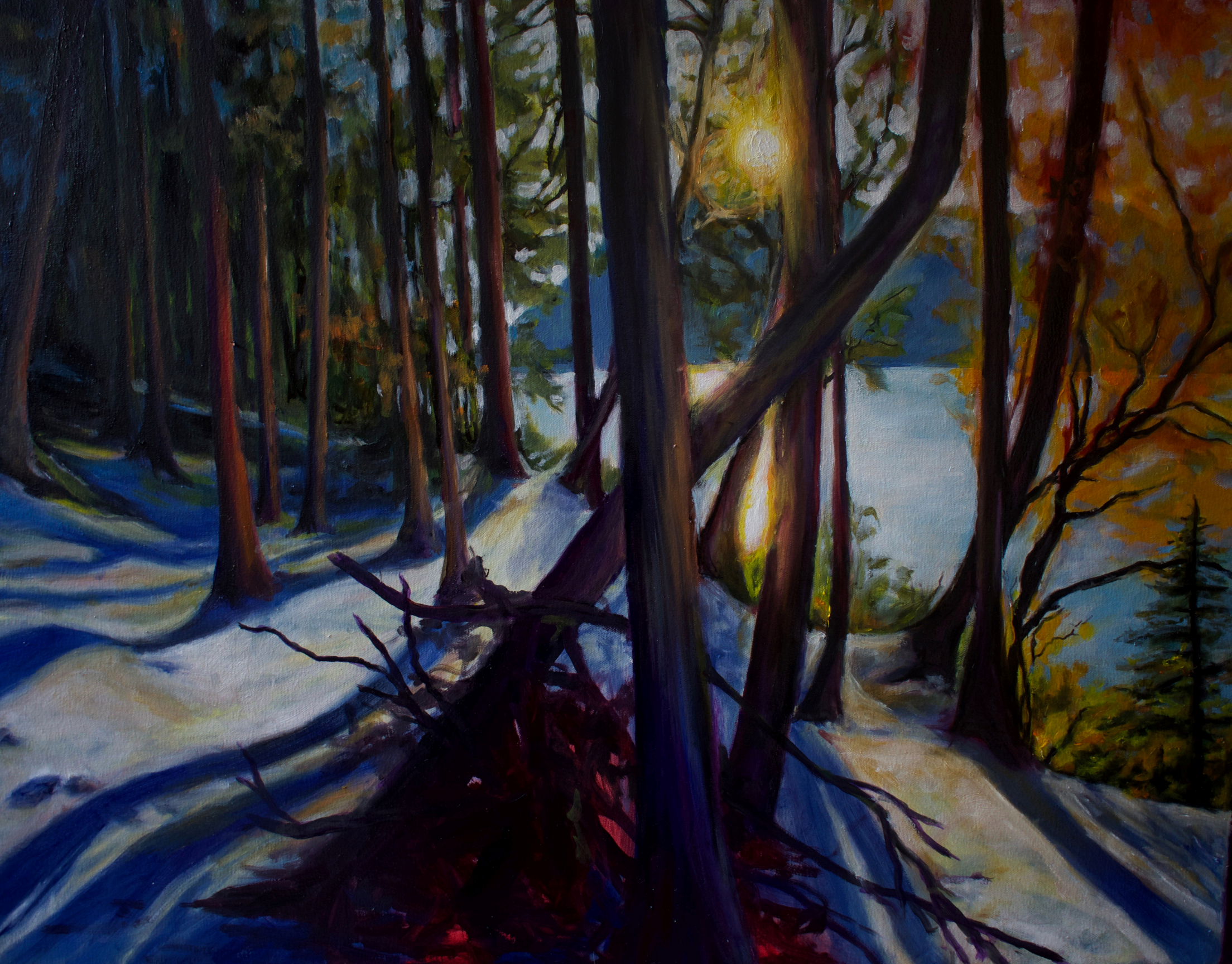
where the water drips  
down my arm but up my leg.

and she wears the jeans that turn her hands  
blue like the monday she can see on her face

when he doesn't come home before eight  
because the table is set for three but she thinks

he's sitting on the end of another table  
set for two.







# CLOCKWORK

Kynzee Mann

*Tik. Tik. Tik.*

Robert's eyes darted upwards, making contact with the smooth dome hung crooked on the wall. His sunken face took in every twitch caused by the moving hands. It was a rather mundane clock. A black ring with black hands and black numbers. The small red hand counting the seconds is what Robert fixated on. He felt it mocked him. Robert sat at a square wooden table covered in a plain white tablecloth. He clenched his jaw; calloused hands clutched the handle of a bread knife so tightly, it would surely leave a mark for hours.

The faded smell of cooked chicken hung over the small apartment. The actual bird rested surrounded by chopped carrots and potatoes, soggy from bathing in the broth for too long. Robert's eyes followed a bead of condensation as it slipped down an estranged glass, the ice having melted long ago. He snuck a glance at the time again, but not even a minute had passed since he last checked. He looked around the room, and took in the brown cupboards and atrocious yellow wallpaper. When he first moved in he hated everything about this place, but she had loved it. She had desperately wanted to decorate it, and after weeks of begging, Robert had given in. He regretted it now when he made eye contact with a small fox figurine. Its sharp eyes bore into his own, a knowing smile on its face.

*Tik. Tik. Tik.*

Plates and silverware rattled as Robert's forehead met the edge of the table. He found the pain helped soothe him for a moment and made his head feel a bit more clear. Robert lifted his head, and dropped it, once again the force caused the glass and metal on the table to shuffle and collide. The pain caused spots and shadows to flash behind his closed eyelids. He sat for a moment and watched the mirage of colors dance around his darkened vision. Once the pain had subsided, he considered doing it again. However, when he made the effort to lift his head he couldn't seem to find the strength. Robert opened his eyes and the faded brown carpet came into focus. Robert observed a quarter, pressed underneath one of the legs of the chair. He had put it there months ago, after she



complained of the tipping motion making her uncomfortable. *Robert, it drives me crazy, just fix it will you?* And so he did. Maybe not how she would have liked, but it worked for him.

*Tik. Tik. Tok.*

Robert's head whipped up, the weakness he felt before gone in a moment. The deeper click of the clock indicated a full minute having passed. He stood up and rushed to where the front door resided, only a few feet away from the table. He took caution not to slam into the door, for Robert would hate to startle her by causing a commotion. Gently as he could, he leaned forward and met his eye to the peephole. The familiar filth of the complex hallway filled his vision. The white corridor was empty, not a soul in sight. He waited a moment, his breath coming and going in short bursts.

Robert felt acrimony fill his chest, an acidic burn clawed at the back of his throat. With shaking hands, he found the gold chain hanging between the door and wall and slid the lock off. He grabbed the handle and pulled the door open. He tried his best not to swing it too violently, nervous that she would appear on the other side at any moment. He strolled into the hallway, looking first down the direction of the elevator, the way she always came. Silence turned and greeted him with a smile. Robert did not smile back. Instead, he rotated himself to face the opposite end of the hall, which he knew only led to more rooms. An open window sent a cool breeze prancing around him, and he smelled the city on its breath. Robert turned back to face the direction of the elevator. He took a deep breath and tried to reason with himself, "I'll wait one more second. She'll be here. Just one more second."

*Tik. Tik. Tik.*

Even from the hallway he could hear that damn clock. Its ticking filled his head, reaching every crease of his brain, every corner of his mind. Robert's muscles felt stiff, he clenched one hand to his heart as if he could stop the barrage of emotions erupting throughout his body. His jaw was tight, and he shut his eyes. He took a deep breath, and felt the ache of resentment deep in his chest. He spun around and stomped back into his apartment. He locked the door back up, he didn't want her to know how desperate he was for her. He made his way back to the table and plopped into his chair.

His eyes bounced over the meal he had spent hours preparing. He didn't know why he was so worried. Of course she was coming, he had done so much for her! He had researched different recipes and the right

spices to use. For God's sake, he had even made broth from scratch! He had gone to her favorite bakery, bought her favorite pie: it was key-lime. He didn't even like key-lime. He had decorated, too. His grandmother's crystal, his father's china, and in the center of the table were a dozen red roses standing in a vase he knew she liked. He always thought it was dumb and old. *It's vintage Robert, it's coming back!* It didn't matter if he liked it or not, Robert bought it because she thought it was beautiful.

*Tik. Tik. Tik.*

The clock was her idea too. *It's so soothing, isn't it?* There was nothing soothing about that goddamn clock. It ticked away at him, day after day, poking and prodding like a bully to a kid.

*Tik. Tik. Tik.*

Everything he did, he did for her. He decorated, he learned to cook, he got rid of his favorite recliner. He had a cat once, it was his best friend, but she was allergic so the cat had to go. He would lay in front of a train for her, *so why the hell wasn't she here?*

*Tik. Tik. Tok.*

Robert slammed his hands down on the table. He planted his feet and stood, causing the chair behind him to fly back. The walls of the small apartment played ball with the resounding *bang* of wood on tile. He pulled his lips into a wide grin, his crooked yellow teeth displayed. He grabbed the simple white tablecloth in both of his hands and, with one big pull, everything flew off the table and crashed into the floor. Plates and crystal shattered, the shards found rest deep in the stained carpet. The roses scattered, glass and petals mingled making the room look like a murder scene. Robert watched in sick satisfaction as the chicken tumbled across the room. Water and wine painted the table cloth until it resembled a modern art piece he once saw with her. *I really feel this one, don't you Robert?* No, he hadn't felt anything for the painting and he certainly didn't feel anything for the ruined cloth now reclining peacefully on the floor.

*Tik. Tik. Tik.*

He grabbed the fallen chair and placed it back next to the table. It wobbled a bit, the quarter no longer supporting the front leg. Robert lifted his foot and placed it in the center of the seat. He pulled himself up, and swung his other foot down on the table. His knee made an awful popping noise as he hoisted himself up onto the wooden furniture. He took a moment to appreciate the chaos that now surrounded the table before turning back to the task at hand. When Robert faced his tormen-

tor, though, he met his own eyes instead. Pale skin with pale hair and pale eyes. His cheeks are sunken and sagged. He shouldn't look this old. When did he get this old? He reached for the crooked clock, and lifted it up off the nail. He gripped it so tightly that his knuckles started turning white. He felt that if he's not careful, it would pop up and get away from him. With the clock in his hands, Robert thought the ticking would be unbearable but somehow it seemed softer. Slower, too. He realized that it must be what she was talking about when she said it soothed her. He almost found himself feeling pity for the clock, but it was quickly overtaken by enmity. The clock was like a dog that bites then cowers in fear. He could almost see the clock whining, hiding its tail deep between its legs. He would not be bitten again.

*Tik. Tik. Tik.*

Robert knew what needed to be done. He sat down on the table and slid to the edge so his legs dangled over. With the clock in one hand, he used the other to push himself off with. His knees locked, which caused him to stumble forwards. He lost a slipper in the process of regaining his balance, but it doesn't register. His mind was obsessing, his salvation the only thought in his mind. He careened towards the window sitting patiently on the wall. Robert took his free hand and pushed the frame out. He grunted in frustration when he was met with resistance, and noticed as the lock acted coy.

He never locked the window, he lived on the ninth floor, for God's sake. It was her that always locked it. *You never know!* Was what she used to justify herself. Robert ground his teeth in newfound resentment. He leaned over and pulled the lock open. He then pushed on the frame once again. It slid over with a groan and a wave of air flooded the room. The dazzling lights and metal mountains would normally have brought awe to Robert's mind. He doesn't waste time enjoying it now, though. Instead he pushed at the screen between him and the city. It popped off easily, and he watched as it fell to the street below. He leaned up against the frame of the window, the edge dug into his stomach. He took the arm holding the clock and lifted it high above his head.

*Tik. Tik. Tik.*

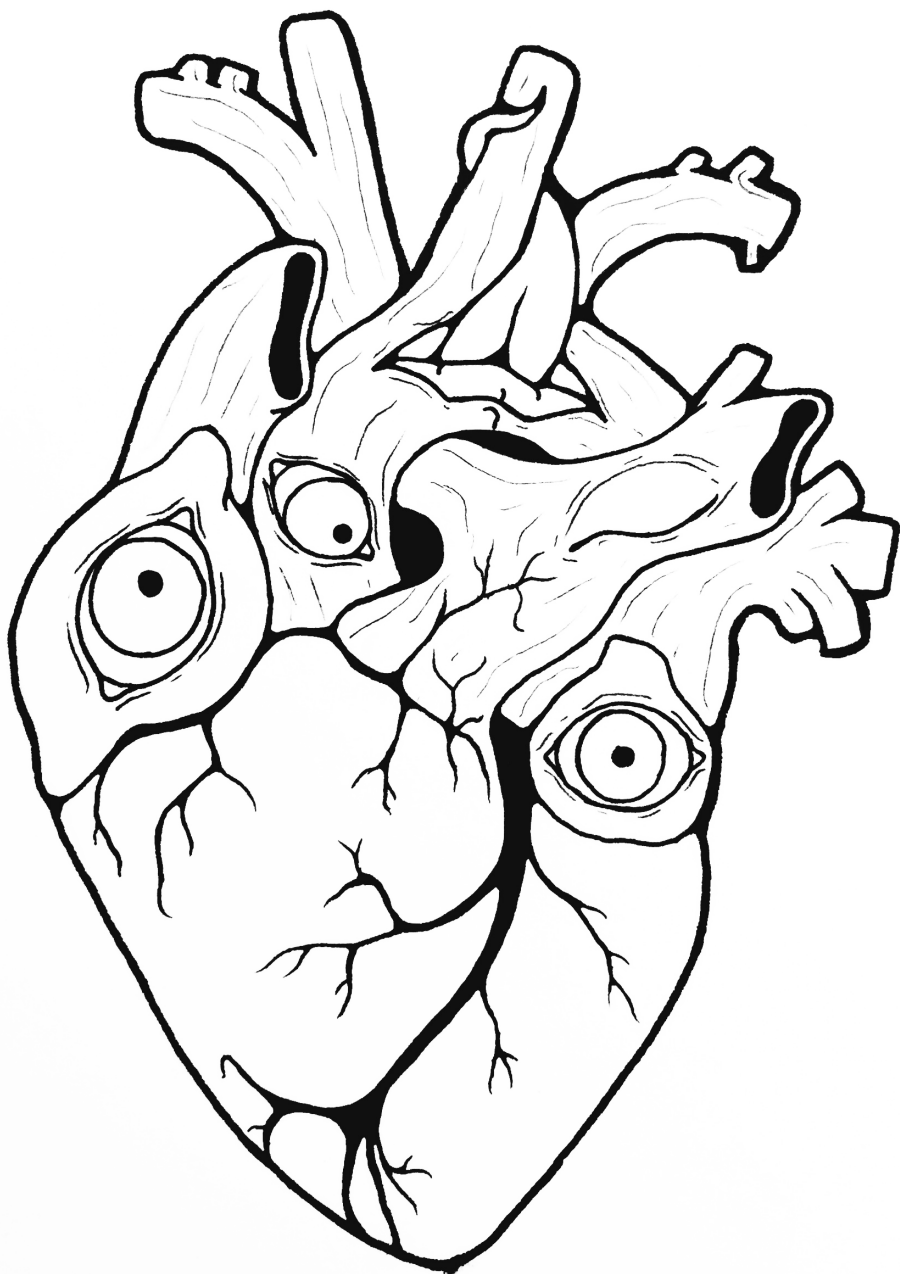
Robert hesitated for a moment, the weight in his chest almost unbearable. He couldn't understand his own anguish. He pulled his arm back, and flung the clock out towards the town. It happened fast, but slow, too. He watched as it spun and flew in an arc shape. It gained speed as it made its way down, but he could still clearly see the red hand ticking

away, uncaring of its own impending doom. He lost sight of the falling object, but the sound of startled metal and panicked plastic echoed through the night.

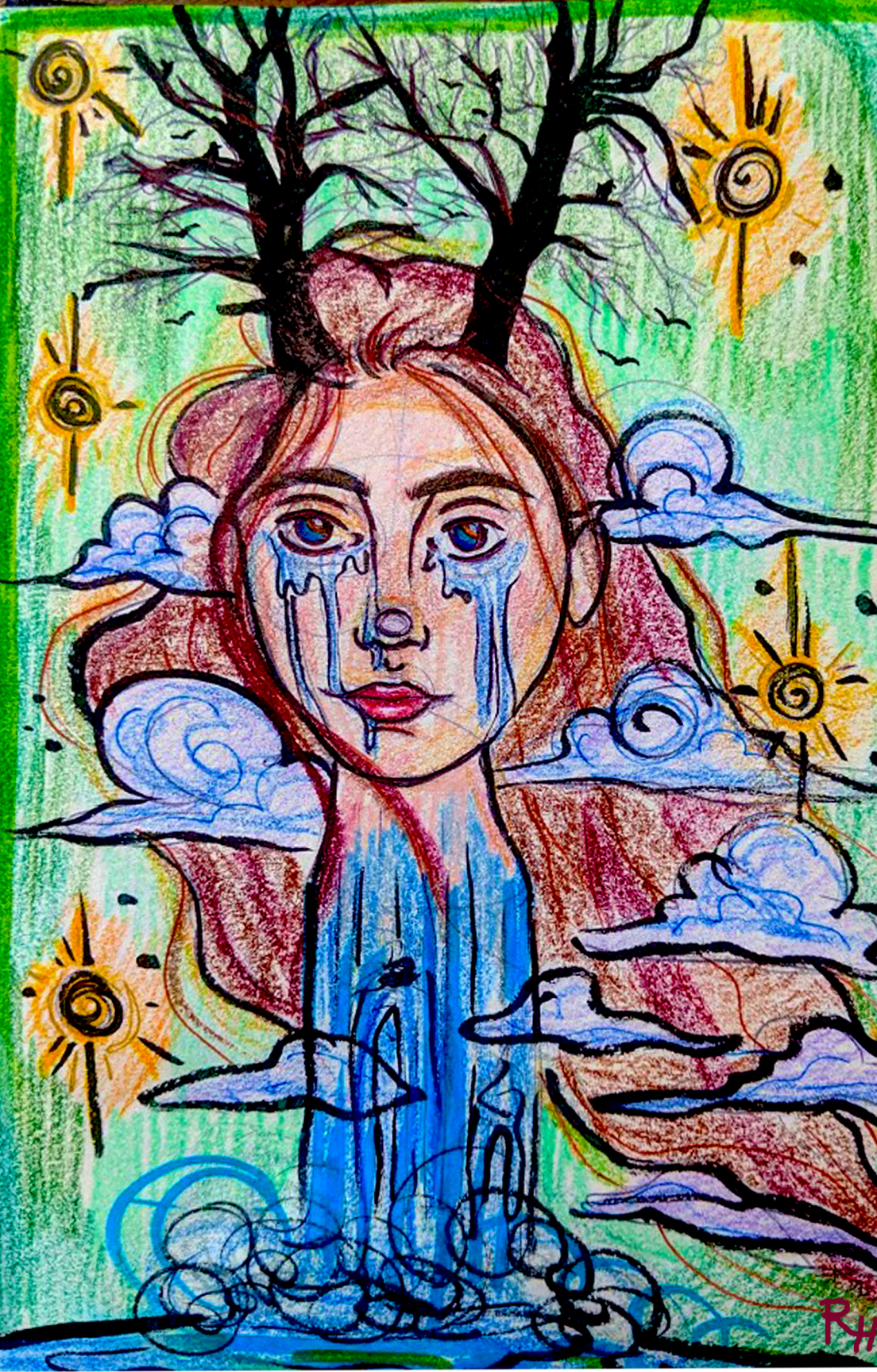
The man's shoulders fell, his entire body relaxed now. Robert took a few steps back, away from the window. A shaking hand found its way to a sweat-soaked forehead, and he used the sleeve of his grey sweater to wipe at the moisture. A small chuckle escaped his cracked lips. Robert turned away from the shining town below, and shuffled his feet back across the apartment floor. He heard a soft crunch come from below his foot, and looked down to investigate. His grandmother's nice crystal surrounded him in pieces. It is only now that he noticed one of his slippers had abandoned the other, and this caused him to laugh once again. He stepped forth with his bare foot, and though he registered the slivers of glass that slid into his skin, Robert didn't feel any pain. He made his way back to the table and the cool surface felt refreshing to him as he laid his hands upon it.

He used the tabletop to find balance, and gradually lowered himself back into the seat. Regardless of the tipping motion the chair had, he felt this to be the most comfortable piece of furniture he'd ever had the chance to sit on. The chair groaned as he released the tension in his body. He stretched his legs out in front of him, and he shook loose his one remaining slipper. Robert looked down at his hands. He found himself staring back through the eyes of a clock.

*Tik. Tik. Tik.*









# "HOW MANY FIELD GOALS IN A TOUCHDOWN?" AND OTHER THINGS I DON'T UNDERSTAND

Donna Arganbright

One of the greatest blessings in my life is that I look like an idiot. I don't know what it is—maybe it's my round face, my hyper-feminine style, or the high voice I affect, but it must be convincing. Since I discovered the fact that I look dumb, it has become a source of many emotional ups and downs in my life, specifically when it comes to my interactions with men.

Men, on average, seem to agree that I am an idiot. They love explaining to me all the basic aspects of life they have decided I don't understand. No matter how I try to prove my competence through top grades, near-perfect standardized test scores, and leadership positions wherever I can find them, I am still typecast as an idiot. Take, for instance, the first swing dance I attended in college. A guy from my Writing 101 class a year ago asked me if I wanted to dance, and, of course, I responded with the obligatory, "I'd love to!"

"So," he said, pulling me out onto the dance floor, "do you know how to swing dance?"

I thought back on my many years of dance classes I'd taken since I was eight and the four years I taught swing and two-step at a summer camp. "I'm okay!" I said.

"Do you know the basic step?" he asked, grabbing my hands and yanking them in and out, while stepping in a circle to what was almost the beat of the music.

Maybe I should have been a little clearer. "Actually, I've been dancing for a while now!" I said with a smile, trying to inject all the laughter and kindness possible into my voice so as not to offend.

"Oh, well do you know this one?" he said, and yanked up my arm, spinning me the wrong way. As I learned over the course of the dance, he didn't know any other moves. Still, it may have been more fun if he hadn't tried to make conversation. "So what's your major?" he asked.

"English, with a concentration in creative writing and English teaching," I said. I tried to get us back on the beat but to no avail.

"Creative writing? Well, have you heard of the writing fiction work-

shops they have here?" he asked.

"Yep, workshops are pretty much the main requirement for my degree. I took Intro to Fiction my first semester," I replied.

"Well," he said, "I'm an accounting major but I'm a great writer too, so I took a fiction workshop for fun. But the lady teaching it was the worst. Lydia Baker or something, did you have her?"

"No—" I was going to continue, but he cut me off there.

"Well, she was the worst. She wouldn't stop judging my story!" he said.

"I mean, she's there to critique everyone's stories. That's her job," I said.

"She said I was sexist because I called a woman in my story a bitch, in the story! She was being a real bitch about it."

I'll spare you the long and arduous three minute conversation we had, where I tried to politely tell him that women don't enjoy being called bitches, and he in turn explained to me that he, as a master of creative writing (who has already finished a novel but will NOT let anyone read it), is right, and that women should be depicted in fiction as in real life. Where they are bitches.

The explanations were relentless, and no amount of reason would quell them. It was for this reason I decided to use the phenomenon to my advantage. It was the summer after my freshman year of college I realized that I could wield this small power.

I was attending the first annual employee kickball game and potluck for the Wake Cup Coffeehouse and Restaurant, where I worked as a barista since my fourteenth birthday exactly (I would have started sooner if it weren't for those pesky child labor laws). There were copious amounts of food and friends, or maybe food and workplace-variety acquaintances. It was a great day. I ate four varieties of mac and cheese, grilled corn, and fried chicken. I chatted with the coworkers I knew best about that one time Emma forgot to take the spoon out of the blender, and where Krissy the Crackhead, the dishwasher who had been fired for stealing our tips for months, ended up (she works for a maid service now and finally got clean, ironically). Eventually, Shayla the pastry chef declared to the party at large, "I wore my damn running shoes, are we gonna play kickball or not?"

And so, the bases were laid out and teams were chosen. I made no effort to hide my distaste for athletics, bemoaning the fact I was required to participate in this heinous activity. How dare they ask me to exercise?

I lined up anyway. Front staff versus kitchen staff, it was decided. Shayla would be captain of the kitchen team, and Shaun, the front manager, was captain of mine.

Shaun is a delightful person, one of my favorite people to work with. He was the one to interview me all those years ago, and I was (understandably, I think) terrified by this large tattooed man with a big black beard and a rough voice. His first question, I remember, was which Harry Potter character I identified with, and the interview was punctuated with at least three absolutely awful dad jokes (what's the difference between a well-dressed man on a bicycle and a poorly dressed man on a tricycle? Attire).

Since then, Shaun and I have gotten to know each other pretty well. I babysit his kids when I'm home for the summer, and I don't fall for his trick of pointing at the floor and saying "Babaga horse?" (you lose if you look at the ground, somehow). That's why it was so surprising that he thought I didn't know how to play kickball.

"Ugh, I don't exercise, how do you even kick a ball?" I asked, mimicking flailing my left foot wildly out to the side.

"Oh, it's really not that hard!" Shaun responded in complete seriousness. "What I do is I usually get a running start at it, from back behind the plate, see?" He backed up until he was about three feet behind home plate. "Then I take about three or four steps forward, like running at it, then you wanna kick with your dominant foot. And you're going to want to use this part," he said, pointing out the top of his foot, "not the toe."

I stood there in shock. This man, who had known me for three years, had heard about all my academic accomplishments, saw how quickly I learned to make gourmet coffee, believed wholeheartedly that I didn't know how to kick a ball. I wondered exactly how far I could take it. How dumb, exactly, did he think I was?

"So then," I asked, furrowing my brow and pouting my lip, "what do I do after I kick the ball?"

"What you wanna do is run to that base there, and the goal is to run around all the bases," he said with sincere helpfulness.

"But that's so easy!" I responded. "You just kick the ball and run around all the bases! Why are there so many people in the field? Are they there to cheer you on while you run?"

"No, not exactly." The poor man still hadn't caught on. "The people out there have to catch the ball. If they catch the ball you're out."

"So if they catch the ball they get a point?" I asked.

“No, you can’t score on defense. You score by running around all the bases.”

“Oh, this is easy! I just kick the ball on the ground! That way they can’t catch it and I can run around all the bases!” I put on my most triumphant face. I knew what was coming next, and I was already formulating my next response.

“Ah, but they can pick the ball up off the ground, and then if they throw it at you and it hits you you’re out.”

“WHAT?” I shouted. “They’re going to THROW THE BALL at me?” I was holding up the game now; the outfield was already set up and waiting for me to kick. Half of the audience I had gathered was looking on in confusion, wondering how I’d managed to live eighteen years without learning how kickball works. The other half was struggling not to laugh.

“Donna, it’s really not a hard ball. It doesn’t hurt, I promise,” Shaun said. “Besides, if you run fast enough it won’t hit you, and that’s the goal.”

“Oh. Okay,” I said, letting my voice quiver just a little and trying my best to look terrified. I stepped up to the plate and finally let Shayla pitch.

To this day, Shaun still thinks he taught me how to play kickball, and I haven’t had the heart to tell him that it’s something every first grader knows. But on that day, I learned a very important lesson. I can prove my intelligence time and time again, and it won’t matter. That competition I had engaged myself in, struggling to convince everyone I meet that I am smart and capable, was never going to happen. At the same time, I learned that I had been given a valuable tool. Maybe this idiot aesthetic was a blessing rather than a curse. The competition was different. Instead of asking, “How can I convince people I’m not an idiot?” I wanted to know how much of an idiot I can convince people that I am. While telling a man repeatedly that you understand simple concepts rarely works, messing with them until they figure it out for themselves results in embarrassment and a realization that I am more than they assumed.

My favorite thing to Not Understand is sports. I really hate sports. I never bought into the idea of watching other people play a game. Playing and competing is the fun part. Therefore, I have turned every game I attend into my own personal sport. I race against the clock, trying to see how ridiculous I can get before whichever man is explaining catches on to the fact that they’re being messed with. I have Not Understood baseball, soccer, ping pong, hockey, and tennis, but by far the greatest sport to Not Understand is football; I have it down to an art.

Having been cheer captain for two years in high school, I have come to intricately understand the rules of football. When I cheered, I had to make sure I was cheering for defense or offense at the right time, and know when to call, “FIRST,” and, “TEN LET’S GO (clap clap).” I had to know how to accurately predict when time-outs would be called and how long they would last in order to prep my team with which cheer and stunt we’d do. I also had to know which cheers would pump up the crowd depending on where the team sat on the scoreboard. In the years since I finished cheering, I have put these same skills to use in other ways. Understanding a sport is very important to Not Understanding.

Each time I attend a game, I figure out who in the group is going to explain it to me. Ideally, I like to choose single guys. The more desperate the better. They tend to enjoy spending time with a pretty girl hanging on to every word they say. However, attraction really isn’t necessary.

For the first Griz game of the year, I attended with an entirely new group of friends. Of the group, two were men, my new friends Peter and Charlie. Both had yet to explain a sport to me.

I made sure to set it up just right. Throughout the pre-game festivities of group pictures and underage drinking, I made sure to pepper into conversation, “Ugh I just hate going to these, I don’t understand what’s going on, you know?” Charlie generously offered to explain, and the game was set.

Once we arrived, it took no more than a, “Wait, what just happened?” after the first loud cheer for Charlie to launch into a lengthy explanation of the concept of “downs” and that we are now back at the first one with ten yards to go. At first, I stick with basic questions that Peter or Charlie would answer.

“What does a fumble mean?”

“Why did they stop playing and why are they just standing in circles?”

“How many points in a touchdown?”

They got used to answering my questions—I got more ridiculous.

“When are they gonna use the tall pointy basket?”

“So, how many field goals until they get a touchdown?”

“If he’s the running back, why is he running forward?”

At one point, Charlie, his girlfriend Grace, Peter, and another man (whose name I never learned, but he was standing near us and thought he would be able to explain better) were all trying to explain the function of a quarterback.

Peter was the first to catch on. He continued answering all my questions but kept up the joke, returning my ridiculous questions with equally ridiculous answers. I learned that a dispute over a call made by the referee is always settled by a fight to the death with broadswords between one member of each team.

Charlie didn't figure out what was happening for another quarter. It probably didn't help that he and Grace were both incredibly intoxicated at the time. It was all fun and games, asking silly questions and getting serious answers, until Grace jumped in.

Standing next to Charlie, she heard all my confusion and decided to jump in with some explanations of her own. This sucked all the fun out of my game right away. Her motivation felt completely different. In general, men want to prove how much more they know about the subject than I do. They are looking for my validation, the shower of compliments on their intelligence for understanding all these complex rules. They want to demonstrate their superiority, and it shows. When Grace explained football, she was trying to make sure I was having fun. She never thought of me as dumb, just lacking information that she has. Her comments were geared towards really helping me understand, not demonstrating her knowledge. She didn't want to impress me or feel superior to me, she wanted to share the joy she gets from the sport with me, and that made her explanations better. I didn't get the long, blustering, technicality-heavy sentences I was used to. Instead, she used words as simple as the ones I was using: "That big guy" instead of quarterback; "The pointy things over there," not goalposts.

Apparently, my idiot vibes were enough to convince even one of the smartest women I've met that I don't understand very simple concepts. I'm not sure how I feel about that. Still, I will continue to Not Understand, just maybe not around other intelligent women.











# HAND-ME-DOWNS

Lucy Hendrickson

Under fleece you've once belonged to  
and later passed to me I am reminded of  
the first breath I took:  
warm in late June air, Minneapolis

Tonight, mid-November, Missoula  
I am curious how opposites make way  
in the same lungs

I look down at my hands  
which in this moment strikingly resemble yours  
I am swallowed in your old jacket  
and I will thank you for that later

Thanks mom,

I don't know how to begin  
because thank you for a lot of things  
but tonight mostly for your purple jacket  
and its long arms

which allowed me to forget mittens  
and find my lungs  
thanks for those, too



# YOUR WORDS

Peter Tattory

your words are like when

the sky puts its pants back on and  
the dark illuminates constellations shaped like  
buttons and zippers—slacks that belt and buckle

you pluck words like smooth pebbles  
from gravel, like color from last-summer  
meadows, chords from noise, sugar from vines

you tuck words into pockets, folded notes  
from last-summer thoughts, in winter coats  
to keep your hands warm

you drip words like sweat  
salty seawater pools  
backwashing into pebble-graveled rivers  
the ones that carve space for the echoes in canyons

your words are like lazy summer shade  
meandering streams  
and pleasant handshakes  
trees that rub branches together  
over picnic baskets

i just wanna be on that blanket











# FED UP WITH SICKLY SWEET

Emmarie Paxton

Slowly the white husk cracks open  
You pluck the pellets of glowing ruby  
Roll them on your tongue  
A moment's pause waiting for the  
Punch of sour  
To hit  
But instead popping sunshine  
Almost bitter

Pomegranates spaced and stacked into a cardboard box  
Enough to last the summer you say  
But now they sit countertop  
In a putrid pink slouch

# THE STEER THIS TIME OF YEAR

Aidan Morton

Jeff Stavish wasn't sure how he would fix the steer just yet. For starters, it stands at least 15 feet high. From ear to ear it's as wide as a Volkswagen Beetle, firm yet fragile, like a giant chocolate bunny.

The years of intense sun and heavy snow had taken a toll on the steer. The cream-colored paint was chipped, revealing layers of old stains and shades of past ownership. Its tail had been reduced to a papier-mâché mess of painter's tape and rotted Bud Light boxes that built it. The snow tore at its horns and dug craters behind its ears. Small clusters of holes, which Jeff assumes came from the barrel of a gun, pierced through the steer's vitals from either side. After all, it's 14 miles to Trixie's Antler Saloon in Ovando in one direction, 14 to the Potomac Bar in another, and 14 to the Filling Station in Seeley, without a whole lot but highway in between.

Through all of this, the cow out front of Stoney's Kwik Stop and bar stands tall and friendly, perched on a small green trailer in one piece at the junction of Montana Highways 200 and 83. The story goes that roughly 40 years ago a travelling salesman drove past the Kwik Stop with the two plastic bovines in tow. The then-owner hopped in his truck and chased the convoy down, dying for a new mascot. The steer has stood out front of the gas station ever since.

Summers are busy at Stoney's Kwik Stop. Tourists and truckers alike swing by for gas, beer, and huckleberry ice cream. Cars line up, bumper to bumper, down Highway 83 to save a spot in line for gas before heading to Glacier National Park or the lake for the weekend. Summer vacation means college students, minivan families, elderly couples in sunhats, and the occasional B-list celebrity from TV shows can all be found at Stoney's on a road trip during the serene Montana summers. Jeff used to stop in as a kid on his way to go fishing and get ice cream. It was busy then, too. The steer was there well before he was, and decades before his sister, Roxanne Ross, bought the convenience store and bar in 2019.

But Stavish doesn't think he'll be fixing the steer anytime soon. It's below freezing for half of the year at the Clearwater Junction, so he

spends most of the winter plowing the parking lot. No one stops to see the steer in the winter, anyway.

"It's been here forever," Stavish said beneath his mustache. "You don't hardly pay no attention to it no more."

For the winter, the Kwik Stop, like the neighboring Blackfoot River, is frozen still, yearning for the summer sun to thaw business and bring traffic and life back to the highways once again. The steer is a popular selfie destination in the summer, but there are only a few frozen footprints in the ice around it in the winter. For Stoney's Kwik Stop and its staff, it's a waiting game: hectic summers and then a nine-month-long winter intermission.

The Kwik Stop isn't a ghost town in the winter, of course. Logging trucks and pickups rigged with snowmobiles and sleds roll through often. There are many commuters, too, looking for a cheap jolt of caffeine to get them to and from their busy lives in Missoula or Great Falls. But you can only sell so many drip coffees and Snickers bars before the cold quiet of the winter sets in and you miss the rush of summer business and the spontaneity of unfamiliar faces.

You learn to love your neighbor, be it that they're 20 miles down the road, or have no neighbors at all. That's what bartender Paul Clasby thinks, at least.

The bar at Stoney's is a locked door away from the convenience store. Clasby opens the bar at 3 p.m., but he occasionally lets a few regulars in to loiter before he turns on the signs while he wipes the counter down. It was an old couple from Lincoln that day. They usually stop in and see Clasby on their way back from Missoula. Electric power stations and Keno machines hummed as the couple shouted country gossip and gripe at Paul as he swept and dusted glasses.

Living out here was more his speed.

"If I could be on the top of a mountain somewhere and fence it off, fuck, I'd do it," he said.

Clasby grew up in Missoula, but he lived to hunt and watch the mud races in Seeley with his friends. He said he headed north when he noticed how quickly and crazily the town was growing. The only reason he goes back to Missoula is for the occasional family gathering and to buy dog food.

"Had to get the fuck outta Missoula," Clasby said between bites of a cheeseburger. "Too many people, too many stupid people."

He loved the parties and trouble he got into at Seeley, but he's too



old and broken for that now. He mans the bar instead.

Clasby is tall, stocky, and stiff from a fallen tree that broke his leg in a logging accident five years ago. His Liberty overalls stacked upon his ankles and hung from shoulders like those of an offensive lineman. His overalls pulled tight and his belly pulsed in a chuckle when asked about the steer.

"It's been here as long as Scruff has," he yelled jokingly at the Lincoln man in the chair. Scruff, whose upper body is almost entirely masked by a thick, wiry beard, didn't take his eyes away from the Keno machine.

He has worked behind the bar at Stoney's for roughly ten years. The bar is packed in the summer with ranchers, fly fishermen, seasonal employees at the dude ranches nearby, and just about anyone that's thirsty for cold drinks and a good time.

But on that day, hours passed with only the Lincoln couple to keep Clasby company. They reminisced about parties and bar stories from summers past. He burned the afternoon away by wandering around the bar, wiping windows and tabletops, looking at a sink full of dirty dishes, and sneaking out to the nearly empty parking lot for a smoke. He threw his ball cap aside, pulled up a chair, and rested his face in his hands.

On the other side of Stoney's, Leilani O'Donnell sees a similar flow of traffic through the convenience store during the off-season, but with a little less enthusiasm.

"It's way quieter in the winter," she said. "Life seems to slow down."

O'Donnell looked short behind the cash register and the backdrop of a towering stack of Copenhagen and Black and Milds. But her thick dread locks, tied neatly on the top of her head, make her a few inches taller. Small tattoos of red and green slipped out of the cuff of her shirt and on to her wrists and fingers when she reached for credit cards, almost hidden by a collection of silver rings.

Her three boys call the cow out front of Mom's work "Bo." She's seen drunks stumble from the bar next door and try to shimmy up Bo, usually to no avail. She remembered one night seeing a man make it on top of the steer, riding it like a bucking bull. A ladder made all the difference.

O'Donnell was raised Mormon in Nevada. She said she wanted to start over in Montana, but Missoula was too much of a rat race. So, she moved her and her boys out to a small cabin near the Kwik Stop. She doesn't mind the winter, that is, until one of the boys forgets to throw a log into the stove while she is at work.

An apple sat on top of a romance novel in her corner behind the

counter. That's for when she has free time. She usually sits and thumbs through her book, peering out the window at the folks who come and go. Truckers that come in to chat. Cars soaring east and west at the intersection, always in a hurry. Always a right or left at the steer.

O'Donnell usually works the weekends, but occasionally takes on a Thursday or Friday shift. She runs the cash register, cleans the bathrooms, and sweeps up and down the aisles, taking conversation when she can get it. The rush hour in the winter is always the same, before and after people go to work.

She enjoys the quiet in the offseason, but that doesn't make it any easier.

"You really see who can tough it out here and who can't," she said.

Her workday starts at 2 p.m. and lingers on until 10:30 p.m. The last hour of her shift is always the worst, she said. But it's the little things about her job in the winter that she finds mundane. The same people, filling their cars at the same pump, coming in and buying the same things. People that work the same jobs coming in, using the bathroom, and then leaving with a chime of the doorbell and a "goodnight," even though her day is just beginning. She said you run out of things to do. People to see. She ends up sweeping the floor twice.

In January, it's easy to think that the steer dreams of the day it can turn its back on show business. Step off the trailer, cross the highway to summer in fields of green grass and alfalfa. The steer probably would, too, if he wasn't pinned to ground with long, rusted steel stakes. But all it takes is a new coat of paint, a brushed-on smirk and a clean cardboard tail to make the steer look like weathering the winter is worth its summer fame. For now, it will have to settle for snow-covered pavement and ice salt, because it's a long time until summer and it doesn't look like it, or the staff at Stoney's, is going anywhere.



# CONTRIBUTORS

**DONNA ARGANBRIGHT** is a sophomore at the University of Montana, studying creative writing and English education. She grew up on a small grains farm thirty minutes outside of Fort Benton, Montana, and spent her childhood living the traditional “small-town Montana” experience. She enjoys sewing, sitcoms, and the color violet. She believes that a person’s coffee order says a lot about them, and hers is a medium quad americano with maybe a little honey and a lot of cream.

**TRISHA BARTLE** is finishing her final semester for her English and German double-major. She's currently in the final stages of her novel. In addition to writing, she's also discovered a love of body painting. Check out her body paintings on her Instagram @trishainfinity.

**NAT BRANCACCIO** is in her third year of studying media arts. She works as the media artist for Curry Health Center and hopes to continue a career in the graphic arts. She paints portraiture in her spare time.

**MADELYN GOFFENA** is a senior at The University of Montana. She is a contemporary artist; her work primarily focuses on self-expression and self-exploration. Her self-portraits depict emotional states and inner thoughts, which aim to evoke emotions in her viewer. Goffena chooses to work in the charcoal medium because it creates both a soft gradient and sharp contrast. These qualities allow her to best convey the emotions captured in the figure.

**EMILY GREENLUND** is a creative writing and studio art double major from Minneapolis, Minnesota. Besides oil painting and writing, she enjoys Nordic skiing, hiking, and playing guitar. She can also be seen driving around Missoula in a car she painted like Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. Her painting, *B Minor 7*, is oil paint on canvas.

**RAEGAN HAUSCHILDT** is a sophomore studying human biology and neuroscience at UM.

Originally from Minnesota, **LUCY HENDRICKSON** moved to Missoula in 2017, where she has found inspiration in the mountains, rivers, and folks that make up the town. She is currently a junior at the University of Montana.

**KAT JACKSON** is from Wyoming, and she is studying English and philosophy. Her best friend is a cat named Lou. In her writing, she is interested in examining the intersection between the individual and the physical world and mimicking thought patterns.

**KYNZEE MANN** is a creative writing major in her third year at UM. She lives with her best friend, Randi, cat, Menchie, and dog, Jude. She enjoys writing free-verse poetry, and psychological thrillers through short stories. Kynzee also spends time painting and drawing, and she hopes to one day have a published book of stories, poems, and illustrations.

**SHELBY METZ** is a creative writing major born and raised in Montana. She's always found storytelling and writing to be a great creative outlet and is happy that she has the opportunity to make that into a career. This is her last semester at UM and she is looking forward to seeing what the world has to offer.

**AIDAN MORTON** is a sophomore journalism student at the University of Montana. His love for collecting sneakers is topped only by his passion for exploring Montana, and his hometown of Bozeman.

**EMMARIE PAXTON** grew up in the charming town of Missoula, Montana, and has always viewed Montana with a sense of wonder. She fell in love with writing and small presses when she was an editor for *The Aerie Literary Magazine*. Along with being published in *Manuscript Magazine*, her work has also won the Scholastic



Gold Key Award. When she is not in school or writing, she spends her time scheming ways to explore new forms of creativity, from randomly learning how to knit, to playing with really old film cameras.

**LIBBY RIDDLE** is currently a freshman at the University of Montana. She is pursuing a degree in wildlife biology but is passionate about lots of other things, from creative writing to international politics. She has been writing for fun since she was a kid, but since coming to college, has begun to pursue it seriously. When she is not writing her young-adult fantasy novel, she enjoys writing about pirates, World War II, girls in love with other girls, graveyards, and anything else that catches her fancy.

**EMILY SOLBERG** is a sophomore this year studying English teaching. She is an avid poet who wishes to make some sort of living off of writing someday, but for now, teaching will have to do. Emily loves to learn and has a passion for creative writing.

**JORDAN STOW** is a creative writing major from Seattle, Washington. In between getting a C in remedial math and the constant struggle of going bald in his early 20s, he has found time to write sub-par poetry. He often daydreams about his ability to fight various animals with his bare hands, which turns into heated debates about whether or not he could kill a rhino, or if he could run faster than a crocodile, and if that would even help his chances, then speculating on the immense guilt he might feel for having killed a rhino (a crocodile not so much). He imagines himself reborn on the African savannah as a super hero, pushed by his former sins to defend all rhinos from harm. He is the champion of the keratin horn, he is justice in the tall grass, he is the poacher's bane, he is Rhino Man.

Born in New Jersey and raised in the great state of Montana, **PETER TATTORY'S** formative years were spent near sun-soaked lakes and mountainsides of Ponderosa. He attends the University

of Montana and has become a lover of writing, music, art, and technology. He is a communicator with an emphasis on empathy, whose words are surpassed only by a charismatic presence, a proclivity for the collaborative effort, and a perspective of openness... in every sense of the word. Peter believes in values and values most that which requires effort, discipline, and love.

**JASPER VANSPOORE** is an English student. Born in Missoula, like her mother, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers, she feels a deep and powerful connection to this landscape. She creates art to better understand the places and people she loves. Her paintings are original watercolors.

**MADALYN WELLMAN** is a theatre major here at the University of Montana with a focus on acting. She enjoys doing photography, filmmaking, and hiking in her free time and is grateful for the experiences that the University has provided her. She hopes to create a positive impact on those around her and is excited about the future.



# HONORABLE MENTIONS

## **NIGHTBRINGER**

Maxwell Briggs

## **WICKED**

Maxwell Briggs

## **PINK SWEAT**

Siena Rose Cysewski

## **NEARLY FORGOTTEN**

Dante Filpula Ankney

## **I HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE OF ALL YOUR DREAMS NOW**

Gabriella Giordano

## **IF RAINDROPS HELD STORIES**

Sarah Griffin

## **WE'RE OPEN! PLEASE COME IN**

Raegan Hauschildt

## **A LIGHTHOUSE**

Noah MacKinnon

## **LIMINAL**

Shelby Metz

## **SEPTEMBER**

Abigail Nordstrom

## **REGARDING THE WOMAN DOWNSTAIRS**

Erin Sargent

## **RIVERS CALLING**

Anna Schale

## **CURIOUS CLIMBER**

Madalyn Wellman



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