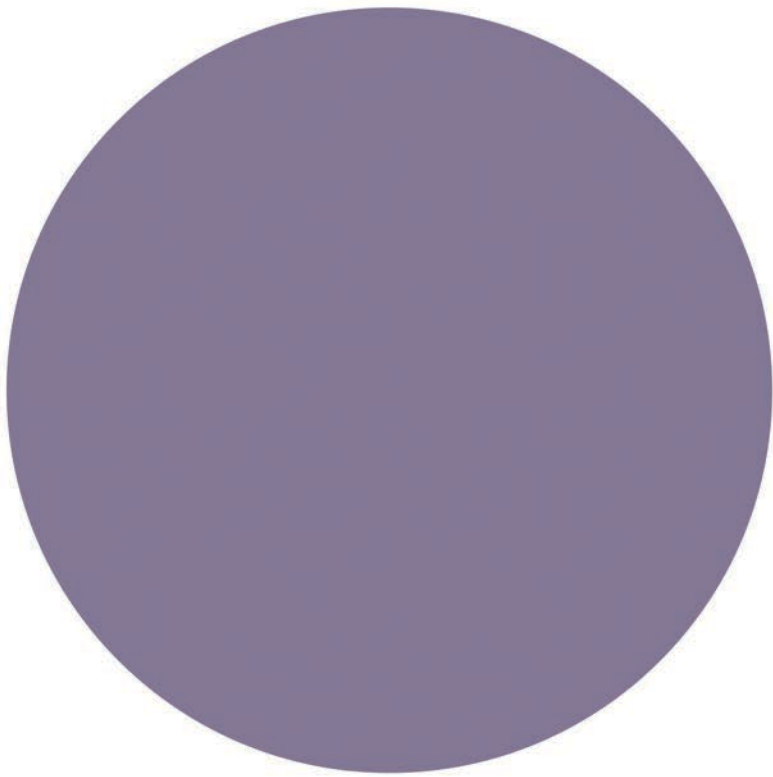


# THE GALLATIN REVIEW











THE  
GALLATIN  
REVIEW

VOLUME 31  
SPRING 2016

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## A Note from the Faculty Advisor:

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This issue of *The Gallatin Review* marks the first time that we have featured work from students of NYU's Prison Education Program. Backed by a grant from the Ford Foundation, the Prison Education Program began offering university courses at the Wallkill Correctional Facility in the spring 2015 semester. We were delighted to invite these new members of the NYU community to submit their work this year—and gratified to receive a large number of submissions, the quality of which was impressive. *The Gallatin Review* would like to welcome the PEP students to the NYU community and thank all of those who submitted work. We'd also like to thank Rachael Hudak, the administrative director of the program, for her assistance in the submissions process, and the PEP faculty, particularly Professors Laurie Woodard and Elaine Freedgood, for their wonderful guidance of these poets, fiction writers, and essayists.

# Atlantic Empathy

Adam Young

it must be slowing  
you down turtle  
the immense design  
must burden your back  
it must be heavy so  
you search for weightlessness  
in a sea it must be so heavy  
that you could snap  
your back in two turtle  
do you know  
how lions stomp  
like kings  
on your plains or of how  
infinite you really are  
turtle you titan  
no wonder  
you grew a shell



*Untitled*, Daniel David Cole



*Girl with Feathers*, Sofia Szamosi

# A Letter to Society

Jesus Mejia

Dear Society,

I hope this letter finds you well among your busy, ever-changing moments. Even though you might know me, or might have forgotten about me, I am one of your citizens, who was born in your hospitals, raised in your neighborhoods, attended your schools, and might have played with your kids.

If you were to search for me, you would find out that I have been missing for almost a decade. And even though I haven't gone far, I have been enclosed in the deepest of your institutions. Of course, that is no direct fault of yours. I take full responsibility for the actions which led me behind these walls.

I have decided to get in contact with you, to re-establish our relationship. If I am to return to you, it is only right that you get to know who I have become. It will have been a decade and I do not wish to be a stranger; nor do I wish to intimidate you.

The last time you saw me, I was two months shy of my 17th birthday. I was a naïve kid who, like many kids, thought he knew everything. I was frequenting your schools less and less. Your streets were more enticing; my friends thought so too. (By the way, have you heard of them? They have not left you, I hope they have appreciated you). I deviated from what was expected from me—school, home, work, and family—and I found myself on a road, where everything is antithetical to you.

I do not understand how this place is supposed to prepare me for you. Where negativity, maliciousness, selfishness permeates the air I breathe, day in and day out. Unfortunately, I have noticed how the residents of this environment remain unaware of its pathogens. They have become immune to them. Let me tell you, these viruses can consume you, absorbing the humanity that is left within you. And once they become part of their host, the patient starts exhibiting them—for the sake of survival.

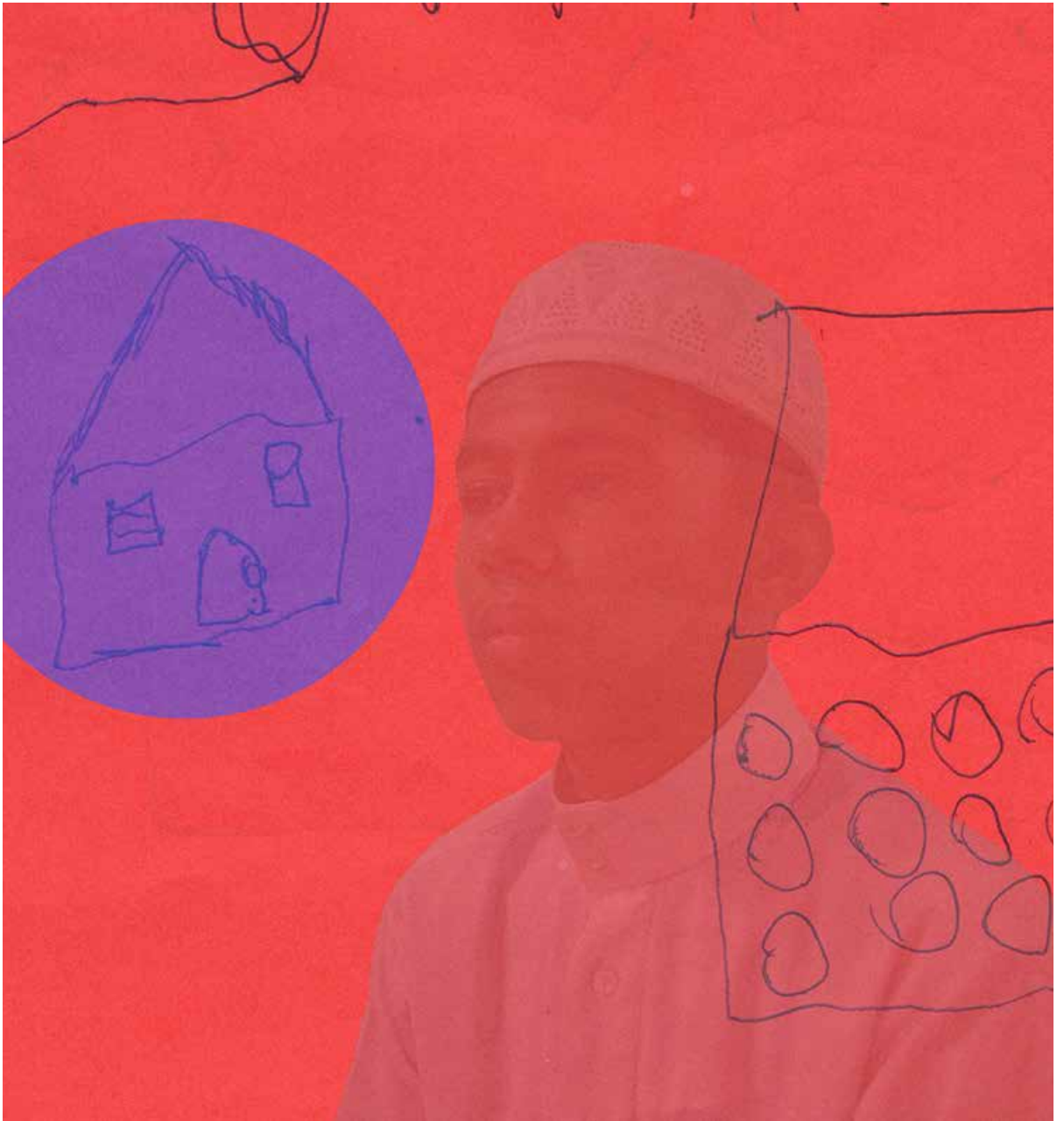
Survival—physical, mental, or spiritual—is essential in this place. Having resided in this environment since the age of 17, you would think that I would have mastered its antisocial norms. However, my internal strength and the valuable support of my family have helped me; first to become aware of the contagious viruses that permeate this place and second, to prevent me from succumbing to them. And it's not because I think so highly of myself or that somehow I am impervious to them. I denounce these pathogens, because they can kill the only thing that keeps me moving forward: hope. Hope that someone will give me a chance. Hope that someone will believe in me. Hope in the good things to come.

When I return to you, you probably will not recognize me. I have changed physically and mentally. Things that once interested me are no longer appealing. I have come to appreciate who I am. I have found a confidence, one that I never knew existed, deep inside myself. My thoughts and actions have become mature. I don't know if it has been that my neurons and prefrontal cortex have fully developed and allowed me to become conscious of my actions and the way they change my way of viewing the world. I believe I am fully capable of engaging with whatever you have to offer.

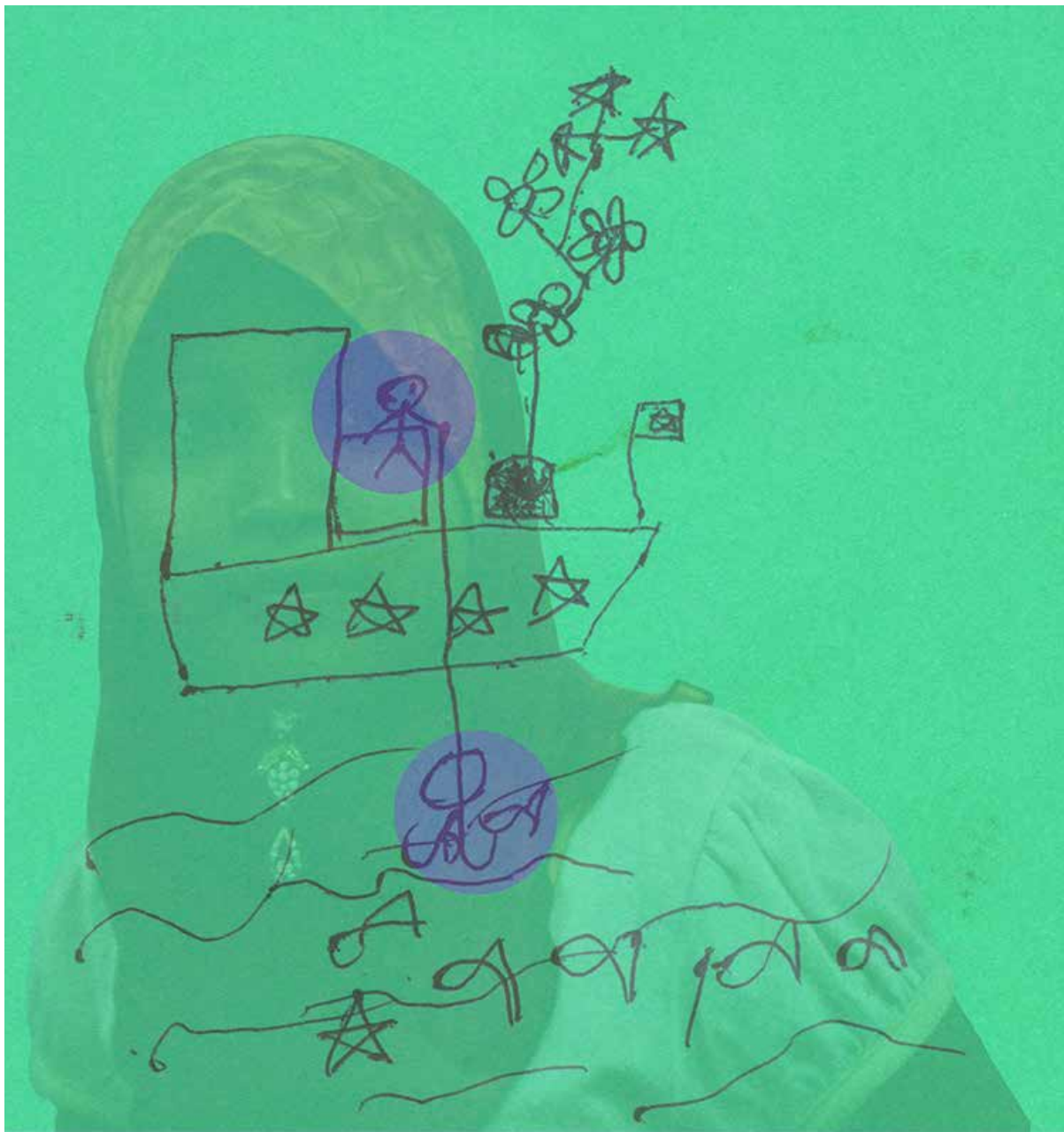
I do not wish to take more of your time. Just remember I will soon be among you, ready to contribute all I have learned. Take care. I know it has not been easy in the world.

Do not be a stranger; keep in touch.

J.M.



*Untitled*, Mike Tan



*Untitled*, Mike Tan

# Song for Peaches

Adrian Zias

Peaches—

you're always on my grandmother's plastic-covered table  
in Greece in mountains where it storms  
and the clouds come down to the windows  
they tap on them to greet us while we eat  
peaches.

And peaches—

I always imagined that your juice was  
the sweat that poured from tender bodies  
when they got too close.

To eat a peach is to trap  
inside of you  
a sweet ray of sun.





*Body Landscape*, Madeleine Stanley



*Untitled*, Allison Casar

# That Summer

Tyler Finley

summertime with its chlorine kingdoms  
it divulges bodily secrets  
she sure did gain weight  
in that one-piece suit  
glimpse his tiny package  
soaked with pooltime pride

finish up Marco Polo with nostrils  
wide open for curls of beefy aroma  
we splash mindlessly under  
the tedious eye in the sky

the sunset eclipsed by foliage  
shiny with forgotten leafy oil  
don't touch the ones  
tinged with poisonous red  
the safe ones tumble  
into the watery oval below

out out out for dinner  
we wear towels like long skirts  
potato salad is mostly mayonnaise  
and burgers drip bloody ketchup  
the cracked deck sucks it up

look up!

the sky's hues are calming down

after a long day  
we all stare at a noisy airplane  
mom says "it's too low"  
"it's dangerous," she says  
"the city is a target," she says  
dusk settles quietly  
mosquitoes buzz about  
plankton of the low-hanging air  
black stars, blacker intentions

hands swat around absurdly  
clapping at the hovering shadows  
ringing like the echoes of mortality  
the smack of a thigh

the little mosquito had packed  
red juice like blood bags  
liquified poppy splatter  
above the slick wet hairs running downward

I wept for the little airplane

but we finished our burgers  
and went inside to watch a movie  
mom smelled like the grill  
and we commented on it  
she frowned like a melting skyscraper

# Kristina (II)

Henry Sheeran

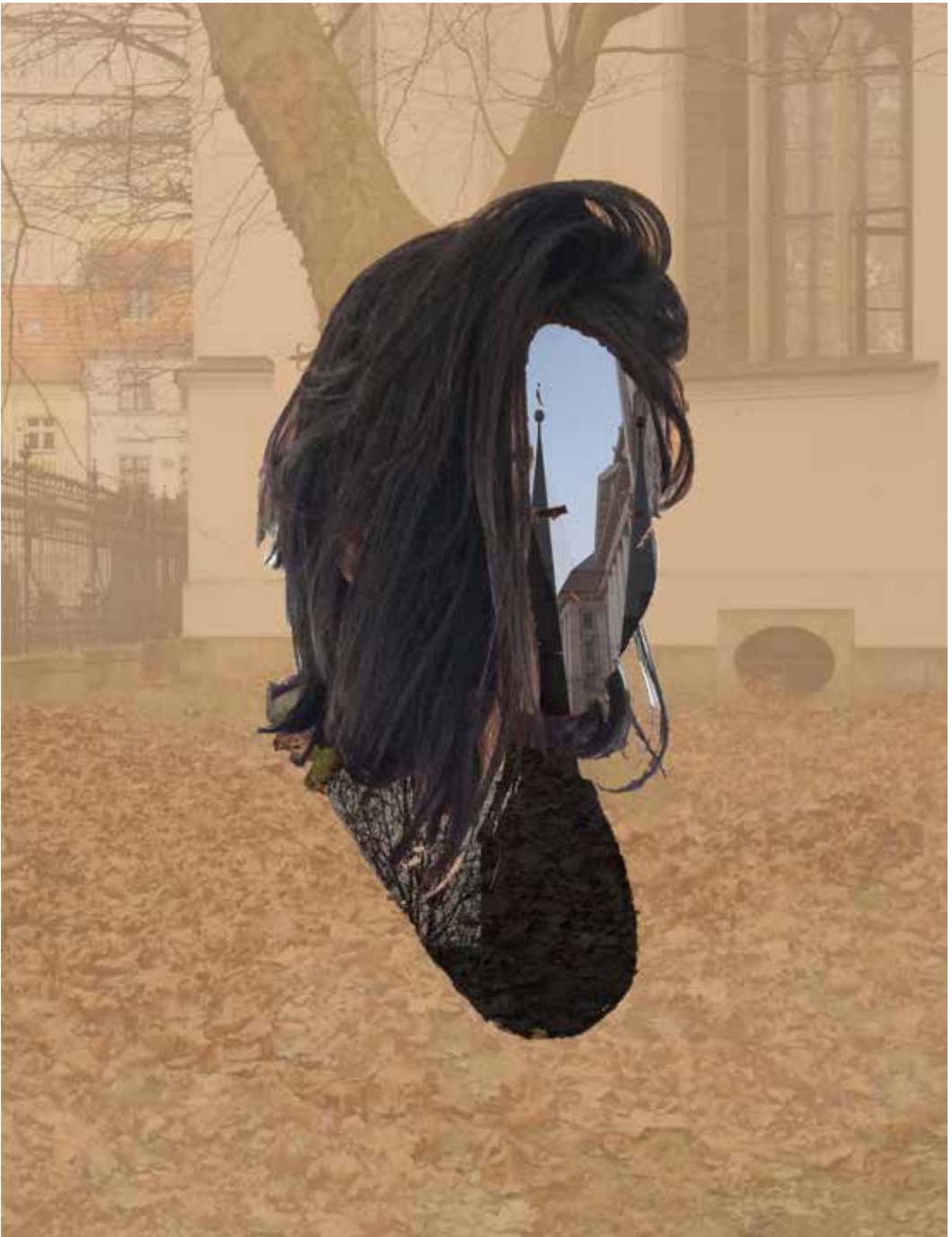
racks of wine  
left for years in  
a too-warm vault

a Frank Stella  
shimmering  
with a foot-sized hole in the corner

a black sports car  
first edition  
left near a metropolis of mice

Kristina was a poet-collector,  
certainly no scientist. her daughter,  
my mother, is sometimes sad  
that such beautiful things  
rotted (so slowly, so surely).

but Kristina would have  
wrestled the universe bare-handed  
into extinction  
before letting a less-than-honest eye  
fall on her daughter,  
the non-thing,  
the angel.



*Many Faces, Many Places*, Smritaa Massey



*Town By the Water 3*, Raechel Bosch

# The Aliens

Alee Bloom



I am a she. A her.

Mom says that I came from the heavens.

Mama says that the aliens dropped me off at the doorstep. She doesn't believe in the heavens. She believes in the stars, and galaxies. In planets far away, just like ours, struggling like ours. Most have died, she says.

I like to believe that the aliens live in the heavens. They are looking down on us and pointing a long, thin green finger toward our tiny, blue planet. They laugh at us because they created us, and we think it was a man with a beard.

I told Mom my idea and she reminded me that not everyone thinks that God is a man. She doesn't say much about the aliens because she's just happy that I believe.

But I believe in bagels for breakfast, and taking walks in the evening, and giving Billie the dog belly rubs, too. She says the things I like will change as I grow older.

Just like my taste buds are replaced every seven years.

In her world, I will grow to believe in coffee for breakfast, and walking to work, and Billie will die and I'll believe in keeping his old collar and leash in the drawer of my bedside table long after he's gone. And then I will switch to tea, and taking the bus; I'll just remember that there was a dog once, and then there was a dog no more.

I wonder if, when all the cells in my body have been replaced, I'll still be a she. Or if I will dissolve into other. Into alien. The aliens are not she, are not he. They exist in a dimension other, and I want to exist there with them.

Because Mom does not believe in the aliens, I told Mama. She doesn't know about the heavens, but she knows lots about the aliens. She thinks they won't come back for me until I am very, very old.

"But I'm an alien, too."

"Is that right?"

"Aliens don't age."

"You are turning seven next week. You are getting older."

"All the cells in my body will replace themselves. I'll be new again. I'll be an alien."

She just smiled and patted me on the head and pretended she had a daughter, and not an alien. She said, "You're a funny girl."

On Saturday, Melody watched me. She comes from across the street when I cannot be watched by Mom or Mama. Mostly, she watches her phone, though. I watch the T.V. I cannot watch myself, unless I stare into the mirror and hold very still, but that isn't really me. I told Melody about the aliens.

"So, why didn't they take me when I was seven?"

"Because they didn't drop you off when you were a baby."

"That makes sense."

She smiled as she said this, like she knew something that I didn't, but when Mom came back, she gave me a tight squeeze and told me goodbye as if she really meant it. My birthday is in three days.

When I came home from school on Monday, I started packing my bag. I took three stuffed animals, a coloring book, five colored pencils, and my dolphin box. I hesitantly packed my toothbrush and toothpaste because the dentist had told me that I needed to brush every day. I wasn't sure if they had sinks in the heavens. I wasn't sure if it mattered. Wouldn't I have new teeth? One had fallen out last week. I pressed my tongue against the empty space. I could feel my transformation coming.

Mama came in and sat on my bed. She looked guilty. She was a firm believer in the truth, and didn't respect lies. She was like a witness in the detective shows Melody would put on who come before the judge, raise their hand, and as they speak, their eyes never focus. Everyone knows that there is something they are not telling us. Adults look this way a lot.

"You know, when you are very, very old, the aliens will not actually take you away."

"I know. They're coming tomorrow."

“No, I mean that you’ll die.”

“I. No. I won’t get old. The aliens will come back for me when I’m new again.”

She didn’t pat me on the head and she did not smile. She told me to come to the kitchen for dinner.

It was still dark when a bright light coming through my window woke me up. I knew it was the aliens. I got my bag and tiptoed through the kitchen, where Mom’s scent still lingered from when she had swept through earlier that morning. On the fridge, she had left a note that said “HAPPY BIRTHDAY! BACK AT 6” with two hearts and a horizontal rectangle with seven smaller vertical rectangles on top. I think it was supposed to be a cake. I wasn’t sure. I thought about writing a note back, but I couldn’t write. Not words. I pretended that I was a cat as I left the house. I was so quiet that not even Billie noticed me go.

The air outside was heavy as if someone had dropped a dark blanket over the world. But I could see the shadow of a spaceship in the driveway.

“*Welcome,*” the aliens said.

“Am I an alien?”

“*Look and see.*”

I held out my hands, and in the new dawn light that was beginning to peak over the trees, I believe I could see that they were long and thin and green.

# Things Like Marshmallows

Sydney Rappis

Martha leaned back in the dining chair, trying to balance on two legs. Using the heel of her boot she tipped back and forth, attempting to gauge where her center of gravity really was. The key was intense concentration.

An old cat slinked across the surface of the table. Baring her teeth at Martha, the cat tried to swipe all the papers off the table. Martha slapped her hand down to save the paper and bared her own teeth at the cat. Disgruntled, the cat flicked her rump and knocked a cup off the table. At the same time, another cat pounced onto Martha's shoulder, knocking her off balance. She toppled backwards and sprawled out on the floor, landing next to the fallen cup. Martha felt her disdain for the cats, a quiet rage bubbling in her chest.

"No. No. No. No. No. No." Her mother fussed around the kitchen checking to make sure none of the food dishes had spilled. "Why do you monkey around like that?"

Four bowls sat on the ground filled to the brim with dry, organic, artisanal food. Martha's mother scurried from counter to corner, laying down four additional bowls filled with organic whole milk.

The reply came halfhearted from under the table. "Sorry, I'm so clumsy today."

"You never think."

Martha lay sprawled out on the kitchen floor, trying to calm down. She pressed into the cold tile beneath her and imagined the ceiling above her was covered in marshmallows. She smelled the powdery vanilla and let it wrap around her like a sweater. Soft marshmallows that had melted into the hot chocolate she'd bought on her way home from school; it was cold by now. Reaching up to her head, she began to knead the temple that had taken most of the blow from her fall.

"Mom?"

The milk bowls were checked to make sure they were filled to the very top.

"Mom? Mother?"

"What? I'm in the middle of something—"

"Anita asked if we could watch her cat for a couple of nights—it's a kitten. They don't want to leave it alone while they go out of town."

“I suppose that would be fine . . . .”

A long hairy tail trailed over her neck, while a paw made contact with her forearm. Martha lunged away and hit her head on the edge of the table.

“Be careful, sweetie!” Martha’s mother bent down to scoop up the two old cats. She cradled them to her chest and looked into their heterochromic eyes.

“You are my babies, aren’t you? Yes, you are. My sweet, precious babies. It’s almost time for dinner! Come on, let’s find your sisters.”

Her mother and the cats went into the living room, where the other felines lounged.

Martha squeezed her head between her hands and felt it pound against her palms. Groaning, she waited for the ringing to dissipate before standing up. Three long claw marks stretched from her elbow to wrist—nothing she hadn’t dealt with before.

The cuts began to ooze red.

“Shit,” Martha shook her head, “petty old gremlins.” She got up to look for a bandage.

The next day Martha returned home with a glowing white bundle of fur. She’d gone to Anita’s after school, listened intently to feeding instructions, and graciously accepted a ride home from Anita’s father.

The kitten was beautiful, fluffy, and sweet. Malvavisco fit into the palm of her hand, but wouldn’t stay there long. She was eager to explore the new world around her. Martha spent the evening playing with Malvavisco in her room, always careful to keep the door shut.

The tree outside her window knocked against the glass in the evening wind, but during the times when the wind would settle, Martha could make out the sound of paws running along the other side of her door. Malvavisco sensed nothing unusual, choosing to bat at the scarves and roll around in the sock drawer, while Martha did her homework. The sunset shone in through the open window, casting an orange net over the room.

“Martha! Come down to dinner.”

Martha looked down at the kitten on her desk. Scooping up the baby, she mumbled, “Stick close to me.”

Malv nuzzled into her sleeve.

The older cats sat on the window ledge in the kitchen, indistinguishable silhouettes. Four pairs of kaleidoscope eyes scrutinized her walk to the table. Keeping her head down, Martha slipped into her spot at the table, kitten hidden close to her chest. Martha began to move the vegetables around on her plate, watching the cats in her peripheral vision. One cat

lifted a dignified paw and began to lick its fur.

“So, introduce our houseguest Martha. Let’s see,” her mother was daintily eating mashed potatoes.

Martha reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out the kitten. Yawning, Malvavisco curled into a ball on the table.

“Oh, isn’t she just the most precious thing!”

A hiss came from the window sill. Two cats leaped from the perch and began to circle the table, pausing twice to swipe at Martha’s calf.

“I love her so much! You’re a cutie, aren’t you! Beautiful, let me hold you!” Martha’s mother reached over the table to snatch up the sleeping kitten. Malvavisco let out a small yelp of protest but quickly resumed sleeping. Her mother pushed aside her food and diverted all her attention to the kitten.

Now four cats were circling the table, each cat completely focused on the kitten. One took a daring leap onto mother’s lap, only to be brushed aside.

The kitten let out the smallest yawn and began licking her dainty paws.

“She’s just adorable! Martha, I think she should stay with me tonight. I could get her some milk now.”

“Oh, that’s ok. I have all her stuff in my room so . . .”

“I just love kittens more than anything,” the mother breathed dreamily. When Martha looked up, she realized that the room was missing all four cats.

After dinner, Martha came back to carnage. Her pillow lay gutted in the middle of her twin bed, the stuffing strewn across the room. Deliberate hacks left the blue paisley design unrecognizable. Chunks of cotton hung from the doorframe and the vanity, while her bookshelf was covered by smudged pawprints.

Martha felt loss. She shed a few angry tears and clutched her hands into fists. Sensing her frustration, Malvavisco twined around her ankles. Bending down, Martha lifted the small kitten. Closing her eyes, she took deep breaths and focused on her soft fur. A film of indignation encircled her heart, but she pushed it back to treasure the time she had with the calming kitten. Clutching Malvavisco protectively, Martha closed the door tightly and began cleaning up the mess.

That night, Martha used a rolled up sweater to support her neck, and her dreams were plagued by the smell of warm milk. Malvavisco, meanwhile, slept curled up in the sock drawer. She snored lightly.

Martha’s door handle creaked as it twisted down, slipping open. Four feline figures,

cloaked in darkness, slipped into the room. The moonlight, dimmed by the drapes, proved to be no problem for their night vision. The one with a white paw jumped onto the windowsill and stretched. She scanned the room, stopping when she saw what slept in the sock drawer. Flicking her head, she motioned to her sisters.

The other three cats jumped onto the dresser and moved to the open drawer. Without hesitation, the cat in the middle bent down and took the kitten's neck between her teeth. Tightening her jaw, she lifted Malvavisco out of the drawer and jumped silently onto the ground.

Startled, Malvavisco let out a soft cry for help.

The cats slipped out of the room with their prize, unnoticed.

Martha woke up with an aching neck. She rolled around under the blanket for a moment before actually getting up. Her morning routine was mundane: shower, brush teeth, get dressed. Today seemed colder than usual. She noticed that her window had been left open, and she went over to close it. Her drapes fluttered in the wind, a long slash down the middle of one.

The drape looked just like her pillowcase.

She looked into her sock drawer. Dried blood was smeared over the side of the drawer and across the top of her dresser. Her blood went cold and her ears started to ring.

“Malvavisco! Malv? Malv!”

Martha ran to the kitchen. It was empty. Bursting into the living room, she searched for the little kitten. Her mother sat on the couch, one cat with a white paw on her lap, watching the game show network.

“Good morning, dear. Have you—”

“Where is Malvavisco?” Martha was hysterical.

“I don't know who you mean.”

“The kitten. The white kitten! Where is she?”

Martha's mother stroked the cat on her lap, “I'm not sure why I would know. She was sleeping in your room, wasn't she? Maybe she's exploring.”

“Your demon cats did something to her! I know it—”

“Nonsense. My angels did nothing. They were with me the whole night.” The cat on her lap moved her smug gaze to Martha, and yawned.

Martha stormed out of the room, looking beneath tables and behind chairs. She ran out into the yard. Moving around the large oak tree, she let out a cry at what she saw.

Next to the old tree, was a matted little ball of white fur. The three older cats

surrounded it, taking turns to slash it with their paws and bite into the flesh. Shaking, Martha ripped them away to uncover the beaten kitten. The cats hissed at her, one slashing her forearm. Martha let out a growl and they retreated, licking their fur clean of blood. Lazily, they made their way back inside.

Malvavisco's left ear was gone. Patches of her fur had been ripped out and she was bleeding from the bites. The cat leaned away from Martha when she tried to pick her up, and burrowed closer to the tree. Crying, Martha tried to comfort the kitten as she took her last, shuddering breaths. Wrapping the body of Malvavisco in her scarf, she went inside to get the kitten's things.

Returning the body of Malvavisco to her rightful owners was difficult for everyone. Martha wasn't sure how to explain what had happened to the little cat, and the family was too shocked to question much. Anger, doubt, and confusion clouded the air. Martha was sure her friendship with Anita was finished. A blanket of guilt settled over her as she left, when she thought about what she had allowed to happen. There was nothing Martha could do for Malvavisco now, other than get revenge.

Before dinner the next night, Martha crept down to the kitchen. She climbed onto the counter and opened the highest cabinet. Inside was an open bottle of Clorox liquid bleach. Tucking it into her jacket pocket, she pounced onto the floor.

Waiting a moment, she listened for trouble.

"Oh, you like being brushed, don't you! Oh, I love you all. Don't worry, Mommy has enough love for you all! Yes, she does. Oh, my lovely angels."

Martha slid over to the milk bowls. Opening the bottle of Clorox liquid bleach released a dry waft of alcohol, quickly disguised by the creamy milk in the bowls. Replacing the cap, she returned the bottle to the rightful place on the shelf.

Martha walked back to her room. She opened the window and, letting the fall wind curl around her, lowered herself to the floor. She looked up at her ceiling and imagined things like marshmallows, while she listened to the sound of the cats being called to dinner.

# Unbroken

Vincent Casiano

The judicial system calls  
me a lawbreaker.  
I'm a criminal in the eyes  
of the system.  
Those who run the prisons  
are mindbreakers,  
but that's only if you  
let them.  
I've been held captive for  
ten years, 11 months  
and eight days.  
I keep the time as  
a momentum.  
I know there's a saying  
with "crime and time"  
in the same sentence,  
but I don't know  
it verbatim.  
In the streets, they  
say "Time is money."  
Well, I say they should  
save some,  
because if they knew  
what I know,  
they won't be stunned,  
when they're free  
one day,

and the next  
they're done,  
locked up in cases,  
no more fun,  
families die,  
no more father to  
your daughter  
nor to your son.  
I look back—  
what did I do?  
What have I done?  
Would I change  
my choices?  
Would I change where  
I've come from?  
Not me.  
I love my Da,  
I love my mum.  
My mind is fully free—  
but not literally, I'm  
physically bound,  
unable to voice my  
opinion,  
can't make a sound.  
I won't let the system  
take me alive.  
I won't let them

take me down.  
I was lost,  
now I am found.  
To the government  
I am a con.  
But to me  
I am a pro.  
Yes, I was living  
fast,  
but now I'm living  
slow,  
stuck in time,  
in the middle of  
a lake with no oars  
to row.  
Sooner or later I'll  
reach land,  
and with the help of my plans,  
I'd be able to try my hand  
at everything I'm seasoned  
at.  
Nothing will be bland,  
I'm unbroken,  
so I take this  
heat now,  
but soon I'll  
have a fan.

# Untitled

Olivia Devlin

My friend Jackie drove me the 50 miles or so from the larger city where she lived down to the state capital, the location of the state's main medium-security prison. I'd talked on the phone the day before with my friend, going over the final details of my visit and the endless rules to follow.

Don't wear blue.

Don't wear jeans.

No high heels.

No open-toed shoes.

No electronic devices.

No metal of any kind.

No tight or sexually-provocative clothing.

Skirts must fall at, or below, the knee.

Shirts must cover the chest, shoulders, back, and stomach.

No more than five sheets of photographs.

All photographs must be cleared beforehand by guards.

No writing instruments.

No blank paper.

No touching, except for at the beginning and end of the visit.

Visits may be denied or terminated at any point.

No one is permitted on prison property before 8 a.m., but if you arrive any later than 8:15 a.m., you can be stuck waiting for hours for a visiting spot to open up. A large group of cars accumulates up near the gates as their occupants wait for 8 a.m. Everyone is anxious to be the first in the door. It reminds me of boarding an aircraft, with all the passengers loitering near the gate waiting for their row number to be called, so that they can be the first in line. I've never understood why people do this. Do they think they are somehow going to get to their destination faster? At the guard booth, by the entrance, you have to identify yourself, identify the inmate you are visiting by name and number, and wait while the guard checks your name against the inmate's file. You are then issued a number and told to wait in a

specific spot in the parking lot for your number to be called. By the time I get to the waiting area, there is already a cluster of chattering women passing around pictures and sharing stories. They clearly already know each other, and as a newcomer I am eyed with suspicion. As more people arrive, I am reminded of something I once read about people sentenced to time in prison: *the women will wait for their men, but men rarely wait for their women.*

Going through security upon entering the prison proper is like going through security at an airport. After surrendering my phone, I have to go through a metal detector, which promptly goes off. The guard asks if I have any jewellery or piercings, and I say no, but I do have shrapnel in my jaw and leg (from two separate but equally painful incidents). The guard thinks I'm joking, and suggests that it might be the metal clasps at the back of my bra. This strikes me as being largely academic. Since the vast majority of men are unable to figure out how to use a bra clasp at all, it seems unlikely they'd be able to fashion it into any kind of weapon. I keep this particular insight to myself.

Once you clear security, you have to show your I.D., give your authorization number, and identify the inmate you are visiting by name and number. As soon as I say my friend's name, I feel the atmosphere in the room change. The other women no longer eye me with suspicion and suddenly want to chat. Apparently, suspicion is trumped by notoriety, even if the notoriety is not my own. Notoriety is almost as desirable as fame, because if no one is paying attention to you, you might as well not exist. Some of the most terrible acts in history have been carried out in the pursuit of notoriety and a desire to be remembered, even for something negative. After all, if you don't make a mark on the world, were you ever really here?

My friend achieved notoriety at the age of fifteen. He is the reason many schools in his state now have metal detectors and random bag searches. He prompted one of the standard backlashes that demonstrate society's willingness to sacrifice the vast majority of its culture in order to ensure that what remains is "safe." His mugshot was in every newspaper in the country. Two decades later, almost everyone on the west coast still knows his name. While the rest of the world tries to grab its chance at the immortality offered by fame and its darker cousin infamy, he does not want it. The notoriety that the other visiting women want to share in has made him a target. The otherwise liberal state he lived in used his notoriety to send a message to others, sentencing him not as an individual, but as a symbol of a new phenomenon that frightened America. Teenagers and loners write to him expressing their desire to emulate him. He was mentioned repeatedly in the infamous Columbine "basement tapes" by two then-unknown Colorado teenagers, who would go on to eclipse him in terms

of both carnage and infamy. New inmates try to establish their status by picking on him, unaware that he is a quiet person, who prefers to spend most of his time alone, reading aloud to himself and writing in his journals, rather than the violent psycho they have been sold by the media. When I finally walk into the visiting room, I am the first visitor he has had in years.

Above all, he is lonely. He eats standing up by the wall in the cafeteria, rather than at a table because he doesn't understand the clique system in prison any more than he did in high school. He misses his mother, but if he shows it, both the guards and the inmates will taunt him mercilessly. He sees a therapist twice a week for the kind of therapy that could have prevented his life from going the way it did. He told me once that the only thing that keeps him going is the thought that he might one day be released, but that with every passing year it becomes harder and harder to believe.

Three and a half hours later, he hugged me and thanked me for being the first person to ever show him "pure, honest compassion."

That night, I cried myself to sleep.



*Hannah's Dream*, Sofia Szamosi

# Do You Follow?

Tyler Finley

Subject: Memories of You

November 18

Dear Ma,

I thought of you today. You probably don't know—because you don't care to know anything about my life—I have this little goldfish, Samantha. This morning, I couldn't find her. No trace of Samantha in her fishbowl. So, guess what I did? Guess what I fucking did? I walked into my bathroom, lifted the toilet lid, and peered inside. Now, why would I do that? Why would I do that, Ma?

Felix

P.S. Samantha is okay, in case you were wondering. Swimming around like normal. The light probably refracted in just the right way to make her disappear.

Subject: Missing you

November 18

Jess,

I missed you so much today. Do you remember when we had that fish tank in my room with the tetra fish? You were really young, maybe three or four. You named the one with the spot on its left side Richard. You were such a fucking weird kid—naming the fish after our creepy mailman. I swear that creeper wanted to get into our diapers. He never knocked on any other door to provide that “personal touch,” as he put it. I thank god Ma thought the same and always kept us out of sight whenever Richard stopped by.

Anyway, so we had those tetras, right? Do you remember when Richard was missing and we began to freak out and ran to Ma? Do you remember what she told us? She said that Richard was down the toilet with his fish friends. She said that's where fish go when they get tired of swimming.

We really fucked it up the next day. We ran upstairs after breakfast and started helping the fish swim because we didn't want any more of them to leave us. Do you remember how we helped the fish—by wrapping our little hands around their bellies and swishing them through that dirty water? We crushed all of them, Jess. And when we went to Ma for help, you know what she told us? She told us that we shouldn't have done that, that fish should be allowed to swim on their own until it's time for the toilet.

Why did Ma say that? She kept up the toilet lie and then drowned us in truths about death and life and shit. She's such a crazy bitch. Anyway, this story came up and I thought of you.

Email me back soon. I know you prefer calling, but you know how I hate talking on the phone.

Love,  
Felix

Subject: IMPORTANT  
Dear Dr. Adler,

November 20

You told me to email you if anything important arose, and I think you might want to hear about this memory that resurfaced. It's from my childhood, so it's probably pertinent to what we've been talking about.

I wake up in the middle of the night to shouting voices. I look to my right at my fish tank, and a silvery fish eye stares back at me, as if glued to one of the tank's walls. In my head, it's like the moon glowering at me with an angry face, but I know it is just an eye. Do you follow?

I think I remembered all this because something triggered the thought of my mother lying to me about a fish of mine that died. That makes sense, right? People often have a hard time dealing with death. Is that what my problem is?

Let me know what you think!

Best,  
Felix

Subject: Re: Memories of You

November 21

Samantha died today. I couldn't find her again, and then I noticed her lying still beneath the plastic castle. I lifted it up, and she swam to a corner and lay back down again, not moving a fin. She stayed like that for hours. At some point, she died. I can't help but think that she wanted to die alone. I flushed her down the toilet. I hope you're happy.

P.S. Thanks for never getting back to me. What could keep a lonely old lady like you so busy? It's not like you've got any friends.

Subject: Re: IMPORTANT

November 22

Dr. Adler,

Did you get my last email? I think it's pretty important, and I'd like some feedback. Samantha died yesterday. I think the whole ordeal was meant to tell me something, but I'm not sure what. Samantha hid while she was dying, and I took her out into view. Am I finally bringing death to the surface—am I confronting my problem?

Hoping for a swift reply,  
Felix

Subject: Re: Missing you

November 22

Hey Jess,

Not really sure what's going on with you. You're usually pretty quick to respond to my emails. Is everything all right?

On my end, I have been having a bit of a hard time these past two days. Samantha just died. She was in her bowl and I thought she was hiding again, but she turned out to be dying. Guess I should've helped her swim a bit longer, eh? I flushed her . . . what's wrong with me? She deserved better. And . . . I didn't do anything for her. I couldn't, though—right? What do you do for something so dead and pathetic like that? And here I am referring to Samantha as a “something.” Already. Am I heartless?

Anyway, it would be nice to hear back from you. I would even be open to a phone call. I promise I won't yell this time. It would be really helpful to hear a friendly voice.

With love,  
Felix

Subject: Re: Re: IMPORTANT

November 23

Dr. Adler,

I'm not sure if you're getting my emails. Can you email me back to confirm that I have the right email address? Also, I realize I didn't explain who Samantha was in my last email. She's my fish.

Felix

# A Letter to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Vincent Thompson

Dear Dr. King,

It has been 47 years since you left us, but your legacy is still here with us. I still find myself reading your “I Have A Dream” speech to this day. You were a unique and influential African American; you definitely were ahead of your time. A lot has changed since 1968: as a country, America is not as open to racism as it was during slavery and the Jim Crow era. Now, the government tries to disguise racism so it will not be as obvious to the public. School segregation is redesigned as residential segregation.

In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court supposedly outlawed segregation in America’s public schools. But if you were alive today, you would be disappointed to see school segregation still exists. Our youth enroll in school according to the neighborhoods in which they reside. The children who live in the suburbs attend school together and the children who live in urban areas, the majority of whom are African American, attend different schools. This system is called residential segregation; it keeps the rich and poor separated.

This kind of segregation is unjust to less fortunate communities. “Funding is determined by property taxes, and most people in inner cities are renters and therefore own little property, or their properties aren’t worth very much” (Abu-Jamal and Hill, 104). If a family lives in a neighborhood where the majority of its residents own homes, there is a high probability that their school will receive more funding for things such as books and computers, than school districts where the majority of residents are renters. The wealthier the neighborhood district you live in, the better education the schools will provide for your child. Residential segregation law is modern day Jim Crow law. There is no difference in a child being denied a proper education in 2015 than there was in 1950. As if that is not depressing enough, these schools are preparing our African American youth for mass incarceration.

Walking past uniformed police officers, parole officers, drug-sniffing dogs, hand scanners and metal detectors: does this sound like an entrance into a school building? According to Mumia Abu-Jamal, “now, urban schools are precursors to prison. Marian Wright Edelman talks about these schools as where they really inculcate prison culture in children, so that they feel comfortable going from P.S. 103 into Riker’s Island” (Abu-Jamal and Hill, 106). These schools are not giving our youth proper education. Instead, they are preparing them for what white politicians think of as the next step in African American life: mass incarceration. These schools are containing, conditioning, and disciplining bodies, preparing them for prison-like existence.

No wonder prisons and jails across the United States are full of African Americans; they feel comfortable in them. “As many as 80 percent of young African American men now have criminal records and are thus subject to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives” (Alexander, 7). The majority of our African American youth are under the control of the criminal justice system, which makes it perfectly legal to discriminate against them, from voting rights to food stamps. Michelle Alexander pointed out that:

Once you’re labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal. (Alexander, 2)

Dr. King, I know these forms of discrimination sound familiar. Once a felony is on your record, the segregation era is back in effect. This new form of Jim Crow is redesigned as a system that is colorblind. These politicians are definitely much smarter. They use this criminal justice system to target African Americans, but these politicians make this system seem as if they target all criminals. “If current trends continue, one in every three black males born today can expect to go to prison at some point in his lifetime, as can one in every six Latino males, compared to one in every 17 white males” (Report Of The Sentencing Project, 1). This system of colorblindness is a disguise. Black and Latino males fall victim to this criminal justice system at astonishing rates, compared to white males in America. It’s not like white Americans commit fewer crimes; in some cases, they commit more. According to Alexander:

If there are significant differences in the surveys to be found, they frequently suggest that whites, particularly white youth, are more likely to engage in drug crime than people of color . . . . In some states, black men have been admitted to prison on drug charges at rates twenty to fifty times greater than those of white men. (Alexander, 99)

While white Americans might commit more drug crimes than African Americans, criminal conviction numbers show something different. Dr. King, if this system’s purpose is not to target African Americans, then what is it? This is nothing new; America has targeted African Americans since day one.

After slavery, the vagrancy laws were in full effect:

Nine southern states adopted vagrancy laws—which essentially made it a criminal offense not to work and were applied selectively to Blacks—and eight out of those states enacted convict laws for the hiring-out of country prisoners to plantation owners and private companies. (Alexander, 28)

The white planters targeted the ex-slaves with these vagrancy laws. If ex-slaves did not have a job, they were going to jail and then back off to the plantation. This was the planters' excuse to put the ex-slaves back on the plantation.

Targeting African Americans did not stop here; the white politicians targeted African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement. You made famous the nonviolent philosophy of protesting, boycotting, and standing up and fighting for your rights without resorting to violence. White politicians started to consider nonviolence a crime at the time when African Americans used these tactics. "Civil rights protests were frequently depicted as criminal rather than political in nature, and federal courts were accused of excessive 'lenience' toward lawlessness, thereby contributing to the spread of crime" (Alexander, 41). White politicians wanted federal courts to take the "get tough" approach on civil rights protesting. Dr. King, you were an actual victim of this; you were arrested in Birmingham, Alabama for a direct action protest. Dr. King, history is repeating itself.

Gone are the days when the Ku Klux Klan and the lynch mob terrorized the south. This generation is introduced to the police department. Their job is supposedly to protect and serve our African American community. But some African Americans may fear the police today as much as their grandparents feared the Klan. Police brutality no longer consists of water hoses and nightsticks. Nowadays, these officers have new tricks: their water hoses are nine-millimeter hand guns that spray hollow-tip bullets at you. Dr. King, this indeed is a whole new ball game. "Law enforcement officials average about 96 homicides a year in which a white officer kills an African American" (*USA Today*). "There were 461 'justifiable homicides' tallied by the F.B.I. in all of 2013:" the highest total in 20 years, even as the national rate dropped (*The Nation*). These law enforcement officials do not receive fair punishments for the homicides. They commit these homicides and receive desk duties. It's like police officers have a license to kill. This is a huge problem on the hands of our African American community. Our African American communities are in a current state of confusion on how to handle this problem.

At this time, we need you, Dr. King. Our communities are missing leaders, like you, who could guide African American youth in the right direction. If there is anyone who could get the youth's attention, it would be you.

When I read your "Letter From The Birmingham City Jail," I admire the way that you and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference went about the timing of the direct action, that landed you in that jail cell. You stated, "Knowing that a strong economic withdrawal program would be the byproduct of direct action, we felt that this was the best time to bring pressure on the merchants for the needed changes" (King, 88-89). This was a strategic move, perfectly timing the direct action so that it could impact the economy. You used this direct action tactic and you forced those businesses

to hear you out.

The best way to get America's attention is through their pockets. Our African American communities are lacking leaders who use their brains in the manner you have. I think that what we are about to witness today is what we would have witnessed without a nonviolent approach during the Civil Rights Movement. The movements organized by Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X would have definitely led to violence. In your words, Dr. King:

I'm grateful to God that, through the Negro Church, the dimension of nonviolence entered our struggle. If this philosophy had not emerged, by now many streets of the south would, I am convinced, be flowing with floods of blood. (King, 95)

Your nonviolent movement might have saved the south from being involved in a bloody war. Today, without a leader like yourself, America may be headed down that road.

In closing, and on the brighter side of things, we have a black President named Barack Obama. Obama reminds me of you; you both had a vision for the future. A future with equality for all and a coalition of all races. In the words of Obama, "there is not a black America and a white America and a Latino America and Asian America—there's the United States of America" (Obama, "Keynote Address To The Democratic National Convention"). We are a country where we all are supposedly united into one. This reminds me of you and your "I Have A Dream" speech. Dr. King, you spoke about a dream, and about hope of integration. Obama brings this new sense of hope, a hope that African Americans can be successful in America. Even with the white politicians targeting African Americans within this criminal justice system, there is hope that we do not have to fall victim . . . .

Sincerely,  
Vincent Thompson

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# Blood Also Tastes Like This

Henry Sheeran

in a field of little red flowers,  
    young,  
sits Lincoln in a loose dress,  
    nursing a corpse,

and under the sunflowers  
worms wet their tongues  
    to suck slowly on  
    our bones in  
    just a few years,

    and in the unsure  
light of the street lamp  
17-year-old white boys  
    cackle  
and draw back their lips  
    and draw state lines  
like doodles in their notebooks,  
    and giggle and howl and  
rub their teeth with dollar  
    bills

    this tastes like metal  
and so do our fingers,  
residue of rifle triggers  
and pornography left  
like such invisible dirt  
    under fingernails,

    and under the sure  
glow of the moon,  
mosquitos and wolves  
    smile,  
    and wait for one of  
us to choke on a bean

# On a Sunday Morning

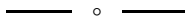
Sheila Marie Orfano

Jerry kissed me for the first time the night before he died.

It wasn't like I didn't know it would happen. The kiss, I mean. Because the entire seventh grade had been buzzing about Jerry's crush on me, and how he was finally going to do something about it at the parish fiesta. William told Robert who told Dennis H., who whispered it to Dennis V. in the back of math class. Then Dennis V. passed it on to the girls by telling Nancy in their carpool, and Nancy called her best friend Kimberly who was already on the phone with me. I found out four seconds after Kimberly took me off call waiting.

Jerry and I sat on opposite sides of our religion classroom, so the note he sent had been folded and refolded many times before it got to me. Below Dennis V.'s crude drawing of Ms. Cadman's head on a T-Rex, Jerry had written, "nora save me a ride on the ferris wheel on saturday!"

I wrote back, "ok ☺."



On the corner of a busy intersection was Our Lady of Peace Parish, a small church with a large congregation and a bell in its bell tower that could no longer ring. Its parking lot was a long stretch of cracked asphalt that glittered in the sun. After mass kids would weave between beat-up sedans and grey-blue Camrys while their parents idled in front of their cars, making lunch plans. On the other side of the parking lot was the school.

Our Lady of Peace School was shaped like a backwards, upside-down F, held together by fading bricks and chipping poles painted blue. In the small outdoor space between the upper and lower prongs of the F was a statue of the Virgin Mary, with a flag pole rising up behind her, where the pre-k to third graders would run around and find lady bugs before the bell rang and they had to line up for class. The tail of the F, hanging beside a field and the basketball courts and an island of lunch benches, housed the library, the computer lab, and the fourth to eighth grade classrooms. Everyone called it The Big Kid Side.

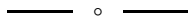
This is where most of the seventh graders were that Saturday night, away from the noise and lights of the fiesta. We thought we were too old for the balloon dart booths, too cool to talk to our mothers volunteering in the food stalls, too tired of the same rides carted into the church lot. So we sat in the deserted tail of the F, on the shore of a dark sea of parked cars, pretending to have fun.

Jerry and the rest of the boys were clustered together. Dennis V. was telling them about how his older brother had snuck him into an R-rated horror movie, the third *Final Destination*. Nearby, I sat with all the girls.

I was wearing a red dress I usually only put on for church. It made me stand out, my bare legs alone in a circle of dark denim. I had changed at home three times, from the dress to jeans, and back to the dress, until my mom threatened to leave without me if I took any longer. I kept fidgeting as I sat next to Kimberly and Nancy, pulling the hem down over my knees.

Dennis V. was reaching the climax of the movie, on his toes with his arms stretched high, when Jerry broke out of the boy group and tapped me on the shoulder. I couldn't look at him when he asked. Instead I stared down at his shifting feet and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, but I nodded yes.

We walked away to giggling and whispers and the distinct echoing of Dennis V.'s clap.



On a makeshift stage, a woman wearing deep red lipstick and bright ruffles danced around a blindfolded man clanging maracas together, the quick beat of a trumpet matching her steps. I led the way through the cheering crowd. Jerry leaned towards my ear so I could hear above the din and said, "I bet I could do that." I tried to turn around to answer him and stumbled into our gym coach. Before I could say, "I'm sorry, Ms. Cooley!" Jerry grabbed me by the wrist and we ran away.

We darted past the ring toss and the prize room and the unwinnable game with the magnetic fishing rods. We stopped at the sweet tooth booth, and he asked me if I wanted popcorn. I told him I was fine, but he fished four tickets out of his pocket anyway and handed them to Dennis V.'s older sister. While we waited as she scooped popcorn into a striped bag, I looked around, up the row of food booths ending at the Virgin Mary statue. The lines were long, because it was nearing time for dinner. The smells of smoky kebabs and acidic salsa and chili-seasoned beef patties on a grill thickened the air. Jerry's mom waved at us from behind the Filipino food booth, but he pretended not to notice.

When we finally inched our way up to the front of the Ferris wheel line, I dug into my mini-purse to find tickets, but Jerry handed the operator enough for two. We both clambered into a red car. The operator smelled like smoke when he leaned in to check our safety bar. He stepped back and flipped a switch, and we rose slowly into the air.

“It was nice of Ms. Werner not to give us homework.”

I looked away from my tight grip on the safety bar, and turned towards Jerry. With his head tilted downward and his eyes peering up, he appeared to be forcing himself to keep his gaze on me. We were two cars away from the top.

“Yeah. Ms. Cadman is still making us do our saint essay drafts though. Can you believe that?”

The quiet, heavy whir of the Ferris wheel restarted and the dangling legs above us disappeared. One more and we’d be at the top, where Kimberly had told me *it* would happen.

“You look really pretty tonight.”

I fiddled again with the hem of my dress, crumpling it up, then smoothing it out again. The material slid easily through my fingers. I was glad I had worn it. My cheeks warmed, but my dark skin hid my blush. “Thanks.”

The Ferris wheel was a small, kid-friendly one. Most of the other riders were younger students, and I recognized Kimberly’s little sister in line, waiting to get on. Our Lady of Peace had had a different kind once, a Ferris wheel with cages for cars that spun, its captives upside down while it rotated through the air. I was a fourth grader then, my first year on The Big Kid Side, my first time on a big kid ride. Nancy, who had gone on it with me, promised not to tell anyone I had cried the whole time. Two kids threw up; ten parents complained. None of us ever saw that Ferris wheel again.

The ride was facing the upper prong of the F. Even in the second-to-highest car, our view was just a faded brick wall. I could hear the kindergarteners squealing in the bouncy house beside us, the older kids shrieking on the Scrambler across the lot. The high-pitched music of the trumpet floated through the air from the other side of the wall. The blindfolded man with maracas and the woman with colorful skirts were probably still dancing.

The Ferris wheel came alive again, and we reached the top. The brick wall fell away as we rose up, and suddenly we could see everything.

My mom was sitting at a table beside my dad, both eating off styrofoam plates. Dennis V.’s older sister was handing the parish priest, Father Alexander, a large pink puff of cotton candy at the sweet tooth booth. The dancers were taking a bow, the man’s eyes no longer obscured, the sound of the trumpet replaced by applause. And far off, away from the bustling fiesta, sat the seventh graders, loitering in the F’s tail.

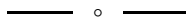
Jerry shifted on the plastic seat next to me. “Nora?”

When I turned to him he was already leaning closer, eyes closed and lips puckered. I instinctively bent away, scared of what he looked like, but he didn’t notice and kept tilting

forward. I shut my own eyes and braced myself. On Saturday night at the Our Lady of Peace Parish fiesta in the seventh grade, Jerry's lips touched mine at the top of the Ferris wheel.

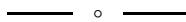
I liked Jerry because he was a starter on the basketball team, and because he sat next to me in math. I liked him because there were only thirty people in our class, and he was the boy I talked to the most. I liked him because he told Ms. Cadman I was the Mary to his Joseph, and whispered funny things to me while we acted out the nativity scene at the Christmas mass. I liked him for all the reasons why anyone likes anyone in seventh grade.

The ride started to move again. The bulbs lining the complicated crisscross of bars in the center of the wheel hurt my eyes as we descended, and the stench of the operator seemed stronger as we got off the ride. We walked back through the fiesta, past the food booths, past the resting dancers, past my mom while she wasn't looking, so she couldn't see Jerry holding my hand. Back to the tail of the F, where all of our friends were waiting.



My favorite time to go to church was during fiesta weekend. The mingling scents of food drifted through the heavy wooden doors, and from my pew I could hear the grumbling of the rides as they awoke for the day. Father Alexander gave one-minute homilies and handed out ride tickets at the end of the mass.

I liked it the most, though, because that was the only time my friends came. On a regular Sunday, the church was filled with the elderly, young families struggling to keep their babies from crying, a few visiting nuns from the local convent, and me. But a fiesta Sunday was like Easter. The pews overflowed with people: dads were relegated to standing on the sides and my classmates whispered excitedly to each other across the center aisle. During communion I saw Kimberly and Nancy, Dennis H. and Dennis V., acting reverent as they processed by my pew but poking me when they passed. I waited for Jerry to come up the aisle, picturing him guiding his little brother towards the altar. My throat tightened with jitters, until the last host was served and Father Alexander was reciting the closing prayer.



The whispers started amongst the moms who were cooking frantically in hot booths to serve the after-church lunch rush.

“Did you hear?”

“How awful!”

“Driving drunk?”

“Asleep in the backseat.”

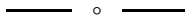
Then, when Dennis V. went up to the Mexican food booth and asked his mom to

slide her favorite son an extra tamale, tears formed in the corners of her eyes. Dennis V. asked, “¿*Qué pasa?*”

Kimberly and Nancy were in line for hamburgers, but they left to spread the news as soon as Dennis V. told them. It had made it to every kid in our seventh-grade class, had even trickled up to a few eighth graders and down to a couple sixth graders, before it got to me.

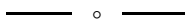
It was Dennis V. who hugged me, crying, telling me “I’m sorry, Nora, but Jerry’s dead. He’s dead. He’s dead. He’s dead. It was Dennis H. who handed me a keychain in the shape of a cowboy boot, saying, “Jerry gave this to me but he would want you to have it, he would, he would, he would.” It was Ms. Cadman, abandoning the ring toss booth, told us to forget about the saint essay, just pray and pray and pray.

It was me who slipped away while everyone cried, boys and girls clustered together in front of the Virgin Mary, Father Alexander telling them to breathe. Breathe. Breathe.



Our fifth-grade religion teacher was a tall old man named Mr. Griffin, whose butt crack showed whenever he bent over because he couldn’t find pants long enough to fit his legs. The theme for religion that year was Family Life, and sometime in November we learned about death.

Kimberly’s *abuela* had died the year before, so she knew what Mr. Griffin was talking about, but none of the rest of us did. Dennis V. spent most of the lesson flicking crumpled scraps of paper at Dennis H., who flicked them back, and I spent most of the lesson watching them. Then Jerry, who liked Kimberly at the time, and only sat next to me because Mr. Griffin separated him from Dennis V. for talking too much, leaned over and said, “I hope God lets me die when I’m happy.”



On that Sunday morning fiesta weekend, I sat in the tail of the F and leaned my head against the door of the seventh-grade classroom. Jerry’s desk was in there. I wondered what would happen to his books, the bag of Oreos hiding behind his pencil case, his worn mini-stapler that everyone borrowed because it had blue staples.

The cool of the concrete seeped through my dark denim jeans. I tucked my arms beneath my thighs, pulling my legs in closer. I thought of the note from Jerry, his bumpy black scrawl and my soft pencilled reply, wedged between the pages of my religion workbook.

My eyes were closed, but I opened them in time to see the Ferris wheel wake up. It was the first orbit of the day, and I watched as empty car after empty car replaced each other at the top until two bodies with swinging legs appeared in a red one. I might have imagined it, but I think they kissed.

# Late July, Lower Manhattan

Shannagh Rowland

Feet dangle over the edge of his bed.  
My eyes, bloodshot,  
admire the ceiling.  
There's a crack in the corner; it  
trickles down to meet a spluttering of

polluted city air, boiling heat.  
Cigarette holes in the fabric of his sheet,  
I knit my finger into the gap and roll  
to watch him duck beneath the door frame,  
gone.

I think about his thread veins,  
the nooks between his toes,  
the soft part of his elbow,  
brittle lungs and a cantaloupe of a brain  
now, lemon.

Searching for needles, spoons, aluminium foil,  
I spot a jar of apple juice on the desk  
Filled with moss balls, khaki green;  
And I waste, waiting.



*Untitled*, Sarah Stevenson





*New York 2015, Daniels Mekšs*

# Marley

Anna Mongillo

The heart weighed 360 grams.

Paul had received the autopsy report in the mail Monday morning, but hadn't opened it until Friday. He had taken the week to hate himself for requesting it at all.

Paul closed his eyes and lay down for fifteen minutes. He did not move. He listened to the sweat fall from his body. His skin felt delicate; he was sore inside. There was a brief sensation that everything would be finished soon.

Finally he turned over and rose to his feet, floating to the window. The schoolchildren were making bright patterns on the pavement. They teased each other, fanning out in concentric circles. The vegetable peddler shooed them from his stand with his big palms flapping. They were strong hands—Paul knew them—and deliberate as they packed *papas*, *cebollas*, and sweet green stalks of *acelga* into plastic bags.

Paul remembered the day he had arrived in Buenos Aires—the scent of the air, like roses burning, and the sidewalk loosening under his steps. Then, there had been so much to feel, so much to touch and imagine. There had been life on every corner. When the sun set, the sky boiled. The smell was different now—stale and stagnant. There was nothing left for him here.

Marley was dead. The words had not yet come to Paul, but just then he felt them flooding his body: Marley was dead, and his heart weighed 360 grams, and his left lung weighed 400 grams, and his right kidney weighed 1500 grams. Paul let the details fill him. He felt them knocking at his stomach lining. The children went on playing below, and he thought of being a kid with Marley, 12 years old in Algiers, Louisiana, racing along the Mississippi, breathing its churning brown beauty, catching bugs in the dirt. Marley was always pulling him along like a puppy.

“C'mon, Paul!” he'd shout.

Paul recalled a summer when they were older. Algiers sagged in the humidity but Marley cut through it like a knife. His feet were nimble—Paul's perpetually too-clean, too-clumsy, too-delicate: the feet of a baby. Marley's toenails were ragged, his snowy soles masked by grime.

The bus would get them into downtown New Orleans in 15 minutes. Paul was 16 years old and Marley was 18. He was tall and thin and preoccupied, and he wanted to be a musician. He would run up and down the wrong side of the road, yelling over his shoulder, “This is perfect, this is great, this would make for a great lyric . . . oh, the streets are screaming at me, Paul!” Once he stared, open-mouthed, for half an hour at a saxophone player improvising on the curb. When the man was done, Marley whistled and nudged Paul with his sharp elbow. “Damn, the guy has talent. If I could just have a drop of that.”

Not much later, Marley left Algiers. No one saw him until Paul’s graduation, though he had written letters and sent postcards frequently during his absence, each from a new city, or perhaps the countryside, always enthusiastic and witty and full of some strange new madness. Paul had earned a bachelor’s degree in comparative literature, and he wanted to write poetry. He was afraid to see Marley—Marley, so strong and wide by then, so loud, so solid—a brother from an alternate dimension.

Yet on their reunion, Marley was shockingly delicate and solemn. His eyes were as round and wide as ever, but his bones had condensed into birds’ wings.

And now Marley was dead. His heart weighed 360 grams. It was a heavy heart. Paul watched the children circling each other below the window, and he felt himself grow a little lighter, as if his brother were inside of him, both palms cupping the underside of his chest, lifting him in secret.



*Untitled*, Stephanie Segel

# Extraction

Mackenzie Leighton

1

cyclical spinning bobbin  
uprooting us from this house  
clawing through our possessions  
only to find that we possess  
three copies of *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn*

but our trees will be entrusted  
to new homeowners  
alongside mother's beloved perennials  
and the peonies that bloom  
in mid june

we'll be gone by july 31st  
goldenrod will appear in august

2

tear yourself away  
from these worn and weathered shingles  
exit the front door  
past oxidized hinges  
peel yourself off of bedroom walls  
abandon singed imprints  
from year-round Christmas lights

shake soil from toes  
and carve out from underneath fingernails  
unfurl arms from limbs of backyard pines  
forgo unwanted geraniums  
but transplant pumpkin, sunflower,  
cacti, chamomile  
those belong to you

squint through father's binoculars  
survey your marshland  
detach yourself from it  
salted and sweeping

and this house  
detach yourself from this too  
a composition of materials  
a heap of  
rivets and timber  
brick, steel, glass  
and windowbox frames  
for a new family to rearrange

let the kids that fill this home  
discover that in the summertime  
the sledding hill will transform  
into a slip n slide  
with three tarps from the hardware store  
the hose from the shed  
and a bottle of dish soap  
from under the kitchen sink

3

goldenrod means it is august  
and that there is little time left  
to purposefully tangle its stems  
into the scrunchie on top of my head

appetite is ebbing  
and even after i shower  
i still have dirt on my skin  
and it has been a while  
since i have slept in a bed  
that belongs to me

# Ponce

Jose Diaz

There are people who have shaped my perception of life and whom I view as actors. One actor I remember went by the name of Ponce. Ponce is a place in Puerto Rico, but I guess that being his place of birth, he decided to carry the town with him around the world. His name was not only his identity but it also colored how the world perceived him and how he perceived the world. I can remember the first day he moved on my gallery at Auburn Correctional Facility. He was a pudgy, bald man standing no taller than five feet three inches. At first sight, I thought I had another crazy person moving into the neighboring cell, but I didn't pay him any attention, other than a glance. It didn't matter to me; I was in the here and now, and I was only focused on the hope of receiving a letter from a female friend that would substitute a delicate touch for some soothing words. The mail never came that day.

Later that evening when I returned from the yard, I wondered who the stranger next door to me was. Was he a rapist, pedophile, snitch, or some mix thereof? My thoughts ran across a list of the most heinous acts that I could possibly conjure, until I was abruptly interrupted by rap on my thin steel cell wall. I looked to where the sound resonated, my eyes transfixed on a gray spot where the lead paint had peeled off, leaving the wall bare. Bare like my nerves that have been exposed and worn raw through this time.

At first, I thought I was imagining the sound. Sometimes in prison our minds become filled with phantoms of fear, because our nervous systems are always in fight or flight mode. The unknown variable is always something to fear. I craned my neck in attempt to better hear through the cacophony of yelling, music, and other raucous sounds. My cell wall rumbled as the man banged to get my attention. Fuck was the first word that came to my mind.

"Yo," I answered looking past the bars of my gallery, past the bars of the cell block, and over the forty foot cement wall and into the empty street of Auburn.

I don't know how many nights I spent looking over that wall, wondering how it would feel to feel what my long-forgotten freedom felt like.

He asked me what time it was in Spanish.

"Diez," I replied.

Although I wanted to maintain my distance, I knew he came to this jail with the bare minimum—nothing.

"Do you need something?" I asked. "*Un jabón*, soup, something to read?"

“Do you smoke?”

“No, but do you drink coffee?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m boiling some water now, *quieres?*”

“No, no, I’m . . .”

“Pass me your cup.”

“*No tengo.*”

“Don’t worry, I got you.”

“*Gracias, Bori.*”

I shook my head at his thanks. Why is it that people thank you when you are only doing what a decent person should do in any unconventional situation?

As the days and weeks passed, Ponce and I got to know each other. He told me of his wife and that, even though she was unable to support him, he still loved her like they were never separated. It broke his heart to know that her health was declining and that she needed him, but he was sitting in jail. He would muse that a simple back or foot massage would go a long way.

His son hated him because he felt abandoned and lied to; Ponce had promised him that he would never return to jail after his first stint. I felt that Ponce looked at me as his second son. I guess he had a need to impart some paternal wisdom and I was an outlet. We would spend many nights awake talking about love and family, and how we threw it all away in pursuit of selfish endeavors.

“*Oiye,*” Ponce called as he knocked on my wall.

“*Yo.*”

“*Que tu hace?*”

“Nothing, just writing my essay for tomorrow.”

“*Entonces,* I won’t bother you.”

“No, no, I’m good. It’s already done. I’m just rewriting. I got time for you . . . what’s up?”

“I was just thinking about my son. You know . . . in life everyone always wants something from you whenever they talk to you. Whether it’s some conversation, help, or something. Nobody says anything to anybody *por na*. There’s always a reason why they call you.”

“So what do you want from me?”

“Nothing—just conversation . . . but since you ask, a shot of coffee wouldn’t hurt.”

I smiled.

“Oh, and while you’re at it, *hervir un pocito también.*”

“Just pass me your cup and I’ll hook you up. *Quieres crema y azúcar?*”

“Since you offer,” he responded coyly.

I smiled.

Our conversations were always sage-like, riddled with words of wisdom most likely forgotten by the masses. I can’t say he ever taught me anything I didn’t already know. However, he taught me about pain. Every time we would talk, I would see his face contort through the mirror he held. For some reason, while the water was warming, he decided to come clean. He told me that he couldn’t do it anymore. His wife was more than likely dying and it was killing him that he couldn’t be there. She didn’t even respond to his letters. His son wanted nothing to do with him and he had started his own family without a mention of grandpa to the child. He was over forty and had many years left in jail.

“*Yo no quiero vivi’ ma’ na’*,” Ponce concluded. When a guy jokes about committing suicide, it’s customary to joke back, saying “before you do it let me get your tape collection” or “make sure you wet the rope so it doesn’t break by accident,” but this was real. I’ve been confronted with many issues throughout my imprisonment and still am, but this was unique. It wasn’t like the pressure of being in the yard waiting for a rumble to ensue, or something that I knew my basic instincts of survival would guide me through. I knew I was in over my head; I knew I was clueless as to finding the means to help him.

The D.O.C. forces inmates to watch videos about rape, Hep C, drugs, etc. When Ponce told me that, he brought me back. I could remember laughing dismissively when I saw the suicide video. I could remember the inmates’ poor acting, and the list of things you could do to prevent a death. One of them was notifying a staff member, which is anathema to the inmate code, and I loathe to break the code. But what could I do? Why was this happening to me? Why did I have to fucking like this guy?

I looked back at my books splayed over my bed, the pen resting on the pad waiting for me to re-submerge myself in a world foreign to my own. Why is it that I could structure my thoughts on paper, but when the medium changed to a personal interaction, my words were harder to find?

“Ponce . . . you serious?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“It’s over for me, *se acabó*. When I go home I’ll be an old man. I told them I’d never come back, but here I am, contigo. You see . . . it’s different for you, *estás joven*. Even though you’re doing a lot of time now, you’ll be what? *Como* thirty when you go home.”

“Yeah you’re hurting now,” he continued, “but you’ll go home *y encontrar un mujer que es ta’ pa’ ti*, and you’ll have kids and move on. *Pero*, for me . . . there’s no moving on. *Mi mamá*, she died during my last time *y mi mujer* is dying now. I don’t have anyone . . . I’m done.”

What could I say to that?

“Walking!”

“Walking!”

“Walking!”

“Tight skirt on!” various inmates yelled out in warning, because an asshole C.O. dubbed “Tight Skirt” was doing his rounds.

Guys lowered their music because if he figured you out, he would shut down the power in your cell and, unfortunately, the two cells next to you too, because the power lines were connected. So if you didn’t want to lose power for a few days, or have two guys angry at you, you would keep it down until he did his rounds.

I looked out the dirty windows again. The streets outside the prison were empty. There was no escape. I studied the windows and the reflections in them. I could see the shadows of other men. It was as if they weren’t real. It was as if they were puppets animated in a mimicry of life. Is this life? Could I really qualify this bathroom I am caged in as a home? I don’t know how many times I would grab hold of those cell bars in a death grip, or rattle my cell gate in frustration. Unlike steel, the bars were made of iron, so they never bent to the exertion of my will. If I kept on, it would be I who would eventually bend or break.

I looked around my cell. There was dirt in the crevice of corners that no amount of scrubbing could get out. No matter how many times I swept or mopped, the dirt would always build up. The windows that I look out into the world were beyond filthy, as if to say that this is what the world sees when they look at me. Could I blame Ponce for not wanting to live here?

I wondered who pulled the strings. Who was the Geppetto to these Pinocchios? What motivated these men to live on? I looked directly at the windows ahead of me, placing myself center stage. Then I shut off my light, taking myself off the stage.

“*Oíye!*” I called.

“*Que?*”

Holding my mirror in my hands, I looked at my reflection obscured by darkness, but I didn’t recognize the person I saw. I felt disembodied. I surveyed the contours of my face, noticing the darkness under my eyes and the overall slackness of my features.

I stuck my hand out the cell, positioning the mirror so I could see Ponce. “Just hold on.”

“I know.”

When our eyes met, I only saw myself . . . “The water’s boiling.”

# Our Great Mother Cries

Ismael Bonano

Dear children, can you not hear my cries?  
Can you not see how I burn with anger?  
Do you not feel me tremble?  
Are you not drowning in my tears?  
Such pain you cause.  
I don't understand the things you do.  
You strip me bare,  
Befoul my air,  
And dirty my waters.  
You pierce my veins and drain my blood.  
The food I give to you is put to waste.  
More of you—every minute, there are more of you.  
Warring with your siblings, you are destroying your home.  
When I am lost, where will you live?  
What will give you shade,  
How will you breathe?  
Even now, you are starving and fighting amongst yourselves.  
It is hard for me to protect you, for I am weak.  
My skin burning, and my heart growing cold.  
Constant agony has aged me well beyond my years.  
Do you not appreciate me?  
Do you not love the life I give?  
When will you grow?  
When will you understand?  
When will you stop being children?




*Untitled*, Olivia Devlin



*Untitled*, Daniel David Cole

# Resurrección

Maria Alejandra Torres



Stained with the silver  
fingerprints of waxen hands  
Crucified on the wall *como Jesucristo*  
the shadows of my inhibitions  
fade into swatted-away particles  
only visible through the glass-eyed glare  
Eclipsed entrapped exposed  
so that people can judge—  
no, “appreciate”—  
the rare gene of exoticism (*¡a!*)  
dripping,  
suffocated by the carbon dioxide bullet  
exhaled by chauvinists,  
from the holes in my hands,  
*las que uso para rezar*

Anchored bruised coarse feet  
kick the crystal,  
*los que caminaban las tierras*  
*de mis ancestros indígenas,*  
drenched in tears of fetishized otherness,  
hovering above gleaming parquet patterned  
hardwood floors, hardened by  
Converse, Nike, Vans  
made in *nuestros países* . . .  
Visitor footprints, patiently contemplative elsewhere  
Dirty deprecating skid marks  
Bekneeth my plagued plaque  
An “Untitled” ~~piece of art~~  
Speci(wo)men, socially constructed biologically  
By conquistador colonist imperialist

Stealthy cameras snarl  
("please refrain from using flash")  
From covert mouths that hiss  
("please keep your voices down")  
About my tacked tongue  
How it can roll its rr's:  
*derribar enterrar chatarra*  
*borrar error terror socorrer correr*  
A tongue of two tongues  
One bitten by the fangs of hegemony  
Even though there is no national official language  
A dialect that does not like spicy food—  
not all *Latin countries* eat spicy food—  
A neglected dialectic . . .

"*Caliente, muy caliente:*"  
A phrase reserved for platters of  
Food and a side of human flesh  
seasoned with sexualization  
A cocoa canvas molded to be curvy  
crazy voluptuous sexy wild in bed  
someone to fuck, not someone with whom  
to make love (*Porque? Yo quiero amor.*)  
*No todas lucimos como* Sofía Vergara  
*No todas nos movemos como* Shakira  
Some forced to fall under the  
trance of blades knives scissors  
thirsty for suction and hungry for silicon  
myself a product of a different instrument,  
more an item from A.C. Moore, sketched

By a wooden stick and bristles  
for this unpopular exhibit,  
Whose soft hair should be  
from the tail of the Kolinsky weasel

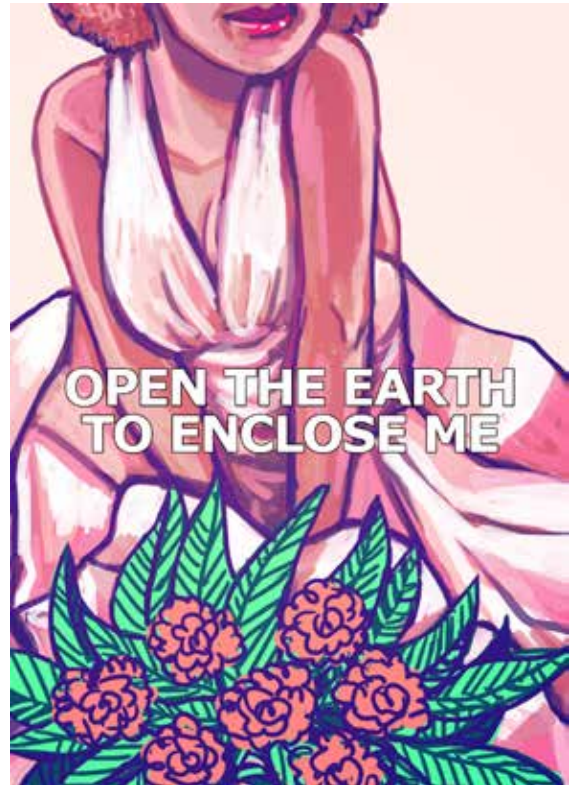
Instead it has been plucked from my scalp  
unruly untamed strands  
suppressed by an ethnic elastic band (*ja!*)  
A burial ground of light-colored hair dye  
Talons of a straightener cremate to  
imitate the other artists' brushes  
Frayed filaments unfit for painting, dabbing a

Centuries-old crusty, invasive palette  
splotched with fresh shades of brown  
whose musky fumes pollute the glass  
irritating my nostrils, making me lightheaded  
Tan beige bronze caramel hazelnut coffee  
coffee with milk  
100% Colombian coffee  
(spelled with TWO o's)  
*importado de mi tierra natal*  
Juan Valdez or Starbucks?  
More milk being poured into this clay cup  
Whole milk overflowing . . .

Barrels of condensed breath in halos—  
binoculars for my coffee bean eyes  
that nail their reflection into the bleached stare  
of a little white boy,  
through the wine-smeared veins  
clawed by my holey fists—  
A little white boy who tugs on his father's hand  
and points with a chubby, sugar-coated finger  
In school he's been taught to distinguish,  
to cross out  
that which does not belong with the others,  
a "lesson" he'll carry through his life  
at the expense of mine



Doce Balanço, João Londres

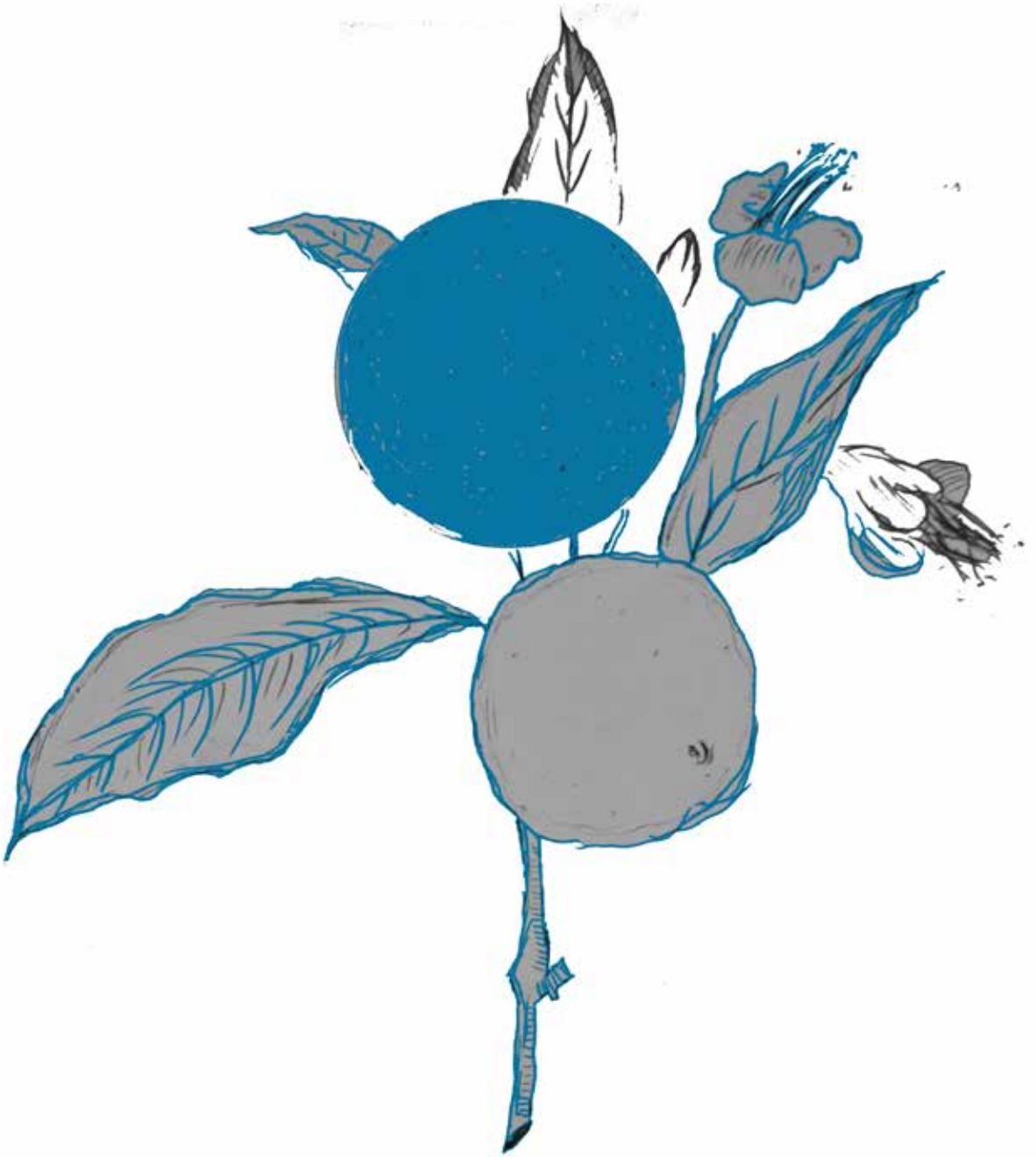




*Daphne 1 - 4, Alex Ling*



*Objective*, Eirdís Ragnarsdóttir



*Blue/Orange*, John Belknap



*Buried*, Eirdís Ragnarsdóttir

# Untitled

Liz Francis

I am terrified of myself

The end of days is as near as the next impending sunset. To many a sensation of beauty, but to me another, day gone and beat under the cruel meat mallet of time. I've written that before. I've written all of this in many ways. Making love on a Sunday afternoon in the darkness of a bedroom that doesn't face the rising sun, every day I fall more in love with you, the happiness begins to feel all sad, like a melting ice cube on a black tar sidewalk. Once so cool, fresh, full of possibility. Today no longer, warm hot water, dissolved into dirty air, frozen solid. So temporary. Do you get it? The smell of peanut butter toast reminds me of my father, the way the crumbs line the plate, like little reminders of pre-pubescence. My budding breasts at seven felt omnipotent and daring, terrifying all the same. I recognized then that I never was, nor never will be, just like my older brother, but instead just a "tomboy." My mom made me start wearing a bra so young then, before everyone else, because I grew outward faster than everyone else, too. The memory of my doctor telling me that gaining fifteen pounds in one year is dangerous and unhealthy. For my part I blame Big Texas Cinnamon Rolls and the advent of the internet, where I browsed Harry Potter fanfiction sites and learned how to make my own butter-beer. Nerd or enthusiast, it was all the same to me, Limewire slowly destroying my computer for Led Zeppelin and *Rent*. I remember the fresh smell of earth after a fall rain, like death and life not exactly cooperating with one another. Jumping into piles of leaves and fearing the bugs that crawl within. The tree that shook and grew over my home, my dad sitting underneath it, one day all of us in the front yard to play, which never happened again. My first time driving in our gold minivan down the tree-lined street.

I remember so clearly, my ear pressed to my parent's door, and my mom saying in a hushed tone, "your daughter thinks she's gay," and my dad said, "I'm worried she's becoming my sister," and I felt a betrayal I never knew I could feel. This is my first time talking about it, the feeling of all the deep buried truths and untruths inside of me whispering silt through my stomach, begging for escape. And the deeper shame that my mother was right, that I am not gay, but something else that lies somewhere in between. But, not all these truths come out, and I am still just a wrapping of thought and heavy, labored breath, sadness and muscle, confusion and bone. What does it mean to live, I wonder, as I watch *Extreme Homes* Collection and *Design on a Dime*? What it means to be awake with my brain completely shut off. What it means to have half a million dollars to create a nest that will never save a marriage. What it means to learn about Chile and know I will never go there.

When a good friend is mean to you and you cry upstairs, vomit a little, and go to sleep. Vomit as though it is that silt, as though it is the tree in front of my house, the betrayal behind the doorway. Vomiting the butterfly-embellished blue jeans I had in the third grade and the rows of benches that lined the front of my elementary school. Vomit the memory of bodysurfing in the Redneck Riviera, of swimming alone in my pool for hours, thinking the sound of my own body in the water was someone going to drown me. Then, quick: the memory of a schoolboy friend, forearm snapped completely in half, standing up and screaming, and my inaction, as mothers with splint material laid him down and tended to his rubber limb.



*Kiana, Meredith Stein*

# Boys Will Be

Drew Gregoy

I am a good mother. No matter what my daughter might say, I am a good mother. I was her age once. I had a mother once. And I know what it's like to have a mother who doesn't respect you, a mother who is stuck in past traditions and practices, who places her own social expectations upon you. Even in the early 2000s my mother would say, "Claire, no boys are allowed upstairs." Or, "Claire, you have to be home by 11." Or, "Claire, go and change. You look slutty." She acted like we were in the 1950s. But I'm different. And our culture now is different.

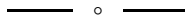
I'm not saying I'm the "cool mom." I wouldn't want to be. But if my daughter had the historical understanding of the last thirty years that I'd like her to have, then I could explain that, in the ways that count, I am cool. I've never been a radical, but at times I was very liberal. I participated in Slutwalks. I defended Planned Parenthood. I attended protests all through the '20s — even attending one while seven-months pregnant. But the elections took place, and the cases were ruled on, and the country as a whole decided against women's health care, and against women's privacy, and against increased restrictions on VR technology. And now we must accept the country that we live in. That is another important detail to note about myself. I have always been practical—practical in ways that allowed me to live the life that I wanted to lead. I absolutely cannot stand people who try to wear impracticality as a badge of honor. I've always encouraged my children to follow their dreams, but they should approach these dreams in a tangible way. It's just good common sense.

I was my daughter's age when my dad died. My mother decided to go back to work after nearly a decade as a stay-at-home mom. She was too proud to do any job she deemed beneath her, so I ended up taking these jobs while she was supposedly still looking. I barely had time to worry about friends, let alone boys, but my mother made me go to my prom. I asked one of the waiters at the restaurant I worked at to take me. He was 20 years old and not very attractive, but it was better than going alone. I let him kiss me at the end of the night. I wasn't the happiest teenager, but I was fine. My mother moved to Canada to live with my aunt a week after I graduated.

I went to college and began having more fun, but I kept working to pay for tuition, and then for graduate school, and then slowly paid off my loans on an elementary school teacher's salary. I didn't eat very much during this period in my life. My present inability to lose arm fat is probably a direct result of living on corn nuts throughout my time as an undergrad and whatever that did to my metabolism. But I made ends meet. And I did find the time and the money to go out with friends, and lead a fairly normal life. It was just about budgeting and being smart. Everyone

could be a lot happier, if they just learned how to live within their means.

I met my husband, Stephen, the day I finished paying off my loans. It was as if I had officially completed one segment of my life and could move onto the next. He can be a bit thoughtless, but he's a good person and he's always added some levity to my life. Three years later, Olivia was born. Logan followed two years after that. For many years, we were a happy family. We still are a happy family. Happier than most anyway. It was just bad timing; we were forced to leave California due to the flooding right before Olivia entered high school. Teenage girls can't handle change.



I can still picture Olivia, walking in with the sort of adult determination only a child can have. She had her hair pulled back and was wearing one of her nicer shirts and one of her nicer skirts, as if she'd dressed up just to have a conversation with me. She'd developed early and even though she was only 14, she looked like a woman wearing those clothes. I was folding laundry with the TV on and pretended not to notice anything out of the ordinary about her entrance.

"Mom, I'd like to talk to you." I still remember the conviction in her voice.

"Sure, what is it?"

"Can I turn this off?"

"Yes, of course." I reached for the remote but she'd already turned around and swiped it to the menu screen. She had a snapdrive in her hand and placed it in the bottom port. The screen lit up with a slide that said, "Why I Should Attend Public School."

"What's this?" I used to hate it when my parents asked questions that had already been answered, when what they really wanted to know was how or why. But I'm not perfect.

"I believe that, when we move, I should start attending public school. And to show you that I'm serious, I've prepared a presentation."

"Don't you want to wait for your father so we can watch together?"

"He doesn't care."

"Stephen!" He wasn't getting off that easy. "Stephen! Come downstairs! Your daughter wants to talk to us!"

"One second!" Stephen talked to me sometimes like he was my third child. We waited for a couple of minutes, while Olivia tapped her toes and rolled her eyes. Stephen finally came downstairs wearing a decade-old shirt with a stain on it and running shorts. Even though he was dressed like a high schooler, he had never looked older.

Olivia went through her slides:

- “1) A public school will better prepare me for the real world.
- 2) More diversity.
- 3) I’m going to have to be around boys at some point, Mom.
- 4) It is cheaper.
- 5) It’s closer to our new house.
- 6) Logan gets to go to public school.
- 7) Suggesting that an all-girl school is safer for me is extremely hetero-normative

(come on, Mom, it’s not 2004 anymore).”

“You know you’ll have to lose your hair and wear an uglier uniform, right?” I asked.

Appealing to vanity usually works with teenagers.

“Yes. I know. But I’ll rebel against it. Better to fight the real world than be sheltered away in some boring fantasy land.”

“You’ll rebel?”

“Well . . . no—”

“What do you think?” I turned to my husband. He began stroking his beard.

“I think, well, it’s fine with me if that’s what she wants.” The words left Stephen’s mouth casually.

“Thank you, Dad.”

I don’t know why I called him down. He was obviously going to give into her and now I had to decide between saying yes or being the bad guy.

“Olivia, you have your whole life to be around boys, and watch what you say, and how you say it—”

“But—”

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes.”

And I could tell she really meant it. I wanted to be a good mom. I thought about how my own mother said no to everything, before she’d even listened. I wanted to be different. I wanted to listen.

“Well, then I trust you to make your own decisions. Just remember, it’s final. Once we don’t put down that deposit, you’re stuck in public school for at least a year.”

“No, no. I know! Thank you!!”

Logan walked downstairs, VR goggles dangling from around his neck.

“Mom, where’s the LiFi box?”

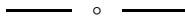
Olivia ran over to him. I remember noticing that they were now both about the same height.

“Logan! I’m going to public school!”

“Cool . . . Mom, where’s the LiFi?”

“They uninstalled it upstairs already. You can play down here. Olivia, take your presentation off. But, Logan, we need to be finished packing by tonight. We’re leaving tomorrow at six.”

“I know. I know.” Logan put the goggles on and started waving his arms. Olivia skipped upstairs. I followed after her. Stephen stayed on the couch.



That summer was the hottest on record. It seems like every summer is. We moved in, met a few of our neighbors. Most of the families had small children, except the Andersons across the street, who had a daughter a year older than Logan and a year younger than Olivia. She was a plain girl, and after a few tries, I gave up pressing Olivia to befriend her. She was younger and attended a private school, so Olivia had no interest. The summer passed with my daughter anxiously awaiting school and my son playing his video games. I sometimes looked out the window, hoping to see a game of street hockey or some kids riding their bikes. But I knew I was looking at nothing. All of our childhoods ended a long time ago.

I walked downstairs at seven fifteen on their first day of school. Olivia was already at the table eating an apple.

“We’re out of almond milk.” She took a small bite from the apple.

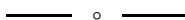
“No, we’re not. There’s another box in the cupboard.”

“Oh . . . it’s fine. I’ll just eat this.”

“Are you excited?”

She looked up from her phone and put on a big smile. “Yes, I am very, very excited.”

As I made her lunch, I couldn’t help but glance at her bald head and the nun-like uniform that was constricting her in its awkward starchy bends. To her, this was liberation. Hiding her body, less hair than her balding father. All of this just so she could glance across the room at boys while she learned geometry. I remember thinking at that very moment that we’d lost. Centuries of progress halted because of some new technology, and the ease at which the wrong person could pull your hair.



My daughter’s face surprised me over the next couple of weeks. I expected to see loneliness, regret, and worry. I’d changed schools as a teenager. Even if she’d made the right

choice, I assumed there would be an adjustment period. But no. She was happy, happy, happy. Even I hadn't eased into my new teaching position with such grace. The other teachers didn't seem to like me very much. They acted better than me. Like the catty teenagers whom I thought Olivia would have encountered. I must admit I sort of started to resent my own daughter. Stephen had been wanting to leave California for a while. And I knew Logan would adjust. He's always been my easy child. But if this move was going to be hard for anyone, it should've been hard for Olivia, not me. Yet she seemed to make friends so quickly. She listed them off like trophies: Jessica, Evie, Isla, Jasmine, Emma, and so on, and so on, and so on. "Any boys?" I asked just to annoy her. She paused a moment too long. "No. We don't eat lunch together, so it's not as easy to become friends with boys." She never invited these girls over to our house. And it deeply hurt my feelings to think that she was ashamed of me.

Then one day she got sick. I drove up to her school and saw her standing half a block further than usual. It was only October, but I could see that she was shivering. Her eyes were red and her face was three shades paler than usual.

"What's wrong?"

"I feel really sick."

"My poor baby. You look terrible."

I felt her forehead. It was cool to the touch.

"Did something happen?"

"I threw up."

I have a mother's intuition. I knew even then something else had happened, but I drove her home in silence. I helped her out of that ridiculous uniform and gave her a pair of her softest pajamas. I told her to go lie down in her room. I asked her if she wanted something to eat. She said no. I asked her if she thought she was going to throw up again. She said no. I asked her if she wanted to talk to me about anything. She said no. I told her I needed to pick Logan up from school. She said that was fine.

And then my phone rang. It was her school.

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I only know what they told me. The school. Olivia through her hysterical tears. I can only piece together what happened, filling in the gaps for myself.

A boy in Olivia's class (she refuses to say who) found a way to message on their school tablets. He began messaging Olivia. They made a plan to sneak away after school and meet up. Jessica, Evie, Isla, Jasmine, and Emma were all girls in Olivia's class, but her teacher said she

never saw Olivia talk to any of them. She was very quiet. Very studious. Her nose always buried in her tablet. Olivia and this boy became closer and closer. They kissed. He told her he loved her. He asked for some of her hair.

I was a teenage girl once, and I imagine the conversation went something like this:

“Hey, Olivia, you know I love you, right?”

“I love you too.”

“Good. I’m glad. You’re really special to me.”

“You’re special to me too. I’d be all alone at this school if it wasn’t for you.”

“I want to feel you.”

“What?”

“No, no. I would never think of doing that to you. Just . . . I just need one of your hairs. And then we can be together, but it won’t count as anything bad.”

“But I don’t have any hair.”

“You don’t shave down there, do you?”

“Well, no.”

“Just pluck one out. And I can feel even closer to you.”

“I feel like it’s still wrong.”

“I’m a guy, and what that means is I need a certain release. So I can keep doing it with celebrities if you want, but I’d rather be with you. Because I love you so much.”

And then she said okay. She had him turn around. She unwrapped her absurd uniform, reached down, and plucked out one of her pubic hairs, DNA-filled skin follicle still attached. And then he went home and put on his VR goggles, had his way with my daughter’s body. Then he called his friends to brag, and when they didn’t believe him, he sent them the file. And they had their way with my daughter’s body. And by the time my daughter got to school the next week, half of the boys had the file, and everyone knew she was circulating around. The most creative violations had been recorded, and the videos were on all of the students’ phones.

— o —

The school scheduled the disciplinary hearing for the following week. Because she refused to give the boy’s name, she was the only one called in. When I asked if they could question some of the other students, they responded that they would not begin a witch hunt simply because my daughter was trying to protect her boyfriend. Stephen had a meeting scheduled that night and when I asked him to change it, he insisted that it would be much easier on Olivia if I went with her alone.

As we sat in the school's conference room, I wondered if Olivia realized that she was wearing the same outfit as when she'd asked to come to public school. That day I had thought of her clothing as mature and conservative. But sitting in this room with its grey walls and fluorescent lights, I thought maybe the shirt was just a bit too tight and the skirt just a bit too short. The first thing the principal asked was why she wasn't in uniform. I answered for her, saying because it was outside school hours, we thought she should wear something nicer. This was met with a grunt. He went on to explain that the reason they have rules set up—for the uniforms, the gendered lunch breaks, and the removing of all hair from the students' heads—was to avoid occurrences such as this one. He asked Olivia how she felt, knowing all of the students had seen her naked, committing indecent acts. He asked me how I felt to have raised a daughter who showed such a complete disregard for the rules. How I felt raising a daughter who, within the first two months of public school, had been unable to control herself, had felt the need to begin an illicit relationship with a boy. He asked me if I felt like I'd failed in my responsibilities as a parent. And then he asked Olivia if she would reveal the name of the boy. She said no. And then he told me that there was no way for Olivia to continue at the school without causing too much of a distraction for the other students. She would have to wait till the year was out, and then begin at another school. He said there was no way to restrict her from attending a public school the next town over, but he recommended that a student like her return to a private institution.

“Why didn't you tell him the name of the boy?” I regretted the harshness of my tone as the words left my mouth.

Olivia said nothing.

“Huh? Talk to me. You didn't stick up for yourself at all. It was that boy's fault, just as much as yours. More so!” The words were meant to be calm and loving, but they came out with such anger. “Do you think this boy loves you? Why are you protecting him?”

She started to cry.

“I'm not trying to be mean. I just want you to talk to me.”

“Well, you are being mean,” she shot back. And I knew she was right.

“I'm not being mean. This boy does not love you. Why, Olivia, why did you give this boy your hair? Do you not realize that all of this bullshit—you being bald, and wearing that god awful outfit, the way these schools are run now, don't you realize that all of it is to keep boys like that from using girls in this exact way?”

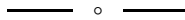
“I hate you.”

“What?”

“I fucking hate you!”

“You should hate me. You should hate me for being dumb enough to let a 15 year old make her own decisions. I never should have let you leave private school. You’ve made an absolute fool of me. And imagine how your brother is going to feel if these videos are still circling around in two years when he gets to high school? It’s absolutely humiliating.” I still hate myself for everything I said that night. I don’t know where those words came from.

As I pulled into the driveway, I saw the Andersons through their big glass windows. They were seated around the table, eating dinner, with big smiles on their faces. The daughter’s long hair moved from side to side as she talked. I looked at my daughter’s bald head, and I began to cry.



Olivia and I didn’t talk for a month or so, but by Thanksgiving she seemed to have forgiven me. Little by little, we put the past behind us. Stephen remained neutral through it all. He was less harsh on Olivia than I was, but in private when I cursed the little fucker who did this to her, all he mustered up was a “boys will be boys.” When I wasn’t teaching my own class, I helped Olivia with online courses and she managed to finish a full year of high school in about six months. We then researched nearby private schools to find the one that angered her the least. By the time she started up again at the end of August, we no longer even mentioned the incident.

I decided to take the year off. I had never fit in with the other teachers at the new school and kids these days make me sad. With the year I’d had, my heart just wasn’t in it, I had promised myself I would never be one of those passionless elementary school teachers who seem to just be waiting for retirement. Stephen was supportive of my decision, and I was happy to have the time to relax.

The first week Logan and Olivia were back in school I found myself snooping around their rooms. I always promised myself that I would never do this. When I was fourteen, my mom broke the lock on my diary. Failing to fix it, she threw my diary in the garbage and washed her hands clean of the crime. She told me this story years later as if it was funny, but at the time losing my diary had been devastating. That day, I made a vow to respect the privacy of my future children. But things had changed. And I’d learned my lesson. Part of being a good mom is knowing what was going on with your kids, and sometimes you have to find that out using alternative methods.

Olivia’s room held nothing of interest. Even her diary was unrevealing. Yes, I still read her diary. No, I didn’t break it. She was excited to be going back to school, but nervous that word of her videos would follow her. I knew they would, but she seemed to think otherwise. It’s true the government did a fairly good job keeping stolen child pornography off of the internet, but one of her new classmates was bound to have a cousin or friend on our side of town and people would

talk. I decided then and there that I wouldn't say anything until the fateful day when she came home crying. It would pass. The girls would talk, but they probably wouldn't have access to the file. And talk is just talk. I flipped back through her diary hoping to find out finally which boy had done all of this. Every mention of his name was hidden under deep scratches of black ink.

I almost didn't go into Logan's room. I've never worried about him. Since we'd moved, he had made a lot of friends. Our family scandal had barely fazed him. If anyone he knew had access to the file, they had been too embarrassed to tell him, or he had been too embarrassed to tell me. Or maybe, they'd been just young enough to not be interested. I still decided to go into his room just the same. When I did my attention was immediately drawn to his VR goggles, probably because he spends more time wearing them around the house than not wearing them. A generational thing, I suppose. He'd locked them, of course. They had the usual security port that needed DNA to operate, a skin follicle from pressing your finger worked just fine. Resigned, I put them back down resigned before remembering what else I could do. I found his old hairbrush stuffed in the back of the closet. He obviously hadn't needed it since switching to public school. I began pulling hairs off of the brush and pressing them on the identification port, hoping to find one that still had the follicle on the end. I tried hair after hair, until finally it worked. The goggles turned on. And I placed them around my head.

The Anderson girl. Tied up in a dark room. Tape over her mouth. She was completely naked. There was dried cum all over her face. Her hair was as long as ever. I looked down and saw my son's swinging penis. I ripped the goggles off.

It took me a moment to register what I had just seen. The room began spinning and nausea began travelling up my throat. I put the goggles back down where I found them and left my son's room. I got a glass of water, took a deep breath, and sat down on our couch, to begin making sense of it all.

There are a few possibilities. Logan might have convinced the Anderson girl to give him some of her hair. Or another boy in town might have, and then given the file to Logan. Knowing my son, the option that makes the most sense to me is this: one of her hairs fell out on the sidewalk, and Logan picked it up one day when taking out the trash or walking to the car. He's going through puberty and got curious. Was it the right thing to do? Of course not, but I talked it over with Stephen, and he assured me giving into those curiosities at his age was normal. Stephen also assured me that what he chose to do was normal, and that he'll surely grow out of it. I considered talking to Logan or having Stephen talk to him, but we both decided that embarrassing him wouldn't do much good. Or maybe it would. I still wonder if we made the right decision. I try to be a good mother. I really try to be a good mother. But sometimes it's really hard and I just don't know what to do.

# A Lesson from My Son

Eric Claborn

October 4, 2015 between the hours of 8:15 a.m. and 2:15 p.m.

My name is being called over the P.A. system. “Claborn 3640, you have a visitor. You have 20 minutes to be properly dressed for your visit and come to the P.C. window.”

I shower and dress in less than 15 minutes. At the P.C. window, I receive a piece of cardboard with the number five on it. I make my way over to the inmate visiting room entrance, where I am patted down for contraband before entering the visiting area. I scan the room looking for familiar faces. I find one, then another: it’s my li’l man—not so li’l anymore—and his mother. He’s no longer the little guy that I remember. Fifty-seven months have elapsed since the last time we saw each other in person. I greet him with a smile; it is not returned. We stare at each other like strangers—no hellos, no handshakes, no hugs, no daps are exchanged. I break the silence with simple words, “I know you didn’t travel this far to just stare at me. Besides, it’s been too long—let’s start over and greet each other properly, with love.” With that, we embrace.

I thank his mother for bringing him to visit, and commend her for the good work she and the village have done raising our son. She has not said more than “Hello” to me. My son and I gradually break down the invisible barrier, word after word, a game of checkers, a game of monopoly, a few hands of cards. I jokingly tease him, saying he’s still a sore loser. He laughs it off, but agrees he does not enjoy losing. I tell him it builds character.

For the rest of the visit I hold on to his every word. I listen as he talks and asks me if I think he’ll grow a beard that will turn white as mine. I tell him, hopefully not any time soon. I listen more. He tells me how he’s doing in school, his strengths, his weakness, his likes, his dislikes. He talks about the journey he has endured without me present. He shares his memories of the father-son adventures we’ve gone on in the past, like the time we had a surprise birthday picnic for his mother in Riverside Park, and when we camped out for a weekend in the woods. I’m impressed by how much he remembers. I listen as he tells me what he missed most about me, and the plans he has for our next father-son adventure, the places he wants us to visit and explore.

I thought, this is what I've been missing. I am extremely happy that he finally feels comfortable enough to reconnect—we've always had a good relationship and he has always been able to communicate with me freely. I feel good about how things are progressing.

At 1:15 p.m., my son asks me to walk with him to the outside area of the visiting room. He wants to talk alone. I oblige. His mother looks at him a bit puzzled, surprised by his openness. We sit down at the cement picnic table where he tells me what his mother told him: I'm here because I lived a lifestyle that either sends people to prison or to the graveyard. Also, that I'm not a bad person, but I've made bad decisions. I nod my head, but offer no verbal response, and he continues, saying that since I'm in prison already, his mother is half-right, and he doesn't want her to be 100 percent right because he doesn't want to visit me in a graveyard any time soon. I quickly agree, laughing. I look at him with admiration for being able to articulate these feelings, realizing I didn't have this type of relationship with my own father at this age. Today, I become his student-father. His parting words are, "Pop," it's not about living that life, it's about what you do with that life you are living." Truer words could not be spoken at that moment. I give him a hug and a kiss on his forehead, and tell him how proud I am of him. My son has matured beyond his 13 years, and as I watch him and his mother leave, I feel blessed, knowing that my son will be just fine.



*Latvia 2015, Daniels Mekšs*

# A Letter to My First Love

Darryl Williams

July 1999

My First Love,

It was Sunday, a hot summer day. Solid Rock Church was at an all-time high. I felt the spirit in this place because of your presence. My father Ernest was playing the drums. Uncle Eric working wonders with his fingers on the organ, and the choir—they sound like they belonged with Kirk Franklin. After everything was said and done, the pastor took to the altar to bring forth the words of God. She was preaching, she was screaming, she was doing everything she could to express her point. Don't ask me what she was saying, don't ask me what the message was about—truth be told, I don't remember because I wasn't paying any attention. I had other things on my mind, like you showing your face here again. When I finally broke out of my daydream, church was being dismissed. I would have to wait a whole week just to hear you again. I wasn't liking it much at all. I would have to find a way to hear you more often.

Let me fast forward a little bit. It was Wednesday. I have school in the morning, and in the evening my dad is getting ready to go to the studio to rehearse with my Uncle Eric and his group. It's almost 9:30 p.m. and I want to go, so I ask and his reply is simple, but he has a pointed look in his eyes. He says, "You can come, but the first time you don't get up for school, I'm never taking you again." Those had to be the most beautiful words I've ever heard. Well, the whole "you can come" part—I don't care about anything else. All I know is that I will be around you. Once we arrive, the atmosphere totally takes me by complete surprise—there's state-of-the-art equipment everywhere.

Rehearsal begins, and Uncle Eric is telling everybody what he needs done, how to do it, and when to do it. Everybody complies, and once again I'm blown away. The drums start, the keyboard starts, the bass is going, and the singers are blowing my ear drums. The hairs on my arms are standing up—I'm really feeling this. They sing, the band plays, and what seems like 10 seconds really turns out to be five hours, and I'm leaving you again.

Rest assured, I'm up in the morning for school because I need to go back; I just can't get enough of you. I go to school and all I can think about is how I can get closer to you. I need to feel your presence more often: this is not enough. I rush home, and I look for my dad, and I tell him,

“Dad, I want to play the drums.” He smiles and replies, “I knew it wouldn’t be long before you made that choice.” He gets up and walks away, and I’m following because I’m not done. He goes to the closet, and, to my surprise, all this time, he had a set of all-white Pearl drums with all the accessories. I wish you could feel my heart; it is like Christmas in July! Just like everything else, this comes with stipulations. I have to behave, continue to get good grades, and do my homework and chores before I can practice. As time progressed, I played and played and messed up, but I continued to practice. I had my mind set on playing with Uncle Eric and his group.

Do me a favor—follow me to September 2002. I am 13 years old. My drumming is beyond superb, and everybody says I’m blessed with the gift. But that’s not enough for me: I need so much more now.

Today is the day my cousin Tasheena, a.k.a. Tetris, is scheduled to go to Uncle Eric’s house and record some of her own things. Sheena doesn’t play an instrument—she’s going to rap. I go with her to the studio and I watch her go into the booth, set up her microphone, get her headphones, and do the thing she does best. When she comes out, Uncle Eric plays her what she just recorded. I’m listening, and I’m looking at everything that is going on. My stomach feels as if I’m on a roller coaster. Sheena and Uncle Eric talk, and she’s back into the booth. When she’s done, Uncle Eric speaks with her briefly about an upcoming performance. He gives her a CD, and before she can say “Do you want one?” I am already telling her yes. With my new CD, I’m ready to go home and tell Mommy and Daddy everything I’ve seen, heard, and learned from Uncle Eric and Sheena.

It’s maybe half a month later, and today is the day Sheena will be performing. Uncle Eric is playing Sheena’s material in the car. I’m just mouthing right along with every word that’s coming out of the speakers. We arrive, everything is looking good, then all of a sudden, here comes a problem. Tetris’s hype man is not going to make it. How do we fix this? Nobody knows. “Hey, let D do it, he knows the songs word for word. I think he can do it.” Those are the words of Uncle Eric. Now my heart is beating a million beats a second. This is what I wanted, but I didn’t know it was going to come this fast. “So what you going to do D?” he asked me. “Imma do this! We good, let’s go Sheena!” I sound as if I’m fearless, but really I’m scared to death. We go to the back, it’s showtime. There’s no turning back now.

Sheena starts, and I back her up, forgetting all about the funny feelings and the nervousness. We put on a show for real. To onlookers, I just helped my cousin, but to me, I just had my first date with you.

“Hey son, wake up! Mommy just had Eli. Get up! We’ll be going to the hospital soon to see her and the baby.”

These are the words coming from my father, early in the morning on December 5, 2003. But my mind is not there: I need you. I need you to show them how I'm really feeling. So quickly, I get dressed and go see my friend who has some recording equipment. I explain to him what's going on, what I want to do, and why. He agrees to give me a track and let me record for free. The only problem is that I don't have any words to put on the track. We sit there, and he plays the beat over and over while I think. Next thing you know, I'm writing. I'm writing everything from my heart, and once I have enough words, I go into the booth and put the headphones on like I've seen Tetris do so many times. I adjust my microphone, and it's on. We finish the song and I call it "Baby Brother." Everything is moving so fast; I rush back upstairs and everybody is looking for me, but I don't care, I finally have something that's all mine—you. I have you and a little brother coming. Once we're all in the car, I give my dad the CD, and on the ride to the hospital, we listen to it. To my surprise, it's good and everybody likes it. To them, I just made a nice CD for my mom and little brother, but to me . . . I just found love.

It's late in the year of 2004. I'm 14 years old and I'm recording more and more material. I'm playing the drums at several different churches and I'm actually getting paid to do it. I'm sort of like a little superstar in my neighborhood, but most of all I have you.

I got with a couple of my friends: Ronald, who we called Stats; Curtis, who we called Prob; and Anthony, who we called Enwaye Gates (pronounced N.Y. Gates). There was Raymond, who we called Spit; Eston, who called himself Fresh; and last but not least, my little cousin Jamil, who was known as Blooks and who didn't record, but was always around to enjoy you. Together we all came up with this idea to form a group called Team A.S.A.P., which stood for All Soldiers Attract Paper. Everybody in this group was receiving some type of money, whether from allowances or summer jobs. However you did it, you had to be attracting some sort of paper. As time went along, A.S.A.P. really started to develop a name for itself, but it wasn't long before things started to fall apart. That's another story.

So let me bring you up to date: it's 2012, I'm 23 years old, and I'm almost starting this all over. I realized you belong with me somewhere else. Some place we could really call our own. This is where I formed my very own independent record label, "Q-Three Entertainment." After all my hard work, after all my dedication, I finally made a choice to benefit the both of us. Throughout my short journey through the correctional system, I met some talented individuals. I actually partnered up with 7even and Jewels From The North. Together, we collectively became Trillionaire Lords. There's so much ahead of us: I don't think the world is ready for it. The feelings I get from you are inexplicable. From the bottom of my heart, I can truly say, "I love you." I'll end here until we meet again.

Forever yours,  
Prada Dot

# Milkshakes

Chris Finnegan

The moment he had been dreading for the last two days had arrived.

“Nick,” the orderly said, “your Dad’s here to see you.”

He closed the copy of *The Nick Adams Stories*, the only respectable looking book on the ward’s shelf, and placed it in the broad, deep pocket of his bathrobe, which had no waist tie, and he got off the bed. His breath was getting shorter and faster, his chest tighter and tighter. Across the room, his roommate, David, seemed to be asleep, his enormous gut rising and collapsing with each breath. It seemed as if all he did was sleep. The only reasons David left the room were breakfast, lunch and dinner. The two never spoke. Nick stood up. He was just outside the door when David yelled, “Good luck, dude.”

The visitor’s entrance was around the corner by the nurse’s station, past the rooms with open doors, where silent orderlies sat in folding chairs, observing patients. It was quieter than usual. There were no arguments. Nobody was screaming. The chair next to the pay phone, where people would sit and cry into the receiver as they conversed, was unoccupied. The only noticeable sound came from the common room.

“Yippee-ki-yay, motherfucker!”

*Die Hard* was on. Again. Out of the ward’s sizeable collection of VHS tapes, it was the only one that worked. There was no cable. Nick stumbled as his foot came out of his shoe, which had no laces. He sighed, and put it back on, and shuffled down the hallway. He shuffled past the last room. The door had a shatterproof glass porthole window. It was the only room with a lock. He rounded the corner.

Bang.

Nick looked at his father, whose back was to him. The feeling started in his toes and his fingertips. As always, it moved up his legs and down his arms, like two long lines of dominoes toppling forward, falling and falling until they collided in his chest. He wanted to eject the peanut butter and jelly sandwich and the fruit cup and the glass of milk that had been his lunch up his esophagus, out of his mouth and onto the floor. He swallowed.

Standing there, his father looked like a tourist who’d stumbled into a bad neighborhood. In his suit, he was more than out of place. His gaze wandered, moving from

the ceiling, down to the floor, up to a window, over to some notices on a corkboard, and then up to the ceiling again. His shoulders were hunched and he swayed like a rocking chair, shifting his weight from his heels to his toes. There was a white paper bag in his hand. He turned around.

Nick put his hands in the pockets of his scrub suit pants, and his eyes went straight to his feet. *Get into the fetal position and play dead*, said the voice in the back of his head. In a perfect world, he would have vanished into thin air. Instead, he looked up and met his father's steely eyes and forced a weak smile.

His father stuck out his hand and said, "Hello, Nick."

Nick shook his head and chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Nick said, as he pressed his palm against his father's palm.

"I brought milkshakes," his father said, holding up the bag. "Coffee. I was going to bring you some magazines, but Katie said she already brought you some."

"She did."

"Is there somewhere we can sit down?"

"Yeah."

Nick led the way into the dining room. There were half a dozen square tables. Each one had a linoleum top, which was stained or peeling, or both. The two of them stood in the doorway silently.

"So, where do you want to sit?" Nick asked.

"Here's fine," His father said as he pulled a chair out from the nearest table and put down his coat. Nick sat down on the other side. His father leaned across the table, stretching his arm out, and set down a milkshake.

"So," Nick said, as he tore open a straw and sank it into the lid, "how was the skiing?"

"Good. The snow was really good. Jackson's having a record year. All of the runs were open. The lift lines were short. It's a hard mountain, though. It takes a lot out of you."

"Your clients must have been pissed you had to leave."

"No. They understood."

"That's good."

"Well, I talked to school. Told them the situation and that you won't be back this semester."

"Yeah?"

“They said they understood, that it isn’t a problem.”

“Why would it be a problem?”

“I don’t know. It isn’t, though.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah.”

“Mom couldn’t make the trip?”

“No. She’s a little . . . unnerved. She’ll come though. Give her a day or two.”

Nick picked up his milkshake. The cuff of his bathrobe slid back from his wrist. His father’s eyes darted to the patch of exposed forearm. The lines of stitches extended from the robe like flower stems from a vase, crisscrossed and tangled. His father winced. It was a crack in an otherwise sterling façade, exposing his horror, sadness, and fear. Nick’s heart sank and rose at the same time. He pulled the cuff back up and sat waiting for his father’s eyes to come back to his own, but instead they stared into the empty space where his arm had been, and drifted to the floor.

“You know, Nick. I just want to say that . . . that I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said what I . . . what I said. It was selfish on my part. I lost my temper and took it out on you. I didn’t mean those things. And I’m . . . I’m sorry that it landed you here. This is the last place I ever wanted to see you.”

It was the first time Nick had seen his father apologize to anyone, for anything. He sat quiet and unmoving. On the other side of the table, his father stared at him with a furrowed brow. Nick took a sip of his milkshake and said, “It’s all right.” He stood to get his cigarettes out of his pants pocket.

“What’s that you’re reading?” his father asked, motioning to the book in the pocket of his bathrobe. Nick put the book on the table and lit his cigarette. His father’s steely eyes went soft.

“*The Nick Adams Stories*,” he said as he picked it up, “These were always my favorite. Your mother and I, we named you after Nick, or I did. She wanted to name you Dylan. I had to fight tooth and nail to name you Nick.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

His father smiled. Nick exhaled. The smoke billowed out of his nostrils, twirling up and into nothing. He smiled, too.

“I never knew that.”

# Seven Seconds

Nikolas Reda-Castelao

Scientists have allegedly concluded that, following a clean beheading, the brain remains active and the person is conscious for up to seven seconds. Then, once the organ fails, DMT floods the brain's chemistry. Therein is a question: before a being too perfectly broken to feel mortal passes, what is she thinking? It is unlikely that a proper interview has ever been conducted with a decapitated person who is fully aware that she has only seven seconds to speak her piece. What would that reporter even ask? Perhaps there is a secret series of experiments somewhere, done by scientists and journalists: they are beheading the terminally ill or some other folks okay with signing consent forms for such a study. The research teams are working through a list of questions from "Are you aware that you are dying?" to "Do you regret anything?" Of course there'd be the wiseass who'd remark, "Yeah! I left the stove on!" and everyone would laugh, except the person who spent his last seven seconds making that joke. Then the researchers would realize that such a wiseass contributed absolutely nothing to science.

Wouldn't a grand question be, though, "How long is this taking for you?" But, really, ask that to any dying person.

Just as a hypothetical, ask that to your grandfather, who is pressed by the pressure of the world onto little more than a cot. He shares a room with two other people, one of whom spends most of his day vomiting and shitting himself. All the while, his wife of seventy years spends another eternity by his side, tending to the gushing of his soul. The other roommate moves so little that perhaps she is already dead. The smell of urine-drenched and molting skin certainly suggests so. You don't pay heed to it. You are pressed back, unable to comprehend how much time for you has passed in every moment of this man. He gurgles to talk to you. It is a wretched sound: a chemical reaction trying to pretend it is a language. For the entire day, you are watching his brain break down and melt into saliva dribbling out of his mouth, and whenever you wipe it from his face, you can hear it crying his memories at you, but you cannot build a citadel of these memory-drenched tissues around his body. They go in the trash. He gurgles at you, as if he is no longer a human but a chimera of something once human. But his soul is still there; he clutches his arms around you whenever you tell him you have to go and you can swear, looking at the one side of his face that wasn't destroyed by the stroke, he is crying.

Ask yourself why he is crying. Forget why you are crying for just a moment; do not assume your sadness is his. You have watched him, minutes wearing the mask of hours, struggle to speak

with his eyes, let alone the shattered larynx eroding in his throat. The nurses creep into the room and push you out, as they pull the curtain around his bed. He is being changed and discharged. You wonder when was the last time he could shit by himself. Even worms can shit by themselves. He will soon become shit for the worms, and he cannot even bring himself to say “I will shit by my own damn self.” He might gurgle it, but that is not language.

There is, suddenly, an inexplicably violent and rancid smell. The old man just threw up on himself. The room smells now. Can your grandfather smell well, you wonder. Is this something he is spared or is it another agony burning his brain?

You spend minutes posing as days caught in his arms, as you try to say goodbye, and you try your hardest to cry, nearly as hard as he, but there’s something so dehumanizing about this place that you cannot reach your soul. It will be four months after the funeral, when you are holding the box with his ashes close to your chest that your monsoon pain will flood the world. You will hold that box as hard as he held you at your birth and at his death, promising with the rustle of his skin and muscle that he would always be there, but now you have to spend forever with that looping seven second paroxysm of being reminded he is gone.

Ask him, though, like the person who has just lost their head, how long it’s all taking them to die. Force yourself away from the Kelvin zero emotion you are frozen in and think of this person, soul and memories bleeding from them, and really try to grapple with not how long it will take their body to decompose, but how much time is passing for them. How many days does the sanitized burn of rancid guts linger in his mind? How much longer is that elderly man watching his loving hearth keep him an inch away from a much anticipated death? How long has that molding skin brain a bed over, have to listen to her monitor screech “You’re still here! You’re still here!” in each of its beeps? How long does your grandfather hear his gurgle be misinterpreted as “keep hope” and watch blinding white robes flash back and forth with the cycle of his eternal breaths and instantaneous liquid eating?

Biologically, his body and brain took seven months to finally fail after his stroke. But he must have been dying for years in that time. He must have spent his entire life dying on that bed. Or it could have just been seven seconds. He tried to tell you, but it took too long.

# Bills to Pay

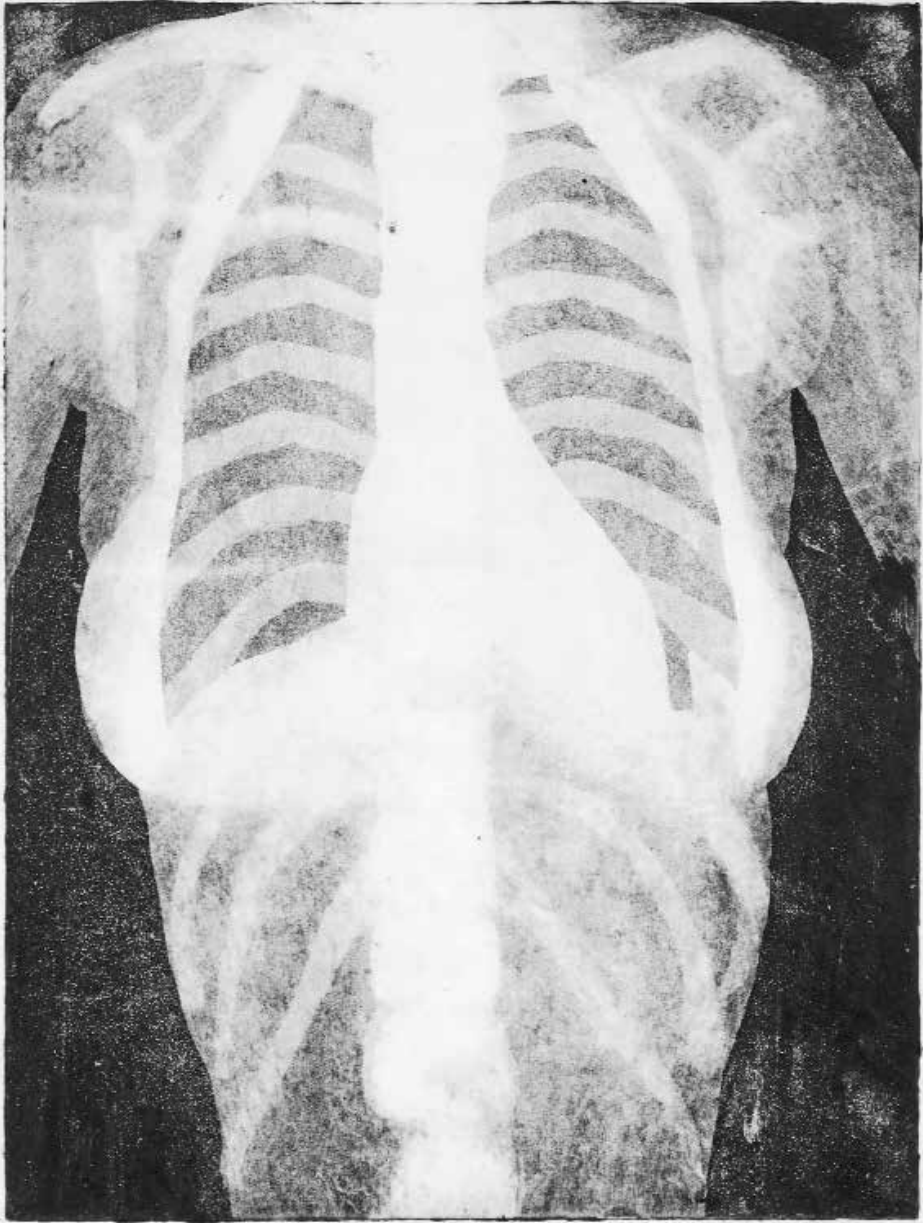
Eliza Lambert

I've got cold fingers, a burning-out lifeline so hot I'm spinning smoke from my rolled up rug. I've circled round the skyscraper's spindle, hung the highbrow heroin needle, the dark carnival's candy center where sand-sparkle street lights sprinkle my acid eyelashes. I'm lying, making the bed with my self-made monster momentarily swooning sirens, pressing the gas pedal for proof of life.

There was a baby once,  
and a credit card surgery in a hobo's pocket,

but now the heart monitor forgets about me because my blood beats sick and slow like my first love's whistle or maybe it's the chemicals creating electricity's inverse in the vein of a flat line. I got a lot of baggage riding on that red rocketing ribbon and these politically correct chicken scratches make my arms bleed, but it's because now I need to know about math's alphabetic equivalent, an encyclopedia of numbered eyes from pharmacist friends and a periodic table of city pills that falls asleep counting lists. My signature has started to procreate like piss and I miss the simple times when my story was the pet next to my cup and people would pay me for my pain but now

I gotta pay it back.



*X-Ray, Corinna Bourke*

# O Prophet

Sarah Hombach

Paris has just been sucker-punched  
and your mother,  
in town for the weekend,  
wants to go to St. Patrick's Cathedral of all goddamn places

She believes her prayer is a force, the sole but mighty spear  
she can wield against this mess

You've got the heavier arsenal of prudence,  
and prudent plans, plans  
you spilled handsomely on your friends last night

They seemed to ride from you like capable equestrians  
atop plumes of pot smoke

You pictured them galloping, somehow,  
to Syria, to D.C., those locked decision-making rooms

Your mother has other plans,  
and one is to trap you beside all the other wigglers  
in this petri dish of pews

Beside the priest who moves across a French scripture with the rake of his accent,  
his milkfed American demeanor

*Jésus Christ m'a so vay*

He's not like that woman you're after—  
she's got the perfect tongue for French  
and words like "recapitulate"  
You usually stick to "recap"  
and English  
and a pessimism  
that has everything to do with your desire to be, above all,  
correct

*Si je traverse les ravins de la mort, je ne crains aucun mal*

Look at the tourists shuffling through mass  
lighting silly candles  
dumbfounded and blinky under the tall ceilings of God

Thank *Jésus Christ*  
you don't affix your hallucinations to the word "prayer"  
and launch them into veritable oblivion

Thank *Jésus Christ* you've read  
a book or two

*Tu es avec moi . . . ton bâton me guide et me rassure*

"recapitulate" is pompous you think suddenly—  
tell everyone she's a rich priss

(still the thought of her half fills your slacks)  
but your mind is deft and sprawling,  
and fills instead  
with a breathtaking objectivity

It decrees her too moneyed and frightened  
to dip a single pretty toe

into the real, *authenticity*, our collective human struggle  
(in layman's terms, life)  
how wicked she seems now  
with her pointy tongue and pronunciations

how wicked  
to princessly, tastefully dwell  
in the space above all this

And those shuffling tourists, they're so cemented in life  
they probably couldn't even tell you what it looks like

(People close their eyes where they're close enough to kiss,  
do they not?)

But hey, at least *Jésus Christ* gives them a few silly candles  
to dimly light their lifelong grope  
through a darkness and obscurity  
best identified by you, from a distance

O prophet, our prophet  
with slit eyes  
and filled slacks  
under the tall ceilings of God and  
the most earnest hopes of gazillions:

Won't you guide us, finally,  
to the light of objectivity's altar  
so we can kneel beside you on that cold stone bench  
and pray and pray and pray?

# Saint Jude

Eduardo Rios-Pulgar

Saint Jude,

an over-the-counter *santera*  
pointed you out  
amongst frankincense and rose-scented candles:  
a sale on syncretism.

Patron saint  
of lost causes,  
to be invoked when there's no hope,  
hold a torch for me!

Brought into my house  
to lower the electric bill,  
lit loyally each night  
to witness me

going from lover to lover,  
drowning them  
in silver blanket oceans—  
hold a torch for me!

Lit a candle for my mother  
at Saint John the Divine,  
haven't been to mass  
in two years,

terrified of saintly statues,  
of frowning looks—  
promised I would visit  
“*por mi mami, por mi abuela,*”

but I am holiest on my mattress,  
eating three a.m. noodles  
reading Virginia Woolf's Orlando,  
giving roses to beautiful people,  
kissing, when they allow.

Blissful Jude,  
I'll light your candle,  
but I don't need your prayers.



*Self-Portrait with Dog, Jimi Stine*

# #I♥human

Joshua Barreto

He woke up with a jolt that sent a shock of pain throughout the left side of his head. In tune with the thrumming of some distant machinery, the numerous wounds in his body throb endlessly like the march-step of his platoon during training. *I can't believe I'm still alive*, he thinks, surveying the scene around him and adjusting to his predicament. Slowly, like some archaic computer program booting up, his mind attempts to make sense of the last few minutes, and of the blurred images that begin to take shape. He realizes that the wall his face was plastered to is actually the deck, and with excruciating effort he pushes himself into a sitting position, congealed blood releasing him with a sickening slurp.

Blinking away the haze that fogs his vision, he wonders if he is in a dream. *No, all of this is real. I have a duty to fulfill. I have to go on.* He attempts to gauge the severity of his head injury, and moves his left hand up to feel his eye. *I better just leave it alone. My eye is just swollen shut, that's all.* He looks down and sees his uniform soaked with blood, now in that sticky and oily state denoting a significant period of time since receiving his injuries. A wave of nausea passes through him, and for a moment he thinks he's going to pass out. He tries to take a deep breath, but winces at the sharp pain in his ribs. He is finally able to see, and is alarmed by another man's eyes looking straight back at him.

In his incoherent state, the name of the man eludes him. He sees the gaping, cauterized hole in the man's chest and knows that the man is dead. Along with the rest of the team. They were twelve strong, and now it's only him. *Get up and move.* The thought passes through his mind like a butterfly at the edge of the vision. He remembers butterflies, so beautiful. His daughter is obsessed with them. Every year, she asks to have a new species painted in her room. He loves his daughter so much, there's no way he could deny her. Before he left, her walls were full of butterflies, some on flowers, others in flight.

MOVE.

He decides to get up from the desk as he slowly balances on all fours. His body inwardly groans with the effort, causing waves of pain to shoot up and down his wounds. On bended knee, he assesses his surroundings, and realizes he's in a wide corridor that runs for another fifty meters from where his team entered in both directions. The hijacked vehicle, nicknamed Hopper, is

still within the docking module. He musters his strength and limps over to it, hoping to retrieve whatever is left of the intrusion program for this station. If it hasn't been destroyed in the firefight, he knows he can salvage whatever is left and carry out the mission to its fulfillment.

When he enters the Hopper, gore and blood are on full display on the ceiling and seats. The vehicle was originally meant for the relatively slender visitors, but his team were able to fit themselves in well enough for the trip. What they didn't take into account was how difficult it would be to get out of the seats and engage the enemy. It was a bloodbath that ended in a few short minutes. He remembers disengaging the harness, attempting to return fire, and then an explosion. As he replays his memories, a sense of vertigo overwhelms him. The taste of bile slowly rises in the back of his throat, but he swallows it, and moves on.

He sees the small, matte black container that holds the intrusion program. It's a fabricated sentient mind, whose sole purpose is to redirect and shunt the energy back into the station to destroy it. Riding high in the earth's atmosphere over the northern polar regions, it's one of three orbital platforms that have been siphoning out the magnetic energy from the earth's core, and redirecting it through a wormhole onto another platform for their planet. The Great Leader knew this might happen. But no one listens to an outcast.

The first time they came, they sent an emissary to the U.N. assembly and detailed the lack of unity the world had, making any kind of access to their level of "ascension" impossible. However, within thirty years, everyone had left behind their old divisions, attempting to portray a united people. There was a gathering of leaders, and a ballot was taken. The speaker for the world would be a woman from Sri Lanka. The only leaders not to attend were those still considered outcasts. *Let's just keep those weirdoes in the attic for now. They'll come along once we get things moving.*

He opens the container with the intrusion program, and accesses the data crystal within. It's heavy for its size, and he feels its heft when he places it in his pocket. Looking out the forward compartment, he can see the distant horizon of the earth curving out of sight. The momentary vista gives him the sensation that he is upside down. But he knows it is only an illusion. His feet firmly planted on the deck attest to this observation as he finds the courage to turn around and complete the task for which he came.

Waves of disorienting pain force him to lean against a bulkhead. His hand can feel the vibrating energy that this orbital platform is continuously providing to the home planet. Before he pulls off, he can't help but wonder at the scope of their operation. Everyone around the world believed them to be a benevolent species that ushered in a new era of health, philosophy, and technology. The Great Leader suspected otherwise. But as he was considered a lunatic relic from

a tragic past, no one paid him any mind. His question was a simple one: *What do they want in return?*

What *could* they want? Their technology, knowledge, and prolonged life span far surpassed anything we could ever imagine. Their ability to assist our longevity was like an irresistible drug. And let us not forget the way they cleaned the atmosphere and removed pollution from our oceans. They were a godsend. If they ever did ask for anything, should we deny them? Of course, the Great Leader couldn't understand these notions; he and his people were still under sanctions for their idea of self-rule. They had no right to speak at the discussion table.

He remembers seeing the procession of troops and transports, tanks and missile carriers through the streets as a little boy. He loved the way the men and women of the military marched as one entity, one body in full discipline and cohesion. He knew he'd join when he grew up, and he'd make it a career. His first post was as a prison guard, where he had to ensure the individuals who had transgressed satisfied the length of their sentencing. Nothing more or less. He got his paycheck and went home. When the visitors began to question his nation's role in the rest of the global community, the Great Leader immediately let it be known the visitors weren't welcome there. Everyone rolled their eyes and apologized for his belligerent attitude, stating his antics were like those of some drunken uncle. But he took pride in the Great Leader's lack of compromise. He immediately signed up for the Ministry of Interplanetary Studies, knowing that one day, there would be a call to arms to defend his country.

His wife was supportive of him throughout his training. She herself was a soldier (they met during a celebration after a city-wide procession of their own), and she knew what a special privilege it was to join such an elite group of troops as the Atmospheric Guard for the Defense of the Nation. He loved how she had joined the women's division in the A.G. Defense Forces. She was brave and hardworking, and although the housekeeping was left to him, she raised a lovely little girl that bedazzled him with her amazing childish insights and remarks. For instance, she had noticed that butterfly species were going extinct at a higher rate than before the visitors arrived. *Do you see Daddy? Ever since they came, more and more keep dying. We need to paint all of them, before we forget what they look like.* She says she wants to be a teacher when she grows up, and show everyone how to catch them.

He moves down the corridor and through an open access way, the pungent stench of their flesh invading his nose. They live in a humid environment, and it is recreated on all of their vessels. Their planetary embassies are located in tropical regions, and are usually the center of dialogue between us and them. The Great Leader never understood why everyone didn't perceive the disrespect and arrogance in drawing the host species to their conference rooms. But he knew,

and his foresight and vision led to efforts in the creation of a military that could counter their imposing threat, in spite of their seeming good will.

He hears their garbled chatter, an almost guttural language that is spaced with the occasional cluck of their long tongues. Probably a cleanup crew to get rid of his team, repair and salvage whatever is left of the Hopper. They are not a wasteful species. His only weapon is a pistol which he recalls in an instant of a lucid-inducing adrenaline rush, is damaged by the earlier encounter. He looks around for somewhere to hide, and decides upon a slightly open nook where steam occasionally rises. He turns around, crouches into a ball, and winces with the pain as he closes his eyes in hope that the creatures won't see him.

After an eternity, he slowly rises from his position, and shuffles his way down in the direction from which they had walked. He knows from the maps he memorized that the docking levels run in concentric rings around the orbital platform. Hoppers bring the visitors to and from the surface with supplies and the occasional human passenger who gains a visa to their centers of operation. The docking levels are meant to be easily accessible to everyone, and that includes the engineering class who work the core of the platform where all the energy is manipulated and distributed to the batteries that send it back to a corresponding platform through the wormhole. He goes down another passageway which he knows leads toward a third tier engineering level.

Upon entering the room, the bass-like drone of machinery begins to vibrate within his chest. His injuries become more pronounced with the deep resonance, causing him to feel the dizziness that has plagued him since his return from the comatose state. The place is enormous. An acrid smell of ozone and electrical discharge overwhelms his nostrils, and it is difficult to maintain balance, as the air itself is distorted by the magnetic energies being conducted through the center of the station. He passes a reflective interface screen, and is shocked by what he sees.

He brings his hand up to the left side of his face, to touch the shrapnel that is embedded in his left eye and fitting out the side of his head. It is about eight centimeters in length and thick. *Holy shit*, he thinks, and for an instant believes he is watching himself in a dream. He chuckles darkly and muses, *the family pictures are going to be ruined this year*.

The glassine surface of the interface node begins to warm and glow to an ultraviolet hue, flashing intermittently with symbols. A small video screen floats out before him, displaying a familiar scene playing out on one of the other orbital platforms. A Hopper docks into the station, a firefight ensues, and control is reinstated shortly after the boarders are summarily defeated. The small glimmer of hope he felt dies with the rest of another crew who have also failed their mission. The vid screen instantly winks out.

It is replaced by another, which slowly resolves into existence off the interface screen,

displaying the outside of the same orbital station. The symbols of the language they speak momentarily freeze along the bottom of the small video display. The orbital station itself begins to flare, lightning arcing out in every direction. The luminescence increases until he is forced to shut his eye, then disappears in a brilliant flash that hurls a field of blazing debris in a circular trajectory from where the station had existed a moment before.

*Somebody succeeded!* His heart races as he digs the data crystal from his pocket. He looks for a slot to place it in, but can't locate one. Reverberating along the walkway are the guttural barks of the Visitors' panic-stricken orders to be on high alert. It is only a matter of time before he is found out.

He runs his hand over the entire interface node, smearing blood all over the panels in the process. He can't find anything that resembles hardware connectivity. The data crystal begins to feel like a searing hot pebble in his hand. In exasperation, he holds it up before his face, hoping to decipher some clue to get it to function. The crystal vibrates in his fingertips and suddenly launches from his grasp. It slows before the glazed surface of the interface node, and slides deliberately within it, accompanied by the satisfying hum of electronic activity.

He smells it before being blindsided away from the console. The creature is two meters tall, wearing a flexible, incandescent suit alive with small glowing symbols running the length of its body. Its pointy ears twitch nervously as it attempts to remedy whatever it was he did to the machine. He looks at its ugly face as he reels from newfound pain. The creature has slanted, dark, and beady eyes, a high forehead and a narrow, pointy chin. Long strands of its wispy, platinum hair are braided down its neck, reaching between its shoulders. After a few more of them arrive, it turns its attention back to him. It begins to squawk and squeal plaintively and points at the interface screen. He senses a palpable fear emanating off the creature, as much as he can feel the air getting thick with heat and energy.

As he coughs up blood, he pulls a picture out of his vest pocket. It is of him and his wife, with their daughter sitting between them. He remembers touching their faces for what would be the last time—eons ago, before he left his home to prepare for this mission. *I love you, my babies.*

A host of thoughts crowd his mind as the taste of copper fills his mouth. *Why didn't anyone listen to the Great Leader? How did we come to this? Why the hell did I have to join up?* In spite of the increasing heat within the station, he can almost chew through the cloying stench of the creatures, as they frenetically try to undo what he had begun. They frantically consult wrist-guided prompts as they mash their bony hands against the screen. Two of them run away; the others stand in futility and resignation. The glare of a million suns blinds him, and a tear rolls from his eye.



*Junot 2, Alex Geisel*

# Pretty Corpse

Hunter Kurepa-Peers

PERRY

I wake up to soft light. Angels fluttering all around me. I'm lying on the lightest cloud I could imagine. Jesus is beside me, my hand in his.

"So," he says to me. "What color were you before the chemo?"

I look down at my hand. Jesus is filing my nails.

"Your hair," he says. "What color was it before it all fell out of your pretty little head?"

I feel the top of my head. I'm still bald.

"I'm thinking you should go auburn," he says.

"No disrespect," I say, "but aren't I supposed to be cured right now?"

"Maybe rosewood."

"Since it's heaven and all," I say, "can I have my hair back now?"

"Oh, sweetie." He blows on my nails. "Did you think this was Heaven?"

My eyes adjust to the divine light, and it's coming from the vanity mirror. Heaven comes into focus, and it looks a lot like a dressing room. This cloud feels a lot like a leather couch. One of the angels burns herself on a curling iron and uses the Lord's name in vain.

"Well, thank goodness," I sigh. "I almost thought Jesus was a homosexual."

He shakes a bottle of glitter nail polish.

"We could make this whole sister act work, y'know. From the looks of those other girls, I bet no one else is playing the virgin card." This is the first time I've ever had my nails painted. My dad always said only prostitutes wear nail polish.

MARGERY

My stylist is sizing us all up in the dressing room, and he's like, at least there aren't any burn victims this year. And he's eying some suicide blonde across the room, saying the crowd always loves them because they take pills instead of doing anything messy.

"And for a car crash, you didn't do a bad job of keeping it together. Your internal organs and all. But your hairline is a disaster. Would it have killed you to hit the dashboard just a few inches higher?"

No, probably not. A few inches higher, and I might've lived, actually.

AURA

It's all about getting us patched up. A little less corpse, a little more queen. The stylists, they've

got jars of putty trying to fill in head wounds. It's less makeup artist, more mortician. The poor girl with cancer, her stylist is shoving protein bars in her, like it'll make her gain weight. Like her digestive system still gives a shit. My stylist sits me down with a pair of tweezers and a needle and thread. I've got three bullet holes in my chest, lined up in a little arc above my tit. She tells me to start digging them out.

"I can't thread a needle with these acrylics."

"I have to start on your hair," she snaps. "Fuck knows, you've got enough of it."

She's going at it with the hair straightener, and I'm stuck digging bullets out of my boob. Instead of foundation and primer, the stylists are airbrushing the life back into our skin. It's less bronzing, more embalming. My hands are shaking so bad trying to hold these tweezers. The bullets are lodged so far in, I'm scraping against my lungs. My bra is soaked in blood, and however much I fill in the holes, I'm going to end up tearing myself open again anyway. And maybe I don't want to look brand new.

My stylist pulls out the rack of gowns set aside for me. Demure, high-necked, mother-of-the-bitch type dresses.

"Hey. You caught me in my prime. My ass is always going to look this good. Why cover me up?"

She stares at the blood stains down my chest. I grab a silver number off the rack. I tear off the sleeves and rip open the front seams down to the navel.

My stylist says, "That's not going to cover anything."

And I say, "Good."

## SCARLET

My stylist won't stop telling me how lucky I am, and I'm starting to notice a trend with the men in my life. No visible wounds. I've practically won already. All that's left is covering up the dark circles under my eyes. The tobacco stains on my fingers. The tattoo down my back.

"But you've still got your pretty face," he tells me. I'd say he reminds me of my father, but the revealing interviews aren't until later tonight. I light a cigarette and start taking out the curlers from my hair.

"You're a knockout, but you gotta really want it," my stylist tells me.

All I really want anymore is a drink. I wish I could say that all this is over when you die. I wish I could say that death is some kind of escape. I wish I could say that it all ends at some point, but really, it's never over. Death isn't the final scene as much as it is a change of scenery. It's live fast, die faster, if you're lucky.

## MARGERIE

My stylist is bitching about the patch of hair he just yanked off my arm, and I'm like, well, at least I have hair. I mean, I could be Miss Chemo over there.

My stylist is like, “Is it too late to trade?”

He tries shoving me into some disaster of a poly blend gown, and I’m like, hell effing no. I spent way too much money on my dress to not wear it. It’s from the Betsey Johnson prom collection, for chrissake.

He’s throwing a fit, saying: “You are not going to be caught dead in that dress. Not again.”

He’s pretty sure there’s part of my brain splattered on there. And no else is going above the knee with their gowns; I’ll look like a harlot. And I’m like, “I’m wearing the fucking prom dress.”

## PERRY

They told me it would get better. They told me Jesus and my grandpa and my old dog Grumpy were waiting for me. They told me my pain was temporary, but eternal peace is forever. They told me this was God’s plan. They told me He wanted another beautiful angel. They told me it was my time to leave earth. They told me in heaven, my hair would grow back. They told me it was okay to let go, because He would be on the other side to catch me. I thought by he, they meant God, not a sweaty game show host. I was the last one to wake up in this—I don’t know what . . . purgatory, I guess. My stylist says the other girls had more sudden deaths. With a terminal illness, it gets fuzzier.

Then, he tells me I’m dead. Sort of dead. Dead for the moment, but I might not stay dead. Was I ever in a local beauty pageant growing up? It’s the same deal. I get dressed up and answer questions and try to make the crowd like me. The winner gets to come back to life. The losers stay dead.

“Would that make me a zombie?” I ask. “Will God be mad that I went against his plan?”

“No, sweetie,” my stylist says, “you’ll be just like Jesus. You’ll be resurrected.”

He’s only just telling me this at curtain call. After spending my life in church and Catholic school and hospital beds, I’m finding it hard to believe.

“Is this another test of faith? I thought life was already the test of faith.”

My stylist tells me to stop talking so he can fix my lipstick.

“Are you really that surprised?” The blonde girl has on a lot of mascara and someone with a headset is yelling at her for smoking backstage. “People spend their entire lives being entertained by everyone else’s misery; you think that changes when we die? None of this ever ends.” And she stomps out her cigarette with her high heel.

## SCARLET

There was no light when I died. The scene just went black. Death isn’t the end of a tunnel; it’s the end of a movie. The stage is so bright, I can’t see my own stilettos moving in front of me. I can’t hear the inside of my own head, the studio audience is so loud. I can’t feel anything. I can’t remember if that was any different when I was alive.

No one ever told us exactly who our audience is. Getting sent back to earth as a goddamn reality show? Is being alive too passé? Is being dead the edgy new thing? Is this what's playing on TV in hell? Hi, Dad. If you're watching this, I'm not surprised you're not in a better place. No matter what anyone says, they love seeing people die young. Marilyn Monroe never had saggy tits. James Dean never sold out. And they never will. Die beautiful before life turns you ugly. Die before the damage on the inside starts to show. Die while your skin's still porcelain and the cracks are only in your head. Die while everyone only sees the cherry candy smirk, not the cyanide pill clamped in the back of your jaw.

## MARGERY

“Ladies and gentlemen, don't they just look so lively?”

The host is wearing a suit as tasteless as he is and more makeup than I am. The audience oohs. I'd gag, if I still had a working reflex. We line up on stage and the host tells us about ourselves. Our names. Our hobbies. Our horrible, violent deaths. Our life aspirations that were tragically cut short. Our astrological signs. Our bios are just as glossed over as we are, but you get the picture.

Perry. Miss Innocence. Brain cancer. Died a virgin. She used to want to be a singer, but now she just wants to be older than 14. They've got her in a wig and a big white dress that she could've worn to a purity ball. She smiles, waves, crosses herself, blows a kiss up to the ceiling. I'm sure her stylist told her to do that. The audience will love it. This one goes out to the Big J.

Next is Aura. Miss Martyr. Shot by police during a student political protest. You can see exactly where they hit her. The bodice of her gown is plunging, her tits are pushed up and spilling over, the bullet holes are right there over her heart. She's got fountains of purple hair. Every flashing light in the studio is reflecting off that liquid mercury dress like she's the goddamn moon. She just has to be such a spectacle.

Then there's Scarlet. Miss Suicide Blonde, wrapped up in red silk and apathy. Her eyes look like they died years before she did. She used to be some gangster's accessory. The host says something about how she killed herself and now wants this second chance at life, but I can tell she would drop dead right now, if it meant everyone would stop looking at her. She does a melancholy little spin. Her backless gown shows off her tramp stamp. The audience swoons. I'm over it.

They get to me, and everything they say is wrong. I'm not even supposed to be here. I'm supposed to be getting crowned prom queen right now.

## AURA

They give us a break to freshen up our makeup. Stay hydrated. Make sure none of our decomposing body parts are sliding off yet. Margery's in the bathroom, leaning against a sink and smoking a joint.

“Where did you get that?”

“I had an eighth in my bra when I got hit.”

“Is it doing anything for you? Our brains being mush and all?”

She shrugs. “Be a doll, would you?” She passes me the joint. “I never thought I was gonna get high again in this life.”

Margery says, “We should get Miss Virgin Mary in here. Show her a good time before—whatever.”

It’s like being at a funeral, where nothing you say will make anything better. She asks, “What’s it like being shot?”

“All I remember is thinking, I have so much left to do, and that this isn’t the world I want to die in. And now I’m here.” I hand her back the joint.

“Do you know who hit you?”

“My ex. I saw his car in the rear view mirror. Last thing I saw in that life.”

“Nasty breakup?”

“Not really. Just a nasty drunk,” she says.

#### MARGERY

They’re escorting us all back onto the stage for the Q&A session of the Miss Die Young Leave A Pretty Corpse Pageant, and my stylist tells me not to fuck this one up. He tried his best, really, but can I stop actively trying to make people hate me? Can I stop being Miss Anthrope out there? Do I even want to live? And I’m like, yeah, okay, but Scarlet over there, she hates all of this too, and people are falling all over her. He’s like, “You can get away with not having a heart if you’re beautiful. And you, well, I tried my best.”

They have us sit in chairs for this next round. I’m sure if I could feel my feet in these Kate Spades, they’d be killing me. The host grins at us with his veneers like we’re fresh meat. I guess, technically, we’re not too far off.

#### PERRY

“If you could resurrect one person, who would it be?”

Now I know this isn’t Heaven, or I would never have to do public speaking again. My stylist said if I didn’t know how to answer a question to just think, what would Jesus do?

“Well, I would . . . I don’t know, I mean, I don’t think I should have that kind of power.”

The audience laughs and goes *awww*, and I can’t tell if it’s a good enough answer or not. I don’t think my blood is circulating anymore, but if it is, I’m blushing.

AURA

“Well, I think we should bring back all the student protesters killed by oppressive, bigoted police.”

Murmurs in the audience. The host is smiling uncomfortably.

“But if I had to choose only one person, it would be my mother.” He looks relieved.

“She was my idol. Died a few years ago, and it broke my heart. I would just want her to see who I’ve become.” If I could still cry, my fake eyelashes would be sliding down my face right now.

“I have so much more to do in this life, so many more things for her to be proud of. I just haven’t done enough yet.” I want to cry even harder, knowing I can’t anymore. “Please.”

I never beg; I’m used to demanding. But then, I’m also used to being alive.

SCARLET

“I would resurrect the man I loved more than life itself.” The host looks at me like he struck fucking diamonds.

“Care to elaborate?”

“No.”

MARGERY

“Can I say myself?” My stylist is standing off to the side of the stage, and he’s giving me a look like he wishes I was still alive right now, because he’d love to have the pleasure of killing me himself. “I mean, that’s the point of this, isn’t it? I didn’t really deserve to die, and you all know that, and that’s why I’m getting this second chance now. I was driving to prom, stone cold sober, and I got hit by my drunk asshole ex-boyfriend. None of that is my fault. I should be alive right now.”

The host says, “We’re cutting to commercial break.”

AURA

Instead of “what’s your dream date,” it’s “what’s your dream funeral.” Instead of “if you could make one change to the world . . .,” it’s “if you could go back and make one change to your painfully short life . . .” They slather us in makeup and cover up our scars with sequins, and now they want us to be raw.

“What do you miss most about being alive?”

“Helping make the world a place that people want to be alive in.” The audience coos. “Also, a fat blunt and a hot bath.”

SCARLET

“What is your biggest regret?”

I take a sip from my water bottle. “I think what you’re expecting me to say is that I regret killing myself.”

The host does a nervous laugh. “No, of course that’s not—”

“I really didn’t,” I tell him. “Until I was brought here.”

PERRY

“What does your ideal afterlife look like?”

“The ideal afterlife is heaven . . . and heaven . . . heaven looks like . . . well it’s heaven, you know . . . it’s . . . .” This is the first time I realize, I can’t breathe. I try to take a deep breath and calm down, but I can’t feel any air in my lungs. I can’t breathe. I’m still moving and thinking and sitting here talking, but I’m not breathing.

“And . . . and this was supposed to be Heaven.” I can’t breathe but I’m not dead. “This was supposed to be the end to my suffering.” I’m not dead, but I’m not alive.

“I’m supposed to be whole, I’m supposed to be eternal, and I’m supposed to have my hair back!”

Aura comes over and puts her arm around me. I guess I was yelling. I guess I stood up. I guess I took off my wig and threw it on the stage. I didn’t feel any of it. She helps me sit back in my chair and put my wig on. I want to curl up in her Rapunzel hair and never leave.

SCARLET

Every time things get too emotional on stage, they cut to commercial break. Anything unscripted just makes everyone so uncomfortable. I go to the bathroom for a drink and a smoke. I’ve got half a water bottle and a full pack left. It’s probably all I’m going to need anyway. This can’t last much longer. My stylist keeps fussing over my makeup. He tries to follow me into the bathroom. I tell him, “What else do you think is going to happen to me? I’m already fucking dead.” He leaves me alone.

I walk into a cloud of weed and hairspray. The other girls are already there. Perry’s balled up on the floor, dry heaving. “I just want this to be over.”

I tell her, “Me too, kid.”

“Hey, Miss Mafia,” Margery says to me, between hits. “What’s the verdict on suicide? Would you recommend?”

I light a cigarette. “At this point?”

You hear those stories from survivors of suicide attempts, people paralyzed from jumping off bridges, people with half their jaws shot off, and the moral is always “it wasn’t worth it.” Really, they only

say that to make everyone else feel better. But with our place surrounded, and my boyfriend shot dead and bleeding out on the staircase, and years of trials and prison and isolation ahead of me, I sat in the whirlpool bathtub and drank bleach. I promised I'd die before I'd let them take me, and I did. And I'd do it again. And now, I might actually have to. I shouldn't be here either, but not because I deserve to live. I probably belong in hell, really, if it even exists anymore. At least I'd be by his side.

Aura's hair is piled up like lavender frosting. She's spraying it all into place.

"What are you ladies doing for your talents?"

"I used to be a star gymnast." Margery flicks the butt of her joint into the garbage. "Until they kicked me off the team for hitting puberty."

Perry's got her head in her lap. Her voice is muffled behind all that white tulle.

"I was the best singer in my school choir."

"I can tie a knot in a cherry stem," I tell them.

"Very nice." Aura tosses her hairspray can into the bin.

"I was thinking of doing a little musical number. A real crowd pleaser," Margery snorts.

"Here's to wasted youth." I raise my water bottle.

## MARGERIE

It's the emergency intermission of the Miss Ameri-Can You Believe This Shit Pageant, and everyone's fending for themselves. Leave the dead girls. This is nothing new to them. They're old pros. Perry said she needed to be alone, so we left her in the bathroom. A few minutes later, she comes out with her dress in flames. The stylists run to the sinks to put it out. Turns out, the bathroom's gone up in smoke too. Something about a can of hairspray catching on fire in the garbage. Someone grabs Scarlet's water bottle and dumps it on Perry's skirt. The flames just get bigger. That's when we find out Scarlet has a drinking problem. Perry's flailing, and we're all discovering just how flammable the dressing room is. All those beauty products and electrical wires. Everything she gets close to burns. Aura is the only one who'll go anywhere near her, and really, it's just because she's got something to prove. The fire's spreading to the front of the studio. The hosts, the stylists, the audience, everyone's evacuating. I think about following them. Maybe I'll win this thing by default. Maybe I just want to see where they're going. Scarlet's sitting on the edge of the stage. She looks too tired to do anything anymore. I don't know what my excuse is, but I stay behind too.

## AURA

I always hated that shit about accepting death, welcoming it peacefully. I wanted to die kicking and screaming for something beyond my existence. It's not so much I'm not going down without a fight,

as much as a fight isn't going down without me. When I get over to help Perry, my hair is the first thing to catch on fire. Lavender was my mom's favorite color.

#### SCARLET

It was all of us, really. Perry's dress. Aura's hairspray. Margery's joint. My liquor. We did it to ourselves.

#### MARGERY

You could call the flames natural lighting; I've been told it's flattering. This is supposed to be the talent portion of the show, if you consider flammability a talent. Perry's white first communion gown is still on fire. Most of Aura's hair is scorched off by now. With all the chemicals she's got in there, no one's really that surprised. She's trying to claw Perry out of that mess of burning tulle, and Perry's screaming at her to stop, just save herself. They're trying to out-martyr each other right to the end. Fashion to ashes. The show is over, but it's never really over. I don't know where the studio audience is. In a better place—at this point, anywhere is a better place. And Scarlet. Miss Hollywood. She's sitting on the edge of the collapsing stage, dangling her feet over like it's the goddamn pool side, sipping on her plastic water bottle of vodka. She lights a cigarette off one of the flaming curtains.

I ask her, "What the fuck are you doing?" The rest of us are burning in hell, and she's already chilling in paradise.

And she's like, "I learn from my mistakes. I'm not dying sober twice in one night." And she stares at me with her vacant, fade-to-black eyes. If looks could kill, and if we weren't already dead.

I stand on the stage and face my audience of three.

"I just want you to know," I scream over the flames, "you all fucking ruined this for me." No one's paying attention to me.

"I was supposed to win!" I can't compete with a fire or a last drink.

"I was supposed to be the goddamn prom queen!" If I could still breathe, I'd be getting choked up. From the smoke, or whatever.

"It just had to be you in that car tonight!" When no one else is listening, you forget who you're talking to. "You fucking ruined everything!"

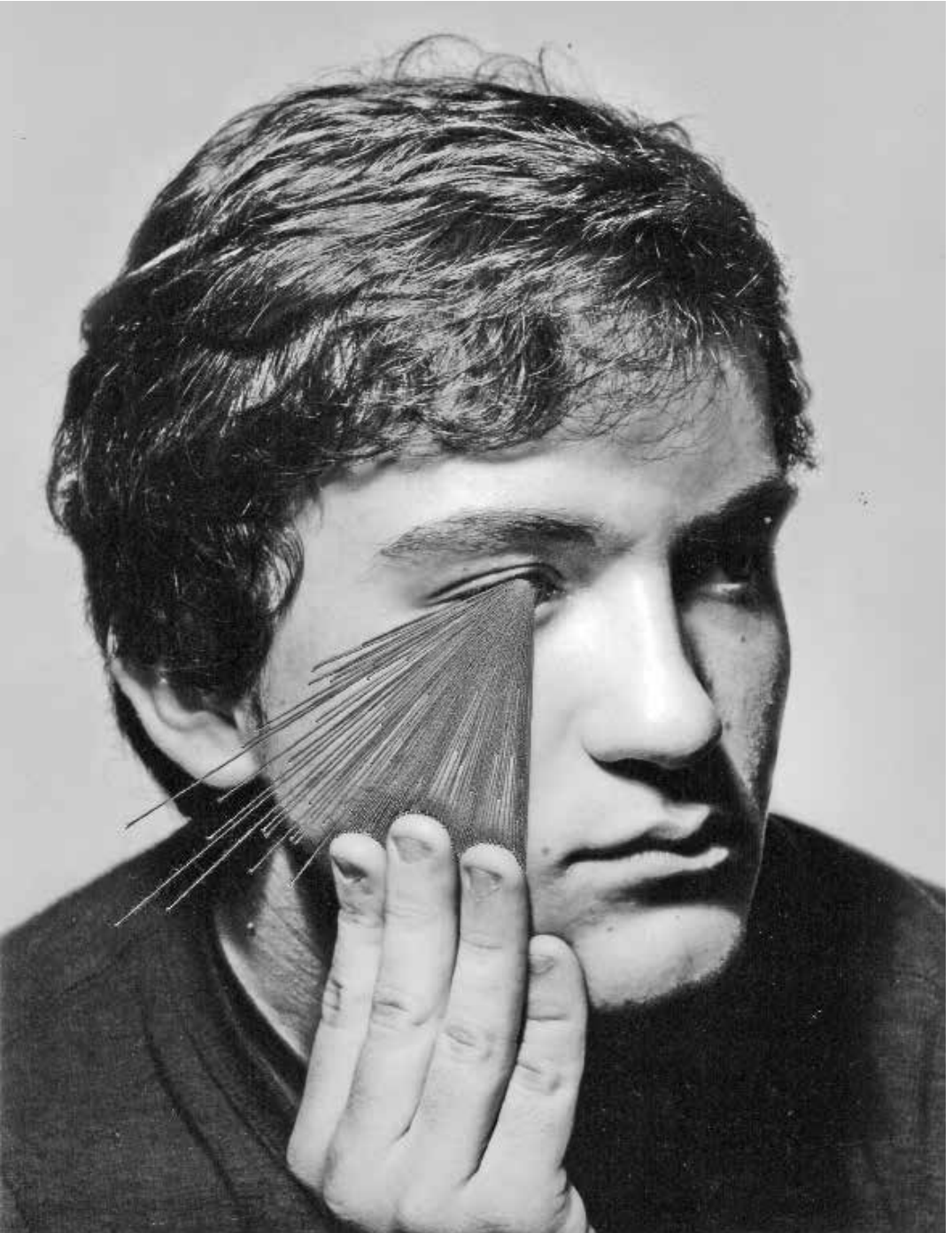
"Margery," Scarlet finally says. "Did you really think any of us were going to make it out of here?"

Perry and Aura are fighting their monster of fabric and smoke, and I have to think, that's exactly how they'd want to go out. Perry pure, Aura in her literal blaze of glory. And Scarlet's sitting there with her cigarette and her vodka. Sparks are starting to catch on the edge of her gown. This is probably what she wants too. I stumble my way over the burning floorboards and sit on the edge of the stage with her. The air and flames are so thick that I can hardly tell where I am anymore. Scarlet passes me her bottle. I take a swig.

# About a Boy and a Time

Jaisal Kapoor

the moon is caught in the telephone wires  
tonight it is our turn to wander across the earth  
spilling light into the ocean tonight  
my memory is breaking in your grasp  
leaving salt on your collarbone  
and a bruise on my chin  
tonight my eyelashes are heavy with the rain and you  
I must not blink tonight  
tonight  
I must not blink



*Chris Barboi, Audrey Lee*

# A Blind Boy's Path to a Young Man with a Vision

Vincent Thompson

On October 6, 1988, at Mercy Hospital in Hempstead, New York, I was born blind—not blind physically, but mentally. A boy with no vision in life: this is how I was during my first eighteen years on this earth. I was born premature, and from the day I was born, you could tell patience was something I could work on. I am Darcel Thompson's fourth child, the only one by my father, Vincent Alexander. I am my mother's youngest child and my father's oldest. My mother's three other children have the same father. My mother lost her youngest daughter; she was born three years before me. Little Destiny was crying one day in her crib when her father picked her up and decided to shake her. This shaking cost Destiny her life. My sibling's father was eventually arrested and charged.

I grew up in my mother's apartment in Hempstead, New York, with my older sister and brother; Tawana and Darrell. I never remember my mother and father being together. Darcel Thompson is my definition of a strong black woman. She raised three children in a single-parent household. Darcel always maintained a job to support her children, and she made sure we had a roof over our heads, food on the table, and clothing on our backs. The only thing she could not do was keep us out of the streets. My father was around when he wanted to be. I remember going over to his house for the weekends as a child. My father has another son with a wife. When I was at his house I felt out of place; it was like he had his own little family. My father lived in the suburban part of Long Island, and my mother lived in the ghetto. As I grew older, my trips to his house decreased. I felt I would miss something in the ghetto if I was not there.

When I was a child, I wanted to be a basketball and football player. I did not want to play just one sport; I wanted to play both. Deion Sanders played two sports, so why couldn't I? That was my dream, but the reality was the penitentiary.

I went to school in Hempstead, where the graduation percentage rate is the lowest on Long Island. My earliest memories are of me as a chubby little boy, whom everyone at Prospect Elementary knew as Tawana and Darrell's baby brother. I had no problem with this reputation, especially with my sister's friends, because they had a habit of grabbing my cheeks. "Oh, he's so cute." This is what they would say, and I liked that. I did want my own identity, which I started to develop after a couple of fights. My peers started to count my wins like I was Floyd Mayweather Jr. My first loss came when I

fought this kid who was bigger and older than me. The first two times that I fought him, he beat me up. The most important thing is that I kept coming back. I could not win fighting him straight up, so I tried to catch him off guard. This was the time in which I embraced my traits of toughness, never giving up, or quitting. The one trait that I was blind to, that stuck with me for years, was my sense of pride.

Prospect Elementary was where I should have seen my skill and talent for writing. In the fourth grade, the mayor of Hempstead put together a writing contest. He picked nine winners, one each from the fourth to the twelfth grades. The title of the essay was *If I Was Mayor For A Day . . .* I won the contest for my grade. The mayor gave all the winners a position for the day. The 12th grade winner was the Mayor. I was appointed Court Clerk. I did not understand this job until later on in life. As I reflect back now, I might have taken winning the contest for granted.

A.B.G.S. Middle School is where everything started. About the time that the first day of school rolled around, I was smoking weed before, after, and during school. During my first month in this school, I noticed something: school was a fashion show. Everyone was in competition with one another for who had the best clothing and sneakers. This is where I noticed my competitiveness. The problem was my mother could only do so much to provide me with what I wanted; she had other children to support. She made sure we had some nice clothes and sneakers for the first day of school. Other than that, it was more a question of what you needed, instead of what you wanted. This was a problem for me because I wanted to keep up with the Joneses.

We lived in an apartment building on Grove Street, which was a drug-infested neighborhood. As soon as you walked out of the door, you became a witness to cars pulling up and approaching the first person they saw for drugs. Directly across the street was where my best friend Marcus lived. We called each other brothers from another mother. Marcus did not live in your ordinary household. His house was where the drug users came to purchase and use drugs, mainly crack cocaine. I spent so many days over there, just observing the drug traffic. This environment was calling me. It was only a matter of time before this 14 year old fell victim. I do not remember my first drug sale, but I do remember the first 1,000 dollars I made. Marcus and I went to Jamaica Avenue and I spent 400 dollars on a Walt Frazier New York Knicks jersey and a pair of white on white Air Force Ones. I could not wait to show them off in school.

I started selling crack in the seventh grade. The eighth grade was the last year I completed. I became fascinated with the streets. I was arrested for the very first time when I was 15 years old and sentenced to juvenile detention in Westbury, New York. I was there for a two-month stay before I was released with juvenile probation. This probation might have been the only reason, other than the girls, that I even attended the ninth grade at Hempstead High School. If it was not for my probation

officer showing up to my first period class, I probably would not have walked into the building. This was around the time when I met Miss Fontesta Robinson. My best friend Marcus and I were at the Roosevelt Field Mall, because I had just bought a pair of sneakers. As we were turning the corner, I bumped into this young lady and knocked her bags out of her hands. I apologized and assisted her with picking up her things. As I was helping her, I noticed her chocolate complexion, and very sexy dimples. I have always been a sucker for dimples. As I was looking her up and down, we made eye contact and that was it. I asked her for her number and she gave it to me. To me, it seemed as though she was sent from heaven, but as it turned out, she may have been from hell. We started out just talking on the phone, getting to know each other. We were the same age, materialistic, and both of us were into fashion. A couple of months passed and she started to come over on the block her friends. I introduced my friends to her friends. Her best friend had a baby by my best friend Marcus. We were starting to get pretty serious by now, and eventually Fontesta got pregnant. Neither of us was ready for a baby. At least that is what her mother told her, so she had an abortion. This just brought us closer together. I had been with other girls before Fontesta, but I had never felt this deep feeling I felt for her.

I had just turned 16 years old. I was not at the legal age to drink, buy cigarettes, and have sex with grown women, but I was old enough to be tried and prosecuted as a grown man. I cannot blame everything on the government, because I was a bit reckless at this age. I was still selling drugs, but now I started carrying guns. I got arrested for a drug sale, but the court released me. All I had to do was keep making my court appearances, which I failed to do. It was only a matter of time before everything caught up to me.

It was June 2006, and I was getting ready to go to the mall to buy something to wear to the Greek Festival, which was going to be held on the weekend at Jones Beach. I was hanging out in front of the corner store when a Ford Taurus drove by with two white men inside the car, looking at me. I grabbed a bike and tried to ride off. As soon as I turned the corner, the car was on my tail. So I jumped off the bike, ran through a yard, and tossed the drugs I had in my possession. The police detectives were now on their feet, chasing me. I had to jump a fence. As I ran through this next yard, I ran right into two more detectives who were waiting for me. The officers grabbed me and put me right in their black Crown Victoria. As it turned out, the police were looking for me for missing a court appearance for the prior drug sale, for which they had previously released me. The detectives also found the drugs I tossed in the yard. They sentenced me to 18 months; with good time, I would come home in one year. I was under 18 years old, so I was sent to the adolescents' block in the Nassau County Jail. This experience had no reform in it. I was placed in a housing unit with a majority of the teenagers that I grew up with, or knew; this was just a little vacation.

For the first couple of months Fontesta was consistent, she was communicating. Then, everything seemed to slow down: first the visits, then the calls, and finally, the letters. I had about a

good six months left when Fontesta was completely gone. That was a hard experience. I had grown to love her. For her to just leave me at a time like that had hurt me. I felt I had to get her back, or if I couldn't do that, the next female in my life would have to feel my pain. This was the birth of revenge that was embedded in me.

On June 15, 2007, I came home. I had not learned anything. If there was any knowledge I had before, it might have been completely lost now. The only lesson that I might have gotten out of being locked up was that I was not going to give any female my trust and heart, without her earning it first.

If I was reckless or wild before, it was nothing compared to when I was released from jail during the summer of 2007. I was 18 years old now, and within two weeks of my release, I was back selling drugs. Within a month, I was locked back up on Riker's Island for 30 days. While I was back in the streets, Fontesta was trying her best to get in touch with me, but I did not want to hear it. As far as I thought, she had not been trying to get in touch with me when I was sitting in a cell. I was not going to hear any excuses about why she left me. I had made a decision: a relationship was not the best thing for me at that time. Instead I just had a couple of friends.

One night, I was hanging out with one of my girlfriends at the time, Jasmine; we were in front of her building, when two masked men walked through the door. The masked men started to approach us, and I observed that they both had guns in their hands—Glock nine millimeters. Something else stuck out: one of the gunmen's distinctive eyes. Jasmine ran into her house. Now it was just me and the gunmen in this hallway. "V, where the money at?" the gunman with the familiar eyes said. At this point I was supposed to give up what I had, because no amount of money is worth your life, but I carried this thing called pride with me.

"Give it up nigga," the other gunman yelled.

"I got nothing for y'all," I responded. I thought I was being tough, but really, it was stupid. One of the gunmen swung his gun at me, hitting me on the side of my head a couple of times. Blood started to run down the side of my face. The other gunman put his gun to the side of my head while his partner put his hand inside my pocket, and took my money, which was 5,500 dollars. He took the drugs I had on me, and a pair of earrings. This situation could have ended worse; I could have been murdered that night. After they took my belongings, I walked out of the building, but not before I made a promise to them: "I'll be back." Revenge was embedded in me, plus the pride that almost got me killed that night. Those two are never a good mix.

I had a gun since I was really young. I never felt the need to carry it on me everyday, but ever since that night, that gun never left my side. This was around the time that I took my first trip down south. Sometimes I need a place to get away to. I used it as a way to cool my name down from the streets, so South Carolina was a good place to disappear to for a while. I was still able to make a little money, which is never a bad plan. But, as that old saying goes, "There's no place like home." Within

two weeks, I was right back around the way. The summer was coming to an end, but it might have just started for me.

One night I was hanging out with my friend Ralik. We had a big brother, little brother relationship. I was just a year older than him, but I was a good 80 pounds heavier. We had known each other since elementary school. The night was August 12, 2009. It was about 12:30 a.m. I was doing what I usually do at this time of night, just trying to make a couple of dollars. I was talking on the phone to one of my homegirls, when this older guy mistook “my little brother” Ralik for someone he had gotten into an altercation with earlier that day. This guy was about six feet two inches tall and about a good 240 pounds. He approached my little brother with a baseball bat. As I turned around, I saw that this guy had Ralik against a fence scared, while acting as if he was about to swing his bat at a pitch. They were about six feet behind me. At this point I pulled out my newfound friend, a .357 Magnum revolver. I pointed it at this guy with the baseball bat and yelled, “Yo, you are bugging, he had nothing to do with that, you got the wrong person.” Now this guy faced my direction. He noticed that I had a gun. My first thought was that this man would realize he had no chance to win with a baseball bat against a gun, but to my surprise, he made his way towards me running, while my gun was pointed at him. In the next moment, I made the biggest decision of my life: I shot this man twice, killing him. This decision changed my whole life.

That night, somehow, some way, I ended up at Fontesta’s house. I spent the night and she told me why she left me during that one year I spent locked up in Nassau County Jail. She said, “I could not handle a relationship with someone that was locked up.” She claimed that she was going through something and needed someone by her side, so she moved on. I told her, “You knew what you was getting into by dating me.” I never held anything back from Fontesta. You have to take the good with the bad. The next morning, I took a cab to my mother’s apartment. Everyone was calling me, asking me what happened last night. They had heard that I was the one who fired the shots. If everyone knew who did it, there was only a matter of time before the police would find out. So I packed my things and went back to South Carolina. I survived the only way I knew how, by selling drugs. I knew people from my past trips, so I started to fit right in. I lived down there for 5 months. I changed my phone number, but I still kept in touch with my mother and sister. I called my mother at least once a week. She always wanted to hear my voice, and the feeling was mutual. Little did I know, my mother’s phone was being monitored.

On December 11, 2007, I was in the house, dozing off at around 5:30 a.m., when a gang of U.S. Marshals rushed in, along with the Nassau County Homicide Unit. They arrested me and put me on a plane for extradition back to New York. I found out that the star witness in my case was my “little brother,” Ralik. That really hurt me. I had been protecting him that night when that man approached him. I could have turned my back on him then, but I did not. I felt as though Ralik had turned his back

on me. Ralik had shown me that all he cared about was himself. My love for him turned to hatred. If Ralik had come into my presence at that time, he would have felt that hatred.

When the judge read me the charges at arraignment, you could not tell me that my life wasn't over. They charged me with murder in the second degree, and possession of a gun in the second degree. At 18, I was facing 25 years to life. I sat in Nassau County Jail for approximately one and a half years, before they offered me anything. I was convinced that the judge and district attorney were coldhearted. Eventually, they offered me 18 years. I told them that I did not want to accept that. The judge called me up to the courtroom. As I entered the courtroom, he told my mother to stand up. I recall him telling her, "If your son does not take this 18 years, he is going to lose his trial and get 25 years to life." My mom started crying, and then she began to yell, "V, take it, take it!" I witnessed the judge and the district attorney try to get this conviction by getting into the mind of my mother. What mother wanted her child to take the chance of getting life in prison? I thank God we did not have to experience that. They reduced the offer twice, the first time with 15 years, then right before trial, they offered 12 years, which I accepted. It was sort of like I was playing Russian roulette with my life, with the judge and district attorney holding the gun to my head and pulling the trigger.

When I took the 12 years, a burden was lifted from me; that burden was my life. At this time, a vision appeared. This vision included a second chance, without taking life for granted. I had a chance at redemption. This vision does not include the streets, drugs, and guns, but it does include a family, a good job, a house, and just enjoying life. It was at this time that I made my first goal: to better myself, mentally and physically. Then I started putting forth efforts to achieve my goals. I started watching what I eat and working out consistently. I obtained my G.E.D., Plumbing Vocational certificate, Food Handling certificate, and P.A.C.E. certificate. I started studying real estate, credit, and stocks and bonds in my spare time. My highest achievement is being accepted by N.Y.U. I have the chance to be the first from my household to graduate from college. I am putting together a plan, so that I can leave here and earn an honest living.

My whole 20s were spent in Sing Sing, Attica, Coxsackie, Eastern, and Wallkill correctional facilities. I want my 30s to be spent in Africa, Brazil, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, and Jamaica. I no longer hate Ralik; I've come to the conclusion that if it wasn't for him, I would still be blind today. I would not have had this vision, and I would not have learned anything at all. The first chance I get I am going to thank Ralik, because with his help, now I can see.

You witnessed this transition from a boy who was blind: no vision, no goals, and no life plan, just living for the moment. A boy who was lead by misdirected pride and revenge. Now he is a young man with courage, who has learned from the experiences and events he was faced with in life. Today this young man has a vision for life, a plan for his future. He no longer has hatred built up inside of him toward the people he felt had betrayed him. He is now thankful, because without them, this transition would not be possible.

# Seeing Beyond the Bars

Manual Rosario

Being sent to prison for a second time was the hammer that crushed every tie between street culture and me. Since the age of 21, I have been confined within prison walls. The earth-shattering fact that I had to change my life was so obvious that only a blind man wouldn't notice. The dangers that came along with my life were ubiquitous. I was living a life encircled in a ball of negativity. In a life of crime, the pain is dominant over the pleasure. It is self-abuse when one knows that pain and suffering are headed one's way, and still one continues to head in the direction of the pain.

The turning point was when I was arrested in Elmira, New York, for drug possession. I went from having money, looking good, and doing whatever I wanted to being broke and alone, all in a matter of days. I was locked up hundreds of miles from home. I knew nobody, all of my money and possessions were confiscated from me, and I couldn't afford bail or a lawyer. I was facing nine years, and my girlfriend abandoned me. I never felt so low in my life. I had to change. Tired of the self-abuse, I began to think differently. Once the mind is clear and one is thinking critically, change begins to take place. I have never been docile, or an excuse-maker, although I now understand the situations that led me into such a life.

Through intense research into Black people's history, I began to notice patterns of oppression that began in the fifteenth century, but carry on until the present day. There is no doubt that the crack epidemic impacted my life and my community in ways too countless for me to even begin to explain. Selling drugs and wrecking lives come hand in hand, but most drug dealers fail to acknowledge that, in the midst of wrecking other people's lives, they wreck their own as well. Now, I got to wondering how such an uncontrollable pattern as this can exist, unless it is indirectly controlled by a higher power. My research led me to a man named Oscar Danilo Blandón, a Nicaraguan immigrant who was flooding south central Los Angeles with drugs, while receiving support from the C. I. A.

My neighborhood was a product of government corruption. A puppet, that is all it was: a puppet indoctrinated into hurting a people that was already hurting. Not just any people—my people. Understanding this was the turning point of my life; I was now able to see how I was being used. Reading made me conscious of what was going around me. Instead

of sobbing and complaining, I began to wage war against the system—not by carrying out acts of violence, but by becoming part of the system. In order for me even to attempt to bring about any sort of change, I have first to be part of the system, sort of an infiltrator.

Once inside the labor force, inside institutions of higher learning, and inside community organizations, I can begin to educate the people around me, so they too can begin to demand a change in how the government is run. I know why segregation and Jim Crow existed: the powers that be feared the unity of the races. Segregation and discrimination are also tools used to keep control of power and resources. So, while poor Black people and poor white people hate and kill each other, the powerful never have to worry about being attacked. Their would-be attackers are too busy attacking each other.

By isolating myself from the labor force and relinquishing my voting rights, I was doing exactly what the powers that be wanted: becoming, and remaining, a statistic without a voice. I could no longer face the fact that I was participating in my own demise. So, during my most recent incarceration, I began to gather as many credentials as possible, since without an education or a certified skill, it is hard to live a comfortable life.

I have been on this mission of transition since 2013. Since then, I have utilized my time as wisely as possible. I exercise, study, study, and study some more. I've acquired certificates in human resources, food handling, college credits, and other valuable credentials. Finally, I'm seeing beyond the bars.

# Perchance

Eric Claborn

The annals of time do not  
articulate every broken  
promise made

I douse the earth  
to quench the thirst  
of the valley of dry bones

No pantheon shelter for  
these scattered souls are found

Like a papoose uprooted  
from sacred soil

Is there a haven for me  
to safely plant these seeds  
I hold

I too know why the caged  
birds sing, for misery's song  
must be drowned out

For if a dream dies  
shattered hopes are unrealized

# ==== CONTRIBUTORS

**Joshua Barreto** is a creative writer who is enrolled in the Liberal Arts program at Wallkill. His interests are revealing the human qualities that connect everyone across all cultures, and the redemption of historically vilified people.

**John Belknap** is a graphic designer. He is a senior at Gallatin concentrating in gender and sexuality studies, art history, and critical theory. Much of his work expresses the anxiety between content and form.

**Alee Bloom** is a junior concentrating in animation and illustration. Her writing and art draws from surrealism and concepts of grief, the Other, and coming of age.

**Ismael Bonano** is a 27-year-old former Liberal Arts student. He will commence a humanities course at Columbia University in May. His goal is to establish an organization that will help individuals in need become independent, responsible, and highly productive members of society. He has a great passion for art, philosophy, poetry, and science.

**Raechel Bosch** recently completed her master's degree at Gallatin with a concentration in visual ethnography, documentary filmmaking, and memory studies. She is interested in non-linear methods for documentary making, and works in both fiction and non-fiction.

**Corinna Bourke** is a Gallatin senior studying graphic art and design with a minor in studio art. She is interested in the ways visual language can be used in the acts of social and political change. She is from New Jersey.

**Allison Casar** is a Gallatin senior concentrating in "Language Use and Storytelling," with a minor in linguistics. She is also a digital artist and painter whose work draws inspiration from music and storytelling.

**Vincent Casiano** is a 28-year-old aspiring author and soon-to-be masseur. Born in Brooklyn, New York, Vincent was raised by a single parent and is now in his second semester at NYU. He hopes to open his first business in the year 2022 and use his NYU education to push those who were told that they would never amount to anything.

**Eric Claborn** is a 51-year-old first-year student of the Liberal Arts program at NYU upstate. He was born and raised in New York City. He aspires to work in the field of human services, and to perhaps assist in addressing some of the social justice issues plaguing our communities.

**Daniel David Cole** is a junior at Gallatin. While his visual work has taken the form of documentary photography and film with a focus on protest, his studies have concentrated on the politics of morality driving social justice movements.

**Olivia Devlin** is an M.A. student from West Belfast, and is studying religious extremism and the sociology of conflict. She is writing her master's thesis on the sociological factors behind the formation and rise of the Islamic State, and will be undertaking a Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of Chicago in August.

**Jose Diaz** is a Liberal Arts student who specializes in unstructured abstract thought. He's an aspiring writer who uses his life story to exhibit the dilemmas encountered while seeking education within the carceral system. He hopes that his experience motivates and mobilizes people past words, and into action.

**Chris Finnegan** is a member of the class of 2016, with a concentration focused on finance and history. His interests include cats, the New York Rangers, and rock 'n' roll.

**Alex Geisel** is a sophomore at Gallatin, studying music as a linguist would study a language. She's interested in the connections between the arts and communication, and that interest manifests itself through her visual and audio art.

**Drew Gregory** is a writer, filmmaker, and theatre director. He is majoring in film and television in Tisch and minoring in English in CAS, but has been fortunate enough to take classes in fiction writing, non-fiction writing, and acting in the Gallatin School.

**Tyler Finley** is a junior in Gallatin. He is still sorting his concentration out; but, when he describes it, he might throw out ambiguous buzz words like "technology," "theory," and "creativity." He has a weird relationship with creative writing where he often despises the act, but feels incredibly fulfilled by the outcome.

**Liz Francis**, born in Texas, is a senior at Gallatin studying "What Makes Dissident Movements Work." She writes poetry and fiction.

**Rachel Gilman** is studying creative writing, journalism, and screenwriting. She is Associate News Director at NYU's student-run radio station, WNYU, where she produces "The Rundown" and "The Write Stuff." Additionally, she is a staff columnist at *WSN*'s arts blog "The Highlighter" and a staff writer at NYU's online magazine *Odyssey*.

**Sara Hombach** is a junior from Chicago studying urbanism, writing, and French.

**Jaisal Kapoor** is a senior in the College of Arts and Science studying psychology and literature in translation. She has taken multiple classes at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study and is interested in the integration of consciousness and form in writing.

**Hunter Kurepa-Peers** is a junior in Gallatin studying music, dance, and television. She's also minoring in astronomy, and could tell you a lot of cool things about space if you asked.

**Eliza Lambert** is concentrating in documentary media at Gallatin, with a focus on radio and the arts. One night, when Eliza was around two, she sat up in her high chair, and began to intone, with awe and grandeur, the following, her first poem: "No sun . . . no moon. No moon . . . no shadow."

**João Londres** is a Gallatin student from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with a concentration in "Storytelling," and is trying to tell more stories about Rio.

**Mackenzie Leighton** is a sophomore in Gallatin concentrating in social justice and arts activism with a minor in creative writing. She grew up in Maine and writes to reflect on our innate connections with the natural world.

**Alex Ling** is a sophomore at Gallatin studying art history, illustration, and marketing. She specifically focuses on visual communication and how art "works" in society. Outside of academia she makes comics and leads Gallatin's 'zine club, Gallazine.

**Smritaa Massey** was born in Kolkata, India, and after moving around a bit, now lives in Dubai. She is in her junior year at Gallatin with a concentration called "Art and Technology," which explores the space in which art and technology intersect to create new forms of expression and experience.

**Eva Matos** is a visual artist born and raised in the Dominican Republic. In 2014 she transferred into Gallatin, concentrating in media studies and visual arts. A lot of her art explores the interaction between shape-shifting bodies and equally mutating physical and digital environments.

**Jesus Mejia** is a NYU upstate student pursuing a Liberal Arts degree. He was born in New York City to immigrant parents. He is an avid chess player, who likes to apply its analytical skills to his life, education, and goals. Learning has enriched his life.

**Daniels Mekšs** is a sophomore at Gallatin interested in photography, cinema, literature and spirituality.

**Anna Mongillo** is a current sophomore in Gallatin studying patterns of human behavior. She is from Austin, Texas, where she returns as often as possible to escape the frigid New York winter and eat as much Mexican food as possible. Anna has always loved writing, as an outlet, a hobby, and a passion.

**Sheila Marie Orfano** is graduating in May 2016 with a concentration in Creative Writing, placing emphasis upon writing about religious experience. She is originally from the San Fernando Valley in California and hopes to pursue a career in book publishing in New York.

**Eirdís Ragnarsdóttir** was born in Reykjavík, has lived in Beijing, Tokyo, and is currently situated in New York. Her work explores today's artificial identities in relation to body image. Her Gallatin concentration deals with the idea of artificial identity. She is interested in how capitalism influences the fluidity of identity, specifically how it objectifies our conception of self and body.

**Sydney Rappis** is a sophomore from Wisconsin concentrating in "Culture of Text," with a minor in business of entertainment, media and technology. Her writing has appeared in the *Washington Square News*, *Odyssey*, and *HERpothesis*.

**Shannagh Rowland**, born and raised in Ireland, is currently a junior at Gallatin. She is pursuing a concentration in literary theory and cultural studies, as she is interested in individuals' relationship to their homeland and how that is expressed in their writing.

**Eduardo Rios-Pulgar** was born in Venezuela and raised in Miami amidst palm trees, gritty night life, and dreams of New York City. His writing encompasses sex, mysticism, and its context in modern love. He is working toward a concentration in music journalism, literature, poetry, and film.

**Manual Rosario** believes that his autobiography can be used as a tool to motivate oppressed people. He thinks that countless people who have been left to rot inside of a cell can relate to his struggles. He says that, while a cell is made of steel and concrete, he is the black rose that broke through concrete to blossom and grow.

**Stephanie Segel** is a senior studying psychology and studio art. She has found

artistic inspiration from human perception, expression and connection. She plans to continue making and selling art after graduation.

**Henry Sheeran** is a sophomore at Gallatin studying Theater-Making and Arts Leadership with a minor in German. Much of his time at NYU is spent hosting, producing, and appearing in events with The Gallatin Theatre Troupe and New Major Records. When out of the city, he splits his time between Princeton, New Jersey and Burlington, Vermont eating a lot of food, playing music, and making theater with his friends.

**Madeleine Stanley** is a senior finalizing her studies in “Entrepreneurship and the Aesthetics of Photography.” Growing up in the woods of Connecticut has influenced her love of showcasing the uninhibited body in nature as the subjects of her conceptual portraiture, which she uses to explore the emotions and beauty of the human mind and body.

**Meredith Stein** a.k.a. MuddaGoose is a sophomore in Gallatin studying marketing, psychology, and printmaking. She likes public transportation and drawing people with dreadlocks.

**Sarah Stevenson** is a freshman at Gallatin, studying the intersection of neuroscience, psychology, and philosophy. She has a background in film photography and alternative processes, and is particularly interested in the ways cognitive science can influence her creative pursuits.

**Jimi Stine** is a second year concentrating in “Narrative Design for Interactive Media” and is the social media disciple for Gallatin’s own Cookies and Coloring Club.

**Sofia Szamosi** is a junior at Gallatin studying self-portraiture. She is currently working on her first children’s book, a series of ‘zines, a line of t-shirts, an array of music videos, and her forever growing collection of photo booth self-portraits.

**Mike Tan** is a Malaysian visual artist working primarily with photographic archives and themes of South East Asian identity. His concentration in Gallatin was entitled, “The Intersection of Fact and Fiction in Photography;” and focused on conceptual methods found in philosophy, ethnography and the fine arts.

**Vincent Thompson** is a 27-year-old from Hempstead, New York. He is currently enrolled in Liberal Arts. He intends to continue with his studies and major in

marketing and business. His other ambitions include screen writing and becoming a youth counselor.

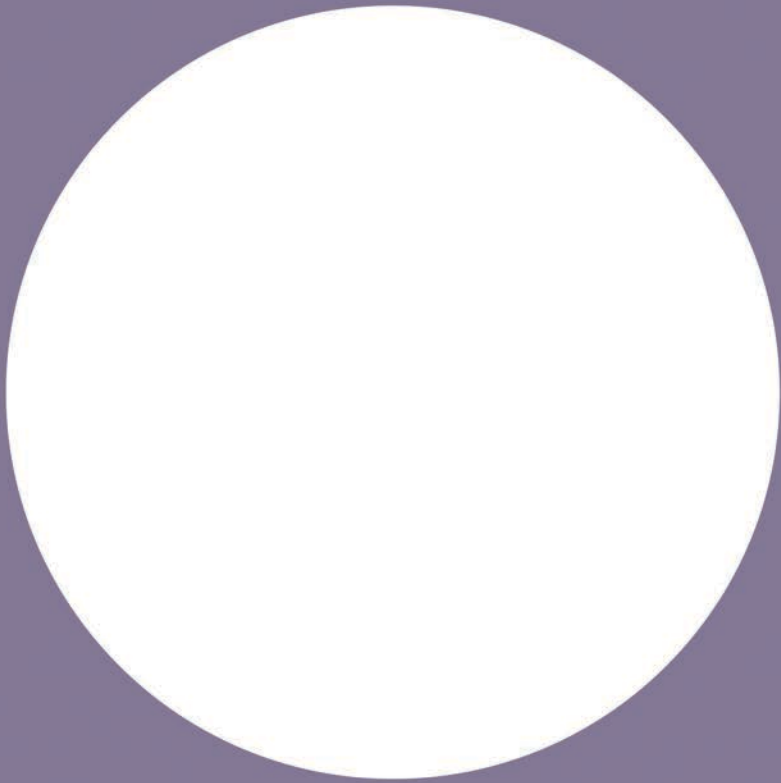
**Maria Alejandra Torres** is a Colombian-born American citizen with a love for food, traveling, writing, and social justice (what she hopes will be a recipe for a fruitful life). She is a second-year Gallatin student concentrating in “Human Rights with a focus on Women, (Im)migrants and People of Color.”

**Darryl Williams** is a 27-year-old musician who makes and performs various types of music, and has a vision of his company Q-Three Entertainment becoming a big success. He is currently enrolled in the Liberal Arts program.

**Adam Young** is a sophomore in Gallatin who doesn’t quite have his concentration figured out, but he is interested in how he can use the principles of efficiency from economics in order to both analyze and write poetry and prose. He has been published in the Bellevue Literary Review.

**Adrian Zias** studies Modern Greek literature and Classics, and frequently enjoys the music of Richard Wagner.





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