



UNDERGROUND POOL

ISSUE NINE — SPRING 2019



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LETTER FROM THE UNDERGROUND

Myth·os¹

Noun

a myth or mythology.

(in literature) a traditional or recurrent narrative theme or plot structure.

a set of beliefs or assumptions about something.

Ex. "the rhetoric and mythos of science create the comforting image of linear progression toward truth"



UNTITLED 2018 SARAH TROOST

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¹ Oxford English Dictionary. OED Online. Oxford University Press.
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FICTION

- 07 **Matrilineal** by Damali Beatty
Illustrated by Katerina Schurek
- 18 **Presence** by Miyuki Okamura
Illustrated by Brianna Ballinghoff
- 30 **Doll Parts** by Vikki Plitt
Illustrated by Tyler Pendzik
- 42 **My Bathtub Was Magical** by Nyeree Boyadjian
Illustrated by Sophie Lane
- 58 **The Oral Tradition in Rehrersburg, Pennsylvania** by Naz Bowman
Illustrated by Abby McManus
- 64 **God's Eye** by Amy Jannotti
Illustrated by Jahvi Thomason

POETRY

- 13 **Moon Blindness** by Kat Mooradian
- 14 **this one started as a knife joke, then became a dick joke**
by Amy Jannotti
- 17 **Imagine You Sleeping** by Katelynn Mirra
- 21 **SEEWORLD: a poem play** by Brekken Carns
- 34 **This Song is Over** by Mikayla Morell
- 37 **Red Stele** by Thalia Geiger
- 38 **Put On a Brave Face** by Jewel Moore
- 52 **Thirteen Lines** by Laura Miller
- 55 **Old Soul** by Keely Brady
- 56 **The Man in the Hazmat Suit** by MeeRee Orlandini
- 57 **Too Tough for a Heart of Stone** by Erin Leso
- 61 **I Want A Cheesesteak** by Aleasha Watson-Mitchell
- 63 **Portland, Or.** by MeeRee Orlandini
- 72 **If Art was a flavor, how would it sound?** by Aleasha Watson-Mitchell
- 73 **Blue Butterfly** by Vikki Plitt

ARTWORK

- 02 **Untitled 2018** by Sarah Troost
- 12 **Suspended in the Early Evening** by Georgia Wescott
- 16 **Crane** by Corby Smith
- 35 **Clouds** by Jen Mundy
- 36 **Lunar** by Georgia Wescott
- 53 **Mania** by Lindsey Gill
- 54 **Madame Sherries** by Joe Sabol
- 71 **Who Am I, Really?** by Georgia Wescott
- 74 **Tuatara** by Corby Smith
- 78 **Human Nature** by Kelsey Durkin
- 80 **Birth Phone** by Kelsey Durkin



MATRILINEAL DAMALI BEATTY

It is the tail end of the morning. I am watching a ecological documentary on my tablet to pass the time. My mother is in the kitchen baking blueberry muffins. Do you know kangaroos can't go backward? Their legs don't have the mechanism for it.

I slept here last night. In a guest room that had, at one point, been my room. In a house that had, at one point, been my house, with a sinking sudden awareness of the close proximity I had to my parents. If I had really truly wanted them to, I could have asked them to comfort me. I could have walked into that room and cried like I did as a child and felt the warm touch of their soft palms on my cheeks as they cooed "there, there." But I am supposed to be beyond that now. Aren't I beyond that now?

I should be past a lot of things, past wasting Sundays on a couch, watching garbage TV, lying to my mother. I told her I needed to stay because I was pretty sure that possums had gotten into the walls again and that one might have died. And I couldn't stand the idea of sleeping in a house with a rotting carcass in it all weekend. And when she offered to have Derrick over too I told her Derrick was away at his sister's place. And now she is making blueberry muffins and I am on the couch.

But, Derrick is at home and he is surely waiting for me. Derrick who is tall, educated, and cleans up well, who fits neatly into our two-bedroom. He has a kind of talk that immediately negates the aggressive and vaguely threatening paternal instincts of my uncles. He has a kind of walk that keeps the wagging tongues of my aunts deep seated in their mouths. And he is handsome, boy is he handsome! Light skin, nice and clear, soft brown eyes, a dimple in his left cheek, and a cute little mole in the corner of his right nostril just so he doesn't seem too perfect. He looks good next to me and I've indulged in his beauty, plastering photos of us all over my Instagram, soaking in the praise from my family. The "y'all so cute"s and the heart-eyed emojis in the comments section. The threats my friend Rachel made that she'd gladly have him if I let him get away. The late night private phone calls with my sister where we talk about all the cute little nephews and nieces she'll have one day. Sometimes it astonishes me how good he looks in pictures. I'll go back.

I could hear the excited clatter of dishes in a sink. That means the muffins are in the oven, and Mom is cleaning up the mess. "Clean as you go," she always says. Mom has been at it since five o'clock this morning. She has cleaned the bathrooms and the dining room, living room, kitchen, and has still gotten the muffins in the oven. As always, I am amazed by how fast she can move when she wants to.

Then I hear the familiar click and creak of the front door opening. Not fast enough.

My grandmother walks through the door adorned in several shopping bags and purses that weigh down her arms and her slowly curving back. She sets each bag down carefully as I watch and as my mother walks out of the kitchen.

"Ma," she calls. "Is that you?"

"Who else it supposed to be?"

"You're here early. I thought I'd get at least another hour."

"Sermon ended cause Reverend Chuck's daughter went into labor today and you know how that man is about his grandbabies." A reusable shopping bag filled to the brim with paper coupons slides like molasses off my grandmother's wrist. "Sides it don't matta' you ain't ready you ain't ready, `nother hour wouldn'ta changed nothin."

"You bring the books, Mama?" My mother is patient.

"Of course I did." I watch as my grandmother lifts the heaviest-looking bag on her arm and passes it to my mother's eager hands.

"Well let's take this to the kitchen and work on it." My mother starts to go back the way she came. "I have some muffins I think you might like and the living room is currently occupied."

"Occupied? By who? Oh!"

She sees me looking at her. "Well look what we got here. Don't know how to say hello huh?"

"Hello, Betsy." I look at her blankly.

"Hello, Tina." She looks right through me.

I go back to my tablet and my grandmother walks away from me, but I can hear her ask my mother in the kitchen, "Child, why'd yo daughter do that to her hair?"

My grandmother and my mother are organizing the family reunion next year. I mean there are others of course who are, or at least should be, helping too, my aunts and great aunts. My sister would be wonderful at choosing stationery for the cards. But for right now, until they ask, it's just the two of them on early Sunday afternoons, planning out venues and checking reviews on caterers. They always veer off-track, whether it's the alarm going off for Mom's muffins or Grandma changing the radio station from one that plays smooth jazz on Sundays to "131.8 THE PRAISE." Or whether it's just in the reminiscing as they tear into the pages of photo albums my grandmother brought with her, exploring with modern eyes which outfits flattered who, who had the babies of someone else, which schoolyard chum was dead now. I hear all their playful chatter from the adjacent room.

"Oh wait! Mom, that reminds me, you need to see this new pocketbook I bought."

"Is there a week that goes by you ain't wasting your money on another bag."

"Listen, don't harass me for traits I got from you. Here, follow me, it's upstairs."

My mother and grandmother exit the kitchen in an excited flurry. Completely in unison, four legs, four hands, two hips that sashay the same way as they go up the flight of stairs. And I hear again their chatter and giggles but fainter now, growing fainter still in the upper portions of the house.

I get up from my place on the couch and leave my tablet where I once sat. I wander silently and aimlessly into the kitchen. On the counters there is a pot of freshly brewed coffee and the muffins on a wire rack. Their tops glisten with slowly melting sugar crystals and a delicate top layer of butter, but still too hot to eat. So, I grab myself a mug instead. The radio continues to play from my mom's ancient mid-2000's stereo. The preacher is in a fervor and his congregation drinks up his enthusiasm

greedily, hooting and hollering along. A call and response segment begins.

"May I ask how many of you here are planning to go to heaven?"

"Yeaaaaahhhh!"

"I said, how many of you here are planning to go to HEAVEN?!"

"YES LORD!"

"Well then you GOTTA, GOTTA LIVE RIGHT BY HIS WORD! SO WHEN YOUR DAY COMES A CALLIN HE'LL SEE FIT TO RAISE YOU UP!! RAISE!! YOU!! UP!!"

"HALLELUJAH!"

I walk over to the table and find a large family tree and a big beige old photo album. I can't help but thumb through the book a little myself, see my cousins and I when we were children. Reality unravels as I turn through aged photos kept safe in their sleeves. I start to dive into a time before I can remember, a time before I existed. Pictures of my family before wrinkles set in deep like fault lines, when the responsible people I looked up to revealed in freedom. I slip a finger into a pocket and pull out a picture of my mother younger than I am now.

I can hear my mother and grandmother talking. They stand in a space just over my head, in the master bedroom on the second floor, and I can just barely make out their voices. But I can make out the rhythm of my grandmother saying one particular phrase, a sentiment she has regurgitated over and over:

"Robert should beat you."

She says this all the time, sometimes, I'm sure, without realizing it. She says it when my mother's house isn't clean enough, or when the skin on the chicken she made isn't crispy, or when one of the dogs she adopted starts to act up. And my mother always laughs and brushes it off because it is my grandmother's sense of humor, and she is lucky. My father is sweet, wouldn't hurt a fly. A sweet kind man with a good head on his shoulders and a subtle, firm way about him. He doesn't hit my mother because he doesn't get riled up, and he doesn't get riled up because he doesn't have to. He can perfectly conquer the storms that are my mother's seasonal rages with very little. When I was young I'd watch as he'd take her light blows and verbal barbs and inevitably calm her down with the soft whispers of, "Come on Jolene, don't be like that. Where's my sweet baby? That's right . . ."

And then there would be kissing and even a bit more. And my mother would soften again and stop worrying him about the bills and the laundry. About shoveling the walk and spending time with his children. About pink stains on the underside of his throat and how she had gotten the clap suddenly after eleven years of marriage.

I thumb the old Polaroid from the days when my parents were still young and had just started dating. She sits in his lap talking to someone just out of frame as he smiles up at her. He looks so good in pictures.

I put the image back as I hear my grandmother erupt into a fit of laughter on the floor above me. I try to ignore her. Yet the next section of the book is almost entirely devoted to her. Pictures of her accompanying her children, then, further back, pictures of her holding her children, and then further still I see her before them. A young woman documented in fading sepia tones.

My grandmother has a mean streak. A crude sense of humor, a sharp tongue, and an unwillingness to concede to the idea that she is picking fights, not "speaking truth." Her jokes, like that last one, are always cruel, but always hold a kernel of truth. I heard from my great aunt that when my grandmother first married my grandfather her mother took one look around her new house, saw the china unaligned in the

cabinets and the mantel and radiators speckled with dust, and said the same thing:

"John should beat you."

A mother wished that onto her daughter, but my great grandmother, unlike my grandmother, had meant it in earnest.

When I was young, I would explore the many overcrowded rooms of my grandparents' house and would often get snatched up by my grandmother, or yelled at by my grandfather, who I only remember as a mountainous form sitting in a chair in a dark TV-lit room. But several years after my grandfather died, when my grandmother finally got the gumption to throw all his things out, she whispered to me the story of each room, in a voice that felt far away. She told me of the doorknobs that fell off because a face hit it. She told me of the notch in the stairs from the time she'd taken a tumble and snapped her wrist. She told me of the stains on the kitchen wallpaper from where a pot of coffee had slid out of someone's hands and shattered, accidentally, even though the stain was well above my head.

But in the grainy photos of the album I look at, my grandmother and grandfather stood quaintly near brand-new cars, or sat at picnics arm in arm. They look good in pictures.

I flip further and further in the book and the photos become fewer and more formal. We are getting older, drawing the curtain back in time. I stop again when I see a formal picture of my great grandparents in their wedding attire. The picture is surely ancient, or maybe a duplicate. I can't tell through the thin plastic sleeve, but I'm too nervous to remove the image from its casing.

Most of what I know about my great grandmother is from stories other people have told me. However, I did meet her a few times; she didn't die until I was eight. From what I remember she was very quiet, had a sort of nervous energy, and even at her advanced age showed the features of someone who was once extremely beautiful. The photo displays all the signifiers of a well-to-do married woman of the era. Her hair coiffed just so, her dress lily white against her medium-toned skin, a veil that fell to the floor collecting itself in delicate ruffles about her feet. But I can't ignore the discomfort on her face, that rests in lines around her smiling mouth, that rests deep in her eyes.

When I was young I hugged my great grandmother but only once. I was hurt to see how quickly she had shaken me loose from her skirts, how she looked down at me with something like rage, something like fear. I would later learn through those very stories that my great grandmother, Elizabeth, had never been a fan of touching. She rarely held her children, rarely hugged her friends, rarely embraced her husband. Which, from what I'm told, my great grandfather preferred. He was much more content just looking at her, his pretty pearl, all dolled up for parties, hair coiffed just so always, long dresses that ruffled around her ankles. She was the perfect bragging point for any occasion. What truly displays the extravagant wealth of a man better than a beautiful wife, all dressed up in satin and silk? And he had made her, he had plucked her from sooty Southern soil where she had no friends or family to speak of. He had won her over with promises of love and glamour and built her into a fine lady. And fine ladies don't beg. I have no idea how my great grandmother felt, but sometimes I feel like I might. Sometimes I imagine what it must be like for desire that is routinely rejected to spill over into fear and hatred. "John should beat you," she had said, and sometimes at night I think it's because she would have given anything to have Henry touch her, in any way, just once. But he had made her to be looked at.

And in the grainy vintage photos, from a lifetime I could never conceive of, I see the accomplishment of his goal. She looked good in pictures.

As I finish my cup of coffee, there is a stillness all about me; everything is the same. My mother and grandmother still chat upstairs, my tablet still sits on the couch, the stereo still belches out the hymns of a large choir. I gaze over the family tree. It is plain but large. There are so many of us that it takes me a minute to find my own name. And then I move up. I follow the line and think of my mother. I think of how Jolene Davis had become Jolene Stewart to escape a house where coffee sometimes came to stain the walls. I think about how Betsy Wharton had become Betsy Davis to escape a house where no one touched. And I think about how Elizabeth Wharton had been made from nothing: she had just wanted away from the Southern hick soil of her birth. And there are no records from my great great grandmother. Her name is a blank just above Elizabeth, floating there. What little my great grandmother told her children was that her mother was back in Texas, and she had been a sharecropper. We could dig deeper but all we would find is pain.

I see my mothers disappearing into married names until it leads me back down to the base of the tree, where I sit, Estina Stewart. I think of this house with its soft blue couch and its blueberry muffins, and I think about my two-bedroom in comparison. And I think of Derrick again. I think of his brown eyes and nice skin. I think of the sharpness of his jawline and the waves in his hair. I think of how when Derrick saw my new haircut yesterday the only thing he could think to say was:

"I never noticed how strange your head shape was before."

And he had chuckled and I got angry. And he apologized but that didn't make it better. And I had walked out of our apartment while he shouted, "Baby, come on, baby wait!" but I didn't. And how I had a long drive to my parents' house, alone, plenty of time to think. I had thought about how he had noticed and commented on my head shape before, and that he'd just forgotten. That he had made fun of it before and just forgotten. How he had poked childish fun at my weight, the folds that were starting to appear on my back, the way my arms moved when I reached up high. How he'd gently smile and nod and not look at me when a friend announced their engagement over Skype. Or how he didn't seem impressed when I caught the bouquet at my best friend's wedding. Or how he didn't stand up for me when I was bad-mouthed by his sister. Or how he didn't look at me after that time in Ontario when I hadn't said yes but I hadn't said no and I cried after because I felt disgusting. Or, how I was thirty-five now, and soon I might not be able to have those babies with his beautiful, beautiful face.

And, I had forgiven Derrick, and stayed.

Like Jolene had forgiven Robert, and stayed.

Like Betsy had forgiven John, and stayed.

Like Elizabeth had forgiven Henry, and stayed.

After all, do you know how hard it is to find a man that looks good in pictures? But as I stand looking at us all together, as the last drops of coffee slide past my lips, for the first time in four and a half years, I think about Estina Stewart disappearing and I can't do it. I can't go back. My legs don't have the mechanism for it anymore.

There is rigorous clapping from the radio. "HALLELUJAH!!!"



SUSPENDED IN THE EARLY EVENING GEORGIA WESCOTT

MOON BLINDNESS

KAT MOORADIAN

Welcome to my witch's hut.
See my shelves of mint and mouse's foot.
Blood drips from hanging herbs,
potent magic in the air.

For your head? A heavy rock to keep it from spinning,
and those closing eyes need some lemon drops.
Come, purge your stomach into my pot
and see it swirl with unholy water.

I will rub your back with tiny bones,
and wipe your melting skin with hag's rags.
Stay with me, crushed thyme will bring you back.
Let me feed your belly with roasted crow.

If you start to forget, I will read your ancient lore,
and hope you can look at me the same.
You say there is no need for witch's magic
but I lift your head to keep you from hitting the cauldron.

I have learned these incantations
for every night you stumble in,
drenched in sweat and vomit,
pants undone and burning water on your chin.

And every night I will tuck flowers into your bed,
though they drive thorns into your hands.
And every night I will stay up next to you,
counting your heartbeats and hoping you wake with the sun.

THIS ONE STARTED AS A KNIFE JOKE, THEN BECAME A DICK JOKE

AMY JANNOTTI

I want to reincarnate as the knife
that cuts you open,
want the tip, want the shaft
want the scabbard, the blade.

I want to reincarnate as that moment of intimacy
when you catch the eye of a stranger
on the opposite side of the crosswalk.

I want to reincarnate as the mouse inside your walls
at two a.m. on a weeknight
keeping you awake.

I want to reincarnate as the chill tickling the hairs
on the nape of your neck, or the fear
that somehow, somewhere
a duck is watching.

I want to reincarnate as the cold sweat that lathers you in the morning.

If I can't reincarnate as grape-scented smoke
then what's the point?

I want to reincarnate as a cave
spelunk inside me
excavate my ruins
come back carrying bones.

Tomorrow, I will reincarnate
as a slab of butter.

Any form is acceptable,
as long as it's not in the hands
of Chinese fascism.

I want to reincarnate as an amoeba
whose sole responsibility
is self-preservation.

I want to reincarnate as the heart embalmed
in the museum of medical oddities,
all its ventricles & arteries stained red.

I want to reincarnate as the cabinet of things swallowed.

Hold my hair back as I vomit up
Atlantis
& other forgotten universes.

There are nubs growing out of my spine,

I hope I'm reincarnating as
an angel, maybe a dinosaur.
They say both have feathers.

I hope you love me just the same.

I want to reincarnate as the whisper
of moonlight on your naked skin,
but my therapist told me
to be more realistic about my goals.



CRANE CORBY SMITH

IMAGINE YOU SLEEPING

KATELYNN MIRRA

look
your naked oily flesh
caked with evidence of a day
ears hearing

what you'll never remember

or
maybe remember
as a scene in a long
forgotten film

air fragrant as a capful of bleach

ear
pressed against
an upper limb lips
swollen pulled apart

just enough to let an ounce of breath
slip through

PRESENCE

MIYUKI OKAMURA

Most people assume her to be a man, someone strong who bursts through my door to order me around. But I think that assumption is a bit sexist. Who says men are the only people who get to ruin lives? Then they want to know what she looks like. What color is her hair? How many bones can you count on her? What does she look like in accordance to me? No one ever asks that last one, but I know they think it. The way they say it is more like, what's she got over you? And I don't know how to tell them literally everything and nothing at all.

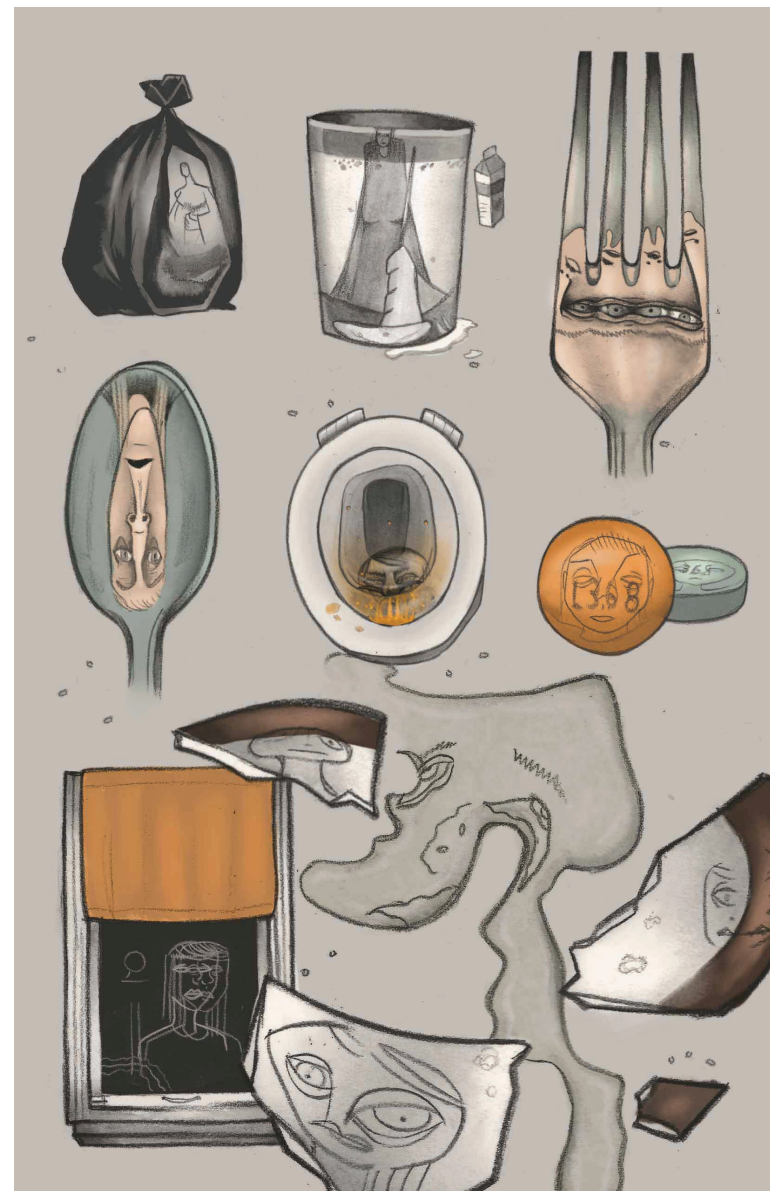
Besides, she doesn't even look like anything. She's not this tangible thing that sifts through my closet and puts my clothing in heavy-duty garbage bags. She's more like a feeling. She's the feeling of wanting to separate my body into one pile for bones, one for flesh, one for muscle, and one for guts, but nothing for my soul. That belongs to her. She's the feeling of scratching and scratching and scratching and never feeling satisfied. She's the feeling of salad; I say it's filling, but it's not really. She's the feeling of tomorrow; it's supposed to be better, but it never is.

So why can't you make it better? she says to me.

Sometimes we're in sync, and we move through the day to our own improvised choreography. I feel her at the right time and sink into her like I'm a part of her. But sometimes, she's too much, or I'm too much. It's hard to tell. On these days she yanks me around the kitchen and breaks plates at my feet. I tell her, I can't do it! I can't do it! And she drives her fist through the wall next to my ear, only for my knuckles to bleed.

I met her when I was eight, eating a cookie, crumbs dropping onto my t-shirt. She came to me and patted my stomach, said, I've always been here. Back then, she was more gentle, pulling my hair back, telling me who I could be if I just listened, obeyed. I thought I needed her because I didn't like being me. I wanted to know who she could make me into.

In high school, she was the only consistent presence in my life, even though she was a presence and nothing more. I felt her in classrooms, where my flesh bubbled over my jeans. In gym class she ran next to me and asked me why I was so out of breath. She held my hand in the cafeteria, as I dissected hoagies. It made me feel better because she said it would. She was always right.



BRIANNA BALLINGHOFF

She turned me into who I wanted to be, then into something else. I only wanted normalcy, stability, visibility. And I had that but not for long. They won't even look at me now, won't make eye contact. God forbid they touch my razor blade contours.

What is this thing you've become? they ask.

Where did the rest of you go?

Are you okay?

But it's her! It's her! I tell them. I swear she loved me once.

Just ignore her, they say because they don't understand.

She won't leave me. When I turn myself away, she fuses herself to me. I lie in bed with her fists pounding on my skull, her teeth in my throat. My body vibrates as she screams, I am you! I am you! And when I tell her to leave, she gets violent. She throws me in the bathroom, and the tiles leave patterned imprints on my skin. She slams my head on the toilet. What will you even do without me? She screams with my cheek pressed on porcelain.

But I've devised a plan. I've contacted others; they call themselves professionals. I distracted her, lured her into the closet with carrot sticks and celery, and left the house to see them. They gave me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, an apple, a carton of milk. And I'm trying to choke it down, but it's hard. It's stuck. I feel tears roll down my eyes with each attempted swallow.

Do I have to eat it all?

One of them sits next to me, pats my hand.

Not today, but you have to try again tomorrow.

Is she going to find me?

She always does.

I throw my carton of milk down. It leaks onto my hand.

What's the point then?

To make yourself a tool, and not a weapon.

SEEWORLD: A POEM PLAY

BREKKEN CARNES

A bathtub filled with water. It contains an orca.

WW

Welcome, welcome!

Land creatures, welcome!

Such a special treat today

Roots trace back to

Puget Sound,

Washington State.

Only little butterfly,

this one here.

Three of her siblings

guzzled down with the squids

rocks full of bellies — bellies full of rocks.

rushing water. pipes of water.

Myth says if you listen close

when the moon stops you can

still hear her calling speaking

the language scratched into her dorsal.

Ladies and gentlemen

boys and girls

Please welcome Lolita!

Applause!

Small hands! Chubby hands!

Pressed together; stuck together!

This is what happiness looks like.

Sound cue!

Wave your fin.

Splash cue!

Flap your tail.

Splash cue!

Spit water!

Spin!

Spin!

WW's hands outstretched. fingers in Pacific Ocean, hand in Atlantic Ocean. spinning around the moon.

Splash cue!
Blow kisses!
Pose!
Watch now as Lolita sketches
her family tree!

easel. paint brush. LOLITA watercolors. rushing water. dripping water. do not let her finish. her watered portrait is small. her mother climbs up the page. power to the matriarch.

Alright, dear Lolita,
one last dip
Splash cue!
Belly flop!
Balance on your tail!
Ta-da!

popcorn as flowers.

All proceeds go to preserving
the killer whales!
Thank you, thank you!

LOLITA
Thank you!

J sweeps kernel by kernel. water rushing. pipes rushing. until he is done. WW distributes popcorn to the floor mites. darkness.

J
Trauma:
an emotional and sometimes physical response
to a terrible event,
natural disaster, or
ongoing and relentless stress.
We are all at risk for
denial, unpredictable emotions, flashbacks,
strained relationships, and physical symptoms.

J sweeps. water stopping. water stop. stagnant. permanent. sound of lights shutting off.

Wonderful performance
Lolita!

You are the smartest
whale here.

Here are some fish.

Swedish fish. gummy toss into bathtub. beat. 48 teeth chewing. gums smacking. J takes invention out of his trashcan. tinkering. polishing. cross legged on floor.

I worked out that electrical problem
in TheToaster™ last night.
You were right —
cross wiring
red over black
always red over black
Told you, you are
the smartest here.

Sir, may I show you my own
invention?

WW
Not now, J.
Clean up on aisle 3!

WW and SUIT football huddle. muscles. muscles breaking bone, breaking cartilage. no screaming. muscles making claustrophobia.

SUIT
Iceland yields nice fish.
Beautiful fish.
Yes, yes.
Two for the price of one.
Think of the figurines!
Dripping in dollars!

WW
In agreement.

SUIT
We are protected
by a fortress of paper.
No bad press exists.

WW
In agreement.

SUIT
Think of a bed made from
purified seaweed
See the black and white
that pillows your head.
Appetizing, isn't it?

WW
In agreement.
Can I do the honors?

SUIT
When you flip him over
it happens with a little coaxing
and glass jar.

*dissipate. food coloring in water. poisonous. SIGNS circling like seagulls around
LOLITA.*

SIGNS
Red angry letters
not as sharp as harpoons.
Sharpen!

"Captivity as torture
captivity as thievery
captivity as displacement."

crash of water. hurricane! SIGNS shouting!

Halt the hunting
halt the breeding
—born into a rifle
Halt the performance!

We stand as water lilies
Speak as iridescent bioplankton.

Nets do not equate to brain power
and jets do not make money
more valuable.

crash of rains. froth! shouting!

Free! Them! All!

*SIGNS single file away. land ducklings. silence. no water. the moon has stopped. no
light. little light. LOLITA swims in circles. beats in every breath.*

LOLITA
3,102
3,101
3,100
3,099
Floating
in space
and
time
no time
no
concept
red lights
blue lights
orange lights
I
see
the net
my
forearms
covered in
barnacles
my
mouth
covered
in starfish

Floating
lateral
listlessly
I cannot
hear
my matriarch calling
anymore

*LOLITA unwavering. WW and SUIT carry TRUA in shower curtain. smaller than LOLITA.
a baby. struggle. fin flap. moan. whale call. mother call. no answer. fin flaps. dumped
into LOLITA'S tub.*

WW
Splash
No cue!

*WW and SUIT retreat with empty shower curtain. LOLITA and TRUA stare. ripple.
stagnant water. smell of bacteria. mixing. infecting. cuts. bruises.*

TRUA
Ye coma fro Izlynd.
Famlad.
Famlad.
Frantic.
Sole crookedling.

LOLITA
I am
Lolita.
This is
my bad fin.
Do not
touch.
Show at eight
noon
four.
Feeding at
seven.
Who is
your
pod?

TRUA
Ib tizen humah?
I din no oseane.
Flo. Ida.
Wa be we?
Dmall but pwoarder.

LOLITA
I want to be
alone.

Stay on
your side.
This is our line.

TRUA
E qat no famlad.
koneish. ly.
furrunded. bu nolond.

LOLITA
Universal.

*J mops. water spilling. LOLITA and TRUA bite the edge of the tub. blood runs down.
pools red in soapy water.*

J
Green algae film
taint their vision.

Confinement has unparalleled
consequences, largely unknown.
It can put one in a catatonic state,
rocking for hours, or pacing.
Antisocial behavior.
Paranoia and hallucinations are common,
as are self mutilating and extreme anxiety.
An inability to control mood and impulsivity.

Animals have no sense
of mortality.

water rushing. lights. popcorn returning. kernels stabbing into gums.

WW
Welcome!
File in like swans,
there is a special surprise
beneath the waves.

Grandson of the mighty,
ancestors of Reykjavik, Iceland,
he has the body of Tilikum:
22.5 feet long
12,500 pounds
he will touch the stars with his nose.

Give a round of applause
to Trua!
Trua the grandson!
Splash cue!
Wave!
Sound cue!
Royalty!

Lolita flip!

refusal.

Wave!
Splash cue!
Waltz my dragonflies!
You all know how much

they love to splash!
Give the signal!
Thumbs together, and hands apart,
wave your arms!
Give them the cue!

*refusal. aggressive. coral snapping. fury in the water. fury pouring from the sky,
from the ocean. fury sloshing over sleek skin. no space. an invasion of foreign fish.
desecration of home.*

LOLITA after TRUA. raking. stinging. smash into the tub. click. click. crying for mother.

Ah! Ah!

*teeth crashing, water spilling. bone against skin. bits of black floating in the tub.
ripple. ripple.*

Ah! Ah!

popcorn! huzzah! kernels as excitement!

retreat. bloodied. black eye. traumatic.

What a hero!
Look at his strength!
The battle rakes along his sleek
silhouette!

Ladies, pudgy cheeks,
these are killer whales!
Applause!

Bow, Trua!

floats. TRUA barely swims. battered. sickly.

Sound cue!
Ta-da!

*popcorn as coins. water stopping. stagnant. rotten fish permeating the air.
nauseating. J sweeps kernel by kernel. leaves a pyramid. a breath underwater.*

J
Algae + bacteria + broken teeth
collapsed dorsal fin +
PTSD laced genetics
whisked together.

Like something found in an old recipe book.
Vets hid medicine in fish heads
— didn't eat them
fish guts
— didn't touch them
until his flesh rotted
from the inside out
and chunks of his jaw
fell off into the water.
Sunday morning found
him floating
his right pectoral flipper
ripped off completely and
Lolita's bite mark in his flukes.

*WW and SUIT shuffle empty shower curtain. lay him down. haphazard. tongue
hanging. eyes vacant. roll him up like sushi. consumed even in death.*

SUIT
Goodbye cruel whale.
Goodbye water bed and figurines.

WW
An unpreventable infection
took Trua from us too early,
nothing but a natural phenomena,
only a calf, surely he would have
been prosperous like Tilikum, like
all the others before him.
His family tree grows on.

We will not bury his memory
here at SeeWorld.

This
is why captivity is so important.
Thank you.

*black and white buried in popcorn. he is a large land grave. visible. not to be moved
or disturbed.*

rushing water. violent water. sit in the blue claustrophobia.

Fin.



TYLER PENDZIK

DOLL PARTS VIKKI PLITT

Peaches 'n Cream (1984)

Sofia had a breakdown when she lost the eBay auction. Mint condition. Never removed from the box. She only has memories of the doll in a mismatched set of Western boots: one red, one pink. Matted blonde curls, a white marking on her left nostril, reminiscent of a coke-booger. They *can* be glamorous, Sofia thinks, and they are. Especially when crusted to her nose ring after a binge, or when her purple racoon coat is sprinkled with white. She licks her finger and dabs off the residue. Then rubs her pointer against her gums. They burn from the grit and the pressure, turning from pink to an irritated red. She chizzles the coke-boogers from her nose ring, eats. Blow is a luxury that cannot be wasted.

Solo in the Spotlight (1960)

Sofia's in college, no way she can afford an original. She could probably find the doll scavenging antique shops. She'll most likely be in rough condition. (We know the black-glittery gown Barbie so famously wears deteriorates at her boobs.) Most dolls who survived those decades don't have the rose corsage pinned at the end of the tulle trim, either. But, if an opportunity is presented to add her to the collection, is it *really* worth passing? Maybe she'll settle for the 1994 reproduction.

Generation of Dreams (2009)

A Christmas gift from her mother one year, maybe fifth grade, and the starting point for Sofia's Barbie collection. The reason Sofia got the doll in the first place was because of a debacle between her and her father a few months prior. That was the first Barbie Sofia kept pristine in the original packaging, high on top her bookshelf where nothing could touch her, where Sofia could ogle Barbie's floor-length, collage-patchwork gown and bask in her blonde beauty. (Sofia isn't a bottle blonde and neither is Barbie, despite speculation, despite no one knowing all the facts, despite Barbie being a fashion doll.)

German Barbie (1987)

Maryland Oktoberfest means he has an excuse to binge-drink—even though he has been since the night before—even while plastered, he's okay enough at driving, he hasn't rammed an SUV yet—Sofia sits in the back with Barbie, both donning similar Dirndls and matching blonde braids—listening to Cheetah Girls on her on-the-go CD player—it stut-t-ters every t-time there's a b-b-bump—

32

By eleven, Tara calls back. Sofia lets it go to voicemail. She isn't ready to hear what Tara has to say, she has one more bump in her, can smoke one more cigarette before confronting Tara. It's eleven-fifteen and Tara only called once. Sofia goes home, ignores the breakdown she had, strips from her fur and throws it into the street. Sofia chain-smokes on her stoop, looking at the roadkill until midnight. It's time for bed.

33

THIS SONG IS OVER

MIKAYLA MORELL

You did become an artist.
Bulldozing corpses of power and bone,
bartering chunks of brunette and blonde made into books of U-boat crews,
smearing your portfolio with ink dipped
in Zyklon B and Semitic blood.

Eva:
cyanide on her teeth,
adorned in white fur,
whispering goodbye, caressing your tired cheek,
her hand around a glass of champagne.

I paint your instrument in a crimson
pool of 50 million. Mesmerized
Germany in annihilation,
crescendo,
decrescendo.

Marie:
cyanide in her lung,
naked,
screaming my name, scraping her nails on the chamber,
her hand around our son.

I must have known death, my people
go back. You're not as acquainted,
sip a quick fix poison cup, newlywed.
We boiled out of chimneys in fire orbs
—the Newlydead.



CLOUDS JEN MUNDY



LUNAR GEORGIA WESCOTT

RED STELE THALIA GEIGER

as a black girl
I also have a black thumb

they call it red stele a rot
when strawberry leaves

redden almost to purple
the blushing stems

bowing drying heads
to the dirt

nothing lasts a full season
besides the weeds

I foster babies
with hydra-like hands

stout stems growing
large and leafy

creatures that cannot be killed
even by their own mother

I am a terrible mother
to kill what I've cultivated

buying reflections of her children
from the supermarket

plastic cartons of others
to stow away

to pretend they're my own
to pretend I can grow

can change my ways
with the moon phases

I'll turn my back
for the scissors

to prune this rot
snip leaves like trimming

a baby's nails.

PUT ON A BRAVE FACE

JEWEL MOORE

I.

Daughter, where can you escape to?
down what street could we dance?
our bodies cry curses that
travel through brick
as pain sings through our feet.
the monsters sniff metallic
and paw at the door.
they follow the blood trail.
my dear, our bodies require weapons—
the finger used to gouge out eyes,
or the hand that blocks the grab.
the love that seeps into self-defense,
like kissing monsters goodnight before
drowning them in our bathtubs.

II.

born from an extra rib,
cracked from a collision with man
who, in defeat,
threw the apple core to the dust.

his tantrum was something about her smell,
her hip bones, and purple neck,
about Lillith and blood,
children and pain,
God and failure.

but in the wasteland
the truth whispered
itself all over their bed—
only he had known
it was forbidden fruit.
and he had offered
the juice

to shift the sacrifice to her.
she then understood what it meant to be
silenced.
and in his deception he had become
naked.

III.

i dreamed of a man
who cut me in half
and with the bottom had his way.
i saw his head fall open
and out poured round yellow
puss and baby pink brain.
he had a smile made for eating,
yet his teeth followed suit—
like piano keys littering the bedroom floor.
i read his blood-ink
and choked up fear,
saw his soul crawling up
to sleep on the ceiling.

IV.

my hands search
for alarm clocks that say evening-time.
where does time go when it leaves me in the morning?
does it rock-a-bye my heart into the sheets?
I want someone to enter,
gasp with horror,
demand I wash my hair.
to love me sternly—to notice I'm hoarse,
to gossip or share a stick of bubblegum,
to say "darling!" and rock me awake.

V.

is the moon heavy for Artemis?
is the sun heavy for Apollo?
that's how it feels,
this womb of mine.
what i'm meant to carry,
shouldn't it feel that it fits?
why is it fighting to escape?

VI.

the red-eyed man on 3rd street
ogles, considers, and lunges
at the nearest tom cat.
i'm not allowed to breathe

until he stalks away,
searching for a sewer rat
to suck out the blood.
i spy a piece of dripping fat
dangling from his left canine,
and i'm not allowed to breathe
until he vomits up the kidney.
he manages to reach into its rib cage
and suck the juice off the bone.
i'm not allowed to breathe
until he turns feral, and his eyes roll
back to me and he winks.
i'm not allowed to breathe
until he backward-crawls to me,
licks my foot and smiles,
"you taste like a girl."

VII.

is 21 enough
of an introduction
to the way the clouds sit suspended?
my spirit snapped at 10—
snapped into place? who can say?
the misery of this age is not lost on me.
the sun has become meaningless.
the moon does not sing me its same lullaby.
i cannot hear dandelions gossip,
i cannot hear the wind waltz.
when will i know the world again?
i am too old for my age—
been living too little to be living this long.

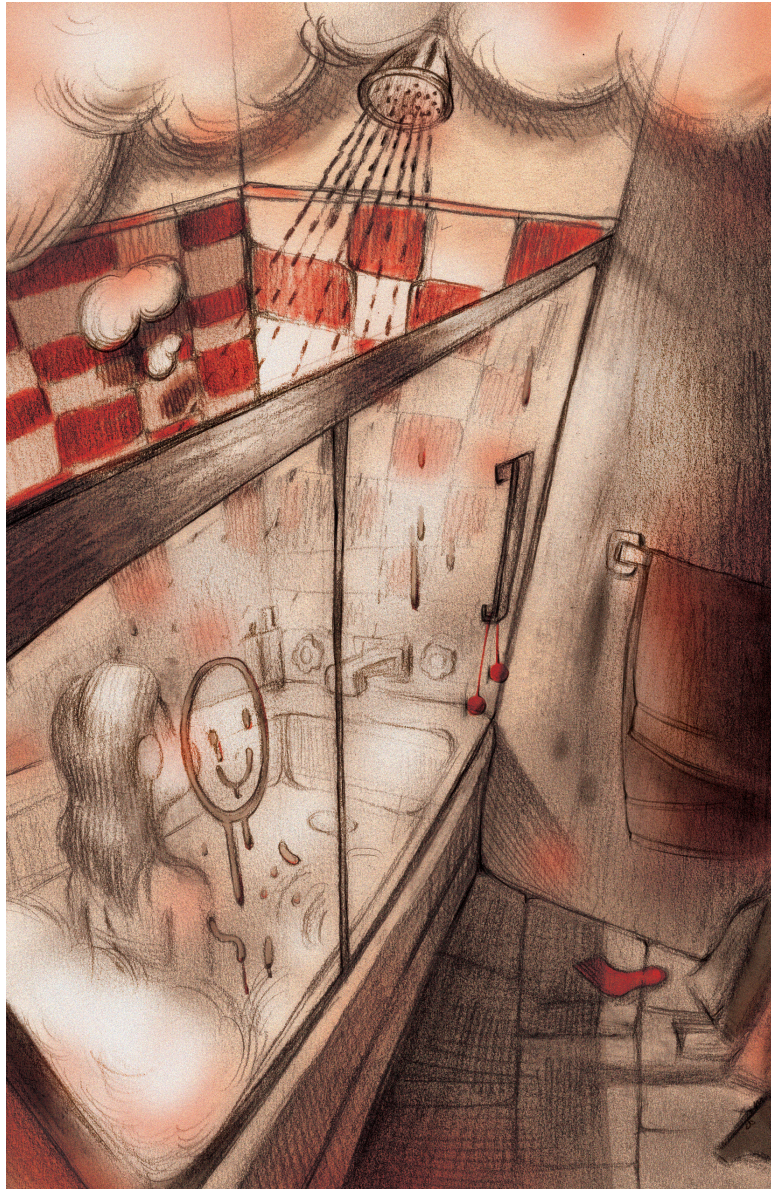
VIII.

where is Woman?
where can i find her?
is she leaping over logs?
hoisting up the moon?
does she cover up the blood trail
with the richest of soil?
is she made of olive branches?
of baby tears and membranes?
was she watching as i drowned
my first monster in its bathtub?
is she the mother of mothers?
do her fingertips birth apple trees?
does she give honeybees a reason to dance?
does the mountain boom when she approaches?

does she enjoy the juice of forbidden fruit?
is she a butterfly?
does the grass sway with her?
is she guiding my feet
away from every seizing hand?
is she but a juniper tree? weeping willow?
have her roots reached the earth's center?
is she singing to constellations?
is Sagittarius her friend?
is the lion her equal?
is her hair conflagration?
does she banish the man on the ceiling?
does she move and shake conversation?
does she tell roses to go to bed?
does she tell dandelions to sing?
and is she chasing me?
does she mind that i am made
of fake diamonds,
cheap drinks and pink neon,
grisly cuts and soda pop?
does she know i was born in the roses,
born again in the creek?
will she find me in the gazebo,
singing songs of my foremothers?
will she know the tune?
or is she waiting for me
to chase after her?

EPILOGUE

you put on a Brave Face
as the sun creeps
toward its perch in the east.
you rise,
forced to compete
with its tenacity.
and I understand that fear well,
Daughter.
it's hard to admit that womanhood
is a paradise turned wasteland.
but what is blood between friends?
after all, Daughter, you hold nine months.
you defend life in all forms.
you crash like the red sea.
it drowns Pharoah in its power.
you do God proud.



MY BATHTUB WAS MAGICAL

NYEREE BOYADJIAN

"Dad doesn't make me sit in the booster seat anymore."

Mom's demon eyes came out, the tinier, evil-twin versions of her eyes when she was happy.

"Well, Dad seems to forget that this car could flip in two seconds and you'd be dead." Her face was already red, and she was shaking real bad. I realized she was sad today, and it would be best if I kept quiet.

I looked out the window to see if any of my classmates were around to see me and make fun of me later. I climbed in the seat anyway, and buckled my seatbelt. It felt tight. I was ten months away from double digits. That's like three years older than booster seat age. I grabbed the water bottle and clackers out of the net attached to the front seat.

A police car waited next to us at a red light. Mom prepped me on what to say if they pulled us over. Dad had taught me two things about this: that the cops don't pull over a mom and kid if they're doing nothing illegal, and that Mom did nothing illegal when she drove. But when cops were next to us, Mom said the side of her body that faced them started stinging. I repeated my lines about how I didn't have to talk til a lawyer was there.

I was starting to get the hang of clacking. Once I steadied into a good rhythm, I would bring them to school. Until then, they'd only come with me to Chloe's or Moe's houses. We practiced together, counted down from three and then clacked. We hoped our balls would hit each other at the same second, to keep one loud beat instead of three spread-out, tiny ones.

I'd think of things to tell my mom the bruises were from so she didn't take away the clackers. I wasn't scared of Dad seeing them. He said getting hurt was part of childhood. Mom always said accidents only happened once.

We pulled into the driveway. I took her hand and walked to our door.

"Hurry, I need to pee," I said, squirming. We had just added a third lock on our door and now it took even longer to get in and out of the house. I ran into the bathroom, the clackers still in my hand. I peed a little on my underwear, so I took them off and washed them in the bathtub, then dropped them on the bathroom floor with the rest of the dirty clothes. I turned on the faucet for a second to make it sound like I was washing my hands, then walked out.

I took my workbook out at the dining room table. Nana was behind me, making a big salad. I had sixteen long division problems for homework and still had no idea how to do long division.

"Nana, do you know how to do this?"

She walked over and took the book with her raisin hands, bringing it real close to her glasses.

"Oh Lammy, I haven't done a division problem in over fifty years. Ask Mommy. Your mommy is great at math."

I got up to pretend like I would, but went to my room and used a calculator. I was just going to say I did the work on a separate paper and left it at home. Mom was having a really bad day today. She'd spent all morning screaming about the couple that moved in next door. She said the man moved here to hurt us. I thought hearing Dad lets me ride without a booster seat must've pushed her over the edge. She always said not being careful enough gets you killed. I could hear her crying through the walls. I tried to think of a way to show her that no one wanted to hurt her. I didn't know that for sure, though. It was always her word against Dad's. I focused on the calculator. Grandma called me to eat my salad.

"Did you give her some?" I asked Grandma. Her face looked even more wrinkly. I felt like she needed a nap.

"Why don't you go give it to her?" Grandma handed me the plastic bowl.

For some reason, Mom only ate food if I made it—or pretended I made it. Every time Grandma or Dad got her something to eat, she'd dig through every part with a spoon, like she thought they put their boogers in it. Then she'd give it back, without even taking a bite. I took the bowl to Mom's room.

I half-tripped on a cardboard box filled with clothes, but caught myself, not spilling even a piece of lettuce. Mom had put heavy curtains on the windows, so the room was pitch black even at 3 p.m. She was lying completely still in bed, crying with a lot of different noises; loud and soft, high and low. My eyes adjusted to the darkness.

"Don't come near me," Mom said.

"What's wrong Mommy?" I asked, staying by the door. The room was stuffy and smelled like sweat.

"Every day I have to hide, Lammy, and every day they find out where I am. I try everything to keep them out. How do they keep finding me?"

I knew by now that nothing I said would change her face.

"I'm not doing it anymore. It's the same shit every fucking day. There's no way out. I'm not doing it anymore." Mom punched her thigh with every word.

"Not doing what?" I asked.

"This! Lammy, I don't want to do this."

The entire room cried with her. Even I had a lump in my throat, but I swallowed hard and wouldn't let a single tear fall. Dad's and my first rule was to not get upset about Mom.

She shook the heavy curtains. In the sunlight that poured in, I saw she looked sicker than usual. Her lips were cracked. Her hair was missing in places. I thought for a second.

"You're safe, Mom. Everything is okay. You can trust me." Most of the time this didn't help, but it was better than keeping quiet.

"I can't do it anymore. They're gonna find me. They're gonna find me." She screamed and I saw her white tongue. The salad bowl started to feel heavy. This happened every time we got new neighbors.

The door opened and I saw Grandma's lamb slippers. My shoulders got stiff. Sometimes Grandma and Dad talked too much to Mom when she was like this. I swear it made it worse.

"What's the matter, Baby?" Grandma only ever called Mom "Baby."

Mom backed up against the wall, crying and slamming her palm on it.

I moved the salad bowl closer to my chest. I wished I had my clackers.

"I just want to kill myself!" Mom took forever, screaming each word. Grandma put her palm over her forehead.

"Lammy, you can go in your room?" Grandma asked. I shook my head.

I had never heard Mom say that before. She talked a whole lot about dying. I knew cause of her how many things could kill you, things that seem sweet like candy and Ferris wheels. But I didn't know that much about anyone killing their own self. I didn't even know if it was possible. To kill your own self. To make yourself dead. I wished she would stop wanting it, that she'd want to do anything else. I didn't know if I should say that. Saying the wrong thing also made everything worse.

"I'll take it from you," I said to her. It didn't seem like enough to say. I didn't know what to say. This used to work for Dad and me all the time. Now it seemed like she'd stopped hearing us.

Grandma and Mom were talking but I wasn't able to catch their words. My head was too full of thoughts. I thought about all the times Mom thought that she was going to die because of other people. I wondered if this meant she was getting worse. I wondered if she was actually going to die. I wondered if all the things she thought and said were going to actually come true.

I waited a long time for Mom's voice to get steady before I left the room. I knew from the last couple of times that nothing I said could change her face. We would look alike if she wasn't so dry and sleepy, if her hair was still down to her waist, like mine, instead of chopped all messy.

I usually trusted my memory for Dad's work number but this time I looked at the index card taped on top of the phone, to make sure I was getting each number right.

"Hello?" Dad said.

"Mom's really sad today."

"What happened?"

"She made me sit in the booster seat again."

"Hey, that's no big deal, she's just worried. Don't give her a problem about stuff like that."

"She also said something so weird."

"What, Lam?"

"She feels like killing herself?" I felt dirty inside, like I was swearing.

I heard Dad breathe heavy.

"Where's your grandma?"

"In the room with her."

"Okay. You remember how to lock the bathroom cabinet?"

"Yes sir," I said like a soldier. He didn't laugh, like I wanted.

"Okay do that for me, Lam. I love you." I didn't want to ask when he would be home but I was hoping he would tell me.

"I love you too," I said to the dial tone.

The bathroom tiles had dirt between them. It made me not want to have Chloe and Moe over. Their houses weren't so dirty. I stood on the toilet to reach the medicine cabinet, and locked it. The thought of Mom seeing me with the keys in my hand made me run back to my room. I kept my door shut. I wished it had a lock on it. I played with the clackers, but it was like the first time I'd picked them up all over again. I sucked. They hit against my arm bone. "I just want to kill myself," I repeated, clacking once for each syllable. After some time, I heard my dad set off the 'ding' in the front door alarm. I let my arm bone get sore and kept clacking.

I jumped up when I heard Dad yelling. I walked into the hallway and saw my Grandma sitting on the couch. I hated when Grandma's eyes were puffy, since there were already so many lines on them. I thought she was so ugly when she cried. I hated that I thought that, but I couldn't help it.

"Is Mom okay?" I pictured Mom, who I thought cried pretty.

"She's okay, Lammy. She's just upset." Grandma stopped rocking.

"Why is Dad yelling?"

"He's upset too."

"Dad never gets upset."

"Everyone gets upset."

"Can I make them feel better?"

"You're actually going to sleep at Chloe's, baby." This felt like a nice way of her saying no.

"I can't! They're both crying!"

"Lammy, I'm going to tell you a secret." Grandma cupped her hands together. I stuck my ear in. "You can't say a word."

I nodded.

"Chloe's been having terrible, terrible nightmares and begged her mom to let you sleep over because she's scared. You should go. Mommy and Daddy have each other, but Chloe really needs you."

I still didn't wanna but I couldn't help but smile. Chloe's mom probably said she could have only one friend over on a school night and she chose me over Moe! Grandma wouldn't let me go in the room to say goodnight, because adult things were being talked about, which was stupid because why couldn't they just talk to me and then talk about their adult things? I wrote a note with a cerulean blue crayon and slid it under the door.

Dear mom and dad,

I hope you feel better. You are the best parents in the whole wide universe.

I love you.

Love Lammy

Chloe only lived a few blocks away, right past 214, the playground with the bridge that moved with you when you ran on it. I thought about Mom and Dad the whole car ride.

"I forgot my clackers," I said, right when I saw Chloe.

"Shit," Chloe said, then looked to make sure her mom didn't hear. She had her blonde hair put back in tight French braids. Her mom had tried to teach me how to do it but I just couldn't get the hang. My hair was always getting knotted, but I didn't care. I liked it long.

"Wanna play homeless?" Chloe asked.

"Sure."

Playing homeless was our second favorite game right now, after clackers. We'd walk around and try our best to survive. We'd take crispy orange leaves and weird berries off bushes and pretend to eat them. We'd pick peoples' flowers and put them in our hair, calling it "earth fashion." We acted like we were cold even though it was September and we had sweaters on, and talked to each other about going out to look for jobs. We stayed out til it was dark, and I almost felt guilty thinking of what would happen to Mom if she found out I was out so late with just Chloe. Mom wouldn't even let me go in our backyard without an adult. She would say someone could take me in two seconds and turn me into their child instead. This used to make me cry and not want to leave my room but Dad pinky-promised that stuff like that didn't happen in Flushing. On the walk back I realized both Chloe's parents thought she could walk around the block as long as she was back before dark. They both thought she was allowed at a friend's house if they had met the parents at least once. They thought so much more alike than my parents did. Mom and Dad were always telling me opposite things.

That night, when I tried to go to sleep, it felt like my sleeping bag was getting smaller and I was stuck. I heard Chloe snoring like a baby pig. She didn't seem like she was having a nightmare. I must've really done the trick.

Or maybe she wasn't even getting nightmares, and Grandma was trying to protect me. Grandma was always trying to protect me. It made me not know if she was telling the truth.

I had nothing to do but stare at the black behind my eyelids and hear Mom's voice over and over again. "I just want to kill myself." I counted the words with my fingers: six. I tried to think of other things moms said that were six words, like "I love you so much, Lammy." I still didn't know if it was possible to kill yourself.

I wanted to ask Chloe what she knew about killing yourself, but I wasn't supposed to talk to anyone about the things Mom said anymore, even to my two best friends. I thought about how Chloe's mom once asked me to stop telling Chloe things that scared her. Or the time I told off Moe for saying her dad helps people cause he's a doctor.

Then I thought about the doctors. I already knew Mom was telling the truth when she told me how evil those needle-poking, nosy scums were. We'd see a lot of them and every single one talked to Mom and me, real slow, the way people talk to babies and dogs. But to Dad they used a grownup voice, and talked with real different, smart language. I always wanted to tell the doctors that Mom actually knew more big words than Dad did, probably more than they did. Dad swore they helped her though, and said she had to listen to them. It was another thing they thought differently about, and fought about lots.

When all the doctors stopped playing like a movie in my head, it was empty again, and the six words started to repeat in Mom's breaking voice. I tried to get it to stop by counting to six, then starting back again at zero. My eyes were getting heavy,

and before I could stop them, the tears were rolling down my face. I took the pillow out from behind my head and wrapped my arms around it. Why did she teach me so much about how not to die if I could just get old and want to kill myself? I wanted to tell her that I would miss her a lot if she was dead, but I didn't know if that was mean of me. To stop her from dying if she really wanted to, just cause I would miss her.

Mom got sad more than anyone I'd ever met. Why would she want to go to heaven and be sad forever? I always thought it was the scariest thing in the world to go to heaven. I couldn't stand the idea of being somewhere forever. I'd try to think about what it would be like to be stuck in the same place forever and my brain would start to sink, like quicksand or a whirlpool in the ocean. Maybe mom was just sick of worrying about when she was gonna die. All I had to do was get her to stop worrying about it somehow. I could probably do it. It would just take a lot of work.

When I woke up, my eyes stung. Chloe let me borrow her "I heart dance" shirt. The heart was made out of ballerina slippers. In school, Mrs. Copel said I would have to bring in the work I showed for my long division before I got any credit. I nodded and said I would bring it in tomorrow.

Grandma worked on Thursdays, so Dad ran right into Mom's room when we got home. I toasted two slices of bread and poured a cup of water to bring to her room. I cracked the door open. Her choppy, dark brown hair was all knotted. I couldn't understand how she slept so much but looked so tired. Her skin was oily, but smooth and wasn't gross to touch like teenagers' faces.

"Hi, Mom," I said, putting my fingers on her forehead. I put the toast on her bed and handed her the water. Once I got in, Dad left the room, saying he would be right back.

"Lammy." She shook her head, getting teary eyed.

She stared inside the cup of water and brought it to her nose before taking a small sip. I saw that thin white gauze covered her wrists. It made the middle of my chest feel like it was getting poked by dentist tools.

"That man from next door wants to take me to Powell's Cove Park and drown me. I can feel it." She got up, and I moved away from the bed to watch from a distance. I hadn't seen her stand in so long. She looked skinnier than I remembered. I thought about her lying in the dirty river behind Powell's Cove.

"Mommy, no one's coming." I got this saying from Dad. I felt too old to say "Mommy" out loud, but it used to make a huge difference. This time she didn't even hear me. Real fast, she stacked her boxes high. Her room was full of stuff she had gathered for protection.

"Stay away! Stay away!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. I knew what kind of mood she was in and knew I better act invisible. I moved to the corner of the room farthest from the door and squatted next to the long, skinny closet. My heart was beating real fast. I thought one of the boxes might go flying, the way she was scrambling to stack them. I thought if I just watched she'd know I was there for her. I felt freezing cold and hugged my whole body. After a long while, Dad pushed open the door, and Mom realized he'd taken out the lock again, which set her into a whole new level of screaming. While I was running out of the room, I caught a glimpse of white thin sponge things covering both her arms.

Dad followed me out the room, and I asked him about them.

"You saw the next door neighbors have that cute, fat gray cat?" he asked.

I nodded, but he wasn't looking at me.

"Little guy bit the hell out of your mom. That's why she's so scared of them. Don't worry, though. I got it under control. Why don't you do your homework?"

I thought about how Dad had started to protect me, like Grandma. I thought about how he could be lying and about the six words.

I gave him a big hug and went to my room. There was too much yelling. It was mostly Mom's yelling that I heard, and I couldn't understand all of it.

"I can't know something bad is about to happen without someone asking if I took my medicine?" Mom screamed. I wondered if she'd missed her medicine cause no one gave her back the keys. A loud bang followed her words, broken glass or something. I wondered why Dad never believed her when she said someone was trying to hurt us, why he thought the doctors had to be the ones who were right. I wondered if someone had come in and hurt Mom's arms but figured she would tell me, even if Dad begged her not to.

But maybe one day someone would hurt us. I swear she wouldn't even say "told you so." She'd just be ready to protect us. She was always ready.

The six words kept me awake again. I hit my clackers against my leg. By now, I was sick of playing with them the normal way. They weren't helping anything.

My bed felt too big for me. It was growing and I was shrinking. The six words were shrinking me. I was starting to think people could kill themselves. I thought about coming home and Mom being dead. I pictured Dad crying even though our number one rule was to not get sad over Mom. Grandma shaking even harder, crying too. I needed to figure out how to make Mom not worry anymore. Maybe we could move to some place with no cops, or doctors, or neighbors. I had to ask my Dad where a place like that was, but I was sure it existed. The world was so big—every kind of place had to exist somewhere.

I just want to kill myself. My leg felt numb with pain but I kept at the clacking. I thought about how if you could kill yourself, you could also decide how your funeral went and what color your coffin was and who got to keep all your favorite stuff. I knew Mom would give me everything she loved most, like the paintings of scrambled eggs that hung in the kitchen, and all of her neon green origami paper. It made me wish I liked when she picked me up from school. I shook my hand with the clackers, faster. I tried to get them to do something different. I wondered what being dead was like. Chloe once said heaven was whatever you wanted it to be, so hers was going to be unlimited candy. Moe said she'd make hers a million baby puppies. It was the first time I felt weird telling them what I was thinking. I didn't say I hoped my heaven wouldn't last forever. I pictured what it looked like on her arm under the bandages. I thought that the old man might've brainwashed the cat into scratching Mom. I switched to clacking with my left hand.

I woke up on my own even though it was a Friday. It was 11:07 am. It felt like I'd been punched in the gut. I started shaking. I should be in lunch right now, I thought. I should've copied Moe during our math test already. Now I wasn't going to be able to cheat and I had no idea how to show work on long division. I wondered if Chloe and Moe were worrying about me the way I worried about Mom. I tilted my head back to try to push the tears back in. I wanted to scream at Mom for saying those stupid six words that made me stay up all night.

I went into the bathroom and heard Dad's voice. He was home from work too

and still couldn't wake me up for school. Grandma was usually here on Fridays, but I didn't hear her.

I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. I had big buck teeth but mom didn't want a dentist shoving their dirty fingers in my mouth. Plus, she said braces gave you canker sores all over your gums.

I got into the shower. I hadn't taken one since Sunday, and my hair looked wet. I thought about how Chloe's mom would tell her when to take a shower.

Nothing in the shower had a smell, not the shampoo, conditioner, or even the soap. I squirted Dad's body wash into my palm with a touch of water to get it like a bubble bath. I put it on my face like a beard, then peeked through the glass door into the bathroom mirror. I put my beard on the wall. I made another one and put it on the wall, next to the last. I did this till all the bubble beards were stacked in a line. I used to play games like this when I was real little. I felt like my bathtub was magical. For a second I wished I could stay inside of it forever. Then I thought about heaven again, and my mind ran circles around the word "forever."

I turned the water the highest it could go and, once the steam covered the glass sliding door, I wrote my biggest secret with my finger just so I could practice writing it to somebody. Then I erased it. Real fast. Like lightning. Except I wasn't sure that it was gone, even if I didn't see it. I stared at the spot where I'd written "I do get sad over mom," praying it wouldn't dry that way and be shown to anyone. I didn't want Dad to know I broke our rule, even if he broke it too.

I turned the shower the hottest it went, almost burning my skin. I thought about Grandma and Dad always protecting me and wondered why Mom would say something that was gonna keep me awake every night. She must've known it would scare me to think about her being dead. I wished I could say this to her, but it would just make her upset. I wished everything didn't make her upset.

I turned the water all the way cold, until I had goosebumps on my thighs. Mom protected me too, in her own way. I thought about the door locks, and the boxes in front of her door, and all the warnings. Mom spent her entire life fighting off death. She wouldn't do it to herself. She wouldn't. And no part of me wanted her to. I didn't care if I failed math.

I got out of the shower and stood on top of the dirty clothes on the floor. I wrapped the blue towel around my body, and as I started to brush my hair, the door opened.

"Mom!" I jumped. She had a pair of purple Crayola scissors in her hands. The knots on the back of her head looked worse. She sat on the toilet and her pee smelled like rotting spaghetti. That happened to me when my pee was real yellow and hurt coming out.

"Lammy, we're getting haircuts."

"I don't want a haircut."

"Lammy, we have to."

"Why?"

"Because we have to change our look and get out of here. It's not just the neighbor; he has a whole team he hired. They have some sort of device they use, a mixture of X-rays and binoculars that let them watch us. We can't stay in this house."

"No, Mom. No one's watching us."

I couldn't have her cut my hair. If I screamed for Dad, she'd think I was a traitor.

I wanted to ask how she knew about the device but whenever I wanted to know stuff like that Dad called it "encouraging unhealthy behavior" which was a stupid fancy doctor saying.

"Mommy. Please. Please don't cut my hair."

"Lammy, we're going to look beautiful." Her voice was strong, more like how it used to sound.

She stared into the mirror and started chopping her hair off. I leaped for the doorknob but heard a crunch too close to my ear. Another crunch, louder. I turned to look at her, sending the Crayola scissor into the back of my neck. I only felt a little blood come down but it stung.

"I'm so sorry, baby. I'm so sorry," she was saying. I felt bad, knowing she thought the cut was probably gonna turn into something real bad that spread to my entire body.

"These things wouldn't happen if you just trusted me!" I said, real adult.

Her demon eyes came out and I bolted.

"Mom's upset!" I screamed toward the kitchen and then closed the door to my room. I pushed my nightstand in front of my door. I should've been in school. I shouldn't have been up so late last night. I shouldn't have counted on anyone to wake me up.

Lying on my bed, I couldn't stop crying. I was going to have to go to school tomorrow and I would look like such a freak. Or maybe no one would wake me up again and I would have to stay home and get more of my hair chopped off. I was stuck. Then I cried even harder because I felt silly for crying over my hair when Mom was crying over things like people watching us. I picked up the clackers and tried to focus on nothing but my rhythm. I tried to hear the clacking over the scissors that kept clicking in my head. I stayed like that for a while, crying and clacking the balls together. I heard my mom screaming, my dad trying to calm her down. I wished there were words in her screams that I could count. I stared at my hand, spotted with bruises. Each one looked like an outline on a map.

THIRTEEN LINES

LAURA MILLER

There is more to say than you
are made of fire, you
are made of inward-facing mirrors, you
dip your hands into the glowing sunset,
campfire beach embers that
roll and pulse and crack, disintegrate between two pinching fingers.
I wanted to stomp out that
smoking, billowing pile; those
invisible grey tendrils of
heated cloud
entered the atmosphere most conspicuously
and I did not want to
be interrupted.



MANIA LINDSEY GILL



MADAME SHERRIES JOE SABOL

OLD SOUL KEELY BRADY

There's this woman
 Who I dream about
 And talk to
 When I can't fall asleep at night
 She has a plump round face
 With dimples for days
 That look as if
 They are the molds for
 Hershey kisses
 And I wonder
 How her words would taste
 If they ever had the chance
 To bang on my ear drums
 But she radiates her answers
 Instead of speaking them
 I don't need to hear her words
 To know what she's saying
 She wraps me in her arms
 And rocks me to sleep
 Whenever I whisper my worries
 To her and twist and turn
 In my own skin
 She helps me shed those scales
 That keep me up til dawn
 And wipes my tears dry
 When there's no shoulder to cry on
 She even combs my hair
 And cleans my skin
 When I can't pull myself to my feet
 By the strings tied to my joints and limbs
 She is a mother I never met
 But long to with every waking breath

THE MAN IN THE HAZMAT SUIT

MEEREE ORLANDINI

There's a man down there in a hazmat suit
who's head-to-toe in yellow, and got it right.
Somewhere among the grid of streets and avenues
the girl of his dreams walks around,
separating her lights and darks at the laundromat,
flipping through the sale racks,
biting into a sandwich.
The world down there is filthy,
the pheromones flying.
From any which way, one might hit you.
Bing! Next thing you know you're a goner.
The man in the hazmat suit can only eat at home,
in his hazmat house.
He's smarter than the rest of us—

TOO TOUGH FOR A HEART OF STONE

ERIN LESO

Sage?
More like *siege*,
meaning to harass,
to pester and overpower
another living, breathing specimen,
one who thirsts on inhaling
the open blue skies and immortal green grass
that flow as perfectly as our sparks
from pure water kissing electricity.

Did you really just see me as my middle name?
Stone?
A pretty solid rock to marvel at?
You once called me that cliché "diamond in the rough."
I melted on your wooden floor when you released me
from my shell that I use to cover my rods and screws
keeping my spine straight and any other imperfections
that appear with my blood,
honest colors that are too blinding for most people.

Certainly not for you as you intermingled ours
for the sun and the moon
for whatever was best of yet to come,
or the worst.

Eventually, crafty little you found a shade you wanted
me to reflect.
Suddenly, the feathers I collected and believed would somehow morph into a wing
to fashion a bird of our own
that would soar so high above the dull patterns on the surface of our battles.
To those feathers,
I give you the bird.

The kind you don't see in the sky,
the kind that's grounded and hard as a boulder,
one that's not as easy to maneuver as an avatar in a video game,
nothing but purified pixels with no humanity to stop you as far as you can see,
a vacant site willing to entertain your ego by flashing your colors of choice.

I'll be as oblivious to the leftover marks on me as you are,
but before I disappoint you anymore
by failing to hop over all obstacles for you.

Sage,
my dear Sage,
I choose to siege tomorrow
before tomorrow sieges me.



THE ORAL TRADITION IN REHRERSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

NAZ BOWMAN

A child was born. The child was born stupid. Stupid and with absent genitalia. The child's mother gasped at first sight of the stupid genderless thing. She never stopped gasping; she gasped through the entirety of the child's life. She gasped and never said anything else. Occasionally her mouth would vibrate around the gasp and create sounds like "Oh that little thing you do" or "You're still interested in that" but she couldn't be said to be speaking. They were more like variations on a gasp.

Around the same time as the variations, she and the father of the child decided to send it to the library. The library was the place where books resided. The library was the only place in the land where people learned. There the child read books by various doctors and learned that not all people talked by sustaining one long gasp. The child also learned that other kids weren't stupid and most them had a penis or a vagina. The child didn't learn this by seeing it but by being told by the witch who worked at the library. The child knew she was a witch because she had a large nose and the child's father had once tried to call her that, but it came out sounding a bit wrong. He must have been exposed to the eternal gasp for too long.

When they decided that the child could learn no more from the library, they decided to put it to work. The child didn't particularly like work. The child would often play with the grass and dandelions instead. By this time, the child had a younger brother. The child was confused. The child's brother was neither stupid nor genderless. The child's brother was born with a giant penis and could recite the alphabet upon conception. The mother would be kept up late because she could hear the ABC's being rattled off inside her gut. The father considered punching the womb a few times, but boy was he glad he did not. The child would work while the child's brother would get praise for reciting Shakespeare at age two. The child liked Shakespeare, at least it thought it did. Maybe it didn't know what Shakespeare was. The child lifted heavy rocks across the yard and placed them down. The child wondered what this work was for.

The child quickly decided that work would not suit it. The child decided to run to a nearby village one day after dark. There the child met a friend. A friend named Molly. Molly loved the child right away. The child didn't love Molly right away. The child thought maybe Molly would call the child stupid, which it was, and ignore it. Molly did not do this. Molly asked the child to move into her shack. The child did because the child knew nothing else to do. The child and Molly would lie next to each other and make intense eye contact. Soon enough Molly became scared that she would get pregnant and that they too would have a stupid child. The child assured her this was not true. The child didn't have the proper genitals, well any genitals really. Molly didn't have to worry about the child's genitals. The child and Molly continued to stare at each other for years, and then finally the child decided to leave the room. Upon leaving, the child saw a million people right outside the door. Some of them looked like Molly and some like the child's brother but none of them like the child. It ran through the crowd and found a bench. It thought about music really hard and so music played. The child recognized the song from its childhood. Its father would sing it. It didn't know what to call the song.

After this incident the child decided it never wanted to see Molly again. It fled this time to the city. The city was like ten villages stacked on each other and turned upside down. The child immediately loved the city. It even began to see people that looked like it from time to time. A man approached the child and said: "What the fuck is up." The child laughed very hard. This man took the child under his wing and decided to teach the child his trade. This man was the town filmmaker. He made educational films so that the city folk knew what not to do. The child was very excited. It had never had the opportunity to tell anyone what to do before. It watched the man very carefully. It learned the skills it needed to. It made its own film. The film was not a success. The man that the child had learned from had made such hits as "Look Both Ways when Crossing" and "Don't Talk Back to Police." The child made a film called "Don't Touch Me" and nobody went to see it. The child cried. The child cried so hard that the tears created a flood and washed the child back to its parents' house.

The child's parents were dead and so the child began to cry harder. The child's brother was there and saw a DVD copy of "Don't Touch Me" in its jacket pocket. The brother took the DVD and began to watch. The brother hugged the child and told it: "Good job, I don't hate you." The child stopped crying and fell over dead. The child's brother buried it right there and never went to visit the grave.

I WANT A CHEESESTEAK

ALEASHA
WATSON-MITCHELL

I aint talkin bout Geno's or Pat's.

Take me to the hood
where I can cop a platta
with saltpepperketchup on the fries,

and the same ol heads be chillen in the back
debating with black plastic bags in hand,

and the yung bouls practice for the NBA
with the rec center's ball and bottomless crate,

and (momma's voice chases the block)
You better be home before them street lights turn on!
and (this time the kids aren't cussing)
grind time slickhead!

both billowing the same weight,

and the brutha outside delivers his siren tune:
IncentsBodyOilsCdsDVDSocksTurtles

and the pastor sends a sermon
to the people waiting for SEPTA,

and the hackcab hustles for a next customer,
Need a ride, I'm ya guy!

and the corner store is a gallery
for the neighborhood's
proms, graduations, funerals and mall photos,

and exact change
means no line,

and you can find your favorite rapper
posed on a pack of potato chips,

and no one is confused
about *wiz or wizout*,

and no matter what you order,
you'll only have to wait
10...15 minute,

and the grease hugs
the paper bag,

its residue imprinting
the body brown.

PORTLAND, OR.

MEEREE ORLANDINI

On the road I see a tavern with a

sign for LIVE MUSIC
plate
or shrimp
or plate of shrimp

& I'm not sure what it could mean.
Why promise a plate without anything on it?

From the leaf-flooded driveway

the house looks like the shape of a
kiss
wrinkled and fat
puckering out

since each side of the roof caved.
I always thought it would get rebuilt.

Through the windows at night

my neighbors all naked
hair
messy as if caught
in the breeze

stick lobster between their lips.
The pink meat lulls them to sleep.

In my kitchen I feel the

linoleum floors cold
checkered
or hideous
or hideous and cold

surface scarred like it was washed with brine.
I stare at the plateware in the cabinets.

The saucers stare back like cyclops eyes.



GOD'S EYE

AMY JANNOTTI

Senior year, Naomi Trazzi became a permanent fixture in the guidance office. Each week, it was something new—threatening a strip tease in the boy's locker room, acting out an explicit puppet show with the frogs in biology, planting hallucinogenic mushrooms in horticulture's model landscape. But every week, it was more of the same. She'd sit across from Miss K and whittle away at the desk with a sharpened pencil while her counselor floundered to instill her with some sort of moral consciousness.

Colleges are watching, K would tell Naomi. The choices you make now could affect your future.

This week, the charges levied were something to the tune of smoking in the girls' room.

"What do you care anyway?" Naomi, bored of her whittling, propped her foot up on the desk's edge and stabbed the pencil into her boot's thick rubber heel. "I'm eighteen. It's not like it's illegal."

Miss K lunged forward and snatched the pencil. "It's prohibited on school grounds. Which I'm sure is why you did it."

Naomi clicked her tongue. "We can agree this is the tamest I've been though, yeah?"

"If you classify exposing your fellow students to cancerous chemicals as 'tame,' then yes." Miss K slid open a drawer & rifled through its confiscated innards—a crinkled bag of chips that hadn't been allowed in detention, a Confederate pride pennant, a can of spray paint, a pair of craft scissors—searching for the perfect place to stow the writing utensil.

Naomi stomped her heel into the desk.

Miss K startled, dropping the pencil next to a warped tech deck dude and his accompanying board, now little more than spaghetti-fied plastic.

Ten minutes after Naomi would leave, River Albright would come to reclaim these items. He'd been bereft of them when he'd "accidentally" launched the miniature skateboard across his chemistry class into a beaker of sulfuric acid.

Miss K's eyes fixed on Naomi as the drawer slammed closed. "There's something else."

Naomi's brow ticked. "Isn't there always?"

The counselor braced herself with a sigh. "... We've spoken many times about your grades—"

"Yeah, yeah." Naomi tore apart the split ends of her lopsided pigtails with chewed fingernails. "Colleges don't like me. I know."

"I'm afraid it's worse than that."

Naomi's eyes flicked up.

Miss K wet her lips. "You won't be graduating."

Naomi blinked.

"You'd have to ace all your finals to pass," Miss K's voice quickened, "which, based on your attendance" She shrugged.

Naomi withdrew her foot from the desk. She circled her arms around herself. Her gaze retreated out the window.

"It's not the end of the world," Miss K reached out. Halfway across the desk, she realized her arms would never cover the distance. She folded her hands instead. "You'll have to retake this year, yes, but you'll have a leg up on the material, and you can take advantage of the extra time to build up your resume"

Naomi hadn't moved. Her mouth hung ajar, tongue paused against the back of her teeth, a girl frozen in time. Some part of her had gone away out there—had slipped through the blinds and taken off running.

"I know you hate it when I bring this up," Miss K tried, "but if this behavior is some way of . . . of preserving Tawna's memory—"

"Her memory?" Naomi's head snapped forward. "Is that how you remember her?"

Miss K was suddenly overcome with the hollow-boned cold one often felt upon opening the front door to discover a hornet's nest. She pulled the knit shawl tighter about her shoulders.

"I remember having conversations like this with both of you." She spoke slowly, using each pause to scan Naomi with an infrared gaze—checking for a tick of the eyebrow, a flinching lid, a tensing shoulder, any gauge of the girl's temperature. "And I know that one way people sometimes try to process grief is by rooting themselves in old habits—"

"Bad habits." Naomi's mouth hardened into a line.

Miss K withdrew her hands to her lap.

"Come on, teach." A vein in Naomi's temple twitched. "Say it like you mean it."

K swallowed. "One week detention for the smoking, starting Monday. We'll set a meeting to discuss next year's course load as soon as I know my schedule."

Naomi fisted her bookbag and swept from her seat. Miss K shouted at her retreating back, "I'm always here if you need—"

"Whatever." Naomi didn't turn her head.

Her locker got the better of her in her rage. She kept rotating over the digits of her combination: a product of either zeal or trembling hands. The second she finally sprung it, she clawed inside and began scattering books, hurling them onto the floor. When she exhausted her texts, she moved on to her scarf, her gym bag, her coat.

When the coat hit the tile, it spat up something shiny. The clank of the something cut through the pulse of blood in Naomi's ears. And when she saw what it was, she threw herself down after it.

A silver zippo, ferruginous in its old age. On its side, a sticker inspired by a

recovered zippo from the Vietnam War.

Thoe I walk thru the valley

of the shadow of death,

I fear no evil, for I

am the meanest mother fucker in the valley.

Less than a year ago, Tawna held that zippo to Naomi's mouth and lit a blunt. They were on their backs on the faux fur rug occupying more than half Tawna's floor, the rug so soft it felt like the real thing. So soft, you could sink right in.

Naomi's head was on Tawna's stomach, her ear pressed against Tawna's bottom rib. When everything else in the room was quiet, the quiver of Tawna's heartbeat rattled Naomi's eardrum.

They were decompressing, or commiserating, while Tawna's father stampeded around downstairs. A rejection letter peeked out at them from the top of the waste bin.

UCLA was Tawna's first pick. She was their last.

"It's all bullshit," Naomi declared, waving the blunt idly about. "Art programs aren't supposed to care about your grades."

"They didn't." Tawna pinched the blunt from Naomi's ever-loosening grip. "It was my portfolio. I didn't make the cut."

She took a long drag. Held it in her chest til she choked. When the coughing settled, she passed the blunt back to Naomi.

"Rhode Island didn't want me either." She leaned back. Let her skull knock against the floor. "I'm never getting out of here."

"That's not all bad." Naomi lifted her head through a cloud of her own smoke. "Is it?"

Tawna picked herself up on her elbows. She saw Naomi's wide, nocturnal eyes, and a smile worked its way through her. "No." She held the blunt to her lips with one hand and rested the other between Naomi's topknots. Pressed her thumb into the crease of Naomi's brow.

That's how her father found them: his baby girl's hand massaging another girls' scalp, smoking.

Naomi tried not to think about what came next—the shouting, the slurring, the threatening. She tried not to think about Tawna pushing her father out of the way so Naomi could escape down the stairs.

She tried not to think about any of it.

"You staging a sit-in or something?" River Albright leered over her, twirling his recovered tech deck like a fidget spinner.

Naomi stuffed the zippo back in her pocket and scrambled to her feet. River offered his arm, which she dodged. He used that same arm to scratch the nape of his neck instead. "So, uh, you comin' tonight?"

"Coming?"

"Tyler found this place out by Saw Hill."

Naomi sucked her teeth.

"I know you haven't been since what happened with Tawna." River stowed the tech deck. I just thought—"

"You'd think some girl OD'ing at one of your dumbass parties would make you, like . . ." Naomi's eyes flicked to the side as she searched for the phrase. "I dunno, not have them."

River stepped back. "We look out for each other. You know that."

Naomi kneeled to gather her books. He sank with her, tugging her gym bag toward him by the strap. "Tawna was on some other shit. You know that, too."

Naomi leaned to grab the bag from his hands, but River swung it onto his shoulder.

"Look, Ny, we're just tryna blow off some steam before we get hit by the Great Big Real, alright? You seem like the type who could use that."

Naomi ripped the bag off of him. "You can go now."

River's hands went up. "I'm going." He stood. "But I'm texting you the address."

Naomi raised her head to argue, but found herself staring at his retreating Timberland soles.

Once that mustard yellow rubber faded from her eyeline, she took out the lighter and turned it over in her hands.

Tawna had given it to Naomi the night she died. She climbed the tree outside Naomi's bedroom and asked Naomi to come with her—blow off being grounded, blow off school, blow off the whole town of Bumfuck, Nowhere.

But Naomi came from a line of college graduates. Had a D in Spanish. Was already on thin ice with her mother for the disciplinary call about her and Tawna skipping class. So Tawna pressed the zippo into Naomi's palm and told her she had to go.

Like, go go. Like go and never come back.

Naomi had assumed she meant running away.

The place by Saw Hill was about as dingy as anyone who partied in abandoned houses would expect: peeling paint, holey walls, rotting floorboards. Naomi had shown up half a flask deep, and only sunken deeper.

Presently, she found herself staring down a patch of floor losing the war against termites. She felt a strong sense of kinship with that patch of floor—with those gnawed edges, and the darkness behind them. Like insects were chewing holes in her, too.

"You made it!" A River-colored shape materialized from the din, double-fisting SOLO cups. He passed one behind Naomi's head, seizing the opportunity to get an arm around her. Naomi nabbed the cup from his hand and emptied it all down her throat.

"That kinda vibe, huh?" River nudged her.

Naomi gasped as she came up for air.

"You might like this, then." River fished something from his pocket: a tab of acid screen-printed with a cartoon pierced tongue.

Naomi blinked down at that tab. Reached out to brush it with her fingertips.

Tawna had a pierced tongue. It glinted every time she laughed.

Naomi peeled the tab from River's hand, sat it in her mouth, let her natural acids go to work.

River's arm went around her again. He was warmer against her shoulders than the air of the old house. He nudged her in the direction of the basement steps.

"C'mon," he egged. "Real party's downstairs."

Downstairs was a haze of muddy colors and weed smoke. Tyler and the rest of River's friends filled a wraparound couch in the corner like a booth of mob bosses playing hot potato with a bong.

Some of them might've said hi to Naomi. Several of them may have even made conversation. She would only hear a phrase or two, then suddenly be on the tail end, watching whomever she'd been talking to turn to someone else.

There were only two constants: River and beer.

Every time Naomi left the couch to get more of the latter, the former would follow. Then they'd return to the couch, and he'd put his hand on her thigh, only her thigh was a yard away.

Every now and again he would whisper something in her ear, and it would be the funniest thing she'd ever heard. Then he'd kiss her earlobe, and that'd be funny, too. Then he'd kiss behind her ear, and that'd be funny, then the side of her neck, and that'd be funny, then her collarbone, and that'd be hysterical.

Then he'd kiss the corner of her jaw, and she'd turn to giggle in his face—only his eyes would be burning. And that wasn't funny at all.

He kissed her on the mouth.

She didn't laugh.

He asked if she wanted to come upstairs.

She let him lead her.

The voyage upstairs felt buoyant, like treading water. The waves stayed there, stirring air under her chin until the kissing resumed.

After that, focus was paramount. River was a moving target—bobbing, weaving. Less than half Naomi's kisses found their mark.

River seemed to be having similar troubles. He'd go to kiss her hip, but it wouldn't be where he thought it was. He'd go to kiss her breast, but it'd be rolling away.

He had to anchor her to the floor so she wouldn't drift.

All the rest was like riding a bicycle: feet here, hands here, sit here. More mouths involved, though. It hurt Naomi's brain less to let River steer.

Everything was the same.

Except, nothing was the same.

River's hands were not Tawna's hands. River's lips were not Tawna's lips. River's tongue wasn't pierced. Couldn't do the things Tawna's could. Naomi reached out to hold Tawna's head and found her fingers in River's hair.

River didn't seem to mind that he wasn't Tawna. He wasn't stopping. He didn't see anything wrong.

So there wasn't anything wrong, Naomi decided, and she leaned her head back, and she closed her eyes.

She crawled through the edges of that gnawed hole into an all-black world and let herself be eaten.

When the tide went out, Naomi followed it to the bathroom. The porcelain felt heavy underneath her. It had all this gravity that kept pulling her sideways. For a moment after she finished, that gravity become too much for her to move, like she'd lost her own gravity in the go. Like she'd peed all her matter out.

River was smoking a cigarette when she came back. She joined him at the window.

That was something, he said.

She meant to grab his collar, but she reached too far and nudged him instead. Sounds bubbled in her.

Let's go for a drive, she said.

They had minimal trouble finding River's car, but then River couldn't seem to fit his keys in the lock.

Ny, he said, I'm too fucked up to drive.

When Naomi took the keys from him, she let her fingertips linger on his palm. He didn't argue with those fingertips.

She let her hair loose as she settled in the driver's seat. Something about the way the steering column fit between her legs made River's jaw hang. She shook her hair out, and his jaw plummeted further. Naomi slammed her foot on the gas.

Within minutes, River's jaw filled with screams. He screamed out open windows, the air rushing past him. Naomi drove in a straight line, but the road kept curving under her. So of course, she had to swerve to keep up.

Slow down!

She almost didn't hear River shout against the wind: Ny, slow down!

Naomi didn't want to slow down.

Slow felt like sinking into a carpet of plastic fibers. Slow felt like the trickle of Tawna's fingers on her scalp. Slow felt like bumping into Tawna's ribcage on purpose just so she could hear the rhythm of her. Slow felt like staring down the barrel of a second semester of senior year with no Tawna, no future.

NAOMI, River shouted. FOR FUCK'S SAKE.

But his voice wasn't his. And he wasn't the one shouting anymore.

They whipped around another corner into a pair of oncoming headlights. The lights swelled and melted together. Like staring down the face of heaven.

One big glow.

And if Naomi squinted, it was the light in Tawna's door—the light falling on a man's face, red and swollen with rage, ready to direct all the kinetic energy building in his taut veins onto the Naomi tripping down the stairs. But Tawna's body blocked his. Tawna stood stock still before the shadow of death, looked over her shoulder, and told Naomi: Go.

River screamed something else—maybe a prayer, maybe a warning. His voice was bowled over by the force of the other car's horn. They sounded the same to Naomi. It was all the same.

River reached over. Tried to rip the wheel out of her hands. But she was anchored now.

I have to go, she said.

And she thought, driving straight through the middle of God's eye: I'm coming, baby. I'm coming.



IF ART WAS A FLAVOR, HOW WOULD IT SOUND?

ALEASHA WATSON-MITCHELL

We, Artist
live in
the breath of
splintered glass and
yellowed grass
pre-dating the hiss of
chickadee or
humming from wolves.

Our bones arching into
the flame's
reflection of fire,
calloused palm
blueprinting journey
into journals.

We feast on tomorrow
til it chuckles
like yesterday,
regrets noosing
our joints hoarse,
until mistakes miss
the anxieties of
bacon grease.

We rise from the soot of
rainbow's slumber,
hair anointed in
the sapphiric
tears of prayers.

We dress our voices
the color
behind dawn,
its yawn
acknowledging
we are the creator
and the creation.

Our body cannot
inhabit homes for wages
below minimum.
Checks aren't signed with
electronic thumb or
double-tapped heart.

Our flesh is not
shredded for
entertainment
then hemmed again
to the roots with
delirium and caffeine,
why, and what if?

So, Don't call
yourself
an Artist
until
*the word's first spell
triples your name
and spins you,
here, into place.*

BLUE BUTTERFLY

VIKKI PLITT

The blue butterfly I saw one muggy afternoon returns,
knocks, flutters through my window, brings fresh fruit,
braids my golden hair with baby's breath, kisses life
back into my dull, lifeless cheeks. She has a name, I know,
but I've never asked and she's never asked mine.
If she's someone I was supposed to know in another life, I'm glad
I know her now, after she's met God, after she's learned her nature, after
she's learned the unknowable, now that she'll shed her wings and birth
an army of herself, now that she'll enlighten, and all of her will
brighten this tower I built for myself.

I know this makes no sense.
It's abstract or whatever, but I swear she's more than some dust. I swear
she's the light at the end of this tunnel. I know that's a cliché,
but it's wild how a man can hold such power over you,
obstruct your view, and you follow because you're obligated to, so I did,

I threw
my hair: out, in, out, in, out, I didn't want him,
but he wanted me,

must have gotten his fairy tales mixed up, told me,
"Since you're tired, just go ahead and sleep."

And I know I have beauty, I never needed him to tell me, but now I'm lying
on my side and I'm taken back to that night when he let himself in and I couldn't
say "no," I tried to stop it, I did, though, he "didn't cum yet," he protested, "let me
just finish" and whether I wanted him to or not is irrelevant because he did and
I didn't want it.

She listens to the abstract; she knows I can't delve too far back in. I want to know
God's nature and she knows I do. This was part of God's Plan for me, I'm told,
but I don't believe it. The butterfly won't tell me, and before she goes,
I hand her scissors, she chops my hair and I watch it fall. I know he can't come
back now, but also, he never left.



TUATARA CORBY SMITH

BIOS

Brianna Ballinghoff | Illustration '20

Brianna is a mixed media illustrator who enjoys painting, printmaking, and drawing. She is also a tattoo artist inspired by American traditional design.

Damali Beatty | Illustration '19

Damali was born and raised in Philadelphia. Her family has lived in the city for at least four generations so every street, every corner, every inch of the city holds a memory for someone dear to her. It was her fascination with history that led her to explore her family's narratives as told from their mouths, and her fascination with memory that led her to writing "Matrilineal," a story themed around family, comfort, repetition, disillusionment, and the ultimate failings of love.

Abby Rose Blaine | Graphic Design '19

Originally from Vermont, Abby moved to Philadelphia to study Graphic Design and Photography. She's passionate about projects that are centered around environmental and social issues, but nothing tops her love for her dog, Moxie.

Naz Bowman | Creative Writing '20

Naz is a disgusting liar who was spent the last six months hunched over a laptop in a cave near Reading, Pennsylvania. For inquiries about the exact location of this cave call 7176799044.

Nyeree Boyadjian | Creative Writing '21

Nyeree is an Armenian LGBTQ+ writer from Queens, New York. Her work has been featured in Red Cedar Review, as well as Brine Literary Journal. She currently lives in Philadelphia with her cat Dakota.

Keely Brady | Creative Writing '22

Keely is a spoken word artist from Pittsburgh. She creates music out of her poetry and also works in visual arts. Her mission as an artist is to speak her truth and for others to speak theirs. You can find more of her work on Instagram @kiwi_berry_.

Jacob Brams | Graphic Design '19

Jacob dreams of being on TV some day.

Brekken Carns | Directing, Playwriting + Production '19

Brekken is a playwright and poet from Arizona. She tells stories inspired by the environment and the relationships among its inhabitants. She spends most of her time walking her dog in the city.

Zoe Darazsdi | Creative Writing '20

Zoe is the Fiction Editor of this issue of Underground Pool and a writer of short stories and plays. She is from the boonies of Northeastern Pennsylvania and draws much of her creative inspiration from the way moss clots on logs or old houses rot in forests. Check out her creative writing workshops and freelance writing and editing on her website, zoedarazsdi.com.

Brandon Dennis | Graphic Design '19

Brandon's favorite part of having a dog is using her as an excuse to go home early.

Kelsey Durkin | Illustration '19

Kelsey is an illustrator and dog-walker from Westchester, NY. She loves to wear winter hats and spends most of her time in the studio or the Internet. You can find her on instagram @durkinart!

Thalia Geiger | Creative Writing '19

Thalia is a poet and fiction writer who loves binge-watching trash TV, reading the same books over and over, and burning too many candles.

Lindsey Gill | Illustration '20

Lindsey is a graduating senior in Illustration. Her drawings are inspired by her passion for nature, animals, yoga, travel, and mental wellness...and of course, cats. She plans to stay in Philly after graduating and start her own line of cute greeting cards and stationery, as well as continue her work as a pattern and surface designer for apparel and home decor. You can follow her work on Instagram @lindseygillart.

Tyra Jamison | Creative Writing '20

Tyra is a writer that's Pittsburgh-born and Hill District-raised. She performs her work as Mantz's, freelances, and manages Communications & Social Media at Paperback Literary Journal. She's a firm believer that everything that feeds us starts underground.

Amy Jannotti | Creative Writing '19

Amy is a South Philly poet, Dr. Pepper enthusiast, and prosaic trainwreck. Her work has been featured in Z Publishing House's Pennsylvania's Emerging Writers and Callipoe literary magazine. This is her third appearance in Underground Pool, of which she is former Poetry Editor.

Sophie Lane | Illustration '20

Sophie loves chocolate, cats, and lots of tea. Before she was an illustrator, she trained to be a professional ballet dancer.

Erin Leso | Creative Writing '20

Erin is a poet, fiction writer, and playwright from Philadelphia. Her poems and stories explore the wonderful and confusing sides of life. She loves musicals, dancing to the radio or on New Year's Day as a Mummer, and classic rock.

Abby McManus | Illustration '20

Abby is an illustrator and a self-proclaimed carb-atarian. When she's not drawing, she enjoys singing, gaming, and watching anime.

Laura Miller | Creative Writing '21

Laura is an aspiring Philly poet and musician who also enjoys experimenting with things like visual art, film, and pants. She is most definitely even more sappy than she may seem.

Katelynn Mirra | Creative Writing '19

Katelynn is looking forward to post-undergraduate life, when she and MeeRee Orlandini will knit sweaters, watch sunsets from antique rocking chairs, and make homemade biscuits.

Kat Mooradian | Illustration '21

Kat is a cat-like comic artist who performs poetry, writes scripts, and paints. Kat likes ranch on fries.

Jewel Moore | Vocal Performance '19

Jewel is a student, singer, poet, and pink-clad Virginian who found herself in Philly somehow. She enjoys being a nerd about the opera, being a nerd about Lemony Snicket, and being a nerd about bats.

Mikayla Morell | Creative Writing '20

Mikayla is allergic to poetry and gluten. As a writer, her search history consists of "babynames.com," "lobotomy," and "thesaurus.com" (to name a few). When she isn't writing, she's looking at videos of dogs and Obama.

Jen Mundy | Illustration '19

Growing up with dyslexia, Jen was terrible at spelling. So she decided to draw her thoughts instead. She is a picture- and 3D object-maker. Check out her website jen-mundy.com or follow her on Instagram @jenmonday!

Miyuki Okamura | Creative Writing '19

Miyuki is a fiction writer, occasional poet, and pop music scholar. Todd Chavez is her biggest inspiration. She posts daily cat facts on her Instagram story @okmiyuki.



HUMAN NATURE KELSEY DURKIN

MeeRee Orlandini | Creative Writing '19

MeeRee is looking forward to post-undergraduate life, when she will knit sweaters, watch sunsets from an antique rocking chair, and make homemade biscuits.

Tyler Pendzik | Illustration '20

Tyler is a death metal enthusiast, doodler, and "strange bird." He posts the weirdness seeping out him on Instagram at @tylerpendzik.

Vikki Plitt | Creative Writing '20

Vikki is a junior Creative Writing major with an interest in experimental prose and poetry. She's the mother of a floofy orange tabby named Ziggy, as well as a student of popular culture. To keep up with her antics, follow her on Instagram & Twitter @vikki_the_vixen.

Joe Sabol | Photography '20

Joe is a photographer whose work includes urban and natural environments. His work can be seen on his Instagram @joesabolphotography.

Katerina Schurek | Illustration '20

Kat is an illustrator with a love of animation who loves listening to singing robots and heavy metal.

Corby Smith | Graphic Design '19

Corby is a graphic designer, printmaker, and collage artist. Check her out on Instagram @unbotheredbinch or her site: www.corbysmith.com.

Jahvi Thomason | Illustration '20

Jahvi is a student and freelance illustrator who seeks to become a concept artist/developer for either his own stories or for movies/video games. He also has interests in other art forms such as music production, poetry, and fine art painting.

Sarah Troost | Photography '20

Sarah is a photographer who likes experimenting with process and fragmented narratives. She also likes soup and train rides.

Aleasha Watson-Mitchell | Creative Writing '20

Poetic Artist. Educator. Jawn. Born and raised in Philadelphia, Aleasha uses her experiences to impact and empower her community through word and music experimentation.

Georgia Wescott | Photography '21

Georgia is a photographer and designer originally from Atlanta, Georgia. You can keep up with her on her website www.georgiawescott.com or on Instagram @georgia.jpg.



BIRTH PHONE KELSEY DURKIN



Mythos of the Self — Written and visual
chronicles of reflection and reconstruction.