

An abstract watercolor painting of a tree. The trunk is a vertical, textured stroke of light purple and grey. The branches are thin, delicate lines in shades of brown, red, and blue. The foliage is represented by soft, blended washes of yellow, light blue, and pale pink. A prominent, thick, horizontal stroke of red is visible in the lower right quadrant. The overall style is soft and painterly.

Sub-Creation

Fall 2019

Sub-Creation

Sub-Creation

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Regarding the Title

“Sub-creation” is a term originally coined by J.R.R. Tolkien in his famous essay “On Fairy Stories,” a read that the staff would definitely recommend. Tolkien used the term to refer to human creativity as a unique and essential aspect of the Imago Dei (Image of God). The term can also function as a Christian philosophy of art and literature; if indeed imitation is the highest form of praise, and if indeed we want to praise God who created all we are and all we experience, then we should use the abilities He has given us to create like He creates (albeit in a lesser manner, hence *sub-creation*).

- 1 PETE AND REPETE *Literary Contest Winner*
Boyd Allsbrook
- 3 MYKONOS
Caroline Park
- 4 THE WRECK OF THE CHARLOTTE ANNE
Daniel McKay
- 5 IMAGO DEI
Hadleigh Callahan
- 6 JOHN 8:12
Annika Lee
- 7 BREATHING ROOM *Art Contest Winner*
Grace Gebhard
- 8 HAUHET
Dontay Givens
- 9 NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 1ST
Naomi Talbott
- 10 THE LAST OF THE ARIO
Annalise Burnett
- 14 GROWING DOWN
Ruth Wu
- 16 LOCUSTS
Boyd Allsbrook
- 20 THOUGHTS AFTER MIDNIGHT
Ruth Wu
- 26 GUINEVERE BY THE LAKE
Annika Lee
- 28 BABY ALIVE
Leah Martin
- 36 EXISTENTIALISM
Caroline Park
- 37 ...BUT THERE WAS NO APPLE TO BE FOUND
Boyd Allsbrook
- 38 A STORY YOU SHOULD KNOW, WEARING A DIFFERENT COAT
Madelynn Helwig
- 42 GAVE BIRTH TO THIS NEW COLOR SCHEME
Grace Gebhard
- 43 THE WORDS OF A SAILOR
Dawson Graham
- 45 NIGHT TIME THOUGHT OF REMEMBERING NOTHING
Naomi Talbott
- 46 BESIDE YOU
Soonmin Kwon
- 47 TO LOVE SOMEONE AS IF
Naomi Talbott



Sub-Creation

IN ASSOCIATION WITH



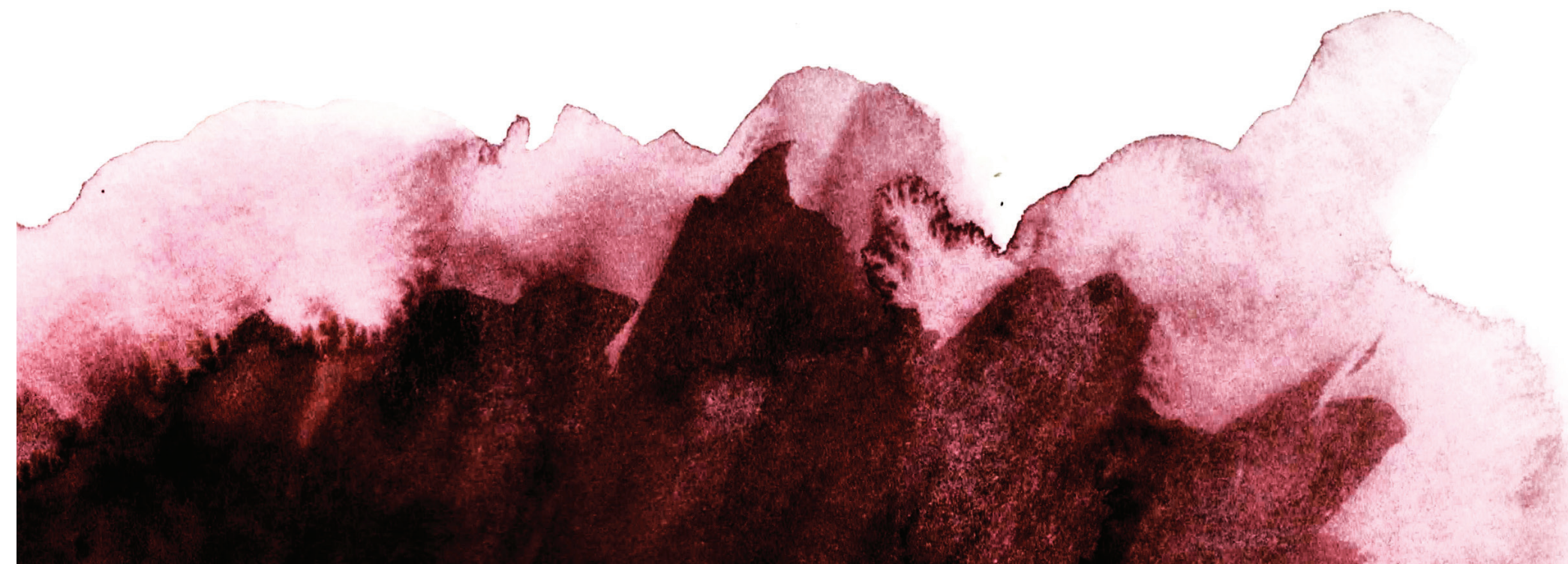
Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up this copy of *Sub-Creation Journal's* first printed issue. While it may seem like an ordinary booklet to you, to me (as well as to the rest of *Sub-Creation's* staff) it's nothing short of a historic triumph. It has truly been a privilege for me to witness and to orchestrate the labor that has made this booklet possible.

In this issue, we are proud to feature the winners of our literary and art contests. "Pete and Repete," by Boyd Allsbrook, is our literary winner. The artistry and subtlety that went into its writing was not lost on the editorial staff, and its humor grows richer and richer with each reading. The winner of our art contest is "Breathing Room" by Grace Gebhard, a painting featured in the centerfold as well as on the front cover.

I cannot hope to properly thank the dozens of people who contributed in one way or another to *Sub-Creation's* success this semester. However, I would like to express my personal gratitude to our editorial staff for their hard work; the artists both verbal and visual who submitted to the journal; our faculty advisor Professor Nicole Mazzarella for her continued guidance and commitment to *Sub-Creation's* mission and success; and Mr. Marion Neal of Lemon Press Printing, without whom this booklet would not exist. Finally, I would like to thank you, the reader, whose work of reading represents the final step in making meaning out of these small black squiggles on paper. I hope you enjoy reading the issue as much as we enjoyed making it.

Yours in Christ,
John Colson, Editor-in-Chief



Pete and Repete

Boyd Allsbrook

Mom used to tell a riddle that was a joke—either that or the joke was a riddle—to us, my siblings and I. We thought it was the cleverest thing. It went like this: Pete and Repete went out in a boat...

Pete and Repete went out in a boat. Pete fell out. Who was left?

Pete and Repete went out in a boat, boating. Pete fell out. Who was left? Repete. Repeat.

Pete and Repete went out in a boat, presumably to fish or pass a leisurely day together, trading sweet kisses in the Cape Cod sun. Pete fell out, of the boat, into the water. Pete fell out for no apparent reason; maybe he tripped or spotted an iPhone glinting lonely on the harbor's sandy bottom. There are myriad reasons why Pete would fall out of the boat. Repete screamed, more from confusion than fear because they'd been out boating many times before with nary a mishap.

Pete and Repeat went out in a boat.

Pete and Repete went out in a boat, to boat, and so then all of a sudden, Pete fell out. Pete took the proverbial tumble down towards David H. Jones's watery locker room. And so after Pete fell out, who was left in the boat, screaming and distraught at the loss of her one true love? Answer: Repete. Repeat.

Pete and Repete, see, they go out in a boat. Who even goes boating anymore these days, anyways, is what I'd like to know? And so but anyways these two goons, Pete and Repeat, they're out in a boat. The boat is, by my lights, a Hopper's New England-style dinghy, appropriate for just these quaint nautical jaunts, to be enjoyed by such lovers as the estimable Pete and his Missus. I suppose the type or class of boat is immaterial, but it helps set the scene.

And see, while in this Hopperesque dinghy, Pete, clearly not the brains of the operation, spies some sort of glint or glimmer or whatnot, and maybe possibly a minimalist chrome apple; which puts him into such a state of excitement that Repete, his wife, Repete has to declare loudly that it would be in his best interest to "calm down, Pete!" And she laughs bell-like and clearly and perfect. Pete and Repete, see, they're out in this boat. And despite his lover Repete's loud and oft-repeated—if you'll pardon the pun—cautious remonstrances, Pete simply has to retrieve that precious McGuffin which may possibly be an iPhone, maybe, dropped as it were, however improbably, from perhaps a New England Bay Line cruise ship's boozed and buxom Bostonian bachelorette clientele.

And so anyways, Pete, he stands up, struggling with his T-shirt—it's stamped with the likeness of Austin Powers and emblazoned "yeah baby" in a shagadeliciously 60's font, the T-shirt—and gets it over his head as Repete makes worried little mews and suchlike about an increasingly unsteady boat. Because dinghys, the types immortalized by Edward Hopper, are not, I repeat not, safe to stand up in. To do so makes them even more treacherous and fall-out-of-able than they were in the first place by simple virtue of being, you know, dinghys.

Pete, see, he's standing there, balanced precariously on a boat designed specifically for romantic nautical excursions or clambakes—most definitely not by any stretch

of the imagination for, designed for, like, impromptu deep-sea iPhone retrieval—and he's there with his Austin Powers shirt over his head, arms raised comically, as if he's a child playing peek-a-boo, struggling stupidly with it, the shirt; and so, a little wave—which is just enough, the little one—it rocks the now-top-heavy dinghy just that much too far for Pete, who looks for all the world like a fleshily erect mast, red shirt taut and flapping sail-like between straining arms.

Pete fell out. Who was left? Answer: Repete.

Pete and Repete went out in a boat. Pete fell out. Who was left?

It's a simple question, kiddos, who was left in the boat?

Pete and Repete are out in a boat.

Pete and Repeat are out in this boat for one final perfect second, which that, the second, ends suddenly with Pete—still frantically entangled in his half-stripped shirt, belly flashing white in the mid-afternoon sun—slipping, and toppling, and cracking his noggin on the boat's starboard edge. And just like that he submerges red-and-white blocked, no longer struggling, or straining or doing much of anything much beyond sliding down, down, down below gentle waves just that much too quickly for Repeat—now truly panicked—to snag him. And he flutters serenely down, inexorable, spread-eagle like some sick sort of ray, those faux-gross English teeth and glasses and kerchief smiling up from the still-taut tee, grinning in rigor mortis back up at the helpless Repete.

Pete and Repete are out in a boat, and Pete, he falls out. And so who is left, exactly?

Pete and Repete went out in a boat. Pete fell out. Pete fell out, into the cold, cruel, water.

Who was left?

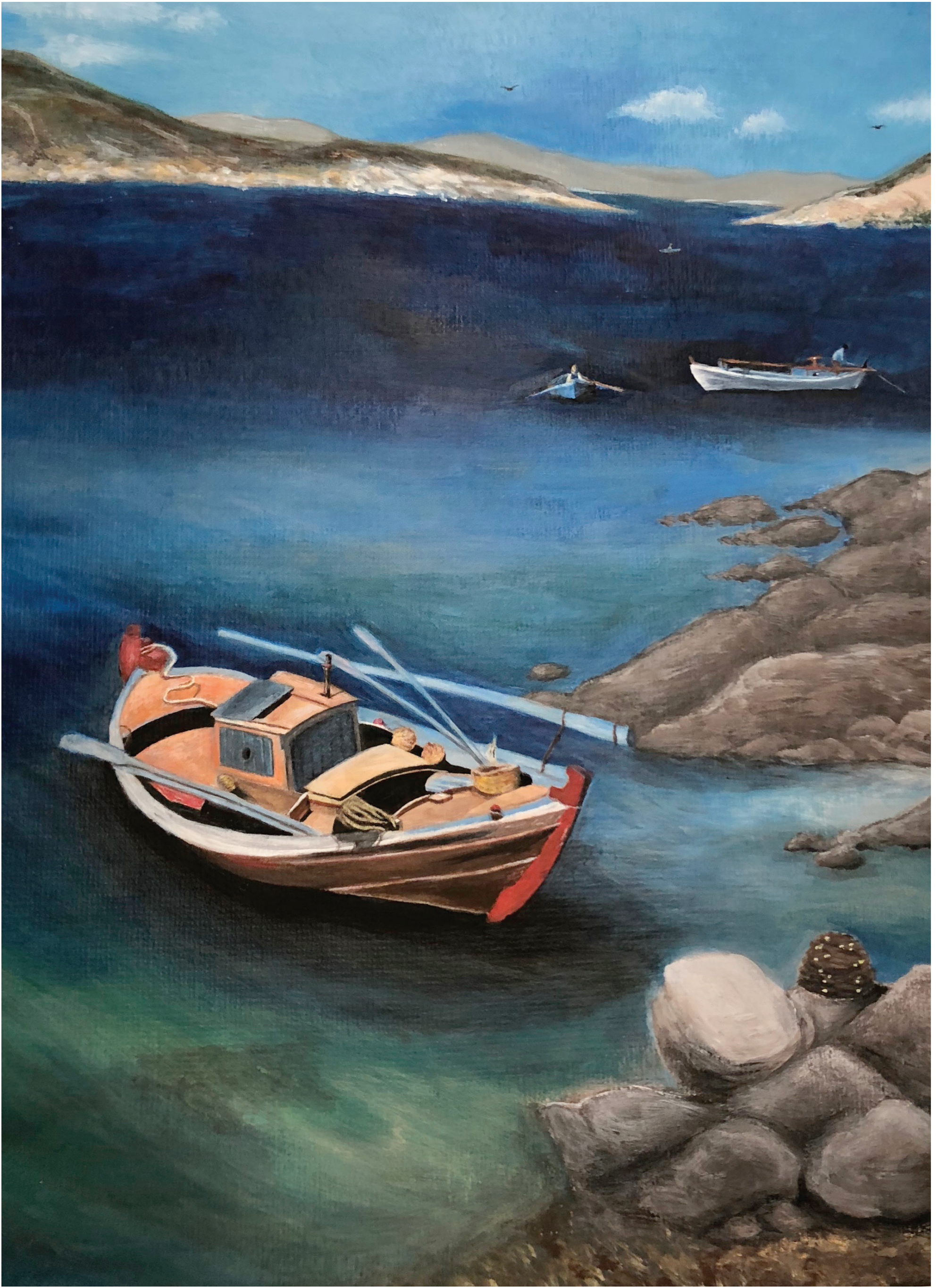
And so, anyways, so, after Pete takes a fall, and smacks his noggin, and suffers a severe hemorrhage of the cortical brain area, and leaves himself swiftly before becoming aware of his drowned body; after this, then, so, Repete is left alone, scream-crying as one does when they are left alone, ontologically so, in a treacherous dinghy, abruptly and irreversibly deprived of their life's love in the blink of a, like, eyeball.

Pete and Repete went out in a boat. Pete fell out. Who was left? Answer: Repete.

Pete is resting at the silty bottom Cape Cod, besides—beside—a little slice of scrap metal. And a half-fathom above him, fetally compressed into a fetal ball of infantile rage and shock, and yeah obviously grief, lies Repete, abandoned and alone—ALONE, as she screams it, like, aloud—alone, and weeping bitterly at the stupidity of the circumstances through which her Pete was taken from her, for keeps. And she screams out 'WHY, GOD, WHY?'

And then not only God, but the whole entire wholly holy Trinity, respond: 'WHO WAS LEFT?' and gleefully answer themselves, selves, 'REPEAT!'

And then all of a sudden Pete and Repeat are out in a boat, a little disoriented, and Pete has a slight headache but is overall feeling just grand to be out here with his one true love, in the hot sun and spray; and Repete is confused as to why exactly her eyes are watering, but decides that she's just crying tears of, like, joy.



Mykonos

Caroline Park

The Wreck of the Charlotte Anne

Daniel McKay

The sky was light and fresh at morn
Yet reddish hue did sailors warn
A portent of the rising storm
Belied by clear horizon

Among the masts of Port Royale
A ship, its crew of high morale
The *Charlotte Anne*, which will and shall
Sail immortal through this legend

A 32-gunner, the pride of her crew
The victor's tread accustomed to
Her exploits near all captains knew
And said that none could sink her

Set out on patrol in the usual way
Though a rising zephyr seemed to say
"A storm is brewing. Stay away!"
Yet duty weighed her anchor

About midday, the lookout cried,
"Sail on horizon! Starboard side!
Deftly handled, a pretty ride
She flies the Jolly Roger!"

The captain turned his vessel's bow
To cross courses with pirates now
Their sailing he would not allow
He planned to do them battle

The storm was at hand when the two ships met
The pirate vessel and sleek corvette
Sizing up the other's threat
Before they joined in combat

The flash of guns, the cannon's roar
Lit up the famous sloop-of-war
And fed the pirates' fear the more
Amidst the raging tempest

The pirate ship, now flaming wreck
With men like ants upon her deck
Blood and foam did rigging fleck
As she sank beneath the waves

The Captain, stout of heart but sane
In all his years on the Spanish Main
Had not seen such a hurricane
So he looked for a sheltered harbor

Night had fallen, tempest raged
The *Charlotte Anne* bucked like one caged
Her damage full could not be gauged
She strove to see the morrow

On the coast there rang a bell
Warning rocks 'neath ocean swell
Anne heard not her funeral knell
Tolled by the bell of warning

In the dark the ship hove to
Upon the reef the hull stove through
'Twas naught but pray the crew could do
To save the *Charlotte Anne*

She broke apart; the men were cast
Into the roiling ocean vast
Sunk 'neath the waves, her stricken mast
She didn't last 'til daybreak

The breaking dawn, a playful breeze
Bore her colors to Royale's quays
But men still claimed, while on their knees
That none could say they sank her

No one, God in heaven save
Had sent her to her wat'ry grave
Her captain, though both bold and brave
Saved not the *Charlotte Anne*



Imago Dei

Hadleigh Callahan

John 8:12

Annika Lee

The apostles performed many signs and wonders ... people brought those who were ill into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by ... all of them were healed. Acts 5:12, 15-16

It has been many weeks
since you left. I'm bereft
and left raw from the loss of you,
my teacher. The people have brought
their sick and dying outside,
laid them on beds and mats, on the dirt
so my shadow might fall
on some of them. Down in Solomon's Portico,
we speak of you to the crowds.

Yet I miss your shadow—the mark
of your imminence the only promise
I've ever believed would be kept.
Your shadow has gone. Break
over me, running light like water.
With you there is no darkness.

Breathing Room

Grace Gebhard



Hauhet

Dontay Givens

Gold. Melanin, roasted skin sun perfectly cooks
like BBQ family Blacked in hood. In skin.
Inhabitation, cold as it sounds, temporal. Beauty
it's longing for, my skin in love that escapes
butterfly Black, wings of blue Black sailing sun in
knight purple, kissing, honor of court wings
galaxy floating in skin kissed night mystical boy
twirls on air hooded, ghetto, Black.

Splendor of Blackness, there is boy kissing sky, lips locked
Sun dancing boy, twirling with sway of the flames. Mystical,
fire dances on red, white and blue devils Ancestors clap in
unison, red earth locked feet in motion as they stomp. Off
moves shackles in tribal sounds, to end bondage and
beauty begins. Again.

What has always been since creation, when Storm
dances in celebration we twist in rhythm, no leaves
can move like we do. The trees sing nothing but
Negro Spirituals our feet move with sounds like
thunder, we dance with lightning the Heavens
embrace us dancing. As boy twirls on air, Storm
silenced by sun dancing in fire to appease the
beautiful, we dance like no one else is watching,
we stomp

Harmony, beautiful song coated in Blackness wind spinning boy
dancing to chimes that sing of our beauty with the earth we
rotate, to be free, dancing to what is beautiful in our ugliness,
patriotic devils damn us, we footwork in our joy they told us
Black ain't beautiful, in our ugliness, we dance to the beauty of
our complexion, and the earth moves with us.

New York, November 1st

Naomi Talbott

I had to explain to my sister the difference between fireworks and gunshots
the taste of the air in the room became sordid, tasted like
the dead wet skin of my lips and
the froth of tears in my mouth,
thump of my stomach,
tight curled up lips,
high tension in frozen faces, and in
the sweat from every hand
I hold
(the sweat mixes).
come hug me, envelop me, cover my face
rain sheet over my eyes
contacts rippling contacts
tightened over themselves
the pushdown and
up-keepmeclosedkeepmeopen!
the muscles of the eyelids
muscles solely made for crying.
the Cross and the secret code,
be heavy over me.
I want my neck to loll on another neck,
legs in other legs,
chest on another chest,
I had to whisper to my sister,
the blockade knot in the wet of my gullet clogging ability to breathe and speak
“oh
no” comprehensibility, but she entirely understood.
Folding from the inside out.
I told people I have something different
(Shalom)
I have the love they want
(Shalom)
But my teacher shot today in school she
didn't have the love
Dead man too...
doesn't have the love
this sorrow is collecting in dry skin,
waterfall in the itching and peeling
dandruffs silently hitting the floor
little souls amassed and portfolio'd
breathless.
There are curtains over the rest of the world,
darkest sleep.
let me sleep in
let me be warm
be touched
be held.

The Last of the Ario

Annalise Burnett

When Arice woke up on October 8th, the worst day of the year, the bird was crowing at the window again. He was not fully awake when he heard it pecking at the door, as though it thought it was an actual person demanding to be let inside. It has succeeded in waking him up when it fluttered into the windowsill and crowed again, right above Arice's head.

"Go away," he whispered, sitting up. He shooed at it, but the bird just looked at him with a cocked head. "Get out of here," he told it again, before its talons could do too much damage to the window frame. It was rain-cloud gray, and the size of a hawk. Whatever it was, he had never seen one before.

It looked like it was surveying their one-room cottage, as its gaze shifted from the small stove, to the empty cupboards, to Calreena lying with a book still clutched in her hands. It was not much to show. Arice shrugged at the sparcness of it all and looked back at the bird. "Don't have any food for you, now scram or I'll have Sielvren shoot you." He closed the shutters before the bird could protest. He listened to it flutter away into the trees to the south.

Good, Arice thought. Don't come back.

He looked over his shoulder to make sure that Calreena had not woken up. And then he laid down again and studied the underside of the thatched roof. After a few moments of restlessness, he gave up any idea of falling back asleep.

The musty thatch was the same as it ever was before, so he crept out of bed, pulled on his boots, and walked to the crooked door. The old hinges shrieked when he opened it, but another look over his shoulder told him that Calreena remained undisturbed, so he stepped outside.

The sun was about to rise and everything was quiet, except for the distant, angry crowing of the bird. He folded his arms together to keep warm, as he walked through the corn field. The stubs of stalks that scratched his boots reminded him of how the harvest had been bad that year again.

Arice found a piece of twine on the ground next to the grainery, picked it up, and ran his fingers over its scratchy length. He walked all the way to the western side of the land where his farm met that of the neighbor's. The fence separating the two was rickety and old, but he managed to climb on top of it without acquiring any new splinters. He whistled as loud as he dared and hoped the neighbors couldn't hear him.

He heard the soft sound of hooves trotting towards him. His horse appeared from behind a tree and approached the fence. Arice had named her Ash when his father brought her home years ago. It was fitting to her coal black coat, getting thicker for the coming winter.

She smelled his pockets, and gave a disappointed snort when she found no stubble from the corn stocks or handfuls of yellow grass. He could sense her readying to bite him, with the way she pinned her ears and clenched her jaw. Arice forcefully pushed her face away so he was out of the reach of her teeth. "Yeah, yeah. No food today."

He tied his piece of twine into a loop around her neck. He was about to swing off the fence and onto her back, but she stepped away and took a big bite of grass from the ground.

"Hey, come back here," said Arice.

She simply looked at him as if to say, What? I have to eat somehow.

"You can eat later," he told her. "You eat better than I do."

She turned her head away from him and swished her tale and chewed loudly on what was left of the yellowing grass.

Arice rolled his eyes. He clicked his tongue and reached for the rope around her neck, even though the horse was farther than he could hope to reach. He could have jumped off the fence and gone after her, but he thought the horse would canter away to the other side of the pasture as soon as his feet touched the ground. She had done this before, and he didn't feel running after her only to have her run away again.

For a moment he thought about going turning back. She wasn't his horse anymore, and that technically made riding her theft, but it was the worst day of the year, so he let himself stay.

After coaxing and promising all the apples and stubble he couldn't give, Arice convinced the horse to come back to the fence. He clambered onto her back before she could walk away again. As soon as he was no longer sitting on the fence, she started walking away towards the southern fence. He tried to balance himself in the center of her back and picked up the makeshift reins. He looped his fingers through her mane, tangled with weeds. He turned her in a small circle, then he pointed her nose to the top of the hill and tapped her sides with his heels. Ash took off, and Arice found himself gripping her mane as hard as he could to keep himself from pulling backwards on the rope.

The low part of the fence where the pasture met the woods loomed in front of them, inching closer and closer as Ash's pace got faster. Arice knew it was a very bad thing to ride your horse over the fence. His father used to tell him that if he rode the horse over too many fences, then she'd jump it without him one day, but Arice rode her over it anyway. He told himself that Ash knew better than to jump fences on her own anyway.

He let the string go loose around her neck, and he grabbed her tangled mane, and without any encouragement Ash broke into a gallop. Wind rushed past his ears as each hurtling stride threatened to throw him off, but he held his balance. She jumped over logs and streams, running Arice's face through leaves and spiderwebs, but he didn't care. He didn't know in what direction they were going. He didn't care.

Trees faded into fields again. He sped past other little cottages nearly identical to his own, sprinkled amid empty land. Arice watched people with wrinkled faces pick the last of their corn, and look into the sky, as it could tell them if the winter would be harsh or easy.

Eventually, Ash got tired of running and started walking again. Somehow, they had ended up on the opposite side of the village. Arice could see the northern horizon of farmland undisturbed by trees, sprawling out in front of him. This landscape—just the same as everywhere else—was the closest Arice ever went to the world outside his village. He looked as far as he could into the lands that he could not touch, and for just a moment considered spurring Ash on, and galloping away forever. He felt as though the northern borders of what he knew was beckoning him deeper into what he did not know.

But he looked back over his shoulder at Halludell instead and thought of his sister asleep on her cot.

“Wait.” He heard a familiar, croaky voice like a frog’s. Several yards away, closer than he would have liked, Arice noticed for the first time a group of five men making their way up the hill to a horse-drawn cart. They were covered in black from head to foot. Arice bit down on his lip as he waited for them to notice him and Ash, standing in the middle of nowhere. No one had caught him riding Ash before, and he wasn’t sure what would happen to him if someone found out. He began to turn Ash’s nose towards home when he realized why the voice sounded familiar.

“Wait,” he heard again. “Please.” It was Arice’s neighbor, and his wife and daughter, all tied on one line. The men wearing black pushed them towards the cart which was fitted with an iron cage on top.

He pressed his lips together, feeling like he should intervene. These people were his neighbors. Friends he had known for longer than he could remember.

“Please,” said the farmer. His name was Hustock. “Being hungry isn’t a crime.”

“Not paying your due to the chancellor is,” said one of the men wearing black. “now hurry up.” He pushed the farmer towards the cart, and kicked him as he climbed inside. Next was the wife. She had tears running down her cheeks.

“Next year the rains will come on time. You don’t understand... I can pay the Chancellor back—”

Hustock stopped speaking when the man in black gave him another firm silencing kick. Hustock didn’t make a noise, but Arice could feel the pain of it in his own gut. “Your chancellor gave you over to me, understand? My only job is taking you to the door. And from there, you three go to the only place for those who can’t follow the rule their sovereign sets in place.”

“Please wait,” said the daughter, reaching her hands through the iron bars as far as the ropes around her wrists would let her. Arice knew her name was Maela. “Please, please,” was all she could seem to choke out.

The man slammed the door of the cage shut, and got into the front of the cart with the rest of them.

Arice shuddered to think of what awaited Husock and his family. Those who did not pay rent to the Chancellor for the gift of farming his land, those who broke the laws or otherwise displeased him, were sent off in carts like these to the Prison World. Arice knew very little of the place that was a constant reason to farm more corn. He only knew of that place the little his father had told him—of how it rained fire there and hailed rocks and that no one was ever allowed to return.

The man cracked his whip on the flank of the horses, and they started off towards the north. Arice listened to their cries for help as they got farther and farther away. Hustock, his wife, and Maela looked up at Arice with pleading faces. As the distance between them increased, they looked like they were staring right at Arice, but he couldn't have known.

Arice clenched his jaw. He almost kicked his horse forward to follow them but he knew just as well as everyone else in the village that once the iron doors of the cart are shut, there is no opening them again. There was no help he could give.

He didn't know what else to do, and it felt wrong to watch them creep along the horizon, so he turned Ash's nose away. His stomach seemed to rumble within him, but maybe that was just his own hunger.



Growing Down

Ruth Wu

A haggard shadow slides
along the white walls
sinking with each step, teeth dig into teeth.
Darkness unfolds into a collapsed figure.

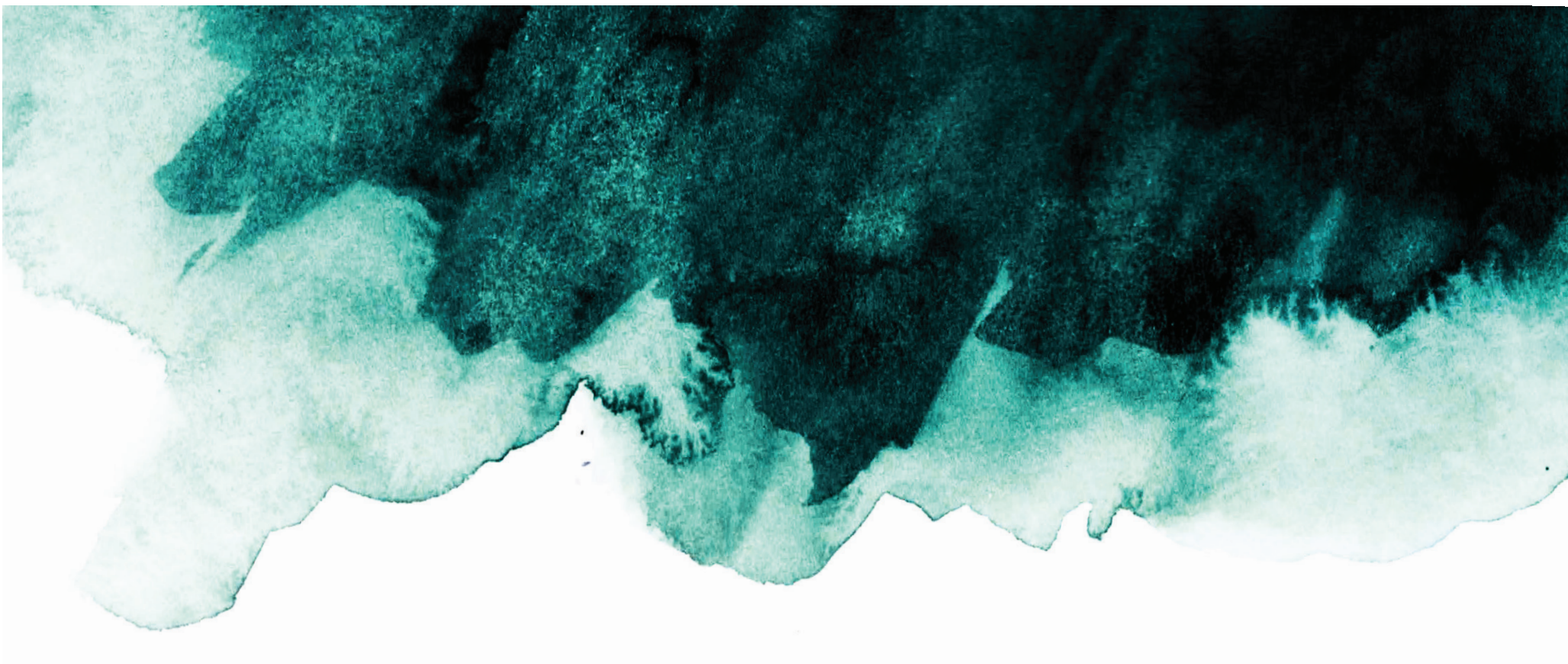
Along the white walls,
my mother braces herself.
Darkness unfolds as she collapses. Figures,
given the news she bears.

My mother braces herself
as she reaches her teenage daughter
to give the news she bears
about her father.

She reaches for her daughter
like one reaches for a teddy bear
or a father
but he is not there.

I reach for a teddy bear.
I'd reach for a mother,
but she is not there
Her mind is not in the room.

My mother is out of reach.



She has shrunk back into her shell.

Her mind has no room.

Breaths rattle her words.

She is a shrunken shell
she clears her throat, a little too much
breaths rattle her

I embrace her trembling back

She clears her throat too much
A table blinks in and out of view,

I embrace her, trembling back

Patting her lightly on the head

A table blinks in and out file:///Users/An-
nika/Downloads/2.png of view,
an image, in and out of focus

Patting her but feeling light-headed

It's hard to swallow.

An image, in and out of focus

I grow older as I lift my chin

it's hard to swallow.

Locusts

Boyd Allsbrook

“Akhu?”

“Yes, Warda?”

“Where is mother, Akhu?”

A vein in the man’s forehead pulsed under his sister’s encircling arm. She shifted slightly and listened to the lilting crunch of rough sand under her brother’s feet. Unsurprised by the emptiness, she yawned. That line of questioning had been fruitless the entire night.

“Akhu?”

“Warda.”

“Where is the end of your spear, Akhu?”

“I lost it when I practiced with those men on the road.”

“Where are the men now?”

“Likely still practicing, if their strength has not given out.”

The little girl accidentally jammed her thumb into his eye.

“That’s my eye, Warda. I still need that.”

She tightened her legs around his hulking neck and repositioned the clumsy hands with an apologetic idiom now long dead and forgotten. They strode on in the early morning’s unsilence for a while longer.

“Why did the man not give it back?”

“Give what back?”

“The spear-tip. The man fell into the river and swam away with it and you did not wait for him to give it back. Why did he not give it back?”

“I think he was probably jealous that I tagged him and no longer wished to train. And to cool off he just stayed in the river.”

“The river you pushed him in.”

“Mhm.” The warrior sniffed sharply and felt at a blue-black splotch on his side.

“He swam a long way...”

He sniffed again and nodded his tattooed head in affirmation. A drop of blood snaked from his left nostril.

“Is he still swimming, Akhu?”

“I very much doubt it, Sunshine.”

The moon was setting over a stark landscape. It was an exceptionally bright night, so much so that the girl could see her brother’s footsteps sift away like quicksilver in the dying night-light. She turned and rested her forehead on the Akhu’s hairless crown. Four days’ stubble greeted her even through the ink designs which snaked up his neck and over his eye. A snarling wolf curled around back and shoulders; just as it had his father’s and his father’s father.

“Where are we going, Fath—” She caught herself and finished with, “—brother?”

“To die,” he answered within himself, and choked. “We are going to die.”

Aloud he said, “We are going to see your aunt and uncle in Haran.”

“But where is mother?”

The Akhu was silent for a long time.

“It is coming at dawn,” he thought, disassociating once more. “It is coming at dawn and it is coming for us. Why us, I do not know. I do not think it knows. It cannot.”

“Where is Mama?”

A sudden wind rippled across the scrub and set Warda’s hair in violent motion. She raised her hands to readjust and nearly toppled off of the massive shoulders. Panic flashed over his face as he reached up to steady her, but she did not see this.

“...would not see this,” thought the Akhu.

“I do not know what it is, but it is coming. And it does not care for us, and it does not know us; it knows of us, somehow, and comes to kill us.”

As if summoned by his thoughts the sun then broke magnificent fiery-crimson over a low ridgeline, casting dark shadows against the ruddy glow that stretched forth clawlike and ominous. The siblings squinted as it gorged on the night sky, swelling to supercosmic proportions. Something incomprehensible flared within it and took form as a blast of furnace breath struck the lone pair. The man had not tasted water in a very long time.

“WHO ARE YOU?” screamed the Akhu. “WHAT DO YOU WANT?”

He wondered why he was screaming.

It hung there, undulating and gargantuan and voiceless. A hum and heartbeat shook the earth and forced his own personal cardiac rhythm into dreadful lock-step.

“WHY?” he roared. “Whh...?” came the trailing whimper as tongue caught in throat.

It hung still, pulsating and regarding him more coldly than one would have thought possible of a Sun. A vast miasmic consciousness moved in and around it, rippling through ground and sky alike. The man’s voicebox crumbled and joined in the hideous thrumming.

It swelled still further and the rumbling grew unbearable; more blood leaked from the man, this time from his ear. The little girl was no longer on his shoulders, and as he looked for her the Thing, the Being, the Fire and Wind, drew near and enveloped them. It was unbearably bright, more colorful than his eyes could handle; he was sick and felt no better.

“SUNSHINE,” he yelled and dry-heaved at the post-hoc irony.

His thoughts came uninhibited and thick, drawn out viscerally in the whirling revelation. Warda was five years living, thought the man. “Five-five-five-five-five-five-five—” his thoughts materialized in the air around them and echoed in various pitches. He could not see beyond the coldly flaming sphere; it encased Being and distorted all light to kaleidoscopic mockery.

“WARDA,” the man tried to scream.

Avatars of his sister materialized in the infinitely flickering light as he considered her. There she was, an infant in their mother’s arms. There again she was playing in the gardens of Nineveh, laughingly oblivious to her home’s decadence

and imminent doom. There she was, as she had just been, fluttering wraithlike and innocent in the moon of their flight from the city.

“Warda?”

There she was, a young woman, beautiful and robed in gold. There again she appeared, a mother to sons, and very proud. And but so; there she was, an old woman, bent and stooped, sinking ever further into her shuddering frame as the light grew fainter day by day. And he, the great Akhu and brother-protector, had long since perished and left her alone to a husband of violent tastes who beat her even now. And then ash, for all of them, now or later. Ash and depletion, and the dying of all light.

It was not until this moment that the hero of a hundred battles knew dread. He spun wildly and lost himself in the Presence, still impartial and coldly watchful.

“No exit,” he thought. “No way out.”

Sand greeted his nostrils, and the Akhu coughed as a soft hand patted him awake. The hand was very small, and not yet withered—he shuddered violently at the ‘yet’ and forced it from his mind.

The sun had shrunk and risen to yellow up above. It glinted down on his sword, and he regarded it for a moment.

“Brother?” She used the colloquial and affectionate form.

He stared up at her, wild and bloodshot. Her tiny frame accentuated very large caramel eyes, which gazed up at him in trustful concern.

“No use for it,” he said to himself in a tone of quiet desperation. He reached down and swung her onto his back once more, even as the scream of a horse broke the morning stillness. He knew they were coming now, now or later. The sun shone on their path and had set itself against them. It would be what it would be.

“Now or later,” he intoned, “we die now or in fifty years. No escape forever.”

He walked on. The little girl did not look back. The ground shuddered slightly, and then more so.

“Warda?”

“Yes, Akhu?”

“When I put you down, you must cover your eyes and ears. Do not uncover them until I come for you. This is very important. Do you understand what I have said?”

“Yes, Akhu.”

Holding tightly now to her feet, he broke into a run. Ahead, the road ran through a narrow ravine.

He reached this as a company of thirty-some men materialized behind them.

“Warda?”

“Yes, Akhu?”

“I love you more than all the stars.”

“What does that mean, brother?”

“I will tell you soon.”

He knelt to set her deep within a shaded crevasse on the far side of the canyon.

She looked up at him with more understanding than he could bear, so he kissed her forehead and shut her eyelids.

They fluttered once, and then obeyed.

“Goodbye...”

The army of God then approached Zrael, bastard-prince of Assyria, as he stood defiant with broken spear and glinting sword. The first three he slew easily, even impaling one on the splintering shaft. He dropped it then, the spear, and snarled at the rest. The sun beat down mercilessly. He whirled and fought like a madman then, and killed very many of them; the blade of his sword dulled and he lost himself completely in the red of his enemies' blood. A wall of flesh built

up before him in between the grinning canyon's teeth; and still they surged on. The sun beat down mercilessly; he had not tasted water in a very long time and felt it. The world began to slur, though he kept the blade in flashing x's in front of him, in front of the girl. Warda means flower in ancient east-Assyrian Aramaic.

With a shuddering squeal and crash, the sword shattered in his hand; the company pressed through the barricade of their fallen. Still he fought, throwing himself at the leader with the remnants of his blade in hand. Surprised, the man fell back with a gurgling cry as his throat burst. The soldiers roared and encircled him and prepared to press in. He straightened, tensing his shredded back; the wolf rippled defiantly, though you could not make it out clearly. And then his heart exploded, more suddenly than he had prepared for. The cruel Sun whirled above, still watching. “No exit,” he thought, and wilted.

In the infinite journey of 6.5 feet to the ground, the son of no man was struck with a memory. There had been a crazy person in the city square some years ago; a ragged fiend who fancied himself some likeness of an oracle. His words now flew unbidden as the spectre of death to the Akhu's heart.

To the City of Blood:

No more of thy name be sown;

You shall pass into oblivion unremembered

Out of the graven avatars of your gods will I forge thy gravestone

For you are vile in my sight.

Her little face flashed rosy in his frozen eyes, and then nothingness. The wolf ceased writhing as the sun twinkled and burned on very far away, and then set, and rose once more.

Thoughts After Midnight

Ruth Wu

1 am

“She cried again today.” That’s my mom. She’s talking about me.

“Okay...?” That’s my dad. I don’t know him that well.

“Okay... and? Don’t you want to know why?”

“I mean, she’s four years old. Also, she does this every Sunday.”

“Yeah, but she shouldn’t.”

“Okay, and what have you done about it?”

“What have I done about it? I walked all the way to church carrying her on my back, I entertained her during worship, I left service early to pick her up. I’ve done everything I can.”

“And you obviously haven’t done enough if she keeps crying.”

“Okay, and what have you done about it?”

“That’s not my job.”

“And it’s mine?”

“You’re her mother, aren’t you?”

“Aren’t you her dad?”

“I am.”

“Then act like it.”

“I don’t have time for this.”

I can’t sleep. Shadows are trickling in between the blinds, so tall they eclipse the lavender-blue walls. Occasionally a light slices the monsters in half, then stares glaringly in my direction. A soundtrack of arguments plays in the background, blurred just enough so that I can’t make out the exact words, but I hear them. My parents are still awake – I know from the way my door glows eerily and their voices leak through the connecting wall between our rooms. The same wall that incentivized my parents to choose this house. I still remember them bragging to me about how colorful our new house was going to be, with green, pink, and blue walls. I was disappointed by the muted tones I saw but pretended to be happy for my parents’ sake. It was one of the rare moments when they agreed on something, after all.

It has been three years since then, and the colors have grown on me. They remind me of our move when the whole family was together. Now, my mother is busy working from 6 am until 6 pm. I rarely see my father. I don’t know what he does. I’ve listened to their fights through these thin walls for years, but I still can’t get used to the rollercoaster of voices. They start off trying to speak in hushed tones, but the volume escalates as each dig up misunderstanding after misunderstanding, time-traveling back to when they first met.

Then there are the moments when they talk about me. I can't distinguish the words, but I know they are unsatisfied with me. I know that my parents are constantly complaining about how they don't have time. I know that I am the one taking their time.

I love my parents' voices, but I can't fall asleep to them.

2 am

Sometimes I am jealous of my niece, Kensley. She benefits from everything my sister and I have learned from our parents' mistakes. My sister has a very strict sleep routine for her. Kensley is her first child and raising her has been a work of science. Her food, naps, and clothing are strictly monitored by apps that chart her growth as she enters different stages of development. She gets up at exactly 7 am and drinks 6 ounces of carefully formulated milk. After she takes her bottle, my sister spoons pureed carrots into her mouth, most of which ends up on her chin. Then she practices chewing solid food, like strawberry-flavored baby cereal. She doesn't like strawberries, but my sister insists on buying strawberry-flavored foods and lotions for her anyway. They probably have additional vitamins. Plus, strawberries are my sister's favorite fruit.

It's funny how my sister is so dependent on scientific research when caring for my niece, even though she was so adamant about not following my mom's footsteps in the research field. On the other hand, my mom, a microbiology professor, raised us without many guidelines. We did not have baby food, whether specially formulated or pureed. Whatever Mom ate, we ate -- rice gruel, seedy peppers, even fish with bones in it. She fed us like a penguin, chewing it up and chopstick-ing it to us. My sister would freak about hygiene if my mom did that now.

After my niece throws more cereal on the floor than she shovels into her mouth, her mother lifts her from the high chair to the spinny seat where she is hemmed in by plastic figures. She doesn't like staying put, but the toys smile at her. She greets them each accordingly by banging the animals on the head. First the lion, then the duck, then the cat. She can't quite reach the cow, so she grunts and skips to the dog. My sister watches from the couch, muscles tense. One hand is poised on her laptop on the off-chance of getting work done. The other hand is a tentative inch away from her daughter, ready to catch her if anything happens.

Sometimes, she'll have a spare finger on her phone for recording my niece's every move. She spams our family feed with videos of Kensley slowly squeezing chew toys into her mouth. Her cheeks bunch up in a smile as her parents clap, only to have the squishy animal fall back onto the carpet. Unperturbed, Kensley swings her legs in celebration, rocking the whole infrastructure. In that moment, my sister is too busy cooing at her daughter to worry about the mess. "Who's the best baby? That's right, you are! Yes, you are, yes you are!"

The first thing my brother-in-law does when he comes home from work is fawn over his wife and daughter. Then, they put Kensley to sleep together. First, they

read “Guess How Much I Love You,” except with way more “I love you’s” than originally penned. Kensley cannot fully comprehend the phrase yet but responds with gurgles accordingly. She is learning to help turn the pages now, which my sister documents with care. Then, my brother-in-law sings her a lullaby and she droops in his arms. The white noise machine is set to an ocean’s roar -- at the recommended decibel, of course. The windows are blacked out for maximum relaxation. They lay Kensley down in her canopied crib, one fitting of a Disney princess. Research says that’s how she’ll rest best. As her limbs go limp, her lips twitch into a half-smile. I wonder what she dreams about.

3 am

My niece doesn’t have the language to describe her dreams yet – if she even has them – and since I’ve been struggling with insomnia, I haven’t had any of my own dreams. My friends do though, so sometimes I ask them to tell me what they dream about. Sometimes, their dreams are a lot easier to hear than to experience.

One of my friends is adopted and has recurring nightmares because of that. We met in college, when he introduced himself with “I’m adopted,” as if “adopted” was his name, but he said it off-handedly enough that it felt like he didn’t want to make a big deal out of it. He shrugged his hands in his pockets and looked to the side, just missing my eyes, so I let the phrase sit between us until he slowly shared about his struggle with sleep.

He says that he sometimes wakes up panting, as if he’d run a whole marathon with a planet strapped to his back. For a moment, he can’t move, trapped in the sheets that have mummified him. Even though his eyes are open now, he can still vividly recall the nightmare he’s had since he was four.

In his dream, he’s in a red Toyota Camry, the 1996 model. It’s dusk. Clouds cloak the sky in an ambiguous gray. Wind rustles through the trees, which dry heave back and forth. No forms of life are visible but his adoptive parents. The car is bouncing along the road, shaking like the old machine always did. He sinks further in the seat with each jostle. He was about to be left behind. Again.

His birth mother put him up for adoption right after he was born. The overcrowded shelter couldn’t care for everyone, so he was left in a corner to fend for himself. As he grew, he observed the babies who got the most attention: the ones who smiled a lot. So, he learned to smile. Isn’t it funny how people are born crying but are expected to learn to smile? But he was willing to smile every second he’s alive if it meant that people would hold him close and never put him down.

He was adopted half a year later by an American family in Minnesota. The faces of the adoption place were quickly forgotten, but he couldn’t shake off the fear of abandonment. He could only sleep when his new parents gently rubbed circles into his back while soft lullabies played in the background. Still, he dreaded closing his eyes. When he was awake, he could hide behind smiles. When he was asleep, there was nowhere to run.

Even in his waking hours, he is haunted by the vision of his adoptive parents pulling up to a rundown shack, him in tow in the back seat. It's one of those wannabe log cabins people own and visit maybe once or twice a month for upkeep. His parents don't own one – at least not one that he knows of – but the image is burned into the back of his eyelids. In his dream, the roof of the shack is sunken in, barely inclined enough for rain to roll off the shingles. There's a noticeable dent on the right side, where the frame is caving in. The wood is barely held together by cobwebs. The structure itself stretches less than three arm-spans wide. A lone light hangs on the porch, moths buzzing around the orange glow. The front door is cracked open, and the darkness bleeds from the inside out.

Four clicks indicate his parents' exit from the family car. He can't even shiver as they open his door and motion for him to get out. He tries to muster a smile as he numbly places one foot in front of the other, slumping closer to the ground with each step. His lips crack in the middle, but he smiles at his parents. They don't smile back. He trudges to the porch, turning with the hope that his parents would be behind him. They aren't.

He's still smiling as they leave. Painfully, his overbite worsens, but maybe if he smiled enough, they would come back for him. In the dark, he can dimly make out the retreating license plate: RBZ238. The license plate of his family car right now. RBZ stands for family to him -- the family that chose him. That repeatedly chooses to leave him in his dreams.

He tries to blink away the horrifying picture, but he can't. He closes his eyes and practices smiling in his sleep.

I didn't know how to smile at him for a while after hearing that.

4 am

It's moments like these that remind me to appreciate my family. Moments when my mom is lying on a hospital bed, white and shriveled. Her face is shadowed in lavender-blue veins, the same color of the room she would tuck me in each night before she relapsed into tense arguments with my dad. But he's not here now. I don't know where he is anymore.

Her face is the same blue that signified that her favorite weather was coming: clear skies. When we went to China for a summer, the last time I saw my dad, the weather was smoggy and grey the whole time. I remember my mom periodically looking up and saying, "I can't see the sky. Where's the sky?" It's clear blue outside, in America. She can see it now. If only she would open her eyes.

A machine beeps in the background, uncannily slow, like a metronome with only one speed. She just came out of surgery for a tumor. The doctors said it was successful, but it doesn't look like it. Behind the mask, her breaths are barely visible. An IV needle drips more blue liquid into her arm, arteries slightly raised. She could have been a marble carving – that's how still and cold she was – but she is not. She is my mother.

I ran out of the room before I fully processed what was happening. All I remembered was the image of my mother's clear blue face and those green and black spots you get from staring at the sun too long. As I left the hospital, my eyes burned, and I blinked rapidly. How can the day be so sunny when my mother was dyed blue?

I forgot how vocal cords worked for a while. My tear ducts were broken too. I hadn't used them much since that imagined accusation years ago, from the cluttered voices of my parents' fights. They split up soon afterward. My mother was heartbroken and threw herself into work, so that she wouldn't have time to even think about arguing with him. So, she didn't have time for me. I tried to make it work. I tried to make things easier: I stopped crying.

Only a shaky inhale. A dry exhale. You would have thought that I was the one in a coma after a heavy dose of morphine. I felt like a broken doll with papery skin and waxy eyes that wouldn't shut, even when placed sideways.

That night, I couldn't sleep. I crawled into my parents' bed like I used to when I had nightmares of shadow monsters in my room. Only cold sheets greeted me. The corners of the blankets were tucked under the mattress, like in hotels. My parents had not slept there for a while.

In the darkness, I could dimly make out dark branches crawling towards my face, but even the sudden car beams did not scare me anymore. Nothing was as bad as that hospital room. Silence is much harder to fall asleep to than the arguments my parents had.

I could hardly move under the stiff blankets. It felt like I was in a coffin. Sandwiched between the sheets, I felt that I resembled my hospitalized mother, except with the undeveloped body of the thirteen-year-old I was. Like her, my cheeks were too heavy to lift in a smile. But my eyelids were too light to close.

5 am

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

I didn't respond.

"You should have told me."

I can't sleep. Rapid heartbeats vibrate my body under the covers, and I sweat even though I'm freezing. Worries circle around in my head on loop. Should I have said that? How did they take that? Did they understand my sarcasm? Is my humor off? Why am I alive? What should I major in? Did I choose the right college? Underlying all of this is guilt from hiding my insomnia from my mom.

Growing up, I always shared a room with people. First, it was my grandma. Then, it was my mom. It's gotten to the point that I have a hard time sleeping in a room by myself. I like a warm presence to be nearby, even if it's a pet. At the same time, I felt that I always had eyes on me. I didn't have a safe place to cry without being bombarded by interrogations of, "What's wrong?" and mentally responding, "me."

I've tried melatonin. I've tried yoga. I've even tried those overly-expensive essential oil blends for relaxation. At first, it worked. But then I started waking up to my roommate turning a textbook page. Then I woke up to the simple sound of her exhale. Now, she doesn't need to do anything to wake me up. I never fall asleep in the first place.

Involuntary all-nighters are torturous, but they get me remembering things. As I smash my ear deeper into the folds of my pillow, they ring, and I remember. I struggled with hearing problems freshman year of high school. I spent a whole semester winging classes, hoping my delayed responses in conversations weren't too noticeable. I secretly tried learning how to read lips. I didn't want to make my mom take more time taking care of me than she needed to.

The first person to notice was my piano teacher. I regularly babysit for her, and her husband realized how I didn't respond to his greetings when my back was turned. He was distressed, thinking that I didn't like him. Then, he realized it wasn't just him. It was everyone. Even during piano lessons, I would slowly inch towards my teacher so I could hear her better. I constantly asked for phrases to be repeated.

"Well done! I would just tweak a few dynamics and practice this section a couple more times."

"Awesome."

"Whenever you're ready."

"I'm sorry?"

"You can go whenever you're ready."

"Go? Where?"

She told my mom, who was furious. My mom immediately made a doctor's appointment and took me in the next day.

"You do realize that telling me earlier would have been much better for both of us."

"I hear you."

I really did. I heard her. I just still don't want to take up more of her time than I need to. If I could learn not to cry, surely, I can learn to sleep on my own. Without the soundtrack of my parents' arguing. Without the need for my niece's white noise machine. Without the recurring nightmare of my adopted friend. Without my mother in the hospital. I should be able to sleep now. But I can't.



Guinevere by the Lake

Annika Lee

Haven't I the greatest, strangest story
of the man who was once king,
in older days. If I tell it halfway well you'll see:
nothing is safe out here, all sacred.

Art—as he was known—was young once,
dirtying his clothes under summer sunlight,
romping through mossy woods, content
with the world, curious and quiet,
drawn to questions with no answer.
He was an old-eyed boy, hair too dark
for pale freckled skin, gaze too piercing
for such small stature.
That was before I knew him.

Our land crowned violence as king.
We slaughtered sons and daughters,
fathers and mothers. From the fog of war
a young prince emerged, hawk and dove,
to claim the sword. When I first looked at Arthur
I knew he was different—perhaps he was even good.
We twined our lives together, vine and trellis.

The golden age rose in blinding light and died
a shameful death, and I fled Camelot. Ships departed
for France, brother against brother, my fault.

At the crossroads of Camlann, hope in a chokehold
gaspd for air, and I returned too late
to save a life, in time to watch.

With Bedivere's help, I took Arthur's body
to the lake where it began, through tears
and failing eyesight. The queens of Avalon
bore him away, into shadow—

—shadow that vanished. Dawn at midnight
cracked the black lake open, a dream
of life. Tears magnified the scene,
otherwise heaven healed me
for a holy moment. Arthur rose,
king of this land and this people forever.

He held a hand to his greatest knight,
who bowed in reverence.
All around him, blurry figures in boats, a crowd
whose presences I felt more than I saw.
Pellinore no longer haunted by his beasts
the Orkney siblings reconciled
and the king's own family, Ector and Kaye.
Spirit or shade, or bodies born again—

All I knew was this: that a small
bright thing long dormant
awoke in me. Now I cannot see
past the light at all,
it has enclosed them.
I lower my head.

Art, I'm no longer young.
Fifteen years at most—soon I'll follow.

Baby Alive

Leah Martin

I'm convinced that not a single picture of me before the age of nine exists in which I am not holding a small, Baby Alive doll in my arms. My parents encouraged my natural love for dolls and for pretending, as they thought that it would make me more responsible and keep my imagination active. For this reason, our kitchen table always had five chairs around it, four hand-carved wooden ones that matched the table, and one shiny, plastic high chair for my baby doll, Chloe. Even if I was helping my mother run errands on a Sunday afternoon, Chloe would travel with me for every stop. I would unfold the light pink stroller I found at a garage sale, buckle Chloe in, and cinch the waist strap as tight as I could so that she wouldn't topple out -- I learned this technique after Chloe took a few face first dives into the sidewalk lining the public library. My favorite place to take Chloe was my grandfather's nursing home. My father and I visited him twice a week and we would always get there just before dinner time. I would sit on my grandpa's lap while he ate, clutching Chloe to my chest the entire time. In-between mouthfuls of pureed sweet potatoes, the elderly women at the table would coo over how loving and gentle I was to my doll. One of these women, Beatrice, took a special liking to me. Every visit she would have me climb onto her lap before I left so that she could whisper a super special secret in my ear. Her memory was far from its prime. It was the same secret every time.

"You listen here, sweet girl. I have a feeling that you are going to make an awfully good mother someday. You are gonna be the best momma the world has ever seen!"

Every time she told me this, I blushed so hard that my grandpa would yell at Beatrice for telling his granddaughter something dirty. To be honest, Beatrice's affirmation was one of the only reasons that I carried Chloe around with me everywhere I went for as long as I did. I wanted with all of my heart to be the best mother in the world and I figured that, in order for one to earn such a title, I was going to need to practice an awful lot.

One of the last times that we ever went to visit, Beatrice asked me why I had named my doll Chloe. I succumbed to responding with the unimpressive truth; it was the name that came on the box. Beatrice laughed so hard about that one that she spit her cranberry juice all over the table cloth. When she finally collected herself she said, "Well baby, when you have a little tyke of your own, they aren't gonna come with any boxes and no names. Do you have any ideas floating around in that cute little noggin of yours?"

"I'm going to have a baby girl," I said definitively, "I'm going to name her Sophie Grace and she's going to be perfect."

Beatrice chuckled at my confidence. "Yes she will, sweet girl. Yes she will."

After our son Jackson turned three in March, my husband Chad and I started talking about trying to get pregnant again. It had taken us a long time to get pregnant the first time and we didn't want too big of an age gap between kids. To our surprise and joy, it only took us two months of trying before I missed a period and decided to pick up a pregnancy test from the drug store on my way home from work. The next night, Chad's parents came over to watch Jackson while Chad and I went out for dinner. About halfway through dinner, I could contain my secret no longer. "Chad," I started, "I have something to tell you."

Chad grinned. "I was wondering when you were going to tell me, Catherine," he said, "you've been glowing all week."

I took both of his hands in my mine. "This one's a girl," I whispered.

"Your pee told you all that?" he teased.

I shook my head. "A mother's instinct."

Chad and I decided to wait until the birth of the baby to find out the gender. However, I confidently told everyone who asked that we were having a girl. At first I even gave Chad some resistant to discussing male baby names, but eventually gave in. I didn't matter though because I was right. She was a girl and she was perfect.

I swear Sophie had the loudest personality of any newborn I ever met. Her control of her facial muscles was impeccable. For every face Chad made at Sophie while he changed her diaper, Sophie would make three. The time spent loving Sophie into our new family was much different than the months following Jackson's arrival. For the first few months after I had Jackson, I fell into a bout of mild postpartum depression. It felt like a heavy fog had settled over everything and left me in a haze as I struggled to figure out how to care for a newborn that didn't have batteries you could remove at will. Even though a few months of counseling had me back on my feet, Chad said some days he felt like part of me was still lost out in the fog trying to find its way back to me. Sophie reintroduced me to that part of myself.

Sophie was born in December and it only took until the month of June before I started dropping casual hints to Chad that I was willing to start thinking about expanding our family again. Even though Jackson was most certainly exercising his developmentally appropriate three year old prerogative to test every boundary known to man, he was still a very sweet toddler and Sophie was a relatively happy baby.

"We wouldn't even have to take down the crib and lug it to the storage shed if we just keep popping out another one every time the youngest is ready for a toddler bed," I joked.

"And we wouldn't even have to pay for haircuts anymore because we'll have just pulled it all out," he retorted.

Even though Chad often joked about the trials of parenting, everyone who knew Chad knew that he adored being a father. His father had passed away from

cancer when he was just a toddler and, in a way, time spent with his kiddos was a form of healing for him. Suffering through an episode of PJ Masks before bedtime was worth watching Jackson and Sophie passed

out on Chad's chest in the dim glow of the TV. Despite his initial hesitance to the proposal of a third so soon, within a few weeks, discussing the idea became more frequent.

One evening as Chad and I were making pasta together, he stopped stirring the alfredo sauce mid rotation with the look on his face that he only makes before saying that we should reshingle the roof, or retile the bathroom, or something as equally as absurd with two little ones.

"I meet your proposition with a proposition," he said, raising the wooden spoon in his hand to the ceiling.

"We're not retiling the bathroom," I smirked. Chad acknowledged my comment by sticking out his tongue and then continued with his request. "If you're gonna outnumber us, I want more training."

I furrowed my brow, inviting him to continue. "The library is offering a course for young parents on safety tips and behavior management stuff that I think might help me be more okay with the idea of another." He paused. "I just want to do this whole parenting thing well, you know?"

"Chad," I started, moving closer to where he was standing at the stove, "when you say stuff like that, it just makes you hotter."

Chad enveloped me in a hug and we stood still for a moment with his lips pressed against my forehead. "Also-" I whispered.

"Yes, baby?"

"I think the alfredo is burning."

Every Thursday night for the month of July Chad's parents would come over to babysit the kids while Chad and I attended our class at the library. Little did I know how valuable this class would be for our marriage. The class could pretty much be summed up by saying that guest speakers came and handed us common sense statements in bullet point format on bright colored sheets of paper and people asked questions that made me mildly concerned that they were raising children. Keep toxic chemicals out of reach, baby gates are important if you have stairs, and using sticky traps for mice is better than rat poisoning when you live with tiny human vacuum cleaners. The class itself wasn't anything special. The fact that the class ended at 7 and Chad's parents babysat until 9:30 was the beautiful thing.

One of the last Thursdays of the class, Chad and I invited our friends Jim and Sarah to join us after for Steak N Shake milkshakes. I had worked as an RN for Texas Health Resources for a few years at that point, and Jim and Sarah were two of my colleagues. They had married two years prior and had a three-year-old daughter. Their family often joined us for dinner and game nights. All of us were in rare form and most people probably thought that milkshakes weren't the only thing that we had drunk that night. We were sober, just sleep-deprived parents.

I looked across the table to see Chad positioning one of the little paper hats

that Steak N Shake has on the tables for children on the head of our new stuffed elephant.

This particular Thursday we had a speaker come talk to us and present us with statistics about the number of babies that are left in hot cars every year. He proposed an inventive method for reducing the number of these avoidable tragedies: the stuffed animal method. The idea is that the stuffed animal always sits in the car seat when the baby isn't and then, when the child is placed into the car seat and the parent is alone, the stuffed animal is placed in the passenger seat to serve as a reminder of the baby's presence. On our way out of the library, the speaker handed us a baby blue plush elephant. And for some reason, Chad felt the need to bring it in to the restaurant with us.

Upon entering the restaurant, Chad had added an extra chair from an empty table to our booth and sat the elephant down in it. He had then proceeded to ask Sarah and I if either of us had a pen in our purse. He flipped over his paper placemat in eager anticipation. Sarah eventually found him a pen and Chad scribbled the words *MR. L. E. FONT* in big bold letters across the paper and placed it in front of the elephant. Our new friend now had a nametag and a hat.

"I swear I can't take this man anywhere," I said leaning into Sarah. "Oh, honey don't worry, Jim is worse," she replied. "I don't think that's possible, pal," I laughed, winking at Chad. "We could switch partners for a day and you'd see what I live with."

Chad pretended to be offended. A fun evening spent with close friends away from all other demands seemed to be exactly what the four of us needed. The parents got to be children for the evening.

When our waiter came over to take our milkshake orders, Chad stopped her abruptly. "I don't think we're ready for that yet. There's something that you need to do beforehand."

The poor high school student looked thoroughly confused, wondering what she may have forgotten. "Ummm... what do I need to do first, sir?" she asked hesitantly.

"First we need to address the elephant in the room," he cried, turning his head toward our new plush friend.

I leaned into Sarah. "It's official," I said. "We're switching."

The first Monday of August, Chad found me at the kitchen table flipping through powerpoint slides and mumbling to myself when he got up at 5. Despite my adamancy against the decision, Sarah, Jim, and I were the three selected to present the grant proposal. Eight of us from Texas Health Resources had been working on the proposal for the past several months and today was the big day to present the proposal to our board of executors at the hospital. I made it clear to my team that I was not the most proficient speaker, but they assured me that they had seen what passion I had for the grant and wanted my help in presenting it, regardless of my public speaking background.

In the midst of my concentration, I hadn't even heard him come in.

"You've been looking at those slides all week. I think this morning you need a

strong cup of coffee, not more practice.”

I shrugged, not taking my eyes off the screen. Chad made his way over to the table and placed his hands on my shoulders. “Everything is going to be just fine,” he said.

Chad eventually convinced me to shut the laptop and we both enjoyed some chocolate chip scones Jackson helped me bake over the weekend before getting the kids up and ready for the morning. Since Jackson’s preschool is a few miles from Chad’s office he typically drops him off before heading to work and I take Sophie to day care.

I stood in the kitchen holding Sophie while Chad waited for Jackson to come back down from his room. He almost had him out the door before Jackson remembered that he was going to show his buddy Noah his spider-man gloves at school that day and need to go up and find them. I kept fidgeting with the button on my blazer.

“Don’t let us slow you up,” Chad said. “You go get on your way and knock that presentation out of the park.”

“Okay,” I conceded, knowing that waiting to hug Jackson might make me late. I handed Sophie to Chad so that he could kiss her goodbye. “Soph, I have a job for you today.” Sophie placed her hands on his cheeks as if she were urging him to continue.

“Take good care of your mother.” Chad passed her back off to me with a wink and Sophie and I were off.

As we left the conference room, I could still feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

“See, now that wasn’t so bad, was it?” Sarah said turning to me. “Maybe you guys were right,” I conceded. “I guess it really wasn’t anything to stress too terribly over.”

“What was that?” Jim shot back. “I’m not sure I caught the first part? Could you say it again?” I elbowed Jim in the side.

Sarah butted in, stretching her arms out to physically create more space between the two of us. “Alright you two, you’re both pretty. Now could we change the subject to lunch? I haven’t eaten anything besides a piece of toast on my way out the door at 6:45 this morning and I’m starving!”

I don’t remember what restaurant the three of us decided on or what we talked about the rest of our way out of the building. The next thing I remember was that we were standing in the parking lot and that Sarah commented on the fact that it seemed like over half of Texas Health drove Jeeps. About 50 feet away, my car was parked near a very similar looking Jeep and, therefore, I began searching for the distinct details that told me which car to go to. From where we were in the parking lot, I could make out the white scrape across the driver’s side door where Jackson had accidentally ran his tricycle into it, the vanilla bean air freshener dangling from the rearview mirror, and our blue plush elephant in the passenger seat.

Oh dear God. I ran for the car leaving Sarah and Jim more than confused as to

what was going on. I began frantically searching for my car keys in my purse. My hands were shaking too much to be able to search for them efficiently. By the time I was able to fish them out of my purse pocket, Jim and Sarah were both next to me.

I fumbled with the keys trying to get them into the lock. By this point, every ounce of dexterity had left me and the keys slipped out of my hand and skidded towards the front tire.

I reprimanded myself under my breath.

Jim cautiously picked up the keys and handed them back to me, fear evident in his eyes. "Catherine? You wanna tell us what's going on?" Sarah asked. I couldn't bring myself to speak. I just fumbled with the keys more intensely. Please, God. Please, God. Please, God. I could see Sophie's faint silhouette through the tinted back seat window, but never let it invade more than my peripheral vision. The first step was to get the car door unlocked and then the back door open. As I continued to struggle with the keys, the only thing I remember seeing was that stupid elephant. Had the window been open, I would have spit all of my current feelings at him. Had the window been open, a lot of things about that day would have been different.

The keys made their descent to the pavement once more and I began to bang my head against the car window. I probably got in about three good whacks before Jim had grabbed hold of my shoulders and pulled me away from the car.

"Catherine! What has gotten into you?!" he cried, his arms wrapped tightly around mine like a straitjacket.

Sarah picked up the keys and unlocked the front door. I began writhing more intensely and either Jim or I lost our footing and toppled into a squirming heap on the hard pavement of the parking lot.

Sarah opened the front door cautiously, still unaware of what exactly was going on. Then she sighed deeply and closed her eyes tight. She must have seen Sophie. She stood motionless with her eyes still closed for a moment, unsure of what should be done. All three of us knew CPR and we were literally in the parking lot of a hospital, but we also knew that more than four hours had passed since Sophie was strapped into her carseat and that this was one of the hotter days of the year we'd had so far. I was sweating bullets fighting against Jim's tight grip for what must have only been about 45 to 60 seconds total. Then, as suddenly as it had started, all motion stopped and I laid limp in Jim's arms. My hands pressed to my face, I began to sob. Sarah pushed a button on the door side panel, setting in stone what I knew was true. She checked for a non-existent pulse and then slowly began to unbuckle Sophie.

"Sarah, wait." I said hoarsely. Jim helped me to my feet and I limped over to the car, my knee bleeding from where I had fallen. I lifted Sophie out of her carseat and clutched her close to my chest. The metal barrette in her hair burned my cheek as I went to kiss her sopping mess of hair. I slid down the car door and sat against it, rocking Sophie. Sarah and Jim both took a seat on the ground near me. None of us said anything for about 10 minutes. Then Jim broke the silence. "Do you want me to call Chad?" he asked, knowingly full well that I was not in a state

to do so.

As Jim stood up to search for my phone in my purse that now lay next to the back tires, Sarah scooted closer to sit right beside me. She began moving Sophie's hair away from her face.

At this point, I was no longer crying, but simply sitting motionless, feeling the weight of Sophie's limp body against me. Her clothes were drenched. She smelled of the stress that her poor little body had endured all morning. A few feet away from where we sat, I could hear Jim's end of the conversation.

"No, Cat's okay. It's Sophie, she's ..uh.. Catherine needs you here, Chad." A pause. "No, we're not at the daycare. We're at the hospital." Another pause. "In the parking lot."

In the weeks following that infamous day, I lost a concerning amount of weight. I ate nothing but Lucky Charms and applesauce for a solid two weeks before Chad insisted that I see someone. Chad had obviously been distraught over the event, but he seemed able to mask the grief as much as he needed to still function. He knew that Jackson and I needed him and that I was grieving enough for all of us.

I had become the definition of a zombie. The faces present and condolences expressed at the funeral were just meaningless noise in my head. I remained deadpan throughout the entire ceremony. I hadn't cried a single tear since rocking Soph that day. I felt as if I were withering away into nothing. Chad was afraid that, if my diet didn't change, that could possibly be my fate.

For Chad's sake, I decided that I would try to muster every ounce of energy I still had left to will myself to get better. At the recommendation of my new therapist, I began practicing mindfulness meditation and bullet journaling. I slowly began to eat semi-normally again, though my appetite was still absent. Our shattered world began to crawl its way back to a gradient of normal. I thought we were going to be okay.

About two months after Sophie's death, anyone watching from the outside would have thought that Chad and I were superheroes. We were both back at work and Jackson couldn't stop talking about his new-found passion for T-ball. By some miracle, we were mostly managing. On Friday night, Chad texted me on his way home from work to tell me that he was picking up a pizza to celebrate making it through another work week.

Chad entered holding the box of pizza with both hands, two small containers of Ben and Jerry's ice cream balancing on top of it.

"Nothing says Happy Friday like ice cream," he said smiling. I mustered up a half grin. Chad pulled the blue-ray copy of the Lego Movie off the bookshelf and Jackson ran off to his room to grab his favorite snuggling blanket. I sat on the couch watching from a distance, my eyes glassy.

"Something happen today?" Chad asked, crouching down in front of the DVD player. "You just seem a little absent."

Something happened two months ago, you know, that whole thing where our daughter died. I forced myself to bite my tongue. "Just a little tired," I responded.

"Well, if you fall asleep during the movie, I'm sure Jackson could give you a three hour summary of any part you might miss while you're dozing." Chad took

a spot next to me on the couch and placed his arm around my shoulder. I pretended to be picking something out of my nails. Our little family was gathered so close together, yet I felt like we were on different planets. Apparently Chad was fine. I, on the other hand, was a different story entirely.

About halfway through the movie I got up to go to the bathroom. I looked at myself long and hard in the mirror as I washed my hands. I looked so different than I had merely months before. The morning of our grant presentation I had curled my short, brown hair and the ringlets fell against my round cheeks, still holding onto some of the weight I had gained while I was pregnant with Soph. Now my face looked hollow, my hair pulled back in a messy bun. I looked ashen. The ghost of Sophie's mother was staring back at me.

As I continued staring at myself in the mirror, the water on my hands was heating up at an exponential rate. I had the urge to pull them away, but some part of me wanted so desperately to keep them there. For the water to burn them right off. I wonder if this was just an ounce of what Sophie felt that day in the Jeep, except over her entire little body.

I felt that I no longer had any energy with which to fight off the thoughts that kept invading the peace I was struggling so hard to keep in my head. Sophie didn't deserve it. I wanted revenge, but there was no crime to be solved, no heinous criminal to execute. I was the monster I so vehemently despised. Well Catherine, welcome to death row.

I turned off the light to the bathroom and walked into the kitchen, my steps seeming almost robotic. I peeked my head around the corner and saw Jackson so peacefully asleep on Chad's lap, the two of them snuggled close together. Neither of them would probably be getting up for awhile. I opened our catch-all drawer in the kitchen and began to shift things around as quietly as I could. I tucked three matches into my pocket and then crept out the back door.

Using my phone as a flashlight, I made my way down the hill in our backyard and out to the storage shed that housed our lawn mower, rakes, and Jackson's inflatable kiddie pool. I lifted up the small red gasoline container next to the mower. Chad had used up the last of our gasoline mowing last weekend and had made a trip into town to buy more. The container was almost full.

I stood motionless for a moment, simply allowing myself to feel the weight of the container. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

About an hour had passed since I had snuck away from the boys and made my way out to the shed. Chad had gotten worried. He had called me four times, but I couldn't bring myself to answer. I sat cross-legged on the cold cement of the storage shed, my hair dripping onto my knees. I started to dry heave -- the smell of the gasoline coating my entire body was sufficiently nauseating.

"Catherine?" I turned my head to see Chad standing in the doorway of the storage shed with a lantern. Over the past two months, this man had been my rock. He had been the glue holding our smaller, struggling family together. He deserved my praise, a medal, something. But there was this burning deep inside of me in that moment seething with hatred for him. It felt as if a noose had been closing around my neck for weeks and Chad had apparently just moved on. Chad had cried his funeral tears and was now the poster child for self-help grief recov-

ery books.

Chad placed his hand on my shoulder and I began to sob violently. “I couldn’t do it! I couldn’t do it!” I cried. I took the three matches out of my pocket and threw them at the wall. Chad was just watching me, expressionless. “I needed to feel what she felt!” I screamed. My eyes were burning from the gasoline. Chad lowered his head, seemingly murmuring something to himself. I stood up and began to beat my head softly against the wall of the shed.

“Chad, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. Sophie’s gone and I’m here. That’s not how it should be, Chad. That’s not how it should be. I’m so sorry.”

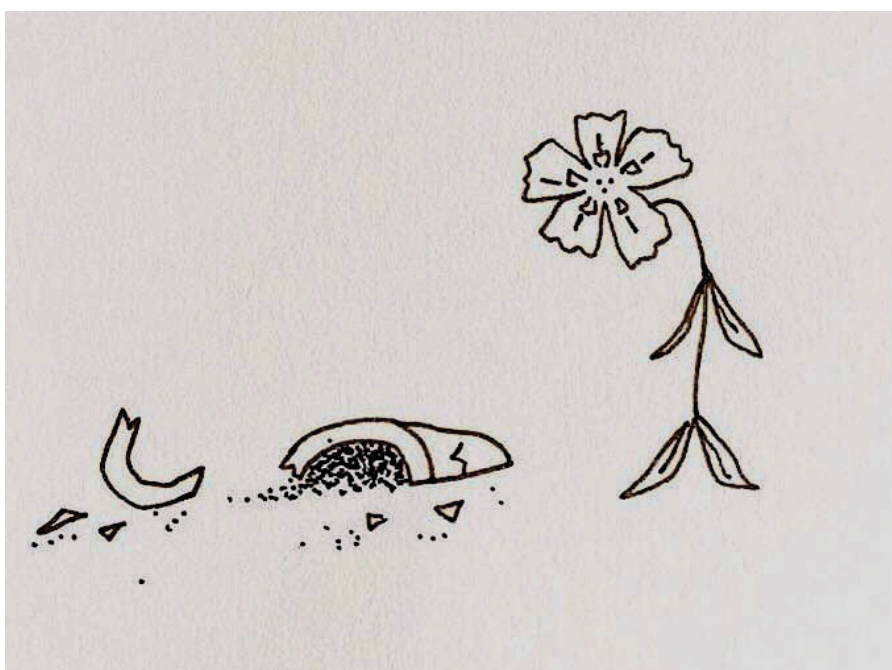
Chad stood up and silently embraced me. Then he began weeping. And then the weeping turned to howling and eventually faded into soft whimpering.

We stood there together in the dark of the storage shed for an hour. Eventually we became a teary mess on the cold floor of the shed. I laid in a ball in Chad’s lap, his arms around me. The suffering felt in a hot Jeep transferred so pristinely to a cold, airy shed. I felt the breeze from outside blowing in from the half open door, goosebumps crawling up my arms as the air hit the wet gasoline on my body.

Next to the picture we have of Sophie sitting on our mantle is a picture of my grandfather and I. We’re at his nursing home and I am sitting on his lap, my Baby Alive sitting on mine. That doll was practically my extra limb. I hated the idea of her being left anywhere all by herself.

In the background of the picture you can see Beatrice wheeling her way over to my grandfather’s table in the dining room. I studied the picture for a moment and then closed my eyes tight. If I tried hard enough, I could still smell Beatrice’s cheap perfume and feel her raspy whisper in my ear.

The best momma in the world, huh? If Beatrice was still wheeling around with her toothless grin, I wonder what she’d have to say about these past few months in our household. I wonder what she’d whisper in my ear now were she here. Honestly, it’d probably be that same secret. And honestly, I think I’d be okay with hearing it a few more times.



Existentialism

Caroline Park



...but there was no apple to be found

Boyd Allsbrook

A Story You Should Know, Wearing a Different Coat

Madelynn Helwig

Sometimes I just see people as their coats. When I was little, there was a red jacket and a blue jacket who were a terror. But the green coat wasn't so bad. Their faces are hazy, but the color of the coats are clear to me, hanging on shoulders of ranging sizes. Some blown up to enormous proportions that defy human capabilities. Or maybe I'm just shrunk down to a size so small they seem that way; my bones scraping against each other trying to disappear.

While I only see the coats, I can hear their voices echoing in the caverns of my mind. I count the different tones that they use, labeling and filing them away, trying to avoid them. Drawer 1—harsh equals angry. Drawer 2—harsh also equals scared. Drawer 3—quiet means angry. Drawer 4—but quiet also means comforting. I lock all the drawers tight shut with their respective keys, but I can't seem to toss away the key ring. It jangles against my waist, a constant reminder of the voices trapped inside me and the hurtful words they contained.

Hands are cold and warm all at once. At first touch, they seem to be cold as the cool air greedily steals away the warmth to itself and whisks it away to some unknown place. The first feel is cold as it makes contact, snapping like ice dropped into a lukewarm drink. Then they are hot, burning against my skin. Fiery pinpricks erupting like miniature volcanoes wherever the snapping made contact. And even when the hand is gone, the heat remains, stoked by the angry voices trailing like smoke in the wake of the eruptions. They are quiet, voices slithering out from their lips, snake tongues darting in and out. *"Stupid," snap. "Idiot." snap. "Retard." snap. "Why are you even alive?" snap, snap.* The words hiss. The hot hands snap. My own thick tongue slides like a snail in my mouth, trying to speak past the fire burning in my cheeks. The yellow of my own coat blares in my eyes, showing my fear in its intensity.

Hands are cold and warm all at once. They are steely cold, like the metal jewelry my mother tries to slip around my neck, but their touch is gentle and warm as the hands that try to place it there. Big blue eyes stand out against the green of the coat that helps me to my feet and gently wipes away my tears. I notice the eyes because they're rimmed in large red glasses that hide half her face. She is quiet, her voice seeping out like melting chocolate from a s'more, smile flickering like a fire. *"Hey, it's all right. It's okay. Don't cry. Everything's going to be fine."* The words seep. The kind eyes smile. My own lips start to quiver, the embers of a fire trying to remember how to burn again. My yellow coat now seems more like the sun than the fear that is escaping deep inside of me.

I slam the drawer on quiet voices shut, locking them tightly back shut, trying

desperately to regain focus of the world I'm living in. But events swirl in my mind, murmuring softly in the corners, beckoning to me from all angles. Slowly, unfurling ropes tangle around my arms and legs and gently yanking them apart. They whisper like air escaping a balloon. *See? Feel sorry for yourself. Sink deeper. Aren't you scared? So scared. Feel it surfacing. Feel it spinning, spiraling, snapping. Remember your secrets.* A shudder races through my back and I'm pulled back into the crowded rooms of my mind.

Pop. Sizzle. Spark. *Don't touch*, she says, her voice harsh. My hand yanks back. It could hurt you. Her voice softens and she strokes my hair. She's tall and warm and green and I feel safe. She leads me away from the heat and sits me in a chair, her big green eyes staring into mine. *Fire is dangerous.* Her voice is loud. She means this. *If you see fire, you stay away, okay?*

Pop. Sizzle. Spark. *Don't touch.* she said. I run away, the smell of burning wood filling my head and making me dizzy. I hear things. The roaring fire. The piercing shrieks. And then my name, shrill over the crackling. Shouted in desperation. I scream. Covering my ears. Falling over and feeling the heat on my back. I scramble to my feet. It feels warm like her, but then it hurts. Fire is dangerous. It's loud in my ears. I'm running forward, forward, forward, until someone grabs me and pulls me to the side. I kick and squirm, trying to run forward again. But I'm too tired. And I fall asleep.

The pressing reminder of being alone blackens my vision. My stomach swims and I feel the heat crawl up my back just like always. Guilt roils, lifting its dragon head and scorching my insides. *You left them*, the voices whisper. *You left them to die.* My breaths come in gasps, my chest struggling to rise to meet the cotton of my moth-eaten shirt. I focus on the pinch of my too-tight shoes to stop the fear from bubbling over, but hot tears spill down my cheeks. Faster, faster, faster, spill out the seventy-five percent of me that is boiling. My stomach tastes bitter on my tongue and I cry hard, falling to my knees. Remember again and again and again.

The green coat girl holds her hand out to me. *Come*, she said. *Be my friend.* Slowly I reach out and take it. But as soon as I do, it's yanked away. A moving car following a big van. An empty house with a big sign in front. And one confused little girl left holding a green coat much too big for her. I drape it over my shoulders, wearing it like a security blanket, knowing that as long as I wear it, someone has loved me. Someone who wiped away my tears and was my friend.

The green coat is ripped from my shoulders and thrown on the ground. Come on, they say, blue and red together. *Come get it.* They snatch it up and dangle it above my head. But as I reach for it, they yank it away. Laughing faces. Large fists. And one hurt little girl clutching her green coat that makes her feel safe. I pull it tightly around myself once it is returned, huddling deep inside its folds and using it to hide my tears.

f you were to walk to the edge of the world, you would end up where you began. And where you began is the edge of yourself. If you were born into poverty, that is your edge. If you are born into money, that is your edge. I was born into fear and so in fear I am enveloped. It helps me survive. And so I allowed it to blanket me as I face the world, stepping out armed with the flimsy sword of fear. It swarms my mind and drives me insane, but it is my edge and I will stick to it. The fluttering in my chest catches my breath accidentally in the butterfly net trying to contain it. The thoughts Fear inspired ran rampant through my brain and I tried to shove them into the same butterfly net that had caught my breath, but they slipped through the holes. B...Aid. Be...Raid. Be...Fraid. Be Afraid. These words come slipping into the hands of my mind and it hesitantly catches them, holding them gently as a fragile porcelain cup. I clench my fists, drawing blood and shake my head. The memories come flooding back in a roar and then hush to silent murmurs in my head.

“If you touch me, I will hurt you.” My voice came out quavering as an elderly woman opened the door to me, her coat a blinding purple. It was a new color. I didn’t know where it fit in my boxes. It floated in the forefront as I clutched my coat forward and rocked. She smiled and laid a hand on my arm anyway. Gently and firmly, she led me into the house.

“I have a rule in my house,” she said, her voice quavery.

“Rule, singular?” I asked on impulse.

“Yes. Rule singular.” I nodded, looking around. The eclectic mix of colors sat wrong in my stomach as I saw blue and red sitting on the shelves mixed in with green, yellow, purple, and colors that had no place in my database. “Aren’t you going to ask me what it is?” Her hand was still resting on my arm, though now I could feel a quiver deep within that matched her voice, like the flutter of a small bird’s wings resided in her chest and its wingbeats reverberated through her body.

“No.” I looked away from the twisting colors and looked at her eyes, expecting there to be a door opening for hurt. But I didn’t see it. Instead, she smiled again. I frowned, feeling deeply unsettled by her unpredictability.

“Very well. Then I will tell you,” she licked her lips and that image stuck in my brain and for the first time, I remembered someone as more than a coat. “My rule is that no one hurts here. This is a place for no hurting. Do you understand?” I nodded and she smiled again. “Good.” We walked upstairs, past little windows into her life and I felt how her step slowed as we walked up the stairs. Something about that slowness made purple safe. For once, I felt at home.

Home is gone. It’s a nonconcept. There is a little drawer for it in the back of my brain and there it lives. I never open that box, but the lock is faulty and sometimes it springs open and the memories of feeling loved pour out, threatening to overwhelm me. That one memory slowly pads down the aisles of my brain and unlocks every drawer, allowing my carefully organized memories to spill out of their prisons and into my open mind. They mingle with each other, flowing together like a river and mingling.

*You're worthless, you don't deserve to live.
She's dead. I'm sorry. There's nothing we can do.
Run! Fire! Danger! Help!*

Worthless

Dead

Fire

Run

Help

Escape

Red

Blue

Yellow

Fear

Danger danger danger danger danger

ESCAPE!!!!!!!

And then silence. Tense, uncomfortable silence hangs like a cloud over my muddled mind. And in enters a thought I've never had: forgive. Forgive what? I thought.

Forgive yourself. Forgive the world. There's nothing to fear. The world is yours to take. Trust me. I'll help you. Just forgive. Let go of your key ring. I'll take care of it for you.

My fist clenches over the imaginary metal and I hold it out, lifting my fist to the air. "It's yours," I say. "Please, make it leave me alone."

Of course.

And the silence returns. A warm comforting silence that embraces me in its arms and welcomes me home. Home is no longer a nonconcept, but a place I can stay, safe within the arms of the one who holds the keys to my fear.



Gave Birth to This New Color Scheme

Grace Gebhard

The Words of a Sailor

Dawson Graham

The East Wind, freed of its heavy chains, had sent us westerly with one mighty huff, faster than the swiftest trireme. Farther and farther, we were forced from our mothers in Troy. Every day, I prayed that Neptune would calm the speeding waves that pushed us towards nothingness. Yet, seven days had passed since we'd seen the flagship of Aeneas.

Under the night sky, I knelt on the ship's sturdy deck and prayed once more that Neptune would command his boundless sea to return me to my family. With or without breath in my lungs, I wanted my aging body to be delivered to the promised soil of Italy.

My body felt light on the deck's thick pine beneath me. The firm wood no longer put pressure on my knees. I rose to my feet, only to have my legs collapse beneath me, the weight of my now hopeless heart too much for them to bear.

My eyes had seen the waves morph into a raging river, and the river into a plummeting waterfall. I watched as the sky consumed the edge of the roaring sea- as if Jupiter was trying to swallow the ocean whole.

And so, we fell.

Too weak to stand, I clung to a nearby mast as my body was almost shot into the air. The howling air screamed at our ship to slow down, but we only fell faster. I looked up at the sky above us. The earth was nothing but a dot, and within seconds it was washed forever away by the endless sky.

But this wasn't my sky, this was something else. The dark night sky had been replaced by an inescapable green light. The light wasn't from the sun, or even nowhere- it came from everywhere. There were small, gaseous green dots that consumed this new expanse. In between the dots, there was a pure, untouched white.

The ship's descent rapidly slowed but didn't come to a stop. My body, saved only by my arms around the mast, fell to the deck like a bird from a tree. No longer praying, I rose to my knees and crawled to the railing, where the rest of the crew had gathered in a frozen stupor. Their faces were painted with dissociation that could only be caused by the realization of complete loss. These men hadn't lost a brother or a wife, they had lost all knowledge and understanding. I gripped the railing and leaned over the edge of the boat. I saw a grey desert, stretching not from one horizon to another, but curving up into the green sky in all directions as if we were falling into a colorless bowl.

As we fell, deeper and deeper, this grey bowl didn't seem to be getting any closer. In fact, it was getting farther away. We were no longer dropping; we had started to rise the way we fell. We flew back up into the foreign sky, hoping to soon jump above the waves that had sent us below the underworld. Sailors began climbing back to their feet. But as we rose, the green sky didn't turn to the blue of the earthly sky, it turned into a light red hue. I looked back down, and the green sky had been replaced by solid black ground. Men were falling to their

knees, screaming and curling into balls, like children. The worst of men were crying before me, begging to the gods that this was a dream or a hallucination, even Hades. Any sense of familiarity is sanity for a lost man. And again, we fell.

We fell many more times, and we rose many more times. The world we knew had become one of many, all of them cycling before us, one after the other. They all took on different states of matter, some that could never be described. We had no sense of time, there was none. Having lost all belief in truth and fact, insanity overcame us all. Soon after, men began to die. Some by their own choice, some by another man's choice, and some by the gods' choice.

We starved and we fought- but mostly we watched. We watched as actuality and fiction became one. We watched as monsters, men, and gods were all around us. We watched as the boundary between those entities disappeared, and we became all three.

And so, I did what any man with a pen and paper should do if his death is before him, I wrote. I wrote in the hopes that one day, our ship would grow weary of sailing through the multiverse. I hoped, but didn't pray, that one day a magnificent ship would fall from the good blue sky and land in the harbor that birthed it. And aboard that ship would be the bones of a historic crew, lost at sea. But amongst those bones would be these words, the words of a sailor.

Night-Time Thought of Remembering Nothing

Naomi Talbott

Lying supine in bed, my hands caressed themselves and soothed the ripples that ensued. Waves of the day flowed through my mind. It was one of those memories that floats back when I begin to reflect. I had taken a walk at some point, but that was towards the evening. What had I done earlier? I cannot seem to recall. This forgetfulness is keeping me up.

I roll over on my side and see the vase on my bedside table. It was a gift. Oh yes, now I remember. I went for tea at the Molloy's, then wandered through the park until I saw Mrs. Burke, the adoptive aunt of that sweet young boy, who's name escapes me now. We slide into gentle conversation, mostly gossip. My unholy elixir of life is the love of others' business and the thrill of having a secret not to be kept. This is my source of entertainment. I can no longer participate in the physical exertion and antics the youth perform. My calisthenics include the refined process of social interrogation.

After her gasps at the melodramatic failures of promise and unsatisfied spouses, Mrs. Burke asked me if I would like to join her for dinner. I offered feigned surprise and a sincere yes in return for her gift.

It would have been socially incorrect of her not to invite me to dine. As it would have been socially incorrect me to decline. We elders seem to be locked into solitude, with flocks of family floating in and out of our lives when convenient, and then, only to be respectful. So it was her duty to feed me, another mouth, on any given day.

We sat by the hearth and a young boy arrived. I began to speak only to him. He had a listening ear, and he responded with his face to everything I said, even though I must have told him those stories a thousand times over. I thought he must have loved my stories, so I continued telling more. His eyes traveled behind me sometimes, toward the door. But then his focus would return again to my face. He wanted to go to the bazaar, to buy something for a girl. I noticed his impatience. A vase that sat on the table. It was old, seeming to be made for fresh flowers, but now it sits empty on the tablecloth, devoid of purpose. The boy took the vase in his hands when he spoke, spinning it slowly around in his dinner-sticky fingers. He didn't look at me when he spoke about the girl. It is easy to find secrets in a young person's face.

I aspire to be youthful like that boy. He has no need or want for routine and rituals which I must have in order to remember to retrieve the mail or to recall the location of my hat. I'm sad to say it's true, but it seems there's not much I can do to reverse time's toil on my mind.

I see him in my dreams sometimes. My late husband. A slightly crooked man, but he made it hard to sleep. I think sleeping alone has caused me to gain a heart of fear. I stay up at night wondering if I will be the one to be forgotten, rather than the one to forget. I have to force myself to remember my small pawnbroker whose only words uttered were prices and denials. But if I didn't remind myself of him, I wouldn't be able to pay him the respect that others would never have given. There is a gap, but I don't miss him. Stark respect is all I am giving.

Looking above my head, I taste the sadness that rolls down my face. The sensation of fatigue courses through me. Reality has ceased to be clearer than my dreams, edges between the fray. I may be lonely, but that's a sorry thing to validate. So instead, I take myself to a place, seeming far, far away, but closer to reality than being what others call conscious, and in the morning I will wake up.



I was
not silent
I suffered
beside
you.

Soonmin
Kwon

Beside You

Soonmin Kwon

To Love Someone As If

Naomi Talbott

To love someone as if they were the
final drip of spit, useless to swallow,
by cause of the inevitable decay
and to feel infantile
like a wobbly, nipple suckling babe.
To sink into the puddle of “not enough”,
Clunking your last penny, one too short,
To burn the acid rubber on expensive fuel
Or shrinking like a dry sponge, too minuscule,
overlooked
because you are not yet useful.
It's the worst kind of love.
You feel like there's no chips
hit the table, then fly into someone else's sweaty palms.
Baby fingers reaching for the thick playing piece,
grasping for appreciation, attention, and affection,
Droplet of milk from the matron.
An undramatic life for now,
Only a baby, so how earth shattering could you be?
What impact can you make?
Babies' cries, helpless, hopeless love.
No doubt in impotence,
Accepting the fact that those you love
will never gaze at you with want and wonder
as they would an unwobbling, unchildish adult.
Until you stretch and reach the
deformity of adulthood.
They who you loved will only see your frailties.
You speak incessantly so they won't leave you alone,
but they're stomach sick of you.
They will say love with a hollow, fruitless core
And you'll say i love you, from your belly,
the fiery molten of the Earth,
Sputtering saliva as it drips down your chin.

Sub-Creation